

PRELUDE

To the Eldest and her sisters, the glass that protected their narrow gallery from sky and weather was as plain to "see" as the dark walls that shielded them from public view. Their senses were not quite of the human kind, and it was not difficult for them to register the infrared that glowed from both sorts of solid surface. Yet they could also respond to visible wavelengths, and thus they could watch both the swayings of the overhanging palm fronds and citrus branches that tempered the bright sunlight and the movements of tree limbs and clouds and sun beyond the glass.

They could also feel. They could feel temperature and dry and wet, and if they could, they would have smiled when the pipes that arched between their shade plants and the glass spewed misting showers to keep the dryness from their leaves and blossoms and the rich soil that embraced their bulbs.

The Eldest and her sisters could hear as well, but they could not speak. They could not, in fact, communicate in any ways that humans would easily have understood. They talked to each other by the slight bendings of their stems, the curlings of their leaves, and mainly by the drifts of fragrance that rode the steady current of air that flowed from the Eldest down the gallery past all the rest. In due time, when the air had swept through all the other passages of their dwelling, those odors would return. But they would be diluted then, spread out and weakened, and of course delayed. The Eldest thus spoke always with the first and loudest voice, and no sister could threaten her dominance. So long as no one rearranged the gallery or tampered with the ventilation system, so the situation would remain. And so long as the Eldest gave no orders for change, their ordered rank and the air currents that swept their messages along the gallery would be undisturbed. She would, of course, order no disturbance of the status quo, for much of her heredity dictated a properly hierarchical sense of her own importance in the larger scheme of things.

Now the Eldest let a long leaf curl and straighten while she twisted on her stem to peer down the gallery and be sure she had the attention of her sisters. She might have sighed if she had had lungs. Those sisters...She was the Eldest by only a little. All had had time to reach their full growth. But only she had reached a size consistent with maturity. The others were small and stunted. Some were deformed in minor, inconsequential ways. And the next generation would have to be worse. Certainly it could be no better. Unless...

Finally, she released a small puff of intricately intermingled odors. Her message was simple, and each member of her retinue added to it comments, so that what the listener furthest downdrift sensed was something rather like:

"WE ARE HANDICAPPED
Cannot leave our beds
Destiny and progeny demand
No handicap
Motility
THINK
Consider

OUR MASTER/PET
Has/had pistil/mate
And scion/seedling/sprout
THAT ONE TOO HAS
Yes, pistil/mate
Let's bring!
Them here!
YES
To us
To study them
And cherish them
To change
If possible
To make them make
Pollen
We crave it!
Yes, fruition
And predestined
Success
IF POSSIBLE
Will these three be enough?
TELL, THEN, MASTER/PET
To get more as well
As rootstocks
And pistils
For our dreams"

The conversation was not hasty, for the speakers were languid beings, unrushed and patient. But by the time the sun had dipped near the hills and the light had begun to dim, the issue was settled. The Eldest and her sisters spread their leaves and turned their faces toward the last of the light. There was nothing more to say, and only a little to do, a little that could easily await another sunny day, when energy waxed and opportunity arose. Tomorrow the Eldest would issue the necessary orders.

Until then, she and her sisters would spend their time in dreams, dreams of some distant day when their scions/seedlings/sprouts might stalk the world beyond the walls that enclosed their gallery, when more active beings would cease their scurryings and bow before them, when...

Darkness fell, but before the dreams grew still and dim, the Eldest sent out the call. Moments later, a hand fell upon the switch near the gallery entrance and artificial lights came on. They were dim but bright enough to sustain consciousness, intent, and dreams even when the world was lost in blackness.

CHAPTER 1

"Do you have the new Slugabeds?"

"Of course we do, Ma'am." Tom Cross smiled at the customer and tugged surreptitiously at the side of his light green coverall. She was old enough to be his mother, and her paisley coverall was both three years behind the fashion and a hair too tight. Yet she was stylish enough in other ways; she

wore no rings or earrings, and the chain around her neck was blackened aluminum, its pendant a classic pewter peace sign, both as current as could be. She must, he thought, hate to admit that she was losing her struggle to keep the figure of her youth. "Right this way, please."

She babbled, as customers tend to do: "We have an antique waterbed, you know. And it doesn't leak. But I saw the ad, and I thought how interesting it would be. Almost like having a pet. And it wouldn't have to be plugged in."

Tom didn't know she had a waterbed, antique or new. He didn't care whether she had seen an ad, or how interesting she thought a Slugabed might be. It was enough that she had chosen to visit Mr. Greengenes' Appliance Garden. And that he had a chance to earn a commission. Someday, perhaps, he would have a Garden of his own. For now...

He gestured at the potted plants they were passing. "Then you don't have any bioppliances? Our hanky bush is quite useful. And the bathroom model is very productive."

"Oh, we have one of those. But it doesn't do much, you know?"

"Neither does a Slugabed. It just lies there."

"But it's warm! And it wiggles. That's what the ad said."

The young man nodded. "If you wish. It'll massage you, or cuddle you, or..." He shrugged. "And yes, it keeps itself--and you--at body temperature. It'll warm you or cool you, depending on the weather."

The Slugabed display was around the next corner, just past the goldfish bushes. "These are more active," he said. "Just drop the flowers in a bowl of water, and..."

"My sister has two."

He sighed as quietly as he could, hoping she would not notice, and led her onward. "There," he said. "We have a good selection." The Slugabeds, looking like unrolled sleeping bags, were arrayed on a carpeted platform, without frames or headboards or box springs. They came in all sizes--crib, youth, twin, queen, king--and in as many shades of skin as one could see on a city street. A few were even piebald.

The customer leaned over to pat a light tan Slugabed. Over her shoulder blades, Tom could now see, her coverall had been embroidered with small wings. His own coverall bore no decorations other than the darker green figures woven into the fabric. "They're not very thick, are they?" she asked.

"They don't have to be. Try one, and you'll see."

She looked skeptical. "And the surface. I expected..."

"Something slimy?" When she stiffened, he thought that of course that was precisely what she had half expected, in the back of her mind, even as she craved to rest on the leading edge of fashion. He added, "Well, the basic genome did come from a slug. But then they added the genes for a real skin. And warm blood."

"It feels just like human skin, without the hair." She giggled at a thought. "Or the stubble."

"I believe it's a modified pigskin. Very smooth, very soft."

She lay down. The Slugabed twisted under her, fitting itself to the contours of her body. It did not wrap around her, but rather cupped and cradled her as if she lay in the palm of some giant lover's hand. It made Tom think of Muffy Bowen. They weren't married, but they lived together, and she would be at home now, looking forward to his return. He wished that he were there now, and that he could afford a Slugabed for their bedroom, and that...He sighed, more loudly this time.

It was not the customer's body that made him think of Muffy, but the way the Slugabed embraced her, and the way the ripples ran through the bioppliance's substance, and the way she responded. Her nipples had erected quite visibly.

The Slugabed's skin, he knew, was as soft and smooth as that of a baby's butt. He had lain down on one when they first arrived and been depressed for a week. He wanted a child; Muffy didn't; that was the greatest flaw in their relationship.

"Ooh!" the customer said. "I see what you mean. What do you feed it?"

"It absorbs your sweat and body oil and skin flakes. If that's not enough..." Tom Cross pointed to a patch of skin near her head. It was slightly lighter in color than the rest of the Slugabed. "This spot turns bright pink, and you pour some milk on the bed, or gravy, or..." He shrugged. "Instructions come with it."

He pointed to a small bump on the skin beside the hunger patch. "That's the control node. Try squeezing it." When she obeyed, the Slugabed fell away from her body and lay flat, quiet and passive, a mere mattress.

"Oh!" she said. She squeezed the node again, and the genimal once more molded itself to her.

"If you squeeze harder," said Tom, "it'll massage you."

"Can you squeeze too hard?"

"The instructions warn against trying. It tries to scale its response to your command, and..."

She was ignoring his answer. She forced the living mattress flat with her hands, rolled on it, patted it, stroked it. "They don't come with fur, do they?" He shook his head, thinking to himself that fur would make feeding a messy business. She rolled over again and pressed her face into the Slugabed's surface. Then, finally, she sat up and said, "I think I'll take it. You do deliver?"

The Slugabed display was near the back of the store. After Tom Cross had written up the sale and arranged for delivery, he fetched a basket of apples and a bottle of nutrient spray from the nearby supply room. He was a salesman, but among his duties he also counted the chore of feeding the inventory.

The spray was for the Slugabeds, and it took him only minutes to distribute their rations. The apples were for the garbage disposals that sat in a row near the wall, held erect by U-shaped brackets. Each of the engineered pigs had a barrel-shaped body, stubby, nearly vestigial limbs, and a blunt snout that pointed toward the ceiling. Once it was installed in a customer's kitchen, the drainpipe from the sink would empty into its mouth and throat. It would then chew up whatever chunks the owner chose to put down the drain, extracting nutrient as necessary. The residues--solid and liquid--would pass through the genimal and into a second pipe. Here, in the Garden, the

garbage disposals were connected only to the outlet pipes, short stubs that jutted upward from a larger pipe that ran beneath their row. Water ran continuously through this pipe. Odor was limited to the animal fragrance of the genimals' bodies.

Tom stuffed an apple into each pig's mouth. When the grinding noises had quieted, he gave the larger models a second helping. Then, the basket still in his hands, he made his rounds of the store, gathering overripe pie plant and sammitch bush fruits, withered goldfish blooms, yellowed leaves, and other organic garbage. He could feed it all to the pigs, he knew, and sometimes he did. But the Garden also stocked litterbugs. They were street and yard cleaners, designed to process huge quantities of dung and other litter, and all he had to do was dump the basket's contents before them. Their shovel jaws made short work of his gleanings. When they were done, he scattered walnut-sized feed pellets on the floor of their pen. The store simply didn't generate enough litter to satisfy their needs.

Tom's boss was a Ukrainian immigrant who liked to brag of his prosperity. Looking sadly down at his flat belly, he would shake his head slowly back and forth and say, "My grandmother would be ashamed of me. In *her* day, a successful merchant would be *fat*!" But not him. He had, he would add, left the homeland just in time. The Ukraine had once been a breadbasket, but climate change had made it a dustbowl, and those of his relatives who were still there were starving. He did not say that many would be dead already if he did not send money, but Tom knew. Tom also knew that the amounts he sent were what kept him lean.

Albert Mettnitzky spent most of his time in an upstairs office. He displayed his own green coverall on the floor of his Greengenes franchise only when there were too many customers for Tom to handle or, as now, when it was time to lock up for the day.

"It's been a good day, Tommy. A good day. You go home now, and kiss that Muffy for me."

Tom grinned. He said almost the same words every day. "I'll do that, Bert. See you tomorrow."

Tom Cross grimaced as the damp heat beyond the store's door reminded him of the quiet hum of the heat pump that kept the store cool in summer and warm in winter. He grimaced again when he smelled...

Some days, the sidewalk in front of the store was totally blocked by Engineer demonstrators. Today, there was only one, wearing a blue coverall streaked with sweat stains, new and old. He wore a golden cogwheel, the emblem of the cult-like movement, on his breast pocket. His beard was unkempt and his body lean to the point of emaciation. His red-rimmed, glaring eyes refused to settle long on any particular part of the scenery, bouncing from the store's display windows to the traffic of gengineered vehicles in the street to the pedestrians, most of whom did not share his obsession. He smiled only when he saw one of the rare automobiles whose owners could afford fuel and hand-made parts. Most of the old vehicles had long since lost their original bodies to rust. The sheet metal was usually replaced with hand-crafted wood and gleaming varnish.

The Engineer did not smile for bicycles, for they were too common. Though they were mechanical, their virtues of simplicity and convenience had let them survive intact the transition to a technology centered on biology.

The picketer's sign said simply "MACHINES, NOT GENES!" Most Engineers

expressed their hatred of the gengineering that had supplanted the Machine Age more violently. Full-scale demonstrations were often marked by litterbug barbecues or Roachster bakes.

Tom stood in the Garden's doorway long enough to watch the man pace slowly past him, turn, and pace back as far as the strip of green that separated the Garden from the electronics store next door. That strip was heavily overgrown with the honeysuckle vines that had appeared everywhere in the past year or so, and the vines, as always, bore a heavy crop of blossoms the size of small wineglasses. Each one held a mouthful of nectar, self-fermented and laced with a mildly euphoric drug.

The picketer plucked a blossom and drained its load of honeysuckle wine. His eyes promptly glazed. Tom shook his head and walked around the man. At the corner, he boarded a Bernie, a modified Saint Bernard with a passenger pod on its back. A few blocks later, he was on the street again, and whistling as he approached his apartment building. He was looking forward to the little time he would have with Muffy. She was still what she had been when he first had met her, the Spider Lady at The Spider's Web. An exotic dancer, necessarily a night worker, and one with a following, too. But he was the only one of her fans to...

A high-backed Armadon, mad offspring of a gene-splicer and an armadillo, clattered down the road away from him. Like Roachsters, Armadons had wheels grown from their shells; their legs ran backwards atop the wheels to turn them, and that was what made the clatter. It had been parked near his own front door, but that did not disturb him. This was city, and the streets were lined with Roachsters, Hoppers, Beetles, and other vehicles. There were even a few internal combustion antiques.

He only glanced at the knee-high evergreen shrubs that lined the walkway between the sidewalk and the entrance to his building. He paid even less attention to the ancient paneling in the building's small lobby, or the carved moldings, or the marble floor beneath his feet. He had registered the building's signs of age when he and Muffy had first moved in, pegged them as too-ample sign that the place was a dump, and forgotten them. Now the building was home, even if there were three flights of stairs between the street and their apartment. He usually paused only long enough to see if Muffy had fetched the mail and to unlock the glass door.

This time, however, Tom ignored the rack of mailboxes to his right. The glass door was shattered, and the shards lay at the foot of the stairs, beyond the frame. Someone had not waited to be buzzed in, or to get out their key. It seemed, quite simply, that they had walked through the door as if it were not there.

He froze, thinking that it must have happened very recently. No one had begun to clean up the debris. Yet there were no cops around. Hadn't anyone noticed?

He stepped through the door's empty frame, careful not to catch his coverall on the jagged teeth that jutted from the rim. His feet crunched on broken glass, and when he caught himself swearing at the noise, he wondered: Whoever it was, could they still be here? What did they want? Whose apartment door had they broken down? Who were they raping, murdering, torturing, robbing?

Muffy?

The thought struck him like a blow. His knees sagged beneath him for just

a second, but he quelled the involuntary response, looked upward as if he thought he could see through all the floors and walls between him and their apartment. Then he took a deep breath and ran up the stairs.

The first floor apartments were closed, their doors intact and undisturbed. The same was true on the second floor. But on the third--the door to Tom's apartment was open. Beyond it, a throw rug had been kicked into a heap. A chair lay on its side. A spray of dirt told him that a fallen houseplant lay just to the left of his field of view.

He stilled his panting long enough to cry, "Muffy?"

When there was no answer, he repeated his call. Finally, he tested the door's knob. The latch was broken.

He entered the apartment. "Muffy?"

The broken houseplant was an amaryllis, an "Alice" so gengineered that its blossom resembled a human face. It had just the one blossom, for the gengineers had merged the four large blooms typical of an unmodified amaryllis. They had also removed the amaryllis's yearly rhythm, so that Alices needed no winter dormant period and indeed would produce new blooms as soon as the old ones faded.

At the moment, this one's bloom, its face, looked as if, if only that were possible, it would cry. It had fallen from a dresser beside the door, along with a book, a photograph, and a small pottery dish in which they had kept odd coins. The dish was as shattered as the downstairs door. The coins were scattered on the floor.

Tom Cross picked up the photo and turned it over. It was of Muffy, one he had taken at the art museum. She was standing in front of a pointillist rendition of a human head formed by a cloud of gengineered gnats. What they pictured changed constantly in expression, sex, and apparent age; the camera had caught a fatherly figure, beaming proudly down upon Tom's mate.

He set it back on the dresser. Where was Muffy? He called again, and again there was no answer. He searched the apartment, but it was small and it did not take him long to be sure she was not there. Nor, by the time he had finished, did he wonder what had happened. The bedroom was in perfect order. So was the kitchen. The back door was intact. The intruders, whoever they were, had broken in the front door and caught her immediately. She had struggled, but the signs were all here, in the living room. And then they had taken her away. But why?

He stood at the window. Its frame was wreathed in the ever-present honeysuckle vines. Most people, he thought, kept the vines trimmed back from their windows. Many even tried to keep them from growing in their yards, though the plants were insistent. But Muffy liked them. She wanted them hovering in the apartment windows, like drapes, she sometimes said, only fresher, prettier, more useful.

He had to admit the vines were prettier, though they did, as now, have a tendency to drape themselves over the sill. He picked up the intruding vegetation and pushed it outside. When it fell away from the masonry, he caught his breath. Had Muffy or her kidnappers grabbed at the vines? Had they struggled here? Had she tried to escape? He didn't think the vines would hold her weight.

Some of the vines' tendrils were broken. He picked fragments from the sill, fingered the stubs, and made a face at the stickiness of the sap that

leaked from them. Where was she? Why had they taken her?

He took a step, and one foot made a "snick-ick" noise as he pulled against a stickiness. He looked. Three honeysuckle blossoms lay crushed upon the wooden floor, their pink and cream flesh discolored by dirt and bruises. The invasion had been too recent for their spilled nectar to dry entirely, but someone had stepped in one of the puddles and the footprints had had time to grow syrupy. Small insects hovered in the air around the sticky patches.

He sniffed. The sickly sweet odor of honeysuckle wine dominated the room. He wondered how Muffy could stand to drink the stuff. She had persuaded him to try it, but only once. He had not liked its taste or smell.

Nor had he liked what he thought it did to Muffy. She had once been vivacious, active, a joy to be with. But ever since she had taken up honey sucking, she had had spells of seeming tired, uninvolved, languid.

He knew that languidness. The wine had made him want to stretch out on a mossy bank, arms spread to the sun, smiling and uncaring, disconnected from the animal rush of life. He hadn't liked the feeling.

A scrabbling noise behind the couch brought him out of his reverie and made his last hopes fall. He turned away from the window. "Randy?"

Randy scuttled from her hiding place, mute evidence that Muffy could not simply have left early for her job. The spider was the size of a cat, black and shaggy, and she was essential to Muffy's work. And besides, the wreckage in the apartment could not be due to simple burglars, or vandals. Nothing seemed to be missing, except for Muffy. And the damage was hardly enough to satisfy vandals.

He noticed that one of Randy's legs was trailing. When she reached Tom's feet, she made a "Meep" noise and waved her palps.

She was usually silent, except when she was hungry or curious about some novel rustle in the vines outside the window. Tom bent and picked her up. She was quivering like a plucked string. "Hurting, are you?" The useless leg was crushed, as if someone had tried to kick the genimal out of the way, or to step on her. He petted her stiff and wiry fur, picked from it the kitties that had been under the couch, talked to her, tried to soothe her. In a few minutes, Randy bent in his hands, trying to reach the base of the broken limb with her mouth.

"I wish you could tell me what happened," he said as she chewed. The leg came free and fell to the floor. He wondered whether it would grow back when she molted again. "You won't be much good to her with only seven legs, will you?" Randy was both Muffy's pet and the prop she used in her dancing. Her fan, her feather boa, her bubbles. That had impressed him once, when he had just run away from home, when he and Freddy had wanted to be singers together.

He had already lost his father. He had found out that his mother's husband had not sired him. That had been a neighbor, a man who had moved away from the neighborhood before ever he had been born. Then, by running away, he had forfeited his mother, and he had never tried to return home. Now Muffy was gone. It felt like a retribution of the fates.

Even Freddy had moved on, and Tom hadn't been able to sing alone. He had worked in the Web's kitchen for awhile. Then he had found his present job, and this apartment, and Muffy had moved in with him. And now...

His eyes watered. He took a deep, shuddering breath. Why? Why?

Had the Engineers, those perfervid reactionaries, taken offense at her dancing? At Randy? Had they taken offense at *him* and his job at the Garden? Was she gone forever? Or would the phone ring and some strange voice demand that he quit his job or burn the Garden or poison the stock? And then, only then, would they release her. They did such things. They had learned well the lessons of a century of terrorism.

