

IMMORTALITY'S PRICE

Kurt pushed at the half-opened door, and it gave way at his touch. The hospital bed lay in stripes of shadow. He drew nearer, peering into the room, trying to see his father's face in the darkness, trying to understand how he felt, what it was like to face the future and see it shrink down to months, then weeks, then less. ...

"Dad? It's me. Kurt." He groped for his father's hand, touched it, felt it pull away. "I—I wanted to talk to you about—"

"About the rest of your life."

His father's lips pressed together, relaxed, pressed to-gether again. "The truth is, Kurt, I just don't give a damn," he said. "I spent the last of my passion the day I knew you were immortal." The voice stopped, then started again, heavier and slower, in a tone Kurt would never forget. "I wanted very much to kill you."

The words were knives and ice. Kurt sat and stared and found a voice, lower, calmer than he would have believed. "Why didn't you."

"I didn't have the strength."

For Bryan
And for Mother and Daddy

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for their technical assistance: Isaac Asimov, Jeff Duntemann, Steve Nesheim, Mike Rogers, George Scithers, R.J. Thompson, Bryan Webb, Tracey Webb, and Jane Yolen. Any errors are solely my own.

I would further like to thank the friends and family members who offered me encouragement and support as I wrote this book.

SHARON WEBB

genius (jçn'yas) n. Exceptional intellectual and creative power. A talent or inclination. *Mythology, Roman*. A guard-ian spirit or deity allotted to a person from birth. *Mythology, Moslem*. A jinni or demon. [Latin *genius*, deity of genera-tion and birth. See **gene**] Greek suffix -gençs, "-born": -GEN, -GENY.

Suffixed full-grade form *gen-yo* in: a. Latin *genius*, procreative divinity, inborn tutelary spirit, innate quality. . . .
Zero-grade form *gn-* in Sanskrit *ja-* in *Krmi-ja-*, "produced by worms...."

PART ONE

Mouat-Gari Year One

Chapter 1

Children. Long lines of children in the gray dawn. Soldiers silhouetted in the mist. Barbed wire.

It started on August 1—the day before Kurt Kraus's fifteenth birthday. The day was hot and muggy from the morning's early rain, but a breeze cooled him as he rode. His narrow bike tires shushed through the shallow puddles, echo-ing the slap and chop of Tampa Bay against its restraining seawall.

The little bike radio picked up the street beacon, "... Swann Avenue. You are now entering Old Hyde Park...." He switched off the receiver and steadied his oboe case with a touch as he veered left, wheeling abruptly back in time. His bike tires jugged unevenly now over the brick-lined street of the restoration.

As he rode past the old-fashioned shops, the smell of fresh hot doughnuts hung in the air. He slowed and eyed the bakery tentatively, but he was late. He didn't have time to stop. Maybe later he would. After rehearsal.

A bell clanged behind him. He swung his bike toward the curb as the bright yellow trolley clacked down its track in the center of the street.

He stopped for a moment, watching as the car paused and discharged several people. Two of them walked toward him, a girl with red braids and a clarinet case and a tall, thin boy about Kurt's age. Late too.

He waved and pedaled on, turning his bike onto the grounds of the old brick junior high school that was now the Wilson Arts Consortium.

He got off under the shade of an ancient live oak and pushed his bike into the lock-slot. When it engaged, he dropped a coin into the machine and pocketed the key he received.

Grabbing his oboe case, he jogged around the building to the side door of the auditorium. He didn't hear music. Hadn't they started?

He darted into the open door. The members of the Tampa Youth Symphony spilled from the stage into the aisles in knots and clumps. No one was warming up—no scales, no arpeggios. Few of the instrument cases had been opened, and Mr. Hernandez was nowhere in sight.

He stopped, clutching his oboe case, staring in puzzlement around him. "What's going on?"

A few heads turned toward him, students from his ninth grade class at Consolidated. A girl holding a silver flute said, "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"It was on the news all morning," said an olive-skinned boy.

"Last night, too," said another. "Late. None of us slept after that."

"Imagine," said the first girl. "We've been eating and drinking the stuff, and we didn't even know.... And all die time we were changing."

Kurt grabbed the girl's arm. "What are you talking about?"

"You really don't know?" She looked at him in surprise. "I'm talking about the process. The Coalition sent World Health all over the world with it—even out to L-5 Center. And nobody knew."

"That's because of the renegades in Argentina. They got the process too," said an olive-skinned boy. "They gave it to everybody in their country. WorldCo couldn't hold it back when Argentina had it, could they? There'd have been a revolution."

Kurt frowned in annoyance. "Hold what back? What are you talking about?"

The girl's fingers caressed the silver flute. "The process. We're all immortal now."

Her words didn't make any sense to him. "What are you talking about?"

"We're not going to die. We're never going to get old or sick. We're all going to live forever."

"Not all." A young man about twenty turned toward them. His fingers tightened and relaxed over the handle of his violin case. "Not all," he repeated. "It only works on kids." He looked at each of them in turn. "Kids your age. Or younger. Nothing's changed for the rest of us."

Kurt looked at him. The young man's words echoed through his mind. Nothing's changed for the rest of us.... The full significance of those words seemed to elude him, and yet there was something wrong with them, something utterly wrong. Because if they were true, then everything had changed.

Slowly, he walked up the steps onto the stage. His mind rejected what he had heard—pushed it aside to be examined later on. He came to his chair and sat down. For a moment, he looked out at the empty seats of the auditorium. The sun shone through the tall windows and sent rectangles of light to play among the shadows. The sun seemed very bright to him, the shadows very dark. He opened the shabby black case, stuck his reed into a little tube of water, and began to fit his oboe together.

He examined the music set out on his stand—Khachaturian's *Masquerade Suite*, Sucharitkul's *Rebirth*. He placed his reed and began to warm up.

The door clanged open at the rear of the auditorium and rumbled shut. Jorge Luis Hernandez walked down the center aisle clutching his briefcase. At the sight of him, the knots and clumps of players dissolved and moved toward the stage. Instrument cases snapped open, shut.

Hernandez stepped to the podium, opened his case, and removed a stack of music. He spoke to no one. As the orchestra began to warm up, he riffled through a score, set it aside, and opened another. He stared at it, his head bent over the music. Broad fingers slicked a wavy mass of thick white hair. He stood like this for some time, then he tapped three times with his baton. Kurt sounded an A and the musicians began to tune.

When they had finished, Hernandez shifted slightly. A silence came. Seventy pairs of eyes stared at him. Fingers touched wooden bows and silver keys. He spoke at last, his soft accented voice carrying over the hush. "These day.... These day is one to be always remembered." He looked from one to another of the young musicians. Sunlight glistened on the moisture in his dark eyes. "We will play the *Rebirth* now. We will listen to what it tells us."

He lifted his baton. It moved. Concentrating, Kurt began to play the opening solo. The haunting notes of his oboe hung in the warm air. String basses and 'cellos began to throb below his song in almost imperceptible accompaniment. A flute conjoined, and then a muted brass choir. Gradually the sound grew and swelled into a celebration, an exultation of life.

Then it was over. Jorge Luis Hernandez stood for a long moment with his head bowed. When he raised it, a bright tear traced down his face. "Thank you." He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Who will conduct you in a hundred years? In two? You will be magnificent." His hands dropped to the score. He closed it and placed his music in the briefcase with hands that trembled. "I cannot go on today."

He turned and walked down the steps and down the center aisle, sunlight glinting on his white hair. At the door he turned and looked at them once again. "Thank you." The wide door clattered in his grasp, and he was gone.

* * *

Kurt stepped out into the blaze of late morning sun. Carrying his oboe case, he walked toward the back of the old building. He wasn't ready to leave yet, to leave the feel of the old part of town. He moved to the shade of a wide live oak and sat on a cracked concrete bench below it. Dark roots ran through gray dirt. A sprig of grass struggled at the edge of the bench.

Three little girls skipped rope on an empty tennis court. The rope snapped its rhythm in counterpoint to the thud of small feet,

"O-ver, o-ver. Evie-ivy o-ver. O-ver, o-ver. Evie-ivy un-der."

The game broke up when one was called to lunch. Two of the children headed arm-in-arm across the court. The other, proprietor of the jump rope, swung it in a lazy loop over her shoulder and walked toward the alley that led to the front of the building.

He stood up then and picked up his case. In the distance, the little girl stood looking at something on the ground in the alleyway. As he drew closer, he saw what it was. In the rippling shadows a large toad sat half-in, half-out of a shallow puddle. It had a piece of bread in its mouth, scavenged from someone's cast-off sandwich. Its mouth stretched comically over the bread. The little girl grinned.

Ahead, a truck rumbled into the alley. It sped up suddenly and she jumped back in alarm. Just as suddenly, it stopped. Inside, two young men looked out at the child.

"Watch out," she said. "You'll squash him."

One of the men spotted the toad and pointed. The truck began to move slowly toward the puddle, toward the toad.

"Don't. No, don't!"

The wheels rolled over the fat body of the toad, stopped, rolled back, rolled forward again.

The little girl's hands curled into fists. Shock glazed her eyes. "He wanted to live," she said. "He did. He wanted to live."

The truck rolled back and forth, back and forth again, flattening the body of the toad into the damp earth. The two men laughed a long time before they drove away.

* * *

He had never thought about the inevitability of his death before except in the most abstract of ways. He thought about it now—now that it would never happen. The hot sun drenched his skin with warm sweat and tightened his dark hair into thick tousled curls.

He looked at his hands, wide fingers gripping the handle-bars of his bike. They would always look that way, he thought. Maybe bigger, as he grew, but always strong and brown from the sun.

Always. He tried to understand it. He had lived for fifteen years; he would live always. In the sun. But suns died. They lived and died, didn't they? They blew up and burned out. The whole universe was going to die.

It made him uneasy thinking about forever. It somehow shrank him to a speck. He pushed that part away, that big incomprehensible part of always, and substituted something manageable—he would live for a hundred years. And after that he would live for another hundred.

The blare of a horn startled him. A huge food transport was nearly on top of him. He was in the wrong lane! He darted to the right. The transport cleared him by mere centimeters.

How could he have been so stupid? He hadn't paid attention at all. Heart pounding, he veered quickly into the bike lanes as a red and silver bubble bike sped past.

He could have been killed. He considered the thought. He could be squashed, mangled, cut up, shot. It was shocking. Someone who could live forever—longer than the sun—and never age could be snuffed out in an instant by a transport. Smashed flat like a toad under a wheel.

He paid attention after that, guiding his bike carefully along the wide boulevard. The hot sun glittered on the bay, but his sweat felt cold against his skin.

* * *

TampaTran disgorged a clot of passengers as he pushed his bike into his lock-slot. He looked up anxiously, scanning the group, looking for his parents. The passengers dispersed and spread by twos and threes toward the cluster of buildings.

He felt relieved that he hadn't seen them, and he felt a little ashamed to be relieved. But he wasn't ready yet. Not yet.

He pressed his card against the door scan and went in, pressing it again to summon the elevator. They were still probably at the hospital. The treatments took a long time.

He felt the familiar tightening in his stomach when he thought of his father—the hateful combination of pity and love and helplessness. Now, nearly every morning showed a change. He could sense the tumor growing when he saw the lines of his facial bones protrude as the flesh fell away. His father—his monument—Richard Kraus. Now he spent his evenings at bars or drinking quietly in his study. He spent his nights with the red narcotic medeject that squatted on the night table, and when the narcotics failed, with shadowy walks through the darkened streets. His father.

It wasn't fair. Tears swam up in his eyes, and he blinked them away. He wanted to see him, wanted to talk about today and what it meant. But not just yet. Not yet.

The econdo was empty. It was warm inside, unpleasantly so. He jabbed absently at the summerstat as he always did, but it resisted his touch. His mother had locked it at 25 degrees. Next summer when the Ruskin fusion plant opened, he intended to set the stat at two below icicle.

A tail thumped in welcome. Committee stretched and grinned his most charming doggie grin. Kurt rubbed the shaggy little head, and then, stricken with hunger, went into the kitchen. Committee, sensing a possible handout, trotted alongside.

He rummaged through the cabinet in search of nourishment and settled on a family-sized packet of stew. He pulled a bowl from the dispenser, clattered it full of stew pellets and stuck it into the bubbler. While he waited, he pawed in the drawer for a spoon and finished off half a liter of chocolate ice cream. The hairy aggregate, Committee, thumped his tail and was rewarded with the dripping remains.

The bubbler buzzed. Kurt extracted the stew and devoured it, washing it down with two glasses of milk. He tossed the empty bowl and glass in the recycler and deposited his dirty spoon in the sink. Committee plopped down on the floor and licked his paws. Kurt looked at him curiously. Did it work on dogs? Committee was only ten months old— not full grown yet. Maybe it worked on dogs too.

He went into the living room and keyed the computer for IMMORTALITY. He watched in dismay at the volume of flexi-sheets that poured out of the machine and fluttered to the floor. He'd never be able to read that much. Punching the OFF button, he gathered up the heap and thumbed through it, pushing discarded sheets into the recycle slot.

...THE RENEGADE BAND, LA SESENTA, DISSEMINATED THE MOUAT-GARI IMMORTALITY PROCESS TO THE MILLIONS OF ARGENTINA. FEARING WHOLESAL INSURRECTION, THE WORLD COALITION EMPOWERED THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION TO ALTER THE PEOPLE'S FOOD AND WATER SUPPLIES....

...INEFFECTIVE IN ADULTS. THE MOUAT-GARI PROCESS IS EFFECTIVE IN ALL CHILDREN UNTIL BODY TISSUES INCLUDING LYMPHOID, NEURAL, REPRODUCTIVE AND BONE REACH 94.2% OF ADULT NORMAL AT THE AVERAGE AGE OF 16.9 YEARS IN MALES, SOMEWHAT EARLIER IN FEMALES. INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS OF $\pm .9$ YEARS ARE COMMON....

...PROCESS INSURES PERFECT REPLICATION OF DNA IN THE BODY'S CELLS. THIS COMBINED WITH THE INHIBITION OF THE INFLAMMATORY RESPONSE CAUSES THE BODY TO RESIST INFECTION. INVASION BY BACTERIA AND VIRUSES STILL OCCUR, BUT THE BODY IN EFFECT IGNORES THESE AGENTS....

He pushed another handful of sheets into the recycle slot, but still there were more:

...EXCEPTION OF TRAUMA AND CERTAIN POISONS. SOME METABOLIC AND GENETIC DISEASE PROCESSES WILL PROGRESS WITH FATAL RESULT IN SPITE OF THE AGE OF THE CHILD...

...MOUAT-GARI INCORPORATES BIRTH-CONTROL. SPECIAL INHIBITING MEDICATIONS MUST BE TAKEN TO OFFSET THE INFERTILITY THE PROCESS CONFERS....

He found what he was looking for:

...WITH THE EXCEPTION OF CERTAIN OF THE GREAT APES, THE MOUAT-GARI HAS NO EFFECT ON LOWER ANIMALS....

He scratched the dog's ears. Committee moaned in pleasure. Letting the flexi-sheets drop to the floor, he gathered the dog to him, running his fingers through the rough coat. He thought of how fleeting some things were. He thought of his father. He sat there for a few moments petting his dog, staring at the flexi-sheets, but not seeing them. Finally he focused on the one that lay on top:

COPENHAGEN—WITHIN HOURS AFTER THE NEWS OF THE MOUAT-GARI PROCESS DISSEMINATION, A PILOT AIMED HIS SMALL TWO-SEATER AIRCRAFT BEARING A WARHEAD OF EXPLOSIVES INTO THE MIDST OF A CHILDREN'S CONCERT HERE.

THERE WERE TWO HUNDRED EIGHT VICTIMS OF THE RESULTING EXPLOSION AND FIRE. SEVENTY-EIGHT DIED, THE PILOT AMONG THEM.

HE LEFT A RECORDED MESSAGE: "HELL'S DEMONS HOLD THEM BY THE PROCESS. ONLY DEATH CAN GIVE THEM BACK TO GOD."

Kurt tried to practice, but the piano seemed hateful to him just then. He stared at the keys and at his broad, tanned fingers above them. He had to get his practicing done before his parents got home. His father would need to sleep then.

He tried again, but he couldn't concentrate on the Bartok Suite. The notes evaded his fingers. It was a relief when the door opened; it was a tightening of his gut too. Not yet. He didn't want to see his father yet.

But it was his older brother Eric, wearing his track suit and muddy shoes, tossing his card, his towel, his lunch sack on the table, spreading an air of cheerful disarray. A smile bent his lips and creased the corners of his gray eyes when he saw Kurt. "Hello, old timer."

A half-smile crept over Kurt's face in response. "You too. Old timer."

"Then you've heard."

He nodded, then looked away. "Does Dad know?"

Concern crossed the clear eyes. "I'm sure he does—by now." He plopped down on the piano bench next to Kurt and swung an arm over his hunched shoulders. "He'll be happy for us. I know he will."

"We're going to lose him." He felt the arm give him a rough squeeze. He tried to smile. "Nothing's the same is it? We're going to lose all of them—Mom, Grandma—all of them after a while."

"We always knew that, didn't we?"

He thought about it. "I guess so." But there wasn't much conviction in his voice.

"And we've got each other. We'll always have each other." Eric gave him a playful shove. "Now move over. You've hogged the piano long enough. You're not the only virtuoso, you know."

Kurt grinned, got up, and settled on the couch as Eric began to play a Chopin etude. As he listened, his critical ear asserted itself as it always did. Eric's technique was sloppy. He was fairly musical, but not enough—not enough to charm an audience into overlooking his deficiencies. Kurt watched Eric's long fingers sweep over the keys, then he looked at his own. He was better. He had more talent, more music in him.

His mother knew it too, from the time he'd been old enough to sit at the piano, and later when he'd blown the first tentative notes into an oboe. She'd never said so; she didn't have to. He could see it in the way her dark eyes shone when he played and in the way she pushed him, giving him harder and harder music to play, until the day she said she'd taught him all she could and sent him to Dr. Rouk at the university.

A discord clanged on Kurt's ear, but Eric played on, ignoring the mistake. Kurt's fingers moved on his lap undoing the error, racing on to bring the piece up to tempo. He wondered what it would be like to change places with Eric, see with his eyes, hear with his ears. It didn't seem possible that Eric's ears functioned the same as his. He considered the thought. He wouldn't want to change with him—really. And yet, if he could have just some of the things Eric had: the free and easy way; the quick sense of humor that spilled over to cheer other people when they were down; the way he had with girls. Girls. How did Eric always know what to say to them? The right words were so hard to find. Only later when he was alone would things come to him—all the funny witty things he should have said. Everybody thought he was aloof. Well, it was better to be that way than stupid, wasn't it? It was better to keep his mouth shut than to let a bunch of dumb words fall out. But maybe when he got to be sixteen, like Eric, he'd be more like him. He stared at his brother for a moment and then sighed. He wouldn't want to bet on it.

Committee's ears perked, sending one to stand erect in splendid asymmetry. He gave a welcome bark and ran to the door. Carmen Kraus pushed it open, holding it for her husband.

Eric stopped playing and swiveled on the piano bench to look toward the door.

Richard Kraus. He moved like a puppet with stiff wire for strings. He leaned on his wife for support. With breath that came fast with exertion, he spoke. His voice barely carried to Kurt.

What had he said? "What, Dad?"

"Hot. It's hot." The words were an exhaled sigh. He slumped into a chair and looked up at his wife, "Honey...."

"I'll get it." She moved toward the bedroom and in a moment was back, bringing the red medeject kit to him. He pressed the lever and a drinking tube popped up. He sucked deeply. He sat then, not speaking, not moving.

Kurt twisted uneasily. It seemed to him that the silence was heavy. Like sound waves too low to hear, slapping against his face with a slow and steady rhythm. "Did—Did you hear the news, Dad?" he said against the silent breakers.

His father's lips rose in a part-smile, quavered, fell. "I heard." He sucked again from the drinking tube, rose, and walked slowly into the bedroom.

Carmen Kraus's dark eyes looked stricken. "He's tired. So much pain...." She smiled brightly at Eric, at Kurt. "It's wonderful news. He's just tired." She fled to the bedroom to see after her husband.

That evening while Richard Kraus kept to his room, the boys and their mother ate a light supper and stared into the little hole set on the table. The news was predictably all about the Mouat-Gari process.

There were other news stories too—the stock market crisis and the homicides. There had been eleven murders in Tampa since midnight. All of the victims were less than eighteen years old.

Chapter 2

Kitty Tarantino stared at her naked body in the mirror. Eight months. Eight months gone, and where's the rent coming from?

Her belly rippled with the quick thrust of a tiny foot. She ran her fingers over the crisscrossed stretch marks. They look like tire tracks, she thought. Tire tracks on a hill. Like a transport had run over her tummy. A transport carrying a load of watermelons. "Whoops! Pardon me, lady, but you got one of my melons in there."

She cupped her hands under her belly and lifted gently. "Are you ripe yet, kid?" She was answered by another quick kick from within.

She thrust her face close to the mirror. It was dark with what seemed to be an uneven tan. The woman at the clinic had called it the mask of pregnancy. She aimed an index finger from the hip towards her reflection. "Stick 'em up." The finger waggled, "The masked lady and the kid here are cutting you out, see? So you gotta die. But you gotta die later, 'cause if I don't shower and get to work, they're going to pink me."

Walking flat-footed, Kitty went into the bathroom and turned on the tap. The metered spray trickled out in a rusty stream. "Damn. Don't I pay enough rent to get wet in the shower?" With the economy of long practice, she lathered her hair and let it rinse while she washed her body. Do it the other way and get charged twice when the meter cut off.

She stepped out, wrapped a towel around her head, and dripped onto the mat. It was cooler that way. She plopped down onto the toilet seat and toweled her hair. Her legs were getting hairy as a goat's, but who could reach over all that baby to shave? The hair was dark and thick against her olive skin. "Really sexy," she muttered. "But who's looking?"

The answer was, concisely, nobody. Nobody since Jeep walked out. Nobody unless you counted the creep orderly at work. The one with the greasy lips and the eyes that looked soft and fat like peeled grapes. Peeled Grapes, that's what she called him. P.G., when she wanted a laugh with the other aides in the lounge when the floor got quiet.

She finished drying and pulled on a pair of limp maternity panties. The front panel snuggled over her belly. She patted it. "It's you and me, kid." Nobody else gave a flipping shit. But the kid would. She was going to be the sun and the moon to that baby. And later on they'd be buddies. Hell, why not? There would be less than nineteen years difference in their ages.

She ran her fingers through her damp hair and brushed it into a short curly flip. No reason why they couldn't be buddies. They'd be close. Go to the movies. Maybe even double date. More like sisters.

Her own mother had been thirty-eight when she was born. Living with her was like riding a roller coaster through a nettle patch. One big scream. For God's sake, Mama. Please take your medicine. It was easy to control manic-depressive psychosis. Only one catch. You had to take a pill.

Kitty pulled on her uniform, gave a final pat to her hair, and headed out the door. With the sun glinting on her hair and with her face bare of makeup, she looked closer to sixteen than nineteen.

She heard the train coming. "Hold on, kid. We're going to be late." She began to run toward the TampaTran station. She ran awkwardly, one hand clamped to her swaying belly. With a little luck she'd be able to clock in on time.

It had never seriously occurred to her that she might have a boy. It was going to be a cute, pink-ruffled girl, she was sure. Maybe blonde like Jeep, with blue eyes. More likely dark like the Tarantino side. It had not seriously occurred to her that her baby would be immortal. Sure, she had heard about all that last night on the late news. But it was an abstraction. A fantasy. Oh and ah over it for a while and then set it aside like she had her graduation trip to Disney World. Of course, she never graduated. But so what if she'd dropped out of school in October. She'd paid her money. Let them try to keep her out when she'd paid. So she took the weekend off from work and showed up, big belly and all for the trip. And if old lady Hamilton didn't like it, she could suck.

She'd had a romp, she told herself. Until she saw the guy that looked like Jeep. Big and blond with a slow smile and a sexy little butt. After that it seemed she saw him everywhere— eating a hamburger, driving a shuttle, sucking on an OJ. Well, who needed him? After all, she had the kid. She was going to call her Margot Lynne after the singer.

The train swung in a slow arc. The bay glistened beneath her. Nearly there. The multilithic structures of Tampa General Hospital loomed ahead on Davis Island. She swung off at the stop, took a shortcut across the grass and reached the clock in time to avoid being docked a half-hour's pay.

The elevator took her to Med-Surg West. She had worked there since she started. Not that she minded. She'd have been bored rigid if she had the same types of patients all the time. There was variety on Med-Surg. And you had to be smart too. No dumbing around.

When she reached the nurses' station, she saw a stiff blonde figure. Marge Rideout was in charge today and wasn't that wonderful? Superlative. If she had a choice she'd rather have Attila the Hun. Thank God Rideout worked only part-time. Who could stand a week's worth of her?

Rideout was listening to a report from the station computer center. She hit the pause button and said, "You're late, Tarantino."

"Slow elevator, I guess. The comp-clock says I'm on time." And who the hell do you think you are? she added to herself.

In addition to Rideout, another RN, Connie Davis, an LPN float, and Kitty's best friend Janice Mills made up the second shift. Oh yes, and don't forget the orderly, Peeled Grapes. There he came—oozing out of the lounge. What a slime. He never said much, but what he did say was obnoxious.

P.G. sidled up to the console next to her. Behind Rideout's back he reached out and rubbed Kitty's belly. She felt her skin crawl. "Hands off," she snapped and moved away.

The ward secretary answered a ring on her computer station. In a moment she said to Marge, "We're getting an admission. A pediatric case. Four years old."

"A four-year-old! On Med-Surg?"

"Pedie's full," answered the secretary. "They've had a run on trauma cases today."

Marge Rideout muttered to herself and then hit the key for a report on the child.

...ANTHONY HERRERA, 4 YO BLACK MALE. ADMITTING DX OF RUPTURED SPLEEN POST ATTACK BY STEPFATHER. SPLENECTOMY PER DR. GONSALVES. CONDITION STABLE. ADMITTING ORDERS....

Four years old and daddy ruptures his spleen. Kitty's arm curved protectively over her abdomen. No father at all was better than that. Poor little guy.

Anthony Herrera arrived via stretcher from the recovery room a few minutes later. He was only half awake. His eyes were so big that they seemed to fill most of his face. Kitty reached out and took his hand. "Hi there, Anthony."

He looked at her with fear in those big eyes.

Maybe they called him Tony. "Hi, Tony. I'm Kitty. Nobody's going to hurt you." She ran her fingers through his soft black hair. The boy seemed to relax a little.

Outside in the hall, Tony's mother stood first on one foot, then the other. She clutched the strap of her handbag, loosened it, clutched it again. Her eyes were as big as her son's.

As soon as Rideout was through checking the little boy, Kitty let his mother into the room. She didn't seem to want to talk, but just stood there squeezing his hand so tightly that Tony whimpered and tried to pull it away.

"You can't stay now," said Kitty, "but you can come back later. Visiting hours start at seven."

The woman shook her head.

"Look. I know you don't want to leave, but the charge nurse is really strict about it. We'll take good care of him. I promise."

Doubtful, the woman looked at Tony, then back at Kitty. Finally, she seemed convinced. "Seven?"

"You can come back at seven. He'll be fine."

She checked on him several times after that. Then she went to supper. In the cafeteria, she talked with an aide from Emergency. "You wouldn't believe how rushed we've been. Strip one stretcher and as quick as you can get a sheet on it, it's filled again. Mostly kids."

"What's going on?"

"They're saying it's because of the immortality thing. That Moo-ah Gary process or whatever it is. There's a bunch of warps out there attacking kids."

"Attacking?"

The Emergency aide nodded over her hamburger. "It's enough to make you sick. One little girl came in DOA. Only seven years old."

Kitty's eyes widened. "Why? Why are they doing it?"

"Crazy, I guess. Who knows? But between the attacks and the drunks, it's going to be quite a night."

Then that explains why Tony's stepfather hit him, thought Kitty. But then, uneasily, she realized that it didn't really explain anything at all.

* * *

There were a lot of visitors that night, but otherwise things were quiet on Med-Surg West. The patients were all listening to the news. Nothing else seemed to be going on in the world but the Mouat-Gari Process.

While the visitors fanned down the hall, Kitty took the opportunity to slip into the nurses' lounge across from the elevator and pour herself a cup of coffee. Every two minutes or so, the elevator doors opened and disgorged another group of visitors. One of them was Tony's mother. Kitty waved at her, but she was too distracted to notice. She clutched her bag, turned, and headed down the hall toward his room.

Kitty was wondering if she could get away with a second cup of coffee when she heard the scream. It began as a high keening cry that rose in pitch and ended in a wail that made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. The coffee sloshed from the overturned cup as Kitty ran down the hall toward Tony's room.

She wondered later why she had run so unerringly to that room—to the room of the only pediatric patient on Med-Surg West.

* * *

The security chief agreed with the police. It could have been anybody. Kitty stared in shock at the sheet covering the body and face of Anthony Herrera. Rideout had given Tony's mother a sedative and led her away.

Only four years old, she thought. Only four. A sweet little kid. She felt sick. She took a few deep breaths and closed her eyes, but still the image wouldn't go away—Tony's dark eyes staring up at her, dilated and glazed. His throat had been cut with surgical precision.

She bent over suddenly and clutched her belly. The baby was kicking again.

Chapter 3

On the next night, Kurt's birthday supper was interrupted by a shooting down the hall. The two little Gomez girls lay dead, victim of an uncle who was baby-sitting while his sister labored in Women's Hospital with her third child. For reasons of his own, he had first killed the children's cat, strangling it slowly with his belt.

As police led the man away down the long hall punctuated with half-opened doors and startled faces, the man looked at Kurt. There was a half-smile on his face and a look in his eyes that the boy would never forget—a look that suggested triumph.

When the police had gone, the people slipped into the halls, each just outside his own door, to talk in low shocked whispers while the little cake with its fifteen candles stood forgotten in the kitchen.

The incident was mentioned on the late news, but the lead story concerned the fire-bombing of the Temple Terrace recreation department during a puppet show. Seventeen children were dead, forty-seven injured.

Mention of the fire-bombing made the late national news, but the story was eclipsed by two other fire-bomb episodes, one in a summer camp near Aspen, the other in a children's hospital in Memphis. There were similar incidents in Budapest, Kobe, and Christchurch.

Within the week, national news had ceased calling the incidents murder. A new euphemism had entered the language—deprocessing.

By the tenth day, one hundred ninety-two children had been deprocessed in the Tampa Bay area.

Chapter 4

Kitty Tarantino stared at the notice the three-to-eleven Med-Surg supervisor had tacked up:

NOTICE

No visitors are allowed in any hospital area where there are patients under eighteen years of age.

In the event that pediatric patients overflow to adult floors, personnel will immediately remove all visitors from the area prior to accepting the patient. Security is to be notified at once. Nursing personnel will stand by elevators and all other entrances until a security guard relieves them. No one without valid hospital ID is to be allowed in these areas.

Rudy Martinez, Administrator

ALL EMPLOYEES TO SIGN UPON READING

She thought about the little Herrera boy and shivered. And what good did it do anyway when they let slime like P.G. creep around on the floor? She had no proof, of course, but who else could it have been? When the police questioned the staff in the hastily set-up interrogation room in the nurses' lounge, she had been sure that the orderly would emerge under guard as the murderer. But, no. He was still here— lurking around like a fugitive from a mental ward. He made her sick.

There had been three attacks on patients in Pedie and two more in OB. Newborns! Thank God she didn't work there. How do you tell a new mother that her baby was fine, perfectly fine, until some slime came by with a plastic bag off a housekeeping cart?

She tried not to think about the babies. She hadn't actually seen them, of course. Her imagination, fueled by the hospital grapevine, had been bad enough. The night it happened she dreamed about them—encased in pale yellow plastic, clear enough so you could see inside, clear enough so you could see the little faces.

The next day she had felt contractions. One of the RNs, Connie Davis, told her it wasn't real labor, but just pre-liminaries. "Braxton-Hicks contractions. They go on all through pregnancy, but you just don't notice them until you get near term."

Tonight, they felt stronger. She had tried to eat supper, but she had felt a little nauseated. Probably because of the mess they'd served in the cafeteria—Chicken Arcane, the staff called it. Pu-oo-oo-trid.

She didn't want to think about going into labor, didn't want to think about her baby being taken into the nursery. She would deal with that later, when the time came. Right now, the time had come to prep Hollis for her gallbladder surgery. She picked up a prep kit and two towels and headed down to 27. When she walked into the room, a pain in her belly doubled her up.

The patient's thin eyebrows quirked in alarm, "What's the matter? You all right?"

She caught her breath, "Sure. I'm fine."

The patient's eyes narrowed and she looked Kitty up and down. "You don't look fine."

Kitty filled the basin with water and began to shave the woman's belly. "Just something I ate, I guess. I'm all right."

"You shouldn't be working, you know. As far along as you are. Let your husband carry the load for a while." Her eyes fell on Kitty's soapy hands. Kitty followed her gaze, then curled her fingers into her palm.

"I don't wear rings while I'm working. They get caught on things," she said defensively. She wasn't quite sure why she bothered to lie. Lots of girls had babies these days without being married. She wasn't ashamed. But there was something in the woman's sharp face that reminded her of her mother.

She was toweling the woman dry when the next contraction came. This time it began in her back like hot tugging fingers pulling on either side of her spine. Her belly felt tight as a drumhead.

She dumped the prep kit into the trash and got out of the room. She leaned against the doorjamb for a few seconds until the pain passed, then headed for the bathroom.

She came out a few minutes later, shaken. There had been a pink-tinged spot on her panties. She didn't know much about OB, but she knew what it was that she had seen. It was what they called bloody show. She was in labor. She didn't want to think about it. Not now. She brushed a lock of hair from her eyes and looked up and down the hall. Janice. She needed to talk to her. She'd know what to do.

She spotted Janice's round, homely face in an excited knot of people at the nurses' desk. "Who would have believed it?" said the ward secretary, looking from one to another. "Of all the people around here, I'd never have picked him."

"It just goes to show you can't tell about people," someone said.

"You can't tell about who?" asked Kitty.

"About anybody. Not anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"About Jim Bohannon."

