

## Echea

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

I can close my eyes and she appears in my mind as she did the moment I first saw her: tiny, fragile, with unnaturally pale skin and slanted chocolate eyes. Her hair was white as the moon on a cloudless evening. It seemed, that day, that her eyes were the only spot of color on her haggard little face. She was seven, but she looked three.

And she acted like nothing we had ever encountered before.

Or since.

We had three children and a good life. We were not impulsive, but we did feel as if we had something to give. Our home was large, and we had money; any child would benefit from that.

It seemed to be for the best.

It all started with the brochures. We saw them first at an outdoor café near our home. We were having lunch when we glimpsed floating dots of color, a fleeting child's face. Both my husband and I touched them only to have the displays open before us:

The blank vista of the Moon, the Earth over the horizon like a giant blue and white ball, a looming presence, pristine and healthy and somehow guilt-ridden. The Moon itself looked barren, as it always had, until one focused. And then one saw the pockmarks, the shattered dome open to the stars. In the corner of the first brochure I opened, at the very edge of the reproduction, were blood-splotches. They were scattered on the craters and boulders, and had left fist-sized holes in the dust. I didn't need to be told what had caused it. We saw the effects of high velocity rifles in low gravity every time we downloaded the news.

The brochures began with the Moon, and ended with the faces of refugees: pallid, worn, defeated. The passenger shuttles to Earth had pretty much stopped. At first, those who could pay came here, but by the time we got our brochures, Earth passage had changed. Only those with living relatives were able to return. Living relatives who were willing to acknowledge the relationship—and had official hard copy to prove it.

The rules were waived in the case of children, of orphans and of underage war refugees. They were allowed to come to Earth if their bodies could tolerate it, if they were willing to be adopted, and if they were willing to renounce any claims they had to Moon land.

They had to renounce the stars in order to have a home.

We picked her up in Sioux Falls, the nearest star shuttle stop and detention center to our home. The shuttle stop was a desolate place. It was designed as an embarkation point for political prisoners and for star soldiers. It was built on the rolling prairie, a sprawling complex with laser fences shimmering in the sunlight. Guards stood at every entrance, and several hovered above. We were led, by men with laser

rifles, into the main compound, a building finished almost a century before, made of concrete and steel, functional, cold, and ancient. Its halls smelled musty. The concrete flaked, covering everything with a fine gray dust.

Echea had flown in on a previous shuttle. She had been in detox and sick bay; through psychiatric exams and physical screenings. We did not know we would get her until they called our name.

We met her in a concrete room with no windows, shielded against the sun, shielded against the world. The area had no furniture.

A door opened and a child appeared.

Tiny, pale, fragile. Eyes as big as the moon itself, and darker than the blackest night. She stood in the center of the room, legs spread, arms crossed, as if she were already angry at us.

Around us, through us, between us, a computer voice resonated:

This is Echea. She is yours. Please take her, and proceed through the doors to your left. The waiting shuttle will take you to your preassigned destination.

She didn't move when she heard the voice, although I started. My husband had already gone toward her. He crouched and she glowered at him.

"I don't need you," she said.

"We don't need you either," he said. "But we want you."

The hard set to her chin eased, just a bit. "Do you speak for her?" she asked, indicating me.

"No," I said. I knew what she wanted. She wanted reassurance early that she wouldn't be entering a private war zone as difficult and devastating as the one she left. "I speak for myself. I'd like it if you came home with us, Echea."

She stared at us both then, not relinquishing power, not changing that forceful stance. "Why do you want me?" she asked. "You don't even know me."

"But we will," my husband said.

"And then you'll send me back," she said, her tone bitter. I heard the fear in it.

"You won't go back," I said. "I promise you that."

It was an easy promise to make. None of the children, even if their adoptions did not work, returned to the Moon.

A bell sounded overhead. They had warned us about this, warned us that we would have to move when we heard it.

"It's time to leave," my husband said. "Get your things."

Her first look was shock and betrayal, quickly masked. I wasn't even sure I had seen it. And then she

narrowed those lovely chocolate eyes. "I'm from the Moon," she said with a sarcasm that was foreign to our natural daughters. "We have no things."

What we knew of the Moon Wars on Earth was fairly slim. The news vids were necessarily vague, and I had never had the patience for a long lesson in Moon history.

The shorthand for the Moon situation was this: the Moon's economic resources were scarce. Some colonies, after several years of existence, were self-sufficient. Others were not. The shipments from Earth, highly valuable, were designated to specific places and often did not get there. Piracy, theft, and murder occurred to gain the scarce resources. Sometimes skirmishes broke out. A few times, the fighting escalated. Domes were damaged, and in the worst of the fighting, two colonies were destroyed.

At the time, I did not understand the situation at all. I took at face value a cynical comment from one of my professors: colonies always struggle for dominance when they are away from the mother country. I had even repeated it at parties.

I had not understood that it oversimplified one of the most complex situations in our universe.

I also had not understood the very human cost of such events.

That is, until I had Echea.

\*\*\*

We had ordered a private shuttle for our return, but it wouldn't have mattered if we were walking down a public street. I attempted to engage Echea, but she wouldn't talk. She stared out the window instead, and became visibly agitated as we approached home.

LakeNebagamonis a small lake, one of the hundreds that dot northernWisconsin. It was a popular resort for people from nearbySuperior. Many had summer homes, some dating from the late 1800s. In the early 2000s, the summer homes were sold off. Most lots were bought by families who already owned land there, and hated the crowding at Nebagamon. My family bought fifteen lots. My husband's bought ten. Our marriage, some joked, was one of the most important local mergers of the day.

Sometimes I think that it was no joke. It was expected. There is affection between us, of course, and a certain warmth. But no real passion.

The passion I once shared with another man—a boy actually—was so long ago that I remember it in images, like a vid seen decades ago, or a painting made from someone else's life.

When my husband and I married, we acted like an acquiring conglomerate. We tore down my family's summer home because it had no potential or historical value, and we built onto my husband's. The ancient house became an estate with a grand lawn that rolled down to the muddy water. Evenings we sat on the verandah and listened to the cicadas until full dark. Then we stared at the stars and their reflections in our lake. Sometimes we were blessed with the northern lights, but not too often.

This is the place we brought Echea. A girl who had never really seen green grass or tall trees; who had definitely never seen lakes or blue sky or Earth's stars. She had, in her brief time inNorth Dakota, seen what they considered Earth—the brown dust, the fresh air. But her exposure had been limited, and had not really included sunshine or nature itself.

We did not really know how this would affect her.

There were many things we did not know.

Our girls were lined up on the porch in age order: Kally, the twelve-year-old, and the tallest, stood near the door. Susan, the middle child, stood next to her, and Anne stood by herself near the porch. They were properly stair-stepped, three years between them, a separation considered optimal for more than a century now. We had followed the rules in birthing them, as well as in raising them.

Echea was the only thing out of the norm.

Anne, the courageous one, approached us as we got off the shuttle. She was small for six, but still bigger than Echea. Anne also blended our heritages perfectly—my husband's bright blue eyes and light hair with my dark skin and exotic features. She would be our beauty some day, something my husband claimed was unfair, since she also had the brains.

"Hi," she said, standing in the middle of the lawn. She wasn't looking at us. She was looking at Echea.

Echea stopped walking. She had been slightly ahead of me. By stopping, she forced me to stop too.

"I'm not like them," she said. She was glaring at my daughters. "I don't want to be."

"You don't have to be," I said softly.

"But you can be civil," my husband said.

Echea frowned at him, and in that moment, I think, their relationship was defined.

"I suppose you're the pampered baby," she said to Anne.

Anne grinned.

"That's right," she said. "I like it better than being the spoiled brat."

I held my breath. "Pampered baby" wasn't much different from "spoiled brat" and we all knew it.

