

SAFEGUARD
by Nancy Kress

Four innocent children may hold the key to our survival, or total annihilation, in this powerful and riveting new tale.

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The uniformed military aide appeared at her elbow just as Katherine Taney rose from her gilded chair to enter the Oval Office. "The president will see you now," his secretary said simultaneously with the aide's statement, "Wait a moment, Katie."

She turned to stare at him. Keep the president waiting? But his face told. For a moment vertigo nearly took her, a swooping blackness, but only for a moment. She said quietly to the aide, "Another one?"

"Two more. Possibly three."

Dear God.

"Ma'am," chided the secretary, "the president is ready."

She straightened her aging back, thought a quick prayer, and went to brief the commander-in-chief. No, not really to brief—to plead, with the war-battered United States government, for compassion in the face of the unthinkable.

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In the beginning, Li remembered, there had been big faceless people, white as cartoons. These memories were quick and slippery, like dreams. The other children didn't have them at all. Since that time, there had been only the real cartoons, the world, and Taney.

He had realized a long time ago that Taney was a person inside a white cartoon covering, and that he himself was a person inside the world, another covering. The world must also have an outside because when Taney left after each visit, she couldn't have stayed for days in the space behind the leaving door. The space was too small, not even room to lie down to sleep. And what would she eat or drink in there until she came back? And where did she get the fried cakes and other things she brought them?

“There’s another door, isn’t there, Taney?” he said yet again as the five of them sat around the feeder in the Grove. The feeder had just brought up bowls of food, but no one except Sudie was eating them because Taney had brought a lot of fried cakes in a white bag. Sudie, always greedy, had eaten three fried cakes and half a bowl of stew and now slumped happily against a palm tree, her naked belly round and her lips greasy. Jana sat with her knees drawn up to her chin, her thin arms clasped around her legs. Kim stared at nothing.

Li repeated, “Another door. You go out of the world through another door, don’t you?”

“I can’t answer that,” Taney said, as always. The girls didn’t even glance at her. Li didn’t expect them to; he was the only one who ever questioned Taney.

But tonight Jana, still gazing over her clasped knees at the shadow of trees against the sky, said, “Why can’t you answer, Taney?”

Taney’s head swiveled toward Jana. It was hard to see Taney’s eyes through the faceplate on her white covering; you had to get very close and squint. The cartoons covered like Taney didn’t even have eyes, no matter how much you squinted at them.

There hadn’t been any new cartoons for a long while.

Taney finally said, “I can’t answer you, Jana, because the world keeps you safe.”

The old answer, the one they’d heard all their lives from Taney, from the cartoons. For the first time, Li challenged it. “How, Taney? How does the world keep us safe? Sudie still fell over that stone and you had to come and fix her arm. Jana ate that flower and all her food came out of her mouth.” The next day, all of that kind of flower, all over the world, had disappeared.

Taney merely repeated, “The world keeps you safe.”

Sudie said suddenly from her place against the tree, “Your voice is sad, Taney.”

Jana said, “When will we get new cartoons?”

But Taney was already getting to her feet, slow and heavy in her white covering. Even Kim knew what that meant. Kim climbed onto Taney's lap and started to lick frantically at Taney's face, and it took both Sudie and Li to pull her back. Kim was tall and strong. Taney said, as always, "Be well, dear hearts," and started away.

Li, clutching the screaming Kim, watched Taney walk the path between the trees until he couldn't see her anymore. The leaving door was in a big pink rock at the small end of the world, near the pond. Maybe tomorrow they would splash in the pond. That might be fun.

Except that nothing was as much fun as it used to be. Li didn't know why, but it was true.

Eventually Kim stopped screaming and they let her go. Jana folded and refolded the white paper bag Taney had left her, making pretty shapes. The sky overhead and beside the Grove darkened. The feeder with its three untouched bowls and one empty one sank into the ground. The blankets rose, clean even though last night Kim had shit hers again.

The four children wrapped themselves in blankets and lay down on the grass. Within minutes all were asleep in the circling grove of antiseptic palm trees that produced no fruit, and whose fronds never rustled in the motionless air.

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"Two-and-a-half enclosed acres. Double-built dome construction, translucent and virtually impenetrable. Negative air pressure with triple filters. Inside, semi-tropical flora, no fauna, monitors throughout. Life-maintenance machinery to be concentrated by the east wall within a circle of trees, including the input screen. All instructional programs to feature only cartoon characters in biohazard suits, to minimize curiosity about other people."

Katherine said, "Two-and-a-half acres isn't sufficient for a self-sustaining biosphere."

"Of course not, ma'am," the high-clearance DOD engineer said, barely concealing his impatience. "An outside computer will control all plant-maintenance and atmospheric functions."

"And personnel?"

“Once the biosphere is up and running, it will need little human oversight. Both functional and contact personnel will be your agency’s responsibility. Our involvement extends only to the construction and maintenance of the cage.”

“Don’t call it that!”

The engineer, whom Katherine knew she should be thanking instead of reprimanding, merely shrugged. His blue eyes glittered with dislike. “Whatever you say, ma’am.”

* * * *

Three days later, Taney didn’t come.

It was her *day*. But lunch came up on the feeder, and then dinner, and then the sky got dark, and the leaving door never opened. Kim sat staring at it the whole day, her mouth hanging open until Jana pressed it closed. Kim couldn’t talk or do much of anything, but somehow she always knew when it was Taney’s day. So she sat, while the others splashed in the pond and pretended to have fun.

All at once the water in the pond gave a small hiccup and sloshed gently onto the sandy beach.

“Did you feel that?” Sudie said. “The ground moved!”

“Ground can’t move,” Li said, because he was the leader. But it had. He waited for the ground to do something else but it just lay there, ground under water. Li got out of the pond.

“Where are you going?” Jana said.

“Feeder time,” Li said, although it wasn’t.

They pulled Kim to her feet and ran. By the time they reached the Grove, their naked bodies were dry. Li could feel his hair, which Taney sometimes cut, curling wetly on the back of his neck. Jana’s hair, shorter than his, stood up in yellow fluff that Li liked. Maybe Jana would want to play bodies with him tonight.

