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HOOKING UP

WHAT'S THE MATTER, TOPAZ? asked her mother, pushing her gently toward the door.

Topaz said, Nothing. Come on, dear, coaxed her mother in that patient, sad way she had, which made Topaz do whatever her mother wanted. All right, said Topaz, and took a deep breath, shut her eyes for a moment, then opened them and went in.

The children turned to look, just as she expected. The teacher came over with a smile, took Topaz by the hand, and said, Class, this is Topaz. They all stopped what they were doing and stared. There must have been a hundred of them. Some of them were mouthing the word Topaz, some were just staring, and a few in the back were making faces. She looked at the floor, she couldn't help it. There were too many eyes on her.

You'll sit over here, the teacher said, right by me, and gave her a quick hug so she wouldn't be afraid anymore. The teacher smelled of soap. She led Topaz to a chair made of real wood. On Nerol, such a chair would be in a museum, and there would be a shield around it so people couldn't touch the wood or breathe on it too much. Topaz knew wood when she saw it because her father had a small wood box that he ran his fingers over when he was troubled by something. The wood of the box was called maple, and it was soft and warm in a way that no plastic could be. All the chairs in the room were wood, but they were not smooth and clean like the maple box, they were beaten up and dirty. They had dents. She thought: I'll never get used to it here.

The teacher said to Topaz, I'm Ms. C. Then she said to the class, Topaz is from Nerol. She was born here, but she went to Nerol with her parents when she was two, and now she's come back. Isn't that interesting.? I'm sure she has fascinating things to tell us. How many of you have been on another planet? Only three hands went up.

Ms. C. turned and told Topaz's mother, Don't worry, she'll be all right. Bye dear, Topaz's mother said to Topaz, waving, see you later, and she left. Topaz could hear her mother's shoes clicking farther and farther away down the long hall.

She was given a notebook that had a screen cloudy from a lot of tiny scratches. One of the keys wobbled but worked okay if you hit it in the center and not too hard. The notebook was awfully slow and didn't have a lot of memory. This was not a very good school, even with the chairs of real wood. But her father had

explained to her, in his serious voice, that good schools on Earth were too expensive for their family budget. In the Franklin Child Center, at least, you got to go to an actual physical classroom and learn social skills. Learning social skills at home-by software, her father said, was ridiculous, like learning to swim without getting in the water.

Everyone on Nerol swam at least an hour a day, because the gravity wasn't good for your vertebrae if you didn't do that. The gravity squashed your vertebrae and made them rub together, which could cripple you for life. Look at Uncle Archer in his big brace and taking three different kinds of pain pills every morning with his orange juice: blue, green, and yellow.

Topaz was asked to stand up and tell the class about Nerol, as she expected. She had prepared something to say, but it sounded so stupid, she wished she could be back home in her bed and under the covers. On Nerol, machines do everything and some of them look just like people. We have to wear special clothes and glasses in the summer because of the rays from our sun. We don't have a moon but we do have a beautiful ring, and in the autumn, from Founder's Day to Christmas, there are so many shooting stars, it's like a fountain of light every night. Our year is fifteen days longer than a year on Earth. Since I've been away six years, that makes me three months younger than I would have been if I stayed on Earth.

Ms. C. said, when Topaz was finished and took her seat, Isn't that something?

At lunchtime, after they ate from trays in a cafeteria and all went out to play in the fenced-in park, two girls came over to Topaz and introduced themselves. I'm Cherry, said the girl who had blond curls, and that's Anemone. She said Anemone in four syllables, pointing to the other girl, who had a big nose, freckles, and brown curls. Topaz wondered if she should make her hair curly too, if that was the fashion here. She would ask her mother.

The three of them played a game that Topaz didn't understand. It was a word game, but had leap frog in it if you got a word wrong. The girls laughed hard, so Topaz laughed with them. She liked Cherry and Anemone, especially Cherry, who was so pretty with her tiny nose. Topaz kept wanting to say Me-ne-mo-ne instead of A-ne-mo-ne, but after she repeated it to herself enough times, she got the name right. The words were shouted faster and faster, and the turns at leap frog got so confusing, you didn't know whether you had to jump or bend over, and soon she was laughing as hard as they were. If you didn't know better, you wouldn't have guessed that this girl had just come from another planet.