"Do you have a spoiled brat?" Echea asked.

"No," Anne said.

Echea looked at the house, the lawn, the lake, and whispered. "You do now."

Later, my husband told me he heard this as a declaration. I heard it as awe. My daughters saw it as something else entirely.

"I think you have to fight Susan for it," Anne said.

"Do not!" Susan shouted from the porch.

"See?" Anne said. Then she took Echea's hand and led her up the steps.

That first night we awakened to screams. I came out of a deep sleep, already sitting up, ready to do battle. At first, I thought my link was on; I had lulled myself to sleep with a bedtime story. My link had an automatic shut-off, but I sometimes forgot to set it. With all that had been happening the last few days, I believed I might have done so again.

Then I noticed my husband sitting up as well, groggily rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

The screams hadn't stopped. They were piercing, shrill. It took me a moment to recognize them.

Susan.

I was out of bed before I realized it, running down the hall before I had time to grab my robe. My nightgown flapped around me as I ran. My husband was right behind me. I could hear his heavy steps on the hardwood floor.

When we reached Susan's room, she was sitting on the window seat, sobbing. The light of the full moon cut across the cushions and illuminated the rag rugs and the old-fashioned pink spread.

I sat down beside her and put my arm around her. Her frail shoulders were shaking, and her breath was coming in short gasps. My husband crouched before her, taking her hands in his.

"What happened, sweetheart?" I asked.

"I—I saw him," she said. "His face exploded, and the blood *floated* down."

"Were you watching vids again before sleep?" my husband asked in a sympathetic tone. We both knew if she said yes, in the morning she would get yet another lecture about being careful about what she put in her brain before it rested.

"No!" she wailed.

She apparently remembered those early lectures too.

"Then what caused this?" I asked.

"I don't *know!*" she said and burst into sobs again. I cradled her against me, but she didn't loosen her grip on my husband's hands.

"After his blood floated, what happened, baby?" my husband asked.

"Someone grabbed me," she said against my gown. "And pulled me away from him. I didn't want to go."

"And then what?" My husband's voice was still soft.

"I woke up," she said, and her breath hitched.

I put my hand on her head and pulled her closer. "It's all right, sweetheart," I said. "It was just a dream."

"But it was so *real*," she said.

"You're here now," my husband said. "Right here. In your room. And we're right here with you."

"I don't want to go back to sleep," she said. "Do I have to?"

"Yes," I said, knowing it was better for her to sleep than be afraid of it. "Tell you what, though. I'll program House to tell you a soothing story, with a bit of music and maybe a few moving images. What do you say?"

"Dr. Seuss," she said.

"That's not always soothing," my husband said, obviously remembering how the House's *Cat in the Hat* program gave Kally a terror of anything feline.

"It is to Susan," I said gently, reminding him. In her third year, she played *Green Eggs and Ham* all night, the House's voice droning on and on, making me thankful that our room was at the opposite end of the hall.

But she was three no longer, and she hadn't wanted Dr. Seuss for years. The dream had really frightened her.

"If you have any more trouble, baby," my husband said to her, "you come and get us, all right?"

She nodded. He squeezed her hands, then I picked her up and carried her to bed. My husband pulled back the covers. Susan clung to me as I eased her down. "Will I go back there if I close my eyes?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You'll listen to House and sleep deeply. And if you dream at all, it'll be about nice things, like sunshine on flowers, and the lake in summertime."

"Promise?" she asked, her voice quavering.

"Promise," I said. Then I removed her hands from my neck and kissed each of them before putting them on the coverlet. I kissed her forehead. My husband did the same, and as we were leaving, she was ordering up the House reading program.

As I pulled the door closed, I saw the opening images of *Green Eggs and Ham* flicker across the wall.

The next morning, everything seemed fine. When I came down to breakfast, the chef had already placed the food on the table, each dish on its own warming plate. The scrambled eggs had the slightly runny look that indicated they had sat more than an hour—not even the latest design in warming plates could stop that. In addition, there was French toast, and Susan's favorites, waffles. The scent of fresh blueberry muffins floated over it all, and made me smile. The household staff had gone to great lengths to make Echea feel welcome.

My husband was already in his usual spot, e-conferencing while he sipped his coffee and broke a muffin apart with his fingers. His plate, showing the remains of eggs and ham, was pushed off to the side.

"Morning," I said as I slipped into my usual place on the other side of the table. It was made of oak and had been in my family since 1851, when my mother's people brought it over from Europe as a wedding present for my many-great grandparents. The housekeeper kept it polished to a shine, and she only used linen placemats to protect it from the effects of food.

My husband acknowledged me with a blueberry-stained hand as laughter made me look up. Kally came in, her arm around Susan. Susan still didn't look herself. She had deep circles under her eyes, which meant that *Green Eggs and Ham* hadn't quite done the trick. She was too old to come get us—I had known that when we left her last night—but I hoped she hadn't spent the rest of the night listening to House, trying to find comfort in artificial voices and imagery.

The girls were still smiling when they saw me.

"Something funny?" I asked

"Echea," Kally said. "Did you know someone owned her dress before she did?"

No, I hadn't known that, but it didn't surprise me. My daughters, on the other hand, had owned only the best. Sometimes their knowledge of life—or lack thereof—shocked me.

"It's not an unusual way for people to save money," I said. "But it'll be the last pre-owned dress she'll have."

Mom? It was Anne, e-mailing me directly. The instant prompt appeared before my left eye. *Can you come up here?*

I blinked the message away, then sighed and pushed back my chair. I should have known the girls would do something that first morning. And the laughter should have prepared me.

"Remember," I said as I stood. "Only one main course. No matter what your father says."

"Ma!" Kally said.

"I mean it," I said, then hurried up the stairs. I didn't have to check where Anne was. She had sent me an image along with the e-mail—the door to Echea's room.

As I got closer, I heard Anne's voice.

"...didn't mean it. They're old poops."

"Poop" was Anne's worst word, at least so far. And when she used it, she put all so much emphasis on it the word became an epithet.

"It's my dress," Echea said. She sounded calm and contained, but I thought there was a raggedness to her voice that hadn't been there the day before. "It's all I have."

At that moment, I entered the room. Anne was on the bed, which had been carefully made up. If I hadn't tucked Echea in the night before, I never would have thought she had slept there.

Echea was standing near her window seat, gazing at the lawn as if she didn't dare let it out of her sight.

"Actually," I said, keeping my voice light. "You have an entire closet full of clothes."

Thanks, Mom, Anne sent me.

"Those clothes are yours," Echea said.

"We've adopted you," I said. "What's ours is yours."

"You don't get it," she said. "This dress is *mine*. It's all I have."

She had her arms wrapped around it, her hands gripping it as if we were going to take it away.

"I know," I said softly. "I know, sweetie-baby. You can keep it. We're not trying to take it away from you."

"They said you would."

"Who?" I asked, with a sinking feeling. I already knew who. My other two daughters. "Kally and Susan?"

She nodded.

"Well, they're wrong," I said. "My husband and I make the rules in this house. I will never take away something of yours. I promise."

"Promise?" she whispered.

"Promise," I said. "Now how about breakfast?"

She looked at Anne for confirmation, and I wanted to hug my youngest daughter. She had already decided to care for Echea, to ally with her, to make Echea's entrance into the household easier.

I was so proud of her.

"Breakfast," Anne said, and I heard a tone in her voice I'd never heard before. "It's the first meal of the day."

The government had fed the children standard nutrition supplements, in beverage form. Echea hadn't taken a meal on Earth until she'd joined us.

"You name your meals?" she asked Anne. "You have that many of them?" Then she put a hand over her mouth, as if she were surprised she had let the questions out.

"Three of them," I said, trying to sound normal. Instead I felt defensive, as if we had too much. "We only have three of them."

