

Grandma's Jumpman

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Someone's wasting fireworks—that's what I'm thinking.

I'm out by the road, just playing, and I hear all these pops and bangs coming from the west. It's the middle of the day, bright and hot, and what's the point in shooting fireworks now? Someone sure is stupid, I'm thinking. Then comes this big old whump that I feel through the hard ground. I drop all my soldiers and climb out of the ditch, looking west, watching a black cloud lifting. That's over by the old prison camp, isn't it? I'm trying to guess what's happening, and that's when he tries sneaking up on me. But I hear him first. I turn around fast and catch him staring at me. Grandma's ugly old jumpie.

His name is Sam. At least that's what it is now, and he's not a bad sort. For being what he is.

"Did I startle you, Timmy?" he asks. "I'm sorry if I caught you unaware."

"You didn't," I tell him.

He says, "Good."

"I'm watching the fireworks," I tell him.

"Fireworks?" He gives the black cloud a look, then says, "I think you're mistaken." His voice is made inside a box sewn into his neck, and the words come out soft and slow. Sam doesn't sound human, but he doesn't sound not-human either. If you know what I mean. He's been here for thirty years, and that's a long time to practice talking. He's one of the prisoners—a genuine war criminal—but he lives up here in his own little house. He helps Grandma with the farm, and after so long people almost seem to trust him.

I don't trust him. I watch him as he watches the black cloud, both of us thinking that maybe it's not fireworks.

"Something's happening," Sam says. He's not big, not even for a jumpie. And he's old, fat gray hairs showing in the red ones, his long face and forearms halfway to white. "They're probably detonating old ammunition. That's all." He waits a moment, then tells me, "Perhaps you should stay near the house, for the time being."

"You can't boss me," I warn him. I won't let him boss me.

"You're right," he says. "It's not my place." Then he says, "Do it for your grandmother, please. You know how she worries."

There comes a second whump, followed by two more.

And Sam forgets about me. His big eyes stare at the new clouds, then he shakes his tongue and starts for Grandma's house. He doesn't say another word, walking slowly in the earth's high gravity, his long bare feet doing the jumpie shuffle.

And I go back to my soldiers. There are more pops and bangs, and I use them with my pretend sounds. Then it's quiet, and I'm thinking it was nothing. It was just like Sam said, someone blowing off old bombs. I put my soldiers down and climb up to the yard, sitting under the big pine tree. I'm thinking about the old prison camp. Grandma's driven me past it, a bunch of times. It's still got wire fences and guard towers, but almost nobody's there. That's what Grandma says. Just some ordinary human crooks stashed there by the county. All the important Chonk-squeal-squeal-oonkkk—what jumpies call

themselves—died long ago or were shipped home. Except for Sam, that is. He's the last one left, and even he's got a death certificate with his hairy face on it. "He died of heatstroke," Grandma told me, driving us past the camp. "And the cumulative effects of gravity, too."

The black clouds have vanished. Blown away. Whatever happened, it's done, and I can't hear anything but the wind.

I start to rip up pine cones, wishing for something to do. I'm bored, like always. I'm sick of being bored, wishing I could be anywhere else, doing anything even halfway fun. And that's when I hear the truck coming, grinding its gears on the hill. A big green Guard truck rolls past. Its back end is stuffed full of soldiers, rifles pointed at the sky. I'm watching them. Unlike my plastic soldiers, their faces aren't worn smooth. Noses and cheeks are sharp. Their eyes are spooked. Nobody waves when I wave, and they barely notice me. Then the truck is past and a cloud of white, white dust rolls over Grandma's lawn, and I'm looking west, wishing I could ride on that truck.

Wishing hard and tasting the rough dust against my teeth.

My folks got called up for Guard duty in June, for their usual six weeks. But this time it was summer and school was out, there was nobody to watch me. That's why they put me on the new Bullet train, shipping me off to the farm.