You can call me at Cherry fifty-seven Z slash two, that's my netplace, said Cherry, when it was time for the children to go back in. Oh, we don't have a modem yet or a netplace, said Topaz, we just moved in. What are you talking about, a modem? said Cherry, wrinkling her forehead. A modem to call you, said Topaz. We don't need a modem for that, said Cherry. She's not hooked up, Anemone explained. Oh right, said Cherry, and they both stopped and looked at Topaz

for
a moment before they continued walking.

Well, when you get hooked up, said Cherry -- this was when they were in the hall among a hundred talking students heading back to Ms. C.'s classroom-- you can call me at Cherry fifty-seven Z slash two. Don't forget. I won't, said Topaz, and said it to herself enough times to remember it.

There wasn't much lesson-teaching for the rest of the day. Topaz didn't need to use her notebook. The students mostly did what Ms. C. called interrelating exercises in small groups around the room. In Topaz's group there was a short boy called Leo. Other children laughed at him as if he were a joke because he had such large ears, but he was very smart when he spoke. There was also a girl called Heather, but she didn't interrelate much, she was too stuck-up, though Topaz couldn't see the reason. And finally there was another girl, whose name and face Topaz didn't remember afterward. The children had to talk on one of five topics, then disagree about one of five things, then share an idea or a plan of their own. Topaz didn't find it very interesting. She looked around for a clock but didn't see one. Evidently people on Earth didn't care about time as much as people on Nerol did.

Do you have the time? she whispered to the girl who sat on her left when the exercises were over and they were all back in their assigned seats. What? asked the girl. The time, do you know what time it is? It's three twenty-seven, said the girl, big-eyed. How do you know that, asked Topaz -- because the time was down to the exact minute -- if you don't have a watch? The girl smiled tentatively, as if thinking that Topaz was making a joke but not sure. Another girl gestured, making a motion at her own head with a finger, and whispered to the girl on Topaz's left, but Topaz heard it: She's not hooked up. Oh, said the girl on Topaz's left.

Ms. C. had them sing a song Topaz never heard before, and not long after that, musical chimes sounded. The children all got up and took their satchels from their lockers, and Topaz's mother came into the room. How did you like your first day? she asked. She did wonderfully, said Ms. C. I'm so glad, said Topaz's mother, giving Topaz a hug, but not too much of one since they were in public. She took her daughter by the hand. They left the Franklin Child Center and went home by the aboveground shuttle, which was slower but less crowded. See all the trees? Topaz's mother said. Doesn't it smell nice here? Topaz had to admit that everything smelled nice on Earth, much better than on Nerol, and the air was clearer, without any red in it.

As soon as they were in the door, Topaz asked her mother, What's hooked up mean?

Her mother poured her a glass of milk at the kitchen table, gave her a sugar cookie, and sat down beside her as Topaz ate it. I've been meaning to talk to you about that, said her mother. It's something we didn't do with you before we left Earth, because it's not necessary on Nerol and you were too young anyway.

I'm hooked up, but your father isn't because he was too busy at the time and didn't need it at work, and also he's kind of old-fashioned, you know. But he'll be getting hooked up now.

What is it? asked Topaz. It's really nothing, said her mother. They've perfected it. It used to be trouble and unreliable, but now it's not. They give you a booklet to read about the plon, it's really just a user's manual, and then they give you a local anesthetic so you don't feel a thing. You might get a little dizzy and have a low fever for a day after, but it's nothing to worry about. You just take an ambulin. Topaz took ambulins all the time, even when she wasn't sick. They were like vitamins.

What's it for? asked Topaz. It's very convenient, said her mother. When you're hooked up, you can be on the net inside your head, wherever you go. Oh, said Topaz, understanding, that's why Cherry doesn't need a modem. And that's why the children can tell time without a watch. Yes, said Topaz's mother, and lots of other things you'll learn about as you get older. Most people on Earth are hooked up now. I think it's about eighty-five percent. Maybe ninety percent.

