

SHEILA FINCH

FORKPOINTS

THE BACKSTAGE MAZE AT the New Globe InterAct PlayHouse reeked of cannabis when Cass arrived, in spite of the stage manager's recent lecture about what smoke did to the delicate Sonytronic rig. The master electrician had an Aiwa negative ion pulsar going over by the lightboard in the control room. Someone had draped a plastic Christmas wreath over the fire extinguisher next to the board.

The electrician looked up. "How's it going?"

"Not my favorite time of year."

"And Jamie?"

She shrugged.

The PlayHouse, a large, rambling, done-over art deco mansion just off Hollywood Boulevard, was almost freezing. Computers needed it cold; InterActors didn't count for much. Amazing somebody hadn't already tried to replace them with robots, she thought. Cassandra Romano, an incredibly realistic simulation of a human being. Maybe not so realistic this time of year.

She headed down a dark corridor to Wardrobe. Myron Dahlberg, the director, wanted her in a chunky tweed suit for the first act, huge padded shoulders, ugly fur collar, the jacket belted army-style over a skirt with inverted pleats, and a black fur helmet on top. Much of the previous century glorified flat, skinny women, and Cass was neither anymore.

Six months ago, he'd introduced her to Noreen Vincenza, pouty, redheaded and ten-years-younger, Cass's understudy. One month ago, he'd added insult to damage by lecturing Cass on her slipping audience appeal, measured each week in the box office receipts by the number of people willing to pay to help her character make decisions.

This morning the insect-squeaking voice of her bathroom scale had announced the addition of another kilo to stuff into the costume.

Forkpoint. Why not quit now?

Because of Jamie, that was why not.

It had started with the parade down Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, a sunny, rose-scented December day ten years into a new century. A hero's welcome home, the last of a dozen extravagant cavalcades across the country. Johnny in the back seat of the convertible, champagne glass in one hand. Later Cass would learn how much the International Space Agency hated that champagne glass, and how they would hide behind it.

But for now, Johnny Romano was the first astronaut to set foot on an asteroid, and that counted for something. Cass could never remember which one it had been.

Seeing her face in the crowd, Johnny stopped his driver and pulled her aboard. "Marry me!" he shouted in her ear as the parade passed the Norton Simon Museum. His fingers tangled in her long, blonde hair. He was so drunk. "Why not?" she said, because his face had been

on the trivid for days, and hadn't she watched him play high school football? As for Johnny's motive, she didn't want to know. Stage actresses never had too many options.

Yet there had been choices. A show in Topeka, a little theater production in Des Moines. Shut out now by the glamour spotlight of Johnny's triumphal tour, abandoned in that moment under the flags, the rose petals and the cheers. And the thought of what it could do for her career. They were a media creation: Starman Snags Sexy Starlet!

ISA put a more conservative spin on it: high school sweethearts.

They married in Hollywood and honeymooned in Las Vegas. Where she sat up all night for the first time, cradling him in her arms while he writhed in silent nightmares. The headaches and nausea started six months after that. Both of them began to wonder what they'd done.

But by then she was already pregnant with Jamie.

"All right!" The stage manager shouted. "Theme One, Scene Three, people. Take your places, please!"

She took the east backstage maze -- actually a staircase off-limits to the audience -- down to the "parlour" of the prime minister's house in London where she did the scene in *V Stands for Victory*. Cameron Gordon, male lead, winked as she came through the cast door; he fiddled with the large headset used in rehearsal, adjusting reception.

She'd been an InterActor for almost five years, but she still got the shivers walking the mazes behind the rooms the audience saw. She was alive here. Theater was in her blood, more real than her life outside its doors.

A tech eased past, checking out electronics for the special effects. The New Globe was state of the art -- First of its kind -- Revolutionizing the field -- Her agent's words played in her memory. It had imitators, but it was still the best for now. She was lucky to be working at all after allowing the media to forget her.