The second night, we had no disturbances. By the third, we had developed a routine. I spent time with my girls, and then I went into Echea's room. She didn't like House or House's stories. House's voice, no matter how I programmed it, scared her. It made me wonder how we were going to link her when the time came. If she found House intrusive, imagine how she would find the constant barrage of information services, of instant e-mail scrolling across her eyes, or sudden images appearing inside her head. She was almost past the age where a child adapted easily to a link. We had to calm her quickly or risk her suffering a disadvantage for the rest of her life.

Perhaps it was the voice that upset her. The reason links made sound optional was because too many people had had trouble distinguishing the voices inside their head. Perhaps Echea would be one of them.



It was time to find out.

I had yet to broach the topic with my husband. He seemed to have cooled toward Echea immediately. He thought Echea abnormal because she wasn't like our girls. I reminded him that Echea hadn't had the advantages, to which he responded that she had the advantages *now*. He felt that since her life had changed, she should change.

Somehow I didn't think it worked like that.

It was on the second night that I realized she was terrified of going to sleep. She kept me as long as she could, and when I finally left, she asked to keep the lights on.

House said she had them on all night, although the computer clocked her even breathing starting at 2:47 a.m.

On the third night, she asked me questions. Simple ones, like the one about breakfast, and I answered them without my previous defensiveness. I held my emotions back, my shock that a child would have to ask what that pleasant ache was in her stomach after meals ("You're full, Echea. That's your stomach telling you it's happy.") or why we insisted on bathing at least once a day ("People stink if they don't bathe often, Echea. Haven't you noticed?"). She asked the questions with her eyes averted, and her hands clenched against the coverlet. She knew that she should know the answers, she knew better than to ask my older two daughters or my husband, and she tried ever so hard to be sophisticated.

Already, the girls had humiliated her more than once. The dress incident had blossomed into an obsession with them, and they taunted her about her unwillingness to attach to anything. She wouldn't even claim a place at the dining room table. She seemed convinced that we would toss her out at the first chance.

On the fourth night, she addressed that fear. Her question came at me sideways, her body more rigid than usual.

"If I break something," she asked, "what will happen?"

I resisted the urge to ask what she had broken. I knew she hadn't broken anything. House would have told me, even if the girls hadn't.

"Echea," I said, sitting on the edge of her bed, "are you afraid that you'll do something which will force us to get rid of you?"

She flinched as if I had struck her, then she slid down against the coverlet. The material was twisted in her hands, and her lower jaw was working even before she spoke.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Didn't they explain this to you before they brought you here?" I asked.

"They said nothing." That harsh tone was back in her voice, the tone I hadn't heard since that very first day, her very first comment.

I leaned forward and, for the first time, took one of those clenched fists into my hands. I felt the sharp

knuckles against my palms, and the softness of the fabric brushing my skin.

"Echea," I said. "When we adopted you, we made you our child by law. We cannot get rid of you. No matter what. It is illegal for us to do so."

"People do illegal things," she whispered.

"When it benefits them," I said. "Losing you will not benefit us."

"You're saying that to be kind," she said.

I shook my head. The real answer was harsh, harsher than I wanted to state, but I could not leave it at this. She would not believe me. She would think I was trying to ease her mind. I was, but not through polite lies.

"No," I said. "The agreement we signed is legally binding. If we treat you as anything less than a member of our family, we not only lose you, we lose our other daughters as well."

I was particularly proud of adding the word "other." I suspected that, if my husband had been having this conversation with her, that he would have forgotten to add it.

"You would?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"This is true?" she asked.

"True," I said. "I can download the agreement and its ramifications for you in the morning. House can read you the standard agreement—the one everyone must sign—tonight if you like."

She shook her head, and pushed her hands harder into mine. "Could you—could you answer me one thing?" she asked.

"Anything," I said.

"I don't have to leave?"

"Not ever," I said.

She frowned. "Even if you die?"

"Even if we die," I said. "You'll inherit, just like the other girls."

My stomach knotted as I spoke. I had never mentioned the money to our own children. I figured they knew. And now I was telling Echea who was, for all intents and purposes, still a stranger.

And an unknown one at that.

I made myself smile, made the next words come out lightly. "I suspect there are provisions against killing us in our beds."

Her eyes widened, then instantly filled with tears. "I would never do that," she said.

And I believed her.

As she grew more comfortable with me, she told me about her previous life. She spoke of it only in passing, as if the things that happened before no longer mattered to her. But in the very flatness with which she told them, I could sense deep emotions churning beneath the surface.

The stories she told were hair-raising. She had not, as I had assumed, been orphaned as an infant. She had spent most of her life with a family member who had died, and then she had been brought to Earth. Somehow, I had believed that she had grown up in an orphanage like the ones from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ones Dickens wrote about, and the famous pioneer filmmakers had made Flats about. I had not realized that those places did not exist on the Moon. Either children were chosen for adoption, or they were left to their own devices, to survive on their own if they could.

Until she had moved in with us, she had never slept in a bed. She did not know it was possible to grow food by planting it, although she had heard rumors of such miracles.

She did not know that people could accept her for what she was, instead of what she could do for them.

My husband said that she was playing on my sympathies so that I would never let her go.

But I wouldn't have let her go anyway. I had signed the documents and made the verbal promise. And I cared for her. I would never let her go, any more than I would let a child of my flesh go.

I hoped, at one point, that he would feel the same.

As the weeks progressed, I was able to focus on Echea's less immediate needs. She was beginning to use House—her initial objection to it had been based on something that happened on the Moon, something she never fully explained—but House could not teach her everything. Anne introduced her to reading, and often Echea would read to herself. She caught on quickly, and I was surprised that she had not learned in her school on the Moon, until someone told me that most Moon colonies had no schools. The children were home-taught, which worked only for children with stable homes.

Anne also showed her how to program House to read things Echea did not understand. Echea made use of that as well. At night, when I couldn't sleep, I would check on the girls. Often I would have to open Echea's door, and turn off House myself. Echea would fall asleep to the drone of a deep male voice. She never used the vids. She simply liked the words, she said, and she would listen to them endlessly, as if she couldn't get enough.

I downloaded information on child development and learning curves, and it was as I remembered. A child who did not link before the age of ten was significantly behind her peers in all things. If she did not link before the age of twenty, she would never be able to function at an adult level in modern society.

Echea's link would be her first step into the world that my daughters already knew, the Earth culture denied so many who had fled to the Moon.

After a bit of hesitation, I made an appointment with Ronald Caro, our Interface Physician.

Through force of habit, I did not tell my husband.

I had known my husband all my life, and our match was assumed from the beginning. We had a warm and comfortable relationship, much better than many among my peers. I had always liked my husband, and had always admired the way he worked his way around each obstacle life presented him.

One of those obstacles was Ronald Caro. When he arrived in St. Paul, after getting all his degrees and licenses and awards, Ronald Caro contacted me. He had known that my daughter Kally was in need of a link, and he offered to be the one to do it.

I would have turned him down, but my husband, always practical, checked on his credentials.

"How sad," my husband had said. "He's become one of the best Interface Physicians in the country."

I hadn't thought it sad. I hadn't thought it anything at all except inconvenient. My family had forbidden me to see Ronald Caro when I was sixteen, and I had disobeyed them.

All girls, particularly home-schooled ones, have on-line romances. Some progress to vid conferencing and virtual sex. Only a handful progress to actual physical contact. And of those that do, only a small fraction survive.

At sixteen, I ran away from home to be with Ronald Caro. He had been sixteen too, and gorgeous, if the remaining snapshot in my image memory were any indication. I thought I loved him. My father, who had been monitoring my e-mail, sent two police officers and his personal assistant to bring me home.