They sat in a circle under the trees, hungry and pleasantly tired from

splashing in the pond. Sudie studied the keypad under the screen, each button with a little picture on it, and chose the cartoon about four children helping each other to make sand paintings. Li was tired of that cartoon, although when it first appeared, they'd all loved it. Days and days had been spent making sand paintings with the many-colored sands on the beach by the pond.

The cartoon played, but only Kim really watched it. The feeder rose and—

“The bowls are empty!” Jana cried.

Li leaped up and examined the four wooden bowls. *Empty*. How could that be? Why would the feeder bring empty bowls?

The ground moved gently beneath them.

“The feeder is broken!” Sudie jumped up and ran to the keypad. Each of its buttons had a picture of a cartoon showing the right thing to do for eating, for playing, for cleaning themselves, for fixing bloody scratches if they fell, for not using up all their kindness if they got angry with each other. But nothing for a broken feeder, a thing that couldn't happen because the feeder was part of the world. But if there was an inside to the covering that was the world and therefore an outside then maybe—Li had never thought this before—maybe the feeder, like Taney, went outside and things *could* break there?

Cold slid along Li's neck. Kim started licking everyone's face, running from one to another. Li let her because Kim was stronger than he was and anyway he was used to it.

“I'm calling Taney,” Sudie said, but she looked questioningly at Li. Calling Taney was, they had all been told over and over, very serious. The only times they'd ever called her was when Sudie broke her arm and when Jana ate the bad flower and all her food came back up through her mouth. Only twice.

“Do it,” Li said, and Sudie pushed at the exact same time both buttons with Taney's picture.

* * * *

Katherine sat very erect, the back of her best suit not touching the

back of her chair, her face stone. A secret congressional hearing didn't scare her, veteran of far too many. But what this particular committee might decide, did.

"Dr. Taney, are they, in your expert opinion, the result of deliberate genetic experimentation?"

"Of course they are, Mr. Chairman."

"And intended by the enemy for use as a covert terrorist weapon against the United States?"

"The enemy does not inform me of its intentions."

"But if released, these things—"

"Children, Senator. And no one is suggesting releasing them."

"But—"

"They are children. Have you even seen them?" Katherine pressed the button on her purse. Equipment she should not have been able to get into the committee room suddenly flashed an image on the far wall. Four babies, three of them beautiful with skin pink or brown or golden, one with a shock of thick black hair and eyes already the color of coffee beans. They could have posed for a diversity poster. Smiling, plump-armed, adorable.

Lethal.

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Li hadn't expected Taney to come right away, maybe not until morning. He couldn't sleep. He didn't want to play bodies with Jana or Sudie. All night, it seemed, he lay in his blanket, listening to Kim breathe heavily beside him, her mouth open. And in the morning, the world broke.

It began with a big shake of the ground, much harder than yesterday, that would have knocked them all down if anyone had been standing. Next came a terrible grinding noise like scraping rocks together but so loud that Kim clapped her hands over her ears. Sudie screamed. Then the ground shook even more, and the sky cracked, and pieces fell down on Li.

He rolled over and shut his eyes tight. The noise went on and on. A tree fell over—he knew it was a tree even without looking, and that made him jump up and shout, “Get away from the Grove! Go! Go!”

No one moved. Another tree toppled and something went bang!

All at once, it was over.

Kim began licking Li’s face, then Jana’s. Sudie still screamed. Jana cried, “Stop that!” and hit her. Sudie stopped. Kim did not; she licked Sudie’s face until Sudie shoved her away.

Silence.

* * * *

“Children,” Katherine said into the silence. “And I have more pictures. So do others, who know these babies’ stories.”

The chairman leaned forward, his face colder than the medals on the chest of the general beside him. “Dr. Taney, are you saying you have breached national security by leaking this information to others? And further, that you are attempting to blackmail—”

“I attempt nothing, Mr. Chairman. I don’t have to. Secrets extend only so far, even secret terrorist weapons. Which these children are, in a long and shameful tradition. Children have been used to blow up American soldiers—and themselves—on four continents, to smuggle poisons into military camps, to deliver biological bombs. We all know that. Right now your impulse is to destroy these children as soon as researchers have taken enough blood and tissue samples. You want to destroy them partly because they are truly dangerous and partly to avoid widespread panic. With the war so recently ended, you don’t want the populace to know what the enemy was—and may still be—capable of, both technically and morally. That’s understandable. But—”

Katherine leaned forward, her gaze locked with the chairman’s. “But I am telling you, Senator Blaine, that your information chain is not secure, and that if you destroy these children—these innocent and very photogenic babies—that fact will become known. This administration—and your political party—has worked very hard to position themselves as the new world force that acts compassionately, that does the right thing. You’ve had a hard row to hoe in that regard,

given your predecessors' actions on the world stage. Do you really want to undo all that careful positioning by destroying four innocent children?"

The senator said angrily, "This is not a partisan—"

"Of course not," Katherine said wearily. "But you've already commissioned a feasibility study for a self-contained and completely secure dome to—"

"How do you know that, madame? How?"

She just stared at him. Then she said, in a different voice, "I was with the original team that extracted the children from behind enemy lines, and I just told you that your information chain is not secure. How would I not know?"

"Senator—grow up."

* * * *

Cautiously Li stamped one bare foot on the ground. It didn't move. He said, startled to hear his own voice so high, so squeaky, "Is anybody hurt?"

"No," Jana said. Sudie said, "Find the cartoon about the right thing to do if the world breaks."

"There's no cartoon for that," Jana said. She looked at Li. "What should we do?"

"I don't know," Li said, because he didn't. How could the *world* break?

"Let's go to the leaving door," Jana said. "Maybe Taney will come."

They wound their way to the far end of the world, Jana in the lead, Li lagging behind to look at everything. Trees fallen to the ground or leaning over. Big pieces of the sky on the ground—what if one of those had fallen on the Grove? And then, almost to the pond and the leaving door—

"Stop," Li said, and looked, and couldn't stop looking.

Sudie breathed, "What *is* it?"

Li took a long time to find the right words. "It's a crack in the world."