"Who?" She shook her head. She didn't feel that she was thinking very clearly at all. "You know. Jim—the security guard," Janice's pale eyes were rounder than usual. "They just picked him up for killing the Herrera kid."

Kitty blinked. Jim? The guy who always had a big hello for her whenever they passed. Everybody liked him. It wasn't possible. She touched Janice's arm. "Are you sure?"

"That's what I said. None of us can believe it. I thought— What's the matter?" Janice reached out and steadied her. "Are you all right?"

Hunched a little from the pain in her back, Kitty took a breath, then said, "I think I'd better go sit down."

Janice steered her to the nurses' lounge, deposited her in a chair, and looked at her sharply. "Have your pains started?"

Kitty nodded and leaned forward, hands clutching her belly.

"I'd better call Rideout."

"No."

"Davis, then. You need to have a nurse look at you."

She shook her head. Nobody else could know. Nobody. She could see Jim standing over the Herrera kid. Jim—with a knife. A

nice normal guy like Jim. She could have coped with the idea of P.G. killing the boy. P.G. the creep. But Jim—

"Look. I gotta call somebody. You're in labor. You need to go up to OB."

To OB—where babies came in shiny plastic packages. Nau-sea rippled in her stomach and became a wave. She ran into the bathroom and began to vomit, clutching the side of the toilet bowl to keep her balance. Then she tottered back to the chair and sank, exhausted.

Janice ran water on a washcloth and patted it on Kitty's forehead. "I'm calling Rideout."

"No. Please. You've got to help me," she begged. "I can't have the baby here. I've got to get home."

Janice's eyes rounded, then narrowed in sympathy. "I know you're scared. But you've got to have a doctor or a nurse."

"You can help me."

Janice shook her head in amazement. "Honey, I know we're friends, but you've got too much faith. I'm just an aide like you, remember?"

"Please. I don't care. I've got to get home. You can help me."

"You can't take that kind of a chance. You need a doctor."

Shiny yellow plastic stretched over little faces. It could be anybody. Anybody at all. Somebody who smiled and gave you a wink on the elevator. Anybody. She began to moan, clutching her belly, rocking back and forth at the sudden contraction. "Oh please. Oh please, oh God, oh please."

Janice turned away. She stared at the floor and rubbed her arms, then she looked back at the hunched figure who whimpered in pain and fright. She took a breath, then turning, reached out and hugged the girl to her. "All right, Kitty. I'll help you." She glanced at the wall clock. "It's nearly eleven. We'd better leave soon."

* * *

Janice stared at Kitty's stove. It was old and it had been modified for metered gas. She fingered knobs that wouldn't turn and looked in vain for some kind of switch that would start the flow of fuel. "Kitty, I can't get the stove to turn on." She stepped into the bedroom.

Kitty lay curled on her side on the unmade bed, clutching a thin pillow, moaning softly. Janice stared uncertainly at the girl. How had she managed to let herself get talked into this? "Kitty, the stove. I need to turn on the stove."

Kitty looked at her, "Huh?"

"The stove. I need to boil water."

Kitty drew up her feet and tried to sit up. "It's on the back. The switch. It's off to one side. I'll do it." She tried to get up, when another contraction began. This one was harder. Her mouth fell open with the surprise of it. She gasped, grabbed the pillow, stuffed the end into her mouth, and bit down.

Janice twisted her hand against her mouth, started to move toward Kitty, then ran to the stove instead. She'd have to have something to tie the cord with. She knew that much, anyway. And she needed to boil water to sterilize the tape and the scissors. Scissors. She needed a pair of scissors. Damn! She didn't know if Kitty even had any scissors. Then she remembered. Sure. She'd had a pair at work. They'd be in the pocket of her uniform. She ran back into the bedroom and picked up the clothes from the heap on the floor where Kitty had dropped them. The scissors were there and she scurried back to the little kitchen.

She ran her fingers behind the back edge of the stove near the top. There was a hole there and inside—the switch. She snapped it on. The pilot light flamed.

She found a pot and ran water, dumped in the scissors, and set it on a burner turned to high. Now.... Tape. She needed tape or string. Something.

She found a clean towel, ragged with age, ripped a narrow length from the end of it, and tossed it into the pot.

While the water boiled, she went back to check on Kitty. Sweat lined the girl's forehead. She lay on her back, arching her body, riding with the force of the contraction. When it subsided, her eyes glazed and she dozed.

Janice pulled down the sheet. God. She was getting the bed in a mess. There had to be something in this room to put under Kitty's hips. She went to the dresser and pulled open a drawer. A jumble of underwear. The next one held a pathetic little pile of baby clothes, a tiny pink dress, a pink gown, two little undershirts and a white blanket. The bottom drawer held a box of disposable diapers. She started to rip it open, but stopped. She'd have to find something else. The baby would need the diapers. She stared at the box and suddenly it hit home—there was going to be a baby, and she was going to have to deliver it.

The sum-total of her obstetrical experience had been pre-siding at the birth of her dachshund's litter. She raced into the kitchen again. The water bubbled on the stove, clanking the scissors in a ticky-tacky little rhythm against the side of the pot. She found a cooking fork and fished the length of towel and the scissors out and plopped them, dripping, on a folded clean dish towel. It wasn't altogether sterile, she thought, but it would have to do.

She laid the towel on the table, then took it up again. The table cloth was plastic. It would do for a bed pad. She put the dish towel and scissors on the counter and pulled the cloth off the table. In the bathroom, she picked up what towels she could find. As she did, a cry from the bedroom startled her. She ran in as Kitty arched her back again. In horror, she saw a gush of fluid spurt from the girl. She caught most of it with a towel and managed to tuck the plastic cloth and another towel under her. Kitty clutched at her arm as another contraction racked her, "Help me-e-e-e." It ended in a strangled screech.

"I'm here. I'm here. It's all right." She prayed that it was. As she pulled away from Kitty's grip, a row of red crescent scratches lined her arm.

At the next pain, Kitty began to bulge and Janice realized with a start that she was seeing the baby's head. Dear God. It was nearly here. She needed to wash her hands.

She ran into the bathroom and washed with a sliver of soap she found there. With dripping hands, she remembered that she had taken all the towels to the bedroom.

A scream sent her racing back to Kitty. "It's coming! Oh, God. It's coming!" the girl yelled. And then it was too late to think about towels or anything except the baby. Its head was fully born. She grasped it, and felt it turn in her hands. A shoulder slid out,

then the rest of its body—a tiny, slippery boy on a bloody towel.

"It's a boy. You've got a boy."

Kitty raised up on her elbows, "A boy? Is it really here?" Her breath came in short pants. "Is it all right?"

Janice stood up wearily and brushed a strand of hair from her face with a forearm. "He's here all right." The baby gave a fretful cry. Then another.

Some of the fatigue went out of Kitty's face when she heard him. "Is he all right? Let me hold him."

Janice reached for the slippery baby, then stopped. The umbilical cord pulsed. "Oh, Christ. I forgot about the cord." And she scampered to the kitchen for her scissors.

She snatched up the dish towel that held the scissors, started back toward the bedroom, then stopped. The placenta was going to come. What could she do with it? She fumbled through the cabinets, found a small package of plastic garbage bags, and pulled one out.

Kitty opened half-closed eyes and stared at her as she came up to the bed. "I'm going to cut him loose," said Janice with false bravado. She didn't know how to proceed. Should she do it now, or wait until the placenta came?

Kitty gave a short gasp, then clutched at her baby with a wail of anguish. Janice stopped short, "What is it?"

Kitty was staring in horror at Janice's hands, and as she stared, the wail became a piercing keen.

"What? What is it?" Janice looked, bewildered, at Kitty, then down at her own hands, at the towel, the scissors, the plastic bag.... Oh, God. The bag! The babies from the nursery.... "Oh, Kitty—No." She turned away from the screaming girl and ran from the room. Her face twisted with the pain of it. They were friends. Friends, damn it. Didn't that mean anything? Janice's face began to work. She leaned against the wall in exhaustion as tears streamed down her face. How could Kitty think it? How could she?

Someone began to bang on the door. Janice scrubbed at the tears with the back of her hand. The thumping at the door grew louder, punctuated with angry female yells, "Open up. Building superintendent." At the sound, the screams from the bedroom stopped.

Janice drew herself up, went to the door, and opened it.

"Do you know what time it is?" demanded the disheveled woman in robe and slippers. Her mouth pinched shut in disapproval—a little line of a mouth lost in the creases of fat that rolled around her chin.

As Janice stared at her, the thin mouth made a little round O and gave out a startled gasp.

Oh my God, how I must look, she thought. She glanced at her bloody hands clutching the scissors. She must think I'm a murderer. She had a crazy desire to laugh. In less than ten minutes, two people thought she was some kind of homicidal maniac. She wanted desperately to laugh, but she was afraid that if she started, she might never stop. So she took a shuddering breath and finally said, "It's Kitty. She just had her baby—" And she found herself suddenly chattering away to the grim-looking stranger, saying aimless, stupid things as if she had no control at all, as if a vapid ventriloquist had taken over her tongue. She waved the scissors under the astonished woman's nose. "—and then I was going to cut the cord. But, I didn't because—Ohmigod. The cord. I never did—I never did cut it."

A thin wail came from the bedroom. "I'd better see about him." She dashed into the bedroom again. The astonished fat woman followed.

Kitty lay very quiet. She held the baby to her breast and his tiny mouth rooted for the nipple. "I'm sorry, Janice," she said in a small voice. "I lost my head."

The fat woman stared at the baby. "Scrawny little thing, isn't it? Dark. Like you." She put her face closer to him.

"He's got a birthmark." A red ellipse pulsed at the angle of his jaw, as he pressed against his mother's breast. "What are you going to name him?"

Kitty ran her fingers over his damp black hair. "Silvio. His name is Silvio."

The baby ceased his rooting and closed his eyes. Then he opened them again. Janice felt as if he were staring directly at her. It was silly. She knew he was too young to focus yet, but he seemed to single her out. His eyes seemed old, and somehow shrewd. She felt fatigue cover her like a heavy blanket. She blinked, then said to Kitty, "I think we'd better get you two cleaned up."

Chapter 5

The world had declared war on its children. In an attempt to regain control, the shaky World Coalition mustered its troops. Government propagandists penned soothing homilies, suggesting that the process might soon be effective for everyone. Sales of liquor and mind-altering drugs were severely curtailed. Strict curfews were enforced. The ranks of law-enforcement agencies, not immune to the war against the children, buckled under the workload. The deprocessing continued.

Religious leaders, deadlocked in internal strife, temporized as a relentless Shiva stalked the land.

When WorldCo's propaganda failed to defuse the situation, the government, in response to the people's cry of "Do something," overreacted. Operating under the theory that a media spreading news of violence throughout the world promulgated more, WorldCo silenced networks and wire services. The media, hobbled by the bureaucratic blanket that muffled world and national airwaves, gave out only such messages as WorldCo deemed fit. No news of outside conditions reached the city now, and so the attention of Tampans turned inward, feeding more on rumor than on fact, as local news sources tried to cope with the problem.

Though traffic continued to flow through the main arteries of Tampa, the sidestreets, the yards, the playgrounds, took on a look of neglect. The opening of school was delayed indefinitely while the teachers, faced with economic ruin, gathered in grim-faced sessions with union leaders.

Pregnant women, afraid to enter the hospitals, panted in labor in their homes behind locked doors, attended by those they trusted. Often their trust was betrayed. Pediatric wards filled with trauma cases.

Psychologists and psychiatrists at the University of South Florida attempted to explain the anomaly, producing conflicting theories, while marauding bands of young men prowled through the streets with knives and chains.

The public outcry grew. Law-abiding citizens demanded that something be done. The mayor of Tampa collapsed with a bleeding ulcer. The beleaguered police, caught between the extremes of a polarized populace, walked off their jobs in large numbers.

For a short time, Tampa grew quiet; and then as economic conditions worsened, outbursts began again. People who had never before contemplated the reality of death were forced to examine their lives. Small groups made not quite sane by jealousy and rage spread their hysteria.

The sick fire smoldered, sputtered into life, flamed, smoldered again. It crept into the roots of the city and consumed them. The terror spread. No child was safe.

Weeds began to press green sprouts through the dirt hollows under playground swings.

Moko, the chimpanzee, sat hunched in her cage in the deserted Busch Gardens and mourned the death of her baby, killed by a single shot as he clung to her fur and suckled.

Chapter 6

Kurt blew into the nearly finished oboe reed and listened critically to its high-pitched crow. It felt stiff. He unfolded his round-tipped reed knife and began to scrape the lay of the reed with the razor-sharp edge. Across the table, Eric shuffled dog-eared cards and dealt himself another hand of solitaire. In a few minutes he tossed the cards in an untidy heap and looked at his watch. "I wish we could have gone with Dad."

Kurt looked up sharply, "You think he'll be all right, don't you?"

Eric stared at the pile of cards before he said, "You know, they said they wouldn't do the implant early. Because of the risks."

Kurt nodded. They wouldn't do it unless—until the pain couldn't be controlled any other way. He tried to imagine the little wires snaking into his father's skull. He'd be free of pain then, with the push of a button. But being free of pain meant not much more time. Not much more. He felt tears spring to his eyes. Embarrassed, he stood up and strode briskly to the window to hide them. The grounds below were deserted. He could imagine thousands of other kids looking out through layers of window glass onto empty yards and playgrounds. It wasn't fair. His eyes squeezed shut. He wanted to be at the hospital with his father. He wanted to hold his hand, tell him it was all right, tell him.... Tell him he loved him.

He stood at the window for a minute or two, then he spun around. "I'm going out."

Eric's mouth opened, then closed before he said. "That's pretty stupid."

"I don't care. I'm going." "Where?"

"I don't know. To—to Grandma. I'm going to see Grandma." "Why?"

"I don't know." His voice rose. "I don't know." He threw open a drawer and found his lock-slot key.

Eric was up, moving to his side, "Are you sure?" He pressed his lips together. He nodded. "Want me to go with you?"

He shook his head and turned toward the door, then stopped, went back and picked up the little folding reed knife and slipped it into his boot. Then, as Eric watched silently, he opened the door to the hallway and was gone.

* * *

He turned his radio off and pedaled silently through back streets and alleyways toward Old Hyde Park. Once he wheeled past an old man who stared at him with shocked eyes and said, "Go home, boy! Go back home."

He came to a section of old wooden houses that turned their faces inward to a paved courtyard. There he jumped off, shoved his bike behind a sprawling hibiscus bush and clattered up the steps and across the gray porch of the old house. He pulled open the sagging screen and tapped on the door.

A pair of sharp eyes peered through the little window. The door wheezed open. "Kurt! Good God. Kurt." The old woman seized him by the arm and hustled him inside. She pushed the door shut and locked it. "What are you doing here?"

He didn't know what to say. He stared at his feet and at the rug that had been blue once, but was now a faded indecisive gray; he stared at the walls with their sagging shelves filled with books and magazines; he stared at the ceiling where an industrious house spider toiled against gravity. He looked anywhere but at her face. Why had he come?

When at last he brought his eyes to hers, he felt a hard lump growing in his throat. He broke into unexpected tears and found them abjectly humiliating. Without wanting to, he began to babble, exposing parts of himself he had thought well-covered—the parts that were still frightened little boy. It mortified him that the words came tumbling out of his mouth as if they had a will of their own. His needs, his hopes, and overall—above all—his fears. His daddy was going to die—and he was going to be left alone in a world too bent out of shape to recognize.

She hugged him to her and then held him at arm's length and searched his face. "Oh, Kurt." The top of her head reached only to his nose. Sharply intelligent gray eyes peered out from a wrinkled face translucent with age. She was seventy-eight and not his grandmother, but his great-grandmother. He had never known his grandmother. She had died when his father was born.

After pushing him down on a hard chair in her kitchen, she bustled around setting things right, first setting her battered copper kettle to boil on the old stove. She would "fix him a cup of tea," because tea was her panacea for all ills, real and imagined. She filled his hands with cookies from a cracked ceramic jar in the shape of a leering frog, and when his mouth was full and crumbs dotted his chin she asked him questions. While they talked, the water boiled away to nothing in the kettle until, with a loud crack, the spout fell off and clattered onto the stove top.

"Dammit to hell!" She leaped up, scurried to the stove, and snatched at the pot. On inspection, the bottom of the kettle was black, but apparently intact. "Melted the solder." She deposited the remains in the sink and turned on the cold water tap. A cloud of steam rose and enveloped her face in a billowing cloud. "Damn. I've had that pot for forty years." She held the spout up to the kettle, fitting it back for a moment. Then she laid it in the sink with a rueful grin. "I guess I got my money's worth."

"Can you fix it?" He felt vaguely guilty, as if the ruin of the teapot were his fault.

"Probably not. Anyway, I have another one." She opened a cabinet below the stove and rummaged around, head and shoulder disappearing inside its murky interior. In a moment she reappeared bearing a dusty battered box. A shiny chrome pot emerged.

"Had it for years, but I never used it before." She rinsed it, filled it with water, and set it on the stove. "Bet it won't last like the old one did, though."

She sat down next to him, patted his hand, and suddenly began to chuckle. It was infectious. He felt a smile creep to his lips. "What's funny?"

"Me. Crazy old woman. Why would I need a pot to last another forty years? That would make me a hundred and eighteen then, wouldn't it?"

He kept on smiling, but his eyes widened, and they felt wet to him. His lips began to tremble, and he caught the lower one between his teeth.

"Now I've done it," she chided herself. "I've gone and made you feel bad again." She patted his hand briskly, causing it to thump against the table top. "Well, don't pay any attention to me. Crazy old woman. I never was any good at being a grandmother." She fumbled for her cigarettes, re-moved a crumpled one, and lit it.

He watched, fascinated. The end of the cigarette was bent at a crazy angle, but it seemed to draw well.

"I never was any good at being a mother either," she said through a cloud of smoke. "Never had any training. I would have made a pretty fair violinist, but when I got married I had to take an executive position—First Vice-President in charge of the children. The Peter Principle at work. It's a helluva thing to trust children to incompetents." She chuckled and thumped his hand fondly. "Fortunately, they seem to turn out pretty well in spite of it."

He grinned at her. "I think the water's boiling away again."

"Hell and damn." She leaped up and yanked the pot from the stove, then began to pour it, bubbling, into the cups. Suddenly she stopped, set down the pot, and stared out of the window at the street beyond.

"What is it?"

A hand prodded the air in his direction, silencing him. Something held her, something in the yard that caused her eyes to narrow and made a little lump of muscle tick at the angle of her jaw. She backed away from the window toward the hall, then was gone. He heard the creak of a closet door on its hinges and then a muffled thump. When she came back, the sun glinted against black metal in her hands. She fished bullets from a little cardboard box and inexpertly loaded the antique Luger.

"What is it?" he whispered. He felt a creeping along the back of his neck like a cold breeze scurrying through his hair. "Who's out there?" He got to his feet and moved toward the window.

"Get back."

He fell back into the shadows, then cautiously peeped out. There were five of them, five men with guns and rusty-looking chains slung from wide belts. They stood at the corner of the house across the way. A thickset man with dirty blond hair and pudgy fingers squeezed the last of his beer into his mouth, then tossed the empty polybag toward a Brazilian pepper bush. It hung for a second on a branch, then flopped to the alleyway below.

He heard the snap of the Luger being cocked. She can't hold off five men with that thing, he thought in dismay. She was going to get them both killed. "Grandma, no!"

"Sh-s-sh. It's all right. I had it worked on when all the trouble started."

"Grandma, please," he whispered urgently. "They don't know I'm here."

"Where's your bike?"

"I hid it behind a bush."

Some of the tenseness went out of her face. "Thank God." But her hands still gripped the Luger. He could see the hard angle of her jaw through the translucent skin. It tightened, relaxed, then tightened again. "Scum," she said, staring out of the window. "Goddamn scum."

The men were laughing at something, a loud braying laugh that bellowed across the little yard. Then they were moving, walking away toward the west with the sun glinting on the loops of chain. In another minute, they were out of sight.

Her breath came out in a little sighing gasp; her shoulders sagged. She laid the gun on the countertop and looked at him with a face crumpled into a thousand folds. "I lost my Linda when she had your daddy. I'm going to lose him too. But I'm not going to lose you." She began to weep, and this time he was the one who patted her hand and awkwardly caressed the thin stooped shoulders.

* * *

When charcoal shadows crawled beneath the moon, Kurt left his grandmother's house. The branches of the hibiscus rustled in the darkness as he extracted his bike and wheeled silently toward the street past black houses with yellow window-eyes. No porch lights shone.

He kept to the side streets, pedaling quickly, casting frequent glances over his shoulder. An owl cried from somewhere just behind him. Cold rippled down his spine.

The smell of salt filled the air from the bay ahead. He avoided Bayshore Boulevard and rolled quietly down back streets under the night shadows of live oaks hung with beards of Spanish moss. Warm air rising from the land rushed toward the cool of the bay. The breeze whipped through the leaves and the moss-curls, causing tarry shadows to creep and shudder in the moonlight.

Light suddenly splashed from an alleyway and washed the street just ahead of him. He veered sharply, skidding to the right along the gutter nearest the alley. Backpedaling, he slid to a stop, crunching a pile of dry oak leaves under his tires.

The light bobbed and swung toward him, away, toward him again. His heart pounded in his ears. No place to turn off. No side street, only driveways. He'd have to turn around. He slid off the bike, turning it back. He moved in a creeping arc, praying, cursing silently, as leaves shattered in his wake exploding the silence.

Light sprayed over him. "Got one!"

He leaped on the bike, pedaling frantically as something hissed through the air.

The length of chain sang against his ribs snapping two of them as it wound in tight embrace. His breath escaped in a high-pitched wail before clenched teeth choked it off in an agonized spasm.

Off-balance, he veered to the left, gripping the handlebars savagely as if to contain the pain. The chain fell away and clanked to

the ground in stop-motion action as if each link struck pavement separately.

His legs pumped in nightmare slow motion. Each breath shrieked against the stab of his ribs. The bike crawled.

A shout behind him—meaningless syllables buffeting: "St— ah—ah—p-p-p h—h—h—i—m-m-m. ..."

Whine. A hot whine. It buried itself, its whine, in the flesh of his shoulder. Hot. Hot. Keep going. Got to keep going. Hot. Dark street. Dark place. Dark....

* * *

He never remembered how he got home. He remembered compulsively pushing a blood-stained bike into a lock-slot. And then—What then? Crouching. Crouching in a room. Elevator? In the elevator. Sick in the elevator. His shirt was off

He dabbed at his mouth with his shirt, trying to wipe away the sour vomit. Blood trickled down his chest. His pants were soaked. Oh God, his pants were soaked. He rubbed at the wet with his wadded shirt, staring at it foolishly as it turned red in his hands.

The elevator opened to the night-lit hall. He teetered toward his door. How to open it? He swayed in confusion. Had to use his card, but his pants were wet. Couldn't he.... Knock. He could knock. His fingers splayed against the door in a sticky pat. Oh God, oh God. Please.

He leaned his head against the jamb. Please? His fingers stretched along the unyielding door. He drew them up into a red claw that scabbled against it.

The door fell open.

He swayed in the entrance. "Mama?"

Carmen Kraus stared at her son. Her mouth twisted open; her throat muscles worked, but the scream aborted in a horrible gagging sound.

"Mama. Help me—"

It was Eric who pulled him into the room. Eric who stood staring for a moment and then eased him to the floor and ran for towels. He threw a pile of them beside him, pressing one against the wounds, sliding another under his head. "We've got to get him an ambulance."

She stared at Eric as if he spoke a foreign language.

"Call an ambulance."

She began to shake her head. It moved back and forth like a wind-up toy. "Mama!"

"I can't, I can't, I can't." She pressed both fists against her face as if to stop the terrible shaking of her head.

Eric pressed Kurt's hand against the wadded towel. "Hold it. Mash hard so the bleeding stops." He scrambled to his feet and ran to the telephone.

Carmen Kraus stood over Kurt. White streaks curved around her mouth and nose, enclosing them in a blanched parenthesis. It was something for him to focus on. The mouth was a dash within the parenthesis; it began to work, "I can't. I can't go back there. Don't you see? Don't you?"

He clutched the wadded towel to him and stared at the mouth, at the white lines that punctuated it. Sweat trickled over his scalp drawing dark hair into damp curling tangles.

"I've already gone to the hospital today. I sat at a bed. I can't go back there. You can't expect me to go back there." Her voice grew fainter as if she were going away, but the mouth still hung over him, moving, stretching itself into different shapes: O's and —'s, a thin dash. Then he couldn't hear the voice at all, but only the rush of his own blood pulsing in his ears, a shaggy windy sound that blew a faint F sharp through his head.

When the two men came, pushing a stretcher between them, he felt a hand clutching his. He came back from somewhere far away and looked up into Eric's face. "Grandma—"

"What? What, Kurt?"

"Grandma—" He strained to project his voice past the rushing note in his head. "Tell her—Tell her I'm all right."

* * *

The doors marked EMERGENCY splayed open. Hands lifted him from the ambulance stretcher to another. Someone switched on the stretcher radio receiver. Over the faint hiss of static, a woman's voice murmured in his ear, "...welcome to Tampa General Hospital. Be calm. Do not be afraid. You will receive the best of care. Be calm...." The voice dropped fainter until the message became subliminal.

Someone covered him with a red blanket. Then the stretcher turned crazily and joggled onto a track. Only half-aware, he felt himself moving.

Beyond a doorway, another radio beacon. The voice was saying, "... now entering Triage Area One. A doctor or nurse will take care of you. You are in good hands. You are now entering Triage Area One. A doctor or nurse will...."

A nurse peered down at him. She threw back the blanket, snapped a pulse cot on his finger and wrapped a blood-pressure sensor on his arm. The sensor tightened, and he moaned. He felt the soggy towel peel away from his chest. The nurse sprayed something icy on his shoulders and ribs. Soft pink foam rose in a soothing blanket over his wounds.

"Can you tell me your name?"

He stared at her face. It blurred then focused.

"Tell me your name."

"K—Kurt."

Her soft fingers ran over his head, his neck. "You're going to be fine, Kurt. Just fine." Fingers probed his abdomen, his groin. A light blazed into his eyes.

The nurse pressed a button and gave the stretcher a shove. He trundled away.

"...entering Trauma Area Three. Be calm. All is well. You are receiving the best of care. Be calm. All is well. You are receiving the best of care...."

The brilliant lights overhead danced insanely above him, then everything went very black.

* * *

"Stop that." A restraining hand captured his flailing arm. "Lie still. You're going to pull out that tube if you don't lie still."

He blinked and tried to focus through a gray haze. Something stung his arm. He reached over to rub it.

"Lie still. You've got a unit of Hemodex going in that arm." The face of a young nurse came into focus. "You lost a lot of blood. That's what the Hemodex is for. You're going to be all right."

He tried to say, "Water," but it came out sounding like a croak. The girl seemed to understand though. She dabbed at his lips with something wet that smelled of lemon. "You can have some water in a little while. Now sleep,"

He did.

He woke with a clear head and a fierce pain in his ribs, but he felt much stronger. He lay in a hospital bed, and the nurse was removing the empty Hemodex container. "Feeling better?"

"Hurts. Can I have some water?"

She held a tube to his lips, and he sucked deeply. Nothing had ever tasted so good. "Where's the pain?" she asked.

His fingers traced a path across his ribs and came to rest on a thick dressing on his shoulder.

She swung a coder from the wall. "Coming up. We'll get you some Endo—M." She pecked out a message on the coder and impressed it with a marker attached to her uniform. Then she touched the marker to the hospital bracelet he wore. A small door slid open in the wall. She took out the skinny tube inside and held it to his nose. "Take a deep breath." As he breathed in, she squeezed the tube. Pain stabbed in his chest from the breath, but it faded almost at once and receded in a dull haze. He felt lightheaded.

"You'll buzz for a few minutes," she said, "then you'll clear. Endo—M is great for pain. You're lucky. If it weren't for the process, you'd be hurting a lot worse."

He looked around the dimly lighted room. "Where am I?"

"Four West. Pediatric Trauma and Orthopedics. I'll let you rest now. If you need anything, call me. My name's Betty."

She started to go, but he caught her arm. "Wait. My dad is a patient here. Richard Kraus. I want to see him."

She looked doubtful. "Nobody's allowed on this floor except staff, Kurt. Since the—the disturbances. Not even parents."

"He doesn't have to come here. I'll go there." She shook her head.

"Please. He had surgery today—an implant. I don't even know how he is."

A line creased her brow, then smoothed away. "Well, I can find that out for you at least. What did you say his name was?"

He told her and she left the room. In a few minutes he heard her voice from the wall speaker. "Kurt. Your father's condition is satisfactory."

"I want to see him."

"I'm sorry. It just isn't permitted. Besides, your father isn't even in this section of the hospital. He's on the Hixon Oncology Wing. I'm really sorry, Kurt. But he's doing all right." The speaker clicked off.

* * *

He felt his heart scurry into his throat. No one was in the darkened hall as he slipped out. He stopped and listened for the faint squishing sound of shoes against polished floor. He heard nothing. The clock on the wall whispered as its display rolled another digit of time away. Three twenty-two.

He felt as if he were breaking the law. No one had told him that he had to stay in his room. But it seemed that in hospitals all the rules were backwards. If you weren't told it was all right, then it wasn't. He had no idea what he would do if anyone caught him outside his room. He had no idea what they would do. The point was to stay out of sight because if anybody saw him they couldn't miss those baggy tossaway pajamas that marked him unmistakably as a patient.

He looked around in sudden dismay. He didn't know how to find his father. The nurse had said the Hixon Oncology Wing, but where was that? He knew what "oncology" meant—cancer, another word for cancer, the kind they hadn't learned how to cure yet.

To the left loomed an EXIT sign. That would probably take him to the stairs or to those motorized evacuation ramps. The elevators would be to the right then. He'd have a better chance with those.

He made his way up the hallway, staying close to the gray shadows along the wall. He heard a soft thump and then the squeak of wheels in need of lubrication. An alcove was just ahead. He darted into the darkened niche.

The wheels were coming closer. He looked wildly around. There were two doors in the alcove, one marked LINEN, the other said TRACTION. He pushed open the second door and slipped inside, pressed against an array of hardware. With a little pulling, the door would just close. In a moment, someone pushed a stretcher into the alcove, turned, and left.

When he was sure that no one was still near, he opened the door. The stretcher stood against the opening. It glided to one side at the touch of his hand. He began to sidle past it, then stopped and ran his hand over the pillow and the thin mattress under it. A little radio receiver was wedged between the mattress and the side rails. He held it to his ear. Nothing. But that didn't matter. It would pick up near a beacon. It was going to lead him to his father.

* * *

He stepped off the elevator, and glanced anxiously up and down the darkened hall. No one was around. He turned right and came to a T. The beacon whispered, "...entering Hixon Oncology Wing. You are entering..."

Behind a half-opened door, a light shone from a patient's room. He heard voices inside. He slipped past and the radio fell silent. Scarcely breathing, he scanned each door as he passed, looking for his father's name. He found it at the end of the hall.

He pushed against the door and it gave way at his touch. The room was dark, illuminated only by pink-hued street-lights shining through half-drawn blinds. The bed lay in stripes of shadow. He drew nearer, peering into the room, trying to see his father's face in the darkness. "Dad?" It was a whisper; it was a question. "Dad."

Richard Kraus stirred and looked at his son.

"Dad, it's me. Kurt. I came to see you," he added irrelevantly. He groped for his father's hand and found it. It felt dry and cool to his touch.

"Why are you here?" Richard Kraus's hand lay unmoving in Kurt's.

"I got hurt. But I'm all right now."

There was no response.

Kurt felt the silence thicken. "Dad, is everything all right?"

A short laugh as dry and cool as the hand he held came as answer. The silence pressed back, then the words, "Everything's fine, Kurt. Everything's wonderful. I even have a button to push to kill the pain." He laughed again. It ended in a spasm of coughing. The hand Kurt held pulled away and groped for a basin on the bedside table. Kurt held it to his lips while he coughed up a string of mucus.

Richard Kraus lay back against his pillow, catching his breath for a moment before he said, "I suppose I should ask how you got hurt." He turned slightly toward the boy. His face lay in shadow, with only a stripe of light across his lips. "Do you know something, Kurt? I can't really think about that now. I can't really care." His mouth pressed shut, then opened again. The tip of his tongue slid along his upper lip. "That's one thing about being sick. It makes you look inside. After a while what's outside doesn't matter anymore. You get selfish."

Kurt stared at his father and tried to understand how he felt. That must have been why he had never said anything about the process. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it was like for his father, what it was like to face the future and see it shrink down to months, then weeks, then less. "I've wanted to talk to you about—"

"About the rest of your life."

He reached for his father's hand again, touched it, felt it pull away.

Richard Kraus's lips pressed together, relaxed, pressed together again. "The truth is, Kurt, I just don't give a damn."

Kurt's face felt stiff and strange to him. He was glad it was dark in the room. He heard the drone of his father's voice; he heard it say, "I spent the last of my passion the day I knew you were immortal." The voice stopped, then started again, heavier and slower, in a tone the boy would never forget. "I wanted very much to kill you."

The words were knives and ice. And Eric too? the thought screamed. And Eric too? He sat in the blackness. He sat and stared and found a voice, lower, calmer than he would have believed. "Why didn't you?"

"I didn't have the strength."

He stood up. Suddenly an overwhelming weakness struck him and he clutched the back of the chair for support. He squeezed the chair with numbing fingers; he squeezed out the words. "I'm glad you didn't." His new-found voice was smooth ice. "Because, now I'm going to live forever. I'm going to watch you die."

He turned and walked to the door. He stood there with his hand on the knob, staring toward the bed, toward the silent man who lay there. Part of him wanted to take it all back, run to the bed and cry, "I didn't mean it." But something in him, something cold and rigid, held him back, and he opened the door and walked out.

Chapter 7

The bulletin had been repeated hourly for nearly a week on the world and national news. Broadcast in all languages, it was duplicated in sign language and subtitles. It emerged on flexi-sheets from home computers. It was brailled. The message assaulted the ear from public transportation speakers and interrupted piped-in music.