How do they do it? asked Topaz. Well, they put a little thing in your brain, said her mother. It's called a plon. It's so little, you can hardly see it, and it does all the attaching in there by itself, with your neurons, in about two hours. It's a very clever thing. It doesn't matter what kind of brain you have, either, because people's brains are different, you know. I read how a man in Pakistan had reversed lobes, and the plon didn't have any problem with that.

I don't think I'd like something inside my brain, said Topaz. She once read a horror story about a spider that got inside a person's brain and took over and made him do terrible things like murder his sweetheart. The story gave her the creeps whenever she thought about it. That was the last horror story she read. It's really no more than getting a vaccination, her mother said. We're scheduled to have you hooked up, and your father too, next week, Monday, right after school. We'll go out for ice cream and melon afterward. Topaz said with a sigh, I guess I have to do it, if all the other children are hooked up. Her mother patted her knee and smiled. You're such a big girl, she said. I'm very pleased with you.

But the Saturday before their appointment to be hooked up, Topaz got the flu. Her nose ran, she coughed, and she was achy all over. This was to be expected, said her father. The bugs on Earth are different, and you haven't been exposed to all of them, even with the shots you had before we came. Take it easy and drink a lot of liquids. He tucked her in her bed and kissed her forehead. His lips were cool and he smelled good. I'll have to get hooked up without you, he said. You won't be there to hold my hand, poor me, he joked.

Cherry and Anemone came to visit. Topaz's mother made them all Nerolian milkshakes, which is kava syrup and licorice jimmies added to the ice cream. The Earth girls loved it. I never had anything like this, Ms. P., said Cherry. Topaz's mother gave her more. They played dolls on Topaz's bed. Anemone had brought three antique Austrian dolls. They're beautiful, said Topaz, afraid to

touch them. They're expensive, said Anemone. You wouldn't believe how much. The three girls played carefully with them, making up a wonderful story about princesses.

Topaz had to stay home for three days. She slept a lot and watched Earth compuvision, which delighted and alarmed her at the same time. There were an endless number of shows, and the neatest games imaginable, and if the focus wasn't always as good as the screen she had had on Nerol, the colors were much better. But some of the shows and games were strange and one or two seemed evil.

They reminded her of Romero back home, who was finally taken out of school on the psychologist's orders and put in an institution.

After Topaz returned to school at the Franklin Child Center, her mother made another appointment for her to be hooked up. And we'll get your hair curled too, she said. Topaz was proud of her mother for being so smart -- Topaz hadn't said one word yet about getting her hair curled, but her mother knew anyway.

In the hall Topaz got into a conversation -- she didn't know how it happened -- with a boy. His name was Lance, and he was tall and had a deep, manly voice. Lance had heard she wasn't hooked up. No kidding? he said, but in a friendly way that meant she had done something remarkable, maybe admirable. He helped her carry her satchel to class, and after school he walked with her to the upper shuttle stop.

What do you think of Earth, Topaz? he asked. It's all right, she said. I've never been to Nerol, he said, but it must be neat to see robots that you can't tell from people. All you have to do, Topaz told him, is get close to one and sniff. They don't smell like people, they smell like rubber and plastic. He said, Why don't you come to the movies with me Saturday? There's The Beta King,

Part Three playing. What's The Beta King, Part Three? Topaz asked. It's the latest war movie, said Lance. You see people being torn limb from limb and impaled and you can't tell it's not real. She said, Who wants to see people being torn apart? That's not fun. She didn't know what impaled was, but it was probably nasty. It's just a movie, he said. I can't imagine paying to see a lot

of people die, she said. It sounds sick. You sure are corny, he said, but from the look in his eyes you would have thought he wanted to give her a kiss.

Topaz

had never had a boy give her a look like that before. She couldn't tell if she liked it. She would think about it later.