Grandma came to get me at the station. She's a big woman with gray hair and a couple million wrinkles, and she's strong from all her hard work. Bags that I could barely lift got thrown into the back end of her pickup. Then she slapped the dirt off her jeans and climbed behind the wheel, driving fast all the way home. She doesn't drive like a grandmother, I can tell you. And I don't know any other old woman who strings fences and drives tractors and calls shit, shit. Mom says that she's the most successful lady farmer in the state. I wonder about that lady part. Her only help is an old jumpie that she borrowed from the prison camp. He was an officer on one of their big rocket bombers. "He's called Sam," Mom told me before I left home, standing over me while she spoke. "Be nice to Sam. He's a very nice sentient entity."

"He's a war criminal," I told her. "The bastard bombed our cities!"

Mom just stared at me, shaking her head. She does that a lot. Then she said, "Don't cause me grief, Timmy. Please?"

"I hate the bastards," I told her. "They came to kill us, Mom."

"A long time ago," she said, "and the war is over." Then she told me, "Please. I don't want my mother thinking you're some brutal little boy."

"I'm not so little," I said.

She didn't say anything.

Then I asked, "Does that jumpie really live with Grandma?"

"Sam is called a jumpman, and he has his own house, Timmy." She made a windy sound, shaking her finger at my nose. "Since I was a little girl, and don't forget it."

I don't forget much. Riding to Grandma's farm, watching the other farms slide past, I remembered everything I'd ever learned about the war. How the jumpies came into the solar system in giant starships dressed up like ordinary comets. How they launched a surprise attack, trying to take out our defenses in a day. Later, they said they were being nothing but reasonable. Once our offensive weapons were removed, they would have become our best friends, colonizing only our cold places. They said. But they

didn't get the chance since they didn't cripple us in the first day, or, for that matter, in the next thousand days.

It was the biggest war ever, and it could have been bigger. But the jumpies wanted to live on Earth, which meant they didn't like nuking us too often. And in the end, when things turned our way, we had the tools to blow away every last one of their starships. But instead of finishing them for good, we made peace. We ended up with a damned sister-kissing draw.

"What isn't won, isn't done," I've heard people say.

That's why we can't relax. The jumpies—jumpmen, sorry—are still out there, mostly hanging around Mars, battering it with fresh comets, trying to make that world livable for them. We can't let them get their own world. That's what I think. What I want to be someday is a general leading the attack, winning everything for all time. Finally.

That's what I was thinking, smiling as Grandma pulled up in front of her house. "We're here," she announced. I climbed out, taking a good look at my first farm. Then I saw the jumpie coming out of the barn, doing little hops instead of walking, and I realized that I'd never seen one before. Not in person. Not moving free and easy, I can tell you. But what really startled me was what he was wearing, which was overalls cut and resewn to fit his body, and how he showed me a big bright almost-human smile.

Jumpies have different muscles in their faces. Showing his thick yellow teeth must have been work. Like all of them, he was red—thick red fur; blood-red skin; black-red eyes. His tall ears turned toward me. Somehow the smile got bigger. Then his almost-human voice said, "And you must be Timmy. It's a great pleasure to meet you at last."

I felt cold and scared inside.

"I've heard fine things about you," he told me, shaking my hand with his rough two-thumbed hand. "Your grandmother comes home from Christmas with such stories. How you've grown, and what a wonderful young man you are."

He didn't sound like the jumpies on TV. I tried picturing him and Grandma talking about me. Standing together in the barn, I imagined. Shoveling shit and gossiping.

"He's rather quiet," Sam told Grandma. "Somehow I expected him to make a commotion."

"No, he's just frightened." She laughed when she said it, then laughed harder when I said:

"I'm not scared. Ever!"

Sam's smile changed. He tugged on the white whiskers that grew from his heavy bottom jaw. Then he said, "I've got chores to do." Chores. He sounded as if he'd been born here, and that bothered me more than anything. "I hope you enjoy yourself, Timmy. Bye now." Nothing was what I had pictured, and I was glad to see him turn and shuffle off, his tail dragging in the brown dirt.

Grandma took me upstairs to a sunny and hot little bedroom. She told me to unpack and showed me where to put my things. "You can go where you want," she said, "but close every gate behind you and stay off the machinery."