Noreen was standing by a mahogany occasional table, tea tray in hand. She was at least twenty pounds lighter than Cass but still managed to look as if she was about to split the seams of the skimpy parlor-maid's outfit. Noreen was supposed to be a minor character with limited forkpoint options, but judging by the number of moves she managed to squeeze out of the peanut gallery's cheapie say-sos, Cass knew Noreen of the pouty lips thought she was the star.

"Cassandra?" Myron's voice sounded as if it was coming over a child's tin-can telephone. "Darling, are you on this planet or orbiting? For the third time -- Patch in!"

Cameron ran a comb through graying hair. He was sitting in the big wingback chair beside a fireplace, watching Noreen. Cass sat down opposite him on the blue and white striped sofa. The lights came up.

"Curtain," the stage manager's voice said in her ear.

Funny how the old terms persisted, she thought. Pretty soon the younger generation of InterActors wouldn't even know what "curtain" and "backstage" used to refer to.

Cameron, as Winston Churchill, accepted a cup of tea from Noreen. "Thank you, Alice. That'll be all."

Noreen/Alice gave a whimsical half-curtsey that the dramatist had yelled about a couple of

times but Myron had defended on the grounds that what audiences didn't know about English manners in 1939 would fill a **book**. She tucked the empty tea tray under her arm.

Cass's dummy-line came next. "Mr. Churchill, I must say that I fail to understand --"

"Miss Faversham." Cameron groped for a second, didn't find what he was seeking, then mimed picking up and lighting a cigar. "I have already done all the explaining I intend to do."

Once a week, the cast went over the skeleplay to make sure they hadn't wandered too far from the original hardline. It wasn't just the casual changes, the little bits of improv-- action or dialogue, spontaneous one night but gradually solidifying -- that tugged the skele off course. Sometimes the real cognoscenti, saying-so for a few crucial roles that they bought into several nights in a row, could wreck the cast's attempts to follow the hardline. Theatrical dilettantes swapped notes, prepared strategy, making a point of working through the most bizarre choices. This was tough on InterActors, but exhilarating if they were good at blending dummy-lines with improv.

Noreen/Alice was supposed to leave the room -- this wasn't a forkpoint -- but she was dawdling around today trailing a faint, musky perfume. It put Cass off a fraction of a second.

"You are truly an arrogant man!"

The scene coach scolded in her ear: "You're picking up late, Cass."

A play had a life of its own, and it changed over a period of several performances. Once InterActors really got into improv to fit a good say-so, they tended to add in those possibilities the next time as if they were part of the hardline. And when that happened, the writers' union squawked if they didn't track it back inside contract limits. Eventually the cast might get to a point where there was no way out.

"London is full of well-bred, sensitive young ladies, Miss Faversham," Cameron delivered Churchill's lines. "Any one of them would seize this chance."

Cass stood up, careful to turn her face toward the north wall where the audience who'd chosen to say-so for Bertha Faversham would stand later. Miss Faversham was indecisive, adjusting the abominable fur hat.

"Well, Miss Faversham? What is your decision?"

Forkpoint.

ISA specialists couldn't find the cause of Johnny's symptoms. "Stress of re-entry," one suggested. "Psychological effect," another wrote. It had been a rough trip. But that was classified. The agency didn't blame Johnny for feeling less than his normal self for a while. Later Cass saw the irony in this. At the time she believed she was in love.

The prospect of fatherhood seemed to rally him. The headaches and the nausea receded. But not the bad dreams. He refused to talk about them, even to Cass.

Then the amnio sent up warning flares, and the ultrasound was indecisive, and the doctor frowned when he spoke to her.

Cass brought Johnny the news at sunset. He was sitting on the balcony of their condo on Balboa Island where the scent of roses in the courtyard was as heady as champagne. He'd taken to sitting for hours like this, staring into space.

ISA wondered when he was coming back to work. They spoke of choices, new technology. Biochip implants. Virtual orbiting. The best way to use his experience and knowledge. They were concerned about the enormous sums of money that had gone into training him. Johnny ignored them.