He stepped across the room. The phone hung on the wall near the kitchen door. The cord was intact. He took it off its hook and held it to his ear. The dial tone was there, normal, undamaged. He hung up again, and he stared at the phone, willing it to ring, willing it to tell him what was going on. He even willed it to *know* what was going on, but the "message waiting" light remained stubbornly dark.

He knew he was being silly. If they were going to call, they would wait. They would want his nerves as much on edge as possible. They would want him to be grateful for the call, so that he would do what they wanted.

And there was no way that Muffy had done it all herself. She wasn't emotionally violent. She never had been, and honey suckers never were. The honey made them quiet, passive, content to do no more than sit and suck more honey. Muffy wasn't as far gone as most, for she retained the energy to dance. But the tendencies were there. They had been there, perhaps, even before she discovered the honey's charms.

So he shouldn't just wait. He should do something. He looked at his watch. Only twenty minutes had passed since he had entered the building. His stomach rumbled. He would, he thought, wait just a little longer. While he waited...The refrigerator was an old model, and while it kept food cold enough, its memory was failing. Once, long before Tom and Muffy had moved into the apartment, it had kept track of its contents and automatically printed out shopping lists. Now, when he touched its handle, it muttered lists of foods Tom and Muffy could not afford and of brand-names no one had seen in many years. "Haagen-Daaz," it said. "Lobster tails. Sara Lee. Prime rib."

Modern food supposedly tasted much the same, though the sources had changed practically beyond all recognition. He thought of pie plants and sammitch bushes and broccoli trees and hamberries. Lobster could still be had, for a price, but for most people...The potster salad in the leftover container before him was made from a hybrid of potato and lobster, and if it tasted much like the latter, it looked and grew like the former.

He forced himself to eat the salad before he reached for the phone again. Then, while he was waiting for the police to arrive, he paced. He held Randy in his arms, petting the bristly fur, and he remembered. He and Freddy had been on stage for the first time in their lives, singing dirty songs to warm Muffy's audience up for her. There had been boozy cheers and catcalls when they had finished, and then someone had patted his shoulder and murmured, "Good job, guys." The voice was soft, feminine, but when he turned, no one was there.

"Watch the stage, dummy," Freddy had told him.

In the glare of the spot, he had seen: black hair, glistening in the light, falling halfway down a bare back: a mass of black fur cradled in a bare arm: a profile undimmed by cloth of any kind. He had gasped in unison with the collective sigh of the nightclub's patrons.

He had met her later, and later still she had joined him for breakfast in the nightclub's kitchen. They had become friends. She had introduced him to

the art museum where Freddy now lived. And then his bud had begun to swell and itch. It had grown painful, and one morning he had been unable to get out of bed.

She had come to him then. She had helped him unfurl his leaves and open his bud.

They had been inseparable ever since. Until now.

The tears came. He let Randy climb upon his shoulder to taste them.

He wished that she had never tasted honeysuckle wine.

He heard the boom of Sparrowhawk wings in the air outside the window. The cops had arrived. He sighed at the thought of talking, of strangers poking through his and Muffy's life, but he also felt a surge of hope. They would find her. They had to. That was their job.

CHAPTER 2

The chatters, wheezes, hums, and rattles of the city's afternoon traffic flowed through the open truck window at Jim Brane's elbow. The streets were full of bioform vehicles, and the sidewalks were a river of humanity clad in coveralls of a thousand colors and designs, with a million ornamentations of patches, embroideries, sashes, and medallions. Some individuals wore other garments--jackets, vests, even skirts--over their coveralls.

Outside the truck window, just ahead, cocked backward to catch his voice, was an ear the size of a bedspread, held erect except for a flopping tip. On the right side of the Mack's great brindle head, the ear was folded down. Tige's shape made clear his canine ancestry. His only marking was a white circle around one eye.

Jim's markings were only a little more elaborate. He wore the blue coveralls of an indentured trucker. Shoulder patches tagged him with the Daisy Hill Truck Farm's distinctive logo, a black-eared white beagle. The logo's aptness was lost in the mists of time; the Farm's products were descended not from beagles, but from bulldogs. A similar emblem adorned the side of the fiberglass pod strapped to the Mack's back. The control compartment or cab in which Jim sat was at the forward end of the pod. The rear was for cargo.

Greasy smoke and an enticing odor poured from a parking lot a block ahead and on the right. As Jim and Tige drew closer, they could see that the lot held no vehicles, except as wreckage. It had been taken over by a small mob of Engineers, a few of whom were still breaking up the shack that had sheltered the lot's attendant from the elements. There was no sign of the attendant.

The rest of the Engineers were gathered around a fire built of the broken lumber. Over it they had hung a gutted litterbug and chunks of Roachster tail and Hopper haunch. They faced the street, some of them holding bullhorns to their mouths, all of them screaming slogans such as, "EAT THE CORRUPTIONS OF LIFE!" When an old mechanical automobile passed by, they cheered. When the vehicle was a gengineered Roachster or Armadon or Beetle, they threw rocks.

Someone even threw a rock at Tige. But where other vehicles dodged and

accelerated and did their best to escape as quickly as they could the neighborhood of the parking lot, when the rock clattered on the pod's side, the Mack just stopped. As horns then blared from behind, Tige turned his great head toward the lot and growled.

The Engineers fell silent. They dropped their rocks. They turned away from the feast they had planned. Only a few dared to shake their fists.

Jim leaned toward his right hand window and showed his teeth in as fierce a grin as he could manage. He could feel the heat of the fire, even above the heat emanating from the city's pavements and buildings. He wished he dared to do more than make faces. He would love to turn Tige into the lotto chase the fanatics, screaming, back to their holes, to scatter the coals of the fire, to seize their meat, nearly done now, judging from the smell. Tige would love that. *He* would love that.

His stomach rumbled, but he knew better. His instructors at the Farm had drummed it into his head over and over again, and into the heads of his fellow trainees, that reacting to the Engineers' provocations could mean only trouble. It might be very, very satisfying, but though they were a minority, they were still a vocal force in society, and they had a great many silent sympathizers. If he attacked them, he would only help their cause.

He yawned. He had been on the job since six that morning, and he should have quit two hours before. Then, as deliberately as he had grinned, he turned his attention back to the road. "Move it, Tige." The department store that was his destination was not far away now. In fact, *there* was the alley that led to the loading dock.

"Slow down, Tige. Ease right. A hair left. Let's stop, now. Back up. Swing right, left, straight. Stop. Good boy, Tige." Jim seemed to be steering his Mack truck by voice alone, but a careful observer might have noticed that as he spoke, his hands never left the steering wheel, while his feet danced from throttle to brake. The controls were mounted on a cabinet whose top was covered with rocker switches and flashing diodes, a control cabinet precisely the same as those found in all bioform vehicles. It held a computer which the government's Bioform Regulatory Administration insisted always be connected to the genimal's brain. Bioform vehicles were supposed to be plugged in, not trained, so that they obeyed the driver's hands and feet, not his voice.

Jim waved at the crew waiting on the loading dock. He recognized them all, for he had made many deliveries here, both as a student trucker and since his graduation last spring to journeyman status. "Hey, Sam!" he called to the crew's silver-haired and dark-skinned chief. "Let me get it open." He yawned again, jumped from his compartment, patted the Mack's shoulder, ducked a string of drool, tossed a biscuit the size of a football between the massive jaws, and touched--for luck--the chrome model of an old mechanical eighteen-wheeler that swung from the Mack's collar. Automobiles still existed; the old freight-haulers had been extinct for decades. Then he went behind Tige, where the crew was waiting, and unlocked the pod's cargo compartment.

The doors swung open to reveal stacked bolts of multicolored fabric from the bacterial cultures of Chicago Micro. Sam Gundar, the crew chief, stepped onto the lip of the pod to survey the shipment. "Is that all? We've been expecting a load of mechin' draperies. Not to mention underwear and shirts."

Jim yawned once more and waved a hand. "I can't help you there," he said. "I just pick up and deliver."

"I know that, son." Sam spat onto the stained pavement below. "It's those

goddam biofabrics. They haven't got the bugs out yet, is all." He spat again, added, "They never will," and turned toward the dock. "C'mon, guys."

Jim shrugged and took the invoice pack from its hook on the wall. As the store's crew unloaded, he used its electronic wand to tick off the items. When the pod was empty, he held out the pack. Sam signed his acceptance of the shipment, Jim pushed a button, and the pack bleeped its record of the transaction through Tige's computer to the office back at the Farm. At the bleep, Sam shook his head and said, "Don't trust us much, do you?"

Jim shrugged again. "I do. *They* don't."

They didn't, either, he thought as he talked and wrestled Tige out of the alley and back into the flow of traffic. They refused to take any chance that an invoice would be lost on the road back to the Farm, or that a trucker would have the time to falsify his records. They knew that the Farm stayed in business only as long as its reputation remained unblemished.

The parking lot was empty now, the Engineers gone, their roast litterbug and Roachster and Hopper nothing but scraps of bone and shell. A live litterbug was nosing at that part of the mess; it would be gone within minutes. Police wreckers, great-clawed Crabs, were removing the vehicles the Engineers had destroyed. A man and a woman in fire department coveralls, slickers, and helmets were spraying water from backpack tanks over the still-smoldering remnants of the fire, raking the coals, and spraying more water. To one side of the lot, the attendant, returned from wherever he had taken refuge, was already guiding civilian vehicles into parking spaces.

They didn't trust, he thought again. But they weren't too clamphole about it. They had given him two years of training as a trucker. They had let him choose his own pup. The price he had accepted--driving for the Farm for ten years--had seemed cheap enough when they had offered him the contract. It still did. In ten years, he'd be just thirty. And Tige would be all his, and he would be free, an independent trucker.

He did not yet know whether he would continue to wear the shoulder patches. Some truckers did, as a badge of origin. They even continued to drive for their training Farms. Others didn't.

Jim thought he might. Both sides benefited from the deal, after all, and they owed each other loyalty. The Farm got a driver. And though the Farm didn't pay well at all--at least until he worked off his indenture--he got his training, his Mack, and all the help he needed while it was growing. Not to mention a place to live. And Julia.

He grinned to himself. Tige was still just a pup, though he was three years old and the size of a delivery van. Macks didn't finish growing until they were eight. By then, Tige would be able to tow a multiple-wheel trailer to more distant places. He would wear only a small pod for his driver and the computer, and a hitch for the trailer. Already, Jim was looking forward to trading the local delivery work for the long hauls.

What would Julia do? Julia Templeton was a year older than he, a year ahead in her career. She would qualify for the long hauls a year before him. But then! Then! He dreamed that they might run from coast to coast in convoy, together. They might even get married.

A buzzing sound yanked Jim's attention to the phonelike radio handset. He made a face, knowing that it had to be the Farm with a new assignment, a pickup that he could make if only he would go just a little bit out of his way. The dispatchers were like that, particularly with the indentured

truckers, like him. They didn't care that his shift had been over for two and a half hours already and that he was on the way home now and more than ready to put his feet up for the night. He was tempted to ignore the call and claim later that he had been out of hearing range. Unfortunately, he didn't think they would believe him.

He couldn't refuse, he thought, and he couldn't quit. Sometimes, loyalty or no, he thought he might as well be a slave.

He reached for the handset, kicking at a loose cable on the cab's floor. "Yes?...No, I'm not out of town yet...Yeah, I can make the pickup...Are you sure of that address? That's a lousy part of town...All right. All right. See you in an hour."

He hung up, thinking of how tired and sweaty he was and wondering how long it would be before he could have a cold shower. He sighed, tapped the brakes with his foot, and said, "Sorry, Tige. We've got to turnaround."

The Mack bent his neck until one great eye peered at Jim through the open window. "That's right," he said. "One more job. And *then* we can go home. I'll hose you down, too. That's a promise.

Tige snorted and shook his head, just as if he understood the words. Spittle flew. But he stopped and turned obediently.

His new destination was on the other side of town. If he could drive directly there, it would take him only minutes, but the afternoon rush hour was starting now, and the traffic on the city's streets was getting thicker with every passing minute. He looked up, seeing the relatively few jellyfish-based Floaters that were leaving the upper floors of office buildings. They were moored to balconies throughout the day; at night, their owners kept them in blister-like garages on the sides of their high-rise apartment buildings. And they never got caught in traffic. He was sure the other drivers, like him, wished they had one of the things.

Jim sighed and maneuvered Tige onto the turf-paved beltroad that circumnavigated the city's center, hoping that that would be faster. But even there, traffic stopped, started, crawled, and honked. He sighed once more. This was one aspect of city life that had never changed and never would. He yawned. His stomach rumbled again. He rummaged in a cabinet, found a stale pastry, and ate it. He stared at the honeysuckle vines that festooned the banks along the road, gorgeous in their blooms, sickening in their odors, and thought that the Farm was surely right to grub up every sprout that dared to show its tip on or near the property. That was a student chore, and he was glad to be at last immune to it, but it had to be done, or the students, the staff, the truckers, even the trucks, might...

There, he thought, under that overpass, strewn across the pavement of granite blocks that kept the embankment from eroding, were a dozen honeybums. If his dad hadn't...He had been sucking honey himself, then. Lethargic, passive, interested in nothing but reaching for another of the blossoms so conveniently to hand. On his way, though he had still been washing and shaving. He made a face. Most of them didn't even try to find food. Whatever nutrients were in the honeysuckle wine were all they got, and their bodies showed all the signs of malnutrition. So did their life expectancies. Yet they did not suffer. The wine saw to that.

The honeysuckle vines were everywhere, along roads, in alleys, climbing up utility poles and the sides of buildings. They were not extirpated as on the Farm because most people thought them pretty, though their scent might be a

bit cloying. Nor did most people worry about the honey bums. They were, said some, bums even without the honey. Useless specimens who would resign no matter what from the human race. Others were more charitable but still refused to exercise their sympathies over the honey bums' situation, perhaps because the bums posed no social problem other than visual clutter and a bit of rank body odor which was smothered anyway, most of the time, by the scent of honeysuckle. They were not given to crime, a blessing many credited to the euphoric in the honey. Or...In the past, drug addicts had been forced into crime to pay for their drugs. The wine was everywhere, and it was free.

When the exit that he wanted came into view, Jim sighed with relief. It was clear, uncrowded. Only a few unfortunates like himself were driving *into* the city, and they had all the inbound roads to themselves. With luck, he thought, he would have the pod loaded and be on his way again in half an hour. Without luck--and surely that would be Murphy's choice--the shipper's representative would be a wizened old man, the cargo would be a hundred cases of vintage wine that had to be carried individually, one at a time, into the pod, he would have to do it all himself, and it would take hours.

He swore. Julia Templeton was waiting at the Farm. *She* had had the day off, and both of them had been looking forward to his return, on time. But Murphy had had it in for them, hadn't he? The Grey God hadn't wanted them to have much time together, at least today.

The beltway ramp had let him into a district of warehouses. As he searched for the address he needed, the buildings grew shabbier and more overgrown with honeysuckle vines, the streets dirtier, and the traffic sparser. There were few signs that the buildings were in use. Office windows were darkly lifeless, and the few shops--a diner here, its windows blocked with faded political placards; a newsstand there, its racks thick with comic books, many of them revivals of ancient superheroes who resonated with an age of gengineered transformations--seemed to have been dead for decades.

Dusk was beginning to settle and streetlights were flickering on. Most of the lights, in this part of town, remained dark, their bulbs burned out or broken, but there was still enough light for him to see, a little back from the mouths of the alleys he passed, buried in green honeysuckle gloom, adorned with the pink and cream of the blossoms, clusters of tiny shacks assembled from packing crates and cardboard. In front of them, escaping their cramped confines, sprawled and crouched the district's honeybums.

The sound of a bumblebee drew his attention to a single Floater as it rose into view above the building to his left, its spinning propellor a translucent disk. He turned one more corner, and there was the warehouse where, the dispatcher had told him, he would find both a shipper and a cargo. But the building was as derelict as any he had ever seen, and far more derelict than any building he had ever seen in use. No pane of the glass that had once blocked weather from its small, high-up windows was left intact. The paving of the small loading area was cracked and potholed. The large door to the warehouse's inside loading bay was undamaged, but the personnel door to one side was missing entirely. There were even gaps in the brick wall of the building, as if there, and there, and there, a giant child had kicked in pique. An alley to one side was choked with honeysuckle and crude shelters. There were no lights, and the dusk was growing thick enough to need them. He flicked on the headlights mounted on the leading edge of Tige's pod, below the windshield, and aimed them at the empty doorway, but they did not penetrate the murk within the warehouse.

Anger washed his fatigue away. The address was right, he knew. So where was his cargo? Where was the shipper? The headlights showed no sign that

anyone had ever been here. The honeysuckle shoots before the warehouse door had not been trampled. There were no tracks in the dirt. Was someone playing a mechin' joke? Or had the dispatcher screwed up?

He opened the door to the pod and descended. Maybe there was another door, and lights or no lights they were inside waiting for him. Maybe they just weren't here yet and he could stretch his legs. Or maybe they weren't coming, and if he didn't move around and exhaust some of the steam that was building up within him he would explode.

He paced around the loading area, looking for tracks. There were none. He looked back at Tige and realized that he had left the pod's door swinging open, unlatched, unlocked. He told himself that didn't matter, for he would be back inside in just a moment, whether the shipper and the cargo were here or not. He walked along the roadway and peered around the building's corner, down an accessway a little narrower than most alleys, and too narrow for vehicular traffic. It was free of honeysuckle, Jim thought as he looked for another entrance, because its surface was unblemished, uncracked concrete. Vines rooted elsewhere avoided it because its narrowness excluded sunlight.

He could find no other entrance. Finally, angrily, kicking the honeysuckle out of his way as he stomped across the broken pavement, wishing he had someone to holler at, he approached the dark entrance to the warehouse.

He was leaning forward to peer into the deeper darkness within when he heard a rush of feet behind him. Tige uttered a single deep, imperative bark. He spun around, and there, silhouetted against Tige's headlights, was a figure rushing toward him, a club of some sort in its upraised hand. He had just time to see that his attacker was not dressed in rags, was no honey bum, before a blow knocked him senseless.

When he awakened, he could barely make out the three figures bending over him. Night had completely come. The only light was a dim skyglow from more active parts of the city. But that light was enough for him to see the rags and know from that, and from the odors that washed over his prone body, that the three were honey bums. They had presumably emerged from their hovels in the nearby alleys once he had been still long enough. Now one was fingering his coverall. Another had a hand on his left shoe.

Dimly, he sensed that the alley bums might retain a vestige of ambition that those who dwelled beneath the highway overpasses had lost. Not only did they build rude shelters, but they could recognize an opportunity when they saw one. If he were dead, if he failed to protest, they would quite happily strip him for his clothes, as well as for whatever might be hidden in his pockets.

He groaned. He kicked. He flailed. The honey bums recoiled, and when he staggered to his feet, they fled. He felt the back of his head. It was already swollen, tender, and hot. It hurt, and he winced. The honey bums were assholes. Whoever had done this was a *mechin'* asshole. Not a honey bum, no. A thief. He checked his pockets. His wallet was still there, holding still as many bills as it had before. Nothing was missing.

He turned, looking for Tige.

Tige wasn't there.

So that was why the headlights weren't on anymore.

He swore aloud: "Mechin' Jeezuss on a crutch!"

His breast pocket held two pens and a small light. He unclipped the light, clicked it on, and scanned the roadway. Julia had given him the light, and he had carried it ever since, though he had never, till now, needed it. He wished he could remember what the occasion had been.

He staggered toward the corner and looked down the narrow alley. There was no sign of Tige. He backtracked and found no sign that Tige had been taken into the stygian blackness of the warehouse. There was only a small pile of Mack litter beside a pothole.

"Mech!"

Movement was making his head feel better. Now, he asked himself, where had those honey suckers gone? They couldn't possibly have had anything to do with slugging him or stealing Tige. They didn't have the energy, or the ambition. Or did they? They were ready enough to strip his dead body, if dead it was, and he supposed they could use money if they ever happened to get any. Could they have been hired? He remembered the silhouette. It hadn't been that of a bum.

Might they have seen anything? He turned toward the alley full of honeysuckle vines and heard a scrabbling noise back among the flimsy walls of the bums' improvised tenement. He strode forward, kicking the sheets of cardboard aside, flattening roofs and walls, crunching meager possessions. He dismissed the uneasy thought that he should feel guilt for his rampage, that honey bums were human too. He was, he told himself, mad, angry, pissed, and woe betide anyone who got in his way.