I knew the rules. Mom had told them to me, maybe a thousand times.

Grandma left, but I didn't unpack. I was feeling curious. I decided to go out exploring, first thing.

Grandma's bedroom was at the end of the hall—a big dark place with the shades down and the heat thick just the same. I took a couple steps inside, looking at the old-person stuff on the walls and on top of the dressers. Brown pictures were in silver frames, and there were some fancy doo-dads. Three out of four pictures showed my mom, one from back when she was my age. I found only one shot of Grandpa, and it was set behind the others. As if he was hiding back there, almost.

Compared to upstairs, it was practically cool at ground level. I turned on the little TV in the living room. There wasn't any cable attached, and no dish outside. There was just one local channel, and it was mostly static and snow. What was I going to do for six whole weeks?

I wandered through the smelly kitchen, then outside. Tractors and a fancy combine were parked in the yard. The combine had big metal arms in front for sweeping and plucking at the crops, and on top, a big glass cab and foam-padded seat. I climbed up and sat with my hands on the wheel. Maybe Grandma would teach me to drive, I was thinking. If I asked real nice. Rocking the wheel back and forth, I made engine sounds, thinking how much fun it would be to mow through a field of corn.

Sam's cottage was behind the other buildings. I found it eventually—a tiny white wood building—and walking up onto its groaning porch, I peered into the dusty windows.

Mom had told me the story a million times. Grandpa died when she was little. It was at the end of the war, but the fighting didn't kill him. His tractor rolled over him, by accident. Mom barely remembered him. What she remembered were the tough times afterwards. Two billion people had died. Life had fallen back a hundred years, or more. Grandma had to farm with old tractors and her own hands. Help was scarce and stupid, the best men still in the military. Finally Grandma said enough was enough, and she marched down to the prison camp and gave its warden ten chickens and her problems. Was there a prisoner who could be loaned to her? Just once in a while? She needed someone who knew machinery, someone who could keep a murderous old tractor in the field. Was there any jumpie worth trusting? And that's how Sam came to Grandma, on loan from the United States government.

"He was brought up every morning for a year," Mom told me. "By armed guard. But that was silly, said your grandma. She took Sam permanently and took responsibility, letting him live in the cottage. Hot in summer, but in the winter, just right for a jumpman."

Jumpies come from a cold place. A place that was getting even colder—too cold for life, they like to claim—which was why they moved here to live.

Mom would always laugh, telling how Grandma promised that Sam wouldn't escape, that if he tried she would hunt him down by herself. "And the warden, knowing her, said that she was better than a ten-foot wall of electrified razor-wire." That's the part that always made her laugh the hardest, shaking her head and looking off into the distance. "And now it's been what? Thirty years. Sam likes it so well there that he's never left. Even when the treaties were signed, when he could have gone home, he didn't. He won't ever."

"Why not?" I always asked.

And here Mom always said something different. Sam was too accustomed to our heat, or he liked Grandma's peach cobbler too much. Always a new reason why, and I got the feeling that none of those reasons were entirely true.

I was staring into the cottage's dirty windows, seeing nothing, and Sam sneaked up behind me, saying, "Can I help you, Timmy?"

I jerked around. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't seem angry either. At least none of his red fur was

standing on end. He asked if he had startled me. I told him no. I was thinking about leading the attack on his people. I almost told him what I was thinking. But instead he told me, "I doubt if you can see anything through that grime, Timmy. For that I apologize."

I wished he wouldn't say my name so much.

Despite everything, I stood my ground. This was my first day on the farm, and I'd be damned if he was going to spook me.

"You're remarkably quiet, I think." He laughed and reached into a pocket on his overalls.

I watched his hand.

He brought out a single key, saying, "Let's go inside and look. Would you like that, Timmy?"

"Inside?" I muttered.