The resulting disgrace made me so ill that I could not get out of bed for six months. My then-future husband visited me each and every day of those six months, and it is from that period that most of my memories of him were formed. I was glad to have him; my father, who had been quite close to me, rarely spoke to me after I ran away with Ronald, and treated me as a stranger.

When Ronald reappeared in the Northland long after I had married, my husband showed his forgiving nature. He knew Ronald Caro was no longer a threat to us. He proved it by letting me take the short shuttle hop to the Twin Cities to have Kally linked.

Ronald did not act improperly toward me then or thereafter, although he often looked at me with a sadness I did not reciprocate. My husband was relieved. He always insisted on having the best, and because my husband was squeamish about brain work, particularly that which required chips, lasers, and remote placement devices, he preferred to let me handle the children's interface needs.

Even though I no longer wanted it, I still had a personal relationship with Ronald Caro. He did not treat me as a patient, or as the mother of his patients, but as a friend.

Nothing more.

Even my husband knew that.

Still, the afternoon I made the appointment, I went into our bedroom, made certain my husband was in his office, and closed the door. Then I used the link to send a message to Ronald.

Instantly his response flashed across my left eye.

Are you all right? He sent, as he always did, as if he expected something terrible to have happened to me during our most recent silence.

Fine,I sent back, disliking the personal questions.

And the girls?

Fine also.

So, you linked to chat?Again, as he always did.

And I responded as I always did. *No. I need to make an appointment for Echea.*

The Moon Child?

I smiled. Ronald was the only person I knew, besides my husband, who didn't think we were insane for taking on a child not our own. But I felt that we could, and because we could, and because so many were suffering, we should.

My husband probably had his own reasons. We never really discussed them, beyond that first day.

The Moon Child,I responded. *Echea* .

Pretty name.

Pretty girl.

There was a silence, as if he didn't know how to respond to that. He had always been silent about my children. They were links he could not form, links to my husband that could not be broken, links that Ronald and I could never have.

She has no interface,I sent into that silence.

Not at all?

No.

Did they tell you anything about her?

Only that she'd been orphaned. You know, the standard stuff.I felt odd, sending that. I had asked for information, of course, at every step. And my husband had. And when we compared notes, I learned that each time we had been told the same thing—that we had asked for a child, and we would get one, and that child's life would start fresh with us. The past did not matter.

The present did.

How old is she?

Seven.

Hmmm. The procedure won't be involved, but there might be some dislocation. She's been alone in her head all this time. Is she stable enough for the change?

I was genuinely perplexed. I had never encountered an unlinked child, let alone lived with one. I didn't know what "stable" meant in that context.

My silence had apparently been answer enough.

I'll do an exam, he sent. *Don't worry.*

Good. I got ready to terminate the conversation.

You sure everything's all right there? he sent.

It's as right as it always is, I sent, and then severed the connection.

That night, I dreamed. It was an odd dream because it felt like a virtual reality vid, complete with emotions and all the five senses. But it had the distance of VR too—that strange sense that the experience was not mine.

I dreamed I was on a dirty, dusty street. The air was thin and dry. I had never felt air like this. It tasted recycled, and it seemed to suck the moisture from my skin. It wasn't hot, but it wasn't cold either. I wore a ripped shirt and ragged pants, and my shoes were boots made of a light material I had never felt before. Walking was easy and precarious at the same time. I felt lighter than ever, as if with one wrong gesture I would float.

My body moved easily in this strange atmosphere, as if it were used to it. I had felt something like it before: when my husband and I had gone to the Museum of Science and Technology in Chicago on our honeymoon. We explored the Moon exhibit, and felt firsthand what it was like to be in a colony environment.

Only that had been clean.

This wasn't.

The buildings were white plastic, covered with a filmy grit and pockmarked with time and use. The dirt on the ground seemed to get on everything, but I knew, as well as I knew how to walk in this imperfect gravity, that there wasn't enough money to pave the roads.

The light above was artificial, built into the dome itself. If I looked up, I could see the dome and the light, and if I squinted, I could see beyond to the darkness that was the unprotected atmosphere. It made me feel as if I were in a lighted glass porch on a starless night. Open, and vulnerable, and terrified, more because I couldn't see what was beyond than because I could.

People crowded the roadway and huddled near the plastic buildings. The buildings were domed too. Pre-fab, shipped up decades ago when Earth had hopes for the colonies. Now there were no more shipments, at least not here. We had heard that there were shipments coming to Colony Russia and Colony Europe, but no one confirmed the rumors. I was in Colony London, a bastard colony made by refugees and dissidents from Colony Europe. For a while, we had stolen their supply ships. Now, it seemed, they had stolen them back.

A man took my arm. I smiled up at him. His face was my father's face, a face I hadn't seen since I was twenty-five. Only something had altered it terribly. He was younger than I had ever remembered him. He was too thin and his skin filthy with dust. He smiled back at me, three teeth missing, lost to malnutrition,

the rest blackened and about to go. In the past few days the whites of his eyes had turned yellow, and a strange mucus came from his nose. I wanted him to see the colony's medical facility or at least pay for an autdoc, but we had no credit, no means to pay at all.

It would have to wait until we found something.

"I think I found us free passage to Colony Latina," he said. His breath whistled through the gaps in his teeth. I had learned long ago to be far away from his mouth. The stench could be overpowering. "But you'll have to do them a job."

A job. I sighed. He had promised no more. But that had been months ago. The credits had run out, and he had gotten sicker.

"A big job?" I asked.

He didn't meet my gaze. "Might be."

"Dad—"

"Honey, we gotta use what we got."

It might have been his motto. *We gotta use what we got*. I'd heard it all my life. He'd come from Earth, he'd said, in one of the last free ships. Some of the others we knew said there were no free ships except for parolees, and I often wondered if he had come on one of those. His morals were certainly slippery enough.

I don't remember my mother. I'm not even sure I had one. I'd seen more than one adult buy an infant, and then proceed to exploit it for gain. It wouldn't have been beyond him.

But he loved me. That much was clear.

And I adored him.

I'd have done the job just because he'd asked it.

I'd done it before.

The last job was how we'd gotten here. I'd been younger then and I hadn't completely understood.

But I'd understood when we were done.

And I'd hated myself.

"Isn't there another way?" I found myself asking.

He put his hand on the back of my head, propelling me forward. "You know better," he said. "There's nothing here for us."

"There might not be anything in Colony Latina, either."

"They're getting shipments from the U.N. Seems they vowed to negotiate a peace."

"Then everyone will want to go."

"But not everyone can," he said. "We can." He touched his pocket. I saw the bulge of his credit slip. "If you do the job."

It had been easier when I didn't know. When doing a job meant just that. When I didn't have other things to consider. After the first job, my father asked where I had gotten the morals. He said I hadn't inherited them from him, and I hadn't. I knew that. I suggested maybe Mother, and he had laughed, saying no mother who gave birth to me had morals either.

"Don't think about it, honey," he'd said. "Just do."

Just do. I opened my mouth—to say what, I don't know—and felt hot liquid splatter me. An exit wound had opened in his chest, spraying his blood all around. People screamed and backed away. I screamed. I didn't see where the shot had come from, only that it had come.

The blood moved slowly, more slowly than I would have expected.

He fell forward and I knew I wouldn't be able to move him, I wouldn't be able to grab the credit slip, wouldn't be able to get to Colony Latina, wouldn't have to do the job.

Faces, unbloodied faces, appeared around me.

They hadn't killed him for the slip.

I turned and ran, as he once told me to do, ran as fast as I could, blasting as I went, watching people duck or cover their ears or wrap their arms around their heads.

I ran until I saw the sign.

The tiny prefab with the Red Crescent painted on its door, the Red Cross on its windows. I stopped blasting and tumbled inside, bloody, terrified, and completely alone.