When one foot met a softer, more resilient mass, he used his light to be sure the mass was flesh, bent, grabbed its arm, and hauled it back to the loading area.

The bum had neither shaved nor washed for at least a year. He looked like what Jim raked out of Tige's curry comb on a rainy day, and he smelled worse. His skin felt as if ropy tumors, stiff and rubbery, were growing beneath it, and dimly, in the darkness, Jim could make out dark, twisting markings wherever the skin was not covered with the rags that had once been a coverall.

Jim swallowed his revulsion, set the man down, squatted before him, and resolved to breathe through his mouth. Then he said, "Tell me. Or I'll find a desert, and I'll take you out in the middle of it, a hundred miles from honey, and I'll leave you there."

"Tell'oo wha'?" The eyes were wide. The breath was foul. The gravelly voice was surprised and defiant, as any voice might be when its owner was interrupted by some rude stranger.

"You saw. The bastard hit me on the head and stole my Mack. Who was he? Which way did he go?"

The bum tipped sideways, caught himself on his hands, and began to crawl toward the alley. "Wan' honey."

Jim grabbed for the back of the filthy coverall. The fabric had been of some quality, once, but now it was thoroughly rotten. It tore away in his hand. He shook shreds of embroidery from his fingers, shifted his grip, fought renewed revulsion at the greasy filth of the hair and the strange feel of the skin, and yanked the bum back into place. "Where'd he go?"

The bum's head swayed back and forth. "Don' know. Don'memmer. Wan' honey." He tipped back into his interrupted crawl and Jim, disgusted, got up. He wiped

his hands on the thighs of his coverall. He spat, a gesture of frustrated contempt for the uselessness of honey suckers, even of the human species in general.

He shuddered to think that he could have become the same sort of creature. There had been a time when the honey had seemed a reasonable escape from the problems of his young life. But then his Dad had taken him to the Farm, and he had met Tige, and...He shook his head, winced at the burst of pain he gave himself, and turned toward the streets he had driven Tige down on his way to this trap.

There were no pay phones in the derelict parts of the warehouse district. It took him half an hour to reach a more active region, one with more than one working street light to a block, with nightlights--and even desk lamps--burning in warehouse offices, with bus stops and--There!--a diner, still lit up, still doing business. A phone carrel was visible just inside the door.

The smells of grease and meat and coffee struck him as he opened the door, in infinite contrast to the stink of the honey bum he had tried to question. His stomach growled, reminding him that he had forgotten that he was hungry. He rummaged in a pocket. There were plenty of bills in his wallet, he knew, for a meal. But the phone demanded coins, and he had only one pentagonal Mitchell dollar.

He dialed his own room at the Farm. If Julia wasn't there, the machine would return his coin and he could try the Farm's main switchboard. But she was, and, "Jim! Where have you been?"

He explained. "They stole Tige."

"Oh, no!" She understood. Any trucker would.

"Come get me?"

"Of course. But you'd better call the cops."

"I'm outta Mitchells."

"Get some change."

"After I grab a bite. Or I'll call when you get here. Use the radio."

"Stingy ass. Maybe I'll call'em for you."

"Thanks."

He told her where he was, hung up, and turned toward the counter. He took his food to go and, minutes later, was sitting on the diner's steps, eating and scanning the street and the mouths of those alleys that opened into it. He was hoping against hope that the thief or thieves would drive Tige past his gaze. But there was no traffic at all. All he saw, even here, was honeysuckle vines and honey bums hiding in their shadows.

He was nearly done with his meal when he heard the siren and a Sparrowhawk stooped out of the sky to land on the street before him. Its talons scraped against the pavement as it landed. It cocked its head, marked as if it wore an ancient warrior's helm. A reddish crest, resembling a tonsure, suggested that those warriors might have been monks as well. The plumage was dark-spotted cream on the underside. The throat was white. A red-brown tail jerked, and a hooked beak opened and closed.

The pilot sat in a narrow bubble or pod of clear plastic, marked only by an oval doorframe, and within that, a small porthole. The police department markings were painted on the fittings that anchored the heavy straps that held the pod to the bird's back. There was no need for structural metal or rotor-mountings, as in the helicopters that still were used at times. Two jet engines were strapped to the root of the bird's tail.

Hawks had replaced helicopters for many police purposes because their built-in weaponry, by its nature--beaks and talons as sharp as scythe blades, and larger--had more deterrent effect on evil-doers than machineguns or rockets. The Hawks were also quite effective at catching those who fled the scenes of their crimes.

He hoped that this Hawk, and its pilot, could catch Tige's thief.

CHAPTER 3

When Tom Cross first woke up, he knew *something* was wrong, for he felt empty, dead inside, his cheeks were stiff with dried tears, and he had the sort of headache that comes with having had too many self-pitying drinks. But what was that *something*? Memory served him not at all, and he felt a surge of panic as he peered within his skull for the answer he craved so badly.

The light that came through the bedroom window was grey, and the honeysuckle leaves beyond the glass glistened with wet. He rolled over with a grunt, slapping at the alarm with a clumsy hand to silence its insistent, strident, "Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!" Then, realizing, he groped at the other side of the bed. But no curve of haunch or hip or breast met his hand. The bed was empty, cold, unwarmed all night by any other body, and the scent of honeysuckle wine that clung to the pillow was only a weak echo of what he was used to smelling in the morning.

He remembered. She was gone, missing, kidnapped. The police had come, and they had been sympathetic, but they had had little help to offer. "Wait," they had said. "Maybe someone will call. Or maybe not. Sometimes the victims just disappear." The woman who had said that had not been able to meet his eye.

He had cleaned up the apartment, picking up coins, wiping up honey, righting the only child they had known, their Alice. The landlord had arrived, with a loop of chain and a padlock for the apartment door, a promise that a locksmith would soon arrive to repair the door properly, and the news that insurance would cover all the damage. Though it could not, admittedly, get Muffy back.

When clouds had blotted out the stars and the night had grown cool at last, Tom had closed the apartment's windows. Then he had had a drink. He had been tempted to try, in memory of Muffy and her own preference, the honeysuckle wine, but he had settled for the scotch in the cupboard. Then he had had another, sitting as near the phone as he could. He had not wanted to miss the call. But no call had come. He had cried, had another drink, cried some more, and finally gone to bed.

He sat up and put his legs over the side of the bed. The motion made his headache worse. He stared at the floor and considered the state of his body. His mouth was dry and foul. His belly felt full of acid, and it lurched quite

involuntarily when Randy, responding to the signs that he was awake, leaped onto the mattress and presented her bristly back to be scratched. The scratch was an essential part of Randy's morning ritual, and if Muffy wasn't there, he would have to do. He sighed, met the spider's demand as perfunctorily as possible, and brushed her aside.

He needed aspirin, a toothbrush, breakfast. Most of all he needed Muffy. Lacking that...Mech, but he missed Freddy. And with that thought, he knew what he wanted to do that day.

As soon as he could, he called the Garden: "Bert? I can't make it today."

"What you mean you can't make it today?" His boss was loud in his surprise. Tom winced and wished the aspirin he had taken worked more rapidly. "We have a shipment to unload. Customers to take care of! And I cannot do it all, at all. Today is when the bills I must send out!"

Tom explained what he had found when he reached home the day before and said, "I want to see a friend. I need someone to talk to."

Bert's voice instantly turned sympathetic: "Of course, you must! Friends are a great help! Count on me! You can, if there is anything I can do. I know how it is. It never happened to me. It never happened to my parents. But my grandfather, it happened to him. Bad times those were, and it was the government that did it, the secret police. Not kidnappers. But I know. The stories! I heard them many times." Tom could almost see him nodding sagaciously, insistently.

The art museum's main entrance, softened by the morning's mist and rain, was framed by marble pillars in the classic mode, though more than a little etched and stained by many decades of exposure. Parked in the paved circle before the entrance was an antique mechanical limousine, its flanks bearing the BRA insignia of the Bioform Regulatory Administration. To either side of the original, central building were more modern wings of glass and concrete and beyond those, clusters of hollowed bioforms, pumpkins and squashes rearing their tumorous hulks against the green backdrop of parkland beyond. In the foreground of the southern cluster, a single dried and windowed eggplant swung from a concrete stem. Broad lawns clumped with shrubbery and trees and twined across with gravel walkways separated the complex from the road.

Usually, the museum's pumpkins gave Tom a pang of mingled guilt and homesickness. He had grown up in one, and he had left his mother--but not his father, never his father, not the *real* one--behind in one. Today, he registered the details only peripherally as he climbed the steps to the entrance. Randy was clinging to his shoulder, her fur scratching against his neck. The attendant at the ticket booth waved them through, saying, "Visitin' again? Where ya girlfriend?"

Tom nodded and shrugged and thought the darkness on his face must be what provoked the attendant's next comment: "Left ya, hah? They do it ever'time." He didn't try to set the other straight but stepped past him and into the cavern of the entrance rotunda, its floor tessellated with geometric patterns, its high walls hung with bronze sculptures. A gift-shop occupied a filigreed enclosure to one side. A sound-plaque mounted on a pedestal before him announced that the shop's enclosure was an adaptation of the fibrous skeleton of the seed pod of the wild cucumber, and that the bronzes had been done during the Great Depression of the previous century, as government make-work projects. The bronzes had adorned public buildings such as post offices and courthouses for over a hundred years.

The music section was in the basement. Tom headed toward the stairs in the back of the building, passing paintings, woodwork, pottery, and more. Near the stairway was an exhibit of early biosculptures. Some still writhed or hummed or reflected iridescence from overhead spotlights. Some were aged, silent, dull. A few, like the very early Atkinsons, had long ago died of old age and been stuffed. Their value was now less that of art than that of history.

It was too early in the day for the museum to be crowded. There was only a single couple ahead of him, studying the biosculptures. The man looked familiar and, briefly, he wondered why. But he dismissed the question. His mind was on other things.

When Jim Brane woke, he too had a headache, but not because of what he had drunk. The back of his head was tender, swollen, and throbbing. Happily, however, his bed was not empty, for beside him, short auburn hair rumpled on her cheek, body warm against his own, face still puffy with sleep, was Julia Templeton. Nor did he himself feel so empty. He remembered immediately what had happened the day before, and though he felt as deprived by fate as Tom, his response was far more angry than depressed.

He and Julia had their breakfast in the Farm's journeyman dining hall, abroad and sunny room with a serving counter down one side. It looked much like the apprentice refectory, but where the apprentices sat at long trestle tables, the journeymen had tables sized for four and sat, mostly, in twos. Jim Brane and Julia Templeton could thus be joined by no more than one or two of their fellows at a time, eager for news of what had happened, full of commiseration and perhaps--more privately, of course--"There, but for the grace of God, go I." Losing one's truck was every trucker's greatest dread. If happened late enough in life, it meant having to start one's career over again with a new pup, doing years of local delivery work while the pup grew and learned and became able to handle the long hauls.

The Farm's dispatching office was next door to the dining hall. On their way out, Julia checked the assignment board hanging on the wall. Then she grinned. "They've left me free," she said. "Must want me to hold your hand. Or this place has a heart after all."

Jim couldn't help but grin back as he took her hand in his. "If this were the Wild West, and if we were cowboys, and if we had six-guns and saddles, we could round up a posse and go hunting the rustlers."

"But it isn't," she said. "We aren't, we don't, and we can't. That's the cops' job."

"So what can we do?"

"We haven't been to the art museum?"

The last thing he wanted to do was pretend that he wasn't driving his truck on their joint labors because he was on holiday. Tige had been stolen. He was bereft, and he grieved. Yet he knew that nothing would be gained, he would subtract nothing from whatever time must pass before he and the Mack could be reunited by the police, if he moped around the Farm all day.

He made a sour face. "So let's." They had been, at one time or another, to most of the city's cultural institutions, but once they had discovered the museum of natural history, with its displays of ancient skeletons that seemed so promising of the Age of Bioforms, they had been satisfied to return again and again. Concerts, plays, and human history had lost their charm. Yet today, pteranodons and gomphotheres and glyptodonts did not appeal. They both needed something fresh.

"Maybe it'll take your mind off Tige."

"Mmph." He grunted skeptically, as if to say he would be upset for days and weeks, and so would she if her Blackie were stolen.

Blackie's ancestral stock had included a strong strain of Boston bull. She was slimmer and longer-legged than Tige, who had owed more to the English variety of bulldog. But the stertorous breathing, at rest or in motion, was similar, and so was the size. Both dwarfed their drivers and could carry many tons upon their backs.

The Farm's Macks were kept in large barns, each in its own bay, each bay with its own door to the outside. The bays were lined with maintenance equipment. Ceiling hoists held cabs and cargo pods suspended in the air through the night, relieving the genimals of their weight. Most bays held at least two pods of different sizes, giving the truckers a chance to tailor their equipment to the jobs of the day. A hallway ran along the barn's central axis, with human-sized doors letting the truckers reach their Macks.

When they passed the door to Tige's bay, Jim had to stop for just a moment. He opened the door, looked in at all the empty space, seeing it as no more vast and no emptier than the void in his heart. "Come on," said Julia, her hand on his arm, and he closed the door. Blackie's bay was next door, and there he helped her lower Blackie's smallest pod, its cargo compartment no larger than the back of an old-time bread-van, from the ceiling and strap it into place. Then Julia tossed her Mack a biscuit. Once they were aboard, she found the computer cable on the floor and plugged it into the socket in Blackie's spine. The socket was exposed in the center of an opening in the pod's floor behind the control console, and it linked the pod's computer directly into the Mack's central nervous system.

Within an hour they were admiring bronze sculptures, ancient paintings, and a display that tracked the development of biosculpture. "Down that way," said Julia. She stopped thumbing through her guidebook long enough to point. "There's modern art, paintings, ceramics, even fashion."

In reply, Jim pointed at the silent Atkinsons before them. "These are interesting," he said. One was a furry double helix; its sound plaque said that it had been gengineered in part from a cat's genes and that it had purred when stroked. He wished he could touch it, but it was enclosed in a glass case. "I wonder what it felt like when it was alive."

"Like a cat, of course. A skinny one. I like this one better." She was staring at three bulb-tipped stalks whose bases bore scores of insectile legs. The stalks moved slowly about their enclosure, its top slotted to admit air, swaying and trembling, forming and reforming a triangular cluster.

"What's it do?" She shrugged, but he did not register the answer. Approaching them down the museum's hallway was a young man who looked somehow familiar, as if, despite the giant spider riding upon his shoulder, he were someone Jim had once known well but had not seen for years, someone who had changed since last Jim had seen him, someone who had grown as much as had Jim himself, someone who...

"Tommy. Tommy Cross."

The eyes that met his were rimmed with dark, and the mouth, like Jim's own, held no smile at all. "Hi, Jimmy."

Jim turned to Julia to say, "We were friends in high school. Best friends. But then he..." He looked back at his old friend. "I haven't seen you since

you ran away from home with Freddy."

"We made it to the city." Tom held one hand as if to add that that was past and now of no importance. "What have you been doing?" The hand moved to point at the other man's shoulder and the patch it bore. "That...?"

"Ah." Jim's tone faltered as if he were embarrassed by a memory. "Dad got me interested in the Truck Farm. I'm a trucker now." Jim turned just enough to wrap an arm about Julia's shoulder and pull her close. "So's Julia. Templeton. And..."

"I see." Tom's expression fell even further.

"What's the matter?" asked Julia. "It sounds like you two should be happy to see each other, but you both look as if you've just lost your best friend. Not found him again." She paused for a moment and added, "I know why Jimmy's down. Someone knocked him on the head yesterday and stole his Mack. But you?"

Tom Cross patted the spider on his shoulder and said, apparently irrelevantly, "This is Randy." But his voice was suddenly choked with tears. In a moment, he went on. "Belongs to *my* girlfriend. Muffy Bowen." Then he explained what had happened.

"Oh, mech," said Jim.

"Yeah. I came here to talk to Freddy."

"You mean he's here, too?"

Julia looked puzzled.

"In the music department, downstairs. He's an exhibit, of all things." Tom pointed toward the stairwell at the end of the hall. "That's where I was going. Want to come?"

The basement music room was actually a small auditorium. There were several arcs of seats for an audience, soft lighting, ceiling panels designed to improve the room's acoustics, wall-mounted speakers, and a small stage. On the stage, a single man, slender, clean-shaven, grey-haired, clad in an anonymous grey coverall and vest, sat in a straight-backed chair, his back to the missing audience. A briefcase leaned against the chair leg. Before him was a small table covered with papers. On the far side of the table were four padded frameworks that roughly resembled highchairs. Each of the frameworks held a genimal. One of the genimals, sitting upright with its snout in the air, looked precisely like the garbage disposals in Mr. Greengenes' Appliance Garden. Another lay on its back with its legs jutting uselessly into the air. Its blunt snout projected upward much like that of the first genimal, though it was considerably more elongated and it was perforated by a number of holes, like the fingering holes of a flute. Its hide was checkered black and tan. The third and fourth genimals were smaller, and each had, poking toward the ceiling, more than the usual four legs.

"That's Freddy!" said Jim, pointing at the garbage disposal.

"Call him Frederick," said Tom. "He insists, ever since he became a serious musician. He sings," he added, looking at Julia. "And Porculata. She's a bagpipe." He pointed at Porculata's snout. "Sphincter muscles close off the holes. Her legs are just hollow tubes, and they used duck genes to give her air sacs. The little guys are their kids, the calliope shoats." He shook his head, as if at the vagaries of uncontrolled hybridization. "Their apartment's behind the stage."

"Do they have names?" asked Julia.

"The kids? Barnum and Baraboo."

Randy shifted on Tom's shoulder, lifting her body and waving her palps as if sifting the air for an odor that seemed familiar. Then she uttered a single "Meep," scuttled down his front as easily as if she still had her full complement of legs, and charged down the auditorium's central aisle. In a moment, she was racing across the stage toward Freddy--Frederick--the garbage disposal, the grey man was pulling his glossily shod feet beneath his chair with an air of distaste, and Frederick was yelling, "Randy!" and twitching as best he could his stubby limbs. Porculata and the shoats were squealing their own greetings. The commotion was anything but musical.

The three young humans approached the stage more slowly, while Randy climbed over Frederick's immobile form, palpating and meeping. When they stepped onto the stage and Frederick could see them, the genimal said in a nasal bass, "Where's Muffy? How'd Randy lose a leg? And hi, Jimmy, longtime no see. Who's the broad? She's got nice..."

Tom glanced at the grey man while Randy moved happily on to Porculata and the shoats. He wondered what he was doing there--the papers on the table looked intimidatingly official--but he ignored the man's obvious irritation while he glumly explained what had happened the day before. When he was done, the grey man cleared his throat emphatically and spoke to Frederick: "You can chat with your friends later. Right now, we have important business to finish."

Surprised, Tom said, "What's with this bird, Frederick?"

His old friend made a rude noise, and his voice rose in pitch. "The man from BRA. He's still wet behind the ears. He hasn't been weaned yet. He..."

"But..."

"He says we're guilty of unlicensed gengineering. Someone spotted Ringling and Bailey at the Met and asked questions." He repeated the rude noise. Ringling and Bailey were Barnum's and Baraboo's sisters. "Now he wants to confiscate the kids."

The BRA agent glared impartially at everyone. "It is a serious offense," he said. "The regulations are quite clear, and no plan was ever submitted. There was never any application for permission. There was no environmental impact statement. And the law requires all these things of all gengineers before production can possibly be allowed to begin. If they are not done, we *must* be sure there is no hazard. We must examine them. That's what our laboratories are for." As he spoke, his hands moved over his papers, pointing to the forms that had to be filed.

"Litter," said Tom Cross. "I suppose all those pieces of paper were submitted, in triplicate, before *your* production was begun?"

"Quintuplicate," said the BRA agent. "And *I* was born, not made. I had parents, and they reproduced quite naturally. There were *no* gengineers involved." His expression was smug with self-righteous satisfaction.

Randy was clinging to Frederick's torso with all but two of her seven remaining legs. She turned to face the man from BRA, waving the free pair, and hissed.

"So were the shoats," said Frederick. "And we're not gengineers, either."

"The curator told me you were responsible for producing them."

"They're our kids, and they're just as natural as any litterhead bureaucrat. Maybe more so!" When Frederick stopped, Porculata snarled, "Get out!" and began to play a martial tune of the sort for which bagpipes had long been meant. For the first time, Jim noticed that a compass rose was tattooed on her throat. The shoats added their own tones to her music, and there was none of the gaiety one might have expected from a pair of instruments whose name still meant "circus" even though the wandering shows for which calliopes had been designed had long been extinct.