"The doc thinks I should abort." All the way home Cass had practiced how to say this, finally deciding on cold words that cut cleanest.

Johnny didn't turn his head to look at her. She studied the black curls lying unkempt on the back of his neck.

"No."

"There's something wrong with it, Johnny."

"No!"

He did turn to her then, his face full of nightmares, and she dropped to her knees beside him, her hands raised to cradle his face. In that moment, perhaps she did truly love him.

"We could try again later --"

In answer, his hands made an obscene gesture at his crotch. "Before these fall off, you think?"

His voice was high, bordering on hysteria. Cass had seen his hands move that way in his sleep, a pathetic warding off of things with no name, dark things with no shape that inhabited the icy sweep of the outer solar system. Things he believed had destroyed his manhood. Cass didn't believe in them because she didn't understand anything about his life in space. But she believed she loved him.

"All right. We'll take the chance," she said.

Jamie was born five months later, premature, underweight, a tiny white pearl of a child with eyes as black as space.

He never cried, even at the moment of first breath.

IN AN ACTUAL performance, the say-sos who'd paid to influence the Bertha Faversham character would signal their choice of two alternatives by pressing a button on their little handheld transmitters. Option A meant Bertha stayed; Option B meant she valued her dignity (and her chastity) and walked. The winning decision would light up on the board in the control room, and then the tracker's job was to relay it as fast as possible to the cast so there was no delay in the scene.

"Option A." Myron picked one today for practice.

She sat down again. Now she went into Bertha's dummy-lines that would lead to her becoming Churchill's mistress, and the scene played out until the next fork. If he'd said "B," she would have delivered a speech about the purity of English womanhood and stalked off stage. And then she'd have been in line for several scenes where she actively worked against Churchill. Ultimately, the play would finish very nearly in the same place, but it would arrive there by different routes.

"Very well, Mr. Churchill. Tell me what you expect of me."

She ran through her scene without giving it much thought. She always found it harder to get into her part in these dry run-throughs. Improv gave the play fire, the excitement of outfoxing some particularly cunning say-sos and getting where she was supposed to be going in the hardline without detracking the entire play. Without the life breathed into it by the InterActors, the skele, the play as written, seemed dead.

At regular intervals the tracker updated them on what had been happening in the two major scenes that played at the same time as theirs but in other rooms of the house, as well as the little bits of business that went on in the pantry and the upstairs hall. Even walk-ons could skew this play if they gave it half a try. One night, some little bastard playing a delivery boy from the local baker had a cheering section from his former high-school drama class primed to twist his one say-so into a major disaster

"Cassandra!" Myron screeched in her ear. "What's the matter with you today, darling? Are you having your period? Pick up the tempo for Chrissakes!"

She imagined him squatting like a spider in the middle of his control room web, peering at three screens in turn and listening to multi-tracks of dialogue.

She took a breath. "IdotypingMr. ChurchillbutIdon'tmaketea --"

"Don't overdo it, Cass, there's a good girl," the scene coach said mildly.

Somehow she got through the rest of the rehearsal without incurring Myron's wrath again.

Afterwards, the cast stood around drinking java, telling plans for the upcoming holidays. Noreen was cooing at Myron, working on him. Cass saw her hold on the role slipping away.

"Caught your ex on a trivid lifecam last night, Cass," Cam said, mug in hand. "What's he doing on the moon?"

"He ran away," she said. "Maybe I should've."

The midnight eyes saw only darkness. The seashell ears were sealed against her.

Weeks of doctor visits turned into months. A year. Two years. A long line of specialists pronounced themselves baffled. The agency's lawyers, fearing some unimaginable liability, blamed it on champagne.

Jamie grew, flawless in every way except one. The pale, exquisite body seemed quite empty like an anencephalic clone grown in a transplant tank.

They fought every night now. Johnny wanted Cass to put Jamie in an institution. Cass refused.