That evening after supper, Topaz's mother and father took her to the top of the famous Power Tower so she could see all the lights. The sky above them wasn't as

interesting as on Nerol, since there was only three-quarters of a moon and it was only a plain ivory or bone white, but the lights on the ground were every color of the rainbow and they twinkled and moved wonderfully, like magic jewels

dancing. It's enchanting, said her mother. Don't you love Earth? Yes, said Topaz. You don't sound enthusiastic, remarked her father. I'm getting used to it, said Topaz, and when she said that, both her mother and father bent down and

gave her a hug, together. Topaz imagined Lance hugging her too.

That night Topaz wondered what it would be like to have curls. She had never had curls. She wondered if it would bother her if they bounced on her forehead and cheeks when she ran, the way they did for Cherry and Anemone and many other girls at the school. With curly hair, she wouldn't have pigtails anymore. She thought about that for a while. She wondered if she would ever be rich enough to own an antique Austrian doll, but she didn't think so. Her father was smarter than most people, but he was always talking about their budget and shaking his head.

She sighed, because her life was changing so much. She was changing, too. She was already so different, and in only a few days. She closed her eyes and felt that she was floating on her bed. It was because of the weak gravity here. She wondered, as she floated, if she would swim on Earth too and what that would be like. She wondered if the waves would be the same, because of the difference in the gravity and the difference in the water. Wondering about the differences between Earth and Nerol, she fell asleep.

When it was time for her appointment, Topaz and her mother went to a glass building and up an escalator to a room where there was a sharp piney smell and a lot of people waiting. One boy had a bandage on his head. His lower lip stuck out, as if he had been punished. It made Topaz feel funny in her stomach to see the bandage, though the bandage didn't have any blood on it. She hoped the plon wouldn't hurt when it went in. She and her mother sat on a very comfortable couch, and to pass the time her mother leafed through a colorful magazine about movie stars. Earth people seemed to like colors more than Nerolians did. In their clothes and shoes, too, there was a lot of color. Perhaps her mother would take her shopping soon, and Topaz would get some new clothes for school.

A woman gestured, and Topaz's mother said, It's our turn. What's wrong with you, Topaz? Topaz didn't know what was wrong with her, but she didn't seem to want to get up. Come on, dear, said her mother. Don't be frightened. It's nothing, I promise. Topaz knew she was being silly, but she couldn't help it. She shook her head no, over and over again. The woman who had gestured at them made an unpleasant smile and gave a shrug. I'm sorry, said Topaz's mother, but I have to talk to my daughter. I can't just drag her in kicking and screaming.

Her mother looked at her with that patient, sad face that made Topaz do whatever her mother wanted, but this time Topaz looked away, so she couldn't see it. Please, dear, said her mother. You're being unreasonable, you're acting like a little child. Topaz said, I don't want anything inside my head. What about your braces? said her mother. They're in your head, aren't they? They're in my mouth, said Topaz. It's not the same. You don't want to be different, do you, Topaz?

asked her mother very sadly. You don't want to be the only child in school who isn't hooked up, do you? And they'll all laugh at you. Think how you'll feel. Topaz started crying. Take me home, please, she said. I don't want anything inside my head.

You're really surprising me, said her mother. I'm surprising myself too, said Topaz, in tears, even starting to sob a little. It made her nose run. I can't help it. I don't know why, I'm sorry. There, there, said her mother, holding her and patting her head. Her mother then told the woman that she was sorry but it looked like they would have to reschedule. The woman said, It's not so unusual for kids to get cold feet, and she gave them a few colorful brochures. Here, she said, this provides some information. We're always afraid of what we don't know. And before they left, she put out her hand to Topaz and said, Here, look, honey, in my hand. Topaz looked and saw, in the palm of the woman's hand, a silver cylinder so tiny, it looked like part of an electronics kit, the kind Ian had on Nerol. That's a plon, said the woman. Do you want to hold it? No, thank you, said Topaz, wiping her face, and they went home.