"Because you're feeling curious. You want to see where I live." He came past me, smelling of hay and something else. Something sweet. He fought with the lock for a minute, then the door swung open. Every window was closed, and the air inside was staler than it was hot, and it was plenty hot. The cottage was just one room with a bed at the back and some curling photographs stuck on the plaster wall. Sam was behind me, starting to pant. I went to take a look at the photos, long red faces smiling at me in that goofy jumpie way; and he said, "My family. From long ago." His voice sounded more like I expected it to be, high-pitched and sloppy. Talking past his panting tongue, he asked, "Do you see me, Timmy?"

I wasn't sure.

With a long black nail, he pointed at a photo, at a little jumpie with adults on one side of him, a giant crab or spider on the other.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A pet. It's called a such-and-such." I couldn't understand what he was saying. "There's nothing like it on Earth. I know it doesn't look it, but a such-and-such is almost as smart as a pig."

The kid in the photo did sort of look like him. Sort of. I swallowed and asked, "What's your real name?"

"Sam."

"I don't mean that one." Why was he being this way?

"My birth-name was such-and-such." He said it twice, slower the second time. But it never sounded like real words.

"Did Grandma pick Sam?"

"No, that was me. It's a very American name."

There was another photo of him as a boy. A really strange one. He was standing beside a dead jumpie, the carcass propped up with poles and wire, its body dried out and both of its eyes gone.

"A famous ancestor of mine," he told me. Then a moment later, with a different voice, he said, "I know you don't approve of me, Timmy."

I blinked and looked at him.

“I know what you’re taught in school.”

“You’re a war criminal,” I said. Point blank.

“Am I?”

“You bombed our cities.”

“I was a navigator on an attack craft, yes. But we never dropped our bombs, if that makes any difference to you. It was my first mission, and we were intercepted before we reached our target. A purely military target.” He tried another human smile. “One of your brave pilots shot me down before I could harm a soul.”

But war criminals are war criminals, I was thinking. You can’t just be a little one.

Walking around the cottage, I ended up at the nightstand. Its wind-up clock wasn’t running. I pulled a couple fingers through the dust that covered everything. And I was thinking something, that something working on my insides.

“Who am I?”

I looked at him, wondering what he meant.

“Names matter,” he told me. “To my species, a name is essential. It’s the peg on which an individual hangs his worth.”

I watched the spit dripping off his red tongue.

“Long ago,” he told me, “I made peace with my circumstances. I knew I would never return home. I had died in that crash, and I was reborn. And that’s why I claimed my good American name.”

I started slipping toward the door.

“In many ways, I am lucky. My particular tribe, my race...we came from the warmest part of our home world. By our standards, I’m quite tolerant of heat...”

Tolerant or not, he looked like hell.

“I never expected the exchange of prisoners. That’s not a Chonk-squeal-squeal-oonkkkk thing to do.” He was looking out the grimy windows, talking quietly. “When the exchange was looming, your grandmother was kind enough to use her influence, and a death certificate went home in my stead. ‘Such-and-such died while working in the field,’ it read. ‘Out of ignorance, the body was buried where it fell, his master unaware of his species’s customary mummification rite.’ ”

I felt sorry for him, sort of. He wasn’t what I’d expected, and I tried not to listen, trying not to feel anything at all.

“This is my home, Timmy.” He meant the cottage, only he didn’t mean it. “You’re welcome to visit me any time. All right?”

I didn’t answer. I shuffled outdoors, the air feeling a hundred degrees cooler. But Sam stayed inside, opening windows and dusting with his sleeves and thumbs. When I stepped off the groaning porch, he said, “Good-bye.”

I might have muttered, “Bye.”

I'm not sure.

I went back to Grandma's house, aiming for my room but ending up in hers. I knew something—a huge secret—only I didn't know it. I couldn't find the words. I kept staring at that darkened room, trying to think. Finally I walked over to the big bed, bending down. And sure enough, I could smell hay and that sweet something that I'd smelled on Sam. And I had a big weight on my chest, making me gasp, the force of it trying to steal my breath away.