NOTICE

As a result of the current emergency, it has become necessary to admit all citizens under the age of eighteen years to protective custody. All children are to be taken to neighborhood collecting points on SAFETY DAY. Children will then be escorted to designated encampments by government representatives. This is a temporary measure. All children will be returned to their parents as soon as possible. Failure of adults to comply with this ruling or to hinder its enforcement has been declared by World Coalition a felony bearing the penalty of fine and imprisonment.

It must be emphasized that this is a temporary measure.

IT IS NECESSARY FOR THE SAFETY OF YOUR CHILD.

Mail-slots filled with directives:

TO PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER THIRTY-SIX MONTHS OF AGE

...will be cared for by skilled caretakers who have passed Government Standard Test 4098: Psychological Profile....

YOUR SCHOOL-AGED CHILD

...from the ages of thirty-six months to eighteen years of age are to be accompanied by parent or guardian to neighborhood collection points. Each child is to bring no more clothing than he or she can carry without undue fatigue. Provide your child with a packed lunch and personal hygiene items. Do not include large toys or other items....

THE PROTECTED INFANT

...and formulas to be provided by special nurses who have passed standard psychological profile tests....

YOUR HANDICAPPED CHILD

....up to the age of eighteen years, must be accompanied by parent or guardian to collection points designated HANDI-CAPPED

....

WorldCo allowed limited debate about SAFETY DAY on its airways. The debates were controlled, of course, weighted with logic and subliminal message. It was unfortunate, it was conceded, but necessary. It was to be a temporary situation.

Subliminal messages purred in every part of the world, in every language... Home in time for Christmas... for Hanukka... in time for harvest... for festival... before the rains... before the snow....

Chapter 8

Kurt looked out of the living room window. In the live oak at the edge of the empty playground, a squirrel flirted its tail and nibbled at an acorn. Pink dawn colored the clouds to the east. Below the elevated tracks of TampaTran, a troop truck had discharged its cargo of soldiers. They sat on the damp grass under the big red-lettered sign:

SAFETY DAY COLLECTING POINT 76

It was almost time. His backpack lay on the floor beside him. Not much space left, but he could squeeze it in. He turned to his open oboe case, pulled out the little reed knife, and slipped it into his boot. Snapping the instrument case shut, he slid it into the backpack, pulled the flap over and latched it. Next to his pack, Eric's duffel lay half-open, a cornucopia of clothes and belongings spilling in disarray onto the floor. Eric was showering. Carmen Kraus still slept. She had stayed at the hospital until late last night.

Committee stretched, yawned, and wagged his tail. The effort served to exhaust him. He flopped flat on his belly, nose between paws, eyelids lowered to half-mast. Kurt scratched the dog's head between the ears, and Committee's eyes slid shut. A sudden clatter and a female shriek from the kitchen brought them both to their feet.

"What's wrong?"

His grandmother stood at the counter pawing at a scatter-*ing* of yellowish discs. One flipped on its side and rolled off onto the floor where it broke into a dozen pieces. The empty package next to the bubbler proclaimed: OM-LETTES. She glared at the bubbler. "I hate those things. Believe it or not, Kurt, but when I was your age, a few people still kept chickens." She wrinkled her nose. "Now they don't even keep fresh eggs."

He rescued their breakfast and dropped the dehydrated discs into the bubbler through the clear plasti-port she had neglected to open.

She pressed her lips together in chagrin. "I was going to fix you boys a nice breakfast for your last morning here." She broke off and turned toward the wall, blinking away the sudden moisture in her eyes. "Couldn't even do that. I should have stayed home."

Slightly embarrassed, he pulled out plates and poured glasses of milk and cups of hot coffee.

Still half-asleep, Eric appeared at the door. He towed his hair dry briskly as if that would rouse him. Kurt pulled out the pan and slid steaming Om-lettes onto the plates and put them on the countertop bar.

Four plates, three people. "Where's Mom?" asked Eric.

"Still in her room." Their grandmother rose. "I'll get her up."

The boys ate in silence. They were finished before the two women came into the room. Carmen Kraus's eyes were red and puffy. She had lost weight over the last few weeks and stress lines showed at the edges of her eyes and mouth. She looks old, Kurt thought in surprise. As old as his grandmother, in a way.

She ignored the food on her plate and took only small sips of the coffee. Several times she seemed about to speak, but each time she looked away, staring at the wall, or at the cup she held. Finally she said, "Aren't you two going to call your father—before you go?"

"Sure, Mom," said Eric easily. "We'll do it now." He got up and headed for the living room, stopped, and looked at Kurt, "C'mon."

Kurt shook his head almost imperceptibly. He hadn't told anyone what his father had said. He couldn't. It made him ashamed to think about it. He shook his head again. They were all looking at him. He stared at his fingers, running the close-clipped nails against his palms.

His mother's voice was unbelieving, "Aren't you going to talk to your daddy?"

He felt old and at the same time he felt like a little kid. He wanted to cry, but all he did was shake his head.

Her voice rose. "You're leaving for God knows how long. And he's dying. You're not going to see him again, Kurt. Not ever." Her voice was a shriek, "Now you get in there and call him."

He felt his jaw tighten. Cold trickled through him. He shook his head.

She slapped him with all the strength she had. He sat staring at her for a moment, and then he stood up. "I can't, Mom." He walked out of the room and into the bathroom and locked the door.

He stayed there, locked away from them, until the wail of a siren signaled that Safety Day had begun.

A rise and fall of voices came from his mother's bedroom. He walked into the empty living room and looked through the window at the scene below. Already hundreds of people were gathering. It occurred to him that he and Eric could be separated in that crowd. The thought was untenable. Commit-tee trotted up and nudged him with a cold nose. He ruffled the dog's fur and hugged him close. Then he went to a drawer and took out Committee's leash. The dog danced in delight at the prospect of a walk. "Not this

time," he said softly. He wadded the leash and started to put it into his pack as Eric came into the room. "What's that for?" he asked.

"Just thought I'd need it." He squeezed the thin leash in his hand. It was something to tie the two of them together. "We don't want to lose each other—get separated or anything."

Eric looked at the leash, then back at Kurt, and nodded.

Their grandmother came out of the bedroom. "I guess it's time," she said, "I'll be going down there with you. Your mother isn't feeling up to it. Now, hurry on and say goodbye."

When Eric kissed her, Carmen Kraus clung to him with pats and little cries. She turned a cold cheek to Kurt to receive his kiss. She didn't look at him; she didn't speak.

He squeezed her rigid shoulder, "Goodbye, Mom." When she didn't answer, he turned, picked up his pack and walked out of the room.

* * *

The guard barred the way with a rifle. "No one over eighteen beyond this point, ma'am."

The old woman clutched at the boys' arms. She looked from Eric to Kurt, then back again, "Well, this is where I get off."

They kissed her. Then Kurt took her hand and whispered, "Grandma, I couldn't call him. I just couldn't."

She searched his face and said, "If you couldn't, you couldn't." She thrust a brown package into his hands, "For you and Eric. For later."

He put the package in his pack and kissed her again, then he and Eric had to move on. Lines of children were boarding the Tampa Tran cars. Once they were pushed apart and lost sight of each other. Then Kurt brought out the little dog leash, and Eric clipped the other end to his belt.

Eventually they found seats together on a car, and fifteen minutes later the train began to move. The children from the southern half of Hillsborough county were being relocated at the old abandoned air force base, MacDill Field, not far from there.

Five minutes after their car started, it stopped abruptly. There were rumors of explosive charges on the tracks. When the train didn't move for several hours, the children on board ate their lunches. At sundown, soldiers came aboard with bottled water. There was no food. Everyone was hungry, and the tiny restrooms were beginning to smell. It was ten that night before Kurt remembered the package his grandmother had given him. He opened it. It was full of the crumbly cookies that she always made. Most of them were broken.

He shared them with Eric, but when he tried to eat his, they seemed to dry his mouth and he had trouble swallowing.

Finally, the train began to move, and they arrived at MacDill Field at three A.M.

Chapter 9

As the first light of morning fell through the streaked window, Silvio Tarantino woke. He lay in a makeshift crib, a laundry basket propped on two chairs next to his mother's bed. He stared at the walls with his strange black eyes and sucked his fist until the first sirens of Safety Day blasted the silence. Startled, he threw out his scrawny arms and legs and squalled in outrage. The birthmark at the angle of his jaw darkened as it engorged with blood.

Kitty woke instantly at his cries. For a moment, the sirens confused her. Half-asleep, she thought she was back at the hospital, hearing the sound of ambulances. She fumbled for her baby and put him to her breast. The sirens continued. Awake now, she remembered, and fear flickered across her face.

She had thrown away the government notices of SAFETY DAY, trying not to think about it, trying not to believe that they would take her baby away. Until now, she had managed to repress her fears into a general nameless anxiety that haunted her dreams and turned her waking self into a gaunt wraith whose pulse raced fast in her throat each time her baby cried.

Holding her baby, standing behind the skimpy curtains so that no one would see her, Kitty peered down from the window at the street. Soldiers in twos and threes were everywhere. A couple led their three children toward a collecting point a few blocks away. As she watched the little group move below her, she clutched her baby closer. It couldn't be real. It couldn't be happening. With one hand, she drew the curtains shut. The movement dislodged her nipple from the baby's mouth. At the loss, Silvio gave an outraged scream.

"S-sh-sh." She gave him the nipple again and stared fear-fully at the door. Had anyone heard him? "S-sh-sh, little boy. S-sh-sh," she whispered urgently. She had to keep him quiet.

When he had finished nursing, she bathed him with warm water from the tap and changed him. The box of diapers was empty. She had not dared to go out for more, not since the notices had started to come. She had stayed in her rooms with him, not going to work, not venturing out. There would be a time when all the food would be gone and there would be no money to pay for more. But that was in the future. The thing was to wait—get past today, past next week. Then she'd be able to find someone to take care of him while she went back to work.

She diapered him with a clean, ragged dish towel and slipped on the little pink dress. Then, laying him back in his bed, she carried the night's accumulation of soiled clothes into the bathroom and washed them out.

No one knew about him, and there lay her safety. Only Janice. Janice and Mrs. Forrest, the building superintendent. Janice hadn't told anyone at work. Just said that Kitty was sick with the flu and down with a relapse. And Mrs. Forrest.... Kitty didn't want to think about her, as if by not thinking about her, she would go away. Silvio hadn't caused Forrest any trouble. He had been quiet at night. The woman had no reason even to remember about him. Anyway, it was none of her business. He was hers. Her baby. Nobody else's. Nobody had any right to him except her. Nobody.

She draped the wet clothes over the towel rack and went back into the bedroom. Silvio lay sleeping. She ran her fingers in a gentle caress over his little body and brushed her lips against his hair. He was hers. He was a miracle, and he was hers. She crawled into bed again and tried to sleep. After a while, she did.

Later, Silvio woke and she fed him again, exulting in the feel of his warm little mouth against her and the press of his body as she held him. When he slept, she went into the little kitchen and looked for something to eat. There were only a few food packages left. She opened one and made herself some soup.

She wondered what was going on down there in the streets. It would help to turn on the news, but she resisted the urge. The sound might draw someone's attention. Better for every-one to think that no one was here. She chanced peeking from the window again. Drawing up a chair, she sat staring through the gap where the skimpy curtains didn't quite meet.

She thought of a world without children, without babies. Sure, the government said it was just temporary, but she didn't believe it. She remembered the old joke: God giveth, and the government taketh away. Her lip curled at the bitter thought. Not her baby. Not hers.

She made herself think beyond today, beyond next week. She had to have a plan. She could take him away. Out to the country somewhere—to one of those tiny little towns. If she moved at night, she could avoid people. But how?

Maybe she could give him something to make him sleep. Then she could tuck him into a backpack and get out of the city. She could find a village with a little hospital where she could work. She stared at the street.

As the day wore on, the crowds passing below became a trickle. At five o'clock another siren sounded, and then a voice reverberated through the streets:

"Only thirty minutes remain in the grace period. All children—repeat, all children—under the age of eighteen must be taken at once to the closest receiving station. For your child's safety, do not delay...."

The countdown continued at five-minute intervals through the next half-hour with the additional warning, *"...any citizen defying the Safety Day edict is reminded that such defiance constitutes a felony, punishable by fine and im-prisonment...."*

Silvio cried fretfully. Kitty snatched him up and offered her breast, shushing him with little pats and coos.

It was nearly seven before the knock came at the door. She sat staring in the dimness, not daring to move, not daring to breathe. The knock came again. "Open up. Building super-intendent." Next to her, Silvio stirred in his sleep.

Don't wake up, she thought wildly. Oh, don't wake up. Don't cry. She rose on tiptoes and crept toward the door. The hammering began again. She looked around the twilight room with a frantic idea of barricading the door with something. Anything. Her hands fell on a chair. The pound-ing at the door stopped. They've gone away, she thought. It worked. They thought she was gone. Then, with growing horror, she heard the sound of a card moving into the lock. A house card! A master—The door fell open.

With a quick fumbling movement, the superintendent flicked on the lights, and she and three soldiers moved into the room. Folds of flesh fell around her little pig eyes. "I know you want the best for your baby, Kitty. That's why we're here." Her mouth moved in a prim smile, "It's for his own good."

She stood stiff as steel for a moment, then gasping, she ran to the bedroom door, throwing her weight against it. Two of the soldiers reached for her, holding her, while the third, a woman, went into the bedroom and switched on the light. In a few seconds she returned with the baby.

Stunned, Kitty watched as the woman snapped a tiny ID bracelet onto his ankle, walked to the door with him, and was gone.

"I'll get the rest of his things," said the superintendent. She moved her great bulk toward the bedroom. As though from a great distance, Kitty heard drawers opening, closing. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. The woman emerged carrying a pink nightgown, two little shirts, and a white blanket. It wasn't until then that Kitty began to scream.

* * *

She sat where they had left her. She sat as still as if she were an empty husk. Only the slight movement of air in and out of her lungs demonstrated that she lived. She sat until the night passed and the morning sun slanted into her window, mock-ing her, profaning her, with its cheerfulness.

She moved then, purposefully, ignoring the pain in stiff, resisting muscles. She walked into the tiny kitchen and closed the door behind her.

She drew off her clothes, stuffing them meticulously into the cracks and crevices that ran along the door and the single closed window. When she was satisfied, she reached behind the top edge of the stove and switched on the gas line. The pilot light gave her trouble at first. It persisted in coming back on no matter what she did to extinguish it. Finally, it succumbed to the soaking wadded dish towel she laid over it. Then she turned the gas full on.

She sat down next to the open oven, hunched and naked on the floor, hugging her arms against her empty belly. And as the gas began to fill the room and flood her lungs, she rocked her body slowly back and forth and hummed a lullaby.

Chapter 10

Kurt lifted his pack to his shoulder again as the line began to move. He tugged at the dog leash. One end was clipped to his belt, the other attached to his brother's. "Wake up."

Eric, head cradled on a soiled canvas bag, opened his eyes. "Kurt?" He looked around uncertainly, shaking sleep from his head.

"Come on. There's food in the barracks up ahead. I can smell it." In the fine mist of rain, his black hair had tightened into thick tousled curls.

The line stopped again.

A little girl began to cry. Doubling her hands into small fists, she pummeled a girl of about twelve. "I'm hungry."

The girl dropped to her knees and captured the little fists. "I know, Cindy. I know." She hugged the child to her.

"Where's Momma?"

"Home." A look of pain came over the girl's face. "She's home."

"I wanna—wanna go home, too." Gasping sobs stole her breath. "I'm hungry."

"I know. I know." The bigger girl fumbled at a sack and drew out half an apple. The flesh was brown, the skin shriveled. She looked at it longingly for a moment, then handed it to the child.

In half an hour the line began to move.

* * *

The outside door to the mess hall opened an inch. The soldier guarding the door said something to someone inside, then shouldered his rifle and stepped aside.

The door opened wide to a nearly empty hall. Other children still inside pushed out through double doors on the opposite wall.

The smell of hot stew came from the hall. Kurt, still leashed to his brother, pushed ahead, crowding into the space between serving table and steel railing.

The first of the children carried trays to the long tables, shoving body against body on rough benches, larger children helping smaller.

A fat woman in her fifties slopped stew into crockery bowls. Another woman cut bread in thick slices. A grim-faced sergeant prowled behind the serving line. A half-dozen other soldiers took up posts throughout the hall.

Kurt took his tray and headed in tandem with Eric toward a table.

"Jesus Christ!" The huge stew pot crashed to the floor propelled by a rifle butt. "Glass! There's ground glass in it!"

A soldier standing near Kurt upended his tray with a well-placed kick. A swipe of his hand sent Eric's bowl flying through the air. Other men ran along the tables throwing crockery to the floor amid sobbing children.

The two women in the serving line stood frozen under the aim of the sergeant's rifle. The floor ran with rivulets of gravy clotted with lumps of carrots and potatoes that glistened in the light with splinters of glass.

The sergeant's hands were tight on his rifle. "Get those kids to the medics."

Soldiers herded the group that had begun to eat toward the double doors. Someone else locked the incoming door. "The rest of you kids, sit down."

A little boy scarcely taller than the serving table, clutched his tray and stared bewildered at the two women. "I'm hungry."

The fat woman's eyes narrowed for a moment. Suddenly she began to laugh—silently. Without a sound, great shaking gales of laughter rippled through her body. As quickly as it had started, it stopped and her face twisted into a caricature of itself. She spat full into the little boy's face.

Kurt sat with his brother at the long table and watched as the soldiers led the woman away. He thought of the knife he carried in his boot. It wasn't large. The blade was only eight centimeters long, but it was better than nothing. He could use it if he had to. Thinking about the knife made him feel better.

* * *

After a long delay and a scanty meal, Kurt and Eric waited again. This time the crowded lines pushed toward a makeshift lab where a dozen technicians snapped on tourniquets and drew blood samples into glass tubes.

A young woman reached for Kurt's arm. He flinched involuntarily at the needle in her hand. "It's not poison," she snapped in annoyance. "It's only a needle. Empty. See?" Then she laughed. "You kids." But he didn't see the humor. The needle stung at the bend of his arm. He watched as dark blood ran into the tube. The girl pulled a numbered bracelet from a box and fastened it to his wrist. A plastic tape bearing the same number dangled from the bracelet. She twisted it off and attached it to the blood sample. "Memorize your number," she said. "And don't try taking that bracelet off."

Ahead of him, a small boy wailed in pain and fright at the stab of the needle.

At the next stop, a thin-faced woman entered his name and number into a computer console. "See to him, will you?" With a jerk of her head, she indicated the sobbing little boy. He seemed to be alone, pushed along the line like a wisp of flotsam. Kurt stared at him. Blue-green eyes full of tears stared back. The child's chin twisted and he began to wail again, stabbing dirty fists into his eyes.

Eric knelt beside him. "Scared to death." He brushed tangled strands of coppery hair from the youngster's face and patted him on the shoulder. "You can stay with us." He picked up the end of a name-tag dangling from the little boy's shirt. *Sean McNabb*. "You can stay with us, Sean. I'm Eric and this is Kurt. We'll take care of you."

Kurt felt a flash of annoyance. Didn't they have enough to worry about? Who needed to think about a kid on top of everything else?

The child's crying subsided into little sobbing gasps. He stared at Eric as a loud-speaker voice boomed into the room directing them toward sleeping barracks. The human wave moved on. "He's so little, we're likely to lose him," said Eric. "Give me your end of the leash."

Kurt stared for a moment, then unsnapped the leash from his belt and handed it to Eric. He watched as Eric fumbled with the child's belt. "I'm going to tie us together, Sean. That way we'll stay together. See? No need to be afraid now."

Sean stared solemnly at the leash and blinked. Then he clutched at his groin and began to cry again. Eric took him by the shoulders. "What's the matter?"

The little boy threw his arms around Eric's neck and whispered in his ear. "He's got to pee," he told Kurt. "All right, Small Size. We'll find you a place." He slipped the youngster's pack from his shoulders and tossed it to Kurt. "Carry this for him. He's worn out."

Kurt slung the little pack on top of his own and followed as Eric and Sean walked hand-in-hand ahead. He found himself resenting the child, feeling shut out—and the kid was barely more than a baby. It was stupid to feel that way. Unreasonable. But he couldn't seem to help it. He felt half-ashamed of himself—and even more resentful as he jogged along behind staring at the two of them until the child began to cry again. Concern grew on Eric's face, "What's wrong, Small Size?"

A trickle glided down the little boy's leg. "Aw look, Eric," he said in exasperation. "He's wetting his pants."

* * *

Kurt bunched the thin pillow against the iron rail at the head of his cot. He leaned against it and stared out of the barracks window at the first gray light of morning. In the bed next to him, Sean curled in a small-boy lump. Even in his sleep, his chubby fingers caressed the leash that tied him to Eric, who lay just beyond.

Outside, past the treeless field dotted with narrow white outbuildings, a tall chain link fence topped with three rows of barbed

wire separated the children from the rest of the city. In the distance, he could hear the dull rumble of a transport. Probably bringing food, he thought. There were a lot of kids to feed. During the night he had heard a muffled series of explosions and had seen the dull red glow against the horizon of another transport blown to bits. They liked to hit the ones with food, he thought.

He was hungry; he had been hungry since he got here. Swinging his legs to the floor, he sat on the side of the cot and surveyed the double row of beds in the gloom. No one stirred. He dropped to his knees and fumbled with his pack. From inside he drew a hardened piece of cheese wrapped in a wadded napkin. It wasn't more than two centimeters square. The juices flowed in his mouth as he looked at it. He chewed it slowly, crumb by crumb, making it last. But it didn't satisfy. His stomach continued to grind against itself.

He stared at Sean's little backpack. Eric had tucked a piece of rye bread into it for the boy. He tried to imagine it—the sweet-sour taste of it. He needed it more than the kid. The kid was small—not growing much now, probably. He stared at the little backpack, gray against gray in the semi-darkness, and then looked at the sleeping child. A scalding shame fought against the impulse. Stealing from a baby. But he was hungry. Maybe half. Just half. He reached for the pack and stopped. From outside in the hall came footsteps. The door opened. Lights flashed on.

Rows of boys stirred. Hands pressed protestingly over blink-ing eyes.

A small group of soldiers stood next to a man in civilian clothes who read from a list. "The following people are to come with me at once.

Billings—42067891

Castro—34257790

Curry—37165292

Hernandez—37642989

Kraus—41738890

Vogel—42839989."

Kraus. Kurt stared at his bracelet. It wasn't his number.

"It's mine," said Eric, half-asleep, puzzled.

"What is it? What do they want?"

"I don't know."

The man began to drone the list again. One by one, the boys whose names were called gathered near the door. Eric got up, found himself restrained by the leash, and unhooked it. Sean stared at him with wide blue-green eyes and started to get up. Eric's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "I'll be back soon, Small Size. Go back to sleep."

He joined the little group of older boys by the door. The man checked his roll again and then led them outside.

Kurt felt uneasy, but he didn't know just why. He pulled on his clothes and made his bed, tugging at the sheets, tucking them into neat corners. When he was finished, he sat on the bed, wrinkling it again as he lay back and stared out of the window at the pink dawn. He whistled a tune that came to him, blowing the notes softly under his breath, so as not to disturb Sean who had gone back to sleep along with most of the others. Finally he dozed, but the uneasiness didn't go away. It stalked his dreams.

* * *

He awakened at a touch. Eric was looking at him with a face so pale, so strained, that Kurt was startled by it. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

Eric slumped on the bedside next to him. "They're sending me home. I have to go in a few minutes."

Kurt felt the thrum of his blood rushing in his ears. His voice sounded far away as he asked, "Why?"

"It didn't take. The process.... It didn't take." Eric raised his head slowly and looked at Kurt. "Some of us were too old for it. Too mature. I have to get dressed. Get my stuff together." He made no move to get up.

Kurt's fingers curled in his palms. He wasn't going to believe it. He had lost all the rest of them. How could he lose Eric, too? He stared at his brother, searching his face, saying the first thing that came to his mind, "They made a mistake."

Eric's eyes widened for a second, as if Kurt had imparted new information. Then he blinked, shook his head, said, "No." He stood up then and went to the duffel by his cot and began pull-ing out clothes. "At least I'll be with Dad. He needs me."

No. Damn it. No! "No, he doesn't," Kurt said aloud. I do, he thought. I do.

He watched unbelieving as Eric dressed quickly and stuffed his few belongings into the messy duffel. In the pale morning light the other five boys dressed too, filling bags and packs, stripping beds in quick motions. "You can't go out there. You'll be killed. They'll kill you."

Eric shook his head. "Not when they know about us. They're telling them now. We're on the news. They gave us these...." He tossed a bright orange armband onto the bed and stared at it for a few seconds. Then he picked it up and wrapped it around his arm. He looked down at the sleeping boy. "You'll have to take care of Small Size." He picked up the duffel with one hand and slung it on his back.

Their eyes didn't meet. Kurt stared at the floor. He stood quietly as if he were the eye of a small but violent storm. He wanted to lash out—to strike. And he did, without warning. "Dad doesn't want you. He wanted to kill you. He told me so."

Eric winced, jerking his face away as if he'd been struck. He stood rigid as wood for a moment, then turned and walked toward the door. And suddenly Kurt was running after him, reaching for his arm, saying, "It isn't true. It wasn't you. It was me." The hot tears burned down his face. "It was me."

Eric stopped and looked at him. It was a look that Kurt would not forget—a look of mingled pain and love, and something else—regret. Eric's hand groped toward his, squeezed once, then released. "Goodbye," he said. And then he was gone, and there was nothing left of him in the room. Just a thin, bare mattress on an iron bed. It was as if he had never been there at all.

* * *

He lay on his cot after Eric left and stared at the wall. He didn't hear the early morning buzz of activity around him. He felt outside of it and utterly alone. The little hand jostled his shoulder once, then twice, "Kurt? Here, Kurt." He looked at the solemn

little face.

"Here, Kurt. Beckfast." A grubby little fist offered him a slice of stale rye bread.

His stomach lurched from something more than hunger, and he shook his head and turned away.

The child persisted, "Here, Kurt."

"I don't want it."

The little face fell. Then Sean plopped to the floor next to Kurt's bed, looked at the bread for a moment, then put it to his mouth and began to chew.

A rumble grew in the distance. Closer. A shout went up from a group of boys at the other end of the barracks. "Look at that. He made it. Food!" The transport rolled slowly through the open gate.

Kurt stared out of the window. Beyond the gate he saw the smoke from a dozen fires. Some were the smoking remains of food transports. Others, smaller ones, were the camps of the disillusioned men and women who roamed the streets in search of prey in a world that was falling to pieces. As soon as soldiers rounded up one band, another took its place. He tried to imagine them. They blame us, he thought, as if we caused it all. As if we were the ones who wrecked the economy and shattered their lives and condemned them to die. But that was one transport they wouldn't get. The thought gave him grim satisfaction.

In an hour, the wall speaker announced breakfast for his barracks. He had gone beyond hunger to a kind of empty sickness. But he got up and walked outside toward the mess hall, ignoring the little boy who tagged along behind him, running to keep up, tripping at times on the dragging leash that dangled from his waist.

A low-flying plane suddenly broke under the clouds and skimmed the tops of the buildings. Someone yelled, "Look out!" Instinctively, Kurt sprawled into a ditch as the plane released its load overhead. Cushioned packages hit the field next to him. Then the plane was gone.

A crowd gathered around the scattered cargo. "Food," someone said. "No. Something else."

Kurt stared at the packages that littered the field. A few had ripped open, tossing the contents in all directions. Seeds. Packages of seeds. Beans, squash, all sorts of vegetables. Groups of soldiers gathered the packages and carried them away. Seeds. They were going to be here for a long time, then. He turned away and headed to the mess hall. The little boy followed.

A group of children were leaving as they entered. They were handicapped. Profoundly retarded. With a start, Kurt realized that they would never grow up. Forever children. Never dying. Never changing. He pushed into the serving line automatically, and Sean followed. "Kurt. Where's Eric?"

Eric was gone—turning to dust. He stared at the vacant eyes of the forever children. Eric was gone.

The last food transport had carried a load of avocados. Nothing else. The one before that, dairy products. Milk, cheese, avocados.

Sean slipped into a tangle of bench and dog leash and managed to plop his tray onto the table next to Kurt. He drank his milk and ate his piece of cheese. His avocado, split in half, had only one bite taken from it.

Kurt pointed to it with his spoon, "Eat that."

Sean stared at it for a moment and shook his head. "It's bad, Kurt."

"Eat it anyway. Here. Put salt on it." He handed the shaker to Sean.

Obediently, Sean sprinkled the salt and took another bite. Then he leaned his head into the plate and began to cry. Strands of coppery hair fell into sticky green avocado.

"Cripes. Why are you crying?"

Blinking blue-green eyes wet with tears. A sobbing gasp, "Where's... where's Eric?"

As if in answer, a woman at the door called out, "Kraus. Eric Kraus. 41738890. Kraus."

Kurt scrambled to his feet. "What is it?" he asked the woman.

"Eric Kraus?"

"I'm Kurt. His brother. They sent him home a while ago."

She looked doubtful, then said, "Well, in that case. I guess you can have this." She handed him a sealed flexi-sheet. "Priority communication."

He snapped open the sheet. He read:

DEAREST ERIC,

YOUR DADDY DIED THIS MORNING AT SIX-THIRTY. I WAS WITH HIM. HIS LAST WORDS WERE OF YOU.

MAMA

Dearest Eric. She wasn't even going to let him know. *Your daddy died this morning.* ... His too. His daddy....

He wanted very much to cry, as if to cry would dissolve the sick, hard lump he felt inside him. He wanted desperately to cry. He couldn't.

* * *

He wandered around aimlessly for the rest of the day, oblivious to the little boy who followed him. Finally, as the day lay down to rest in purple shadows, he went back to the barracks and pulled his oboe from his pack. Fitting it together he began to play while Sean watched from the next bed.

The music that came out was the opening solo of *Rebirth*, but the irony was lost on him. He thought only of the sound he made, a sound as somber, yet as beautiful, as the graying tones of evening around him.

When at last he paused, the little boy asked him again, "Where's Eric?"

"Gone. He's gone away."

"Gone where?"

"Home."

Sean hugged his knees and looked at Kurt. "I'm gonna go home too."

"You can't."

His face crumpled. "Can. I'm gonna see Eric and Momma." Then he brightened, "My momma's pretty. Is your momma pretty, Kurt?"

He looked at the floor. *Dearest Eric...*

A woman wearing a uniform came into the barracks, pausing at each cot, checking names and numbers. She came to Sean, "We'll have to reassign him," she said as if to herself and wrote something on her chart.

"Why?" asked Kurt.

"He's too young to stay here with the older boys. We're reassigning to permanent quarters. He can't stay here."

Sean looked up at the woman with eyes wide and frightened. Then he crept away toward the door.

"But why? He doesn't know anybody else." Kurt found himself on his feet. He didn't understand why, but suddenly it seemed of vital importance to make the woman understand. "He's just four. He doesn't have anybody. Just me."

"I'm sorry. The only exception are family members. We're trying to keep them together."

"But he's my brother." He felt astonished at the lie. Why had he said it?

The woman looked at her list, "But you have different last names."

"We had different fathers." He saw Eric's face—as real as if he stood there. His last words were of you.... "We had different fathers."

"Oh." She looked at him sharply, and he met her gaze. "Well then, I'll assign you together." She moved on.

Somehow he felt proud of himself. Inordinately proud. He turned back to Sean's cot, "Did you hear that, little brother?"

But Sean was gone.

* * *

Uneasily, he stepped from the barracks, calling softly, "Sean."

The streetlights of the camp cast pools of light outlined by shadow. Again, "Sean."

Across the field, a transport rumbled into the compound and stopped. The guard spoke to the driver. His back was turned away from the open gate.

Beyond, outside, Kurt thought he saw a small figure move away toward the shadows. He found himself running toward the gate, dodging behind oil drums and outbuildings, keeping out of sight. They'd stop him if they saw. They wouldn't let him out.

He stopped in the dark ten meters from the gate, in the shadow of the transport. Light spilled onto the ground beyond. He heard the shift of gears. The transport began to move between him and the guard. He ran, heart pounding, toward the outside.

He slid into the shadows just beyond the gate. A campfire flickered through a clump of trees and bushes ahead, sending fingers of light through the low branches. He stared into the night, willing his eyes to adjust to the dark. Listening, he heard a faint murmur of voices—and something else—the rustle of leaves. He stalked the sound. It paused, then moved again toward the light of the fire. Then he saw him, Sean, moving toward the circle of light. The leash dangled from his waist and slithered behind him through the leaves. The men's voices grew louder.

Stop. The thought screamed in his head. "Stop, you little dummy," he whispered. But he knew he wouldn't. He was going to go right up to them like a moth to the flame and ask for his momma. "Oh please, stop." He crept closer.

Sean stepped into the light of the campfire and gravely regarded the two seated men. Ice formed in Kurt's belly.

One of the men looked up, then rose in a half-crouch. His lips twisted into a smile, his voice was slurred. "A little pig.... A little pig for the fire."

Oh God. Run. Why didn't he run?

The other man put down a nearly empty bottle and slowly focused on the little boy. Sean stood with legs wide apart and stared. The first man moved toward him. "Here pig. Here piggy." A gun shone darkly from his belt, but Kurt sensed with horror that the man had other plans for Sean.

A glimmer of surprise, then fear flickered in the wide blue-green eyes.

Oh run. For God's sake, run!

He ran—turning away from the outstretched hand, little legs pumping, tangling in the dragging leash. He fell to the ground and scrambled to get up, but a hand twisted the end of the leash and pulled him close to the man's face. "Do you know what we do to little boys around here?" His meaty hand covered the boy's throat, stroking it, pinching.

Sean's eyes were wide with terror. He shook his head, barely moving it.

The man laughed and, with a quick motion, unhooked the leash and wrapped it in a slack noose around Sean's neck. "First we tie them up like little pigs." He drew the noose tight. The other man laughed and swallowed again from his bottle.

Kurt felt a cold sweat break out and drain from him. Fumbling, he reached in his boot and took out the little knife, the blade rounded at the tip, but sharp as a razor along its edge. It opened in his hand.

He circled slowly until he stood behind the man just in the shadows. Then he leaped, flying like an animal at the man's back, legs wrapped around the man's waist, knife at his throat. The force threw them both to the ground.

The other man stared, in drunken satisfaction as they struggled. The knife bit into the man's throat. "Lie still or I'll kill you."