"You'd better. They're not very mobile, but we are." As Tom spoke, Jim picked up the agent's briefcase and set it on the table. He and Julia then both grabbed fistfuls of paper and crammed them into the case. After a moment of stunned immobility, the agent pushed them aside and finished the job himself. He did not try to straighten the crumpled mess they had made.

When the auditorium door had closed behind him, Porculata screeched, the bagpipe still strong in her voice, "He'll be back! I'm psychic, you know, and he'll be back. Just as soon as he realizes the kids are legal, but we're not!" Her voice trailed off at the last, bubbling into a sob. Frederick squirmed in his padded support frame and said, "Tommy? Move me next to her? Please?"

Tom was obliging when Jim looked at the shoats, who had said nothing throughout the crisis. "Tommy? Can't they...?"

Tom shook his head as Frederick answered. "None of us can move much on our own. And they can't talk. But they understand, and they hate that bastard. Right, boys?"

They answered with strident blasts of sound.

"Now," said Frederick. "As they used to say: Shit!"

When the humans looked puzzled by the archaic curse, he added, "You were telling me what happened to Muffy, and I never got a chance to react."

Tom shrugged. "I wanted to tell you, talk about it, you know? Get it off my chest. But you had troubles of your own. And so does Jim."

Briefly, Julia explained how Jim had lost his truck.

"Huh." The sound was a soft hooting noise. "Well, *my* problems are done now. You did a good job of chasing him off."

"We make a good team. Or we used to."

"What d'ya mean, *used* to? Sounds like you need some help now."

"It's not the same thing..."

Porculata squirmed in her seat and began to shriek: "You'd better not leave me! I won't stand for it! I can't take care of the kids all by myself! And if you do, you'd better forget *right now* any thought of deflowering any strange ladies!"

Halfway through her tirade, Jim and Julia turned away to hide their grins. They were thus the first to see the man standing in the stage's wings. He wasn't very tall, his skin was ruddy, and his forehead stopped only when his hairline was even with the tops of his ears. He wore a tan coverall and a tweed jacket, and he was grinning back at them while holding a finger to his

lips.

"But Honey-buns, Pork-pie, Gravy-down-my-gullet Sweetums, the kids are almost as big as you are. The staff takes care of them. And I haven't been anywhere in ages!"

Porculata answered her mate more calmly, though her words were still punctuated by bagpipish squawks: "I'm psychic. You know it! And if you go, you'll be a help, all right. But only if you stay away from the ladies, and that's impossible, so you stay right here. I need you!"

When she ran down, Frederick rolled his eyes as if to say, "See what I have to put up with?" The stranger in the wings stepped forward, still grinning, and said, "If you wish, Frederick, I can give you a leave of absence." Then he looked at Tom Cross. "Did something happen? Where's Muffy?"

The garbage disposal made an unmusical noise. "The way you're all shoving," he said, "I guess I haven't got much choice. So I'll go." He rolled his eyes. "Hey, Frankie, you know where to find that handcart I rode in on?" Then, as if realizing that Jim didn't know who Frankie was and Julia didn't know anything about the handcart, he added, "When we ran away from home, Tommy jammed me in beside his suitcase and trundled the whole schmear down the road. Pinched my toes and pounded my butt black and blue." He sighed ostentatiously. "Now he'll do it again. And he's Franklin Peirce, the curator around here. He knows what's in all the closets."

"I hope so," said Peirce.

Tom began to explain to the curator why Muffy wasn't with him.

Jim interrupted with, "He came here to see Freddy."

Porculata butted in with, "Just wanted aid and comfort."

Peirce said, "And I'm sure Frederick will give it to him."

The garbage disposal said, "Just call me Freddy. For the duration, anyway, since I won't be a singer again till I get back."

Porculata began to sob, "I'll never see you again!" But she didn't say a word about being psychic.

Julia Templeton said, "Shaddap everybody! Tom was talking!"

In the sudden silence, he looked at her gratefully. Then he continued with the story. When he was done, Peirce shook his head and said, "I'm sorry. I really wish I could help. But the leave of absence is about all I can do."

They stood in the museum's main door, looking out. The rain had increased, and the air that swept around their ankles was damp and chilly. Tom held the handles of the handcart in which Freddy sat, braced with a pair of pillows Peirce had liberated from a staff lounge. Randy sat beside the garbage disposal, patting him over and over with her palms, as if to reassure herself that though she had lost one friend, she had regained another.

"Forget it," Freddy said. "You can take me right back downstairs where it's warm and dry. I admit it, I've been spoiled. I don't want pneumonia. I don't even want a bruised butt again. I'd rather..."

Tom tsked. "You've been wetter. Remember when the sink leaked all over you?"

Freddy made a disgusted noise. "At least this is clean."

"We haven't seen the sculptures," said Jim. "Let's stay here awhile, and maybe the rain'll quit."

"I thought we wanted to find Muffy," said Julia. "And what's going on over there?" She pointed to the left, where an open lawn had disappeared beneath a small crowd, all wearing raincoats and ponchos over their coveralls. The people were milling about, separating into two groups, one that hung loosely around the other, which formed itself into two circles. The outer group began to clap and voices raised in a song that soon became recognisable as the ancient "Havah Nagilah." To one side watched a pair of Engineers in raincoats the color of their blue coveralls. Their faces wore matching dour expressions.

The circles began to move, counterrotating so that, for a moment, each person in one circle faced each person in the other. As they passed, their hands raised, swung, and met. The sounds that echoed across the lawn were solid clacks whose rhythm grew synchronized by the pounding words and feet and, driven by the song, accelerated. Whatever they held to make the clacks was hard, but it was also invisible except for occasional flashes of color.

Peirce explained what was going on. "They're holding worrystones." He reached into a pocket and withdrew an egg-sized chunk of translucent, glowing green. The shape was that of a tetrahedron that had been half melted in a fire, pinched in the middle, and slightly stretched. Within it hovered an amorphous glob. A gold-colored chain passed through a hole bored in one end. Peirce ran his thumb over the stone's curves and said, "Very soothing, but they also interact. If you knock the right pair of stones together, they chime."

As if to prove his point, a ringing noise lifted above the moving circles on the lawn. Two figures walked away from the dance arm in arm.

"People think they have some mystic affinity with whoever rings their chimes." He shrugged. "The dance out there is to give them a chance to knock stones with as many people as possible as quickly as possible."

"I should think they'd get pneumonia," said Julia.

Peirce shrugged again. "They don't seem to care, but we...We feel responsible. We sponsored the artist who...He modified iguanas. The stones form inside their skulls, and they contain a bit of nerve tissue." He pointed at the shapeless glob within the stone. "It's alive, but..." He shook his head. "I'm not sure even the artist understands exactly what he did."

"How long do they last?" asked Jim.

"A year, at least. That's how long they've been available."

"I haven't seen them, and..."

"I know, Tom. You're here often, but mostly only on weekends. They show up during the week, and they seem to prefer the nastier days, as if they don't want too many observers."

Tom grinned, while Peirce fell silent for a moment. Then the museum curator ran his eyes over the group. "None of you," he said, "are wearing pendants."

Jim shrugged. "Truckers don't."

"Most don't," Julia corrected him.

With a grin, Peirce offered, "We sell them in the gift-shop. Would you like any? They say they bring luck, and it's one more thing I can do, after all."

Soon, a worrystone dangled from a chain around the neck of each member of the party except for Randy. Julia's was a green almost precisely the same shade as Franklin Peirce's. Tom's was a gold laced with threads of red. Jim's was a clear sky-blue. Freddy's was yellow.

The three young people were standing in the rotunda outside the giftshop, their new luck charms in their hands, when Freddy squirmed in his handcart and said, "So knock'em already. Maybe you'll find out you're all soul-mates."

Franklin Peirce emerged from behind the shop's counter with a small box in his hand. "Here," he said. "One more." He held it out to Tom. "Give it to Muffy when you find her."

Tom Cross accepted the box. His eyes watered. Freddy repeated his cry, "Knock'em!"

Jim and Julia looked at each other as if each found the idea just a little silly. It was superstition, of course, just like the notion that the stones could bring luck. "Go on," said Freddy. They moved closer, raised their stones on their chains, and knocked them gently together.

The only sound was a quiet click.

"Now Tommy," said Freddy, and Julia Templeton turned toward him. Perhaps fortunately, they drew the same quiet click, as did Julia and Peirce. Nor did Jim find a chime with the other two men, nor Tom with Peirce.

"And now you," said Julia. One by one, the humans leaned over the handcart to click their stones against Freddy's. Still there were no chimes.

CHAPTER 4

"Now what?" asked Freddy. He was still sitting in the handcart, propped by a pair of now-damp pillows. "Where are we going to look for Muffy? Or Jim's truck?"

They were crowded into the cab of Blackie, Julia Templeton's Mack. Tom Cross sat on the floor beside the handcart. Randy was in his lap. Julia drove slowly down the boulevard that led traffic past the museum. Jim Brane had the seat beside her.

"The police are looking," said Tom.

"We can't do much but wait," said Julia.

"We could go to the apartment," said Tom.

"Or the Farm," Jim added to the list of options.

"We could get drunk," said Freddy.

"Or wait sober." Julia gave the pig a reproving stare.

"I've got some scotch," said Tom. He sounded wistful, as if that option held a strong appeal.

"There's always honeysuckle wine, too," said Jim.

Freddy snorted. "I'd rather twiddle my thumbs." He wiggled his stubby forelimbs as if to draw his trotters to their attention. "If I had thumbs."

"How about lunch?" Julia pointed ahead and to the left where a small restaurant lay washed nearly free of patrons by the weather. On sunnier days, it would fatten on the flow of people to and from the museum and the park beyond. Today, however, they would have it almost to themselves.

When they entered, they saw that it held a single bored looking waiter who wore over the ubiquitous coverall a tailless striped shirt with dark bands around the upper arms. He was leaning against one end of the bar and chatting desultorily with an androgynous bartender whose face bore both a mustache and eye shadow. The only other customers were a trio of determinedly blue-rinsed ladies at a table by the far window. Their coveralls were decorated with cameo brooches and ruffled sleeves and collars.

The ladies were so quick to jump to their feet when they saw Freddy that they beat the waiter to their table. "We saw you once," one said. "In the museum. Singing."

"And very nicely, too," added the second. Her cheeks, just forward of her ears, bore inserts of tortoise shell. They were faded by time, relics of a day when it had been all the rage to induce patches of human skin to transform into jewel-like fragments of insect wings and reptile hide. "Could we have your autograph?"

"Don't be silly, Bets!" said the third. She reached out as if to touch Freddy's stubby forelimbs. He flinched away as best he could. "He can't write!"

"Excuse me," said the waiter, reaching past them with the bread basket and a sheaf of menus adorned with a sepia photo of a bicycle with an over-sized front wheel and a bicyclist with a shirt similar to his own. His movement brought his arm close to a mass of bristly black fur on Tom's shoulder. When he realized what he was almost touching, he jerked away, face white.

"Well, then, how about a paw print? Or..." Bets's voice hesitated as she realized what she had said. "A hoof print?"

"I'll give you a print, all right," said Freddy. "I'll give you a..." His voice choked off as Tom crammed a muffin into his mouth.

Jim, grinning, said, "You'd better go. His manners are really inexcusable, you know."

"It's not surprising," said Tom. "He *is* a pig, after all. And he got his start in a strip joint. We sang bawdy duets." And he's not used to fans, he thought. We weren't famous when we sang together, and now the museum protects him from the gropies.

"Like 'the Duchess and the Student'?" offered the lady who had spoken first.

"Maude!" said the third.

"Don't be silly, Emily," answered Maude. "You laughed too the day we heard that one." But she let her friend seize her arm and pull her away.

Freddy swallowed noisily. "Killjoy," he said. "I was just going to..."

"I know you," said Tom. "You want another muffin?"

"Your mother was a coin-op," the pig replied. Tom winced, but he said nothing.

Jim reached for a roll himself, but only to break and butter it. "So now what?" he asked.

"It's obvious," said Freddy. "And yes, I want another muffin. In pieces, this time. I get enough stomach-aches already. And butter it, like Jimmy's."

Julia obliged him as Tom Cross said, "What do you mean, it's obvious?"

"You've got your best friend back," said Freddy. "You've got me back. But I'll bet you still haven't called your parents."

Julia stopped feeding the pig and stared at Tom. Jim shrugged and said, "What do you expect, Julia? He stole the family garbage disposal the day he ran away. Can you imagine what happened the first time someone tried to use the sink after that?"

"I hope they laughed. Later, anyway. But why'd he run away?" As she spoke, Julia turned toward Tom and laid a hand on his forearm. "Why did you?"

Tom had met Julia for the first time just that day. She was a stranger, but she was also Jim's girlfriend, and Jim was his buddy from years before. Therefore, she was his friend, too, or at least she could be, and she was nice, kind and caring, the sort of person he would like for a friend of his own. So was Muffy.

He stared at the tabletop, silent, bowing under the twin weights of loss and the painful reminder of what he had thrown away. Freddy answered for him: "He found out his Daddy wasn't really his Daddy. That tumbled Mommy right off her pedestal, and then..."

"They've gotta still be mad," said Tom. "I haven't dared..."

"It's been years," said Freddy.

"Freddy's right," said Julia. "Right after lunch, let's go see them."

"But why should we?"

"Isn't that what families are for? Even more than friends? So you can go to them for help and support and encouragement?"

"But only then? Only when you need...?" Tom knew he sounded plaintive.

Jim snorted. "I've seen it that way as often as not."

Later, when Tom tried to give her directions, she said, "I know the way. You lived next door to each other, right? Your folks are in that pumpkin? And Jim's taken me home to meet his folks. While yours have never heard of Muffy."

Tom hung his head, ashamed of himself, knowing that he had indeed waited far too long, aching with the knowledge that if he never saw Muffy again, neither would his parents, and then...He would have no one to help him hold

the memory. She would be twice as gone, twice as dead, and he twice as diminished by her loss. He stared out the side of Blackie's pod, watching the rain slant through the air, dimpling puddles, dripping from leaves, spraying from the feet and wheels of other vehicles.

Their destination was one of the city's several suburbs. The streets there, unlike those in the city, were paved with turf, and when Blackie's feet hit that softer pavement, each step became a squelching splash. The houses that lined the roads changed from stone and concrete high-rises to small brick and wood bungalows to bioforms such as the Cross family owned. Lights, turned on against the greyness of the day, testified that within their walls all the many sorts of homes were much the same.

The edge of the bioform neighborhood was marked by a dilapidated mosque, its minaret overgrown with honeysuckle. Tom remembered playing with Jim and other kids in its empty courtyards. Now smoke rose from those courtyards, and ancient mechanical vehicles, in many stages of dilapidation, were parked helter-skelter against the outer walls. Three figures in telltale blue coveralls lounged in the main doorway. The Engineers had adopted the building as their local base.

Tom Cross snorted at the aptness of the Engineers' choice. As boys, he and Jim Brane had puzzled over the mosque's abandonment until they had thought to ask at the local library. There they had learned it had happened a century before. When certain Moslem groups had chosen to threaten with destruction all writers, actors, politicians, and other public figures who offended their conservative beliefs, the nation's government had decided that Islam, as a religion, was too great a threat to social progress, human rights, and freedom to tolerate. It had then deported all avowed Moslems, claiming that the legal precedent had been set long before, with the deportations of the Mafiosi. A few had argued that the deportations were as irrational as the Moslem death squads, but they had accomplished nothing. Still others had argued that the problem was not Islam, but intolerant, irrational, fundamentalist fanaticism of all kinds--Moslem, Christian, Jewish, Communist, Capitalist--but they had accomplished even less. Some cows were too sacred to gore.

Julia turned Blackie around the last corner, and there the houses were, two in a long row of bioforms, pumpkins, beanstalks, squash, a Chinese lantern, a puffball, the layer of plastic that strengthened its inflated skin glinting slickly in the rain. The Branes lived in a Swiss-style chalet mounted atop a beanstalk some fifteen meters high that twined around a concrete pillar that provided wind resistance, added strength, and housed an elevator shaft. The beanstalk bore both flowers and fruit.

The Cross pumpkin was a six-room house shaded by the immense leaves and decorated by the yellow blossoms of its parent vine. Both the beanstalk and the pumpkin were twined around with honeysuckle vines. Honeysuckle blossoms dangled over the railing of the porch that surrounded the chalet on three sides. They wreathed the pumpkin's doorway and windows. They littered the ground.

The pumpkin's blossoms were sterile, for the plant had been engineered to bear only the one fruit. That fruit, once it had reached its full size, had been levered onto a concrete stand and its flesh had been chiseled out with jackhammers. The shell had been allowed to dry and coated inside and out with preservatives and sealants. Windows and doors had been cut, partitions and wiring and plumbing installed, and Petra and Ralph Cross had moved in. Tom had been born later.

Jim peered upward at his parents' chalet, lightless in the rainy gloom,

and said, "The Armadon's not there. They're at work." His father, Abraham Brane, was a textdisk editor; his mother, Lisa, was a statistical analyst for a law firm. "And Caleb's in school." Caleb was his younger brother.

Tom's legal father was a department store bioppliance buyer. His mother didn't work, so even though the Cross family vehicle, a Roachster, was not in the drive, there was light in the pumpkin's windows. "She's home," he said, and Julia turned her Mack into the drive.

They left the handcart and Randy in the Mack. Jim carried Freddy while Tom tried the knob to the front door. The latch clicked. He hesitated, pushed the door halfway open, and leaned forward. "Mom?"

There was no answer other than a low murmur from another room. "Mom?"

Finally, the murmur quieted and a slurred voice said, "Who's there? C'min."

They entered, passing through a small entry into a kitchen whose counters were littered, its sink stacked, with dirty dishes. Dirty laundry was mounded on the table. The dry stalk of a long-dead pie-plant jutted from an earthenware pot by the window. Paint was peeling from the window frame. The floor gritted under their feet, and the air was sickly with the reek of honeysuckle wine spilled and soured and of blossoms rotted on the floor.

Tom's voice was low with surprise: "It didn't used to be like this."

"I remember now," said Jim. "Before I went to the Farm. I could stand on our porch and see her picking honeysuckle."

"She can't be..." Tom protested. "A honey bum," he was about to add, but the words died in his throat as they stepped through the doorway into the house's living room.

Their first impression was olfactory: The room reeked of unwashed body, dirty laundry, and honeysuckle, fresher now. Their second was visual: Petra Cross was clad in a stained and tattered bathrobe. She sprawled across a low Sino Finn couch. A table beside her held a wooden rack that centuries' worth of laboratory workers would instantly have recognized. Its half-dozen openings, however, were too broad for test-tubes. What they held was honeysuckle blossoms, each with its ration of euphoric nectar. On the floor beneath the table was a small pile of empty, wilted blossoms. Sticky patches much like those Tom had found in his and Muffy's place marked the table top, the floor, the rack.

Tom's mother was staring at a large veedo screen that hung flat against the wall opposite the couch. On it, a singing group clothed in bright green costumes brandished equally green instruments. A line of type across the bottom of the screen identified the group as "The Lily White Boys," though it contained only three Caucasians; its other three members were two blacks and an Oriental.

As Tom led the way into the room, Petra turned her gaze upon him and said, as if he had been gone only a week, "Tommy. S'down and have a drink." She turned toward her rack of blossoms, her hand hovering briefly before selecting one, and then she held it toward him in a rudimentary salute. She blinked at the others. "Friends, too."

They made no move toward her honeysuckle rack or the nearby window, which needed only opening to serve them all. The afternoon light, grey as it was, was more than enough to show the rich reserve that awaited on the other side

of the glass.

When their refusal had registered, Petra shrugged almost invisibly and returned her attention to the veedo screen. She fumbled in her lap for a control unit, and The Lily White Boys' song became audible:

You've got the question.
Your perfume says it all.
I've got the anther!
Shakin' my anther for you!

They sang in six-part harmony, with a strong bass line, and their gyrations made Tom smile despite the pain of his losses, of Muffy and of the mother he had once known. But he ignored the singers while he crossed the room, took the control unit from his mother's lap, and turned the veedo off.