We're eating supper in the kitchen. It's still day, still hot, but it's been hours since the explosions down at the prison camp. Grandma and Sam aren't talking about the camp or the soldiers in the truck. I can practically hear them not talking about those things. Instead they're making noise about a neighbor lady who broke her hip, and how many pheasants they've seen in the fields, and the chances that the local school can win State two years running. That's what they're saying. A lot of nothing. And then we hear someone at the front door, knocking fast and loud.

I beat Grandma to the door, but not by much. A man waits, tall and tired. "John?" says Grandma. "What are you doing here?" A dusty bike is propped against the porch rail. "Come in here. Would you like supper? We're just having a bite—"

"No. Rose," he says. "I can't. I'm going places."

She doesn't say anything, watching him.

Sam shuffles into the room. He's the one who asks, "What happened this afternoon, John? It seemed to involve the camp."

"It did," says the tall man. "Oh, it did."

"An accident?" Grandma asks. "Was it some kind of fire?"

"No, it was a fight." The man shakes his head, talking in a careful voice and not looking at anyone. "This isn't to be told, okay? But I thought you should hear it. I was walking in my pasture north of the camp when the fight started—"

"Who was fighting?" asks Grandma.

"Soldiers. Special commandos, I guess they were." He shrugs his shoulders. "They went through the old wire, then broke into the barracks. They were after the prisoners."

I say, "But there aren't any."

The man halfway glances at me. "Drunks," he says. "Speeders. One wife beater. Remember Lester Potts...?" He pauses, shaking his head. "Anyway, a deputy spotted the soldiers. Shot one of them. Then the rest took cover in the east barracks—"

"Oh, shit," says Grandma.

"—and I heard the shooting. I got my deer rifle and went down to help. We had them surrounded. The Guard was rushing us help. You know the Wicker boys? The ones that drag race on the highway every weekend? Well, the sheriff freed them and gave them guns, and they were plugging the east end. Which is the direction the bastards decided to go. They set off the old stockpile for a diversion...that's the explosions you heard... and things just plain went to hell!"

Grandma puts her fists on her hips, halfway looking at Sam. She has a tough face when she wants, blue

eyes bright and strong. “When you say ‘commandos,’ do you mean human soldiers? Or not?”

“They were human, all right.”

He says it quietly, as if it’s a bad thing.

“At least it’s not jumpies,” I tell him. And everyone.

Nobody seems to hear me.

“What happened to these commandos?” Grandma asks.

“Some died,” John says. “I’m sure of that much.”

Nobody talked for a long moment. Then I said, “But at least it’s not jumpies. It’s not jumpies!”

Sam touched me, just for an instant. “But Timmy, why would humans be interested in the old camp?”

How should I know?

“On the other hand, jumpmen would be interested. They might send human agents.” He’s talking to everyone, including himself. “After all, humans can move at will here.”

“But where would they get people like that?” I ask, not having a clue.

It was Grandma who says, “Think.”

But I can’t see it.

“Think of me,” says Sam. “I stayed behind willingly. Didn’t I? And doesn’t it make sense that some of the human prisoners might have preferred life in space?”

That’s stupid idea, but I don’t get a chance to say so.

Instead, Grandma says to John, “But these commandos are all dead now. That’s what you’ve come to tell us, right?”

Sam asks, “How many were there?”

“Three or four,” says the tall man. “Or five, maybe.”

“How many are dead?” Grandma wants to know.

“We’ve found three bodies. So far.” His eyes were seeing things. “The other bodies might be in the barracks. The Guard will search through the mess in the morning, when the ammo cools down enough.”

Sam says, “I’m sure everything’s being taken care of.”

Nobody else talks.

Sam comes up beside Grandma and touches her arm, lightly. Both John and me watch him. Then he says, “What if one of them escapes? He saw no one but human prisoners. No one, and everything’s fine.”

Grandma’s jaw is working, her teeth grinding.



Sam asks John, "How bad was it? Were any of us hurt?" Us?

"A deputy," says John. "And one of the Wicker boys. They were killed."

Sam shakes his head. He looks small and soft next to Grandma.