Later that day, her mother had a serious talk with her father. Topaz heard some of it, from the next room, even though their voices were low. Her mother said: It must be difficult for the child to adjust. Think, dear, it's not just a new school and new friends, for her it's a whole new planet. It's not new to us, we grew up here, but she doesn't remember Earth. Let's not push her. Let's give her time, and all the room she needs. Her father said more than once: Fine, fine, I agree. But Topaz could tell that he wasn't pleased. He wanted his daughter to grow up more quickly than she was growing up.

Topaz felt nervous about going to school, afraid that the children and Ms. C. would know all about her cowardice at the glass building. But no one referred to it or hinted at it, so maybe they didn't know. The class had a lesson about fractions and percentages in the form of a game, where they all had to stand in different parts of the room and move around according to the numbers Ms. C. wrote on the board, and Topaz was one of the few who didn't make any mistakes. In the fenced-in park, during the lunch hour, she played the leap-frog game with Cherry and Anemone and another girl who joined them. The other girl's name was Iris.

In the afternoon, Ms. C. had a man come from an important company and tell the children about the future of compuvision. He had a wonderful voice and said that someday, and not too long, either, people wouldn't need sets to watch compuvision, they could just close their eyes and think a keyword to get a menu in their head. His company was developing a new, improved plon that would join with the plon the children already had. As the man talked, Topaz saw Iris finger her head behind an ear and a little up diagonally, and Topaz fingered her own head there and imagined the plon going in. It wasn't so bad, she told herself.

Why was she being such a baby about such a little thing?

Lance came and talked to her again in the hall after school. She knew that he had come especially to talk to her, and she heard one of her new friends say, behind her, Look, Topaz has a boyfriend. She supposed that Lance was her boyfriend, d. It made her feel very grown-up. As they walked toward the upper shuttle stop together, Lance actually took her hand, maybe because of what the girl said, and Topaz let him hold it. She thought: Will he still like me when I

get hooked up? Because it seemed to her that he cared about her the way people care about a person who is ill or very old or who can't see and has to get around with a white cane and one of those ear aids that make echoes. There was something nice about his caring, but at the same time there was something not nice about it.

At home, she told her mother that she was all right now about the plan and wanted to be hooked up like everyone else. Her mother nodded, not at all surprised, as if she had been expecting Topaz to change her mind, and made another appointment. To make the appointment, her mother talked into the air, not on the phone as before, so Topaz knew that their family was on the net now and that soon, after the operation, she would be able to talk to Cherry without

a modem. She repeated to herself: Cherry fifty-seven Z slash two. Maybe they would play interactive games, too, in their heads together.

It was the day before her appointment, a Tuesday, in the afternoon, when the crash happened. The children were in the hall during a break, and suddenly they

all fell down. Topaz got down on the floor, too, thinking that this was a new activity no one had told her about, a game or maybe a joke. Or maybe it was an earthquake drill, like the kind they had on Nerol near the equator. Topaz had seen a video once. She remembered that everyone was supposed to get under the nearest table. Once a whole town was destroyed by a quake, and the sky was purple-gray for a month after that even as far as their continent, Anglia.

The children were still, though some arms and legs were twitching a little, the way dogs do in their sleep when they have dreams. Whatever this was, it didn't seem to Topaz like a joke. After a while, she got up and went to the classroom, and there was Ms. C. on the floor by her desk. Ms. C. was twitching too. Topaz saw her teacher's eyes. They were all white. And there was some white on Ms. C.'s lips. That frightened Topaz, so she ran out, not stopping to get her satchel with her new art supplies from her locker.

She took the upper shuttle, which was running fine, except that the people in it were either lying on the floor or lying on their seats on top of one another. The only sound besides the humming of the shuttle was a child in the back crying. Topaz looked and saw that the child was standing and pulling on the hand of one of the people. He was a toddler, curly-haired, maybe two years old, and the fact that he wasn't lying down with everyone else frightened Topaz even more than her teacher's white eyes had, because the thought came to her, and what a cold thought it was, that she and the toddler were the only two people in the shuttle car who were not hooked up.

Topaz ran home as fast as she could from the shuttle stop near her house, past some people lying in the street or on the sidewalk. One man was on his back

and
had his mouth open, and his eyes were open too and didn't blink once. Help,
Topaz cried, though there was no one around to help her. On Nerol there would
have been police robots, and they would have come quickly to see what was the
matter.