A narrow jagged break, just like when he cracked a stick on a hard stone. The break started at the ground and he could follow it with his eyes up the sky to a place where pieces of sky had fallen, making a white pile. Jana started toward the crack, stopped, started again. Li followed her. After a moment Kim darted after them both, frantically trying to lick their faces.

“Not now, Kim!” Li snapped. He stood beside Jana at the crack and they both peered through.

“What is it, Li?” Jana whispered.

“It’s ... it’s another world. Where Taney goes when she leaves us.”

Jana turned her thin body sideways and squeezed through. Li said, “No! You don’t—”

“We need to find Taney, don’t we?” Jana said.

Li didn’t know. He didn’t know anything any more. The world on the other side of the crack looked so different.... All at once he wanted to see more of it, see it all. He turned sideways and pushed himself through, scraping skin off his shoulders. Immediately Sudie and Kim began to howl.

“Stop that!” Jana said. “We’re going to find Taney! Sudie, push Kim through.”

Kim was the biggest but very strong and flexible; she wiggled herself through easily. Once out, she just stared from the tiny eyes in her broad, flat face. She didn’t even try to lick anybody. For once Li knew how Kim felt. He had walked a few steps away from the old world and he couldn’t stop staring.

Rocky, wrinkled ground stretched away on all sides—so much ground! Li’s stomach flopped; this world was so *big*. But empty. He saw no palms, no bushes, no flowers, nothing but ground that was red and white and brown, endless ground, and far, far away the ground rose up high, blue with white on top, and above that—

The sky of this world was blue, not white, and it went on forever. Forever, so high above that Li’s head wrinkled inside just like the ground. All this ... and Taney had never told them. Why not?

“Li, Sudie won’t fit,” Jana said. “She’s too fat for the break in the

world.”

Sudie had reached one arm through the crack and was frantically waving it and howling. Li wanted her to shut up; he wanted to go on looking and looking. The endless ground was covered with rocks, hundreds of rocks; for the first time, Li understood what the numbers cartoon meant by “hundreds.” Rocks red and white and gray and black, all sizes and shapes, some tiny as a thumb and some bigger than Li, some—

“Li, she won’t *fit*,” Jana said. Sudie howled louder. Jana said, “Oh, be quiet, Sudie, we’re not going to leave you. Li?”

“Tell her to go roll in the mud by the pond and get all wet and slippery.”

Sudie did, and eventually they pulled her through, although not without making blood come out on her arms and shoulders and hips. Sudie didn’t seem to mind the blood. But she took one look at the new world and promptly began howling again, plopping down onto the ground and covering her head with her bloody arms.

Something very bright came into the new sky over the top of the old world. Li tried to look at it and couldn’t; it hurt his eyes too much. Fear filled him.

Jana gasped, “What’s that? Sudie, shut up!” Kim began licking all their faces.

The bright thing didn’t seem to be falling on them. Li said, “I think ... I think it’s morning.”

“That’s silly,” Jana said. “Morning comes all over the whole sky at the same time.”

“Not in this world,” Li said. He felt a little dizzy, as if he’d been playing the spinning game. “Jana, this place is so *big*.”

“Then how are we going to find Taney? I think we should walk on the path.” She pointed.

Li had to turn his back on the morning and squint before he could see what she pointed at. A faint path, no more than a pressing down of rocks, led away from the real world. Closest to him, it had a broken pattern of triangles in the dust.

“Come on, Sudie,” Jana said. “Get up. We’re going to find Taney. Li, follow me and she’ll come, too.”

Li followed Jana, who didn’t look around but just walked fast on her thin, long legs. Sudie and Kim stumbled after them, Sudie complaining that all the stones on the ground hurt her feet. Jana seemed to have become the leader now, but Li didn’t care about that, or his feet. All he wanted to do was look and look.

Rocks, growing redder as the morning rose in the sky. The morning looked like a rock, too, brighter and brighter, so that looking at it for even a second hurt Li’s eyes. And there, on that flat rock...

Sudie started to scream again. Jana, who had used up all her kindness, hit her. The thing on the rock scurried away, underneath more stones. Li said, “Don’t hit Sudie, Jana!” at the same minute that Jana said, “I’m sorry. She won’t—what was that, Li?”

“It was alive, I think,” Li said uncertainly. “Like birds.”

“Then why didn’t it fly away?”

“I don’t know.” He had never seen anything alive except themselves, Taney, and the birds in the old world. A memory came, himself asking Taney, “*What do the birds eat?*” “*The world gives them food high up on the sky,*” she’d answered, “*just like the feeder gives you food. The world keeps you both safe.*”

They weren’t in that world anymore. Li said, “Watch out for other living things. Don’t step on any because you might hurt them. You might even make them dead.” They had all seen dead birds in the real world. Taney always took the bodies away with her.

They walked for a long time. The morning rock in the sky got brighter still. Something was wrong with the air; it got way too hot. Li was very thirsty but there was nothing to drink. They walked silently, even Sudie, and Li began to feel very afraid. The hard-to-see path didn’t seem to go anywhere. Why would there be a path that didn’t go anywhere? What if they couldn’t find Taney?

“Look,” Sudie said as they trudged over a low rise, “a big path!”

She was right, but this path was different: very wide and very straight

and very hot. Putting a foot on the black stone, Li yelped and immediately pulled it back. But immediately he forgot about the pain. Something was coming very fast along the path.

Sudie screamed until Jana raised her hand and Sudie stopped. Li could feel Jana tremble beside him. All four children huddled into a knot. The thing made a lot of noise, growing bigger and bigger until it stopped with the loudest noise yet and a person jumped out.

A person who was not Taney, and not in a slippery white covering or a faceplate. Again Li's mind wrinkled and dizzied. Even Sudie was too scared to make noise. The only one who moved was Kim, licking everyone's faces.

"Oh my God, you kids caught in the earthquake? What in hell happened to you? Jack, one of 'em's bleeding!"

Another person got out of the moving thing. Now Li could see that the thing wasn't alive, like the not-bird had been, but it still made puffing noises. The second person had a lot of hair growing on his face, which looked silly and scary. But his voice was kind. "Where's your folks? And your clothes? Sally, they look damn near dehydrated. Get the water. Kids, what happened?"