She squirmed in the couch, reaching toward her son's hand to retrieve the remote. Her robe slipped to expose the grey-tinged slope of a breast, and he hesitated, almost allowing her to touch him, before recoiling from her, her dirt, her smell, her...But his reaction did not register on her awareness. Her hand patted the air as if it had indeed reached its goal.

"Where's Ralph?"

"He's at work," she said, her voice beginning to slip into a whine. "Always at work. Works more'n ever now, and he's promoted, got more assistants, s'posed to have more time, time for me, y'know? But no. He's always gotta work." She fingered the remote control unit once more, and the Lily White Boys sang:

You're spreading your leaves.
I smell it on the air.
Showers of pollen!
Shakin' my anther for you!

Tom sighed, stepped to the veedo set itself, and punched the off button. The screen flickered, the picture died, and the music stopped. His mother pouted and reached for another honeysuckle blossom, while Jim and Julia shared glances. Tom noticed, and he had to agree: Obviously, his family was in a bad way. Petra was what she was. His father was fleeing into his work, or perhaps to a mistress in the city, one who was not a honey bum. Tom understood how his friends might feel sorry for him, though he hated that understanding. No one wants to be an object of pity.

Tom himself simply stared at his mother. She drained another blossom and muttered, "Me, I just stay home and watch the veedo. And get potted." She tossed the empty blossom on the floor and reached for another, but the rack was empty. She held it up toward her son. "Get me some more? Please? That's a good boy, Tommy."

He grimaced, but he did as she wished. He opened the window, admitting a gust of cold, damp air, plucked blossoms, and inserted one in each of the rack's holes. When he was done, he closed the window and passed the rack back to his mother. She immediately grabbed a blossom and drained it with a sigh. "So much nicer fresh," she said. "Oh, yes." Then she blinked at Tom as if she were seeing him for the first time. "Tommy! What are you doing here? You've been away for..."

He nodded, tears springing to his eyes. "I know," he said. "A long time." He hesitated, while his friends backed up toward the door into the room as if to give him what privacy they could. Jim set Freddy down and shook his arms in

mute expression of their fatigue. Freddy remained uncharacteristically silent, leaving the stage, like the humans behind him, to the mother and son.

"Did you get married?" asked Petra, peering toward Freddy. "Is that a kid? My grandson?"

"No, Mom." He didn't try to explain what Freddy really was. "I got a girlfriend, though. She was kidnapped yesterday."

Petra's expression shifted rapidly from sympathetic interest through consternation to a bitter skepticism. "You sure she didn't just runaway?"

"Yeah." He shook his head and described the way the apartment had been when he came home. "I wanted to tell you and Ralph. Share it, you know?"

"Just like he really was your Daddy?"

"I guess."

"He'd like to know, y'know. Like to help, even."

"But he's not here."

"Not much at all." Her mouth turned down sadly, self-pityingly, but her face brightened immediately as she reached for another honeysuckle blossom. "He comes around, though. Sometimes. Even brings me presents." She looked at Tom from under the ragged edge of her hair, slyly coquettish. When she realized that he was empty-handed, she added, "Brought me a Slugabed once, he did."

"And he's not my Dad."

She shook her head. "That was next door." She spoke slowly, as if it took effort to retrieve the memory. "Jimmy's place. 'Fore they moved in."

Tom glanced at his friend. He remembered when he had first told Jim, not long after he had found out himself, that Ralph was not his real father. He had said, quite simply, "So what else is new? Mine isn't either."

Tom had glared at this lack of sympathy, but Jim had said, "Test-tube stuff, you know?"

"That's different," Tom had said. And he had thought it was. BRA allowed human engineering only in order to cure genetic diseases. Anything else was "man-mucking," and both its practitioners and its examples were hounded ruthlessly. Yet there were varieties of human biological engineering that were not *genetic* engineering. For many decades, plenty of parents had been using not just sperm banks, but even egg and embryo banks, to obtain the children they wanted. Sometimes the reason was infertility. More often, it was the wish for talented or intelligent or beautiful offspring. Supposedly, the donors had genes of higher quality.

His mother continued her struggle to bring back the past: "He moved outright after...right after we..." She hesitated. She turned to stare at Tom, her eyes wide, imploring. "I wanted so much then. And he had it all. Parties. Loud music. I could see the dancing. And...So one day I climbed up the beanstalk."

The others were silent, though Freddy wriggled on the floor. Her eyes drawn to the motion, Petra went on. "Wanted a good time, I did. Wanted everything, 'n Ralph wasn't giving it to me." Quietly then, as if speaking only

to herself, she added, "Still isn't. Never did, really. The bastard."

She paused while her gaze roamed around the room. "Place's a dump. Meant to clean't up this morning." She looked back at Tom and his friends, but her eyes seemed unfocused, her mind on other days and other people. "So I chased Jack. That was his name, y'know. Jack. A gengineer, he was."

She took another of the honeysuckle blossoms her son had fetched for her. "I peeped in the window. 'N there he was. Dancing. Shakin' it. His ladies standin' round the room, in rows, just swayin'. Giant Alices. Though there weren't many Alices then."

Jim shifted his weight and spoke, loudly enough for Tom to hear. "Before I went to the Farm, we replaced the carpet. And under the old one were a bunch of round marks on the floor. Like big flower pots."

Petra nodded, and Tom thought that he and his true father must share a liking for the plants with the human-like faces. They were child-like, cute, pretty. But dancing in front of them, just like they were people, women?

"That's when he got me," his mother said. "Just shook it. 'N when I woke up, there I was, on the ground, m'nightie all dirty. And you in my belly. He's your Daddy. Your real Daddy."

Freddy snickered. "If I'd been there, you'd have waked up in a bed!" When Tom spun around, his mouth open to utter some reproof, he added, "Sorry, Boss. She may be your mother, but she's a sillier windbag than my wife."

Petra was sitting stiffly upright, her eyes wide. "That's no little kid!" she said. "That's..."

"Right, lady," said Freddy. "I'm your garbage disposal. Tom liberated me when he ran away."

"We ran away together," said Tom. He aimed toward his mother a gesture that said the situation all those years ago had left him no choice. "He could think and talk..."

"Don't forget 'sing,'" put in Freddy.

"And sing. He didn't belong under the sink. So..."

Petra blinked at the thought that a garbage disposal might not belong under the sink. After a moment, she nodded. "I guess. But..." She reached for another honeysuckle blossom, but the rack was empty. She gave her son a mute and pleading look.

He obliged, taking the rack once more to the window and refilling it. When he handed it to her, their fingers touched and he almost failed to suppress a shudder at the gritty, sticky feel of her hand. As she took it, her sleeve rode up her arm and he noticed faint threadlike marks beneath the surface of her skin. Did she, he wondered, have some kind of worms as well as filth? Should he call the public health department? Should he find Ralph and suggest that she be taken away, hospitalized, for treatment? But she had made it clear that he saw her at least occasionally. He knew what she was like, and he would, Tom had to trust, do what was necessary. His legal father was a conscientious man, a good man, even a good father, except...

Freddy was apparently less willing to leave Petra's salvation entirely to others. "You shouldn't," he said, "be giving her that. She's had more than enough. I wouldn't dare even to eat her empties."

"I know," said Tom. He looked at Jim and Julia as if to ask them what else he could do. "But..."

"F'get it," said his mother. "I'll drink all I want. Can't stop me. Ralph can't stop me either. I'll drink m'self to death. Least, it doesn't hurt. Not like having y'son run away from home, and steal the garbage disposal while he's at it. Not like..."

She paused, groping at the air with the one hand that did not hold a blossom. She seemed to be searching for words, or a thought, and no one interrupted. Finally, she went on. "Jack couldn't either. Even if he came back. Which he won't. He's busy. He's got your girl, Tommy. What's her name?"

"Muffy."

"Got your Muffy. What goes around, comes around. He got me. Got her, now. Gonna turn her into a flower lady, he is. You wait and see. She'll be potted, too. Just like me. He's got her."

CHAPTER 5

The broken glass had been cleaned up but not repaired. The central expanse of the building's doorway, through which visitors had been able to watch their hosts descending the stairs and residents had been able to watch for mail deliveries and friends, had been filled in with a sheet of plywood.

This time, Tom Cross had to use his key. He held the door while Jim and Julia entered the building. Julia was holding two sacks, one of take-out Korean food and one--from a pet store--with a rat for Randy. Jim was once more carrying Freddy. Randy, perched on Tom's shoulder, began to shift her weight back and forth when he stepped through the door himself.

"Third floor," he said. Then he reached up to give the giant spider a reassuring pat. "Nervous?" he asked her softly. "I don't think anyone'll be there. Not this time." Not even, he thought, Muffy. She was gone, perhaps forever. The kidnappers hadn't called before he left the apartment that morning. They hadn't tried to reach him at all. Unless...

By the time he caught up to the others in front of the apartment door, he had dug from his pocket the key to the landlord's padlock. He used it, wishing the door had been repaired, that it had a normal, working lock, that life could have returned already that much closer to normal. When they entered the apartment, the first thing he did was to check the phone.

His heart leaped when he saw the blinking light that meant someone had called. But when he made the phone play back the message it had recorded, it was only Cal, the owner of The Spider's Web, where Tom and Freddy once had sung, where Muffy danced, where she had been supposed to dance last night, and again tonight. "Where is she?" Cal wanted to know. "Is something wrong?"

As he told his friends that the message was not from the kidnappers, Jim Brane set Freddy on the couch, propping his barrel form against the cushions. The pig twisted as best he could to bring his gaze to bear on everything. In a moment, he said in his distinctive nasal rumble, "What a dump! A plywood door downstairs. A chain upstairs. No elevator! No...!"

"Shut up," said Tom. "I have to call Cal." He did so, explained that Muffy was missing, apologized for not calling the night before, and finally said, "Yes, the cops are on it. We have our fingers crossed." His eyes watered.

There was a moment of awkward silence after he hung up. Then Freddy said, "Is that Muffy's picture? By the Alice?"

"Yeah." Tom picked it up and showed Jim and Julia what she looked like.

"I'd like to see her again," said Freddy. He sounded wistful.

"So would I," said Tom. His eyes filled now with actual tears, and when he had wiped them dry, Julia said gently, but practically, "The food's getting cold."

Tom barely noticed what he was putting into his mouth. Nor did Jim seem to be paying much attention to the food, while Julia was watching Jim far more intently than her plate. It was left to Freddy to say, in between the forksful that the others dropped into his mouth, "Good stuff. Not like the swill at the museum. They try, you know? But they're not geared for intelligent genimals. And it's not much better when they feed us from the cafeteria. I'd still get heartburn, but I wish they'd send out more often. Either that or hire a..."

Julia Templeton interrupted him. "Why doesn't your Dad do something?"

"He's not my Dad." Tom turned away to watch the spider. She had jumped on the rat as soon as they had released it, paralyzed it with her venom, and withdrawn with it under the couch. Now she was pulling it into the open again, all neatly trussed with silk. He pointed, and they all watched as Randy tugged the rat across the floor until it was under Julia's chair.

She moved, he thought, as if nothing--not Muffy, not a limb--were missing at all. The wound where she had gnawed free her broken leg was already tightly sealed with new tissue, and her nervous system had compensated more than adequately for the imbalance in her gait. He wished he could adjust as easily.

"That's where Muffy usually sits," said Tom. Finally, when she was where she wanted to be, Randy crouched over her rat to suck its fluids.

"Ralph's her husband, isn't he?" asked Julia. "Then..."

Tom shrugged. Jim offered, "Sounds like he's not there much anymore. I'll bet he has another place."

"He should be there," said Julia. "She's not well, physically or..."

"She's off her nut," growled Freddy. "A drunk. A junky. A honey bum."

"We could call the cops?" said Jim. "Though they don't care much about honey suckers. And they can't do a thing. The vines are everywhere, after all."

"Then put her in a loony bin," said the pig. "Dry her out."

"It's up to Ralph, really," said Tom. "If he cares anymore."

"Don't you?" asked Freddy.

"Yeah, but..."

"He has his own troubles," said Jim.

"So do you," said Julia.

Tom sighed. "Muffy," he said. "She likes honey too. Though not that much."

"How'd your mother know that?"

When he looked puzzled, Julia added, "She said it had to be your real Daddy, that Jack, who kidnapped her, and he was going to turn her into a potted plant, just like her."

"If she likes the wine, that shouldn't be too hard," said Jim.

"But he can't turn her into a plant. Can he?" asked Tom.

"You're the one who works in a bioppliance store."

"Maybe," said Freddy. "Maybe she's as psychic as Porculata."

"That's..."

"Hogwash?" said Freddy. "You bet, and it's a lot of fun. We've got a tub there at the museum, and..."

Randy's rat now lay shriveled on the floor. Jim picked it up by a loose strand of silk and said, "Want the leftovers, Freddy?"

The response was outraged. "Goddammit! I'm a musician! I may have started off as a garbage disposal, but even then I didn't have to eat dead rats. You can stuff that rat up your..."

Tom Cross scooped a handful of rice from one of the cardboard boxes before them and dropped it into Freddy's mouth. Then, while the pig made choking noises, he said, "What's Randy doing now?"

The giant spider was scuttling back and forth across the apartment floor, her palps raised and twitching. If she had been a dog, they would have thought she was casting for a scent, and then, as she froze, waved her palps, and began to move straight toward the apartment door, that she had found one.

When she reached the door, Randy stopped and meeped. "I think," said Julia, "that we should follow her."

Jim Brane dropped the dead rat into an empty take-out carton. Then he and Tom cleared away the debris of their meal. While they worked, Jim said, "It's night, and she's black. How can we?"

"There's a leash," said Tom.

The rain had stopped. The sky had cleared. Now the air was still and damp. Randy scuttled around the intersection, searching for ascent that time and weather must almost totally have destroyed. But her senses were as keen as those of any bloodhound. She stiffened, paused, and turned left, her seven legs pulling the leash taut against Tom's arm.

The man behind the arm refused to move. After six blocks of following the spider down the center of the road, dodging traffic, wishing fruitlessly to be invisible when pedestrians were in sight, he had had enough. His feet were already sore, and there seemed no sign that Randy would ever stop.

Hand over hand, he drew leash and spider toward him, picked her up, and turned toward the Mack not far behind him. Jim opened the right-hand door and said, "Had enough? Whatever she's following has to be riding by now."

"Keep going," Tom Cross said. "I'll get out at the next intersection and let her check the direction."

Their progress was slow, but it was nevertheless faster than walking. Blackie could cover the long straight stretches between the intersections far more quickly than Tom's personal shank's mare. He could catch his breath while he petted the bristly back of the spider who was leading them, he hoped, toward her mistress and his mate. For a moment he envied his old friend, Jim, who might have lost his Mack, and, yes, of course, that had to be a blow. But he still had Julia.

As Tom thought, he remembered that when he had come home--just yesterday!--an Armadon had pulled away from the curb in front of his and Muffy's building and gone down the road ahead of him, in just the direction they were moving now. He wondered if there were indeed any connection besides coincidence, and then he decided it didn't matter, for here was another intersection. It was time to get down, let Randy cast about for the scent and point their direction of travel, climb aboard again, and then drive on.

It was a slow stop-and-start process, but in due time it led them out of the residential neighborhood in which they had begun their tracking and onto a larger artery that bent their path back toward the city center. Now Tom had to give up his wish for invisibility, for it was more unrealistic than ever. The brightly lighted streets were thick with Buggies of every description, and the sidewalks with shoppers and theater-goers. And here, as nearly everywhere, honeysuckle vines grew wherever they could find bare soil, in the cracked pavement of alleys, by the roots of curbside ginkgoes and maples, in the miniparks to be found on many blocks, and then climbed toward the sun on whatever vertical surfaces were within their reach. Honey bums huddled in cardboard huts sheltered in the shadows of the vines. Litterbugs patrolled the streets and sidewalks.

The intersections were now so busy that they had to use Blackie to block traffic while Randy searched for scent. Drivers made their various genimals honk, growl, and bark. Drivers and pedestrians alike cried out, "Where's your Spiderman suit?" Most of them surely did not know that Spiderman had been created long in advance of the genetic technology that had prompted the revival of superheroes in new comics and veedo shows.

At one intersection, however, there was no such noise. Blackie stopped, deliberately blocking traffic. Tom emerged with Randy in his arms. He set her down, and she quickly ran to the limits of the leash to scuttle from side to side, forward and back, exploring for the scent that had first caught her attention in the apartment. But the halted traffic was silent, and the humans simply watched.

"Tommy!"

He raised his head, and the silence caught at his attention. Jim Brane was leaning out the door of Blackie's pod, pointing urgently with one hand toward the side of the intersection on the other side of the Mack, gesturing frantically with the other for Tom to get back inside the pod. Tom wondered what had so upset his friend. Were the cops coming to tell them to quit blocking traffic? He looked around him. Then why was everyone so quiet? Knowing that he might be doing something foolish but intent only on answering that question, hoping that the answer might help him solve the larger mystery of Muffy's disappearance, he let Randy draw him forward until he could see around the Mack.

Standing on the other side of the intersection were four Engineers,

distinctive in their blue coveralls and golden cogwheels. They had apparently been strolling down the center of the street, for a horde of bioform vehicles was silently backed up behind them. One wore a metal helmet that resembled the helm of some ancient knight. Another had shiny brass springs dangling from his earlobes. All held curved lengths of sharpened metal that might once have been automobile springs. Now they were swords, machetes, the perfect weapons with which to terrorize modern drivers. They could chop off a genimal's limbs or head, slash its wheels, destroy upholstery and control computers and even drivers. The Engineers were staring at the Mack that had dared to block their path, at the man and the spider, which had now, finally, caught the scent and begun to strain the leash straight ahead, toward the threatening quartet.

The Engineers laughed and stepped forward as if to meet her.

A chill ran down Tom's spine.

Blackie growled. The Engineers stopped and gave her a wary look.

Pedestrians began to edge away, deciding that though this bit of impending street theater might be fascinating enough, it might turn nasty, and who, after all, wanted to get his or her shoes or coverall or gown bloody?

"Get in here!" Jim's gesture was more urgent than before. Tom obediently drew the spider in, picked her up, and turned toward the Mack.

"What's going on?" cried Freddy. The Mack's pod had not been meant for passengers. It had only two seats, one of them the driver's. Jim sat in the other. Tom had to squat behind, while the pig was simply braced in the handcart by his cushions. "Lift me up so I can see!"

The Engineers laughed again when Jim raised the pig's head into view. One said, "I'm kinda sick of pork, but at least it's not a litterbug." Another added, "Too small. Just an appetizer."

Freddy swore and added loudly, "Gotta catch me first!"

"We'll catch you all! Dogmeat for dinner!" They waved their makeshift swords in the air, but Blackie growled once more and they didn't move.

"Let's get out of here," said Jim as Tom climbed into the pod. Julia put her Mack into motion, the Engineers stepped aside to let them pass, and soon the intersection was behind them.

Jim turned the rear-view screen toward his face and adjusted the magnification. "They've stopped a Roachster," he said. "Hauled the driver out." Tom leaned over his shoulder to see. The Roachster's owner was curled on the sidewalk while two of the Engineers kicked at his head and ribs. The other two were turning the Buggy into something reminiscent of an antique convertible. Roachsters were exoskeletal genimals, half lobster and half cockroach, and their passenger compartments were bubbles in the shell of their back. Dealers cut holes in the bubble wall and installed windows and doors before selling the vehicles. Now the Engineers were using their blades to chop away the entire bubble. Fortunately for the owner, if the Engineers left the Roachster alive, its next molt would recreate the bubble, and the post-molt body shop would have no more work to do than ever to make it just as good as new.

"Now they're following us," said Jim. "And everyone else is going the other way."

"I wish we were going the other way!" Freddy's loud defiance of a moment

before had turned into a moan of despair. "Fast. I don't wannabe barbecued!"

"Do you think Engineers did it?" asked Tom. Kidnapped Muffy and stole Tige, he meant. "Maybe they wanted to get me to destroy the Garden, or..."

"It's not their style," said Julia Templeton. "If they wanted to closedown the store, or that place where she dances, they'd simply walk in and chop it to bits." The precedent had been established long ago by protestors against alcohol and abortion.

They stopped at the next intersection as usual. But while Tom set Randy again to searching for scent, Julia turned Blackie to face the way they had come. The Engineers stopped their hijacked Roachster half a block away, waved their blades, and screamed threats. The few residents of the neighborhood who were on the street promptly disappeared. Vehicles turned and fled, seeking other routes to their destinations.