Mother, Father, she called, running in, but they weren't at home. Topaz went
to
phone her mother at work but couldn't find the phone, then she remembered that
they didn't have a phone anymore, not needing one. I hope they're all right,
she
said out loud, like a prayer. She didn't know what to do. She didn't want to
go
back outside, where all the fallen people were. She got into her bed upstairs
and pulled the covers over her head, but she felt much too nervous to keep
lying
there, so she got out of bed and went downstairs again.

She turned on the news on the compuvision. There was no news or any show on,
just a sign that said that there had been a crash and people should wait. The
system would be up momentarily. Topaz sat and stared at the screen and read it
ten times, trying to figure out, from those few words, what had happened and
what it meant. If the system crashed, what did that do to the people who had
plons in their brains? Would they have to go to the hospital? Topaz remembered
what her mother had said, that eighty-five percent of the people on Earth,
maybe
ninety percent, were hooked up.

She went from room to room and looked at everything carefully, her mother's
things, her father's things, the furniture, the pictures on the wall. One
picture was of a state fair that Topaz had been to on Nerol when she was
seven.

She was smiling at the camera, as if laughing, and had her arm around a
silly-looking lamb. Maybe I could curl my hair, Topaz thought, while I'm
waiting. The straight-haired, pigtailed girl in the picture, Topaz at seven,
seemed to be laughing at her.

Topaz looked in her mother's drawer and in the bathroom for curling things but
didn't find any. Then she got the idea to play disks. She didn't really care
for
the games on the disks, but that would be a good way to kill time until
someone
came, since she didn't know how to curl her hair by herself.

She played Life for a while, then walked around some more and looked out
different windows. She couldn't see much. From her upstairs window she could
see
the most: three people lying crumpled in the street, one man and two old
women.
The two old women were together. Perhaps they were friends or sisters.

Topaz stopped playing Life and played Bucket, until she began to get hungry.
She
realized that it was suppertime. Her mother and father still weren't home.
Maybe
the shuttle wasn't working now and they had to take the bus instead and the
driver had to keep stopping to clear the people out of the way so they
wouldn't
be run over. Or maybe her mother and father were helping out in the crisis.
Her

father was good at taking charge. Topaz decided to cook herself supper. They would be pleased to see how grown-up she was, cooking for herself. She made one of the five-minute dinners, using the microwave, and was very careful not to leave a mess after she was finished. She even washed the dishes and then polished the faucet in the sink, to pass the time. She went back to the compuvision after that, but the sign on the screen was still there and nothing had changed.

She sat by herself in the living room and waited. She was learning how to wait better. She was able to sit still with folded hands for a whole hour: she timed it. She played Bucket some more, though she couldn't really concentrate on it, then waited some more, and finally she grew sleepy. She sighed, got into her pajamas, brushed her teeth, and went to bed. She prayed, Dear Lord, please take care of my mother and father wherever they are and bring them home soon. She never prayed at home, because her father didn't believe in it, but sometimes at school on Nerol, on a special occasion, there was a prayer. The Nerolians were old-fashioned about things like prayer.

The next day, Topaz had breakfast and took a shower. She cleaned her room. Once, at about ten o'clock, looking out her window, she saw someone walk past. The thin man had a funny walk, as if he needed a cane but didn't want to use one, and his clothes were dirty. Topaz knew right away that he wasn't hooked up.

On the second day, she got so good at waiting that two or three hours went by with her doing nothing, just staring at a lamp or a shelf or a corner. She wasn't even sure what she was staring at. She felt that she was asleep in a way, although she had her eyes open and wasn't in bed. She might actually have fallen asleep in the armchair that faced the door, because when the door opened, she didn't remember having heard anyone knock or ring the bell.