"Maybe they'll find a cure," Johnny said. They both knew better, even then.

Johnny's nightmares faded, but they slept in separate bedrooms. He became enraged if Cass intruded on him in the bathroom they shared, covering his genitals like an adolescent boy in a locker room.

"He's beautiful," Cass said, tracing the delicate lines of the child's sleeping face.

Johnny was signing Christmas cards provided by ISA. "I can't stand to look at him."

"You wanted him once."

"I thought I had a chance. One chance," he said. "I lost even that."

Cass lifted the sleeping child from the crib and held him close to her breast that he'd never learned to suck.

"Madonna and child!" Johnny said. He threw the cards on the floor.

Sometimes a play goes offtrack. Good InterActors deal with it. She'd give up her career. She'd keep Jamie. It was very dramatic.

Johnny went out the door without speaking, leaving the cards on the floor, the closet full of his clothes, his wedding ring on the bed.

Skeleplays weren't that much different from the previous century's interactive books. If you want Captain Kirk to beam down to the planet, turn to page 38. If you want him to stay on the Enterprise, page 51 -- The difference was three plotlines at once and the InterActors.

Cameron Gordon had a more cynical view: InterAct theater was popular in inverse proportion to the amount of governmental control its fans experienced in their lives. "In that case," Cass had said, "we'll be in business a long time!" Cameron shook his head. "Always something new. Always forkpoints."

The setting sun smeared the sky as she changed into her costume for the evening performance. She crammed the ugly hat on her head. It gave off a faint odor of mildew. The costume designer found it in a thrift shop.

The three interlocked plots ran in separate areas of the house simultaneously: Churchill's battle to save England from the Axis powers, the problems he had with pro-appeasement forces in Parliament, and his romance with his secretary. A small change in only one theme meant another would have to change course to accommodate.

She adjusted the tiny plug that let her hear the tracker, easing into the character. The melodrama of real life outside the theater fell away. In the backstage maze, the rustle of programs and murmur of voices were muted. Cass glanced through a peephole onto the parlor set where Cameron was playing a scene with two members of the Tory party. Behind him, she saw the audience, thumbs on the buttons of their transmitters, intent on taking part in the play. She recognized several of the regulars. Behind the row of seats stood the cruisers who wandered from scene to scene rather than stay with one character throughout.

She heard her cue and entered the scene through the cast door. The familiar scene between Churchill and Miss Faversham began to play.

Sometimes a rowdy audience could get carried away by their sense of taking part in the action, but not tonight. They bunched together against the north wall, paying close attention.

"Well," Winston Churchill said. "What is your decision?"

The scene had arrived at Bertha Faversham's forkpoint.

She was aware of the flutter of fingers on transmitters from those who'd paid to influence Bertha's actions. A fraction of a second passed.

The tracker's voice murmured in her ear: "Option B."

"I very much regret to say that I value my honor, Mr. Churchill, more than I value financial reward," Cass said haughtily, drawing on gloves that were too tight.

Under her words, she heard the tracker again, warning of a kink in the skele. "Lord North on his way with dispatches."

She could deal with that, cutting her lines to fit the revised scene when Churchill's colleague arrived, working the crucial parts around their dialogue. Cameron caught her eye; he'd been advised of the kink too. The trick was to make it seamless.

Lord North burst into the room, a new InterActor given to tripping over his lines when flustered. Cass got off the set credibly.

The stage manager was in the maze, shaking a finger at Myron. The director frowned at Cass, passing on the SM's anger.

Sometimes life resembles a play with a bozo skele, all the forkpoints leading down to absurdity or despair.

Jamie's needs were minimal, food, clean diapers. But he lay unmoving in his crib, his small body almost bloodless in its white perfection. Vacant. Perhaps waiting. Past his first and then his second birthday. He never used his voice to make a sound. Perhaps he didn't have one.

And why was Cass being so stubborn? She didn't know the answer herself. Perhaps life was like improv, becoming hardline when no one paid attention.