I woke up to find my husband's arms around me, my head buried in his shoulder. He was rocking me as if I were one of the girls, murmuring in my ear, cradling me and making me feel safe. I was crying and shaking, my throat raw with tears or with the aftereffects of screams.

Our door was shut and locked, something that we only did when we were amorous. He must have had House do it, so no one would walk in on us.

He stroked my hair, wiped the tears from my face. "You should leave your link on at night," he said tenderly. "I could have manipulated the dream, made it into something pleasant."

We used to do that for each other when we were first married. It had been a way to mesh our different sexual needs, a way to discover each other's thoughts and desires.

We hadn't done it in a long, long time.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked.



So I did.

He buried his face in my hair. It had been a long time since he had done that, too, since he had shown that kind of vulnerability with me.

"It's Echea," he said.

"I know," I said. That much was obvious. I had been thinking about her so much that she had worked her way into my dreams.

"No," he said. "It's nothing to be calm about." He sat up, kept his hand on me, and peered into my face. "First Susan, then you. It's like she's a poison that's infecting my family."

The moment of closeness shattered. I didn't pull away from him, but it took great control not to. "She's our child."

"No," he said. "She's someone else's child, and she's disrupting our household."

"*Babies* disrupt households. It took a while, but you accepted that."

"And if Echea had come to us as a baby, I would have accepted her. But she didn't. She has problems that we did not expect."

"The documents we signed said that we must treat those problems as our own."

His grip on my shoulder grew tighter. He probably didn't realize he was doing it. "They also said that the child had been inspected and was guaranteed illness free."

"You think some kind of illness is causing these dreams? That they're being passed from Echea to us like a virus?"

"Aren't they?" he asked. "Susan dreamed of a man who died. Someone whom she didn't want to go. Then 'they' pulled her away from him. You dream of your father's death—"

"They're different," I said. "Susan dreamed of a man's face exploding, and being captured. I dreamed of a man being shot, and of running away."

"But those are just details."

"*Dream* details," I said. "We've all been talking to Echea. I'm sure that some of her memories have woven their way into our dreams, just as our daily experiences do, or the vids we've seen. It's not that unusual."

"There were no night terrors in this household until she came," he said.

"And no one had gone through any trauma until she arrived, either." I pulled away from him now. "What we've gone through is small compared to her. Your parents' deaths, mine, the birth of the girls, a few bad investments, these things are all minor. We still live in the house you were born in. We swim in the lake of our childhood. We have grown wealthier. We have wonderful daughters. That's why we took Echea."

"To learn trauma?"

"No," I said. "Because we *could* take her, and so many others can't."

He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "But I don't want trauma in this house. I don't want to be disturbed any more. She's not our child. Let's let her become someone else's problem."

I sighed. "If we do that, we'll *still* have trauma. The government will sue. We'll have legal bills up to our eyeballs. We did sign documents covering these things."

"They said if the child was defective, we could send her back."

I shook my head. "And we signed even more documents that said she was fine. We waived that right."

He bowed his head. Small strands of gray circled his crown. I had never noticed them before.

"I don't want her here," he said.

I put a hand on his. He had felt that way about Kally, early on. He had hated the way an infant disrupted our routine. He had hated the midnight feedings, had tried to get me to hire a wet nurse, and then a nanny. He had wanted someone else to raise our children because they inconvenienced him.

And yet the pregnancies had been his idea, just like Echea had been. He would get enthusiastic, and then when reality settled in, he would forget the initial impulse.

In the old days we had compromised. No wet nurse, but a nanny. His sleep undisturbed, but mine disrupted. My choice, not his. As the girls got older, he found his own ways to delight in them.

"You haven't spent any time with her," I said. "Get to know her. See what she's really like. She's a delightful child. You'll see."

He shook his head. "I don't want nightmares," he said, but I heard capitulation in his voice.

"I'll leave my interface on at night," I said. "We can even link when we sleep and manipulate each other's dreams."

He raised his head, smiling, suddenly looking boyish, like the man who proposed to me, all those years ago. "Like old times," he said.

I smiled back, irritation gone. "Just like old times," I said.

The nanny had offered to take Echea to Ronald's, but I insisted, even though the thought of seeing him so close to a comfortable intimacy with my husband made me uneasy. Ronald's main offices were over fifteen minutes away by shuttle. He was in a decade-old office park near the Mississippi, not too far from St. Paul's new capitol building. Ronald's building was all glass on the river side. It stood on stilts—the Mississippi had flooded abominably in '45, and the city still hadn't recovered from the shock—and to get to the main entrance, visitors needed a lift code. Ronald had given me one when I made the appointment.

Echea had been silent during the entire trip. The shuttle had terrified her, and it didn't take long to figure out why. Each time she had traveled by shuttle, she had gone to a new home. I reassured her that would not happen this time, but I could tell she thought I lied.

When she saw the building, she grabbed my hand.

"I'll be good," she whispered.

"You've been fine so far," I said, wishing my husband could see her now. For all his demonizing, he failed to realize she was just a little girl.

"Don't leave me here."

"I don't plan to," I said.

The lift was a small glass enclosure with voice controls. When I spoke the code, it rose on air jets to the fifth floor and docked, just like a shuttle. It was designed to work no matter what the weather, no matter what the conditions on the ground.

Echea was not amused. Her grip on my hand grew so tight that it cut off the circulation to my fingers.

We docked at the main entrance. The building's door was open, apparently on the theory that anyone who knew the code was invited. A secretary sat behind an antique wood desk that was dark and polished until it shone. He had a blotter in the center of the desk, a pen and inkwell beside it, and a single sheet of paper on top. I suspected that he did most of his work through his link, but the illusion worked. It made me feel as if I had slipped into a place wealthy enough to use paper, wealthy enough to waste wood on a desk.

"We're here to see Dr. Caro," I said as Echea and I entered.

"The end of the hall to your right," the secretary said, even though the directions were unnecessary. I had been that way dozens of times.

Echea hadn't, though. She moved through the building as if it were a wonder, never letting go of my hand. She seemed to remain convinced that I would leave her there, but her fear did not diminish her curiosity. Everything was strange. I suppose it had to be, compared to the Moon where space—with oxygen—was always at a premium. To waste so much area on an entrance wouldn't merely be a luxury there. It would be criminal.

We walked across the wood floors past several closed doors until we reached Ronald's offices. The secretary had warned someone because the doors swung open. Usually I had to use the small bell to the side, another old-fashioned affectation.

The interior of his offices was comfortable. They were done in blue, the color of calm he once told me, with thick easy chairs and pillowed couches. A children's area was off to the side, filled with blocks and soft toys and a few dolls. The bulk of Ronald's clients were toddlers, and the play area reflected that.

A young man in a blue worksuit appeared at one of the doors, and called my name. Echea clutched my hand tighter. He noticed her and smiled.

"Room B," he said.

I liked Room B. It was familiar. All three of my girls had done their post-interface work in Room B. I had only been in the other rooms once, and had felt less comfortable.

It was a good omen, to bring Echea to such a safe place.

I made my way down the hall, Echea in tow, without the man's guidance. The door to Room B was open. Ronald had not changed it. It still had the fainting couch, the work unit recessed into the wall, the reclining rockers. I had slept in one of those rockers as Kally had gone through her most rigorous testing.

I had been pregnant with Susan at the time.

I eased Echea inside and then pulled the door closed behind us. Ronald came through the back door—he must have been waiting for us—and Echea jumped. Her grip on my hand grew so tight that I thought she might break one of my fingers. I smiled at her and did not pull my hand away.

Ronald looked nice. He was too slim, as always, and his blond hair flopped against his brow. It needed a cut. He wore a silver silk shirt and matching pants, and even though they were a few years out of style, they looked sharp against his brown skin.

Ronald was good with children. He smiled at her first, and then took a stool and wheeled it toward us so that he would be at her eye level.