Jana said, "We have to find Taney."

"Taney? Is that a town?"

Jana said, Li wondering at her bravery, "Taney's a person. The world broke and before that the feeders didn't give us any food and we have to find Taney!"

The person with the hair on his face looked away from Jana. His face above the hair looked very red. The other person came hurrying toward them with a white thing in her hand. "Here, drink first. Jack, go get some sheets or something from the trunk. Poor kids must have been asleep when the quake hit, you know these hippie tourists just let their kids sleep buck naked, it's a disgrace but even so—"

Li stopped listening to her words, which after all didn't even make sense. The white thing was sort of like a food bowl closed at the top and sort of like the spring faucet in the real world, giving out water. Li passed it first to Kim, as always, who drank greedily, the water dribbling down her chest. Then Jana, then Sudie, and by the time it got to Li, he felt he couldn't

wait another moment. Nothing had ever tasted as good as that water, nothing.

The person called Sally handed a big thin blanket to Jana, who let it drop to the ground. "Put it on you, for God's sake," Sally said, and the kindness in her voice was getting used up.

Jack still not looking at them, said, "Sal, I think maybe they're in shock. Or maybe a little feeble-minded."

"Oh!" Sally said, and she looked at Kim, still trying to lick Sudie's face. "Oh, of course, poor things. Here, honey, let me help you." She picked up the blanket, tore it in half, and began to wrap Jana in it.

Jana pushed away. "It's not time to sleep!"

"Jana, let her," Li said. He didn't know what these people were doing, but the kindness had come back into Sally's voice, and they were going to need kindness, Li realized, to find Taney. This place was much different from the real world. Brighter and harder and hungrier and bigger.

From the corner of his eye he saw another of the not-birds watching him, stretched out on a flat gray rock. Its eyes were shiny and black as pebbles.

Sally tied blanket pieces around all of them and said, very slowly, "Now get out of this sun and into the car before you all broil. Honey, you're burning already, and bleeding, too. You get hit by debris in the quake?"

She was looking at Sudie, but Li answered. "She got scraped by the crack in the world."

"I knew it. Get in, get in!"

The "car" was just another covering, made of the same material as the place the sky met the ground in the real world. Inside the car, however, the air was more like the real world: cooler and not so bright. The four of them squeezed into a space in the back, and Sally and Jack climbed into the front space. Sally turned around.

"Now what all are your names?" She still spoke very slowly, making each word with her lips all pushed out.

Li said, "I'm Li. This is Jana and Sudie and Kim."

“Good,” Sally said, smiling wide as a cartoon person. “Now tell Aunt Sally what happened. How you got all alone out on the desert.”

Li said, “The ground shook last night and then this morning the world broke. We squeezed out through a crack in the sky and walked. We have to find Taney.”

“Is Taney a town, son?” Jack said.

Li didn’t know what a town was. “Taney’s a person. She takes care of us.”

“A foster mother?” Sally said.

Jack said, “I don’t think a foster mother could handle four retards, Sal. More likely some sort of institution. Might be in East Lancaster.”

“Doubt it,” Sally said. “East Lancaster got hit pretty hard by the depression, only been minimal facilities there for fifteen years, and now with the quake and all....”

“Well, them kids didn’t walk very far buck-naked in the desert,” Jack said. Li could hear that the kindness was getting used up in his voice. “Somebody must of took them camping or something. But I can’t go racketing around looking for some institution when we need to see how badly our place got hit. Best bring them home with us tonight and check the Internet for this ‘Taney.’”

“Right,” Sally said. “Kids, don’t worry, everything’ll be all right.”

Jack snorted.

The covering round them leapt forward and Sudie screamed. Jana pinched her hard and Sudie stopped, although she didn’t look any less terrified. Kim began licking Sudie’s face. Sally watched a minute and then turned away, the tips of her mouth turning down. Li didn’t want Sally’s kindness to get used up again. He leaned forward.

“Sally, thank you so much for the water. It was very good.”

“Oh, God, you’re welcome,” Sally said.

“My name is Li. Not God.”

Jack laughed. "He's not so dumb after all!"

* * * *

The "car" walked a long way, and everywhere on the long way looked the same. Li watched everything, inside and outside the car, until despite himself, he fell asleep. He woke up when the car stopped at a big square thing which, Li realized when they went inside it, was another world, with its own ground and sky. How many worlds were there?

"Still standing, by the grace of God," Sally said. "We're damn lucky. Jack, you get on that computer and start searching. Li, what did you say your last name was?"

"My name is Li."

"No, honey, your *other* name."

Li just stared. He had no other name. Jack sighed and went around a part of this world's sky. The place the children stood in was cool and dim, with large, funny-shaped rocks covered in blankets to sit on, and a feeder. The children crowded near it, waiting.

"Y'all are hungry, right?" Sally said. "Can't say as I blame you. Well, go ahead sit at the table and I'll rustle up something. A lot of smashed crockery in the kitchen, but that can wait."

This feeder was broken, too; no bowls rose from it. But apparently Sally had saved food from before it broke because she brought out big bowls. The food looked strange but tasted wonderful, and Li ate until his belly felt full and round. Afterward sleepiness took him again, and he stretched out on the floor beside Jana, who was making strange sounds in her throat.

"You got allergies, hon?" Sally said. "Never mind, I don't expect you to know. Jack, you making any progress in there?"

"Just over a million hits on 'Taney,' is all," Jack said, which made no sense. Nobody was hitting anybody. "This ain't going to be easy."

Li's throat felt strange, and not in a good way. Jana kept making strange noises in her throat. Li must have slept, because when he woke it was night again, and very dark. Something glowed in a far corner of the

room, and at first that scared Li. He lay on the ground, watching to see if the glowing thing moved. It didn't. Slowly he crawled toward it, until he could see that it was a tiny ball of morning, like the big one in the sky of the big world, but not so bright. Li touched it, and snatched back his finger. The tiny morning was hot.

Carefully he studied it. It was a made thing, like the pretty folded things Jana made from Taney's paper bags. Li's breath came faster. All these things were made: the feeder and the bowls and the blanket-covered rocks—"chairs" Sally had called them—to sit on, and maybe even the sky of this world.