Like Johnny, the ISA doctors urged Cass to put the baby away. A home, they said. Excellent care, and success with puzzling cases like this. Well, not quite like this.

The agency sent half Johnny's pay check every month. More, their lawyers advised, might have been an admission of liability.

At three, Jamie suddenly learned to walk.

Then one day a trivid popshow sent a lifecam to hover a foot above Jamie's head. It even followed Cass into the bathroom where Johnny had been ashamed to have her see his manhood, shriveled like roses in an early snow. Being on stage twenty-four/seven was more than she'd contracted for.

The home the doctors recommended cost the entire ISA monthly payment. Cass would need to supplement it. If she put Jamie away -- and what difference would it make to the child who didn't know Cass was his mother? -- she could go back to the theater.

Older now. Heavier.

It was a bozo skele. All anyone could do was hope it didn't go down to disaster.

The stage manager called a meeting after the performance. She sipped thick java a scene coach pressed into her hands and watched the SM gesticulating. They'd had a string of real InterActive aficionados recently, some of them bright kids from Cal Tech who liked to cause mischief. The cast had to work hard to keep the play tracking. They'd been using a lot of special effects to get out of impossible kinks and deadends that these say-sos forced. All that tech was expensive.

"All right, folks. Listen up." The stage manager banged a mug against a steel strut. "We've got business to share. Stuff we want you to keep to yourselves."

Several of the InterActors, the younger ones including Noreen, sat cross-legged on the floor.

Cass dragged out a folding chair. Cannabis had left a thin signature on the air, but no one smoked in the stage manager's presence.

A tall man wearing shades and a dark suit stood beside the SM, a nuleather folder in his hand. The stranger spoke about innovations in InterActive equipment that she didn't understand. He tucked the folder under his arm and held something out on the palm of his right hand. The InterActors leaned forward to see. Noreen made ooh and ahh noises.

"What is it?" Cass asked the scene coach.

"Bio-chip," the coach said. "Space Agency has 'em. I didn't know we'd managed to steal the technology."

Myron gazed across the bent heads at her. "Light-speed communication, darling. It'll eliminate that delay that's been killing us. Multi channels for InterActors, director, techs. Everybody! This will revolutionize the field."

Burying metal in her brain scared her more than Noreen's arrival.

"Give it to us in English, Myron," Cameron said.

"You haven't seen InterActive drama till you see how this little chip's going to work," Myron said. "InterActors will be able to monitor all the say-sos at every single forkpoint, not just their own. And they'll receive my instructions for all scenes simultaneously."

"Why would we want to hear everybody's say-sos?" the InterActor who played Lord North asked.

"Think what it'll do to a drama if you know what everybody's doing and can incorporate their decisions into your own."

"Sounds like we'll need to be Einsteins," Cass said.

"That's what's wrong with you, Cassandra. You're not flexible anymore, darling. InterActive drama's changing. This is the future!"

"And we're the first company to get it," the SM added.

"Of course, according to contract, we can't actually force you to have the implant," Myron said. "But we're going to be awfully appreciative of those who volunteer."

Now they were all asking questions.

"Disability pay for six weeks while you recuperate, and for the retraining period after that," Myron said.

"Do we have a choice of hospitals?" Noreen wanted to know.

"Well --" Myron's face had that fixed smile Cass had seen before when he was trying to weasel some particularly low clause past them into the contract. "We've made arrangements with a clinic in New Delhi."

"The procedure's not licensed in the States," Cameron translated.

"Theater's going to be dark for a couple of months, starting now," Myron said. "We're extending the normal end-of-year break. Then we start rehearsal on a brand new version of this play."

And of course, Cass thought, there she rose: Miss Pouty-Lips Vincenza herself, standing so close to Myron he could hardly look at her without staring down the low-cut front of her costume.

"Myron," Noreen said, "I want to be first to volunteer."

"Fabulous, baby! Anyone else?"

The SM took out an epad. Several hands went up, including Cameron's, but his went up more slowly.