"Echea," he said. "Pretty name."

And a pretty child, he sent, just for me.

She said nothing. The sullen expression she had had when we met her had returned.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked.

"I don't want to go with you," she said.

"Where do you think I'm taking you?"

"Away from here. Away from—" she held up my hand, clasped in her small one. At that moment it became clear to me. She had no word for what we were to her. She didn't want to use the word "family," perhaps because she might lose us.

"Your mother—" he said slowly and as he did he sent *Right?* to me.

Right, I responded.

"—brought you here for a check-up. Have you seen a doctor since you've come to Earth?"

"At the center," she said.

"And was everything all right?"

"If it wasn't, they'd have sent me back."

He leaned his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands and placing them under his chin. His eyes, a silver that matched the suit, were soft.

"Are you afraid I'm going to find something?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"But you're afraid I'm going to send you back."

"Not everybody likes me," she said. "Not everybody wants me. They said, when they brought me to Earth, that the whole family had to like me, that I had to behave or I'd be sent back."

Is this true?he asked me.

I don't know. I was shocked. I had known nothing of this.

Does the family dislike her?

She's new. A disruption. That'll change.

He glanced at me over her head, but said nothing else. His look was enough. He didn't believe they'd change, any more than Echea would.

"Have you behaved?" he asked softly.

She glanced at me. I nodded almost imperceptibly. She looked back at him. "I've tried," she said.

He touched her then, his long delicate fingers tucking a strand of her pale hair behind her ear. She leaned into his fingers as if she'd been longing for touch.

She's more like you,he told me, *than any of your own girls* .

I did not respond. Kally looked just like me, and Susan and Anne both favored me as well. There was nothing of me in Echea. Only a bond that had formed when I first saw her, all those weeks before.

Reassure her,he sent.

I have been.

Do it again.

"Echea," I said, and she started as if she had forgotten I was there. "Dr. Caro is telling you the truth. You're just here for an examination. No matter how it turns out, you'll still be coming home with me. Remember my promise?"

She nodded, eyes wide.

"I always keep my promises," I said.

Do you?Ronald asked. He was staring at me over Echea's shoulder.

I shivered, wondering what promise I had forgotten.

Always,I told him.

The edge of his lips turned up in a smile, but there was no mirth in it.

"Echea," he said. "It's my normal practice to work alone with my patient, but I'll bet you want your mother to stay."

She nodded. I could almost feel the desperation in the move.

"All right," he said. "You'll have to move to the couch."

He scooted his chair toward it.

"It's called a fainting couch," he said. "Do you know why?"

She let go of my hand and stood. When he asked the question, she looked at me as if I would supply her with the answer. I shrugged.

"No," she whispered. She followed him hesitantly, not the little girl I knew around the house.

"Because almost two hundred years ago when these were fashionable, women fainted a lot."

"They did not," Echea said.

"Oh, but they did," Ronald said. "And do you know why?"

She shook her small head. With this idle chatter he had managed to ease her passage toward the couch.

"Because they wore undergarments so tight that they often couldn't breathe right. And if a person can't breathe right, she'll faint."

"That's silly."

"That's right," he said, as he patted the couch. "Ease yourself up there and see what it was like on one of those things."

I knew his fainting couch wasn't an antique. His had all sorts of diagnostic equipment built in. I wondered how many other peopl

Certainly not my daughters. They had known the answers to his questions before coming to the office.

"People do a lot of silly things," he said. "Even now. Did you know most people on Earth are linked?"

As he explained the net and its uses, I ignored them. I did some leftover business, made my daily chess move, and tuned into their conversation on occasion.

"—and what's really silly is that so many people refuse a link. It prevents them from functioning well in our society. From getting jobs, from communicating—"

Echea listened intently while she lay on the couch. And while he talked to her, I knew, he was examining her, seeing what parts of her brain responded to his questions.

"But doesn't it hurt?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Science makes such things easy. It's like touching a strand of hair."

And then I smiled. I understood why he had made the tender move earlier. So that he wouldn't alarm her when he put in the first chip, the beginning of her own link.

"What if it goes wrong?" she asked. "Will everybody—die?"

He pulled back from her. Probably not enough so that she would notice. But I did. There was a slight frown between his eyes. At first, I thought he would shrug off the question, but it took him too long to answer.

"No," he said as firmly as he could. "No one will die."

Then I realized what he was doing. He was dealing with a child's fear realistically. Sometimes I was too used to my husband's rather casual attitude toward the girls. And I was used to the girls themselves. They were much more placid than my Echea.

With the flick of a finger, he turned on the overhead light.

"Do you have dreams, honey?" he asked as casually as he could.

She looked down at her hands. They were slightly scarred from experiences I knew nothing about. I had planned to ask her about each scar as I gained her trust. So far, I had asked about none.

"Not any more," she said.

This time, I moved back slightly. Everyone dreamed, didn't they? Or were dreams only the product of a linked mind? That couldn't be right. I'd seen the babies dream before we brought them here.

"When was the last time you dreamed?" he asked.

She shoved herself back on the lounge. Its base squealed from the force of her contact. She looked around, seemingly terrified. Then she looked at me. It seemed like her eyes were appealing for help.

This was why I wanted a link for her. I wanted her to be able to tell me, without speaking, without Ronald knowing, what she needed. I didn't want to guess.

"It's all right," I said to her. "Dr. Caro won't hurt you."

She jutted out her chin, squeezed her eyes closed, as if she couldn't face him when she spoke, and took a deep breath. Ronald waited, breathless.

I thought, not for the first time, that it was a shame he did not have children of his own.

"They shut me off," she said.

"Who?" His voice held infinite patience.

Do you know what's going on? I sent him.

He did not respond. His full attention was on her.

"The Red Crescent," she said softly.

"The Red Cross," I said. "On the Moon. They were the ones in charge of the orphans—"

"Let Echea tell it," he said, and I stopped, flushing. He had never rebuked me before. At least, not verbally.

"Was it on the Moon?" he asked her.

"They wouldn't let me come otherwise."

"Has anyone touched it since?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. Somewhere in their discussion, her eyes had opened. She was watching Ronald with that mixture of fear and longing that she had first used with me.

"May I see?" he asked.

She clapped a hand to the side of her head. "If it comes on, they'll make me leave."

"Did they tell you that?" he asked.

She shook her head again.

"Then there's nothing to worry about." He put a hand on her shoulder and eased her back on the lounge. I watched, back stiff. It seemed like I had missed a part of the conversation, but I knew I hadn't. They were discussing something I had never heard of, something the government had neglected to tell us. My stomach turned. This was exactly the kind of excuse my husband would use to get rid of her.

She was lying rigidly on the lounge. Ronald was smiling at her, talking softly, his hand on the lounge's controls. He got the read-outs directly through his link. Most everything in the office worked that way, with a back-up download on the office's equivalent of House. He would send us a file copy later. It was something my husband insisted on, since he did not like coming to these appointments. I doubted he read the files, but he might this time. With Echea.

Ronald's frown grew. "No more dreams?" he asked.

"No," Echea said again. She sounded terrified.

I could keep silent no longer. *Our family's had night terrors since she arrived*, I sent him.

He glanced at me, whether with irritation or speculation, I could not tell.

They're similar, I sent. *The dreams are all about a death on the Moon. My husband thinks—*

I don't care what he thinks. Ronald's message was intended as harsh. I had never seen him like this before. At least, I didn't think so. A dim memory rose and fell, a sense memory. I had heard him use a harsh tone with me, but I could not remember when.



"Have you tried to link with her?" he asked me directly.

"How could I?" I asked. "She's not linked."

"Have your daughters?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Do you know if anyone's tried?" he asked her.

Echea shook her head.

"Has she been doing any computer work at all?" he asked.