The man lay under Kurt's weight, breathing hard gasping breaths. With his other hand, Kurt grabbed the gun, and jumping back, aimed it. "Get out. Both of you. Get out or I'll kill you."

As they scrambled away, he scooped up Sean and began to run back toward the camp.

When they reached the fence, he lowered Sean to the ground and leaned against the locked gate for support. Air shuddered in and out of his lungs. Then he dropped to his knees beside the little boy and took the leash from around his neck. He started to toss it away.

"No. No, Kurt." The boy reached for it and began to cry.

Kurt took the tear-stained face in his hands. "It's all right. We don't need it anymore."

He stared at the woods, at the dots of campfire light that glowed against the sky. He could see their faces, all of them. He could

feel their resentment, their hate, like a tangible thing. And then, like smoke, he saw them gray and fade. He saw them for a moment as mist. Ephemera. Bones to ashes. Ashes to dust.

He turned toward the camp and shouted to the guard. Startled, the man ran to unlock the gate.

He picked up Sean. The little boy said, "I don't like it outside, Kurt," and buried his face in his shoulder.

He looked at the child he held. Only four; he was only four years old and the only world he knew was dying. And suddenly Kurt realized that he would be the oldest some day. He was fifteen years old, and he was going to inherit the Earth.

He stroked the boy's hair. It wasn't much of a world out there, he thought. Not much of one. "We'll have to build a new one," he said to Sean and, without looking backward, stepped through the gate.

PART TWO Mouat-Gari Year Five

Chapter 1

The clang of first dinner bell rang through MacDill Compound. It was answered by an echoing growl from Sean McNabb's stomach. He brushed a sweaty strand of coppery hair away with the back of his hand, pulled off the battered catcher's mitt, and tossed it into the field box. "Hurry up, Jorge. Let's eat."

"Well give me a couple of seconds, will you?" The dark-skinned boy retrieved the baseball wedged between a clump of weeds and the barbed wire fence and threw it to Sean.

He caught it deftly, feeling its sting against his palm, and tossed it into the ball slot.

The two trudged toward the cafeteria until Jorge stopped and stared at the row of elementary school buildings. He rolled up his eyes and groaned.

"What's the matter?"

"I forgot. It's my weekend to feed the Kindy pets."

Sean's stomach growled again, "Well, do it after."

Jorge hesitated, then he said, "No. I better do it now. It won't take long."

"Long enough to put us at the end of the line," grumbled Sean, but he followed Jorge to the kindergarten, which stood apart from the other buildings, separated by a small playground.

Jorge pushed the door open, and they entered the wide hall. Their footsteps clattered across the old wood floor. Room One was on the left.

"It's hot in here." Sean pushed open the door to a room cluttered with bright pictures on the wall.

"Yeah. They keep the windows closed on the weekend."

Jorge walked up to the fish tank against one wall and opened the lid. A half-dozen goldfish boiled to the surface, mouths gaping. He measured out a small spoonful of food and scat-tered it over the surface. "They tried having the Kindy kids feed the pets, but they were too dumb. One chunk-brain put half a box of food in one of the tanks and killed all the fish." He closed the lid and headed toward a door at the back of the room.

"Where are you going?"

"Got to feed Pepper Pot."

"Pepper Pot?"

"Guinea pig. She used to be just Pepper because she's black. But now that she's going to have babies, she's got a pot belly. That's why she's in here"—he rolled his eyes sug-gestively—"privacy." He pushed open the door to the long, narrow cloakroom. It was stuffy and dim, lighted only by a row of windows near the high ceiling.

The guinea pig rustled the cedar shavings that lined the old aquarium. "Hi, girl," said Jorge.

Sean, pressing closer for a better look, caught a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye. Whirling, he said, "Who's there?" He jumped back in time to see a small figure slip behind a large stack of boxes.

"Come out of there," yelled Jorge.

In a moment a small, black-eyed boy of about five stepped out.

Jorge stared at the child. "What are you doing in here. You're not supposed to be here."

The boy stood, legs apart, chin thrust out belligerently. "Nothing." An elliptical birthmark pulsed at the angle of his jaw; his hands, clenched into fists, hugged his belly.

"Bull," said Jorge. "Have you been messing with Pepper?"

Suddenly suspicious, Sean bent over the tank that held the guinea pig. Fumes struck his nostrils. "It smells like kerosene—or gas." He glared at the boy. "He poured some-thing in there."

"She bit me," said the child.

"Well what do you expect?" Jorge turned toward the little animal. "She's pregnant."

Suddenly Sean yelled, "Look out! He's got a match."

The match flared as it arced through the air into the tank. Instantly the soaked shavings flamed.

"Oh God! You damn slink—" Sean plunged his hands into the tank and drew out the screaming animal. Clutching the guinea pig, he stared dumbly at his hands as the pain seared into his skin. Black smoke billowed as the flames shot into the air.

"Get out of here!" Jorge reached a hand toward Sean, grabbing, propelling him toward the door. As he did, it slammed shut and they heard the sound of metal click against metal.

"Locked! He locked us in." Jorge beat against the heavy wood door. Fists hammering, he yelled for help until the swirling smoke made him choke. Coughing helplessly, he sank to the floor next to Sean.

The pain in Sean's hand was making him sick. "Here," he managed to say, "you can breathe over here." He pressed his face

toward the narrow space at the bottom of the door, and then, remembering, moved the guinea pig closer to the crack.

Huddled together as smoke darkened the room to night, the boys sucked air from the tiny crack. Jorge's voice was a strained whisper: "We're going to die."

"No... window... got to open it." Sean tried to sit up. Then, choking, the pain hot lead on his hands, he began to vomit.

* * *

The boy stopped running when he was out of sight of the kindergarten building. Without looking back, he paused to catch his breath and then walked slowly toward the cafeteria.

By the time he found his dormitory group, he was very calm and his face was composed.

The dorm mother looked anxiously around and began to count noses one more time when he walked up. "Silvio!" Relief spread over her face, and then the edge of anger. "Where have you been?"

His lips crept into an innocent smile. "Bathroom," he said, gauging her reaction. "And then I fed the squirrels. I had some crackers." He stretched out his arms and hugged her waist, pressing his face against her body. He looked up at her and smiled angelically. "Did you miss me?"

The anger faded from her face and slowly a grin took its place. She ran her fingers through his dark hair, "You scamp. You had me worried." She gave a little slap to the seat of his pants. "Now go over there and get in line."

He smiled brightly up at her again; then, humming softly to himself, he joined the other children.

* * *

When the terrible retching stopped, Sean gasped for air. "Can't... can't climb up there... too much smoke."

Jorge's voice broke, "We're going to die." It ended in a fit of coughing as the suffocating blanket of smoke pinned them closer to the floor.

"Shoe... take it off... throw your shoe.... Got to break the window." His stomach twisted again, and he began to gag. Dizzy, only half-conscious now, he heard Jorge scramble in response. The last thing he heard was a thud as the thrown shoe struck futilely against the wall.

* * *

Kurt Kraus buried his hands in Lauren's soft hair. His excitement was pain to him as he pressed his body against hers, bent his head toward hers again in another fingering kiss.

They lay on the ground under the screening mass of the giant mulberry bush. His hands moved, caressing her, when suddenly she pulled away. Blindly, he reached for her.

"Kurt, no! Look."

Only half-aware, he followed her gaze through the low-hanging branches. A column of smoke surged from a building across the wide field.

Lauren scrambled into a sitting position. "It's a class building."

He shook his head, staring, feeling his passion ebb to emptiness. As they watched, people ran toward the building. In the distance he heard the clang of a fire unit.

By the time they were halfway across the field, the fire unit skidded to a stop and spilled its crew, like ants, onto the ground. A hose snaked into the building on human legs.

Short of breath, Lauren grasped his arm, pulling him to a slower pace. "There's nothing we can do now."

He stared at the building for a moment and then looked down at her. "Thank God," he said. "Thank God it's Saturday and no one's in there."

* * *

Lauren still clutched at Kurt's arm as they watched at the edge of the crowd that had gathered. The wail of a siren grew. "Who is it?" she asked again. "Does anybody know?"

"Two of them," said a girl. "Two lads."

He couldn't see over the crowd. He felt vaguely ashamed of his curiosity and fell back as the ambulance pulled up, siren whining to a stop. He felt ashamed, and yet something held him there at the edge of the mass of people and made him watch.

"Stand back... out of the way." The crowd rippled apart as the ambulance attendants scurried in with its kits and stretchers. Behind them, bright flames squelched by streams of chemicals turned to spewing, fetid smoke.

The first stretcher deposited its burden in the ambulance—a dirty dark-skinned boy. Then the next. The last of the dying sun glinted on the coppery hair of a limp figure on the stretcher.

Kurt stared at the still form for a frozen, time-stopping second. The stretcher slid into place, doors clanged shut, and the vehicle sped away in a cloud of dust, but still he stared, not moving, not able to move.

He barely felt Lauren's hand on his, tugging; barely heard her say, "Kurt?" He barely heard his own voice, strangely altered, whisper, "Sean... he looked like Sean."

Chapter 2

Kurt jumped to his feet as the side door to the Trauma Care Unit of the compound hospital opened and a nurse stepped out. At a distance, Kurt followed him down the hall to a small nurses' lounge. He hung at the door watching the man as he extracted a cup of coffee from the bubbler.

"I want to know about Sean. Sean McNabb."

The man turned startled eyes toward him. "You're not supposed to be in here."

"I don't care about that. I want to know about Sean." He stepped inside, leaning against the door as sudden fatigue stole his strength. "I want to know. I've been waiting.... I've waited a long time and I'm not going to wait anymore."

The man stared at him for a moment. "While you're not waiting, you'd better sit down. You've got the wobbles." He waved in

the direction of a small couch. "Sit down." A sympathetic smile quirked the man's lips. "This room's not big enough to have you stretched out on the floor."

Kurt sat down. "How is he?"

The nurse pulled out another cup, filled it and handed it to Kurt. "Not good, but we think he's going to stay around."

The cup shimmied in Kurt's hand as if it had a life of its own. He set it unsteadily on the shabby table in front of him. "And the other boy?" He studied the man's face. Lines of strain traced it and deepened as he sank into a chair next to the little couch. "The other boy," he said again. "What about him?"

The nurse stared at the cup he held for a moment before he said, "He, uh, moved away about two hours ago."

"Dead? He's dead?"

A slight nod affirmed it.

The obscenity tore from him before he could give it thought, the words twisting his lips like an echo from the twisting sickness he felt inside.

The nurse gave him a level gaze. "Rip off again, if you want," he said kindly, "if it helps."

"Does Sean know?"

"Not yet. He'll have to play that hand soon enough. But kids... kids deal better than adults sometimes."

"I want to know what happened. I want to know all of it." He had to know all of it; had to know why this had happened, why anyone would do such a thing. "The door was locked; I know that. What else?"

The man stared at him, "I shouldn't be telling you any of this." He took a swallow of coffee, then he said, "The other boy, Jorge, tried to break a window. He was barefoot. He climbed through the smoke. Got up on a table and smashed the window with a shoe. The updraft got him. He inhaled a lot of smoke and his lungs were seared. We tried an implant, but it was too late. He died in surgery. When he smashed that window, it killed him—but it saved the other boy's life. The updraft sucked fresh air under the door—a sort of chim-ney effect. They had to chop a hole in the door to get them out. The McNabb boy was blocking it."

Kurt shook his head and slumped back onto the couch. "Why? Who did it? Did he say? Did Sean tell you?"

"He's not saying anything right now. He's trached. He's on a respirator." The man stood up and tossed the cup into the recycle chute. "Time's up for me; I have to go back now."

Kurt was on his feet, "I want to see him. Let me go with you."

"No. No visitors until Dr. Olivo says so. He's sleeping now anyway." The man grasped Kurt's shoulder, squeezed once, then gently, but firmly, steered him toward the door. "It's nearly three. Go get some sleep before the sun comes up. There's nothing you can do here anyway."

Kurt let himself be guided down the hallway.

Outside, the night air felt clammy against his skin; the tang of the bay was in it, the dampness. He walked in the dark-ness toward his dorm, on unsteady legs, remembering an-other night over five years ago when a fifteen-year-old boy had learned first-hand what hate could do.

In the years since, his life had been a routine of school and dormitory life—often boring, often deadly in its sameness, but safe. Safe, while outside his fenced boundaries the world swung in diminishing arcs toward a precarious balance.

Now, unbelievably, it was starting again. Someone, sick to the core, had waited, watched, until he could trap two nine-year-old immortal boys in a flaming room.

"You wanted to take them with you, didn't you?" he said aloud to the black shadows that clotted the streets. "You knew you were going to die, and you wanted company."

He felt his rage sicken him, and with it came a creeping fear and a memory of an old pain—a length of chain winding around his ribs, snapping them, crushing out his breath. With what was left of it, he whispered, "Well, he didn't die. He's going to live."

...going to live and watch you die...

* * *

He followed dimly lighted streets toward College Sector, passing the tech-school buildings that squatted near the old air strips, passing the tech dorms with their dark windows, passing the theater. He came at last to the area defined as MacDill College.

He felt an aching fatigue, and yet sleep lay as far away as sunrise. Inside his dorm building, he went down a dim hall, turning once, then once more, to his room.

This night, as on many nights before, he was glad he shared the room with no one. It was one of two privileges he held, privileges he shared with the other members of M.Y.G.A. He had been on the Discipline Committee of MacDill Youth Government for two years now—and for two years he had enjoyed a treasured privacy.

He flicked on the light to a Spartan room—narrow bed against one wall, desk and dresser against the other. The only decorations that relieved the stark walls were a bright poster of L-5 Habitat and his oboe, hanging from a gold-tasseled rope above his desk.

Next to his reader, slim-cased discs marched across the scarred desk in military rows by subject—prescribed texts for his score range—each one embossed with the WorldCo symbol: a globe held in a curved, protecting hand. *World History* and *Governmental Concepts* stood next to *Psychology: An Overview*; *Calculus*, next to *Biological Patterning*; *The Arts For All* tilted against *World Literature*; *World Communication Through Language* touched the last—*One Tongue, Volume 2*. Next to these, spaced by a clear cube embedded with a musical note, his own discs began—a catholic collection of natural history, astronomy, biography, science fiction, and music.

A pile of flexi-sheets and a package lay in scattered confu-sion on the otherwise neat desk. His mail. Lauren must have left it there for him. He scooped it up absently and, flicking on the small lamp next to his bed, settled down to look through it. He laid aside the notice of a M.Y.G.A. meeting and smiled faintly at the package addressed in his grandmother's tilting hand. Cookies again. It was always cookies, crumbly, flavored with ginger and brown sugar. But this night, although he was empty, he had no appetite for them.

There was a short note from Eric inviting him to his recital next Friday: "...don't forget. Sign up for your pass now— while

you're thinking about it...." A pass whenever he wanted it—the other privilege of M.Y.G.A.

He held the note without really seeing it. On his last pass home, he had brought Sean with him. Eric would want to know. He'd have to call him in the morning. Finally he laid the note down next to the package of cookies and examined the last of his mail.

At the bottom of the stack was a flexi with the WorldCo emblem across it, just above his name. He snapped it open:

KURT J. KRAUS—41738890

World Coalition summons you to Conclave 3000....

He stared at the sheet. What did it mean? He searched the summons for an explanation and found none—only directions that he appear at twelve hundred hours at MacDill Operations for transport orders. He was to bring clothing for two days.

He had to be at MacOps in less than eight hours, and he had no idea why.

He undressed and, lying in the darkness, tried to coax sleep into his brain, but too many questions, too many emotions, roiled there. Finally he snapped on the light, crossed to his desk, and opened the reader. He might as well study. Might as well.... No sense in staring at nothing all night.

He pulled out the *Arts for All* disc and slid it into the reader. Crawling back into bed with it, he stuck the little speaker in his ear and opened the book. He flicked it on scan, stopping at the section on music.

Another, slower scan and then the text appeared on the Thai composer Sucharitkul. He read for a time, listening to the illustrative excerpts from the early works. Then he came to the section on the later works—the muscular yet haunting music, the music that spoke of magic, and grieving at its loss, created it anew.

Rebirth began to play, and Kurt's eyes blurring with something more than fatigue, abandoned the text and closed. As he listened to the opening oboe passages, he remembered when he had played those notes; remembered that day with a clarity so crystalline that he could see the light and shadow play again on the auditorium walls; see the sunlight dance on the white hair of Mr. Hernandez as he conducted.

That was the beginning, he thought. The day it all began, the first day into forever. It seemed so long ago now, that first day... and there would be no last.

As the music played, he fell asleep. The reader, slipping from his hands, clicked shut, turned off. And the light from the single lamp burned on, reflecting from the desk, the walls, onto his oboe hanging from its brave gold rope.

The oboe hung at an angle on the wall. Its reed was split, its slim black body coated with a graying layer of dust.

* * *

After less than five hours of troubled sleep, Kurt got up, showered, and packed a few things in a small gray canvas pack.

He made his way to the commons room and pecked out a number on the comset.

A woman's face appeared on the screen. "Compound Hospital."

"Sean McNabb," he said, "how is he?"

"One moment." She bent over the in-house set, fingers touching one button, then another. "Condition serious."

"Can I see him?"

She glanced at the screen again, then said, "No visitors authorized except parents."

As he said, "Thank you," she clicked off. He placed a call to Eric; and when no one answered, he left a message.

He wanted to find Lauren and say goodbye, but as he headed for the door, he remembered that she was gone for the day—a field trip. To one of the bay islands, wasn't it? Biology.

His fingers moved again, storing his short goodbye for her, ending with the words "...miss you. Back soon with news about the mystery trip."

When he arrived at MacOps, there was only one other person waiting there—a girl. He vaguely remembered seeing her around, but didn't know her name.

She stuck out a slim black hand, "I guess we ought to introduce ourselves. I'm Hallie. Hallie Washington. It looks as if we're the only ones going."

He took her hand, shook it, and searched her face. "I'm Kurt," he said. "And where.... Where are we going?"

Her lips tilted in a rueful grin, and she shrugged. "I was hoping you could tell me."

Chapter 3

"I just think it's going too far," said the kindergarten teacher. "They're hardly more than babies."

"Babies, they're not," said the other woman. "There are some surprisingly adult thought processes going on in those little heads. Remember Kurtin and Clift's study about children's fantasies?"

She quirked a smile, "Would any teacher admit she'd forgotten a standard text? But still... I just don't think it's necessary."

"It probably wasn't in our day, but these children...." She looked around at the group of youngsters playing on the swings and slides while another group squealed with anticipation as they dodged a large programmed ball. "These kids are different, Margaret. Anyway, when the stuporvisors and obstinatricians send down orders, there's nothing we can do about it."

Margaret shifted on the bench toward a shadier spot. "I know... I know all about that theory." She parroted the text, "'...In order for the immortal child to have respect for life, the child must be exposed to the realities of death....' Well, I just don't like it." She glanced across the playground toward the blackened wall of the kindergarten building and shuddered. "It's ghoulish."

"Maybe so," said the other teacher, "But, ours not to reason why—" A howl caused her to jump up and race toward an incipient battle between two small boys. "Jimmy! Stop that!" She grabbed a small hand in mid-smack. "You're not to hit. Besides, it's Michael's turn on the swing anyway."

* * *

The black eye makeup Marta Nobregas Aguilar had so care-fully applied stained her tears and slid toward the shadows that hollowed her eyes. Brother and husband flanked her, their arms curving protectively around her narrow shoulders, their hands

steadying, guiding.

They crossed the narrow ramp connecting Compound Hospital to the small concrete building with the faded legend—CHAPEL. When they came to the door and crossed the threshold, she stopped, then pulled back from their grasp, shaking her head as if to deny this place was where her son lay.

Her husband leaned toward her and spoke. In response, her keening cry caused the two men's eyes to meet and darken. They led her to a bench in the small lobby, giving her tissues supplied by the dark-clad man who met them.

When the first tissue was limp and stained with black streaks, she took another. Finally, she seemed composed enough to whisper something to her brother. He nodded and rose. As he did, he fished in the inner pocket of his jacket, took her hand, and closed her fingers around the rosary beads.

She ran her fingers over them, feeling the smoothness of the ebony beads, polished over many years by many fingers. The rosary was old. It had been old when Maria's great-grandmother had crossed in a storm-tossed fishing boat from Cuba, bringing to this new land only the clothes on her back and a strand of ebony beads ending in a heavy silver cross.

Her husband spoke to her again. She nodded and rose. Supported by the two men, she moved on legs that threatened to give way.

They entered a windowless room with walls bathed by hidden lights, a room that smelled faintly of roses. The center of the chapel lay in soft shadow. At the far end, next to a stand heavy with flowers, stood an open white coffin.

Fingering the ebony beads, lips moving silently, Marta Nobregas Aguilar moved on trembling legs until she reached the edge of the white-lined box that held her son.

She could not look down. Catching her breath, she searched the face of her husband, looking for an end to the awful dream. "Jorge?" she whispered.

At his slight, anguished nod, she shook her head. It couldn't be so. It wasn't so. Jorge would live forever. Forever. Hadn't they told her so? Hadn't they told her so when they took him away? She looked into her brother's face then. He would tell her the truth. He had always told her the truth. Her eyes were wide and pleading, her voice as faint, as fleeting, as the scent of pale roses in the air. "Jorge?" And when his eyes refused to meet hers, when he looked away, with pain twisting his lips, she knew with a terrible clarity that this moment was real, that every moment of the last two days had been real, would always be real.

She felt a sudden draining of emotion, a sudden hollowness that left her strangely numb. And with the numbness came a sort of strength—a strength born of detachment, a strength that came from somewhere at the core of her. Using it, she looked down into the still face of her son.

She stood like this for some time. Then, leaning over him, she kissed him once and slipped the worn old rosary into his hands.

* * *

As twenty five-year-olds filed out of the chapel into the sunlight, Margaret got up. Her group was next.

Although the children emerging from the chapel seemed unshaken by their experience, Margaret failed to share their equanimity. Her palms felt sweaty. She rubbed them together, then surreptitiously wiped them against her sleeves. "Come along, children. Line up the way we do in class."

The group of children moved from the shade of the old oak, shifted, and then fell into a ragged line.

"You're in my place, Silvio," yelled a pigtailed girl.

Not moving, Silvio smiled complacently at her.

"Move!" The girl yanked at his arm. When that had no effect, she gave him a shove. "I'm supposed to be in front of Richard."

Silvio stared at her calmly. Then he raised his voice in a whimpering "Oh-oh-oh," and turned toward Margaret. His lower lip protruded, quivering. He clutched his shoulder.

Margaret seized the little girl's arm. "Shame on you, Sally. Now, get to the end of the line." Why did they have to squabble and make things worse? "Are you all right, Silvio?"

Lip still quivering, he nodded slowly.

She gave him an absent pat and stared at the chapel door. It just wasn't right to take little kids in there, she thought. But, underneath the thought, another, only half-exposed, emerged: it wasn't right to make *her* go in there. Not again. She didn't want to see this again.

She blinked and looked at the line of children, "Now, we're going to go inside, and everyone is to be very quiet."

As the line filed up the side steps and into the chapel, she hesitated for just a moment before she followed them.

* * *

Inside the chapel lobby, the children listened as the psychologist finished his short talk, "...and now, you're going inside to see Jorge one last time and say goodbye."

Margaret watched the line of children file past. It wasn't right... not right. She twisted her hands together and tried to look calm and competent. It wouldn't do to have the psychologist think that she was nervous. It was just that they were so young... It wasn't right.

She walked by the casket first, quickly, glancing away almost at once. The smell of the place—the flowers—the smell was always the same. She stepped aside, standing in the center of the room, as the children each walked by the casket and stared in frank curiosity. *It wasn't right*. The odor of her sweat mingled with the faint scent of roses.

It had smelled like that when Stevie died. He lay in a little casket so much like that one. He had been five—and she was only nine. She had loved him so much. More than just a half-brother. She had adored that little boy, who looked so much like Daddy. It was amazing how much she had felt for him, especially since she hadn't known him very long at all. Not until Hank moved in, and Mama sent her to live with Daddy and Charlotte at the lake.

And she took such good care of Stevie. She was very grown-up for nine. Still... they shouldn't have expected her to watch him every minute. Not when she was only nine....

A small table stood against the wall. She moved toward it, pulled a tissue from the box there, and wiped her hands. Then, taking

her place in the center of the room, she seemed to watch the children, but instead, she stared at a point above their heads at a picture of a pastoral scene of a child and a lamb. The tissue turned to shreds in Margaret's hands. Outside. They'd be outside soon.

Distracted as she was, she failed to notice that one of the children passed the open coffin and then circled back to the end of the line behind the pigtailed Sally.

First into the lobby, Margaret counted heads as the children emerged. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.... Someone was missing. She stared at the inner door. Maybe she'd counted wrong. She was halfway through her second count when Silvio stepped out and slipped into the group.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Margaret stepped outside, "Come on, children. It's time now for juice and cookies. Move right along." Juice and cookies—and then, thank God, she could turn them over to the dorm parents and go home.

* * *

During the afternoon free-play period, the kindergarten dorm parents gathered in the shade of MacDill's Park pavilion for coffee and gossip before the evening rigors of feeding, washing, and bedding their small charges began.

Hidden from their view by a clump of young Australian pines, Silvio knelt at the grassy edge of the concrete strip that had once been a runway. The main strip served as a highway for an array of children racing battered tricycles. Further down, a group of slipskaters circled, screaming with laughter when one of them fell. But here, near the fence, hidden by the pines, he was quite alone.

He scrubbed an object back and forth across the pavement. He had worked diligently for over an hour with a patience unusual in a child twice his age. Occasionally he stopped to examine his work and then began the scrubbing motion again. Sweat ran from his brow and, dropping on his hand, trickled in grubby streaks into the furrow he had gouged in the concrete.

Completely absorbed in what he was doing, he failed to hear the footsteps in the grass behind him. "Sil-vee-o," came the girl's mocking voice. "Dumb old Silvio hiding again."

Instantly on guard, he dropped the object and swung a leg over it as the branches of the pine parted and Sally looked through. "Sneaky snitch. Dumb donkey-ass." She seized her pigtails and hoisted them into waggling donkey ears, a supreme insult. "Dumb donkey-ass."

He eyed her evenly, then slowly smiled.

She glared back and took a step forward, swishing the low branches against her bare leg. She repeated the donkey ears and, for emphasis, added a stuck-out tongue.

When the smile, gentle and ingenuous, stayed on his face, uncertainty spread over hers. "Donkey-ass," she said again, but this time with less enthusiasm. When that got no response she said, "I hate you, Silvio."

"Why?"

"You're a sneak snitch and I hate you."

He looked up at her. "I don't hate *you*. I was going to give you a present."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "What? Show me."

"I don't know... now." He looked away as if the group of skaters had become of immense interest.

Sally squatted beside him. "What? What were you going to give me?"

He caught his lower lip between his teeth. Then, tenting his fingers, he stared at them intently for a moment before he gave her a sidelong look. "Something special... for a friend." Again the smile, "Are you my friend?"

She looked at him speculatively. "Well... I guess so."

"You gotta be my best friend, because it's magic."

"What is?"

His hand traced a pattern on his thigh. "What I got."

She sat down beside him on the warm grass. "I'm your friend, Silvio. What is it?"

"Code's honor?"

She circled her chest with a finger. "Code's honor."

"Well... I don't know. It's a secret."

"I won't tell. I promise."

He reached in his pocket and brought out something he clutched in a grubby fist.

She caught his hand, and he let his fingers be pried open. In his palm lay three small black beads. "They're magic," he said. "If you tell, then the magic turns to bad and hurts you."

She stared at them with eyes as round as coins. "How do they work?"

"You save them 'til you want something real bad. And then when you want it bad enough, you swallow one and then the wish comes true."

"Really?"

He nodded solemnly. "You get a magic wish for each one. But, if you tell, you might get sick. You might even die... like Jorge did."

She blinked at that. "Oh, I won't tell."

One at a time, he placed them in her hand and watched as she stared at them for a moment, then stuffed them in her pocket.

"You better go now." He leaned toward her and lowered his voice to a whisper. "If you don't somebody might guess."

Hands on knees, she pushed herself up, and then stood there uncertainly for a moment. She caught a small branch of the pine and ran it through her hand. "Well... goodbye then."

Smiling to himself, he watched as she walked away and joined a group of children playing some distance away. Only then did he retrieve the object hidden under his leg; only then did he begin again the scrubbing motion that slowly, very slowly, reduced the crucifix to a gleaming silver T.

Kurt had no idea where they were. First there had been the short hop to Jaxport, then the transfer to a WorldCo craft. It had flown high and fast, crossing an expanse of water. Then an unbroken cloud layer far below obscured his view. Shortly afterward, the sky darkened to shades of purple; and as the craft banked, he caught a view from the port window of the last blazing pink of the sunset behind them.

Although his stomach had not yet sent its distress call for dinner, a meal came. It was surprisingly good. He managed to consume it all, and Hallie's dessert as well.

Their section was filled with young men and women, all about his age. There were at least ninety of them, and no one—at least no one he or Hallie talked with—seemed to know where the craft was headed—or why.

The attendants, each wearing WorldCo insignia, were courteous and helpful, but they could not—or would not—answer pointed questions.

Hallie twisted in her seat next to Kurt. "Wherever it is we're going, I wish we'd hurry up and get there."

Kurt turned it over in his mind once more, trying to understand. They had flown east, then northeast, over the ocean. That much he knew. And he knew something else: each of the people around him were students who were taking college courses identical to his and Hallie's. That meant they were all within the same score range. He looked around, guessing that if he questioned everyone in the section, he would get the same answer. If that were so, he could come up with only one conclusion: WorldCo was gathering them together for a project that required people from a rather narrow score range, people with certain skills and certain interests. What the project could be, he couldn't imagine.

Suddenly the craft stalled, and then began a controlled vertical drop through the darkness. As they broke through the clouds, he saw a fog-shrouded bank of lights off to port.

They deplaned on movers that took them quickly through a wide hallway. As they came to a waiting area, the movers slowed to a creep. To the right, a clear, convex section of wall opened, as a woman's voice from an unseen speaker announced in one-tongue: "Please board the cars at once in an orderly fashion.... Please board...."

He stared at Hallie, who grinned and shrugged, "You heard the lady."

They got on, taking seats next to each other at the front of the car. As soon as his weight touched the seat, a speaker at his ear whispered: "Engage the lever to your right... for your protection, engage the lever to your right...." He touched it, felt it slide under his grasp, and discovered that the movement had locked him firmly to the seat.

Hallie had done the same. She turned toward Kurt and simultaneously gave a little gasp that turned into a giggle. "It's not a seat. It's a swing!" The seat pivoted slightly with her movement.

Before he could comment, the curving wall-section slid shut and the car doors sealed. He heard a far away whooshing sound and a green READY light came on. Kurt found himself looking through a clear, curving window at glowing lights illuminating a featureless, cylindrical tunnel ahead.

The car began to move, accelerating rapidly. Suddenly, the tunnel fell away at a steep angle. He gasped involuntarily as they plunged downward. Hallie squealed and grabbed his arm as their seats tipped backward to compensate for the incline.

The tunnel gave way to a shaft. Their seats tipped sharply again, as the car shot into a downward plunge so rapid that Kurt felt himself rise slightly against the restraints.

"Who-o-o!" Hallie clung like a vise to his arm. "I didn't know we were going to an amusement park."

The shaft began to bend, decreasing the angle until the car rode the horizontal again and began to slow.

When the doors slid open, they followed directions and found themselves on another mover that took them past other, divergent movers and came, eventually, to an enormous rotunda that seemed to be a sort of hub.

People met them and directed them to seats in a large auditorium shaped like a circle with a bite taken from one edge. The missing bite proved to be a stage, which rose slowly. As it rose, three thousand voices stilled.

One man stood on the stage: a man with a shock of white hair and startling black eyebrows—a man Kurt recognized, as did everyone else in the auditorium: Polvay—the Prime Minister of WorldCo.

In utter silence, Polvay stood, staring at his audience, fixing first one section, then another with a look that expected—demanded—attention. Three thousand pairs of eyes stared back into his, into eyes that burned with an almost palpable intensity.

Polvay stood this way for a full minute. Then, with a curt nod, he said in one-tongue, "World Coalition welcomes its immortal leaders."

As a faint gasp rippled through the group, Polvay continued. "You have each been carefully considered for your new status. You have been observed and evaluated. We have found each of you fit for service to the Coalition and to its people.

"At this time, the burden of governing is yours. Those of you who decide to take it up should know now that this burden is not a light one, and not one to be cast aside later. You must know now that as a group you will carry the welfare of your fellow humans—and with it, you will carry the stigma of leadership. For all time, you will be set apart from others; for all time, you and your children will be divorced from other people.

"Those outside your group will look upon you, with cause, as their public servants... public servants in the truest sense of the word. They will look upon yours as an elite group... and they will feel thankful that they are not required to be a part of it."

Kurt stared at Polvay and tried to follow each word. He had studied the one-tongue for over two years, yet still it required his full attention. He could not yet think in one-tongue; he had to twist each phrase into English to get its meaning. He blinked at the words he heard, wondering if he understood, thinking that if he did, what then?

As if in answer, Polvay stared in his direction, "You have been chosen as part of a leadership pool. As individuals, your skills and inclinations are divergent; as a group, your profiles are complementary. Some of you will be trained as educational leaders; some, communications experts; some, economists, and so on. Yet, at the end of this training period—and it will be a long and an arduous one—each of you will understand your place within a changing Coalition, and each of you will understand your duties—and the duties of your fellow leaders. The people will see to it. And if you fail, they will cast you out...."

Kurt strained to follow Polvay's words with one part of his mind, while the other part tried desperately to assimilate the meaning. Leaders. They were going to be leaders in a chang-ing WorldCo. After they were trained, they would be chosen by lot to head a Ministry. Every minister would have a watchdog group—the Guardians of the People—culled from the general populace to monitor all the minister's activities.

Polvay went on: "As leaders, do not think that you can deceive the people. They will be conditioned to believe that to be chosen as a Guardian is the highest honor and duty... higher even than a Minister's... for you are the servants of the people; they are the people. The term of duty of each Guardian group will be variable, but its vigilance will not. If a group discovers misconduct in a Minister, a second and larger group will be convened by computer to decide guilt or innocence." Here Polvay fixed the group with a gaze that seemed to bore into Kurt's soul. "If you are found guilty, you will be ousted in disgrace and declared non-functional."