Of any world.

Li's mind raced. He never got back to sleep. All the rest of the night he either crawled around, touching things and trying to figure out how they'd been made, or else lay still, thinking. His throat still hurt but he ignored it. *Made things*. Other people. Worlds within worlds.

When morning—the big morning—returned, the girls still lay sleeping on the ground. All of them breathed too heavily. Li stood, stretched, and went to look around the parts of sky that touched the ground for Jack and Sally.

Jack sat slumped over a small screen, which still glowed. Sally lay on the floor. Both of them were dead.

* * * *

Not here.

Katherine made another, equally futile tour of the biosphere, stumping heavily, leaning on her cane. She'd fallen two days ago, twisting her knee, which had led her to put off her visit to the children. Then had come the first quake, which had made her fall again as she hobbled across her living room. No one had predicted the second, massive quake.

She called again, knowing it was pointless. She'd seen the blood on the crack in the supposedly shatter-proof dome. The children had squeezed themselves through and set off, probably looking for her. They wouldn't get far, naked in the desert, without water. There was, by design, nothing within fifty miles of the biosphere. Scavengers, of air or ground, would get the bodies.

Tears welled in her eyes, behind the faceplate. *Stupid*. This was one solution, maybe the only solution, to a problem that could only grow as years passed. Katherine was nearly seventy—what would have happened after she could no longer carry on this long, painful fight? Some days she felt ninety. Some days she felt already dead, even as the world slowly revived itself from the bad years of the war.

Li, with his dark expressive eyes and quick mind ... delicate Jana, who in another world would have been a startling beauty ... funny emotional Sudie ... even Kim, afflicted with both Down's and autism ... even Kim she would miss. Her children. She'd had no other.

Katherine put herself through detox, leaving her biohazard suit behind, even as she doubted that detox was any longer necessary. She hobbled toward her car. The AC felt blessedly cool. Fifty miles to the village of Las Verdes, where a group of Native American descendents eked out a subsistence existence, survivors of past injustices just as the children had been of a future one. A mile outside Las Verdes, Katherine had built a house, which was now a pile of debris. The Indians would rebuild it for her; they were good at starting over. Although now there was no reason for her to stay.

Li. Jana. Sudie. Kim.

She drove home through a desert wavery with heat and tears.

* * * *

"Why don't the buttons have cartoon pictures on them?" Jana said.

"It isn't for cartoons," Li said slowly. They stood around the little screen where Jack had died. Li and Sudie had pulled him off the chair and laid him on the floor beside Sally, and Jana had covered the people with a blanket. Li didn't know why she'd done that, but it seemed a good thing to do.

The children had examined this world. It had four places, two with faucet springs. In those two places a lot of things were broken, and sharp pieces of clear sky had fallen down. Jana cut her foot on one piece, but it only bled a little. One of the places had more of the strange food, but not very much of it. They'd eaten it all.

"If the screen isn't for cartoons, what is it for?" Sudie said. She stood behind Li, breathing heavily into his neck, and her voice sounded ... thick,

somehow. Like food was stuck in her throat, although she said it wasn't.

"I don't know what it's for," Li said. "But we can't take it with us because it's tied to where this sky touches the ground."

"Take it with us? Where are we going?" Sudie sounded frightened and Kim began to lick her face.

Jana said, "We can't just walk like yesterday, Li."

"We're not going to walk. I watched Jack make the car go. I think I can do that."

"But where?"

"We'll go along the big path. There's no more food here, Jana. Maybe the path will take us to Taney."

Jana considered. "Okay. You're right, we can't stay here. We have to find Taney. But first fill those white bowls with water from the faucet spring."

They went out the leaving door and climbed into the car, lugging blankets and water. Sudie had untied the blanket from her body, but Li made her put it back on. "People here are different," he said. "They use up their kindness faster if you don't have blankets around you. Oh—wait!"

He went back inside and brought out a big armful of the blankets behind another leaving door in the biggest place. They were like the blankets around Jack and Sally, all shaped like bodies and fastened together with tiny little strings or hard bumps that Li had examined in great detail. "Put these coverings on you," he told the girls.

"Like Taney has," Sudie said happily, even though none of Jack's and Sally's coverings were slippery like Taney's. But some were white, and Sudie picked one of those.

Li turned the thing that Jack had turned to make the car go, and it started making noises. But it wouldn't go forward until he pushed down with his feet on the flat things on the car's ground. Then the car stopped.

"It's dead," Sudie said.

Li made it start again, and pushed the flat things. The car stopped. "Maybe I should just push one."

The car raced away so fast that Sudie screamed, even Jana gasped, and Kim started licking everyone frantically. Li pushed on the other flat thing and the car stopped.

Eventually he figured out how to make it go-stop-go-stop-go-stop, and they started down the wide dusty path, under the hot ball of morning high in the sky, to look for Taney.

* * * *

“—eight point one on the Richter scale, slightly higher than the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. The president has declared southern California a federal disaster area, and the Department of Domestic Rescue is mobilizing to—” Katherine turned off the car radio.

She drove past the village. Las Verdes—a bitter joke of a name, if there ever was one—had gotten off fairly lightly because when all buildings were one-story adobe brick, collapse was quick and clean. No fires, no burst gas mains, no floods. The underground spring, the only reason this village existed at all, was still there, although the well-house had crumbled. The windmills and lone cell tower lay on their sides; TV satellite dishes littered the rubble; somewhere a woman wailed, a high keening borne on the thin wind.

Katherine’s house was a pile of dirt, but the shed in the back yard still stood. Under its deceptive façade of cheap plastic was a reinforced steel frame, thief-proof and, unlike the biosphere dome, far too small to crack. She let herself inside with the key around her neck. A generator-powered computer running encrypted, military-grade software sat on a table that nearly filled the small space. It had a direct uplink to a military satellite.

TOP SECRET

CODE WORD ACCESS ONLY

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

CASE NO. 254987-A

CODE NAME: ACHILLES

DATE: 6/12/28

AGENT IN CHARGE: SIGMA INVESTIGATOR K.M. TANEY

SUBJECT: DEATH OF GM JUVENILE AGENTS

* * * *

She typed swiftly, sent the report, and turned off the computer. With a second key, Katherine turned a small lock set into the machine's side. She closed the door, hobbled back to the car, and drove several hundred feet away. Five minutes later, the shed exploded.