"Listening to House," I said. "I insisted. I wanted to see if—"

"House," he said. "Your home system."

"Yes." Something was very wrong. I could feel it. It was in his tone, in his face, in his casual movements, designed to disguise his worry from his patients.

"Did House bother you?" he asked Echea.

"At first," she said. Then she glanced at me. Again, the need for reassurance. "But now I like it."

"Even though it's painful," he said.

"No, it's not," she said, but she averted her eyes from mine.

My mouth went dry. "It hurts you to use House?" I asked. "And you didn't say anything?"

She didn't want to risk losing the first home she ever had, Ronald sent. *Don't be so harsh*.

I wasn't the one being harsh. He was. And I didn't like it.

"It doesn't really hurt," she said.

Tell me what's happening, I sent him. *What's wrong with her?*

"Echea," he said, putting his hand alongside her head one more time. "I'd like to talk with your mother alone. Would it be all right if we sent you back to the play area?"

She shook her head.

"How about if we leave the door open? You'll always be able to see her."

She bit her lower lip.

Can't you tell me this way? I sent.

I need all the verbal tools,he sent back. *Trust me.*

I did trust him. And because I did, a fear had settled in the pit of my stomach.

"That's okay," she said. Then she looked at me. "Can I come back in when I want?"

"If it looks like we're done," I said.

"You won't leave me here," she said again. When would I gain her complete trust?

"Never," I said.

She stood then and walked out the door without looking back. She seemed so much like the little girl I'd first met that my heart went out to her. All that bravado the first day had been just that, a cover for sheer terror.

She went to the play area and sat on a cushioned block. She folded her hands in her lap, and stared at me. Ronald's assistant tried to interest her in a doll, but she shook him off.

"What is it?" I asked.

Ronald sighed, and scooted his stool closer to me. He stopped near the edge of the lounge, not close enough to touch, but close enough that I could smell the scent of him mingled with his specially blended soap.

"The children being sent down from the Moon were rescued," he said softly.

"I know." I had read all the literature they sent when we first applied for Echea.

"No, you don't," he said. "They weren't just rescued from a miserable life like you and the other adoptive parents believe. They were rescued from a program that was started in Colony Europe about fifteen years ago. Most of the children involved died."

"Are you saying she has some horrible disease?"

"No," he said. "Hear me out. She has an implant—"

"A link?"

"No," he said. "Sarah, please."

Sarah. The name startled me. No one called me that any more. Ronald had not used it in all the years of our reacquaintance.

The name no longer felt like mine.

"Remember how devastating the Moon Wars were? They were using projectile weapons and shattering the colonies themselves, opening them to space. A single bomb would destroy generations of work. Then some of the colonists went underground—"

"And started attacking from there, yes, I know. But that was decades ago. What has that to do with

Echea?"

"Colony London, Colony Europe, Colony Russia, and Colony New Delhi signed the peace treaty—"

"—vowing not to use any more destructive weapons. I remember this, Ronald—"

"Because if they did, no more supply ships would be sent."

I nodded. "Colony New York and Colony Armstrong refused to participate."

"And were eventually obliterated." Ronald leaned toward me, like he had done with Echea. I glanced at her. She was watching, as still as could be. "But the fighting didn't stop. Colonies used knives and secret assassins to kill government officials—"

"And they found a way to divert supply ships," I said.

He smiled sadly. "That's right," he said. "That's Echea."

He had come around to the topic of my child so quickly it made me dizzy.

"How could she divert supply ships?"

He rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger. Then he sighed again. "A scientist on Colony Europe developed a technology that broadcast thoughts through the subconscious. It was subtle, and it worked very well. A broadcast about hunger at Colony Europe would get a supply captain to divert his ship from Colony Russia and drop the supplies in Colony Europe. It's more sophisticated than I make it sound. The technology actually made the captain believe that the rerouting was his idea."

Dreams. Dreams came from the subconscious. I shivered.

"The problem was that the technology was inserted into the brain of the user, like a link, but if the user had an existing link, it superseded the new technology. So they installed it in children born on the Moon, born in Colony Europe. Apparently Echea was."

"And they rerouted supply ships?"

"By imagining themselves hungry—or actually being starved. They would broadcast messages to the supply ships. Sometimes they were about food. Sometimes they were about clothing. Sometimes they were about weapons." He shook his head. "Are. I should say are. They're still doing this."

"Can't it be stopped?"

He shook his head. "We're gathering data on it now. Echea is the third child I've seen with this condition. It's not enough to go to the World Congress yet. Everyone knows though. The Red Crescent and the Red Cross are alerted to this, and they remove children from the colonies, sometimes on penalty of death, to send them here where they will no longer be harmed. The technology is deactivated, and people like you adopt them and give them full lives."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Perhaps your House reactivated her device."

I shook my head. "The first dream happened before she listened to House."

"Then some other technology did. Perhaps the government didn't shut her off properly. It happens. The recommended procedure is to say nothing, and to simply remove the device."

I frowned at him. "Then why are you telling me this? Why didn't you just remove it?"

"Because you want her to be linked."

"Of course I do," I said. "You know that. You told her yourself the benefits of linking. You know what would happen to her if she isn't. You know."

"I know that she would be fine if you and your husband provided for her in your wills. If you gave her one of the houses and enough money to have servants for the rest of her life. She would be fine."

"But not productive."

"Maybe she doesn't need to be," he said.

It sounded so unlike the Ronald who had been treating my children that I frowned. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Her technology and the link are incompatible."

"I understand that," I said. "But you can remove her technology."

"Her brain formed around it. If I installed the link, it would wipe her mind clean."

"So?"

He swallowed so hard his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "I'm not being clear," he said more to himself than to me. "It would make her a blank slate. Like a baby. She'd have to learn everything all over again. How to walk. How to eat. It would go quicker this time, but she wouldn't be a normal seven-year-old girl for half a year."

"I think that's worth the price of the link," I said.

"But that's not all," he said. "She'd lose all her memories. Every last one of them. Life on the Moon, arrival here, what she ate for breakfast the morning she received the link." He started to scoot forward and then stopped. "We *are* our memories, Sarah. She wouldn't be *Echea* any more."

"Are you so sure?" I asked. "After all, the basic template would be the same. Her genetic makeup wouldn't alter."

"I'm sure," he said. "Trust me. I've seen it."

"Can't you do a memory store? Back things up so that when she gets her link she'll have access to her life before?"

"Of course," he said. "But it's not the same. It's like being *told* about a boat ride as opposed to taking

one yourself. You have the same basic knowledge, but the experience is no longer part of you."

His eyes were bright. Too bright.

"Surely it's not that bad," I said.

"This is my specialty," he said, and his voice was shaking. He was obviously very passionate about this work. "I study how wiped minds and memory stores interact. I got into this profession hoping I could reverse the effects."

I hadn't known that. Or maybe I had and forgotten it.

"How different would she be?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Considering the extent of her experience on the Moon, and the traumatic nature of much of it, I'd bet she'll be very different." He glanced into the play area. "She'd probably play with that doll beside her and not give a second thought to where you are."

"But that's good."

"That is, yes, but think how good it feels to earn her trust. She doesn't give it easily, and when she does, it's heartfelt."

I ran a hand through my hair. My stomach churned.

I don't like these choices, Ronald.

"I know," he said. I started. I hadn't realized I had actually sent him that last message.

"You're telling me that either I keep the same child and she can't function in our society, or I give her the same chances as everyone else and take away who she is."

"Yes," he said.

"I can't make that choice," I said. "My husband will see this as a breach of contract. He'll think that they sent us a defective child."

"Read the fine print in your agreement," Ronald said. "This one is covered. So are a few others. It's boilerplate. I'll bet your lawyer didn't even flinch when she read them."

"I can't make this choice," I said again.