Non-functional. What did he mean? Kurt leaned forward in his chair as Polvay repeated, "Non-functional. Outside of society... Those guilty of corruption of a Ministry will be clothed and fed and no more. They will be allowed no useful work, no enterprise, no comfort within the society of humans... for eternity."

A shiver rippled up and down Kurt's spine. It would be better to be dead than cast out with nothing left but boredom and futility. Better to be dead.

Polvay's tone changed abruptly. His voice was lower now, yet somehow more intense. "We of the Coalition realize that government for immortals must be different in kind from ours. This has caused us to look backward in the hope of seeing into the future. When we looked, we chose as our template the longest-lived government on the face of the earth—the government of Lycurgus, leader of Sparta. We have taken this template and changed it into what we believe will be a government for all people... for all time..." Polvay looked above their heads then as if he gazed at some-thing very far away. Then he repeated in no more than a whisper, "...for all time..."

Kurt watched the old man on the stage and suddenly he knew what Polvay meant; he was talking about his own end, his own personal mortality. Kurt blinked at the quick realization that came to him: the certain knowledge that Polvay was asking three thousand young immortals to implement a gov-ernment in perpetuity for one reason, and one reason only—to give the mortal leaders of WorldCo the only immortality they would ever have.

* * *

They had been divided into thirty groups of one hundred. Kurt found himself shunted deftly into a line marked 12 Coalition. He looked in vain for Hallie's now-familiar face as a mover took him swiftly to 12-Co's quarters.

He tried to hide the insecurity he felt must show on his face. He could feel it creep into his eyes as he glanced around at the others on the mover; he thought he saw it reflected back from other eyes, some bright blue, some dark. His group seemed to be composed of people from every quarter of the world.

A young man turned and spoke to him in an unfamiliar tongue. When Kurt stared back, not comprehending, the man rephrased his question in meticulous one-tongue. "Do you know where we are going?"

Kurt shook his head. He looked at his neighbor uncertainly. He was Chinese... or maybe Korean. Phrasing as carefully as he could in one-tongue, Kurt thrust out a hand in greeting and introduced himself.

The young man's hand gripped his. "Chao Ching-jen."

For a moment, Kurt felt confusion at what he took to be a foreign greeting; then, with a grin, he realized that he had heard a name, not a salutation.

Chao Ching-jen gave him a quick nod and an answering grin that tilted the outer corners of his eyes even more. "Just call me Chao. My guess is perhaps less accurate than yours, but I think we are going to move into most interesting times."

That was supposed to be a Chinese curse, wasn't it?—may you live in interesting times. When he saw the corner of Chao's mouth quirk and his eyes begin to twinkle, Kurt realized that it was meant as a joke. "Most interesting times," he answered.

The mover slowed, and the group that was 12 Coalition filed after a woman in WorldCo uniform who spoke briskly in one-tongue. "These are your quarters for the next two nights. You will follow me, please."

They trailed after her through wide doors into a large brightly lighted lobby with tiers of rooms to one side. The walls were like the rest of WorldCo's underground complex, smoothly cut from rock and painted white. From the vaulted ceiling, a bank of purplish lights gleamed down on a jungle of plants in a crescent-shaped central oasis.

The group followed the woman to one side of the green island into an alcove delineated by a small waterfall. They took seats on curving chairs and couches set in an elliptical pattern. Kurt sat next to Chao on a thick white couch next to a planting of cycads and bananas.

When they were settled, the woman said in one-tongue, "I will speak slowly so that each of you can follow what I am saying. I realize that many of you find the language difficult. In time, it will become completely natural to you. One-tongue is necessary to the Coalition for obvious reasons: understanding cannot take place in Babel.

"Just as you will know the language as if you were born to it, so you will know your brothers and sisters of 12 Coalition. You will be spending the next thirty years in each other's company."

The surprise Kurt felt spring to his face was reflected in others around the room as they looked at each other.

"I will repeat. You will be spending the next thirty years in each other's company. During that time, you will learn intimately the ways and customs of every group of humans in the system. You will travel to every corner of this planet and to the satellites that circle it. You will learn firsthand how to govern this system and its people from the handful of primi-tives in the Philippine jungles to the tiny group beginning to mine the asteroid of Vesta.

"Tomorrow, your classes begin. You will be assigned sleep-ing rooms now. In a half-hour, you are to gather here for refreshments and an opportunity to get to know each other." The woman turned and looked around the group, "I can tell you now that 12 Coalition's first assignment will take you for five years to L-5."

L-5! Space. He was going there? Actually going there? He shook his head in bewilderment. He had always dreamed of space, hoped to go there, but never had he thought it would be this way. He lost his concentration then. Although he continued to watch

the woman intently, conflicting thoughts warred in his brain. It seemed too much to absorb at once: the strange intensity of Polvay and his revelations; the coming change of leadership; the chance to go into space. And twined around these thoughts, constricting them with a tightness he felt in his throat, were the woman's words—"thirty years."

He looked around him at the faces of strangers and tried to imagine his future. Thirty years—no time at all in the scheme of things. Thirty years. Behind him lay his own twenty, his past years stretching like a curving path back toward a misty beginning that seemed to be a very long time ago, yet they were nothing, nothing at all... not even a blink of an eye in the face of eternity.

* * *

He had managed to get pleasantly drunk. With one arm thrown over the accommodating shoulder of Chao Ching-jen, he steadied himself and poured another glass of punch. Half of it managed to slop out of his glass and slosh toward a tray of cheeses. He watched, fascinated, as the puddle crept toward the edge of the table. As it began its inexorable dribble to the floor, he clapped his hand on Chao's shoulder in glee, "Look there. Would you look at that!" he said to him in a hideous mixture of English and one-tongue.

It seemed to him that the little stream of punch was somehow laden with meaning, somehow profound. He could almost grasp it. Instead, he grasped Chao's shirt and began to sag alarmingly about the knees. As he buckled, his grip tightened on the shirt and a ripping sound began in the region of Chao's shoulder. He felt a steadying hand about his waist and Chao's voice tickling his ear, "Perhaps this leader of humanity would sit down now."

He felt himself steered in a zigzag course toward a couch next to the purple-lighted jungle. As one entity, they turned, backed up to the couch, and plopped down together. Part of what was left in his glass landed in his lap; he drained the rest in one swift gulp.

Behind him, the little waterfall trickled down its artificial course. He cocked his head. "Listen." It seemed to him to echo the profundity of the dribbling punch. "Do you hear that?" he asked Chao. "Do you know what that means?"

As Chao looked back with an uncomprehending expression, it seemed to Kurt that his companion's eyes were bleared. Perhaps Chao wasn't intelligent, he thought. Poor guy. He should be kind to him. He stared intently into the dark, slanting eyes. "Listen to that." Now, not only Chao's eyes, but his entire face seemed bleary. Poor guy. The poor guy. Kurt reached for the one-tongue words that would express in simple terms the amazing concept that seemed so clear to him. Anyone could grasp it, grasp the elegance of it: Fountains went on and on, just like he and Chao were going to go on and on. "Listen." He brought his face close to Chao's.

"People. Some go on and on and... some are poured out." He beamed into the Oriental face beside him. "Listen to the water. What does it make you think of?"

Chao cocked his head unsteadily toward the fountain. He listened intently for a moment before he said, "Perhaps dangerous pressure in the bladder should be relieved."

Kurt stared at him, and then as the words found their way into his brain, he extracted their meaning. "Excellent. You are a perceptive person, friend Chao."

Clinging to each other, they rose as one wobbly being and proceeded in a scuttling crablike gait toward the bathroom.

* * *

A lemon-scented cloud puffed from a small aperture near his head. Kurt muttered in his sleep and tossed a protesting arm over his face.

"Good morning," said a cheery voice. Another puff of lemon scent trailed across his nose. "Take deep breaths, and you will awaken quickly."

Half aware, he complied. As the shrouds of sleep began to fall away, they were replaced by a headache of hideous intensity. He groaned and touched a throbbing temple. As the headache increased its torture, a tormented "Oh, God" escaped from his parched lips. Vague memories of the night before came to him in a strange montage. He remembered looking into Chao's eyes. Why couldn't Chao understand? Stupid not to see. The whole meaning of life—right there in front of his eyes, and he couldn't see that the punch... the punch... something about the punch.... Kurt tried to seize the revelation, but it glimmered away just out of reach.

Hot tongs clamped onto his temples and squeezed rhythmically. He moaned piteously. With the pain came a dim memory: he remembered grappling with a girl named Cat Cheese.... No. That wasn't right.... Catch Ease? ... Katje.... Brilliant girl. Could say "no" in seven languages.

"Good morning," repeated the voice. "Take deep breaths and you will be fully awake. Report to the lobby in one-half hour."

As full awakeness came, he increased the volume of his groans. Ever so slowly, he rose to a sitting position and tried not to jar his head. He looked round the room with no memory of how he had gotten there. Somehow, he was sure that the negative Katje had not accompanied him.

He sat, holding his head, and wondered what had possessed him to get so thoroughly shredded. Oh... had he been drenched!

The hot tongs seemed to be squeezing his eyes together. Had to be.... He couldn't focus. He applied fingertips to his eyebrows and gently tugged in a vain attempt to separate his malfunctioning eyes.

Slowly, he became aware that his tongue had enlarged—it had swelled and dried out during the night. Propelled by the persistent lemon scent, he got to his feet and tried to rehydrate his tongue in the bathroom.

He splashed water on his face. The pressure of the droplets on his tortured temples was unbearable. Never again. Never again would he get so blinkered. Oh-h-h-h... Never.

* * *

He managed to get to the lobby only a little before Chao, who seemed to be in similar distress. Together, holding their heads very stiffly, they joined the straggling group.

Their WorldCo guide from the night before said with disgusting cheer, "Good morning. Breakfast is served in the hall to your right."

Breakfast. Oh, God.

With a sly smile, she added, "Those of you who are too disabled to contemplate breakfast will follow me, please."

Kurt looked through crossing eyes at Chao, who gave him back a sheepish look and shrugged. Without a word, they fell into a ragged line behind their guide and meekly followed.

She led them down a hallway and onto a mover that whisked them away with a speed that deranged Kurt's vision and balance, a speed that seemed to him to be close to that of light. The proof of it was that his head felt large enough to fill the universe. Beside him, Chao clung to the handrail. From the expression on his face, death would be welcome.

After what seemed to be an eternity, they came to a large hall. Over wide double doors leading off to the left hung a sign: INFIRMARY.

He considered the sign. Infirmary.... For the infirm. He seemed to qualify.

Kurt, Chao, and half a dozen others followed the guide into a large room. One by one, she deposited them in cubicles.

He sat where he was told. Waiting, he passed the time listening to his head throb. Presently, a motorized cart appeared and spoke to him in a monotone: "Place your hand in the tube." The cart extended a vid-eye, beamed in on his pale face, and extruded a tube in his direction.

He poked his hand inside. Immediately, he felt it clasped and drawn, along with most of his arm, inside as the cart moved closer, pinning him against the chair. Sundry pricking sensations assailed his captured limb. Before he could open his mouth to protest, the vid-eye stared into his. "Breathe," commanded the cart. Simultaneously, a mask emerged from the body of the machine and pressed itself over his mouth and nose.

Clamped as he was in the cart's embrace, he had no choice but to breathe the cold, sharp gas that filled the mask.

After half a minute, the cart removed its breathing apparatus and replaced it with a tube that snaked toward his mouth. "Drink."

Fearful of what it might do to him if he refused, he began to swallow. To his relief, the drink seemed to be a sugary mixture of fruit juices.

At last, the cart released his arm and pulled away. As it trundled toward the next cubicle, he realized that his head-ache was subsiding and his vision was slowly returning to normal. A few minutes later, he was ravenously hungry.

The guide collected them with a cheery, "Better now?" and steered them out through a hallway toward the mover. On the way, they passed a series of rooms marked COUN-SELOR. Through a partly open door, he heard a girl's voice cry, "I can't. I can't do this. I want to go home." A moment later she began to sob. He caught a quick glimpse of her. She held her face in slim fingers, white against the strands of auburn hair that trailed over them.

He paused and stared through the door. A moment later, the guide caught his arm. "This will be explained to you later. Now, you must eat or you will feel much worse."

* * *

The rest of 12-Co had left the dining hall by the time they arrived. By now, Kurt's head was clear as ice and he trembled with a hunger that approached nausea. The others seemed to be in similar shape.

They sat in two groups of four, Chao and he with two young women he vaguely remembered from the night before. They gobbled their hi-pro breakfast in unsociable silence. Only when their unnatural appetite was abated did they attempt conversation.

"Could it be," asked Chao, "that the treatment is perhaps worse than the malady?"

"Poisoned. Poisoned with punch and then tortured," said a girl with ash blonde hair and pale skin. "It's a Coalition of Borgias we've got into."

Kurt stared at her in surprise; she had spoken in English. He lapsed into it too as he introduced himself.

"My name is Foster," she said. "Pamela Foster. From Chelsea."

The other girl frowned at them, looked across at Chao, and said pointedly in one-tongue, "I was taught that it is rude to use foreign languages in the presence of non-speakers. Weren't you taught that?"

Chao remained politely silent.

"Sorry," Pamela said in one-tongue. "Deplorable lapse of manners. Did you see the girl in the Counselor's office?" They nodded.

"I talked with her last night. She despises the idea of the Ministry and all that. I think they're going to send her off."

"Home?" asked the other girl. "Do we have a choice?"

"I think so. It wouldn't make sense to keep someone on in a program they hated, would it now?"

"It's happening too quickly," said the other girl. "They haven't given us time to know what our training will really be—what any of the future will be, for that matter." She turned to Kurt, "If we do have a choice, which way will you go?"

He stared at his plate. Her question had started an avalanche of thoughts—thoughts of what his life had become since Mouat and Gari had changed the world.

What would he choose? He scarcely knew what the choices were. He thought of Polvay—that little man in the last stages of his life—reaching out for some sort of immortality. He felt the bitter core of disillusion emerge once again. What choice had the mortals given the children they killed? What choice had they offered Jorge? He thought of Sean lying in MacDill Hospital—Sean who had never harmed anyone.

And what choice would his own father have given him? He could see those lips moving once again—moving, compressing:... I wanted very much to kill you....

He looked evenly at the girl across the table. "We don't have a choice." They were the oldest—the ones who had to go first, the ones who had to lead the way. He thought of the younger ones then—the children. They would look to the oldest the way a child looks to its parents. "We don't have a choice," he repeated. "We've got to change things."

Chapter 5

The door sighed open, and Kurt and Hallie stepped out-side into a blazing afternoon. The pavement steamed from the remains of a shower too brief to clear the muggy air that hung over Tampa.

Shouldering their packs, they walked together in silence. Finally, Hallie said, "I don't know why, but it seems as if we've been away for a lot longer than two days."

He had noticed it too; he nodded.

"It's because we crammed so much in, I guess." She paused at the turnoff to her dorm. "This time next week then.... Join the Coalition and see the world."

More than the world. In one week, he would be leaving for L-5 with 12 Coalition. Hallie was joining 10-Co then—bound for the South Pacific. "Send me a coconut."

"Sure." With a grin, she took his hand. "You'll get it as soon as you send me a package of space dust."

They stood staring at each other as if their eyes were bonded together. Then with quick parting waves, they turned and walked in opposite directions.

Without stopping first at his dorm, Kurt headed for MacDill hospital.

* * *

The woman at the desk consulted her console, then looked up uncertainly. "He can have limited visitors, but I'm not sure about you. Family members only—" She stared over his shoulder. "Wait. There's Dr. Olivo now. I'll ask."

Kurt followed her gaze to the tall young woman in a lab coat who emerged from the chart room. "Never mind," he said, "I'll ask her myself."

Turning, he fell in step with Dr. Olivo as she walked briskly down the hall. "Yes?" she asked pleasantly.

"I'm here to see Sean McNabb. What can you tell me about him?"

She stopped and turned toward him. "You must be Kurt."

He nodded. "How is he?"

"Better. Much better, physically. But otherwise he's not doing as well as I'd hoped. Maybe you can help."

He turned puzzled eyes toward her. "How? What is it?"

Lines creased her brow, then smoothed away, "He knows about Jorge... but he's not consciously accepting it. He won't talk to me or the nurses about what happened. Maybe he'll talk to you." She smiled. "He's asked about you at least a dozen times."

"Then he'll be all right?"

"Oh, yes. Physically. But he has to deal with this emotion-ally too. Come on. I'll take you to him."

They turned, and he followed her down the hall to a door. She tapped once and opened it. "Sean. Someone's here to see you."

The boy turned startled blue-green eyes toward her. When Kurt stepped through the door, Sean's eyes widened even more.

"I'll talk with you later." She stepped back into the hall and shut the door quietly behind her.

Kurt crossed the room in two steps. "How are you doing?" He ruffled the boy's coppery hair with a broad hand. "Need anything? Something more to eat, maybe? You look as if you could use a few candy bars."

Sean shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

Kurt searched the boy's face for a second, then he drew a chair up to the bed and sat down. "They told you I was out of town, didn't they? I came the first night, but they wouldn't let me in."

"Yeah, they told me." He looked down at his hands and pulled on a finger until the knuckle popped.

Sean looked pale to Kurt—too pale. His freckles seemed to stand out in three-dimensional relief against the white skin. "You, uh, feeling all right now?"

"Yea, fine."

He wasn't fine; he wasn't fine at all. "What happened, Sean? Who did this to you?"

The boy caught his lower lip between his teeth. He blinked and shook his head.

Kurt leaned forward, "Who was it? One of the maintenance men? A workman?" Then with sudden suspicion, "A teacher? Was it a teacher?"

Sean shook his head again and looked away toward the window.

Kurt caught his arm. "Who, then? Look at me, Sean. Who was it?"

The boy looked at Kurt for a moment and then stared down at his hands. Tugging at his fingers again, he popped one knuckle after the other. Finally, he said in a low voice, "It was one of the Kindy kids."

"What?" Kurt took the boy's hand in his.

"One of the Kindy kids."

"Which kid? Which one?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know his name. He had a red birthmark right here." Sean touched an index finger to the angle of his jaw. "Right below his ear."

"You're sure?" He couldn't believe it. He had been so certain it had been one of the adults, one of the mortals.

Sean nodded. "He locked me in."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"What about Jorge? Are you saying this kid locked both of you in that room?"

Sean looked blank for a moment. Then he said, "Jorge got away. He got away, but I was locked in."

Kurt stared at him for a few seconds, then he said quietly, "What happened to Jorge?"

His lips began to quiver and he pressed them together.

"What happened to Jorge, Sean?"

"He got away." He thrust his chin out, and then his lips began to quiver more. "He got away... but I couldn't. And it was hot and my hands hurt. They hurt so bad. And smoke was all over. I got sick and then—" Tears brimmed from his eyes and he covered them with his hands. He sobbed, shak-ing the bed with the force of his anguish. "The guinea pig died, Kurt.... The guinea pig died...."

* * *

"A child? A five-year-old?" Lauren raised unbelieving eyebrows.

"That's what Sean said... and I believe him." Kurt dropped into the chair by Lauren's desk.

"But, surely they could overpower a five-year-old."

"Not if he slipped out ahead of them. It must have hap-pened fast."

A thoughtful look came over her face, then she frowned. "If he did that—if he locked them in—then it was deliberate. I can't believe a little kid could plan something like that."

"Believe it or not," he said with a trace of annoyance. "The door was locked from outside."

She touched his shoulder. "But Kurt, you said yourself that Sean thought Jorge got away. Maybe he's confused about the whole thing."

"That's what I'm going to find out." He had set the wheels in motion already. He had marched back to MacOps and demanded priority computer time in the name of the MacDill Youth Government Association. "Something ought to turn up by morning when the teachers get notice. How many chil-dren could have a birthmark like that?"

"I can't believe it, Kurt." Lauren shook her head. "I just don't believe that a five-year-old could do anything like that." She tugged at his hand. "Let's go to dinner. And on the way, you can tell me about your trip." She tipped her head. "What was the big mystery about?"

As they walked together, he told her bits and pieces about 12-Co, but when he looked into her familiar face, he couldn't find the right way to tell her that he would be leaving in a week. The words seemed to be dammed up inside him.

"This training period," she persisted. "How long does it last?"

How could he tell her? How could he tell her that he wouldn't be seeing her for the next thirty years?

As if sensing something, Lauren looked at him gravely. "I, uh, hope that this 12-Co thing won't come between us, Kurt."

He tried to mask the sudden empty feeling with a quick smile. "How could it?" But, everything had happened so quickly. And at least part of his decision had been based on Sean... He had been so sure—so positive—that mortals were responsible for the fire.

A hundred thoughts jostled in his brain at once until none of them seemed to make sense any more. When Lauren spoke again, she had to repeat herself twice before she had his attention.

* * *

Margaret stared at the flexi-sheet. That business about the birthmark... They had to mean Silvio Tarantino. But why? She looked up from her desk in the portable shelter that served as a kindergarten classroom until the main building could be repaired. Silvio was painting industriously with bright tempera colors. He seemed completely absorbed in what he was doing.

She rose and walked over to the boy as he worked the broad brush over the paper in meticulous orange strokes. "That's very nice, Silvio."

As he looked up at her, a smile stole over his face. He turned back to the paper and added another streak of orange that trailed upward toward the top of the sheet. "And what's this?" Margaret pointed to a small dark object near the bottom.

A thumb crept to his mouth. "Pepper."

"Oh." The guinea pig. With a start, she realized what the orange streaks of paint represented. Awful how even the very young ones were affected. They should never have taken them to the chapel. "Everything's going to be all right, Silvio. We'll get a new guinea pig very soon." As she stood staring through the open window at the blackened wall of the main building, she squeezed his shoulder absently and wondered why in the world MacDill Youth Government would be interested in Silvio.

* * *

Instead of the committee she had expected, only one young man met Margaret as she walked into the chapel with her hand tight around Silvio's.

A nice-looking young man, she thought, but there was something in his eyes she didn't like, something that came into his eyes when he looked at Silvio. She slid her hands protectively over the boy's shoulders, squeezing gently. "You say you're on the discipline committee? I don't understand." This was nonsense. The discipline committee was concerned with troublemakers. Troublemakers—not little boys like Silvio. He had never given her a moment's grief—which was more than she could say about so many of them.

"I'd like you two to come with me." Kurt picked up a small recorder and led them to the ramp that connected the chapel and the hospital.

Baffled and a little defensive, Margaret recaptured Silvio's hand and followed Kurt down the hall. They stopped outside a door tagged with the name Sean McNabb. She stared at it. Wasn't that the boy in the fire? Yes. She was sure of it. She thrust her chin toward Kurt. "Maybe you'd better explain why you're so interested in this child."

"I'd be happy to. Later. But right now, I'd like to ask him a few questions." He started to open the door, then stopped. "Please let him answer for himself."

Really. She felt an intense flash of dislike for this young man—as if, somehow, Silvio were threatened by him. Anxiously, she looked down at the child who smiled calmly back. Well, at least he didn't seem nervous. And why was she? She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile as they walked into the room. But somewhere deep inside, she felt a sharp, cold sliver of fear. She had no idea why.

The red-haired boy lying in the bed stared at them as they walked in. His eyes were fixed on Silvio.

Kurt switched on the recorder. "Sean, I want you to repeat what you told me a few minutes ago."

The boy blinked. "That's him. The one I told you about."

Margaret listened in growing horror at Sean's words. Horror—and outrage. She gripped Silvio's shoulders and tried to quell the cold feeling inside her. This was nonsense. Impossible nonsense. The idea that Silvio could do those things was completely unbelievable. It was ludicrous—a child as sweet, as innocent as Silvio?

Unbidden, the image of a scrawled picture came to her... Silvio dipping the wide brush into bright tempera, the page blooming

with childish orange flames....

Impossible. It would mean he was a monster—a manipulat-ing monster. Why, it was laughable. The idea that a baby could have fooled her. Totally absurd. Laughable.

But the laugh would not rise to her throat. Something caught it, held it. Something that felt like ice.

* * *

As Sean repeated his story to the recorder, Kurt watched Silvio closely. There was something elusive about the child's eyes—something sly that crept into them. The look was fleeting. He could catch it for only a second or two before it slid away to be replaced with the bland look of innocence.

The boy was incredibly calm. A lot calmer than his teacher. She wouldn't take her hands from his shoulders; her fingers kneaded and probed while a dozen different expressions flick-ered over her face.

When Sean finished, Kurt spoke to Silvio: "Were you in the room when Sean and Jorge, came in?"

The child shot a quick look at Sean and then said some-thing in an inaudible voice.

"Talk louder, Silvio. Were you waiting in the room? The room with the guinea pig?"

The look again, quickly replaced by another—one a shade too wide-eyed, too innocent. "Yes."

"What did you have in your pocket, Silvio?"

"Nothing." A thumb glided into his mouth.

"Did you have matches in your pocket?"

"That's enough!" Margaret caught her lip between her teeth and narrowed her eyes at Kurt. "You've said enough. You're frightening him."

He looked at the bland-faced boy she clasped and won-dered if it wasn't the teacher who was frightened. As quickly as her words came out, the child's lower lip began to tremble. Whimpering, Silvio turned toward her, hugging her, and buried his face against her body.

She held the boy close, glaring over his head toward Kurt. "You see? You've frightened him." Her. lips pinched shut, relaxed, pinched again. She thrust her chin toward Sean. "You ought to be ashamed. You ought to be ashamed to tell such lies. I'm not going to let you abuse him anymore."

With a final parting glare, she swept Silvio into the hall and slammed the door behind her.

Kurt watched in silence for a moment before he clicked off the recorder and turned to Sean. "I'm sorry I had to put you through this."

Sean held one hand with the other, pinching and stroking a fist so tight that the skin showed white over his knuckles. He stared at his hands intently as if there were nothing else in the room, as if there were nothing else in the world. His lace began to work, and ugly, hard sobs shook his body.

Kurt grasped the boy's shoulders and felt them shake un-der his grip. "What is it? What is it, little brother?" Calling him "little brother" was always good for a grin, but this time it didn't work. In dismay, Kurt held the boy against him until finally the harsh gasps slowed.

"It's my fault, Kurt"

"What is? What's your fault."

"Jorge. It's my fault."

He caught Sean's face in his two hands and turned it toward him. "Stop that," he said gently.

Sean wouldn't look at him. "It is. It's my fault. I told him to break the window and... I killed him. Jorge's dead...."

Not knowing what else to do, Kurt held Sean close and let him cry.

Chapter 6

Kurt stood before the door, hesitating for a moment before he raised his hand to knock. It always seemed so strange now when he went home, as if he had never lived there at all.

His mother opened the door. She stared at him for a second, then drew him inside. He kissed the cheek she turned toward him.

"Well," she said brightly, "I'm so glad you could come." She spoke as she would to an acquaintance invited for drinks. The lines that touched her face, the shadowy hollows that had come during Richard Kraus's last illness, had remained, never advancing, never retreating. It seemed to Kurt that she had been somehow captured in that time—aged, but not aging—drowning in his father's death like a fly in amber.

Carmen Kraus led him to a couch and busied herself in making him a drink. She thrust it into his hand and then retreated across the room to a narrow chair. "Well," she said again and raised her half-drained glass to her lips.

"Where's Eric?"

She smiled abstractly. "Sleeping. I wanted him to rest before the recital. When he gets up, we'll have something light. There'll be time for dinner after he plays."

Feeling acutely ill at ease, he nodded. She had never really forgiven him for not saying goodbye to his father, he thought. Not that she had pursued it. Instead, she had covered herself with a layer of something impenetrable, a sort of indifference, until he had become not her son, but someone else—someone to be nice to on his infrequent visits, nothing more. "Uh, what's he playing?"

He asked to make conversation; he knew from Eric's letter what was on the program: the Bach, the Prokofiev, Sniffen's new *Suite for Piano*. He stared at his mother as she told him; he tried to remember how things used to be—how they used to be when he had been her favorite, when she had pinned her bright hopes to him like a medal. "And, what's he going to do after graduation?" Again, a conversation ploy. He re-membered their last talk—Eric telling him his plans: "I'm going to keep on with Dr. Rouk and send my tapes around until someone asks me to audition for a job. I never had my sights as high as you, you know. Ill be happy accompanying—if anybody wants me."

"Silberman is interested," she said. "And Eric seems so set on accompanying, although..." the sentence fluttered away to nothing.

Silberman—the flautist. He could have his pick of pianists. Why would he want Eric? Why would he want somebody still in school? Eric had improved tremendously over the past five years and yet... "I'm glad to hear that... about Silberman."

"He's kept the tape for months," she said defensively. "He wouldn't have kept it if he weren't interested. He would have sent it back."

He changed the subject. "How's Grandma?"

Eric swung into the room. "The same. She's always the same." He gave Kurt a grin. "I thought I heard you." Then quickly, "How is Sean?"

"Better now. Much better."

His mother leaned forward. "Did they catch the man who did it?"

"It wasn't a man."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows rose.

"Sean says it was one of the children. There'll be a full inquiry Monday morning. And then—" He was interrupted by the sound of someone at the door—his grandmother.

She seemed smaller to Kurt each time he saw her, a little gnome of a woman, with eyes still bright with love for him. He hugged her gently, because she had grown so tiny now.

She chided him for his growth each time she saw him; she did it now, telling him he had grown much too enormous to suit her. "You make me feel like a dwarf, Kurt." And he grinned at her and leaned over to plant a kiss on her forehead.

She stood, staring up at Kurt and Eric, spreading her shriveled little hands in mock horror. "Great-grandsons," she said, putting unmistakable emphasis on the word "great." Then to Carmen, "I suppose we'd better feed them before they turn on us. They'll need a lot of food just to keep them tame." Then with a smile that turned her face into a miracle of lines, she hustled Carmen Kraus away with her to the kitchen. When Eric and Kurt followed with offers to help, she shooed them out, declaring that she had no desire to be "trampled by behemoths" in the little kitchen.

Eric smiled and flopped back on the couch. "She'll make me drink a cup of tea."

"You can be sure of it," Kurt said with an answering grin. He felt much more at ease now that Eric and his grand-mother were here, as if, for a time, he could believe things were as they used to be. "A cup of A.P.T." All-purpose tea. "Wakes you up in the morning; puts you to sleep at night."

"Calms the nerves and lifts the spirits," Eric echoed, and they both laughed.

Kurt glanced at the piano. "Need to warm up? Don't let me keep you from it."

"Not just yet. Time for that later. I want to visit for a while. It's not like we see you every day."

Kurt nodded. It had been over three months since he had been home. But the press of his activities, his classes, seemed to eat up the time.

Suddenly Eric leaned forward, serious now. "You haven't seen the university for a long time, have you?"

He shook his head.

"We're the last class, you know. When we graduate next week, most of it will be shut down. Just a couple of buildings left open for graduate students and Adult Ed." The late afternoon sun shone on Eric's face, lighting the planes and hollows of it; he turned more toward Kurt and a faint shadow crossed his gray eyes.

Kurt knew it was the last class—the class Eric had joined when he was sent home from MacDill. He had been one of the youngest placed in a high school senior class that con-vened at the university. Kurt tried to imagine the sprawling school shutting down, its nearly empty hallways echoing with the clatter of feet. In another week or so, even the echoes would be gone.

"It's an ending," Eric said. "It started me thinking and I—I started thinking about other endings, so I did something you may think is stupid." He paused, obviously embarrassed now.

"Well, what?"

Eric grinned self-consciously. "I-uh-bought an Ever-Vault in your name."

Kurt felt his eyes widen. An Ever-Vault. They had started springing up two or three years ago. Little safes—rows of them—that the mortals filled with vacuum-packed trinkets and mementos: little boxes of themselves, their heritage to their immortal children; a plea to those children not to forget them—a plea to those children... and to a brother.

"It's just a few things." Eric went on rapidly, "Just a few tapes and things. I was-uh-going to add a recording of the recital tonight." His eyes didn't quite meet Kurt's.

Kurt bridged the awkward moment with an outstretched hand reaching out to take Eric's—reaching, clasping quickly, then withdrawing to perch tentatively on his lap.

"I put a few things in there from Mom and Grandma too. They don't know about it." Eric stared at his hands, stretch-ing and tenting the long fingers. "I guess you think it's stupid—"

"No. No, I don't." And he was thinking about thirty years— thirty years of training that would leave him physically unchanged. Eric would be fifty-one then. And his mother.... His grandmother.... He wanted to tell Eric then that he was going away, but instead, he said lightly, "I can guess what you put in for Grandma. A cookie and a tea bag embed-ded in Lucite."

"Not a bad idea."

And a moment later, their grandmother called to them. "Come and get it. There's soup and I've made tea to go with it."

"And cookies for dessert," said Eric. They grinned at each other then, and their eyes seemed suddenly moist, suddenly brighter, in the lowering sunlight.

With a smile, a young woman handed them programs. They took seats near the front to the left—the traditional place for watching keyboard soloists. Kurt bent over the program, trying to read it in the dim light, when he felt a hand touch his shoulder.

He looked up into the lean face of Dr. Theodore Rouk.

He jumped to his feet and reached out an eager hand. He hadn't seen his old teacher in years.

Although they were nearly the same height, Theo Rouk seemed taller. He was thin to the point of gauntness. He took Kurt's hand, clasping it with fingers only, the way he always taught his students. "You can't be too careful. The over-eager well-wisher can damage your hands." Nodding to the women, Rouk folded himself into the seat next to Kurt. "I might not have recognized you if I hadn't spotted your mother."

Kurt stared at his old teacher. The fierce gray eyes seemed paler now, nearly matching the kinky silver hair. When had he gone gray? He had never thought of Dr. Rouk as aging; he had always been a constant. All those years he had seemed the same; hawk eyes fierce above hawk nose; long, bony fingers swooping down to the keyboard, pinioning each note in a sure attack.

"You've kept up your work, of course," he said to Kurt. He meant the piano; to him it was the only work. Then quickly, "Or are you concentrating on oboe now?"

He was saved from answering when the house lights dimmed and Eric, an unfamiliar Eric in formal wear, stepped onto the stage.