When they set off again, this time down a side street that led them into a neighborhood with fewer streetlights and open stores and less traffic, the Engineers continued to follow. Their shouts echoed from the walls that enclosed the street.

As the intersections passed behind them, their surroundings grew darker, the homes and apartments that lined the streets shabbier, more festooned with graffiti, much of it reflecting the sentiments of the dispossessed of the age, the Engineers and their sympathizers. But Randy continued to pick out their turns, and the speed and apparent confidence of her choices increased as the streets grew drabber and less traveled. "Not so many newer odors laid down on top," said Jim Brane.

"She didn't pick out any scent yesterday?" asked Julia.

Tom stared ahead, over their shoulders and out the windshield. Somewhere ahead, near or far, the trail would come to an end. And then..."No," he made himself say. "I wish I knew why she did today. You'd think the scent would be a lot dimmer."

"Of course it is," said Freddy. "But she lost a leg, right? She was in shock. It just didn't penetrate."

Jim checked the viewer and barked a surprised laugh. "They're turning off! Got bored, I bet."

"Or decided they didn't have enough of an audience," said Julia.

All four relaxed, though Freddy didn't seem entirely to trust Jim's report. "Keep an eye out," he said. "They may be circling." They were entering a district of factories and warehouses, of streets that even litterbugs ignored and whose gutters overflowed with filth, of alleys choked with honeysuckle, of cracked masonry and burned-out hulks, of stark desolation softened only by the draperies of the honeysuckle vines.

"This isn't far from where I picked you up," said Julia, with a glance at Jim.

"A few blocks," he said.

"Turn off the headlights!" said Tom.

Ahead of them, the street ended in a paved square surrounded by buildings and unusually free of honeysuckle and rubbish. An Armadon was parked to the

left. The only exit was a narrow, tunnel-like opening in one wall. Yellow light, flickering as if someone or something were moving between the source and them, glimmered around the edges of some object in the tunnel. The light was brightest on the right.

"Looks like we walk," said Julia. "Unless this..."

"You stay with Blackie," said Jim, thinking of how he had lost his own Mack. "And lock the doors." When he and Tom were down, Tom put Randy on the ground, and she began to dance and strain at the leash, pulling them toward the tunnel. She meeped insistently.

"The scent's fresh," said Jim. "Right in there, but what is it?"

As they drew closer, they could hear quiet voices and make out scattered words: "That's...last...Glad...done. Wonder what...do." The object in the tunnel became clearly a truck trailer, being loaded through a side door drawn hard by a loading platform in the side of the tunnel. At the trailer's other end, presumably, there was a Mack.

The trailer's door slammed and latched. The lights on the loading platform went out. A voice rose: "Let's get outa here." They heard the door to the Mack's cab open and close. The trailer's lights blinked on, and the glare of headlights reflected from a wall beyond the tunnel.

"I wonder!" Jim's voice was just a whisper, but it carried as clear a load of eager anticipation as if he had shouted.

"What?"

Instead of responding, he called aloud: "Tige!"

There was an answering bark. Jim's voice rose joyfully. "Tige!" Behind them, Blackie woofed a more canine greeting. A cry of anger echoed in the tunnel from the men in Tige's cab. The trailer lurched forward, but as soon as it had cleared the far end of the tunnel, the Mack pulling it began to turn, its headlights revealing that the tunnel linked a pair of similar courtyards. Reflected light illuminated Tige's brindle hide, the white circle around one bright eye, an open mouth, a lolling tongue.

Tige stopped and turned his head, snarling, toward the cab of the pod upon his back. His limbs and neck shook spastically, as if there were within his brain a war between his loyalty to the master who had called his name and the electronic controls through which the thieves were trying to make him turn and flee.

"Tige!" The great dog still trembled, but the spasticity diminished and he walked haltingly into the tunnel and toward his true master, the signals from the computer in the cab classified as delusions though they remained obviously distressing. Tige snarled, whined, and whimpered by turns, until at last the door to the cab opened and three cursing men leaped out and fled back through the tunnel.

Tige stopped, panting, in front of Jim. The trucker grinned, thumped the side of the overhanging snout, dodged an immense tongue, danced his delight, turned, and saluted Julia in her own Mack. But Randy was still meeping and tugging at the leash.

Tom Cross let her lead him toward the trailer that had been hitched onto the stolen Mack. Tige still wore his original pod, cargo compartment and all, and the new trailer had little more room for cargo than the pod. What it had

in addition was the side door that had permitted loading from the kidnappers' hideaway here, and that was where Randy stopped to meep again, more insistently than ever.

The giant spider climbed up his side until it could face the trailer's door from his shoulder. He pulled on the door's handle, and it clicked. It was not locked. He froze, suddenly afraid to pull the door open. Was Muffy behind it? Randy seemed to be saying that she was. But if she wasn't? What would he do then?

Julia Templeton touched him on the shoulder. He turned and saw Freddy in her arms. "So open it," said the pig.

He could see Jim Brane climbing into Tige's cab, presumably to see what damage had been done and to turn off the flow of conflicting commands that still had the Mack twitching. He turned back to the door and pulled. As soon as the opening was wide enough, Randy stopped meeping, leaped for it, and disappeared.

The interior of the trailer was pitch black. There was no motion, no sound of anything but quiet breathing, interrupted by Jim's swearing from the direction of the cab on Tige's back. "I'll bring Blackie over," said Julia, handing him Freddy. "For the headlights."

In a moment, he could see a large bucket from which jutted the stems of a number of lengths of honeysuckle vine. He supposed someone had wanted to keep the vines, and the blossoms that bedecked them, fresh. More blossoms were scattered, empty, trampled, across the floor of the trailer. Along one wall were several ceramic flower pots or planters the size of half-barrels.

The breathing was coming from a row of heaped and rumpled blankets on the other side of the compartment. Tom set Freddy inside the trailer, stepped in himself, grabbed a blanket, and pulled. The snoring, honey-stunned face that was revealed was young, female, and lovely, but it was not Muffy's.

"Mech," he said. He grabbed another blanket, Julia joined him, and together they uncovered the rest of the captive women. Only at the end did they find one against whose side huddled a bristly spider. She had dark hair and a familiar face that made Tom sigh. With an air of immense relief and satisfaction, he said, "That's Muffy!"

"But...who are the rest of them?"

Tom shook his head. There were six, seven counting Muffy, all wearing coveralls much like Tom's or Jim's own, varying mainly in the length of leg or sleeve, all in the same stupor. Had their captors forced them to drink the wine? Or had they, like Petra, been ready enough to drink if only someone would put it within their reach? They didn't look so dissipated. Perhaps they had just been willing to drink to relieve the boredom of captivity, and their captors had encouraged them with the bucket and the vines to simplify their task of preventing escape.

"They're just as potted as your mother said," said Freddy. He had tipped over and now lay on his side, his snout aimed toward the bodies Tom was uncovering. "But I bet it's not your real Daddy. It's slavers, hauling them off to an Iranian brothel. Nice merchandise, too. If I didn't get seasick, I'd disguise myself as a eunuch and sneak onto the boat with them." Ogling the sprawled bodies, he whistled.

"You are a hypochondriac," said Julia.

Tom shook his head again. He didn't believe Freddy's suggestion. "How are we going to wake them up?"

"Try fresh air and cold water," said Jim. He was standing on the ground outside the trailer door, having finished what he had to do in the cab.

The water in the bucket wasn't cold, but it would do. They plucked honeysuckle blossoms, emptied them of nectar, and used them to splash water on the sleeping faces. The women responded gradually, at first able only to moan, gasp, and utter incoherent words. But then Muffy's eyes focused on the face leaning over her, and she said, "Thomas!" For a moment, her face was alive, alert, and she was fully there. Her hand clutched at the familiar bristly shape cuddling itself against her. But then, though her eyes remained open, her alertness faded. Tom supposed that she was the victim less of the alcohol in the honeysuckle wine than of the drug, which much more effectively blocked the channels of caring and attention.

"We've been looking for you, hey?" The tears came to his eyes once more, and he blinked as he lifted her head so she could see the others.

"'s Freddy! But who...?"

"That's Jimmy. An old friend. They swiped his Mack to haul you off. And his girl, Julia. Randy tracked you down." Remembering, he drew a small package from a pocket. "Franklin sent this, for when we found you." He showed her the worrystone and when her hands could only fumble with the chain looped it around her neck.

"But...but..."

He was going too fast, and he knew it. He stopped, guided her hand to the worrystone, patted it, laid her head down again, and said, "We'll get you something to wake you up. And then home, right?" She nodded weakly.

To make room, Freddy's handcart went into Tige's cargo compartment. Within minutes, then, they had moved Muffy Bowen and two of the strange women into Tige's cab and the others into Blackie's. All the ex-captives were still dopey, and there was no argument when Julia said, "That diner's not far off. See you there," and headed her Mack out of the courtyard.

Noticing Tom's puzzled look, Jim said, "Last night, after they stole Tige, I had to call the Farm. *That* diner. Come on. We'll keep the trailer for the cops."

They climbed aboard, Jim said, "Follow Blackie," and Tige moved so smoothly into motion that they barely staggered as they found their seats. Then Jim kicked at a loose cable on the floor. "Litterheads plugged that in. Tige isn't used to that."

"What do you mean?"

"Way back," Jim Brane explained. "When I was new at the Farm. I wanted to impress Julia, so I taught Tige to do a few tricks. He was just a pup then, but now he does almost anything I tell him to. I don't need to touch a thing, though I do." He set his hands on the wheel as if he were steering.

"Then why...? Tom gestured at the cable, the console of the control computer, and the wheel.

"For show," said Jim. "Pretense. The computer just works the headlights, and the radio, but I never plug him in. We're training Blackie too."

Neither mentioned what they both knew, that voice control of a bioform vehicle was illegal. The Bioform Regulatory Administration insisted on electronic chains in order to prevent any possibility of genimals running amok in the streets.

By the time they reached the diner, Muffy Bowen and her companions had returned close enough to full consciousness to hold and drink from their own cups. While the coffee then percolated through their systems, Jim said, "Maybe your mother's really psychic after all."

The Macks were parked along the side of the street, and everyone had moved into Tige's cab. No one had thought it a good idea to take the ex-captives into the diner. Now Freddy snorted. "Nuts, maybe. Weird. Bizarre. Not psychic."

They ignored him. Julia Templeton said, "The pots? Were there enough?"

"I didn't count," said Jim Brane.

"Enough for what?" said Tom Cross. "To plant seven women? There would be no point, for they'd never grow roots."

"And pigs don't talk," said Freddy. "Don't count on it."

"Sheer coincidence," said Tom. "They were part of your truck's cargo before."

"Uh-uh." Jim shook his head. "Empty. Though maybe they stole the trailer, and they were in that."

"No." The voice, still slow and wavering with residual daze, was Muffy's. "They loaded them on with us. They didn't say why."

"So maybe your mother's psychic after all, Tommy," Freddy said. "Your Daddy's behind it all, and he wanted to turn your bride into a plant. A potted plant."

Muffy shuddered. Another of the ex-captives laughed out loud. "Come on, now!" She was short and slender, with yellow hair cut short, the sort of young woman who, if she were indeed to be turned into a flower, might be a daffodil. When Tom turned toward her, she added, "I'm Kimberley--Kimmer. They caught me when...I was shopping, and I wanted to try something on, and when I went to the back of the store, for the changing room, they just grabbed me and pulled me out the back door."

"I was with her," said another, taller, heavier, ruddier, perhaps a dahlia. Kimmer nodded her confirmation, and then the others told their stories. Most had been kidnapped in similar circumstances, in public, when isolated for just a moment. Only for Muffy had the kidnappers broken into a home. Only Muffy had apparently been a specifically chosen target. The others had been chosen for their kidnapping solely by accident or fate.

Three of the six lived in the suburbs. The rest lived in town, and when Kimmer said, "Just drop us off at my place. I'll see they all get home," the other two both said, "Or mine."

But Julia shook her head. "No," she said. "We'll have to drop you off at a police station."

Despite the protests that erupted around them, Jim and Tom had to agree with her. They would have to report that Muffy and Tige had been recovered and

turn over the trailer and its remaining contents. And Muffy and the other young women would have to be interviewed while their memories were fresh, for the police would want the best possible descriptions of the kidnappers.

CHAPTER 6

"I'm beat," said Freddy as the apartment building came into view ahead. "I'm not used to running around looking for kidnappers. Hey, I'm not even used to staying up this late. It's way past my bedtime. I like to cuddle up next to my little bagpipe around nine, unless we have a late show, and..."

The street was quiet, free of traffic and pedestrians, the streetlights dimmed for the hours of little need, the entry lights of buildings sparks that remembered the comings and goings of life. The curbs were largely free of parked bioforms, for most people put their vehicles in stables, their own or public, at night. Mechanical vehicles, because they were valuable antiques, were even more likely to be kept under shelter. Yet there were a few vehicles in sight--a Roachster, an Armadon, a Tortoise.

"We all are," said Jim Brane. He was wearing a grin of immense satisfaction now that he had his Tige back. As if to prove his point, he stretched that grin into a deliberate, colossal yawn. Tom Cross, grinning just as happily, yawned back at him. Jim was sure that Julia Templeton in the other Mack was just as tired. Muffy Bowen, still under the influence of the honey she had consumed while a captive, was sound asleep on the floor in the back of Tige's cab. Freddy sat propped against her side, while Randy rested on her belly.

"Slow, Tige," said Jim. He held the wheel in his habitual concealment of the Mack's independence, but his fingers danced with little pats and strokes. "Right, now. There's plenty of room for both of us."

Tige obeyed the verbal commands. His control computer was not plugged into his nervous system, though it still had functions. One was to feed appropriate signals to the control panel's LEDs, among whose tasks it fell to inform whoever looked that it was now well after midnight. They had, as planned, stopped at the nearest police station, and the cops had taken charge of the trailer and agreed to get Kimmer and the other young women to their homes. But they had asked only the simplest of questions, saying that the details could wait for daylight, when the detectives who were working on Tige's theft and the disappearances of the women came on duty. "Go home," they had said. "We'll call you."

"Do you think," said Jim. "That they will ever catch the kidnappers?"

Tom Cross shook his head. Then, as if realizing that his old friend, who was staring out the windshield, could not see the gesture, he said, "No. They ran away, and I don't think the girls' descriptions will help them very much."

Freddy yawned again. "We know why they stole the Mack," he said. "They needed something to haul the women. But why'd they steal the women?"

"Not white slavery," said Tom. "They don't do that anymore."

"Wanna bet?"

"Then what?"

"Murphy knows," said Jim Brane. Tige was parked, with Julia's Blackie right behind him. Jim turned off the headlights and added, "Wait just a bit, Tige. And then the Farm."

At the slam of a door behind them, Tom opened his door and peered toward Julia's Mack. Its parking lights were still on, and Julia was striding toward him. When she was beside the cab, looking up at him, and past him to her mate, she said, "Is she awake?"

"Uh-uh. Here." They passed her Freddy and shooed Randy out of Tige's cab. Then they tried to wake up Muffy, who stirred and muttered but stubbornly refused to open her eyes or stiffen her muscles enough to support her weight.

"Come on," said Tom. "We're almost home. Almost into our own bed. Just across the walk and up the stairs and..." He pulled her into a sitting position, and she responded, clumsily folding her legs beneath her, straightening them as he and Jim lifted, bracing a hand against the side of the door frame, letting them guide her feet onto the steps that led down to the sidewalk.

Julia and Freddy were watching intently. The men were concentrating on keeping Muffy from falling. Muffy herself barely had her eyes open.

No one was watching their surroundings, the buildings that overlooked their struggle against minor catastrophe like box seats in a theater, the expanse of roadway and sidewalk that stretched away from them to fore and back like some infinite stage, the few vehicles parked along the curb like critics. No one noticed that the Armadon parked near the mouth of the alley across the street was not empty, nor that its door had opened and several slender figures were slipping from shadow to shadow in their direction.

Jim locked the doors to Tige's cab. He was sure that no one was wandering around this neighborhood at this late hour and that he could quite safely leave the doors wide open. But he had thought the same the evening before, and the back of his head was still tender from the thump it had taken. He would never take that chance again. Nor, he guessed, would any of the Farm's other truckers, at least until the memory wore thin.

Together, he and Tom supported Muffy Bowen as she stumbled along the sidewalk toward the front door of the apartment building. With every step, her efforts grew stronger, her head rose from its drug-dazed slump, and she needed their help less. She looked at Julia Templeton and seemed puzzled. She noticed Freddy in Julia's arms and smiled. Randy clambered up Tom's leg and side and stepped from his shoulder to hers, and she produced a lopsided, drunken grin.

They swung from the roadside sidewalk into the short walk that led to the apartment building's entrance. Tom and Jim felt their legs brush against the shrubs to either side. Then Muffy braced herself against the step the men's hands were urging her into, stopped just feet away from the building's door, shook them off, and raised a hand to pet her spider.

"Come on, honey," said Tom Cross. "Just a few steps more."

"Yeah," said Freddy in his nasal bass. "Let's get to bed."

A low, rumbling growl made them all turn right to look at the Macks. Tige was staring toward the building, and his neck hair, where the weight of the pod did not mash it down, was bristling erect.

"What...?" said Julia.

Jim had the ominous feeling that he knew just what it was that was upsetting the Mack, but before he could speak, Tom said, "There's something..." and a stranger stepped into the light that spilled from the building's entrance.

Dressed in a black coverall unadorned by patches or embroidery, his skin darkened by nature or by artifice, he had been invisible in the shadows. Now Jim was aware of just how many shadows there were and that they might shelter an army in the night. He looked, his eyes flicking from right to left, but he could see no others.

The stranger laughed quietly and said, "Let's have her back. The boss insists."

"You too," said a voice behind them. Hands seized Tom and pulled him away from Muffy Bowen, drawing him toward the street. Others seized Muffy herself, and though Tom struggled, whoever held him was too strong. Jim tried to grab Muffy from her abductor, but another figure blocked his move, butting him into the shrubbery beside the walk. In a moment, Julia fell beside him. Freddy spilled from her arms and cried, "Ouch! These mechin' bushes...!"

The strangers, each of them clad in black, were clearing all possible interference from their path. Jim watched, stunned, as Tom tried to scream. As soon as his friend opened his mouth, his attacker crammed into it a dripping sponge. The reek of honeysuckle wine was strong.

Tom Cross struggled visibly not to swallow, but the wine was too much. Jim imagined it pooling in his mouth and running down his throat. If he wished to breathe without strangling on the alcoholic, drug-laden liquid...Very soon, Jim could see the wine's euphoric striking into his friend's brain, bringing placidity, passivity, nonresistance. Tom blinked and wrenched his arms, fighting both the drug and his captor.

Jim shifted his gaze to watch Randy leap from Muffy's shoulder to the man who held her. He heard a scream, "Goddam spider!" and a cry of pain. He saw the man go to his knees, one hand against the side of his neck, and fall to his side on the walk. Released, Muffy tried to run, but another of the black-clad strangers seized her before she had stumbled more than three steps.

"Got 'em."

"Then let's get out of here."

"Wait. Hold them." The man who had greeted them by the door stepped down the walk, knelt beside the one Randy had bitten, and said, "Got him this time." Vaguely, his mind fogged by the honeysuckle wine, Jim noticed that Randy was now nowhere in sight and recalled her broken leg. Had she attacked her victim before--in the apartment? when Muffy was kidnapped?--but failed to get close enough to bite? Had he struck her and broken the leg before she reached him? The apparent chief of the kidnappers laid a hand on the victim's throat, waited briefly, and shook his head. "Leave him. He's gone."

They were clumped then, one down, two holding Tom and Muffy, two more standing free. Jim noticed that Muffy too had a sponge in her mouth and her head was dropping as if the drug were having an easier time with her. He shook his head. Of course, he thought. She already had plenty of the stuff in her. As would Tom before long. He swallowed despite the empathy that tried to lock his throat and shuddered at the thought. What did they want Tom for? What did they want *Muffy* for?

Tom was staring back toward the building. Jim Brane was getting to his feet, Julia beside him. Tom's captor took a firmer grip on his shoulders. Another bent to seize his ankles, and he was being carried like a sack of grain across the street, Muffy beside him. At least, Jim thought, they were together this time.

They were nearing the Armadon across the street. Someone opened the vehicle's door, and as his friends were lifted into captivity, Jim opened his mouth and yelled, "Tige!"