Now there was nothing to keep her here at all.

Nonetheless, she drove toward Las Verdes. The village had regarded Katherine with neither kindness nor suspicion. Mostly it had let her be: one more crazy white inexplicably in love with the inhospitable desert, wasting her time making bad paintings of rocks and sunsets, supported by means beyond their world. Still, the trunk of her car held medical supplies, among other things; perhaps she could help.

* * * *

The car stopped going and Li couldn't make it start again no matter what he did. "Is it broken?" Sudie said. "Like the feeder and the world?"

"Yes," Li said. He opened the door; it was getting very hot inside. It was hot outside, too. The four children got out and sat in the brief shade on one side of the dead car, trying to not touch its burning side.

Jana started to say something, stopped, took Li's hand.

He gazed out across the big world, glanced briefly at the hot ball of morning in the big sky, and anger grew in him. All this—all this had been out here all the time, and Taney had never let them have it. All this, and now that they had found it, they were going to die here. Li knew it, and he guessed that Jana knew it, too. Sudie and Kim did not. But Kim might have known something, deep in her different head, because she crawled over Sudie and began to lick Li's face.

He pushed her away and dropped Jana's hand. His kindness, he knew, was all used up. He didn't want to die.

"I'm so thirsty," Sudie said. No one answered.

A long time later Sudie said, "Look at those big birds up there. Flying around and around in circles. Why are they doing that, Li?"

"I don't know," Li said.

Jana said, "Something is coming on the big path. There." She pointed.

Li strained his eyes. Finally he saw a sort of wiggle in the air—how could Jana see so far?—with a black dot in it. The dot got bigger and bigger and then it turned into another "car" but big, enormous, so that Sudie whimpered and tried to hide behind Li. The car stopped and a person got out.

"What the ... what happened here, son?"

"This car stopped," Li said. He stood. The man didn't have hair on his face like Jack, and his voice sounded more like Taney's.

"*You* were driving? Where's your folks?"

Li didn't know what "folks" might be; everything in this world was so strange. He said, "We have to find Taney."

"But your parents ... hell, get out of the sun, first. We can help you, son. We're Department of Domestic Rescue. Climb in."

Inside the big car was another little world, with chairs and blankets and a feeder. A woman gave them water and said, "Baker, where did they come from?"

Baker sat at another of the little screens and did something to it. "They said 'Taney,' but GPS isn't giving me anything like that."

"Well, we're due in Las Verdes like, *now*. Shall I drive? And while you're on-line, is there any more email on why we're being diverted to an ass-end hole like Las Verdes when real population centers are screaming for help?"

"No. Presumably Las Verdes has an emergency situation."

"Two states have an emergency situation, Baker. Why the priority-one diversion to Las Verdes?"

“Ann, ours is not to reason why—”

“Oh, roast it. I’ll drive.”

Baker gave them all food, and Li fell asleep on the moving ground of the car. When he woke, Baker and Ann were leaving the big car. “You stay here, Li,” Baker said. “Safest and coolest inside, and we’ve got work to do. We’ll get you sorted out tonight, I promise. Okay, buddy?”

There was kindness in Baker’s voice, so Li said, “Yes.”

“You could maybe ... I know! Here.”

Baker did something to the car’s sky, and all at once a screen came down, glowed, and made *cartoons*. Sudie squealed with joy. A cartoon bird—how could cartoons have birds, not just people?—flew toward the hot ball of morning in the sky, chased by a person. Sudie, Kim, and Jana crowded close.

Li watched through the clear place in the car’s sky as Baker and Ann walked toward piles of dirt and crying people. He watched for a long time. The hot ball of morning sunk down into the ground (how did it do that?) and the sky turned wonderful colors, purple and red and yellow. Baker and Ann came in and out, carrying things out with them. On one coming in, Ann touched a place on the wall and morning came inside the car’s world, although not in the big world outside. The girls watched the cartoons, too absorbed to even laugh. Li looked outside.

Figures moved in and out of houses made of blankets, some of which Ann had folded. Little bits of morning lighted the blanket houses. And by that light, as he peered out of the car with his nose pushed flat against it, Li saw her.

“Taney!”

* * * *

Her back ached. She had moved too much, lifted too much, grown too old for this sort of field work. For any sort of field work. But everything was done that could be done tonight. Under the capable direction of the DDR agents, Ann Lioni and Baker Tully, the wounded had been treated, the homeless housed in evac inflatables, the spring water tested and found safe. Everyone had been fed. Tomorrow the dead would be buried. Katherine looked up and saw a ghost at the window of the DDR mobile.

No. Not possible.

But there he was.

Li waved his arms and Katherine, dazed, half lifted her hand before she let it drop. *How ...* But it didn't matter how. What mattered was that Lioni and Tully, that everyone here, that Katherine herself, were already dead.

* * * *

The leaving door wouldn't open. It wouldn't *open*, no matter how Li pushed it. He cried out in frustration and shoved Sudie, who was making everything harder by pushing the door in a different direction from Li. But then he got the door open and tumbled down the square rocks made of sky material and he was with Taney, throwing his arms around her waist, Sudie and Jana and Kim right behind him. Kim started licking Taney's face, jumping up in mute excitement.

"Taney! Taney!"

"You found us!"

"You lost your covering! I can touch you!"

"Taney, the world broke and we came out! It broke!"

"Taney! Taney!"

"You know these kids?" Baker said behind Taney. She turned, Li and Sudie still clinging to her, and Baker said in a different voice, "Doctor—what is it?"

"We ... they ... Kim, *stop!*"

They had never heard that voice from her before. Li, startled, stepped back. But then Taney's kindness was back, although she sounded very sad.

"Li, take the others back inside the trailer. I promise I'll come in just a little while, okay? Just everybody go inside."

They went, of course; this was *Taney*. Jana and Li stared at each

other. Sudie went back to watching the cartoons still showing on the screen. Kim pressed her nose against the clear sky-metal to watch Taney, mutely following her every tiny movement in the gathering dark. Li joined Kim.