A man and a woman came in. Topaz P.? asked the man. Yes? said Topaz. Are my mother and father all right? They didn't come home. The woman said: Topaz, dear, pack a suitcase, I'll help you. Take a few days' worth of clothes and your favorite toys. Where are we going? asked Topaz. There's a center, said the man, for children who. He stopped on the word who and blinked, not knowing how to continue. Topaz saw that he was clumsy. His hands were too big, and his tongue got in the way of his words. The woman helped him out: There's been a big crash, Topaz. I know, said Topaz, I saw the sign on the screen. But it says momentarily, and this isn't momentarily, is it? You're right, said the woman, it's been a very big problem and it will take a while to fix, I'm afraid. Meanwhile we need to gather all the children together so we can make sure they are taken care of and have enough to eat while everything is being fixed.

Topaz said: I can cook for myself. I cleaned my room, too. That's wonderful, dear, said the woman, but we need to gather all the children, so please come with us. I'll help you pack your suitcase. The woman repeated herself a lot, Topaz saw. She asked: But what if my mother and father come home and I'm not here? We'll leave a message for them, said the woman, after thinking a bit, a message that tells them where you are.

So the woman and Topaz packed some clothes and toys. The woman said, Oh, what is this? Topaz said, It's a mardeb, a fossil from Nerol. They lived sixty million years ago, on the bottom of the ocean. They're not that valuable, because there are so many of them, but I like this one. The planet Nerol? asked the woman. Yes, we just moved here from there. I'm at the Franklin Child Center. I've been traveling a lot myself, said the woman, to herself more than to Topaz, and her voice sounded even sadder than the voice of Topaz's mother when she wanted you to do something you didn't want to do.

They went with the man, and got into a green van that had a sign on it that said Tandem Enterprises. There was no one else in the van but Topaz and the man and the woman. The man drove them to a gray-white building that was opposite a playing field. No one was on the playing field. Topaz saw that there weren't people anymore lying in the streets and on the sidewalks. Someone had taken them to the hospital. Topaz hoped they would be all right. Maybe the old plons had to be taken out and new ones put in. It wouldn't hurt much. Her mother said that all you needed was a local anesthetic, and maybe you'd be dizzy and have a little fever afterward. But you could take some ambulins.

The next day, Topaz met some of the other children. They assembled in the cafeteria. There was something wrong with most of them, she saw. A lot were Down children. Some talked to themselves in odd voices and swung their arms. One boy had his arm in a cast and didn't say anything. They were divided up. Topaz's group was taken to a classroom and introduced to their new teacher, Ms. G. Ms. G. was a lot like Ms. C., positive and cheerful, though she wasn't as pretty. She was fatter and had a knob on her face. Also, she didn't always know what to say. She had to keep looking at a card she held. And sometimes she swallowed hard and had to wait. But Topaz liked her because she tried hard.

Children, said Ms. G., we're going to be giving you therapy sessions. Do you know what therapy is? Therapy is something that makes you feel better. We have people who will do that with you. They've been specially trained. We'll give you some medicine, too, to feel better. It's very important to be honest about how you feel and not deny it if you feel bad. I hope you understand. It's all right to cry. Sometimes bad things make us feel bad, but we can't let it make us cry all the time, either, we have to learn to be strong.

Topaz saw that the chairs were the same as at the Franklin Child Center. The notebooks, however, were better, newer. Her notebook didn't have any wobbly keys, and the screen was nice and clear. It had plenty of memory. One of the children behind her was moaning, but it wasn't an unhappy moaning, he was just making that noise because he didn't have all his mental capacity. That's why they hadn't hooked him up. The sound was monotonous and annoying, but Topaz didn't mind it. Actually, it made her feel comfortable, as if she was in a kind of family. She felt that she could help take care of these children, and the thought made her feel very grown-up. Her mother and father would be proud of her when they came to the school after the trouble was over. What a wonderful

child
we have, they would say, amazed.

The pills the children took were pale blue. After a while they made Topaz feel warm inside. They made her feel like laughing, too, but she kept the laughing feeling to herself, because something awful had happened, after all. A woman who had been specially trained took her and three other children into a therapy session in another room, and they played with dolls that fell down and didn't get up ever again. They talked about that, and how they felt about it. The woman told them how wonderfully they were doing. After the therapy session, Topaz went out to the fenced-in park and introduced herself to two girls who were standing by the fence. I'm Topaz, she said, who are you? I'm Amber, said the short girl, who had a scar on her mouth. I'm Fiona, said the fat girl, who had a big body but a small head.