"Cassandra?" Myron asked.

She was tired of making decisions that, like peanut say-sos, never really changed anything. Tired of living her life day after day with the enigma of her strange child, her lost marriage, her failing career.

"Won't last long," the scene coach muttered. "Same chip technology supports VR. And then where'll we be? Simulated on the net, that's where."

Myron bit his fingernail. "It's your decision, Cassandra."

Anonymous, red-tiled communities jamming the San Fernando Valley flashed by outside the maglev window. The hillsides were choked from valley floor to hill crest with apartment buildings, motels, shopping malls, high-rise office blocks, swimming pools and health clubs, like 3-D photocopies of one community stacked endlessly side by side.

At Woodland Hills, Cass got off the train and transferred to the tram winding down Topanga Canyon Road. Oak Grove House, private residential home for developmentally disturbed children, stood behind a high brick wall. The brief winter afternoon faded as she reached the main building, lights dimming on the set of this dumb skele she was trapped in. Dry rosebushes lined the path, showtime over, like actors who've taken the wrong fork.

If she left the theater, she couldn't afford to keep Jamie at Oak Grove.

The administrator came outside to meet her, a red Christmas ribbon in her hair. "He's in the garden."

"How is he?" Cass asked the same question, month after month, year after year.

And she always got the same answer: "As well as we can expect. We mustn't look for miracles, must we?"

She didn't know why not.

She walked across the green lawn to the play area under the trees. Small children climbed the jungle gym; toddlers shrieked on the teeter-totter and the slide.

Eight-year-old Jamie was all by himself, safety-belted into the swing. Cass stood a few feet away and looked at him. His cheeks glowed translucent as if light moved under his skin. His hair had been freshly cut, the white curls brushed back from his forehead. He wore the spaceship sweatshirt she'd brought him a year ago. It was still too big.

The skele came to this: a blind, deaf child on a swing.

He swung back and forth, back and forth, his sightless eyes fixed on trees at the dark edge of the lawn. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was normal.

Normal. There it was. In Johnny and Cass's bozo skele they'd chosen a fork that led to poor, abnormal Jamie.

But that wasn't quite right either. Normal was a word for other children. Jamie had been touched by something that couldn't be measured by human standards.

One of the therapists came up beside Cass, a young black man. He flashed her a quick smile, then stopped the swing and unbuckled her child.

"Time to stop swinging, Jamie. Mom came to see you."

"You know he can't hear."

"There may be other ways of hearing," the therapist said.

She stared at the dark young man with the child in his arms. "His father went into space."

"I was in high school, but I followed his news. Something made contact out there."

"It ate him up. Whatever it was."

"No," he said. "It gave you a gift."

He set Jamie down on the lawn at her feet.

"Rosemary's Baby?" she asked. "Or maybe the one about the astronaut -- what was it called?"

"Much older mythology. Changelings and demigods and messiahs."

She watched Jamie. He seemed preoccupied with his delicate hands, the long fingers weaving like ghosts through the air. Almost like he was trying sign language.

"Look," she said. "Have you tried to teach him to sign? I mean, Helen Keller made it. Perhaps he could "

Of course they'd tried. Dozens of doctors, teachers, scientists of all the new disciplines of space medicine. But nobody knew the language Jamie had in his brain. If he had one. Nobody on Earth.

"No," she said. "There's no meaning in it."

"Myths have their own meaning." The therapist touched her arm. "Love him as he is, Miz Romano. He isn't like the rest of us. Someday, maybe you'll know what he is."

He put the boy's hand in hers and walked away, leaving her with Jamie. She bent to lean her cheek against the boy's, her nose brushing his snow-cold hair.

It was InterActors who rescued a fantastic skele from failure. There are no miracles, but there is life. If she took Jamie out of Oak Grove, she could afford to leave the theater.

They walked back across the lawn in gathering dusk. She began to talk to the child about his father.

Forkpoints, she thought. Life was full of them.