A woman ran up to Taney and Baker, waving her arms and shouting.

* * * *

“Experiments?” Baker Tully said, bewildered and angry and, Katherine could see, terrified. As well he should be. “Bioweaponry experiments?”

“From the very end of the war,” Katherine said. “Intelligence discovered the operation and we sent in two entire battle groups five days before the surrender.”

“And Ann—” He couldn’t say it. It had been hard to pull him away from Ann Lioni’s body, lying crumpled between a DDR inflatable and the ruins of an adobe house. Beside her, incongruously, lay an unbroken planter filled with carefully watered dahlias. Now Katherine and Baker stood behind the huge mobile, away from the others. She looked at his young, suddenly ravaged face, dimly lit by a rising gibbous moon, and she thought, *I can’t do this.*

He had courage. He got out, “How long? For me, I mean?”

“I don’t know for sure. The only tests we could run, obviously, were on animals. When did you and Ann first pick up the children?”

“About six hours ago. Give it to me straight, doctor. *Please.* I have to know.”

She saw what he was doing: looking desperately for a way out. All his training, like hers, had taught him that the way out of anything was information, knowledge, reasoning. But not this time.

I can’t do this.

She said, “I have to sit down, I’m sorry ... knee injury.” She eased herself onto the ground, partly cutting off the illumination from the floodlamps, so that they sat in shadowed darkness. That should have made it easier, but didn’t.

“A virus in their breath gets into the bloodstream from the victim’s lungs and makes a targeted, cytopathic toxin. When the virus has replicated enough for the toxin to reach a critical level, it stops the heart. And the virus is highly contagious, passed from person to person.”

“So everyone here—”

“Yes,” Katherine said quietly.

“I don’t understand!” All at once he sounded like a child, like Li. Simultaneously Katherine shuddered and put a hand on his arm. Baker shook it off. “I just don’t understand. If that’s all true, the virus would spread through the whole country, killing everybody—”

“The—”

“—and then the whole world! The enemy would have killed themselves, too!”

“No,” Katherine said. Her knee began to throb painfully. “There are racial differences among genomes. Small differences, and not very many, but enough. Think of genetic diseases: Tay-Sachs among Jews, sickle-cell anemia among Blacks. We’ve found more, and much more subtle. This virus exploits a tiny difference in genetic structure, and so in cellular functioning, in anyone with certain Caucasian-heritage genes. Tully—”

“The Indians here...”

She peered at his face, shrouded in night, and loved him. She had just told him he was going to die, and he had a soul generous enough to think of others. She started to say, “Depends on whether any of their ancestors intermarried with—” when his rage overcame his generosity.

“You’re a fucking geneticist! You and the entire United States government couldn’t come up with an antidote or vaccine or something!”

“No. Do you think we didn’t try?”

“Why didn’t you kill them all as soon as you found them?”

Katherine didn’t answer. Either he hadn’t meant the question, or he had. If it had been just more terrified rage, she certainly didn’t blame him. If he meant it, nothing she could say would make it clear to him.

He said bitterly, “There were political considerations, right? Ten years ago it was fucking President DuBois, working so hard to undo the wrongs of the previous screw-ups, ending the war with compassion, re-establishing our fucking position as the so-called moral leader of the world, and so now Ann is dead and I have to....” Abruptly his anger ran out.

She waited a long moment and then uttered what she knew to be, the moment she said it, the stupidest, most futile statement of her entire life. “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t hear it. She sat dreading his reply, and it was a full minute, more, before she realized there wouldn’t ever be one. Baker Tully still sat with his head thrown back in fury and anguish against the mobile’s rear wheel, but when she felt for his wrist, there was no pulse.

Six hours, then, from the time of initial exposure.

He was too heavy for her to move, but nobody would find him there before morning. She returned to the tent where the villagers had laid Ann Lioni’s body and told everyone that Baker was mourning alone, in the trailer. Katherine checked on the patients in the medical tent, issued instructions, and drank coffee to stay awake for the few hours until everyone else slept. Then she removed the distributor caps from the three working vehicles in the small camp and carried them with her inside the DDR mobile, where the children waited.

* * * *

“Why doesn’t she come? Why doesn’t she come? Why doesn’t she come?” Sudie made the words into a song, and it made Li’s face itch. But he didn’t let his kindness get used up. Maybe the song helped Sudie wait.

Eventually, however, she fell asleep, and so did Kim. Jana and Li waited. In the light from the car’s sky, Jana’s hair looked yellow as the big morning. She smelled bad because none of them had splashed in a pool since the first world broke, but Li put his arms around her anyway, just to feel her warmth.

Finally—finally!—the door opened and Taney came in. This time Li really looked at her, at Taney without her covering. Her face was wrinkled. Her eyes sagged. She walked as if something was broken, pulling herself up the square sky-metal rocks by holding onto the edge of the leaving door. Slowly she sat on a chair. Li’s heart filled with love.

“Taney,” Jana said softly, breaking free of Li’s arms and climbing onto Taney’s lap. “I knew we’d find you.”

“No, you didn’t,” Li said. He sat on the ground at Taney’s feet. “Taney, I have a lot of questions.”

“I’m sure you have, dear heart,” Taney said, and there was something wrong with her voice. “So do I. Let me ask mine first.”

So Li and Jana told her about the break in the world, and Jack and Sally, and sitting beside the broken car on the wide hot path when Ann and Baker came along. Sudie snored and Kim whuffed in her sleep.

“Taney, why were we in that world and not this one?” Li said.

“Tell you what, I’ll answer all your questions in the morning,” Taney said. “I’m very tired right now and so are you. Look, Jana’s almost asleep! You lie down here and sleep. I’m going to see about the other people once more.”

“Okay,” Li said, because he was sleepy.

Taney kissed them all, covered them with blankets, and left. Li heard the leaving door make a noise behind her.

* * * *

A voice in Katherine’s head said, *Even the most passionate minds are capable of trivial thoughts during tragedy.*

Standing there in the dark, it took her a long moment to identify the speaker: Some professor back in college, droning on about some Shakespearian play. Why had that random memory come to her now? She even recalled the next thing he said: that only third-rate dramatists put children in peril to create emotion, which was one reason Shakespeare was infinitely superior to Thomas Hardy.