Eric began with the Bach. The tic-tocking clockwork rhythms counterpointed the thoughts that played in Kurt's head. Eric was good—getting better every year—and yet something was missing. Intently, he watched Eric's fingers methodically moving over the keyboard. *I always played better.*

It was sudden, and shocking, that thought. Shocking not because of its sentiments, but because of its tense—its past tense. Although he had managed to find places to practice, although his mother had sent him reed supplies and had caused the MacDill computer to obligingly spit out copies of his music, he was letting it all slip away.

Well, what else could he do in a place like MacDill? Might as well make music in a prison, he thought. And yet, under-neath lay the knowledge that other people had emerged from worse places with their music intact—places like the old concentration camps he had read about.

He tried to submerge the thoughts, tried to drown them in the Bach, but they popped up like corks to float in his consciousness. Gradually, he had grown less involved in his music. Less of himself was in it now. He was less willing to... sacrifice for it. He clenched his fists in the darkness as if to hold the shameful thoughts in check. But, what could he expect anyway... in a place like MacDill.

He had always had such a sense of urgency about his music, always a sense of time rushing by, always a need to catch up, get ahead. Well, what had he been in such a bloody hurry about? Plenty of time for that. All the time there was.

The thought was exceedingly comfortable. He held it up tentatively, then slipped into it and found that it fit quite well. He wasn't letting his music go at all. He was just putting it off. Just for a while—until his life was more settled. Then, later, he would take it up again, and when he did, there would be time to perfect it. Plenty of time. What did he expect anyway... in a place like MacDill?

* * *

After the recital, they went home to a late supper. Theo Rouk was invited along with Eric's voice teacher, Eva Dowdy. Her husband, the shadowy bassoonist, Bertram Dowdy, came too. He wore black trousers and a black jacket with silver buttons. He presented such a thin, cylindrical appearance that Kurt snorted with glee when his grandmother said wickedly, "Bertram, you're getting to look more like your bassoon every day."

"Don't heckle him, Grandma," he said with a grin.

She raised an eyebrow and, turning toward the kitchen, said, "I'd better help your mother. If I know Carmen, she's fluttering around like a wounded bird while the fruit turns brown." She bustled off, saying over her shoulder, "You stay and entertain our guests."

But her command proved unnecessary. Theo Rouk had seated himself at the piano and Eva Dowdy, one hand on the piano as if to anchor it, began to sing a German song. As her rich voice filled the room, one thin eyebrow rose and twitched methodically to show distress at unrequited love.

Kurt watched her from the recesses of a deep chair. Then he closed his eyes and listened. Her voice was truly beautiful. He opened one eye experimentally. She had hooked her fingers together now, tugging in opposite directions, round elbows pulsing up and down in rhythm to the music, while her eyebrows crept toward the ceiling at the rate of about four or five millimeters for each elbow pulse. He considered the spectacle gravely. It was too bad she wasn't recorded. If the visual were switched off and no one could see the girth of her body and the distracting gymnastics of her face, it might be possible to imagine a slim young girl in a tragic love affair. But as it was, it struck Kurt that Eva Dowdy's plaintive song more closely depicted grief over a severe shortage of strudels than over unrequited love. He raised a quick hand to mask the expression that crept over his face.

When the song and the applause were over, his mother and grandmother laid out trays of food: fluffy little quiche pastries, rolls, salad, cold ham, and a platter of cut fruits.

As they ate and sipped the cold, white Rheingau, the talk was of music. Everyone there was, or had been, a performer. Most taught too. All of Carmen Kraus's piano students now were adults—but she was doing well. Many people who had studied as children, then given it up, had returned to the instrument. "Of course, they aren't that good," she said. "They've lost that dexterity that children have. But it gives them pleasure."

Teachers had been faced with economic ruin in the first Mouat-Gari years, but now there was a resurgence of interest in the arts. With the children gone, people needed some-thing to fill the void. Now—everywhere, it seemed—adults were taking up painting or involving themselves in theater for the first time. Adult classes in writing, art, and music were springing up like weeds. And the products of these classes were often stored carefully away—in the Ever-Vaults.

After dinner, over coffee and brandy, Theo Rouk turned suddenly to Kurt. "It's time we heard you play."

Eva Dowdy poured a rich dollop of cream in her coffee. "Yes, do."

Kurt shook his head slightly. He couldn't play for Rouk. "I don't have anything ready," he said with a faint smile.

"Kurt's probably been too busy with his oboe," said Eric easily.

"But that can't be right, Eric." There was an edge to Carmen Kraus's voice. "He hasn't asked for reed supplies in over a year—have you, Kurt?"

He stared at his hands. Why was she doing this?

"Surely you'll play something, Kurt. A Ravel, perhaps," she said primly.

She used to say to him, "You can be a Ravel specialist. You have a special gift for interpreting him." He looked at her sharply. It stood out in her eyes, the pain that had twisted to malice. She pressed her lips into a thin smile. "Do play, Kurt."

Her look told him everything: it told him that he had hurt her, that he had taken her hopes for him and trampled them; more, it told him that she wanted to retaliate, wanted to see him humiliated in front of the others.

His grandmother caught the look. "Carmen," she said sharply, "if he doesn't want to play, he doesn't want to play."

"Nonsense." Carmen Kraus smiled brightly, but her eyes felt cold and hard to him. "He just wants us to beg. Don't you, Kurt?"

A heavy layer of silence fell. He stared at his mother. It seemed as if he still heard the echoes of her voice in the stillness. He felt his jaw tighten. He shook his head again. "I don't have time for that now."

"But, Kurt... we have all evening."

He stared at her, at her prim smile, her calculating eyes. Yes. He could be his mother's son. "I don't have time for that now. I'm going away for a special government program. It's for the future leaders of WorldCo. There's a short training period," he said, throwing her mortality in her face, "...only thirty years. And then I'll be tied up for a while. I plan to get back to Ravel some time next century."

Her face grew suddenly white and then it reddened as if he had slapped her. For a second, he stared at her cheeks as if he could see the marks of his attack. She deserved it, he told himself. But almost at once, he regretted the words, regretted the way they hung oppressively in the room. How many in that room would be around at the end of his "short" training period? Probably not Theo Rouk, who stared intently into his cup as if it told his fortune. Maybe not the Dowdys, who fast approached their fifties. Not his grandma. Maybe not his mother.

He felt sick. He got to his feet and tried to say, "I'm sorry." Failing, he turned and stumbled from the room.

Chapter 7

"Whatever it is he expects, I hope he's satisfied." Kurt slung the wadded flexi-sheet against Lauren's wall.

"Kurt, can't you see what's happened. He didn't have any choice."

He nodded grimly. Mortimer's tail was caught in a crack. He had to listen to M.Y.G.A.'s Discipline Committee, but he couldn't ignore the teachers. "You should have heard that woman. She called Sean a liar. And then she pranced off to Mortimer and told him we were 'persecuting a baby.' "

Lauren looked away, and then said in a low voice, "Are you, Kurt?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "Is that what you think?"

She leaned forward and touched his hand, caressing it gently. "I know you're upset over what happened to Sean, but... this teacher—what's her name? Harris... Margaret Harris—she's been around Silvio all year, Kurt. Surely if something was wrong, she'd know it."

"Would she?"

"Yes. I think she would. Teachers have special training in these things, don't they?"

He thought of the kindergarten teacher—of the fear he had seen reflected in her face—and shook his head. The inquiry was less than an hour away, and that woman was going to try to turn it into a travesty. It ought to be obvious to anyone that Silvio was seriously disturbed. If he didn't get help, who knew what he might do next?

"You're forgetting that he's just a child."

He got to his feet, retrieved the crumpled flexi and smoothed it carefully before he looked at Lauren. "And you're forgetting that another child is dead."

* * *

Margaret squared her shoulders and, taking Silvio by the hand, walked briskly up to the conference room. "This will all be over in a few minutes," she said to the boy and then wondered why she had said it. He seemed perfectly calm.

Well, it was, after all, a matter of principle. It was her responsibility to protect him. She paused outside the door and squeezed his hand. Poor motherless thing. He was too young to realize the threats to him. Children just don't understand these things. Not until they were ten or twelve—at least ten, she thought.

She opened the door, and they stepped inside. Margaret shivered as she looked around—it looked like a judge's chamber. She blinked. Whatever was it that made her think of that? But, suddenly she could think of nothing else; suddenly, she was nine years old again—just a baby, really—standing in that chamber while they asked her about her half-brother, Stevie.

And could she help it that she was a better swimmer? It wasn't her fault that the boat capsized. They shouldn't have expected her to take care of him while Daddy and Charlotte sat under the trees and smoked, twining their toes and hug-ging while the smoke trailed in tendrils over their heads. She loved him—loved Stevie. She really did. She didn't want him to drown. She had never wanted that.

She had cried in the judge's chamber. She had cried again at the funeral when Daddy sat so stiffly next to her in that room filled with white roses. Charlotte wasn't there. She was in the hospital—"Under sedation," Daddy said. Margaret leaned against her daddy and felt the rough fibers of his old black coat scratch her bare arm. Now that Stevie was dead, there was just one child left. Just Margaret. She glanced at her daddy's face. It was so serious, so stricken. She wondered how he felt, wondered if he felt the way she did when he went away and left her and Mama. And then she began to cry again because she loved Stevie—she really did—and he was dead.

She cried until the tears clogged her nose and tightened her throat the way the water did that awful day when she reached for Stevie, trying to tug him from the tangle of drowned roots that caught him, pulling until her chest was on fire. She gasped and felt him slip away in the dark water, his smooth, limp arm slithering from her hands.

She loved him. She did. She did.... And so why, under the suffocating tears, did she feel such a fierce and sudden joy?

* * *

When the door opened, Kurt looked up. Margaret stood at the threshold. She clutched Silvio's hand and stared around the room with such a look of panic on her face that he blinked at it. What was wrong with her?

In a moment, the look passed. She sat down and pulled Silvio into the chair next to her.

Mortimer, the MacDill Superintendent, stood with his back to the room and stared out of the single window. Suddenly, he turned, fixed Kurt and the other two members of M.Y.G.A.'s Discipline Committee with a quick look, and strode to the center chair on the small platform at one end of the room.

One of Mortimer's assistants, a rawboned, square-faced woman, handed him a note. He glanced at it abruptly, then pushed it toward the tall man at his left. Mortimer cleared his throat. "This is an inquiry, not a hearing. I expect these proceedings to be completely informal." But something in the man's presence seemed to inhibit informality. "We've all heard the taped testimony of Sean McNabb. Is he able to appear if we need him?"

The square-faced woman jumped up, went to the door, and disappeared into the hall. In a moment, she came back with Dr. Olivo.

Mortimer repeated the question.

Dr. Olivo sat down easily, crossed her slim legs, and said, "If it's absolutely necessary, Sean can appear, but I'd prefer he didn't."

Mortimer raised an eyebrow. "It seems to me that he ought to be able or not."

"Physically, he is able," she said, "but I'd rather not put him through the emotional stress."

"Perhaps you can tell us about his emotional state then."

"He seems to be adjusting well... now."

Mortimer thumbed through a stack of flexi-sheets until he found what he was looking for. "This is an entry from the McNabb boy's chart." He began to read: "...patient is repressing details of the accident. He refuses to admit that his friend is dead...." Mortimer rattled the flexi at Dr. Olivo. "Your note, I believe."

"Yes. That's my note. At that time, Jorge's death was just too painful for Sean to admit to himself."

"Would you say that the McNabb boy was confused about the accident?"

"In a manner of speaking. Unconsciously, he knew, but consciously he thought Jorge had escaped and was safe. It wasn't until Kurt visited him that he remembered."

Kurt stared at Mortimer, who looked sharply at him. "Oh, yes. It seems that Mr. Kraus played a major role in this whole business. Isn't that right, Mr. Kraus?"

"I suppose it is." He spoke evenly, but, inwardly, he seethed at the letter Mortimer had sent him earlier. It accused him of stepping out of bounds, using his M.Y.G.A. connections improperly, convening the Discipline Committee without prior clearance.

"Then perhaps you will enlighten us as to that role." The antagonism in Mortimer's voice was unmistakable.

Kurt shifted in his chair and then began to recount his visit with Sean.

"And so," Mortimer interrupted, "the McNabb boy didn't remember the details until you jogged his memory."

Kurt felt a quick anger flare. "I resent that." He shot a look at Margaret and the boy. "Silvio admitted that he was in the room when the fire started. It's on the tape."

"It was an accident!" Margaret leaned forward in her chair. "You know it was."

"I don't know anything of the kind."

"That's enough." Mortimer closed his eyes for a second. He looked suddenly old, suddenly very tired. He turned toward Kurt, "You have known Sean McNabb for several years?"

Kurt nodded. "Yes."

"Do you admit that knowing the boy—being his friend— might have caused you to be biased in your dealings with this matter?"

"I can admit that I know Sean tells the truth. I've never known him to lie."

"But, do you, concede that it is at least possible that you may be biased?"

"Toward Sean," Kurt admitted, "but not against anyone." He glanced at Margaret and Silvio. He didn't think he had been biased against either of them. But he was quickly becoming that way in the face of her hostility. There was something wrong here. Something wrong in the way she refused to see beyond her tight little preconceived notions.

Mortimer turned toward Margaret. "Miss Harris, how long have you been a teacher?"

"I've taught for eight years. Ever since I graduated from South Florida. I've always taught kindergarten. I've devoted my professional life to five-year-olds," she said defensively. "And I think I know a thing or two about them."

Mortimer sighed faintly. "I'm sure you do, Miss Harris."

"I have been professionally involved with Silvio Tarantino for over nine months now. And I can assure you that whatever happened in that room was not this child's fault."

"Can you, Miss Harris?"

She flushed, then bristled. "Maybe we should find out what the McNabb boy is trying to hide." Kurt stared at her in disbelief.

She thrust her chin forward defiantly. "He's repressing something. That means he feels guilty. How do we know who really struck that match?"

Kurt was on his feet. He stared angrily at Margaret Harris and then said sarcastically, "Maybe you asked the wrong person about bias, Mr. Mortimer. Maybe you'd better ask Miss Harris."

She looked at Kurt coldly. "I'm speaking as a professional."

"Then start acting like one," snapped Mortimer. "Your 'professional' expertise does not extend to a psychological evaluation of Sean McNabb."

A sudden shocked look crossed Margaret's face. Then she said, "Why don't you ask Silvio if Sean started the fire?" She turned to the child. "Did he?"

Kurt couldn't take his eyes from the woman. She was unbelievable. Now that she had put the thought in Silvio's head, it was predictable how he would answer. Again, he saw the sly look flicker over the child's face.

"That's enough, Miss Harris." Mortimer's voice was low, but emphatic. "I will repeat myself. This is an inquiry. No one is, on trial here. And although we do not stand on formality in this proceeding, we will have order."

After that, a subdued assemblage listened to succinct re-ports from firemen and rescue personnel and to a brief non-committal report from a MacDill psychologist until Mortimer declared a brief recess while he deliberated with his assistants. The M.Y.G.A. Discipline Committee was pointedly excluded.

Twenty minutes later, they filed back into the room.

Mortimer began to speak: "The tragic death of Jorge Aguilar has had a profound effect on all of us. We have grieved for the boy and for his family, a family whose trial, unfortunately, did not end with Jorge's death; they have further been upset by the loss of a family heirloom—a crucifix—which disappeared from the boy's casket. It would seem to serve no purpose to further distress this family with pointless judicial proceedings when this inquiry clearly shows that Jorge's death was accidental.

"Our deepest sympathy goes out to his family in their time of anguish. This inquiry is now closed."

Silence struck the room. Then Margaret stood abruptly. "It's all over, Silvio. You can forget about this now."

Very calm, very quiet, the boy stood next to her. He looked at Kurt for a long moment, and in that moment Kurt saw something flicker beneath the artless baby veneer—something so old, so malevolent, that he felt a sudden chill.

"I don't forget. Ever," Silvio said. And then the look of virgin innocence slid back again, and a chubby thumb crept to his lips.

After the others left the conference room, Kurt waited until he and Mortimer were alone. "I want to talk to you."

Mortimer leaned back in his chair and eyed Kurt. "I thought you would."

"You don't really believe it was an accident."

Mortimer was silent for a moment; then he said, "MacDill has a good record. We're going to keep it that way."

"By ignoring the evidence?"

"By avoiding public arousal and panic, young man. There are thousands of parents out there who expect me to keep order here. They expect me to guarantee the safety of their children. Guarantee. No matter if that child is here or home on pass."

"And you think the way to do that is to ignore a child like Silvio."

A faint smile quirked the edge of Mortimer's lips. "And you think the answer is to drag in the judiciary." He leaned forward in his chair. "Did you stop to consider the results of that? If people believe that this death wasn't an accident, then they'll choose—many of them—to believe that the old troubles are starting up again. Another thing: today should have taught you something. The question of the McNabb boy's guilt would surely be raised. Would you want him to go through that?"

"But—"

"Listen to me." He fixed Kurt with a penetrating look. "What could be gained by proving the guilt of a five-year-old? A five-year-old is a legal innocent."

Kurt's eyes widened. "Then you believe Silvio did it too."

"Do you think the way to help the child is to have his record marred for all time?"

Kurt sat back and stared away for a moment. Then he said, "You had your mind made up before you walked in here, didn't you? Is that why you tried to discredit me? Make everyone believe I was biased?"

"People are always biased, Kurt—one way or another. I wanted you to examine your motives."

He curled his lip. "And that's all you had in mind?"

To his surprise, Mortimer laughed. "Of course not. I was using that to strengthen my position... my decision. I admit my bias, you see." Then, solemnly, "It's too bad you acted so impetuously. If you'd come to me first, it could have been handled in a different way; the child could have been quietly referred to doctors. I'm afraid you complicated things unnecessarily. You really left me no choice."

"And so, you're just going to pretend it never happened—pretend everything is fine."

Mortimer leaned back in his chair and studied the ceiling before he said thoughtfully, "Did it occur to you to wonder why I'm telling you these things?" He gave Kurt a quick look. "No, I didn't think so." Then abruptly, "I know you've been chosen by WorldCo for training. And your training might as well start now. You will not be dealing in absolutes. You're a fool if you think that everything is black and white."

"But... in this case—"

"In no case," he thundered. Then more quietly, "There are no absolutes. And in the end, you have only your own judgment to rely on."

Kurt raised an eyebrow. "Even if it's wrong?"

"Especially if it's wrong. Do you think you can put it to a vote? You're not dealing with a democratic system here. You live in an oligarchy. Better to be wrong and take the consequences than to blow with the wind."

As Kurt stared at him, Mortimer leaned forward and fixed him with an iron gaze. "Let me tell you something, young man. Someday you are going to be faced with a problem that affects the lives of many people. You're going to have to take responsibility for your decision. And you're going to have to live with it. When that time comes," he said deliberately, "I hope you can."

By the time Margaret got back to her class, she was exhausted. She felt hot and out of sorts. Brushing a lock of hair from Silvio's

face, she sent him to his seat where a group of children cut bright paper into strips with round-nosed scissors as the substitute teacher watched.

Margaret thought of asking the girl to stay on for the rest of the day. It would be so wonderful to go home now, to stretch out and go to sleep. She wasn't feeling well. Not at all well, really. Margaret glanced at the clock. Not much time left though. She supposed it would be best to stay.

The girl left, and Margaret sat down at her desk. Story time was next, but she just didn't think she could manage that. Her head was beginning to ache. She decided she would just let them keep on cutting and pasting for as long as they would.

Time passed until she was startled by a boy at her elbow. "I'm thirsty."

She stared at the clock. It was past time to take them for a drink and then to the bathroom. She stood and looked around the room. "Water fountain time." She tried to make her voice cheery, but her head felt awful.

The children fell into a ragged line, and she marched them out to the low water fountain that stood on a concrete strip between two of the temporary buildings. "Don't push," she said automatically.

Sally was next in line at the fountain. She put a hand quickly to her mouth and leaned over the stream of water, her pigtails swinging with the motion like braided ears. Suddenly, Sally stiffened and threw a hand to her mouth. Her face flushed as Margaret watched. "What is it? Sally, what's wrong?"

The child's mouth worked, but no sound came out, and to Margaret's horror, a dreadful gray-blue color spread over Sally's face. Choking. Oh, God! She was choking.

Running to her side, she grabbed Sally from behind. Trying desperately to remember her first aid, Margaret pressed a fist into the child's stomach.

With a little whooping sound, something flew out of Sally's mouth, and the child began to cough and sob simultaneously. In near panic, Margaret whacked and patted the girl's back until both of them had recovered enough to breathe normally again.

Margaret looked at the excited cluster of little faces around her and shooed them back into their water fountain line. Then kneeling before Sally, she took her shoulders. "What did you have in your mouth?"

The little girl looked away, then coughed—this time more from guilt, Margaret decided, than from choking. "What was it, Sally?"

"A bead."

"A bead!" She ought to know better than that. "Do you have any more?"

"Well... one."

"Show me."

The child fished into a minuscule pocket and brought out a shiny ebony bead.

Margaret took it. "Why did you put that in your mouth?"

"Cause it's magic. Silvio said." Then Sally clamped her hand over her mouth and shook her head.

"What? What did Silvio say?"

Sally's eyes were wide now. "I can't tell. The magic turns to bad if I tell."

"Nonsense." Her voice was sharper than she meant it to be. "There isn't any magic in that bead. Magic is just a made-up thing, Sally."

"Huh-uh." The pigtails swung as she shook her head. "It turns to bad if I tell. I could die... like Jorge."

Margaret rocked back on her heels and stared at the black bead in her hand. As she stared, she suddenly saw quite clearly in her mind a string of black beads in a dead boy's hand—a string of beads that ended in a silver crucifix.

The pounding in her head intensified. She could smell them—smell the roses. She was drowning in the smell of them. "Stevie," she said under her breath. "Stevie...."

She had been paddling the little boat. Stevie sat in the bow, facing her, chubby legs stretched out. She looked around quickly. They were out farther than they were supposed to be, but Daddy and Charlotte hadn't noticed.

The sun was hot on her body and her suit was nearly dry now. She leaned forward and said slyly, "Know where we are?"

He shook his head.

She rose, half-crouching, clinging to the boat with one hand, pointing with the other to the place where the water was blackest next to the tangle of roots from a half-submerged cypress. "That's a gator hole." She clutched at the boat with both hands now and began to rock. "Ole gator lives down there, and he eats little boys."

Stevie's eyes grew wide and he clung to the boat—tighter now as it tipped deeply, then righted, then plowed in the other direction. "Don't, Margaret."

"Ole gator's gonna get you." She rocked again, wilder now. "Gonna eat you up. Gonna eat you up, and you'll be dead." Water sloshed into the boat.

He began to whimper now. "Don't. Don't, Margaret."

"Gonna eat you up, and you'll be dead." Suddenly she felt her foot slip. Startled, she fell heavily against the side of the boat and plunged into the water.

Sputtering, she grabbed the capsized boat and blinked the water out of her eyes. She didn't see Stevie. "Come on up," she said. "Come on. There isn't any gator."

The water rippling around her chest felt warm—much warmer than the sudden ice she felt in her belly. "Stevie." The ice was pure fear now. "Stevie...."

Margaret was on her feet, stumbling through the startled clump of children. She clutched at Silvio—hugged and clutched and sobbed out the words "He didn't mean to. Didn't mean to. Didn't mean to.... It was an accident...."

Silvio stood rigidly in her panicky embrace, his face quite impassive until he slowly smiled.

The shuttle wasn't what Kurt had expected. From its pictures, he thought it would be much larger. It was most like a TampaTran car stuffed into a metal sleeve, he decided.

Before lift-off, his emotions had hovered between disappointment and excitement. Now, they were in free flight, and all he could see to his left was a curving metal wall lined with thick plexi-shields, and to his right, the smiling face of Chao Ching-jen.

They were so firmly velcroed and latched, so completely medicated for motion sickness, that except for the fact that he felt something like a trapped balloon, weightlessness was boring.

Ahead, all he could see was an arm emerging here and there from one of the dozens of contoured seats. Every-one seemed subdued and preoccupied, like passengers on a night commuter train. He sighed faintly; he was going into space and it wasn't much different from going into Tampa.

"Am I detecting a sigh of grief, or one of dyspepsia?" Chao asked.

It was something in between. "The shuttle." Kurt smiled ruefully. "I was expecting something a little more exciting."

Chao nodded, then suddenly chuckled. "I find it hair-raising."

Kurt followed his gaze. From the seat ahead, someone's long braid of black hair had escaped its moorings and was rising slowly in the air. The tail of the braid spread like a cobra's hood as its body writhed in snakelike undulations.

Kurt held an imaginary flute to his lips and began to whistle the popular song "Snake Dance." Chao took up the theme with guttural jungle "uck-ucks" and drummings on his thigh. Behind them, someone laughed, and in seconds the aft section of the shuttle echoed with fluty whistles and drum-beats to the complete puzzlement of the forward section.

Finally, a hand reached up, seized the braided appendage, and it disappeared to a storm of applause and delighted hootings.

But the chill was gone from the air now. Somewhere behind Kurt, a girl began to sing a funny little song about a frustrated unicorn and, with much faking of the words, everyone joined in on the chorus.

The captain's voice came abruptly over the speakers: "Earth to starboard." As he spoke, internal lights dimmed and winked out as a section of the hull at right-overhead rolled away, leaving only the plexi-shield between them and the black of space.

A collective gasp rose from the group. Kurt felt his heart clench at the sight: the jewel-blue, cloud-dressed full Earth. It was so beautiful and yet at the same time so vulnerable, so alone, that he felt a wrench at the full realization that he would not touch home again for many years.

Someone sobbed, and then a girl's clear voice began to sing the anthem "Our One World." One by one they took it up, adding voices, and then everyone was singing the simple, moving melody. The song swelled until it seemed to fill all of space, until it seemed as if they were a part of it, floating free of their craft to hang like stars above a gauzy sapphire caught in velvet night.

PART THREE

Mouat-Gari Year Ninety-Nine

Chapter 1

When his solo came to a stop at North Underground, Kurt Kraus got out and strode through the public room to the restricted area of Chatlanta Terminal. A small mass of muscle bulged over his tightly clamped jaw.

A light snow was falling outside, melting as soon as it touched the ground. At the higher elevations, the decks of the econdos that studded the face of Missionary Ridge were already coated with white. Inside the terminal the walls glowed sun yellow, counteracting the dull weather.

As Kurt stepped into the G-1 waiting room, a steward came up carrying a tray laden with steaming cups. "Help you, Mr. Kraus? Coffee today?"

Kurt shook his head and selected a caffeine tablet, washing it down with a glass of orange juice.

"Something to eat, perhaps?" asked the steward.

Kurt didn't know him. He glanced at the man's badge, reading his name. "No, thank you, Thomas." There was a wry twist to his lips as he smiled at the man. The stewards were anachronisms. A sop to our egos, he thought. But it was nicer to keep some of the old ways—more personal than a machine.

The light came on over the boarding gate; a purring female voice said, "Boarding for the Ministry Offices now beginning."

Kurt stepped into the Tube and took a seat in his car. Another sop, another anachronism—having his own car. The thought passed; the car came with the job, and he had been Minister of Culture for nearly fifty years.

He settled back in his chair, fitting perfectly into its contours, and ran his hand through his thick black hair; then he dropped his hand to the console in front of him and pressed a button.

The communicator screen lit up. "Good morning, Mr. Kraus."

"Schedule," he said. The windowless car sealed and in a moment began to move through its smooth bore. It accelerated rapidly. The communicator flashed Kurt's schedule on the screen. At ten hundred hours, the "meeting" with Mencken—translate, "encounter." He twisted his lip. He'd seen the results of Mencken's tests and charts a dozen times. The tests pointed to only one conclusion.

Logically, that left him a single decision. A cloud seemed to pass over his eyes for a moment. A single decision—And did the end, after all, justify the means?

The car began to decelerate. In two more minutes, he disembarked. In southeast Chatlanta, the snow had not yet begun. Pulling his outer close to keep out the damp cold, he stepped from a windy passageway onto the roofed zontilator as a drizzly rain spread its dull sheet over South End. He stood tall and alone, gliding silently through the gray street, hearing only his own thoughts: How many would have to die? How many?

* * *

Cameran Mencken pressed the console button with a slim, manicured finger. As the display flashed on, she turned to Kurt. "My

office checked the results again. The correlation is unmistakable." She fixed him with a cool stare.

A muscle pulsed over his jaw as he stared at the screen. He had an innate distrust of the vague, the inexact. Was that why he had temporized over this so long? Statistical measurements weren't pure math though. Too much margin for error, yet—

She took the thought from his mind, "What's the alternative, Kurt?"

He leaned back in his chair, looking at the screen, seeing nothing for a moment, saying nothing.

"It's dying, Kurt. Maybe already dead. We find it in the young children, but when the process begins, the test scores, fall off. Then, in a few more years it's gone." She pressed another button and the screen changed. "You can't deny it anymore. It's there in front of you."

He didn't look at the screen; he didn't have to. It was the process. He had known it for some time. Cameran Mencken's graphs and charts only added confirmation.

"Kurt, there's been nothing new in biochemistry since Adler died twenty years ago. And physics—nobody's left to carry on Carmody's work, or Kraft's—no one for eighteen years."

His mind took up the refrain. The last gifted sculptor died thirty years ago, leaving in her dust nothing but a feeble imitation of art. And music? Where were the Sniffens, the Havilands, the Sucharitkuls now? He looked, at his hands, remembering a long time ago when those hands had moved over a keyboard, over the keys of an oboe, with what had been called genius.

Mencken's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Something's got to be done. The plan we discussed. It—"

"It will be my decision," he said sharply.

"But how can you—"

"Do I have to remind you that I'm your superior?" He watched as the color drained from her face.

She raised her chin slightly. Her voice chilled the room. "Of course. I'll leave you with these final results." She put a subtle emphasis on "final" as she stood, straightened her shoulders and walked out.

He took a slow breath when she'd gone. She didn't deserve that, he thought. She was just doing her job. And she was right, of course. It was easy to be right in her position.

He pressed his hands flat on the desk top and stared at his outstretched fingers for a moment. Then, abruptly, he stabbed out a communicator code. In a moment, printouts began to slide into a neat stack. The pages had a single word at the top: RENASCENCE.

* * *

At twelve hundred hours, Kurt Kraus took the sublif to the underground and stepped into a solo. As he pressed a code, it accelerated smoothly. In three minutes it stopped. In two more, he walked into the lobby of the Peoples' Hotel.

The high ceiling glowed blue. Fully holo clouds floated in the surrogate sky overhead. He took a seat and waited. In a few minutes, the sublif doors opened again, and a withered old man got out.

Throughout the lobby, people nodded and smiled at the old man. He was a celebrity to them—the last mortal. Not the last really, but less than a dozen remained now. All the others were gone. Dust and memories.

He walked slowly, bent over his cane, pausing to feel his way with each faltering step. He hesitated and looked around the large room. His eyes were dim and pale.

Kurt was walking toward him, reaching out, touching his arm. "It's been a long time." He guided the old man, slowing his vigorous stride to match the halting one. "I'm taking you to lunch. And, happy birthday to you."

He steered the old man toward the hotel restaurant. They sat in soft white chairs amid green plants hanging in confused tumbles. Electric blue fish swam behind transparent curving walls. Kurt glanced at the menu that glowed from the table top, then he studied the old man across from him. He was appalled at the changes he saw. He was so frail now, and his skin was as translucent as parchment. "Have you been well?" he finally asked in a voice as stilted as a computer's. But he was thinking, why did I bring you here? And why did you accept? Why didn't you just stay in Tambay? That's where you'd rather be.

The old man peeped out of faded eyes that reflected, fleetingly, the youth of the other. "Fine, Kurt. And you?"

"Oh, very well," he said, and he thought, this is what we say to each other—"How are you?" "Fine." We say the trivial things, the meaningless things, as if we were merely acquaintances or neighbors passing in the halls. He remembered the stack of letters, years of them, full of ideas, commitments, humor, pathos—full of touching. He looked at the old man. A stranger. Not like his letters. Not like his letters at all. One hundred sixteen today, he thought. Only one year older than he was, and frail, clinging to life with fragile stick fingers and will. Eric—his brother.

They ordered. Their food came, and then Kurt said, "What are you remembering on your birthday?"

The old man started from his reverie. "I was remembering being ten."

"Ten?"

"I think I got to be ten and then stayed that way." A wisp of a smile trailed across his face. "I don't feel any older now, really. Inside." He looked down then, as if he were ashamed of what he said.

Kurt reached out and touched the old man's arm. Eric had never been ten, he thought. He had always been older. When they were boys, it was always Eric who stood between him and disaster, between him and the world, between him and his father—I'm going to watch you die. I'm going to live and watch you die. He blinked at the thought and felt the dark edge of guilt shadow his soul.

"A silly conceit, isn't it?"

Kurt stared, then shook his head and gently squeezed the thin arm.

"When you're my age—" He stopped and looked at Kurt, "That is, when you're old it's hard to keep up the illusions. Your body has a way of betraying you."

Kurt's eyes narrowed in sympathy. He wanted to tell Eric about his work—about Renascence. But how could he tell him what Renascence meant? Could he say, "Eric, the world made a mistake. We made everybody immortal and that killed creativity. And now we have to change things. Now we have to take our brightest, most talented children and ask them to choose between losing their immortality or losing their creativity?" Could he look at Eric and say that? Could he look at him and say, "We'll be asking our

children to choose to be what you are?" Yet, shouldn't he? Wouldn't it make the old man less lonely to know that there would be others, to know that he wouldn't be the last mortal anymore? Or would it really matter?

We should have kept it to letters, he thought. If they had kept it to letters, it would have been easier. He looked at his strong hand resting on Eric's arm, and he thought of contrasts and of betrayals. Finally, he looked at Eric, "Now, tell me. How has the weather been in Tambay?"

* * *

He stood in the hotel lobby, watching as Eric made his halting way to the sublif. When the doors opened, the old man stepped inside and, leaning on his cane, turned toward him. The programmed lights of the lobby ceiling were dimming—fading to black. As the vast room plunged into total darkness for a moment, the lights of the sublif played on the old man's wispy white hair as he stood alone. Steadying himself, he lifted one hand in a trembling goodbye.