Topaz took charge of them and taught them the word and leap-frog game, but Fiona couldn't jump, so Topaz taught them another game. They didn't seem to care that much for it at first, but when they warmed up, they started smiling. You look much better when you smile, she told them, using the voice the therapy woman had used to her.

In the hall, Topaz noticed that a boy was following her. She turned and asked him his name. Buck, he said. I'm Topaz, she said, and held out her hand to shake hands. Paz, he said. Topaz, she said. Paz, he repeated, and didn't shake her hand. Nice meeting you, Buck, she said and went back to her class.

Ms. G. told them a story about a princess who is put to sleep for twenty years because she was rude. She didn't tell it very well, and Topaz had read it before anyway in a book. When the princess wakes up, she isn't rude anymore, she's learned her lesson. Topaz didn't understand how sleep could make you polite, but she remembered her father saying that sleep was a healer. Uncle Archer slept a lot, because of his back.

The children lived together in the gray-white building opposite the playing field. The window of the room she shared with seven other children looked out on the field. It was a nice view. You could see for a long distance. She wondered when they would be allowed to play on the field. Not today, it was raining. The rain was the thing Topaz liked best about Earth. It was very gentle here and smelled good. On Nerol, the rain stung and people had to avoid it. Topaz got her roommates to help clean up the room, because it was dirty. She said, Let's make a game of it, and they did. The woman in charge of their floor was pleased with Topaz. I wish they were all like you, she said. It wasn't a very diplomatic thing to say in the presence of the other children. We'll all get better, Topaz

told her.

At school the next day, Buck followed her around more, even missing a therapy session he was supposed to go to. Topaz let him carry her satchel for her, and she wiped his nose for him and tied his shoes for him. They kept getting untied.

She tried to teach him how to make a knot that wouldn't come loose, but it was too much for him. Paz, he said, as if that was his only word now. She wondered if he would ever be in good enough condition to get a new plon when the new plons were ready. Maybe a plon would be invented that not only hooked you up to the net but also made you intelligent.

A man came to talk to them, from the government. He had a big nose and not much

hair, and his voice was deep and scratchy, reminding Topaz of a comedian on compuvision back on Nerol. The comedian's name was Ajax. She was glad she remembered that. The man told the children about progress, that sometimes there

were problems but the problems could always be solved if you used science and kept your eyes on the future. Look at all the new things we had, and every day there were more of them. The government was installing something in the net, the

man told them, that would make it impossible for it to crash anymore. And if there was wrong feedback or a glitch sometimes, the man said, the thing that they were installing now would protect the people. There would be a cut-off switch in every plon. So the children should not be afraid of the net. He kept looking at Topaz as he talked, because she was the healthiest and best-looking and most intelligent child in the room.

Topaz thought that when she grew up, she would have a lot of responsibilities and help take care of children. Maybe she would be in charge of a child center.

She would be a leader of some kind, she could see that. She would be important.

People would need her, because on all of Earth there would only be a few like her: a child who hadn't been hooked up because she came from another planet and

not because something was wrong with her head or her brain was damaged in some way. And when she was in charge, she would make sure that all the children didn't do exactly the same thing all the time. They wouldn't all have curly hair, and they wouldn't all play Bucket. Maybe the plons could be different too,

and maybe there could even be different kinds of nets. It was very important, Topaz thought, for children to do different things and be different from one another. They should be like wildflowers in a field, not like a row of tulips in

a fenced-in garden. That way, if something bad happened, as her father liked to

say about what to do with their money, with their savings, you didn't have all your eggs in one basket.

Topaz turned and looked at Buck. He needed the drool on his chin wiped. While the man from the government talked in his deep, scratchy voice, Topaz took out a

tissue, half-got out of her seat to reach Buck's desk, and wiped the drool away.

Paz, he said.