He scooted forward and put his hands on mine. They were warm and strong and comfortable.

And familiar. Strangely familiar.

"You have to make the choice," he said. "At some point. That's part of your contract too. You're to provide for her, to prepare her for a life in the world. Either she gets a link or she gets an inheritance that someone else manages."

"And she won't even be able to check to see if she's being cheated."

"That's right," he said. "You'll have to provide for that too."

"It's not *fair*, Ronald!"

He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and leaned it against my forehead. "It never was," he said softly. "Dearest Sarah. It never was."

"Damn!" my husband said. We were sitting in our bedroom. It was half an hour before supper, and I had just told him about Echea's condition. "The lawyer was supposed to check for things like this!"

"Dr. Caro said they're just learning about the problem on Earth."

"Dr. Caro." My husband stood. "Dr. Caro is wrong."

I frowned at him. My husband was rarely this agitated.

"This is not a technology developed on the Moon," my husband said. "It's an Earth technology, pre-neural net. Subject to international ban in '24. The devices disappeared when the link became the common currency among all of us. He's right that they're incompatible."

I felt the muscles in my shoulders tighten. I wondered how my husband knew of the technology and wondered if I should ask. We never discussed each other's business.

"You'd think that Dr. Caro would have known this," I said casually.

"His work is in current technology, not the history of technology," my husband said absently. He sat back down. "What a mess."

"It is that," I said softly. "We have a little girl to think of."

"Who's defective."

"Who has been *used* ." I shuddered. I had cradled her the whole way back and she had let me. I had remembered what Ronald said, how precious it was to hold her when I knew how hard it was for her to reach out. How each touch was a victory, each moment of trust a celebration. "Think about it. Imagine using something that keys into your most basic desires, uses them for purposes other than—"

"Don't do that," he said.

"What?"

"Put a romantic spin on this. The child is defective. We shouldn't have to deal with that."

"She's not a durable good," I said. "She's a human being."

"How much money did we spend on in-the-womb enhancement so that Anne's substandard IQ was corrected? How much would we have spent if the other girls had had similar problems?"

"That's not the same thing," I said.

"Isn't it?" he asked. "We have a certain guarantee in this world. We are guaranteed excellent children, with the best advantages. If I wanted to shoot craps with my children's lives I would—"

"What would you do?" I snapped. "Go to the Moon?"

He stared at me as if he had never seen me before. "What does your precious Dr. Caro want you to do?"

"Leave Echea alone," I said.

My husband snorted. "So that she would be unlinked and dependent the rest of her life. A burden on the girls, a sieve for our wealth. Oh, but Ronald Caro would like that!"

"He didn't want her to lose her personality," I said. "He wanted her to remain *Echea*."

My husband stared at me for a moment, and the anger seemed to leave him. He had gone pale. He reached out to touch me, then withdrew his hand. For a moment, I thought that his eyes filled with tears.

I had never seen tears in his eyes before.

Had I?

"There is that," he said softly.

He turned away from me, and I wondered if I had imagined his reaction. He hadn't been close to Echea. Why would he care if her personality had changed?

"We can't think of the legalities any more," I said. "She's *ours*. We have to accept that. Just like we accepted the expense when we conceived Anne. We could have terminated the pregnancy. The cost would have been significantly less."

"We could have," he said as if the thought were unthinkable. People in our circle repaired their mistakes. They did not obliterate them.

"You wanted her at first," I said.

"Anne?" he asked.

"Echea. It was *our* idea, much as you want to say it was mine."

He bowed his head. After a moment, he ran his hands through his hair. "We can't make this decision alone," he said.

He had capitulated. I didn't know whether to be thrilled or saddened. Now we could stop fighting about the legalities and get to the heart.

"She's too young to make this decision," I said. "You can't ask a child to make a choice like this."

"If she doesn't—"

"It won't matter," I said. "She'll never know. We won't tell her either way."

He shook his head. "She'll wonder why she's not linked, why she can only use parts of House. She'll wonder why she can't leave here without escort when the other girls will be able to."

"Or," I said, "she'll be linked and have no memory of this at all."

"And then she'll wonder why she can't remember her early years."

"She'll be able to remember them," I said. "Ronald assured me."

"Yes." My husband's smile was bitter. "Like she remembers a question on a history exam."

I had never seen him like this. I didn't know he had studied the history of neural development. I didn't know he had opinions about it.

"We can't make this decision," he said again.

I understood. I had said the same thing. "We can't ask a child to make a choice of this magnitude."

He raised his eyes to me. I had never noticed the fine lines around them, the matching lines around his nose and mouth. He was aging. We both were. We had been together a long, long time.

"She has lived through more than most on Earth ever do," he said. "She has lived through more than our daughters will, if we raise them right."

"That's not an excuse," I said. "You just want us to expiate our guilt."

"No," he said. "It's *her* life. She'll have to be the one to live it, not us."

"But she's our child, and that entails making choices for her," I said.

He sprawled flat on our bed. "You know what I'll chose," he said softly.

"Both choices will disturb the household," I said. "Either we live with her as she is—"

"Or we train her to be what we want." He put an arm over his eyes.

He was silent for a moment, and then he sighed. "Do you ever regret the choices *you* made?" he asked. "Marrying me, choosing this house over the other, deciding to remain where we grew up?"

"Having the girls," I said.

"Any of it. Do you regret it?"

He wasn't looking at me. It was as if he couldn't look at me, as if our whole lives rested on my answer.

I put my hand in the one he had dangling. His fingers closed over mine. His skin was cold.

"Of course not," I said. And then, because I was confused, because I was a bit scared of his unusual intensity, I asked, "Do you regret the choices you made?"



"No," he said. But his tone was so flat I wondered if he lied.

In the end, he didn't come with Echea and me to St. Paul. He couldn't face brain work, although I wished he had made an exception this time. Echea was more confident on this trip, more cheerful, and I watched her with a detachment I hadn't thought I was capable of.

It was as if she were already gone.

This was what parenting was all about: the difficult painful choices, the irreversible choices with no easy answers, the second-guessing of the future with no help at all from the past. I held her hand tightly this time while she wandered ahead of me down the hallway.

I was the one with fear.

Ronald greeted us at the door to his office. His smile, when he bestowed it on Echea, was sad.

He already knew our choice. I had made my husband contact him. I wanted that much participation from Echea's other parent.

Surprised? I sent.

He shook his head. *It is the choice your family always makes .*

He looked at me for a long moment, as if he expected a response, and when I said nothing, he crouched in front of Echea. "Your life will be different after today," he said.

"Momma—" and the word was a gift, a first, a never-to-be repeated blessing—"said it would be better."

"And mothers are always right," he said. He put a hand on her shoulder. "I have to take you from her this time."

"I know," Echea said brightly. "But you'll bring me back. It's a procedure."

"That's right," he said, looking at me over her head. "It's a procedure."

He waited just a moment, the silence deep between us. I think he meant for me to change my mind. But I did not. I could not.

It was for the best.

Then he nodded once, stood, and took Echea's hand. She gave it to him as willingly, as trustingly, as she had given it to me.

He led her into the back room.

At the doorway, she stopped and waved.

And I never saw her again.

Oh, we have a child living with us, and her name is Echea. She is a wonderful vibrant creature, as worthy of our love and our heritage as our natural daughters.

But she is not the child of my heart.

My husband likes her better now, and Ronald never mentions her. He has redoubled his efforts on his research.

He is making no progress.

And I'm not sure I want him to.

She is a happy, healthy child with a wonderful future.

We made the right choice.

It was for the best.

Echea's best.

My husband says she will grow into the perfect woman.

Like me, he says.

She'll be just like me.

She is such a vibrant child.

Why do I miss the wounded sullen girl who rarely smiled?

Why was she the child of my heart?