"And the other brother is missing. We haven't found his body, or he ran off. Hopefully that's all. He got scared and ran."

I would never run off in battle. Never.

John rocks back and forth, saying, "I've got to go, folks. I'm trying to warn people, and we're not supposed to talk about this on the phone." He walks onto the porch. Grandma and Sam thank him for coming, and he tells us, "Now you people take care." Then he straddles his bike and pumps the pedals, working his way through the soft dust. He's moving like a bike rider in a dream, at half-speed. Something about him real frantic, but real slow, too.

The three of us watch the news at ten. The sun is down and the heat is finally starting to seep out of the house. Grandma is sitting on the sofa, like always. Sam is squatting against a wall, against a cushion, not close to her but not far away either. And I'm on the floor, legs crossed. I'm squinting through the snow on the little screen. The news doesn't mention anything about commandos or explosions. It's going to be hot tomorrow, I hear. And for the rest of the week, too. Then they go to a commercial, selling headache pills with a pounding hammer.

A helicopter passes overhead. Thump-thump-thump.

When it's gone, Sam says, "Rose," and I realize how nobody else says her name with that voice. It's not a jumpie voice, or a human's. It's just Sam's. Then he tells her, "I know what it is. It's the new Chonk-squeal-squeal-oonkkkk council. They hear rumors about people like me, and they're looking for an issue to pull all the tribes together."

"Politics," she says. A low, tight voice. "Exactly." He gives me a little wink, nodding to himself. "I bet that's it."

Now the sports comes on, the baseball scores too fuzzy to read.

"From now on," he says, "I'll stay on the farm. No more visits to the neighbors. No more working by the road."

Grandma says, "Perhaps that's best."

Then Sam takes a deep breath and says, "Timmy? Do me a big favor. Go to my house and get those old pictures. Bring them to me, please."

I do it. I go out the front door and around, past the barn and the fancy combine—everything huge and dangerous-looking in the darkness—and I slip into the cottage, working fast. The photos feel slick and odd, made of something besides ordinary paper. Keeping quiet, I come back the same way. I hear Grandma saying, "I'm not giving you up." She sounds angry and strong and certain. "Nobody's taking you anywhere. Do you hear me?"

I'm up on the porch, and she stops talking.

I come inside.

Sam has pulled his cushion up beside Grandma, rearing back against the sofa with his long feet beneath the coffee table. "That's the boy," he says, taking the photos. He doesn't look at them. Pulling a long match from his chest pocket, he strikes it and sets them on fire in a candle bowl. All of them. I watch for the dead jumpie and the boy, only Sam's put them facedown. It's just the slick non-paper burning. And he tells Grandma, "Nothing will happen. They found nothing, and they're dead."

Grandma says, "All right," and nods. Once.

Then the fire is out, and he tells me, "Go dump this, please."

I'm out on the porch, throwing ashes off the rail, and Grandma says, "You didn't need to do that. Why did you think you needed to?"

"To end any doubts," he says.

"Whose doubts?"

"Not mine," he says. Then he says, "This is my home, Rose."

Rose. Just the way he says it makes me shiver.

I grab the rail with both hands, watching the sky. Mars is the pink star in the east. Before too many more years, it'll turn white with clouds. Sam's told me. His people are flinging comets down at it, sometimes two a day, trying to make it livable. And for a moment, without warning I feel jealous of the humans that might be up there, imagining them throwing those comets, having that much fun every day.

"I've been here my entire life," says Sam, "and I won't leave you."

"You're damned right you won't," says Grandma. Then she adds something too soft for me to hear, despite all my trying.

We go to bed, and I fall asleep for five hours, or maybe five minutes. Then I'm awake, flat on my back and completely awake. Why am I? There comes a sound from downstairs. A bang, and then a thud. Then more thuds. I sit up in bed, my heart pounding. People are coming upstairs. Suddenly my bedroom door flies open, and some guy in jeans and a torn shirt stands in front of me. He's got a funny look on his face, tired and sad. He keeps his empty hands at his sides, very still, asking me, "Where is he?" with a tiny voice. "The prisoner... where is he...?"