A howl of rage erupted from the Mack. Tom's head spun toward the giant canine, as did those of his abductors, and he gaped at the sight of the wide-open jaws, streetlights reflecting from the fangs and drops of spittle, all getting nearer very quickly as ponderous legs propeled the genimal's charge across the road. The kidnappers dropped their victims--Jim winced when he heard Muffy's head strike the pavement--and leaped for the safety of their Armadon. The door slammed, and the smaller vehicle began to flail its limbs against the tops of its wheels.

Tige loomed over Tom and Muffy, his feet avoiding their bodies as if by miraculous chance, and his jaws closed around the Armadon's rear. Crunching sounds marked the damage his teeth were doing to the Armadon's surface armor, to the root of the genimal's tail, and to its left hind limb and wheel. The Armadon's scream was incongruously shrill. On the other side of the street, Blackie's throaty snarl played counterpoint and threatened that, if Tige were not enough, she would be all too pleased to join the fray.

"Tige! Enough. Let go." The Mack obeyed, and the Armadon spurted down the road away from them all. It now had only three useful wheels and propulsive limbs, and its left rear quarter dragged on the ground, but the adrenaline of fear gave it almost as much speed as it could have mustered when intact. It barely needed what must surely have been its masters' panicky hands upon its throttle.

Jim could not help but pity the genimal. A Roachster, like the one the Engineers had mutilated earlier, could be restored when it molted and replaced its shell. This Armadon, however, would have to be destroyed. It was not an exoskeletal animal, despite its appearance. It was a mammal, and its armor was bony plates embedded in its skin and covered by horn or scale, delicate and slow to heal. The wheels, great hollow bubbles of scale and bone, their rims covered with rubber treads, were irreplaceable.

Jim and Julia helped Tom to his feet. Then, while Tom's own adrenaline began to clear his head of the honeysuckle wine's euphoric haze, he and Jim carried Muffy into the building and up the stairs. Julia handled the genimals, directing Tige back to his parking place and patting the side of Blackie's snout to calm her down.

Once in the apartment, Muffy collapsed onto the bed and began to snore. Tom managed to sit down on the couch before the residue of the wine forced him to close his eyes. Julia was the one who called the police and asked them to come pick up the body on the sidewalk. She did not tell them to look for a damaged Armadon. Macks were not supposed to have the freedom to do such things. Nor did she identify herself.

After hanging up the phone, she told Jim how she had scooped over the body of the kidnapper Randy had bitten. While she had checked the fading pulse, Randy had emerged from the shrubbery and positioned herself as if proudly beside her victim's head. Julia had stared and shaken her head respectfully. "Too bad," she had said. "Too bad there's only one of you." Yet

she had moved her hands slowly, warily, when they came near the spider. She was still, she told her mate, unsure of the genimal's ability to discriminate between friend and foe.

There was a cross on a chain around the kidnapper's neck. She had checked his pupils and found them as constricted as if he had received a massive dose of heroin. He was comatose, unwakeable, and she had left him to pickup Freddy. The pig was undamaged but not speechless. When she leaned over him, he said, "I knew it! I can't go anywhere with Tommy without something happening! I'm scratched. I have a headache. And my butt is even sorer than the last time."

In the apartment, she grinned and said to Jim, "Just imagine what that thug will say when he wakes up in a cell and learns that his friends left him behind, thinking he was dead."

"If he wakes up," said Freddy, now propped in an easy chair. Randy was squatting by his side, uttering occasional quiet meeps. "And I hope he doesn't."

INTERLUDE 1

The gallery faced west, and the rising sun could not shine its brilliant rays directly through the glass of roof and wall. The building of which the gallery was but one small part, albeit the part that gave it its reason for existence, was opaque toward the east, its walls pierced by no openings that could bring light to the Eldest and her sisters.

Yet the sky above brightened quickly, and soon after the sun peeped above the horizon, that portion of its light that reached the gallery outshone the electric lights that sustained intent and dreams through the dark hours of night. The Eldest and her sisters awakened and spoke, Eldest first, the air currents carrying the messages along the line of speakers and listeners, permitting comment and expansion.

"FAILURE," was the Eldest's first word, or not-word, an expression of scent and twisting sword-blade leaf. Almost as a footnote, she emitted scents to summon the hands that could turn off the artificial lights, open the louvers in the glass roof, and activate the sprinklers that would refresh them all with a morning shower.

"Vine-borne word
Yes, has come:
Our master/pet
Chose bulb-rotted agents
Bulb-rot, root-rot
WEAKNESS IS NO EXCUSE
They had master/pet's
His scion/seedling/sprout's
Own pistil/mate
Twice!
And the scion/seedling/sprout himself
And others too
THEY LOST THEM
No pollen for us
No fresh genes

And we have no more old
No fruition and no rootstock
No new pistils
For us ourselves
To pollinate
WE WILL TRY AGAIN
Unless our master/pet has lost all his usefulness
If so..."

The last speaker's fronds drooped dejectedly. Soon, very soon, the next sister downdrift followed suit, and the next. Then the air currents wafted through the darker spaces of their dwelling and returned to the gallery's updrift end, and the Eldest of the sisters began to echo the gesture. But, even as the signal reached the next in line, the Eldest stiffened her leaves and sternly pronounced:

"NO! HE CANNOT, FOR IF HE HAS
We are lost
Cannot reach out
Cannot do
Cannot change
WE WILL USE OUR MASTER/PET
To order out his agents
Once again
To try again
AND AGAIN
As many times
As necessary
Until we have them all
Have enough
Do not forget
Our master/pet's own pistil/mate
We need..."

A vagrant breeze disrupted the phrase, but it did not matter. Frustration and regret had been expressed, and determination affirmed anew. Their plans would go on, until such time as all their hopes were fulfilled, or all hope was lost. They had time, and patience, and briskly scurrying allies who could and did upon command run their errands for them.

As always, the discussion had taken time. The sun had moved from its low dawn position to high in the dome of sky. Now it shone down upon the Eldest and her sisters, through the glass above them, filtered by mute palms and other trees, given sparkling rainbows by the mist that issued from the pipes beneath the roof. The Eldest spread her sheath of leaves to soak in sun and mist, to bask in the forces of life, to grow, to think, to dream again, but more vigorously, empowered by the day-bright light.

Her sisters followed suit. The gallery grew still, and the odors of communication died away.

CHAPTER 7

Detective Bernard Fischer looked like an experienced cop. His hair was

thin and grey, his nose round, his cheeks jowly, his belly a taut arc of flesh, and he walked with a stiff-legged limp. But his eyes were the same flinty blue they had surely been in his youth. They matched his uniform coverall.

Muffy Bowen and Tom Cross were eating breakfast when they saw the Sparrowhawk land in the street outside their building. "They said," said Tom, "that they would want to interview us." He touched his worrystone. Muffy, her eyes caught by his, raised her hand in tentative imitation of his gesture. There was something hard at her throat, a stone like his. She blinked and smiled, suddenly remembering, aware of Peirce's gift. The night before, her mind had been too fuzzed by honeysuckle wine to hold a thought.

"I'm glad he's not using the siren," said Tom. Both of them had awakened with headaches. Aspirin and coffee were helping, but...

"It better not take long," Freddy grunted. The pig was propped with cushions in a chair beside Tom's, his own worrystone dangling around his neck, and his mouth was full. The man had been feeding him chunks of toast covered with hamberry jam. "You've got Muffy back. And I want to get back to the museum. To my wife and kids. And my music. I've had enough already. You should have heard my heart last night! I had palpitations!"

"Did we stop at a station?" Muffy ignored the genimal. She was far more conscious of her surroundings than she had been, but she still felt a little dazed, and her eyes kept straying toward the window with its fringe of honeysuckle vine and blossoms. She also ignored Randy, happily crouched beneath her chair. Beside the spider lay a husk of sparrow. She had gone out the window earlier to catch her own breakfast.

Tom Cross smiled gently at his mate. "Of course. We had to tell them you were safe. And so was Jim's Mack."

She looked again toward the honeysuckle vines. Her glossy black hair, clean now, trembled as she shuddered at the thought of the stupor the kidnappers had used them to induce in her, and at the further thought that she might willingly do the same thing to herself. She was still groggy.

"Jim?" she finally said. "You've mentioned..." The entrance buzzer interrupted her. Tom rose from the table, used the viewer, said that their visitor was indeed the cop who had just landed, and let him in. Then he opened the apartment door to wait for their visitor to climb the stairs, the sounds of his climbing betraying his limp as surely as sight.

Once Detective Fischer had introduced himself, Muffy pointed to a chair and said, "Coffee?"

"Smells good," said Fischer. "What's that? A pig? At the table?"

"I may not have a uniform," said Freddy with a snort. "Or hands. But I've got as much brain as you do."

Even Muffy, dazed as she still was, could not help but smile at the expression on Fischer's face. Tom said, "He's a fluke. I've never seen another one like him."

"Neither have I," said Fischer. "But you'd better keep him out of sight. BRA doesn't like rogues."

"They know," said Tom. He tried to explain where Freddy lived, and what he did there, but the pig interrupted, "They're a pain in the..."

Tom dropped another piece of toast into Freddy's open mouth. Muffy rose, moving slowly but with a clear sense that her dancer's grace was returning. When she returned, cup in hand, Fischer said "Thanks," took out his recorder and began to ask his questions: Ms. Bowen had been kidnapped, right? How many kidnappers had there been? Did she get a good look at them? What kind of vehicle did they drive? Where did they keep her for the day she had been a captive? She didn't know? They had kept her drunk on honeysuckle wine? And things were still a little fuzzy? He understood.

He shook his head and turned his attention to Tom: And you, sir? You tracked the kidnappers down? How? By following the spider? What spider? That one? What in the world do you people keep a spider for? Oh.

While Tom answered the questions, Muffy leaned forward, absorbed, as if she had never heard the tale before. She was sure she had. Tom would have told her everything when he had found her, but she had then been too benumbed by the wine she had drunk to register a word he had said. And she still had not entirely recovered her wits.

The buzzer sounded again. Tom went to the window and looked at the street. A ring-eyed Mack was now parked behind Fischer's Sparrowhawk. "That looks like Tige," he said. The entrance viewer confirmed him as he let the newcomers in. "And both of them," he added. "Jim and Julia."

"The Truck Farm was my next stop," said Detective Fischer. He finished his coffee while Muffy poured two more cups and admitted that the two truckers seemed just barely familiar. Tom introduced her to his old friend, and his mate, all over again.

Fischer cocked his head--perhaps he was skeptical of this part of the case--and turned to the truckers. He asked whether the dispatcher at the Farm recorded calls such as the one that had sent Mr. Brane to the abandoned warehouse. When they shook their heads and said they didn't know, he sighed and said he would have to visit the Farm anyway. A recording would be handy, for it might allow a voice-print identification. Then he felt the still-tender spot on Jim's head, where the man who had stolen Tige had clubbed him. He asked, Why hadn't he locked the door? And when he finally found the missing Mack, he just called? Like this? "Tige!" he cried, as if he were calling a dog. He had had one, he explained, when he was a kid. And he came? Genimals weren't supposed to do that, were they?

Jim's face turned pale. Muffy guessed that he had not intended to reveal as much as he had. He set his cup down, looked at the table top, seeming to think, and said at last, "I've been training him. I figured it might come in handy, you know? Like remote control, or if the control computer broke down."

"Or was sabotaged," said Detective Fischer. He sounded thoughtful, as if he were remembering something other than a long-gone dog from his own past. In a moment, he smiled, and the expression had an air of conspiracy about it. "Don't worry," he said. "I think I'll leave that out of my report. It would get into the national database, and there's no point in alerting BRA to the irregularity."

After a pause, he added, "And besides, you were riding another Mack anyway, weren't you? And there was only the one exit from the courtyard? You must have blocked the exit, and then the kidnappers fled, and you reclaimed Tige. Wasn't that more like it?"

"No," said Jim Brane. "The archway went through. I think there must have been another courtyard there. Or a street."

"But Tige came toward you?" Jim nodded, Fischer flicked his recorder off and everyone sighed their relief at the end of the questioning. "I can't help much," Fischer said then. "We probably won't ever touch those fellows. We'll never figure out who they were, and if we do, we won't be able to prove a thing. Doping you--" he tilted his head toward Muffy"--with the wine was better than wearing masks. And last night, it was dark, their skins were blackened..." He shrugged and grinned. "And I'm sure they're not driving an Armadon anymore."

Muffy Bowen glanced at Jim and struggled with her memory of the night before. Through the fog came a picture of how Tige had damaged the other genimal. Detective Fischer had seemed very sympathetic, very understanding, of the earlier anomaly, when they had called Tige and he had come. Now he seemed to be saying that he could guess what had really happened, that Tige could do more than simply come when called. The kidnappers surely would be driving something else. By now, she thought, they must have fed the Armadon to the litterbugs, something the veedo shows insisted was a common underworld tactic for disposing of biological evidence.

Fischer sighed. "I wish that body we collected from the sidewalk last night had been more than that."

Julia stiffened. "He was alive when..."

"When you called it in? I guessed it was you when I saw the address. Unfortunately, the fellow never woke up. Spider venom?" When Muffy nodded, Fischer turned his recorder on again and asked her and Tom a few questions about the attack of the night before--How many were there? They grabbed you both? But the four of you fought them off? And they fled?

"What puzzles me," said Fischer. "I can see why they would kidnap you." He was pointing at Muffy with the middle finger of his left hand. There was a gold band on the finger beside it. "As Mr. Cross said, if they were Engineers, they could use you to put pressure on him, or on the store." He shifted the target of his finger to Tom. "But why you? They want you both, and that says there has to be some other reason. I wish we knew what it was."

"So do we," said Tom.

"Maybe it's his Daddy," said Freddy. When Detective Fischer looked curious, the pig explained: "His real Daddy was a neighbor man, a gengineer. And his mother says he wants to turn Muffy into a plant. Maybe he wants to do it to Tom, too." He paused while Fischer's expression changed to bafflement, and then he added, "But she's a honey bum."

Tom didn't laugh, but Jim did, uneasily. Muffy smiled, and so did Detective Fischer. "Ah," he said. "Maybe so. But they did try a second time. Maybe they'll try again, whatever their reason. Perhaps you should lay low. Stay away from the places you usually go. Work. Even here. Make yourselves hard to find."

Tom nodded in agreement.

"Litter!" said Freddy. "I wanted to go home. You'll have to call Frankie for me, Tommy." He twitched his limbs as if to remind his old friend of how useless they were.

The city zoo was in no way unique. Like most zoos, it had quarters for birds, reptiles, small mammals, elephants, antelopes, buffalo, wolves, buildings and fenced enclosures, large and small. There were endangered species and common species and even domestic animals--goats and sheep and

rabbits and fowl--for the children to pet and feed. There were concessions selling hot dogs and potster chips and popcorn and peanuts and cotton candy and caps and pennants and toy animals, both stuffed and plastic. There were benches for the tired and pedal boats for the romantic. There were elephant and camel and donkey rides. And litterbugs were everywhere; there was no shortage of food for them.

There were even moving vans, hydrogen-filled Bioblimps gengineered from jellyfish, tethered to the ground, turning to festive music while children and adults rode the seats suspended from their tentacles and enjoyed the shade cast by their fifty-meter gasbags. The sailing-ship logo was prominent on their sides, for they had been donated for the sake of publicity. Mayflower Van Lines held the monopoly on these genimals, but it had found that the vans bred in far greater numbers than the company could use, and it had had to find other uses for them. Most became food for jets and other genimals. Some were pickled when tiny for use in school biology classes. A few had found their way to zoos and amusement parks as biological merry-go-rounds.

The zoo was crowded and noisy and, Jim Brane had suggested, not at all a place where anyone would expect to find them. They had been there, of course. Hadn't everyone? But they were not in the habit of strolling from cage to cage and throwing popcorn and peanuts at the animals.

It would be, they all agreed, a perfect place to go to ground, at least for a day, and while the police were trying to find the villains, or while the villains were growing tired of their nefarious determination to spirit Muffy--and now Tom--away for unnamed but presumably foul purposes, they could enjoy themselves.

As soon as Detective Fischer had left, they had therefore all crowded into Tige's cab. Tom had fitted the handcart and its cushions into a corner and set Freddy in it. Randy had clung with her seven legs to the cart's edge and a cushion, close to the pig but safely out of range of any crushing lurch. Jim had taken the wheel and said to his Mack, "Head for the Reagan, Tige. We're going to the zoo." Tige had known the way, and thereafter Jim had had to do no more than hold the wheel and look like a driver. Muffy Bowen had marveled at the Mack truck's obedience, forgetting that Jim had explained it the day before.

"More honey bums," said Tom Cross, pointing at the stone ramp beneath an overpass. Heat shimmered off the concrete that sheltered the bums from the weather.

"They're further gone than your mother," said Julia Templeton.

"I've heard," said Muffy. "That they stay on the pavement there because if they don't..."

"They'll grow roots?" Tom snorted. "I don't believe it."

"But you never do see them lying down on dirt," said Jim Brane. "In the city, they're in the alleys, never in the park."

"How would they know?"

"Something in the wine? A gene vector with a memory tag? Or maybe they've just seen a few bad examples."

Freddy laughed. "Remember that boob from BRA?" Tom nodded, smiling at the crack.

"What boob?" asked Muffy, puzzled. She hadn't been there.

Tom described the scene he and Jim and Julia had met on the museum's small stage.

"He was telling us why our kids are dangerous," said Freddy. "But that honeysuckle *is* dangerous. *Look* at 'em!" He rolled his eyes toward the nearest window. "And no one ever asked permission to gengineer it, or to release it. And no one's analyzed it to see what the gengineer behind it might have hidden in its genes."

"But roots?"

"Your mother seems to think..."

"But she's..."

They passed under a wrought-iron archway, found a parking place, and paid their entry fees. Once they were past the turnstile, they relaxed, feeling safe. Julia said, "You can't be sure. They might have followed us."

Tom shrugged. "Then there's nowhere safe. We might as well enjoy ourselves."

The handcart shook as its wheels rolled over a hump heaved up in the path by a root. "Watch it!" cried Freddy. "I'm still sore from yesterday!"

"There aren't any honey bums," said Muffy. Randy was riding on her shoulder now, shifting her stance to scan the zoo's woods and enclosures for new and interesting sights. She herself was scanning with something else in mind.

"Too many fences," said Jim. "And the gates are locked, except where there's a ticket booth."

"There also isn't much honey," said Julia. "It's like the Farm. They must dig it up." She pointed at a single small vine with three flowers, and Muffy stepped toward it.

Tom stopped her with a hand on her arm. "You shouldn't."

The craving was strong in her. In fact, perhaps thanks to the heavy dose her kidnappers had given her, it was stronger than she had ever felt it. Certainly, it was stronger than it could possibly have been the week before, when Tom had said much the same thing, and she had responded, "I'm an adult! I can have some if I want it! I can handle it!"

She turned, glaring, feeling her brows hunched aggressively above her eyes. But then she froze, facing Tom, and her mind raced.

Her father had been an alcoholic. Her mother had favored pills. Neither had often been conscious enough to talk with her, to help her with all the concerns of a growing girl. She had tried to flee to her friends, but they had teased her about her parents the zombies. She had retreated, keeping only one girlfriend, Helena. But then her father had made a pass at Hel, her mother had said nothing--if she had even been aware of what was going on--and she had been alone. That was when she had acquired Randy. Soon after, she had begun to dance.

And when her father had made a pass at her, she had left.

She had never told Tom what she had fled. Now she wondered how much he guessed, how much her own dependence on the honeysuckle wine had told him, how far she had already gone on the path to being just like her father, or her mother. She shuddered.

But just a little? It would ease the tension in her skull, the befuddlement she still felt. It would clear her vision and release her normally lively spirit from the mud in which she felt it was trapped. It would...Finally, her face relaxed, she sighed, and she said, "You're right." She said nothing more as she turned away from the tempting vine and its blossoms.

As they walked along the zoo's many broad paths, Freddy was vocal in his disapproval of the animals: "Look at that," he said when they had stopped to peer at one of the three remaining rhinoceroses on Earth. The other two were in the Paris zoo. "The horniest animal here. And absolutely useless. Unless you're another rhino."

"Or a gengineer trying to grow a Tank," said Jim Brane. Long after the last pure rhino died, the species' genes would live on. Armies had been using Tanks for decades.