That professor had been an ass. Children were always the first ones put in peril by upheavals in the world. But not like this ... not like this.

She unscrewed the gas cap of the DDR mobile and drew the lighter from her pocket. Used for starting campfires at the center of the kindling, it could flick out a long projection that generated a shower of sparks. The village’s distributor caps were inside the mobile. Baker’s body lay beside it.

Everybody else, marooned here, would be dead by morning, except those with no European ancestry in their genes. And although she'd spent the ten years in Las Verdes mostly keeping to herself, Katherine was pretty sure no such Indians existed in the small village. If they did, they might conceivably be turned into carriers, like Li and Jana and Kim and Sudie, but Katherine didn't think so. The children had been designed to be carriers. Their genomes showed many little-understood variations. The enemy, free from laws against genetic experimentation, had done so with a vengeance.

When all hosts died, so did their viruses.

She clicked the lighter and the projection snaked out, already glowing. Her hand moved toward the fuel tank, then drew back.

I can't.

But what were the alternatives? Let the children, locked inside, die of starvation. Or, either if they were picked up by other people or if Li somehow learned to drive the mobile as he had Jack's car, to let them infect more people, who would infect still others, until the air-borne virus with a 100 percent kill rate had, at a minimum, wiped out two continents. Who in hell could decide among those three choices?

Katherine had fought for these children's lives, had tended them for ten years, had loved them as her own. What mother would choose the deaths of her children over the fate of the world?

What rational human being would not?

Hail Mary, Mother of God. ... More useless words, rising out of her distant past like subterranean rocks in an earthquake. Her hand again moved toward the fuel tank, again drew back.

She couldn't do it. It was physically impossible, like suddenly flying up into the air. And in less than a few hours she, too, would be dead, and none of this would matter to her any longer. That, too, was a choice: to do nothing.

From beyond the ruined village came wailing, many voices at once. So everyone hadn't gone to sleep, after all. The Indians were holding a ritual mourning for the three dead in the quake. Sudden light flared in the darkness: a bonfire.

Katherine clicked off the lighter and sank hopelessly to the ground. In

a moment she would do it, in just another moment. The explosion would be violent and instantaneous; the children would not suffer ... in just a moment. There was no other choice. Light found its way to her eyes, and she closed them because in such a world there should not be even the flickering light of the bonfire, let alone the steady lying beauty of the silver moon in the wide desert sky.

* * * *

She woke at dawn. Cold, stiff, shivering—but alive.

With enormous effort, Katherine got to her feet. Limping, she made her way to the medical tent. Everyone in it was dead. So were the villagers in the emergency inflatables, and an old man lying beside the ashes of the bonfire. Only Katherine lived.

Trembling, she hobbled back to the mobile, climbed the steps, and unlocked the door. Only Kim was awake, tearing at a loaf of bread with her small sharp teeth. She took one look at Katherine, dropped the bread, and began to lick Katherine's face. Katherine, stretched almost to breaking, started to shove Kim away ... and stopped.

No. Not possible.

Li woke. "Taney!" he said, rubbing his dark eyes. "I was sleeping."

"Yes." It was a croak. Li noticed ... those dark eyes, that quick little mind, missed nothing.

"You said you will answer my questions today."

"Yes." Her arms were tight around Kim, so tight the child squirmed. When had Katherine put her arms around Kim, who usually had to be shoved away? She couldn't remember, couldn't think.... She got out, "Li, when does Kim lick people's faces?"

"When she thinks they're sad or angry or hurt. Taney, you said it was my turn to ask questions today."

"Yes."

He crowded close to her, smelling terrible. "You said the first world was to keep us safe. But the feeder broke and we were hungry and then the first world broke, Taney, it *broke*, and all this other world was out here. Why

did you say the first world would keep us safe?”

“A safeguard,” Katherine said, and wasn’t sure what she was saying. “Oh, the bastards—an antidotal safeguard for the first researchers. In her saliva.”

“What?”

“Thousands of compounds in saliva. We couldn’t possibly have tested them all.”

“*What—*”

“Taney,” Jana said sternly from the floor, “stop crying. There’s nothing to cry about. We found you.... Stop it, please, Taney, stop it before my kindness gets all used up.”

* * * *

The real fight was just beginning, she knew that. It would rage on so many fronts: medical, military, political, even journalistic if they drove her to that. So much energy would be required, so much strategy. She had won ten years ago but she was older now, and much more tired.

Nonetheless, her mind was already marshalling arguments. The enemy’s research division had been thoroughly destroyed, and so had its personnel. But there was no guarantee that the bombs had actually gotten them all; there had never been any guarantee. The enemy was supposedly our ally now, but if the world situation changed again ... and things always changed. A biological antidote was the first step toward a vaccine ... *No, Mr. President, tissue samples cannot provide the same mechanisms as a living organism....*

Katherine, driving the DDR mobile across the Mojave, glanced back over her shoulder at Kim, the only ugly and unappealing child of the four. Kim, erratic about controlling her bowels, screaming like a stuck siren, forever licking the faces of people she loved. A child no one would want, a child likely to have been stuck in the back ward of some institution somewhere, while the other three babies would have been adopted, cuddled, loved. Kim, now the most important child on the planet.

“It’s my turn now!” Jana said.

“In a minute,” Li answered, just as the computer said, “Cat. ‘Cat’ starts with ‘c.’ Say ‘kuh’ for ‘c.’”

“Kuh,” Li and Jana said simultaneously, and the computer broke into congratulatory song. Li and Jana laughed with excitement.

Sudie suddenly appeared beside the driver’s seat. “Taney,” she said seriously, “Now that the real world got broke, are you going to keep us safe?”

Medical fights, military fights, political fights, journalistic fights. Katherine’s knee throbbed. The desert shimmered in front of her, murderous with heat, the earthquake disaster behind. Katherine was nearly seventy years old, and her knee hurt.

“Yes, dear heart, I am,” she said, and drove on across the desert, toward the next world.