I don't say a word.

Someone else says, "Who is it? Who's there?"

"A boy," says the guy.

"More!"

He moves back, and a commando fills the doorway. He is huge, both tall and thick, wearing nothing except for battle armor and an ammunition belt. He's holding a big gun as if it's a toy. It's a mean looking thing with a curled clip filled with rocket-jacketed bullets, and he's pointing the barrel straight at me.

"Where is the prisoner?" he says to me.

I can't talk.

"Tell me. Now."

I have no voice or breath, my heart beating behind my eyes.

The commando's face is huge and wild, big eyes shining at me. He looks maybe twenty-five. He seems ready for anything. When Grandma's door comes open, he wheels around. And then the guy with him—the missing Wicker brother, I guess—suddenly bolts. I hear him on the stairs, half-stumbling, and the commando—the human traitor—aims fast and fires. My bedroom is lit up by the flashes. I see myself sitting in my bed, sheets pulled up around me. Then the firing stops, and I smell rocket exhaust hanging in the air. I can feel how nobody moves. Nobody is running down the stairs. And now the commando looks at Grandma while pointing the smoking barrel straight at my head.

“You're holding an illegal prisoner of war,” he says. “Tell me where to find the navigator, or I'll execute this child.”

“Don't hurt the boy,” says Grandma. Her voice is dry and tough and angry. “Sam is out back. But he doesn't want to go with you, you bastard!”

The commando smiles, telling us, “Thank you.” The gun drops, and he adds, “I don't want to fight old women and boys. So if you promise to stay here, I'll leave you here. Safe.”

I want to believe him.

“Get the hell out of my house!” Grandma screams. “I'm warning you! Get out!”

She scares me, talking that way.

But the traitor doesn't notice us anymore. Stepping back, he melts into the darkness. I hear him on the stairs, then running through the kitchen. And Grandma picks up the phone in her room, saying, “Dead,” and then, “Shit,” as she slams it down again.

I stand, creeping out into the hallway.

Grandma's wearing a long white nightgown, and she's half-running. “Come with me,” she whispers. “Now.”

A dead body lies on the stairs. He scares me. I've never seen anyone dead, and all of a sudden I'm tiptoeing through his blood, the stairs warm and sticky under my bare feet.

“How could that man know about Sam?” I ask.

“That boy must have told him.” She kneels and looks at me, then says, “Run. Cross the road and hide in the corn. Whatever happens, stay hidden.”

The dead boy was a traitor for telling. I never would have told. Never.

“Go on now! Go!”

I run out the front door, out across the dusty yard. I get as far as the pine tree, stopping there to breathe. That's when I hear Sam and the commando talking. Fighting, they are. They're beside the barn, and Sam is saying, “What did you do to her?” He's caught up in one of the big man's arms, trying not to be carried. The commando tells him to be quiet. “I haven't hurt anyone,” the bastard lies. Then he says something in jumpie, a jumpie-built box implanted in his neck letting him squeak and squeal like a native. And Sam turns still and quiet, letting himself be carried, the commando taking him to the pickup and throwing him inside, then climbing in after him, and with both hands he tries to hot wire the engine.

A big engine starts up.

It's too loud and deep to belong to the pickup. The air seems to throb. The commando's gun is beside him, then it isn't. Sam has a good hold on it, I realize, and suddenly the two men are fighting for it. I can see them when the combine's headlights come on. And the big machine lurches and starts to charge.

Everything's happening fast and crazy.

The commando wrestles his gun free, then turns and fires out the window. Sam slips out the passenger door, bouncing faster than I ever thought possible, trying to reach the barn. The commando starts chasing him, but not fast enough. A scared old jumpie can cover ground even on Earth, at least for a few feet. In he goes, and the big barn door starts pulling shut, and the commando reaches it too late, pulling at it with his free hand while he turns and fires at the charging combine.

Glass breaks.

Headlights die.