In the dark, Kurt's hand rose in a like gesture, and when the hologram of Saturn with its wheeling rings winked on, lighting the room once more, the sublif doors had closed and Eric was gone.

Shaken, Kurt sank into a chair. The meeting had jarred loose a part of him that he had locked away—a portion of his youth that he had forgotten until now: Eric's voice was saying "...we've got each other. We'll always have each other..." Eric was only fifteen then... no, sixteen.

His brother's face shifted in his mind again. He could see it—see the brow furrow as Eric struggled with a piano pas-sage that had come so easily to his younger brother.

So much came back, so much, from so long ago.... A hand reaching out, steadying him, as they played that sum-mer in the creek at Juniper Springs, as he plunged into first one, then another boy-sized spring, sinking to his chest, then popping up again with the pressure of the water. Shrieks of "Quicksand!" ...bubbling, giggling screams of "Help!"

He remembered the time he had blacked Eric's eye. He remembered the talks. Oh, the talks... about sex, about what it would be, must be, like... the talks about what they would do with their lives, where they would go... the talk that magic night as they lay in sleeping bags under the stars. "We'll go there someday, Kurt. To the farthest star in the whole universe..."

As people passed, Kurt leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, stared at the rings of the bogus Saturn moving slowly above him, stared at the dim electric stars that burned beyond. "We'll go there, Kurt. To the farthest star..."

Would they?

They had opened the door to infinity; yet, as they stood on the threshold, they saw that no other doors lay open to them. The process had given them time—all the time there was—and it had robbed them of their dreams, individually and collectively.

He remembered a boy of fifteen standing on the brink of it, a boy who thought he had inherited the Earth. He had. And more. He—all of them—had inherited a series of minor plan-ets revolving around a secondary sun—nothing more. Now, they had the rest of time to contemplate how truly small, how truly insignificant they would always be.

He could hear his fifth-grade teacher—what was her name? Mary Will Chase—talking about the pioneers who faced great hardships as they crossed a hostile land in flimsy covered wagons. The old woman's face had glowed with an emotion he had never seen there before, and he had felt stirrings within himself. She talked of die frontier of space—the last frontier—the one with no limits. "It's beginning," she had said. "One day, there will be colonies in the asteroids and mining on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. After that, hu-man beings will travel among the stars." He had looked at her then with wonder. She won't go, he had thought. She's too old. And then, somehow, he knew that this didn't matter to her. It didn't matter because someone would go.

And they had traversed and conquered these planets, these circling worlds, to their limits. Now, there was only one pioneer left—gone before he was born—a little unmanned ship that carried on its hull a thin gold disc engraved with the likeness of a man and a woman.

A bitter smile crept onto his lips. Spacecraft moved now at eight times the speed of the little Pioneer—for brief times, much faster. And at this speed, immortal man, sealed inside a tiny surrogate Earth, would take over eight thousand years to reach the nearest star—a star that had no worlds.

He knew then the terrible legacy they all shared. It was as if the comfortable God who dwelt in the stolid brick Presbyte-rian church of his childhood had cast aside his disguise, had suddenly burst into a geometric growth so huge, so all-encompassing, as to be completely and forever unreachable. Only echoes were left, elusive shadows of unguessable dimen-sions mocking and taunting him.

They had created their own immortality, and in the doing they had shrunk themselves into something infinitesimal; as part of the design, they had cast away the leaven of their own creativity, the only Godlike touch humanity held. They were left as tiny shells of protein and acid, collections of helical strands of being that raged at puny longevity. And one day they would stand at the far reaches of a tiny system of circling planets; they would watch the giant red disc of a dying sun and know that there was indeed no place, no future, no hope left to them.

The universe would expand and then begin to fall back upon itself, contracting its growing energies into a tiny pri-mordial mass until, full circle, it would once again explode, again contract—a pulsing, living thing, a beating heart. While immortal man would end in futile entropy; all his energies dissipated by his aimless, outward drift to a boundary he could not cross, could never learn to cross, without the fuel of a lost creativity.

Their hope now—their only hope—lay in their children... at the cost of their lives.

* * *

Back in his office, Kurt found the message light blinking on his console. He pressed it. The communicator's silky voice said:

Re requested meeting this date, 1400 hours: Minister of Education—verified. Minister of Finance—verified. Minister of Communication—verified.

He glanced at the time signal 1342. He stared at the console, reached out, pressed a button.

Waiting.

"Add Cameran Mencken, Liaison." He clicked off. He picked up the stack of printouts beside the console and read the title again:

RENASCENCE

He had no choice. Not anymore. Children in dormitories all over the world and in the space colonies would be reaching a critical period within weeks. No child born within the last eleven years had been given the immortality process.

He made up his mind. Irrevocably. He entered the code for the operation and signed it with his own. Then he stared in silence at his fingers spread before him, thoughtfully, as if he had never seen them before.

He entered the conference room at 1400 hours on the dot. Cameran Mencken was already there. She looked up. "Are you ready?"

He nodded and faced the imager.

She pressed the conference button, and the life-sized holo-gram of the Minister of Education formed. The tiny woman nodded affably in spite of the early hour in Sungchiang.

"Greetings, Yu Hsuan-chi," he said formally.

"Greetings, Kurt Kraus," she answered.

The imager roiled into focus a blustery red-faced man with beefy jowls. "About time," he growled. "I'm waiting dinner for this."

A wry smile curled the corner of Kurt's lip. "Greetings, Alexei Kapov." It would be a short meeting if Kapov's stomach was involved.

Kapov snapped a formal greeting in reply, then stared impatiently at Kurt.

Severin Jastrow, Minister of Communication, signed in. Her pale gray eyes and square face bare of makeup, contrasted with her carefully done hair. Jastrow, at least, was neither sleepy nor suffering from a delayed dinner. Her image was transmitted from the Communication office only blocks from Kurt's own. She entered the meeting with formal greeting to Kurt and nods to the others.

Kurt shifted in his chair and began. "After careful deliberation, and after input from all your departments, I have instituted the operation known as Renascence. I know that you are all familiar with this operation. I want to know from you now about any new developments that might affect this project."

Kapov leveled his belligerent glare toward Kurt. "Commerce and Industry are not represented."

Kurt met his gaze, "Commerce and Industry have been notified of my decision. Those departments are not represented because they have no direct bearing on Renascence."

"They have direct bearing on my department," snapped Kapov. "There are problems now with the asteroid colonies—in particular, Vesta. The tail is trying to wag the dog. I suggest your project may cause trouble there."

"For what reason?"

"The Vestans are technicians, with a technician's orientation. They place small value on the arts and not much more on the pure sciences. The climate on Vesta is provincial." Kapov's hand stabbed the air to emphasize his point. "The Vestans believe that Earth is exploiting the Belt. Commerce feels that Renascence will be interpreted by Vesta as a skimming off of their best potential. They won't react well when their most promising children are taken to Earth. I say, delay Renascence."

"Impossible," said Kurt. "The program must start while the children are young enough to make a choice."

"Then produce an alternate site. One on Vesta would take the sting from the wasp."

Kurt stared at the man, "As you have just indicated, the Vestans are provincial and anti-culture. Hardly a climate conducive to the aims of Renascence."

Jastrow broke in. "This seems to be my province. Communication has cooled hotter coals than this."

Yu Hsuan-chi asked quietly, "Will Communication's methods be quick enough to forestall any trouble?" Her smooth brow creased in concern.

"If we employ subliminals equating Vestan patriotism with Renascence, we should neutralize public opinion fairly rapidly. Within fourteen days, I would say." She smiled slowly. "Enthusiasm for the project will take more time. A three-act drama showing children of Vesta in the Renascence environment might do nicely. We could incorporate the idea that the children will turn the tables, so to speak—that they will learn certain things that might exploit the Earth to the benefit of Vesta."

Kurt considered the idea. Subliminals were used, had always been used, and yet he didn't like them. They had stopped many an incipient revolution, true, and they had given many a citizen a sense of purpose. But he was uneasily aware that he, himself, had been manipulated by them. He also knew that his office, by its very nature, dealt in a type of subliminal suggestion. Music hath charms—the artist was a wizard producing moods and undercurrents. The artist, the poet, the actor all dealt in suggestion. Was what Communication did so different? And yet.... The difference seemed to lie in the audience, and in its free choice. "I suggest that subliminals be discontinued as soon as possible on Vesta." And there would be none at Renascence, he resolved. None. When a child made the decision, it had to be a real one, conscious and reasoned. Otherwise, Renascence was nothing more than a hideous joke.

Kurt looked at the Minister of Finance, "Alexei Kapov, does the proposal of Communication overcome your objections?"

The man nodded curtly. And as he did, his stomach began to growl. It began with a single low note that rose in pitch as it rose in volume. It quavered. It sobbed. It sang its tragic song while Kapov's ears reddened. And when it finally paused, Kurt said solemnly, "I second the motion. Meeting is adjourned."

Cameran Mencken's voice was icy as she reminded Kurt of the evening's birthday festival for Eric. Many of the children on the list for Renascence were going to perform.

He looked at her. She's still angry over this morning, he thought. He supposed he ought to apologize, to smooth things over.

Her golden brown eyes flashed as she spoke. They were only a shade or two darker than her skin, and every inch of her was uniformly golden. He remembered the last time. Her skin had been beaded with sweat, yet smooth, smooth as silk and velvet. She'd worn her hair another way then, in that Cleopatra thing. It was longer now. Loose and golden brown. It matched her eyes. He wondered how her hair would look in soft strands against her skin. He ought to apologize.

But it was too late. She turned abruptly and left the room.

* * *

Later that day as he sat in his office, the door opened a few centimeters. He looked up and saw nothing. Then he glanced down. A look of amazement passed over his face. It was followed by a grin.

A pair of grotesque lips perched on top of a tiny pair of legs. The spindly legs moved, marching the lips into the room. The lips stretched into a smile exposing little teeth and a red wooly tongue. The toy advanced, then paused, and the lips and tongue moved in a silent exaggerated "Hel-lo."

He laughed, and the door pushed open further. A head peeked around the opening, and a pair of blue-green eyes crinkled with laugh lines met his.

"Sean?" Then he shouted in glee, "Sean McNabb!" And he was up, bounding across the room with his hand extended.

Sean's hand caught his. He grinned. "Hello, Big Brother."

"My God. It's been years." Kurt stared at him. "When did you grow the beard?" It was magnificent—a coppery bush, curving upward on either side of his chin like a second smile.

"Ten or twelve years ago, I think. You look just the same."

"I thought you were in China."

"I was. The Tube's nearly finished through Hunan. The laser work, anyway. My part's done." He grinned. "I had a deadline. I couldn't miss Eric's party, could I?"

Kurt's smile faded. "Have you seen him yet?"

Sean shook his head. "Not yet. We've been writing though. And I had another reason for coming, besides seeing you—my son, Terry." The laugh lines crinkled around his eyes. "You didn't know about that, did you? We petitioned to have him. He's ten now. Lilia and I have seen him only twice, but we keep up with him. He's in Garden District Dorm in Orleans. They send us tapes and reports once a month. Look." He fumbled at a pouch slung on his belt and produced a little three-dimensional image.

Kurt held it. A solemn blue-eyed boy looked back. Next to the boy stood a pedestal with a small stone animal of some sort. The lines of the little sculpture were primitive, but the animal was amusing. A smile crept across Kurt's lips. "Your boy looks like you."

Sean beamed. "I'd say so. And what do you think of the griffin he made? That boy can use a laser better than I can." He replaced the image in his pouch. "We'll see him tonight. He won't know us, of course. But we'll know him. I can't wait to claim him when he's eighteen."

A guarded look came into Kurt's eyes. "You'll see him tonight?"

"Kurt, they tell me he's gifted. Really gifted. He's been chosen for some special project coming up. It's not settled yet, but as soon as it is, he'll be going into a special center for children like him."

Into Renascence, thought Kurt. He felt a chill creep inside him. The children had been abstracts to him until then, faceless abstracts. And now a blue-eyed replica of Sean had made them real.

* * *

When Sean left, Kurt picked up the toy and set it on his desk. It took a wavering step on its insect-thin legs. The lips mouthed another silent "Hel-lo." He examined it. The toy was programmable. He coded it and watched while it moved again in a tottering walk, then paused. The lower lip ex-tended in a pout. And then the silent, unmistakable phrase, "I'm-m sor-ry."

He took the toy with him and walked down the hall. He knocked on the door, opened it just a crack, and sent his silent message into Cameran Mencken's office.

* * *

He stood half-clothed on his cantilevered deck and looked toward the northwest. A bitter wind blew from the valley upward over the face of Lookout Mountain. The gray clouds were broken with streaks of gold and pink from the setting sun.

The wind stung his flesh. The sharp air left a taste of flint in his mouth. Dehydrating ridges of snow curved against the wind along the edges of the balustrades.

Finally, he turned and went inside. The door slid shut behind him. He looked around him at the familiar room, seeing it with new eyes. It was as if the wind had blown away the clouds from his brain.

The oboe that he had played as a child hung against the wall. He walked over to it, staring at it curiously. He had seen it every day, but with the haze of familiarity. Now, with his new eyes, he saw that the wood was dry and cracked, the silver dulled. He reached out and touched its reed, and with his touch it shattered to dust.

And it was so, he thought, with himself. With his new eyes he looked inside at the part of himself that he had passed over for so long. And it was dry there, and dull, and useless.

He examined this part dispassionately, this dead part that he carried inside. Strange that he had never really noticed it before. Strange how empty it seemed. Once it had communi-cated, and received more than it gave. It had set him apart and at the same time let him reach into the deeper parts of himself. And in the reaching, he could touch other people. It was the touching that was the important thing. It was the only thing that told him he wasn't alone, utterly alone. And it had turned to dust.

He stood, looking at the ruined oboe, wondering. How would he have decided if someone had given him the choice? How would he have answered if they had said to him, "Choose," if they had asked, "Will you take your music knowing that it means denying immortality? Or would you rather live forever—and carry forever a strange dry husk inside you, knowing that once it lived?"

He examined the question and found it unanswerable. He wondered if he could ever have answered. He wondered if the children of Renascence could.

* * *

Cameran Mencken stepped naked from the blower. Her hair had dried in soft curving waves that moved as she walked. She stepped into the central room. The chill air struck her flesh and hardened her nipples. She crossed her arms over her breasts and hugged her shoulders. "Kurt, why is it so cold?" She darted out of the room and returned a few seconds later wrapped in Kurt's wooly outer. "I'm freezing."

He didn't seem to hear her. Finally, he turned and looked at her as if she were a stranger, staring as she drew the outer close around her. Then he said, "We'd better get ready. We'll be late for Eric's party."

In silence, they dressed together, he in formal silver gray and charcoal, hung with the scarlet and gold ribbons of his office; she in translucent blue that changed to silver, then to green, as she moved.

In silence they walked to the door and stepped into the cylindrical Everard alloy sleeve and onto the platform that dropped swiftly into the depths of the mountain. She reached out and touched his arm. "If you don't want to talk, I understand."

He turned to her then and blinked. "I want to talk," he said. "I want very much to talk."

They reached the bottom of the shaft and stepped out. He pressed his code on a small console. His solo, coupled with another, glided up. He helped her into the rear seat, then swung into the front and swiveled to face her. "I've been thinking. I—" He looked at her closely, strangely, then looked down at his hands. When he glanced up again, a smile quirked at one corner of his lips. "I've been thinking that you're not very familiar with this part of the city. I'll be your guide." He turned slightly, coded the solo, then turned back. The cars began to move through a lighted tunnel. "We're under Lookout Mountain now," he said; "we'll be going under the river in a few minutes."

The cars accelerated. They came to a hub in the passage-way that radiated in all directions. He nodded to his right as the car plunged on. "That way is the industrial area. Most of it moved to the southeastern end when the Tube was opened. What's left of it is Underground."

In a few more minutes, the cars came to another, larger hub. They swung into a side slot and came to a halt. He helped her out, and they stepped onto the zontilator that rolled along the edge of a wide mezzanine. Above and below them cars sped by, many stopping to deposit well-dressed men and women. The zont moved toward a sublif bay marked MOCCASIN BEND PLEASANCE. They entered and rose swiftly.

"We're in the stem now," said Kurt.

She was puzzled. "The stem?"

He smiled, "You've heard it called the Crystal Center, but everyone here calls it the glass mushroom. We're in the stem now."

The doors opened, and they stepped out into a vast room. The transparent walls of the center curved up and away in front of them. Behind, bisecting the ellipse, was the convex auditorium wall, which rose partway to the lofty ceiling. Hanging gardens swung above them, reached by the Spiral, which carried its passengers around the periphery and then beyond to the dome observatory and restaurant.

A display of artwork stood just ahead near the transparent outer wall.

Something had caught his eye—a comical stone griffin. It squatted on its haunches. Its front legs were dangerously bowed. With wings folded behind its back and eagle's head cocked, it glared at Kurt as if expressing disapproval.

Cameran smiled and ran a finger over its head. "He doesn't think much of us, does he? If he could talk, he'd say, 'Tch-tch.' " She examined the artist information plaque, which changed as they watched. A three-dimensional image of a blue-eyed boy came into view, and then his name: TERRY MCNABB. "It's by one of the children picked for Renascence."

He nodded. "All of it is." He swept a hand toward the islands of displays that dotted the room. And as she moved to examine the sculpture and the pictures, he turned to stare outside at the snow that clung to clumps of evergreens at the bend of the river below, lighter shadows against dark in the moonlight.

Cameran's hand brushed his arm. "Listen, Kurt." He turned. Nearby, a group of children had begun to dance to the music of a peleforté played by a little girl not more than ten years old. He ignored the dancers—he couldn't take his eyes from the girl. She was tiny. Her eyes were wide and very dark, too intense for beauty. As she played, her body leaned toward the keyboard, following the motion of her hands. Her hair was a soot black that gave back no light as it floated in a soft cloud around her head.

When she finished, the dancers moved away and a door opened. As it opened, a hush grew over the assemblage. The old man entered, flanked by attendants. They led him to one of the chairs drawn up in an informal circle near the peleforté. The little girl rose, bowed slightly, and spoke to Eric. Hid-den microphones spread her soft voice with its thick accent through the room.

"My name is Tanya. I am honored, Citizen Kraus, to play for you a piece I have written. It is a night song. I call it 'Web of Star-Spinners.' "

Her tiny hands moved over the keys and sent magic into his head. It was a song—a singing—without words that moved in his brain and found hidden there the keys to emotions only dimly sensed. She played on, and the key turned slowly and opened a place where traces of old tears lay under a century of dust.

As she played, he watched them through bright eyes—Eric and the little girl Tanya. It was as if they were the only two in the world. The last mortal, he thought. And the first.

Chapter 2

Silvio Tarantino, Communications Technician, 1st Class, stared at the frozen holo and frowned. The Vestan caught a shadow in the image that wasn't quite right.

He frowned again and swung his chair into the image, peering sharply at the reflection in the holographic table to his right. The empty likeness of a smiling woman stood by the table. She held a tray of food reflected on the polished countertop below her.

Tarantino propelled his chair back to the console and twid-dled one dial, then another. The computer-enhanced image changed as he watched. Onto the gleaming tabletop came the ragged, yet unmistakable letters:

His eyes narrowed at the image. He pressed the next frame. Again, the smiling woman, the tabletop, and the shadow—but the shadow was different. His hand moved on the dial. Enhanced, the shadow grew into letters, then words:

A flare of anger sputtered and flamed. How did they dare? How did they? He clenched his teeth together, working them. The birthmark at the angle of his jaw darkened.

He leaned back in his chair and considered the subliminal. As he did, he fingered the heavy silver T that dangled from the chain around his neck. This was the first time they had slipped a sublim past him. He had always known before. He had always been informed when new tapes came out from Earth.

Often, he was the one who added the sublims. Usually, they were for Vestan eyes only. Now, for the first time, they were trying to slip something past him. But maybe not the first time. He twisted the silver T back and forth in his hand, knotting the chain, unknotting it. What if it weren't the first time?

His black eyes seemed to grow even darker, seemed to absorb, instead of reflect, the flickering lights of his console.

Then he dismissed the thought. After all, he'd found it, hadn't he? They couldn't fool him the way they did ninety-nine percent of the idiot sheep. And they were sheep—all of them. Sometimes it amazed him at how easily they were led. All it took was a look from him, and a few well-placed words, and people ate from his hand. He smiled to himself and extended his hand, palm up.

Idiot sheep. They called him compelling. They told him that, one-by-one, in confidence, dropping their eyes before his gaze as if they were ashamed of what they said.

He looked at the holo again. A smile grew on his face, making him look as open, as innocent, as a cherub. Well, let them play their games, he thought. It was his move now. His hands glided over the dials, orchestrating the image before him. Across the woman's smiling face he faded in the shadowy letters:

He looked at the image and nodded, satisfied. The game would take a long time. And he had all the time there was.

* * *

As dayglow faded, Silvio ate alone in his austere quarters. He allowed himself a single glass of wine with his dinner. He never had more. He didn't dare.

Twice he had overindulged. Only twice. And each time, as he felt himself losing control, came the fear—the dreadful cracking open of the thing inside him. It was only with the effort of his will that he had managed to lock it down again, the thing. Only with extra effort could he keep it hidden.

It was buried deep within him, and he felt its strength without understanding it. He liked to think of it as an inner magma, sequestered away under a placid surface, molten, fiery, and very, very powerful. And some day, when it was time, he would let it roil through him, through the dark insides of him. And when it was time, it would change the face of humankind.

He ate slowly and sipped his single glass of wine and felt the power churn deep within him. That it was power, he had no doubt, but its exact nature eluded him. He suspected that it was cosmic. He sensed it—sensed its uniqueness. That it might be an ultimate evil intrigued him, titillated him, yet the fact that it was a mystery suited him perfectly. He knew it would be revealed to him in time. And Silvio was a very patient man.

He considered the concept of Renascence. He thought how easy it would be to sway public opinion against the program. He held Vesta's media in his hand. He extended his hand, palm upward, and smiled, considering the symbolism. He was going to let the chosen children of Vesta go to Earth. His fingers curled in his palm and tightened there. He was going to let them die, when he, only he, could have prevented it. It was his will.

* * *

Later that night, he prowled the walkways of Vesta and entered the asteroid's labyrinthine tunnels, which were avoided by most

citizens.

The government had chosen to ignore the Labyrinth, wink-ing at its existence, whisking it away with bureaucratic ease as if it didn't exist.

He walked through its maze of scented holograms, ignoring the faint haze of human pheromones, aware as few others were of the subliminal sensations that bombarded his senses and whispered softly, ever so softly, in his brain. He walked, untouched by the pulsing throb of rhythms that were felt more than heard. He brushed by the proffered dusts and pastes that offered dreams and oblivion for a while and, turning, entered a narrow alley and came to a silken door.

The woman there took his hand and led him inside.

The room was a vaulted cave, rough-hewn from the rock of Vesta. Dim indirect light pooled and pocketed among shad-owy recesses and rooms. A heavy scent of flowers mingled with the faint cloying smell of rot.

The woman looked at him, her eyes shadowed, "Vio. It's been so long."

He stared at her evenly; he didn't answer.

She led him to a dim room. "You want a woman, Vio? A man?" Five bodies lay before them, still and waxed on stone slabs, dressed in veils that suggested as they covered.

He stared at them, stared at a girl who lay next to him. The thin waxy coating that covered her skin was yellowish. She lay as still as death. Only the slightest rise and fall of her chest betrayed her. That, and the faint exhaled odor of the drug she had taken to slow her life processes.

He shook his head.

"You want the cap again, Vio?" purred the woman who held his arm. "It's good, isn't it?"

He didn't answer, but instead followed her down a narrow winding hall until they came to another door.

She opened it. They stepped into an anteroom. Then she turned to him, running her hands over his shoulders and down his chest, pressing her thighs hard against his. "Let me stay with you this time, Vio. It'll be better with me. You'll see."

He put his hands over hers and pulled them away. Then, smiling a cherub smile, he shook his head.

When she had left, he stripped, piling his clothes neatly in a little stack. He pressed a lever then and caught a stream of brownish liquid in a tiny cup. This he sipped slowly. When he finished, he took a black box from a niche beside the inner door and opened it.

The cap gleamed in the dim light. It was a silver band bristling with wires and electrodes. He picked it up slowly and placed it on his head.

A console fit into the wall beside the inner door. His fingers caressed it with a code. The door swung open, and he stepped inside.

The room was dark. In the center stood a pale, narrow slab, with projecting arm-pieces a third of the way down.

A tiny pulse at his temple ticked rapidly as he walked toward it, lay down upon it, and stretched his arms out along the crosspiece.

The cross rose slowly, bearing his weight until it came to rest at a slanting angle with his feet lower than his head.

A narrow blaze of white light seared into the blackness, illuminating the man outstretched on the great silver T. The cap, activated by the light, began to pulse its message into his brain.

His ecstasy rose until it culminated in thundering orgasmic pseudodeath.

Chapter 3

Winter lay on the mountains. A pale sun shot through an ice-blue sky and drizzled its light on the rime-ice. The frost played back the sun's light from billions of facets that shiv-ered in the cold wind running through the bare trees. Here and there, solitary evergreens bowed with the weight of the crystals.

In the valley, curves of thin gray ice rimmed the lake. Dry snow crunched under Kurt's feet as he walked along its shore. The man with him paused and pointed beyond the clearing to a broken woods, which grew dense further on with clumps of rhododendron and hemlock. "The cabins be-gin over there. Each one is a single. Bath, but no food center. They'll take their meals in the dining room"—the arm swung in an arc—"over there."

Kurt nodded. It was amazing. Renascence had been fin-ished just that week, and yet it looked as if it had been there forever.

"The Common Hall is the large building over there," said the man. Kurt followed his gaze past a curve in the lake to a spit of land that projected into it. The building was made of wood with wide decks cantilevered over the water. Smoke puffed from a massive stone chimney at one end. "Would you like to take a look? There's hot coffee inside, and food."

"I'd like that," said Kurt. The cold was beginning to cut through him. His toes felt numb. He followed the man to the building. As he walked, he leaned into the wind and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

They reached the wide stone steps and walked up to the massive door. It slid open at the man's touch, and they stepped inside.

Kurt looked around in wonder. The room was vast, and yet everything was to scale from the huge stone fireplace and its giant logs, to the vaulted roof with its massive beams. The center of the room was open to the wood ceiling some fifteen meters above. He stood near the middle and looked around. A mezzanine edged the periphery, forming niches and al-coves underneath—here a graceful music room with peleforté and Alder harp surrounded with comfortable couches, there a small elevated stage for puppet theater, next to that, a read-ing room. Thick gold rugs snugged against a polished parquet floor. Curving couches and soft chairs sat in groups designed for conversation below intimate lamplight, or in front of the blazing fire. The magnificent building had been built to Hedrich's plan—Hedrich, dead now fifty years.

Kurt shook his head in disbelief as he looked around. He had known what to expect, indeed had insisted on it, and yet actually seeing it was beyond belief. The Common Room held many of the art treasures of the world—irreplaceable paintings hung casually on rustic walls, priceless sculptures stood on slim pedestals. There by the window was Epstein's bronze of Albert Einstein, and Moore's *Reclining Figure*. And on the walls, a Figari, an O'Keeffe, a blazing yellow Van Gogh.

Music began to play softly in the background—an old inter-pretation of Yun-Shih's "Pomegranate Blossoms." The man came back with a tray laden with steaming mugs of coffee, sandwiches, and cake. "I'm sorry we can't offer you a better meal." He set the tray on a low table in front of the fire. "We won't have full staff here until the children come in a few weeks."

"This is fine," said Kurt, then as he tasted, "Very good."

"If you don't mind my asking, Mr. Kraus, why are the buildings so—so old-fashioned?"

"We felt they had to be," he said. "We wanted to surround the children with the world's cultural heritage, and at the same time, set them apart without distractions from modern society." A sterile society, he thought. "In effect, Renascence is a time machine—an alternate universe. An alternative. We expect the children who choose Renascence will want to live here. Want to spend their lives working and teaching here."

He sank back against the couch. The firelight flickered across his face, across his half-closed eyes. He felt at home here, in this place that he had wrought. And suddenly he realized that he didn't want to leave it. And yet, when the children came, he knew he wouldn't fit. Not anymore. A restless envy robbed him of the moment's peace. He had made Renascence for himself—for the gifted child he once had been. And in the completion of it, he had shut himself out.

He stood up abruptly, rattling the mug to a stop on the tray. "It's getting late."

The man rose too. "Of course, Mr. Kraus. You need to see the rest before you leave."

They walked, the two of them, out again into the winter afternoon as the sun sank low in the sky. They walked past dining hall, past solitary practice rooms in deep woods, past the amphitheater. They came at last to a high point of land overlooking the lake. A section of the land here was sur-rounded with a low stone wall topped with an ornamental iron fence. The curving gate was silhouetted in the red light from the setting sun. There was nothing inside except for a few gaunt trees.

"What's this?" asked Kurt.

"Why, that's for the children, later on," said the man. "That's the cemetery."

Kurt stood in the snow for a long time, staring at the gate and at the plot of land beyond, as the sky grayed with the coming night and cold winds whistled through his soul.

Chapter 4

Behind the locked doors of his Vesta Central control room, Silvio Tarantino aligned the circular conference grid. Helmut Mensch, Provisional Governor of L-5 Community, would be slotted in north position. South was for Bondurant, ProGo of Vesta. Ian Cripps of Luna Com took west and Prentice Reece of Hebe sat east.

The amber signal from Luna Com flashed on, followed quickly by another from Bondurant's Vestan quarters. Silvio dialed enhancers, and at a verbal code, the three-dimensional figure of Cripps shimmered, then solidified into a small holo at the two-seventy degree position. After another, similar maneuver, Bondurant's seated figure appeared at one-eighty degrees.

Prentice Reece flashed on at ninety degrees; Mensch was late.

Silvio activated the patch. In each conference room on the various bases, life-sized holo figures appeared.

"Good day, gentlemen." Prentice Reece leaned back in her white chair, crossed her long legs, and nodded toward Cripps and Bondurant.

Bondurant muttered a greeting and sipped something from a glass he held; while Cripps, glancing at the vacant area to his left, said acidly, "It would seem that the Honorable Mensch has kept us waiting again."

As if in answer, the amber light from L-5 blinked. Silvio spoke Mensch's code into the Vocorder and with a turn of a dial, the fourth tiny figure appeared at three-sixty degrees on the grid.

"Sorry," Mensch said with a cheerful grin. "A little techni-cal trouble with Communications Control."

Silvio's face showed no emotion. Mensch's lie was inconse-quential. Nothing at all in the scheme of things. He filed it away, then leaned forward and listened intently to the four small figures.

"Requesting private conference," Bondurant said. The oth-ers nodded, concurring with the request.

From Control, Silvio responded with a vocal command. The voices of the small figures abruptly cut off and the blue CONFIDENTIAL light came on in each of the four confer-ence rooms.

From his mobile control chair, Silvio smiled down at the four silent little holos on the grid and then pressed an over-ride code—one that had been ridiculously simple to devise. Although the blue lights remained on, the voices were re-stored instantly. Silvio smiled again and leaned back to listen.

Bondurant was speaking: "...blatant act of piracy." He took another swallow of his drink and glared at the others.

Prentice Reece stared at him. "So you feel the same way. Hebe looks at this project as a serious breach of Earth-Outland relations. Renascence is robbing us of our most important resource."

Mensch smiled pleasantly. "Robbing? Piracy? Surely Rena-scence doesn't deserve such strong sentiments."

Bondurant leaned forward. "That's easy for you to say— from your position."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean," Bondurant said deliberately, "L-5 has nothing to lose—does it now?"

"We have a child chosen for the project."

"A child!" Bondurant set down his glass with an audible click. "One child."

"L-5 is a delimited area," Mensch said. "It doesn't have your privilege of free breeding. We've reached the max al-lowed by Population. You haven't."

"All the more reason for us to resent this takeover of our children. Our best young minds siphoned off..."

Prentice Reece leaned back in her chair. "It seems to be a ploy to keep us in a subservient position to Earth. I've noticed more and more lately an Earther resistance to our hopes of autonomy."

Cripps, who had remained out of it until then, said, "That's the whole point, isn't it? The hope of autonomy. That's all it is—a

hope. But you're forgetting we don't have that capacity yet. Where would any of us be without our supply pipeline from Earth?"

His words were met with silence. Then, Prentice Reece said wearily, "He's right, you know. They're going to take our children, and there's nothing we can do about it."

"We could refuse to let them go," Bondurant said.

She shook her head. "And then what? Do you think the Ministry would let us get away with an act of insurrection?"

"Insurrection! Dammit, those are our children. Our future. We weren't even consulted."

"We're never consulted," said Cripps. "Why should this case be different?" His voice grew heavy with sarcasm. "No one expects the people of the outlands to have a meaningful opinion."

"We're going to have to join the game then," said Mensch. "We don't really have a choice."

"A show of solidarity?" Prentice Reece raised a delicate eyebrow.

"Why not?" Cripps eyed the others. "Resistance now won't do any good, and it might harm our interests later."

"I agree," Mensch said. "The various peoples of Earth are sending gifts to Renascence—some of the treasures of the world are already there. I think we need to do likewise."

Bondurant glared over the rim of his glass. His silence was eloquent.

"Personal gifts for the children then," Mensch said easily. "Surely you can't object to that."

Bondurant drained his glass. "I don't think much of your idea." His tone indicated that he didn't think too much of Mensch's face or ancestry either.

"Do you have a better idea?" Mensch asked sharply.

The discussion degenerated rapidly into a personality conflict between Mensch and Bondurant. Cripps, ideologically more aligned with Mensch, but personally disapproving of him, hung at the sidelines and sniped at both, while Prentice Reece stared at all three in silence. Finally, she leaned forward and said in a low voice, "You can give up your dreams of autonomy. None of us are fit for it."

They stared at her in shocked silence as she looked each of them up and down. "None of us... If we can't even show some sort of unity among ourselves, how can we expect to break free of WorldCo one day?" She turned to Bondurant, "The proposal before us is whether or not we respond to Renascence with a show of solidarity. I call for the question."

The vote was three to one. Bondurant lowered his brows. "I don't approve of this."

"Neither do I," Prentice Reece said evenly, "but it is expedient."

"Expediency be damned," he roared. "I'll agree to withdraw my objections to WorldCo, but I will not endorse Renascence with official gifts."

A speculative look came over Cripps's face. "What about unofficial gifts? Something from our children, perhaps..."

Silvio smiled to himself as he listened to the four small figures bicker among themselves. He knew from experience that Bondurant would acquiesce to pressure and accept Cripps's face-saving suggestion.

Within minutes, they had agreed on "personal gifts only." Balking at Mensch's suggestion of bracelets, Bondurant re-joined with "Necklaces... with Vestanite crystals... but only if the crystals are collected by the children..."

And so, with a signal to the Vesta Central control room, the meeting was adjourned. Silvio touched a code and the blue privacy lights turned off. A moment later, the life-sized holograms in each conference room winked out, leaving each of them alone.

Silvio stared down at the four figures left on the circular grid. Smiling, he touched another code. The grid vanished, and for a moment the little holos stood in the palm of a three-dimensional hand until, slowly, its giant fingers began to close.

In his quarters ten days later, Silvio leaned intently over a small tank and watched as silver began to coat the submerged metal. In a few minutes, he fished it out and examined it closely.

He nodded, satisfied. No one would notice the addition, he was sure. He turned again to the box next to him—the box that had been so easy to intercept—and reached inside.

He worked quickly, with a deftness born of many years' work with tiny communications components. In a few minutes, he was finished. He scrutinized his work carefully. The little silver-plated compartment was barely visible. It blended quite nicely with the silver setting that held the blue Vestanite crystal. It would do. It would do quite well.

Humming to himself, Silvio reached into the box marked RENASCENCE and drew out the next necklace.

Chapter 5

The trip to Tambay was hurried. The message had come in the middle of the night: *Your brother Eric is very ill.* It was still dark as Kurt strode to the hospital desk and inserted his Ministry card into the console.

The console replied at once: "Greetings, Mr. Kraus. What is it we can do for you?"

"Eric Kraus. A patient here. I've come to see him."

"Programmed," said the console. The sublift bay next to it slid open. He stepped inside. The bay closed, and the car dropped a short way then engaged a horizontal track. A moment later, the door opened, and he stepped out.

A man came up to him and extended a hand. "I'm Dr. Perez."

"I've come to see my father... uh..." Kurt paused for a moment, then blinked. "My brother. Eric... my brother.... How is he?"

Lines of concern traced across the doctor's face. "Mr. Kraus, we're very sorry.... It was a C.V.A.—a stroke. Your brother died twenty minutes ago."

He stared at the man. "I want to see him."

A slight pause. Then, "Of course. Come with me."

He followed the doctor down a hall and into a dimly lit room. Kurt stopped at the door and looked across the room at the still form on the narrow bed.

"Would you like to be alone with him?" Perez asked.

"Yes. Please."

Alone in the room, he moved closer to the bed and stared down at his brother. He stood like this for some time and then he said, "Well, Eric...." His voice broke and it was a minute before he tried it again, this time in a whisper, "We didn't say goodbye, did we?" He reached out and touched the old man's hand. "Well... I never was much good at goodbyes anyway. Always seemed to say the wrong thing."

But they should have said something. Something. Kurt stood, touching Eric's hand. The last of his family. No one was left now. No one. He felt a hollowness grow inside, as if the core of him were crumbling, falling away to nothing. There were so many things they should have said. So many.

He stood for a long time, touching Eric's hand, feeling the bones beneath the fragile, cooling skin. Finally, he turned and walked out of the room.

* * *

He spent the rest of the night traveling Tambay, searching the old parts of the city for fragments of himself—his past. But it was all so changed now. Nothing was the same.

He stopped by the edge of Tampa Bay and stared at the black waters until they began to pale with first light. He looked across the gray expanse and felt a soft wind blow across his face, a wind that brought the smell of salt to his nostrils. It was as if nothing else were left now except the gray flatness—and the wind. It had blown across this land, across this bay, for thousands of years... tens of thousands. It would blow for thousands more across other cities in its wake—cities that would rise and fall again with no more permanence than ripples across the face of a sand dune.

He sat by the edge of the bay until the sky grew pink and the sun glittered on the water. He remembered something then. Standing, shaking off fatigue, he turned toward the heart of the old city again.

* * *

The Ever-Vaults were sealed against the creeping dampness of the bay air. He sat staring at the little door to the vault that bore his name. It was less than half a meter square. He dialed the code to open it. Pressurized air replaced the vacuum inside, and the door swung open.

As it did, Eric's voice suddenly said, "Hello, Kurt." He started at the sound—Eric's voice, but the way it was when they were scarcely more than boys. A soft light came on, and Kurt looked inside at a row of pictures. The first showed two small boys perched on an oak tree limb. He couldn't have been more than six then and Eric, seven. The next was later—a formal pose—the two boys with Richard and Carmen Kraus. Then—Grandma.

Eric's voice began again. "Do you remember what you said about Grandma? You said I ought to imbed a teabag in Lucite for you to remember her by. I didn't do that, but I did something else. Take a deep breath...."

Puzzled, Kurt did. There was a faint hissing sound and then the odor of tea and ginger cookies struck his nostrils. He heard Eric's soft laugh. "Great, huh?"

He sat for a long time and listened to his brother's voice and to the unseen tapes that played old music: His mother on the piano; Grandma playing the violin—her bowing tremulous with advancing age; Eric's senior recital. There was something else: Eric was saying, "I guess I'm asking you not to forget us. But there's something else you shouldn't forget either." Suddenly, he heard the sound of an oboe—his own—playing the opening bars of *Rebirth*. Cellos and string basses joined in, erasing a hundred years of his life until, for a time, he was back in the old Wilson Consortium, playing again, eyes locked on Mr. Hernandez, the conductor.

He listened to the swelling sound of the orchestra. As it finally faded and died away, he heard Eric's voice one last time: "Goodbye, Kurt."

"Goodbye, Eric," he whispered back. With a quick hand, he wiped at his eyes, then reached for the door to the Ever-Vault. It felt cool under his damp fingers as he closed it gently and walked away.

Chapter 6

A pink sun peeped over the mountains at the first morning of April. Mist rose from the lake. Three brown ducks swam through the smoky plumes of fog and broke the still surface of the water with their wake.

Kurt stood at the lake's edge until the chill of a sudden breeze caused him to move again. He walked under the bare-limbed trees, past patches of ground fog captured among roots and hollows. The Common Hall was just ahead. He caught the smell of the oak and hickory fire that puffed its smoke from the stone chimney. A patch of jonquils, butter-pale ghosts, bloomed from a pocket of mist by the steps.

He opened the door. Inside, a woman standing by the fire looked up and smiled at him. "Something to eat, Mr. Kraus?"

"Yes, please." He had spent the night in a cabin tucked in a wedge of hemlock trees. Wrapped in his warm bed, he had listened through a partly opened window as cold gusts prowled through the needles of the trees. He had heard a solitary owl mourn above the dying wind and then sleep came—the best he had had in more years than he cared to think about. Now, he was ravenous.

"May we serve you here by the fire?" the woman asked.

"Certainly." No reason to use the dining hall until that afternoon when the children arrived. He took a seat by the fire and stared at the flames. He was so lost in thought that he heard nothing until a voice said, "May we join you?"

He looked up. Dr. Nesheim stood at his elbow, and with him was a child—the girl who had played the peleforté at Eric's birthday party.

"Have you met Tanya?"

"No. No, I haven't." Kurt extended his hand to the little girl who took it gravely.

"Tanya and I arrived the same day last week," said Nesheim. "We've gotten to be buddies."

"I didn't know any of the children were here yet."

"I am the only one," said the girl. "My dormitory mates were moving to a new building. The dormitory parents thought it would be better for me to come to Renascence early than to move twice."

He looked at her solemn face. "You must be lonely. But don't worry. You'll have company soon."

"Oh, I am not lonely at all." She seemed surprised that he would think it. "I have been reading and practicing. And I have explored. In my spare time, I help Dr. Nesheim."

The doctor sat down on the couch adjacent to Kurt and pulled the child to a seat next to him. "I'm going to make Tanya my official assistant. She's been helping me organize the dispensary."

The dispensary. The suspension of the Mouat-Gari process from the world's children had allowed disease to attack again after a truce of many years. As their mortal patients dwindled, doctors had forgotten many of the old skills. Their practice had turned more and more to trauma cases until eleven years ago when they had to return to old techniques that had been abandoned by all but veterinary practitioners.

Tanya looked at Kurt and said seriously, "Did you know that there are sicknesses children can get that grownups cannot?"

Kurt stared at the child with a pang at the vulnerability he saw there.

"I think medicine is fascinating. I think I like it next to music. Oh, look—"

A man came up bearing a tray of food. He placed it on the low table and pressed a small hidden switch. The table rose smoothly to dining height.

Tanya lifted the lid of a steaming pot and sniffed deeply. "Sassafras tea," she said with satisfaction. "It is my favorite." She poured cups for all of them. "It is good plain, but best with sourwood honey." She offered Kurt some.

"In that case, how can I refuse?" Sassafras tea and sourwood honey—he had stepped into a time machine of his own devising. He smiled at Tanya. "After breakfast, maybe you can show me some of the places you've explored."

She smiled back over the rim of her cup. "I would like that... but first I must practice."

* * *

"Look," said Tanya. "No. Not here. There." She pointed to the far side of a massive log that bridged a tiny stream. "Do you see?" She ran across the log, balancing easily.

Kurt followed. She knelt by a clump of wild ground orchids. "They are beautiful, are they not?"

He grinned and nodded at the little girl. She had been born to city life, had lived in an urban dormitory, and each new wild thing she saw was an object of wonder and discovery. She leaned over and cupped a flower in her hands. Her hair fell free in a dark cloud around her face as she tipped her head. She seemed to be listening to something.

He watched her curiously until the moment passed and she raised her eyes to his. "They are waiting."

"Waiting?"

"Waiting to be music. I can hear some of it." She hummed a snatch of melody. "That is a part of it. I think I will hear the rest soon... in my head. Sometimes I dream it."

"You like it here then." Somehow it was very important for her to say "yes." Instead, she took his hand and said, "There is something else I found."

He followed her along the edge of the little stream until it emptied into the lake. They walked uphill then, and he struggled to keep his footing on the damp, dead leaves that slid away beneath him.

"It is here." She was on her knees next to a small depression in the ground. She brushed the leaves from it until they made a spongy pile.

He knelt beside her. A heavy piece of bronze lay partly buried under the leaves.

"It has writing on it, but I cannot read what it says."

He brushed away the dirt that clung to the plaque. Of course she couldn't read it. It was in English. "I'll translate. It says—"

Her muddy fingers touched his lips. "Sh-sh," she whispered urgently. "I may not want to know."

He stared at the puzzling child kneeling beside him. "Why?"

"Because it ought to be important. I found it and I want it to be important, but maybe it is not."

He sat back on his heels and looked at her for a moment, then back to the plaque. He sat staring at it for a full minute without seeming to see it, and then he pointed to the top. "It says 'Georgia' here. And here it says 'Blood Mountain. Elevation 4458 ft. Chattahoochee National Forest.'" He paused, looked at her closely, and began to read aloud:

"In Cherokee mythology, the mountain was one of the homes of the Nunnehi or Immortals, the 'People Who Live Anywhere,' a race of Spirit People who lived in great town-houses in the highlands of the old Cherokee Country..."

Tanya looked at him intently as he read. When he finished, her eyes glowed. "Yes," she said and cocked her head again.

And he watched her with something close to envy as he realized she could hear the distant sound of music in this place—and he could not.

* * *

The children began to arrive in the afternoon. In order to keep their first-day stress to a minimum, Kurt had excluded WorldCo ministers and officials. Instead, he wanted the children to be greeted by their new teachers and counselors. But, realizing the system-wide interest in Renascence, Kurt permitted a WorldCo satellite broadcast that evening.

After an early dinner, they gathered in the Common Hall. In the dimly lighted room, firelight flickered on the faces of the children. Some seemed puzzled and apprehensive, others seemed at ease immediately, but all of them showed a bright gleam of curiosity about each other and their new surroundings.

He allowed them to talk away the edge of their nervousness before he signaled for the program to begin. When a hush fell over the group, he rose and stood casually by the great stone hearth and began to speak: "Welcome. Welcome to Renascence." He scanned the faces of the children, trying to place them in his mind. He had gone over the list many times. There, almost hidden in the depths of a chair much too large for him, was a pale blond boy—Evan, whom they said would probably turn mathematics toward a new direction, given his chance.

Sprawled ungracefully on a large couch against one wall were a set of identical twins from Australia's interior—two dark boys who could work magic with primitive flutes and pipes of their own devising.

Standing well back under an alcove was a girl so lean and tall, so black, that she seemed to blend with the shadows of the room—a girl who through dance and mime could charm and seduce—yet she was barely ten.

His gaze darted around the room: There, a child who found a battered violin in a Vienna dorm when he was three years old and, though it was much too large for him, had coaxed marvels from it; across, a girl who seemed to think in meta-phor and parable, who planted language like seeds and reaped a compelling harvest; next to her, a boy whose mind jumped the chasm of language altogether and drew symbols and abstracts from the computers he worked with, until it seemed that he and his machines were of one mind.

"Welcome—all of you—to this place called Renascence," said Kurt. "You are surrounded here by four thousand square kilometers of wilderness. There is a reason. In the wilderness, life starts a new cycle each spring. For too long now, human-kind has ignored its origins. It is time to touch them again, to regain the rhythm, the flow, of these cycles; to experience what we hope will truly be a renascence—a rebirth of humankind.

"You will live here until your body tells us that it is time for your Final Decision. At that time, you will choose between the immortality of your body or your art." He paused, then said, "The choice will be yours, and we believe you will choose well..."

Balfour, the Director of Renascence, stood up then to make the formal presentation of the gifts to Renascence. Lights came on at her touch, illuminating each work of art given by the people of WorldCo: a sun-yellow Van Gogh blazing with light; a backlit collection of ancient musical instruments from China; a blue light playing over a gold mask from a king's tomb. On it went until the magnificent room was awash with light that richened the golden glow of its walls and disappeared within its darker beams and balustrades. The children put on necklaces then—"Gift of the Outland children of L-5, Luna Community, Vesta, and Hebe...." said Balfour, as the hidden camera eyes of WorldCo watched.

"And now," said Balfour, "we present a recital of your peers." With another touch, the lights began to dim and then winked out. Instantly a single spot came on, and a small girl began to dance to the accompaniment of the twin Australian boys' pipes. The two boys, hidden at first, emerged as elongated three-dimensional shadows that stretched nearly to the top of the high ceiling. Faintly then, the plaintive sounds of a peleforté joined in counterpoint to the improvisational pipes until it seemed as if the instruments were under the control of one mind.

The little dancer's body was a part of it—moving as if the dance were music made into flesh, and then, somehow, transcending flesh. At a trill from a pipe and an echo from the peleforté, the child began to spin—so rapidly that the blue Vestanite crystal at her throat seemed to wink with the motion like a blind blue eye.

She spun to a stop, then suddenly staggered awkwardly. She stared out into the room and gasped for breath. As the pipes played on, she gasped again—too heavily for mere exertion—and, clutching her head, she began to vomit.

Kurt stared in horror at the girl. Then, with a crash of hands against the peleforté keyboard, Tanya rose to her feet. She was panting, dragging in air with sobbing, struggling breaths. She turned her face toward him, a face pale as death. She stared at him with glassy, unseeing eyes, then, swaying once, she collapsed.

A scream came from behind Kurt. Then another to his left. He saw a child in the audience begin to gasp—and then another. He began to run and found himself on one side of Tanya. Dr. Nesheim knelt at the other.

The doctor felt the carotid pulse of the gasping child. Suddenly, he leaned over her, his face close to hers, and sniffed her breath. He raised stricken eyes to Kurt's. "Oh, God!" he said. "It's cyanide."

"What!" Kurt's pulse pounded in his throat. "How? From the air?"

"No. We'd all be dead. It's not in the air." Nesheim barked orders to an assistant who rushed over. "Amyl nitrite. And hurry!" The man left at a run. Others followed.

"Was it the food? Something they ate?"

"The time's not right." With a thumb under Tanya's chin, Nesheim tipped her head back, opening her airway.

Kurt bent over the child. Her head was cocked to one side. The Vestanite crystal had flipped over. Caught in the hollow of her throat, it moved with every gasp. He stared at it. Disrupting the smooth setting was a thin outward-curving casing of silver. A tiny drop of fluid hung at its base. The necklace... the only personal gifts.... And every child was wearing one!

With a sudden move, he ripped it from her throat. He leaped to his feet, his voice carrying through the crowd: "Take off the necklaces. Throw them down. Take them off now!" His voice rang with authority. At his words, people began to snatch necklaces from the throats of children.

He repeated his words again and again. It seemed to him that time had entered a new frame, that people responded in slow motion. Hands moved like slugs. Blue crystals drifted to the floor through thickened air. Across the room, a boy began to drag in air in an interminable gasping struggle for oxygen.

Yet, only seconds had elapsed.

Chapter 7

From his Vesta Central control room, Silvio Tarantino watched the broadcast of the opening ceremonies of Renascence.

A dancer was spinning. The blue crystal at her throat winked with every revolution of her body. Suddenly, she staggered and was violently ill. Silvio leaned forward in his chair and stared intently at the holo figures. Within seconds, Renascence was in chaos. People screamed as children began to gasp and clutch at their heads. His eyes widened at the sight. What was happening?

A voice yelled something. Then, hands reached out—snatching necklaces away, breaking thin silver chains, flinging crystals to the floor.

Silvio's gaze locked onto the scene. As necklace after necklace arced and fell, his hands coiled and tightened into claws. Why were they doing it? Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.

Abruptly, the transmission ended. He was cut off from Renascence now. His fingers tightened in his palm as he stared at the

blank transmission stage. Slowly, he opened his fingers, closed them again, opened them once more. Bright crescents of blood welled in his palms, yet not noticing, again he clenched his fists, driving his nails deeper into his flesh. It was all going wrong. That wasn't what he had planned. It was all wrong.

The nagging thought came to him that perhaps he had acted hastily. Prematurely. He had been so sure his plan would work....

He felt the fury of defeat creep and grow within him. Underneath it, that other thing—that part he kept so hidden— stirred and shuddered. With effort, he held it back. He mustn't let it show. Must not let it show now. Must not.

It was growing, the thing. It was coming, and he had to hide it. Hide from it. Had to.

Somehow, he was on his feet, scrambling to the door. The Labyrinth... had to get there. They could hide him there— lock him away until it was over.

It had happened only twice before—the terrible unleashing of the thing inside him. The last time he had been locked within the cell-like room for over two days until it was over, until he was calm again and in full control.

Only then had he been able to step out, smiling, from the rock-hewn room with walls that ran with blood.

Chapter 8

Still no word. No word yet about the children. Seven of them lay in the little Renascence hospital while medical personnel worked behind closed doors.

At first, Kurt had worked feverishly too, taking over the communications console of the Director's office, summoning ex-perts, dispatching an urgent message to the Ministry of Justice.

Activity whirled around him now like winds around a storm center. On the surface, he seemed calm. Inwardly, he seethed with a fury partly directed at the violation of the children, partly directed at himself. He could not put aside the feeling that he had done this to them. Renascence had been his project, his decision. He had to live with it now—and with the knowledge that seven children might die because of it. Seven? Only seven? All of them were going to die because of him—all the children who chose to stay on and deny their immortality. A bitter smile played across his lips as he remembered a scrap of advice he had been given once: ...in the end, you have only your own judgment to rely on.... Only his own—even if it were wrong.

A tone sounded on the console in front of him; a call came through: the chemist he had summoned. "We have partial results of the analysis."

"I'll be right there," Kurt said.

* * *

"You work fast."

"The laboratory facilities are exceptional," Thompson answered.

They were meant to be. Nothing too good for our young, mortal scientists, Kurt thought bitterly. Give them the best— after all, they won't be here very long. He looked around the lab. "I never thought it would be christened like this. What have you learned?"

Thompson picked up a necklace and pointed to the back. "The compartment was added. It was sealed off with a wax that melts at body temperature. The carrying agent stayed inside until the children put on the necklaces."

He stared at the pile of Vestanite crystals tangled among the silver chains. "Little agents of death—every one of them."

"No," said Thompson. "The poisonings were accidental."

"Accidental! How can you believe that?"

The chemist stuck a sheaf of printouts in Kurt's hand. "Look," he said. "This is what we found."

Kurt stared at the chemical equations. "You'll have to translate these for me."

"They're incomplete, but they show dimethyl sulfoxide— the carrying agent—mixed with a mild hypnotic. We're not sure which one yet. Whoever did this didn't know enough chemistry."

"What do you mean?"

Thompson pointed to the compartment at the back of the necklace, "Silverplate. Some of the necklaces picked up enough residue to combine with the carrying agent."

"Residue?"

"Silver cyanide. It's used in silver-plating. The residue combined chemically with the carrying agent—enough to release free cyanide in the children's bodies. The poisonings weren't planned."

Kurt looked at Thompson. "None of this makes sense. You said there was a hypnotic mixed in. Why?"

Thompson turned the necklace over in his hand, then laid it down and nodded toward the laboratory adjacent to them. "The electronics people haven't issued a final report yet, but it seems that the purpose of the necklaces was suggestion. Subliminal. That's why the hypnotic was added—to make the children more suggestible."

"Suggestible! What are you talking about?"

Thompson picked up a necklace and handed it to him. "Put it on." As Kurt hesitated, Thompson laughed, "I'm not trying to poison you, Mr. Kraus. That one's empty."

He, held the two ends of the silver chain together at the back of his neck and felt them lock shut. "Well?"

Thompson had stepped to the door of the adjacent electron-ics lab. "Give it a little time," he said over his shoulder and disappeared through the door. In a few minutes, he was back with a small recording device in his hand. He thumbed it on. "Hear anything?"

Kurt shook his head.

Thompson touched a dial on the device. "Now?" A whis-pered sound came from it. Again, the sound. Kurt couldn't make it out.

"Ah, but you can," said Thompson. He switched off the device. "Hear anything now?"

Kurt strained to listen in the stillness of the lab. At last he heard something—a sound so faint it might be nothing more than the shushing whisper of his own blood in his ears. "I think so."

"Right," said Thompson. "You're hearing this...." He switched the instrument on again, louder now.

"It sounds like a hissing. White noise."

"To your ears. But, it's speeded up. What your brain is hearing is this—" Thompson moved the dial again, slowing the sound.

Kurt heard the words distinctly: Silver T, Silver T, Silver T....

"From the necklace," said Thompson. "It's activated by body heat."

"You mean it does this constantly?"

"As long as it's worn."

Kurt touched the crystal, cradling it in his hand. He had to strain to hear the faint shushing sound. "And that's it? That's all it says?"

Thompson nodded. "It could be a form of conditioning— for some later stimulus."

Kurt nodded uneasily. That would explain the initial hypnotic—something to chemically start the conditioning process. But... for what?

* * *

Back in the Director's office, there was still no report from Nesheim about the children. Kurt sat alone and tried to keep his mind from hovering at the hospital door by sorting out what Thompson had shown him. Subliminals. He had vowed never to let them touch Renaissance. To him, this attempt on the minds of the children was more obscene than the assault to their bodies.

A lump of muscle in his jaw pulsed. How dare they? How dare they invade the minds of his children?

With a faint start, he realized that he had thought of the children in the possessive. But, that's what they were now, weren't they? His children—his responsibility.

A quick knock came at the door. He looked up as Balfour, the Director of Renaissance, said, "Mr. Kraus. The Minister of Justice is here."

He stood up as the man came into the room and grasped his hand—a link to the past. Chao Ching-jen.

"I am sorry we must meet under these circumstances," Chao said. "I thought it best to come in person."

Kurt nodded, then sat down.

"It is with regret that I heard of the death of your brother and the illness of the children." Chao made no attempt to sit down. "I have received the chemist's report. My office has been apprised of it."

"When do you expect to take action?" Kurt asked.

"It may not be so simple," said Chao. "We may never learn just who did this."

Kurt's eyebrow rose. "Why?"

"My office has been in touch with others over this matter. There is a difference of opinion about what should be done. The consensus is that an open investigation would exacerbate certain grievances with the Outland colonies."

An obscenity burst from Kurt.

Chao stood in silence for a moment. Then he turned and walked to the window.

"And you are concurring with this... consensus, I suppose," said Kurt sarcastically.

Chao turned slowly and looked at him. "There are vast distances between us and the outlying colonies. Distances in kilometers and in outlook. They add complications. The neck-laces came as a gift from the Outland children. To raise accusations now would be to risk open hostility from the colonies—a breach that might be impossible to mend."

"And so you're suggesting that we drop the matter? I can't believe this."

"The other side must be considered," said Chao slowly. "The colonies would never accept these charges. They would choose to believe the Coalition had manufactured the charge of poisoning as a ploy against them."

Kurt stared at Chao. "There's something more to this— something you're not telling me."

Chao looked away for a moment, then back. "The Outlands squabble among themselves, but if it were to come to revolution, they would unite. The only effective deterrent we have is economic. It may not be enough."

"What are you saying?" Kurt demanded. "Where could a threat from the Outlands lie?"

"From the Guardian Force."

Kurt sat stunned for a moment. The Guardian Force of L-5—the high ground. The Guardian Force controlled WorldCo's arsenal—warheads that had enforced the peace for over a century.

"We cannot allow dissension in this area," said Chao. "With a takeover of the Force, the Coalition would fall."

Kurt stretched out his hands on the table. He stared at them for nearly a minute, then raised his eyes slowly toward Chao. "I see," he said at last. "And so what do you recommend?"

"Careful monitoring of all things coming into Renaissance," he said. "And quiet surveillance of the colonies. Communication and Education will redouble their efforts to... persuade the Outlanders of our good intentions."

Through subliminals, thought Kurt. "And turnabout's fair-play?"

"It would seem to be the only move we have," said Chao. "We—"

A chime from the console interrupted him. A voice said, "Mr. Kraus, Dr. Nesheim wants to see you in the Common Room."

* * *

Lines of fatigue traced Nesheim's face. He leaned back against a couch and sipped a cup of coffee from a thin porcelain cup emblazoned with WorldCo insignia.

Kurt walked briskly into the room. At his footsteps, Nesheim looked up. "The children are out of danger," he said. "Except one."

Tanya?"

"Still very sick."

Kurt sat heavily on the couch next to Nesheim.

"We might lose her," said the doctor. "We would have lost them all without the antidote." He shook his head. "It was only because of an afterthought that we had any at all. A lot of wild plants that grow here have amygdalin in them—wild cherries,

elderberry—things children might sample. When amygdalin is digested, it releases cyanide. We stocked the medications as a precaution."

"But, Tanya—"

Nesheim shook his head. "We wait." He rose and set down his empty cup with a sharp rattle that echoed through the stillness. "I have to go now."

"I want to know of any change," Kurt said. "At once."

With a quick nod, Nesheim left the room.

* * *

While Chao closeted himself away with the electronics experts, Kurt paced the confines of the Director's office and paused to stare through the window at the darkness beyond. Then turning, he walked out of the office and through the vaulting Common Hall.

Balfour rose from her chair as he entered, but perhaps something in his face kept her from speaking. Without a word, he walked past her and stepped out onto the shadowy deck that projected over the black lake.

He stood, leaning against the railing, staring into the inky waters as a night wind stole through the bare trees and rustled against the leaves of mountain laurel and rhododendron. The wind was from the north, and chill, but he seemed not to feel it. He stared down into the black water at a pale shimmer of reflected moonlight.

As clouds traced over the face of the moon, the patch of reflected light rippled with the wind and seemed to change and take on features until he imagined he could see a child's face there, a face framed with a cloud of black hair that vanished into the night.

Would she die? That child who had taken his hand that morning and led him to a buried plaque of bronze? He thought he heard a voice then; he turned his face toward it, but it was only the wind burrowing under the wide deck, chattering through a stand of reeds at the lake's shallows, whispering against the resistant branches of the hemlocks. He imagined for a moment that he could hear their voices—the voices of the Nunnehi, the shadowy immortals, the spirit people whose home he had invaded here in these mountains. He imagined he could hear their ancient whisperings, their spectral whisperings of immortality. But it was only the wind blowing in the darkness—only the empty promise of the wind.

And would she die? This child of his? His child? The bitter thought came: His to play God with.

He had seen himself as a sort of idealized father—standing apart, not touching—and yet directing his children, dabbling in their destiny, giving their lives an impetus that had been in his own best interests.

He felt sickened as he saw his own motivations standing flimsy in the cold wind, bare of rationalizations. Kurt the father—a better one than his own. One so noble that he railed against the idea of anyone influencing his children's minds—anyone except himself.

He looked around at the place that he had wrought. Renaissance.... Rebirth.... The new world he had vowed to build. And every stick and stone of it a suggestion—a subtle seduction—a subliminal invitation to give up a real immortality for the shadow of one.

And then he knew that he was empty... like the wind—blowing forever, never changing—but with the power to destroy, to crumble away the impermanent clay across which it blew.

Chapter 9

New buds masked the scars of winter with pale greens and muted purples. Poplars thrust four-fingered leaves toward the sky, and spring crept up the mountains.

Standing ankle-deep in a narrow stream, a boy scooped gray-blue chunks of clay from the bank and swirling the wet color across his palm, compared it—with much squinting of his eyes—to the grayer, bluer shadows from Slaughter Mountain.

Kurt stood on a tiny island shaded by a wide hemlock. Across the lake, the duck-squawk of a bassoon rode the soft wind. Half-hidden by the low branches of the tree, he watched as a black-haired girl stepped onto the arched wooden bridge that linked the little island to the land. She carried a basket in her hand, this pale, serious little girl. She looked around, searching the bit of land, until she saw him and smiled. "You remembered."

Smiling back, he caught her outstretched hand. "Of course I did—the first Sunday after you were well. And how are you, Tanya?"

"Oh, much better now." She laid her basket on the ground at the edge of the lake and sat down beside it. "I hoped you would remember. I had the kitchen pack the things you like." Tanya reached into the basket and brought out picnic cups. Turning the lid, she opened one and handed it to him.

"Sassafras?" He sniffed at the rising steam and nodded at the spicy odor.

She opened hers and sipped it, looking over the rim at Kurt with solemn dark eyes. "I have something to show you. I worked on it all week."

"A piece of music?"

She shook her head. "No. Something else." She reached into the basket and drew out a small bundle wrapped in layers of dried moss. She held it in her hand and made no move to give it to him. "It is not the real thing. It is more of a pattern to make them from," she said. Then she placed the little packet of moss in his hand.

As he moved to open it, she caught his hand. "It may break. It will break very easily."

Gently, he lifted the light layers of moss until he uncovered what she had made, until a thin clay ring lay in his palm.

"I thought we should have something like that to wear—the people here at Renaissance. Something that was just for us."

He looked at the red clay ring in his palm. It looked as if it might crumble in his breath.

"It has a design," said Tanya. "See." She pointed to one side.

He raised his palm to eye-level and looked at it. Traced on its face was a lazy-eight design—the symbol of infinity—interrupted by a break in its curving, continuous line. Underneath, in careful letters, the words: For Art.

He blinked; he heard her say: "It took such a long time. They kept breaking. I made rows of them," she said. "Stacks. I made

them on a big flat stone in the middle of the creek by the clay bank. And then they were so wet, I had to let them dry in the sun for hours."

He sat looking at the little ring in his palm while the wind riffled over the island.

"I think they should be gold. Don't you?" she asked.

"What?"

"Gold. The rings. They should be gold. I thought of how they should be when I was sick. It came to me just how they should look," she said. The design and the letters should be gold, and behind them, it should be black."

He looked at the curving, broken symbol of infinity. "Why not another color, Tanya? Blue, maybe. Gold against light blue."

Her eyes grew very round, very solemn. "Oh, no. It must be black." "Why?"

"Because that is the way it is. I saw it." She laughed. "Dr. Nesheim said I was out of my head, but I remember how it was exactly. I was flying inside it. There was bright gold dust all around me. I was in it, but I could see all of it too. It was like I was there, and watching me be there—all at the same time." She pointed to the symbol on the ring. "I was moving very fast. Then I could see the broken part ahead—and it was black. It would never be right to make it blue."

"What else did you see, Tanya?"

She wrapped her arms around her knees and looked across the lake. "I do not think I saw anything else. But, I heard things. Things I hear every day. You know... music in things. Like that—" She flung an arm in front of her, pointing toward the surface of the water. The sunlight sparkled on the wind-chopped surface. She cocked her head. "Can you hear it? Inside your head?"

He stared at the sunlight glittering on the water. For a flashing moment, he thought that he could hear it too—inside his mind—but, it was only the echo of laughter from a group of children near the lake.

She looked at him and said softly, "I will make it into music and play it for you. Then you will hear."

He looked into her dark eyes and thought he saw his own reflected there. "You want that chance, don't you, Tanya? That choice."

She seemed surprised that he would ask. "Oh, yes," she said. Then she leaned forward and searched his face. "My ring. Do you think it is right?"

He held the clay ring gently between finger and thumb and felt the coolness of it. It was a fragile thing, this little ring, made from the earth and water of Renascence, dried in the sun. He could crush it to dust in a moment.

And yet, somehow its fragileness made it precious to him; somehow its very impermanence spoke to him of something more. It spoke to him of ancient winds blowing over plains that once were hills and scarps; of mountains turned to dust, and dust become once more the mountain stone that strug-gled toward the sun.

There were things that changed and things that never changed. And maybe there wasn't any real difference. He took her hand in his and placed the little ring in her open palm. "It's beautiful, Tanya," he said at last. "It is exactly right."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Webb is a registered nurse, which, she says, gives her an understanding of how the forces of stress affect people and develop character, for better or worse. She is the author of a non-fiction book about nursing school and created the character of Terra Tarkington, R.N. in her Bull Run humor series for Isaac Astmov's Science Fiction Magazine. In addition, she has written many serious stories for Asimov's and has been published in Chrysalis, Other Worlds and Quest Star. Her work has been reprinted in several anthologies including 1981 Annual Worlds Best SF.

Earthchild, her first novel, begins in Tampa, Florida, where Ms. Webb was born. Much of the later action is set in the Atlanta and Chattanooga areas and in the Blue Ridge Mountains, which she now calls home.