I can just see Grandma behind the steering wheel, crouched down low. The mechanical arms are turning and turning. Her target tries to run but he picks the wrong direction. There's a utility shed beside the barn, and he gets caught in the corner, shoots twice, then throws the gun and turns and leaps higher than seems possible or right. He's lived all his life with jumpies, I realize. He's too young to have been taken prisoner during the war. Trying to be a jumpie has given his legs extra bounce, which isn't enough. Because instead of leaping over the spinning arms, he falls into them, his body flung back into the barn's wooden wall just as the combine strikes home with a big sharp crunch.

I hear him scream, maybe.

Or maybe it's me.

Then the scream is done, and Grandma turns off the engine and climbs down. Sam comes hopping out of the barn. Both of them are wearing nightclothes. They hold each other and squeeze, saying nothing. And I walk past them, making for the barn. I'm curious to see what happened to that poor stupid man.

Only Sam sees me first and says, "No, Timmy. Come back here, please."

I turn and look at them. Then I walk over to them. I'm not scared or anything. That's what I'll say if they ask. But all of the sudden I'm sort of glad to be stopped.

I won't admit it, but I am.

Soldiers come in their helicopters and trucks, then pick up and leave again taking the bodies with them. The officer in charge warns us that nothing happened here. Everything needs to stay secret. He shakes my hand then Grandma's. And, after a pause, Sam's. And he tells my grandmother that she can expect a confidential commendation. Then as he climbs into his helicopter, he tells us, "Our enemies underestimate us. They don't appreciate the gift of our ordinary citizens." Or something like that. I can barely hear him as the helicopter starts revving its engines.

By then it's morning, and time for breakfast.

It's just the three of us, and Grandma makes pancakes and sausage. I drown everything under thin syrup. Eating is more wonderful than I could ever have guessed. I keep feeling happy and lucky, glad about everything. Grandma's wearing a bright country dress, and Sam's already in his overalls. Nobody says much until Sam finishes his cakes, puts his fork down and announces, "Once I can make the

arrangements, I'll contact my old family. Just to tell them that I am well and happy."

He says it, but I don't believe it.

Neither does Grandma. She says, "You can't be serious. What in hell will that accomplish?"

"How many others are there like me?" he asks. "Dozens? Hundreds? But as long as we're secrets, we're dangerous. Not just to us, but to our adopted families. Our adopted species."

Grandma stares through him, saying nothing.

"I want to show my people that it's possible to coexist with humans. At peace." He smiles like a human, and like a jumpie, his ears lying down flat. "Until last night, I didn't know that I was important. But since I am, I need to do the right thing."

And after that, nobody says much of anything.

Done with dishes, we drift outside. Sam studies the barn and combine, talking about what needs to be fixed first. I'm pushing at the splintered wood, looking at the dark red smear but never touching it. Then Grandma says something to Sam. I can't hear what. And she comes to me and says, "Would you do me a favor, Timmy? Go play with your soldiers out by the road. Stay there until I say otherwise. Would you do that for your old grandmother?"

I ask, "Why?" and suddenly wish I hadn't.

She gives me a look, level and strong.

Then Sam calls to her. "Rose," he says, taking little hops over toward the cottage.

"Play by the road," she repeats. "Now."

I start walking.

"And don't tell anyone," she warns me, her hard old face looking into me. I don't have any secrets. Not with her, I don't.

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

She follows Sam.

I go to the ditch and find my soldiers buried in the dust, and I play with them without liking it. They're just toys, I'm thinking. And the plastic jumpies don't even look real. But all of the sudden I get an idea. It just sort of comes to me. And I get up on my feet and climb out of the ditch, walking until I've got the cottage in sight. Just one peek, I'm thinking. Just that. Only my feet stop moving all at once, and I get cold inside. And then I turn around and start running back toward the ditch, running faster than I've ever run in my life.

After last night—after what I saw Grandma do last night—there's no way I'm leaving my little ditch.

I hunker down with my soldiers, and I stare at their worn-out faces.

Only one face in this ditch is scared, I tell myself.

Only one face doesn't belong to an idiot. That's what I'm thinking right now.