No one else said a word. An unmodified rhino was indeed a forlorn and useless beast. Once, said the printed notice mounted on the low railing that surrounded the rhino's enclosure, Africans had slaughtered the rhinos so that Arabs could carve their horns into dagger handles and grind the chips from the carving into a dust reputed to be an aphrodisiac. Fortunately for the rhinos, war had sterilized the lands that had supported that trade before all the beasts were gone. Yet that had not saved them. Their original habitats were gone now, eaten up by expanding populations and their need for farmland, or too altered by changing climate.

Sound plaques seemed rare outdoors, but there was one on the wall around the armadillo yard. As they approached, it began to speak, describing its subjects and outlining how armadilloes leaped straight upward when startled. As a result, when one of the animals is crossing a road, and a vehicle comes along, it either is hit by the bumper or knocks its brains out on the vehicle's underside. The results were generally fatal in the days when vehicles were built of steel and propelled at high speeds by internal combustion engines. Today, when most vehicles are alive, and hence softer and slower, more armadilloes survive their peculiar reflexive response.

"Bright," rasped Freddy. "But I guess they got that bug out of the Armadons."

They moved on, and Freddy was saying, "Look at that one! It's weirder than I am, or Porculata, or the shoats. A hairy-assed banana on legs. A..."

"I've read," said Muffy as Randy peered at the strange beast, meeped, and began to crawl down her mistress's front. She caught the cat-sized spider in both hands before she could escape and, perhaps, try to turn the animal into lunch. "They're working on making vacuum cleaners out of them."

"Don't laugh," said Jim, pointing at the sign on the fence. Tom leaned forward and read the words aloud: "Born Samuel Hurd, December 19, 2045, this anteater volunteered for the 'Endangered Species Replacement Program.' After massive gene substitutions, he assumed the form you see."

The sign did not say, but they were aware, that so many species were so nearly extinct--or, indeed, had died out completely--that this was the only possible way to supply specimens of those species for zoos. It was also an

expiation of human guilt, an expression of human responsibility, a promise of what amends were possible, for in most cases the species' endangerment or extinction was due to human actions. People had hunted them for furs and skins and ivory and dagger handles, for gall bladders and musk and oil. People had destroyed the forests and swamps and plains in which they lived to build farms and subdivisions and shopping malls.

This was the only form of non-medical human gengineering, man-mucking, that was legal. It was only fair, said some, that people turn themselves into the images of their victims. With time and progress, the day might come when people could become more than mere images, but duplicates or avatars, all their genes replaced, and the diminished and vanished species would live again. Others said that the idealism was only noisy propaganda designed to maintain the flow of failures, criminals, escapists, and psychiatric refugees on which the ESRP depended, and to let the remainder of society feel virtuous about permitting the program to exist.

Freddy muttered, "I'd like to substitute *my* genes." The same techniques might give him a body to match his brain, a human body, with legs that could walk and run, with hands that could do more than protrude uselessly from his torso. Tom Cross reached out a hand to pat the pig's barrel torso reassuringly, and Muffy recalled tales she had heard of the dawn of the Age of Gengineering, when the first steps were being taken toward the genetic repair of birth defects, and handicapped people, led by anti-progress demagogues, were saying they preferred their handicaps to being cured by gene replacement. Given the chance for such a "cure," Freddy would seize it with all four of his twitching stubs.

"And look over there," said the pig. He was pointing as best he could with a forelimb at a young woman wearing a very brief tunic. "How about substituting those genes for Porculata's? Wow."

"You'll need money," Tom said.

"So I'll go on tour," said the pig. "Want to come along? We'll sing dirty songs together again."

Tom opened his mouth and let "Shakin' my anther for yooou!" emerge.

"You need some practice," said Jim Brane.

"What's that?" asked Julia Templeton, and they, like all the zoo-goers around them, like the animals themselves, fell silent to listen to a distant growl. Was it thunder?

Whump! A gout of flame erupted noisily beyond the trees as the hydrogen that filled the gasbag of a Bioblomp merry-go-round exploded. Screams echoed out of sight.

The thunder grew louder. Some zoo-goers began to move toward the edges of the walkway. A dozen motorcycles, three abreast, rounded the curve of the path beyond the rhino yard and accelerated toward them. Those pedestrians who had lacked the foresight to get out of the way ahead of time now leaped, cursing, for safety. Children screamed. Zoo animals scampered, crawled, and lumbered for the entries to their dens, caves, and stables.

The riders wore the coveralls and insignia of Engineers. The first three carried pennants adorned with crude portraits of gears, hammers, and wrenches. Most of the rest wore strapped to their backs flat bundles of boards and sticks, clearly picket signs. Two backs bore each a pair of crossed bullhorns.

Muffy and her friends had been heading toward a broad mall that ran roughly down the zoo's center. It held flower beds and fountains, the sea lion pool, an open-air cafeteria, and several concessions. To either side were the zoo's larger buildings, ancient, ivy-covered masonry, housing for primates, cats, elephants, and staff.

Now the Engineers roared their motorcycles into the open space, dismounted, planted their pennant staves in a flower bed, unfolded their signs, and unslung their loudspeakers. In moments their message became clear--they wanted an end to gengineering and a return to the glories of the Mechanical Age, when humans could not be turned into animals, when life was sacred, immune to tampering, and when God's divine plan could not be daily blasphemed.

Most of the pedestrians were now flowing, running, away from the mall. With them went Muffy and her companions, Freddy bouncing in the cart. When they found a quiet spot in which to pause, the pig moaned. "I feel like a mechin' soccer ball! I'll be black and blue all over! I'll..."

Tom said, "The first time I ever saw them, I had just come into the city. They were screaming the same sort of stuff and barbecuing a litterbug. I had Freddy in the handcart."

"And they saw us," said Freddy.

"They wanted him." He paused as if remembering. "I crashed the cart into an Engineer's knees, and we fled. We wound up hiding in The Spider's Web." He looked at Muffy. "And meeting you."

Now it was Jim's turn to remember: "They don't know what they're talking about." He gestured at the zoo around them. "It was the Mechanical Age that wiped out so many species. It also used up the very resources it needed to survive--especially fossil fuels--and if they got their mechanical golden age back, it would immediately come crashing down around their ears. They'd get the real 'Good Old Days' then--subsistence farming, high infant mortality, starvation."

Julia Templeton laughed. "That's what they taught us in Bioeconomics."

"We've heard it too," said Muffy. She spoke hesitantly, the effects of the wine on her mind still apparent. Tom took her hand, and she let him finish her thought. "On veedo, and in the magazines." His voice changed to indicate that he was quoting, at least roughly, a line of thought he--and they--had heard many times: "It's only the gengineers who have kept civilization going since the mechanical resources became scarce. We have just enough left to fool the reactionaries into believing they can retreat into the past successfully."

The Engineers' bullhorns fell silent as the ululating, siren-like cry of a Sparrowhawk echoed overhead. They looked up and saw three police jets stooping toward the demonstrators. "Over there," said Jim, pointing toward a broad path a hundred meters off, and they saw two police-model Roachsters, their long-armed claws gaping toward the mall, maneuvering through the pedestrians. In a moment, the motorcycles roared again, the pedestrians leaped for safety, and the Engineers were fleeing as they had come.

"Now can we have a bite?" asked Freddy.

Tom laughed, and they turned back toward the mall and its cafeteria. When they reached it, they saw a litter of picket signs and pennants, abandoned when the Engineers had fled. Litterbugs were already attacking the debris, while police officers tried to shoo them away. One litterbug was already

demonstrating the reason why, lying on its side and panting uselessly for breath. "Sometimes, the ink they use on their signs is poisoned. A neurotoxin," said Julia. "On purpose."

Freddy made a whimpering noise. "That's barbaric. Poisoning food!"

"It's worse than you think," she added. "If they feed the carcass to other litterbugs, or to anything else, the poison will get them too. They'll have to burn it."

Eventually, the Engineers' debris was removed and the zoo returned to normal. They explored the exhibits, had lunch, roamed some more, and grew bored. Tom's arms, he said, were weary and his back sore, and he and Jim began to trade off the chore of pushing the pig in the handcart. Both of them said they envied Muffy, for Randy was a much smaller genimal, and though she kept the spider on her shoulder, her step actually seemed to grow lighter as the last traces of the honeysuckle wine left her system.

They were in the bird house when they finally decided that they could dare to go home. The sun was still high, but Julia had sat down on a bench, taken off her shoes, and begun to rub her feet. "I've hidden long enough," she said. "I'm hot and sweaty and tired. And..."

"There's been no sign that anyone is following us," said Jim Brane.

Muffy Bowen said, "You forget, that's why we're here. It doesn't mean no one's waiting for us at home."

"But we can't stay here all night," said Jim. "They'll chase us out."

"So where do we go now?"

"The Farm?"

As they left the building and headed toward the parking lot, Freddy began to sing just loudly enough to attract the attention of the others on the walkway: "I've got the anther!"

Muffy chuckled when Jim winced at the pig's rough bass. He was pushing Freddy, and the pig's mouth was closest to his ear. But Tom joined in on the second line anyway:

"And showers of pollen!
I've got the anther!
Shakin' my anther for you!"

When they were done, Julia said, "It's an idiot song." She and Jim both laughed.

They were passing a paddock in which grazed a mixed herd of bison, zebra, and wildebeest. A broad, slow stream ran through the paddock and held numerous waterfowl. Where the paddock ended began a grove of broad oaks. Set among the trees was a cluster of acorn squashes, each about half the size of the pumpkin Petra Cross lived in. Wooden hallways linked the squashes into a single structure that blended into the woods and contrasted happily with the stone and concrete of most of the zoo's buildings.

A short gravel path led toward what was clearly the main entrance to the structure. Where the path left the main walkway was a sign:

ENDANGERED SPECIES REPLACEMENT PROGRAM

CENTER #251
POSITIONS OPEN:
Siberian Tiger
Cheetah
White Rhinoceros
Golden Tamarind
Adelie Penguin
Minke Whale
Manatee

As they paused to read it, a short, grey-haired woman appeared in the open doorway a few feet away. "Interested?" she said. "The Minke's a pretty good deal. No hands, but it has a nice big brain. And the ocean's always cool."

Freddy twitched. "Can you...?"

She shook her head, apparently unsurprised that a garbage disposal could speak. "Sorry. People only. The humane society insists."

Behind them, there was a rush of feet. The ESRP woman's eyebrows rose and her mouth opened. Hands seized Muffy, and she watched Tom spin even as someone hurled him to the ground. She jerked her head to either side and saw that she was held by two men. There were five more of their attackers, all men, all burly, all wearing grimly determined expressions and light tan coveralls. None of them were familiar from the night before. Two were now bending over Tom. Two more had Julia by the arms. Jim, like Tom, was on the ground. The only sounds had been the thugs' grunts of effort. No one had spoken or cried out in alarm.

The attackers were ignoring Freddy, who had flown out of the handcart and now lay half under a low shrub. Randy was scuttling up a tree trunk, her missing leg no handicap at all.

Rough hands wrenched Tom into a sitting position and bound his arms behind him. Muffy felt her arms being yanked into the same position and rough cord grinding into her skin. The two thugs who held Julia seemed to be waiting their turn with the rope. When Jim tried to get up, the seventh thug, standing to one side of the path where he could see both them and the ESRP woman, aimed a pistol at him. He did not need to say a word to make the trucker lie down again. Nor did he need to speak to make the ESRP woman halt her movement back into her building. It was enough to point the gun in her direction.

The thugs' coveralls, Muffy noticed, were none too clean, and the thugs themselves smelled as if they could have benefited from a closer acquaintance with soap and water. But they knew their business. They moved without confusion or wasted motion, and they spoke not a word, neither to each other nor to their victims.

The silence was eerie. These men were trying to take Muffy captive once more, for whatever reason. With her, this time, they would take both Tom and Julia. Why hadn't she yelled? Or Tom? Jim? Julia? Were they *all* so shy of attention that they would rather be kidnapped?

She glanced upward. Only inches from her face hovered a slender honeysuckle branch with two blossoms. She swallowed, said a silent *No!*, and looked away as quickly as she could. And there, there was something she could focus on. Randy had moved out onto a branch above them and was fastening to the bark a strand of her silk. In a moment...

The spider leaped, landing on the neck of the thug with the gun. He

screamed as she bit, his gun jerked up, pointing at the sky, and went off. He fell to the ground. The ESRP woman backed up and closed the door. The other thugs turned to see what was happening. Jim scrambled to his feet and begun to run toward the parking lot, yelling, "Tige!"

Two of the thugs began to chase him. Randy leaped toward the others, they backed up, and she climbed back onto Muffy's shoulder, where she faced the would-be kidnappers with her forelegs raised threateningly in the air and her fangs gaping. Each of those venom-filled hypodermics was over an inch long.

Tom got to his feet. Julia, the only one other than Jim whose hands were still free, picked up Freddy.

There was a distant roar and a crash as Jim's Mack came through the fence nearest the parking lot. In a moment, Tige was in view, with Jim sitting atop his head, holding to the tips of the ears.

Those of their attackers who still could turned and fled.

CHAPTER 8

The city, like all cities, was a mosaic of neighborhoods. Some were new, extensions of the basic urban structure into its peripheral suburbs and even open land, places for the prosperous to build or grow expensive homes, places for industry to stretch free of the constraints of ancient infrastructure. Some neighborhoods were old and unfashionable, falling into decay like that warehouse district where Jim Brane had lost his Tige. Some were old but had somehow retained their exclusive, moneyed respectability and added to it a patina of time. Here were well-kept, classic residences, built of red brick and stone, roofed with slate or tile, solid, anchored in the soil of history both by the achievements that had earned their builders their wealth and by their architects' respect for ancient building styles. None of the residences were bioforms, for that technology was not yet mature enough to carry the necessary weight of tradition. The city's aristocrats looked down on those who dwelled in bioforms with something of the disdain prior generations had reserved for those who lived in mobile homes.

Some of the city's mansions held the descendants of those who had had them built. Others held later purchasers and renters. Most held private households. A few held businesses--a brothel, a casino, a dealer in biological contraband--that required the sort of room and the invisibility that only an address in such a neighborhood could provide. There were as well a few private foundations and foreign consulates.

No one could tell who or what occupied any specific house, for there were no signs, not even the most discreet of brass plaques, and the houses' exteriors and grounds offered no clues. With few exceptions, they all looked much the same, surrounded by broad lawns and thick trees, their walls draped with ivy, the brickwork showing through like the scalp beneath an old woman's hair. Very few homeowners allowed honeysuckle to replace the ivy, although many did, for the sake of an occasional sip (or more) of wine, let the vines have a planter by the pool.

The most obvious exception to the general pattern was a three-story house whose brick had been painted blue. The four white columns that dominated its

facade had been given spiral bands of red so that now they resembled peppermint sticks. But as startling as the paint-job seemed among the more staid treatments of the neighboring houses, very little of it struck the eye. The house was swathed not in ivy, but in a thick layer of brilliant green, a vigorous growth of curling vine that spilled onto the lawn and buried it in verdure, that climbed and cloaked the trees, that threatened the neighbors so greatly that they had set the miniature sheep that normally served them as lawn mowers on permanent boundary patrol. Their lawns were shaggy, but the strange vines did not invade.

"It's not honeysuckle," said Julia Templeton. "But what is it?"

"That's the address," said Freddy. Tom Cross was holding him so he could see over Jim's shoulder. Jim Brane was driving Tige, with Julia in the seat beside him. The rest were crowded into the space behind the seats.

"Are you sure?" asked Muffy Bowen.

"It has to be. I told you he was strange."

They had been stuck at the zoo until the police had come and gone, satisfied that Jim had, as he claimed, run to the parking lot and driven Tige through the fence to rescue his friends. The cops had taken with them the body of the thug Randy had bitten. Then they had had to wait until the zoo's own officials had decided that the blame for the damage lay with the terrorists who had waylaid them. Once they were free, they had gone directly to the Farm. On the way and over dinner and afterwards, in the small apartment that Jim and Julia shared, they had discussed events.

The discussion had told them nothing, of course, but it had solidified their sense of mystery and made them wish out loud that they could find out why they were being attacked and kidnapped and robbed, and who was behind it. Was Tom's mother, Petra, right despite her honey-drunken befuddlement? Or was it merely fantasy that Tom's father, Jack, wanted to turn Muffy into a plant? If so, then what had those giant flower-pots been doing in the trailer in which they had found Muffy? Was the villain someone else? Then what was the motive? The goal?

"Maybe," Freddy had said. "I know a fellow. He comes to the museum occasionally, and we're pretty friendly."

"So what?" said Jim impatiently.

"Hold your water." The pig's voice dropped a note in scorn. "So he's a computer expert, he makes his living as a free-lance researcher, and he might be able to help."

"What's his name?" asked Julia.

"Joe-Dee Alvidrez."

No one had recognized it, but none of them was surprised at that. The city was full of people of whom they had never heard, and never would. But the address--that they recognized, and it made Tom whistle. "He must be a pretty hot researcher. Maybe he can help us."

Now Jim talked Tige into the long drive that curved past the front of the house and said, "But how strange is he?"

"Wait and see," said Freddy.

But when the door opened behind the peppermint pillars, they did not see a man. The figure peering out at the Mack truck that had stopped before the house was that of a young woman, blonde and slight and wrapped in a robe, patterned in geometric designs on a white ground and clasped at breast and waist by gaudy brooches that shone brilliantly in the sun. Tom leaned over Julia's shoulder, pointing toward the cab's window in surprise. "Isn't that...?"

"It's Kimmer!" cried Muffy. Where before the other had been as disheveled and muzzy as Muffy, now her hair gleamed and her eyes shone alertly. "I never thought I'd see her again!" Randy, riding as usual on her shoulder, shifted her weight and meeped in reflection of Muffy's excitement. "But she said she had an apartment."

Julia Templeton opened the door to Tige's cab and the two women jumped to the ground. Now it was Kimmer's turn for a double-take and a rush of words: "How did you find me here? But oh! You don't want me. I'll bet you're looking for Daddy."

As the men descended from the Mack, she and Muffy Bowen embraced. Freddy interrupted from his perch in Tom's arms: "Right. We're old friends. And if I'd known he had someone like you around the house, I'd have visited before."

"You'll fit right in," she answered him. "He's a pig too."

Muffy laughed, Julia said, "Do we want the cart?" and Tom said, "Leave it." Then he gestured at the greenery covering the house and grounds. "What's...?"

"Kudzu." Kimmer's grin said she thought her father was a nut as well as a pig. "He prefers more traditional vines, but he doesn't want to be as old-fashioned as..." To finish the sentence, she simply pointed at the ivy on the house next door.

"Who's there?" The voice that echoed from within the house was a deep bass.

"Go on in," said Kimmer. They let her lead the way through a living room whose identity showed only in odd scraps of carpet, the arm of a chair or couch, a corner of a once-shiny table, that peeped out from under mounds of cardboard boxes, piles of technical manuals, hanks of wire, and dusty pieces of electronic equipment identifiable by their keyboards and screens. Kimmer waved a hand at the disorder: "Most of this is so obsolete it belongs in an antique store. He never throws anything out. Says he might need a box, or parts, or a spare. And he never does."

The next room was high-ceilinged, long, and broad enough to have served as a banquet hall for the mansion's previous owners. Perhaps it had. But now the parquet floor was scarred, the French windows void of draperies but fringed by encroaching kudzu, the paneled walls smudged and stained. The hall was presently the throne room for the master of an electronic kingdom. The throne was a padded seat that rode a metal rail down the center of the room. On the seat sat the king; he must have weighed 200 kilograms, and the long, greasy hair that rimmed his broad bald spot, the unshaven cheeks, the stains and tears that marked his old-fashioned pants and shirt, said immediately that he cared less for his appearance than for the gadgets that surrounded him. To either side of the room's central throne-rail were two long rows of workbenches covered with computers, their screens glowing with rapidly changing text and diagrams. The room held at least two dozen of the machines, along with photonic printers and plotters, external memory banks, and

communications gear.

At the moment, the king was staring expectantly toward the entrance to his throne room. When his daughter appeared there, he repeated, "Who is it?" But then Freddy was in view, carried in Tom's arms, saying, "Hey, Joe-Dee! Your daughter's got nice..."

Joe-Dee Alvidrez laughed so loudly that Tom thought something might fall from the metal shelves that covered the room's walls and groaned beneath burdens of more manuals, electronic parts, unused computer apparatus, and unlabeled boxes, all seeming much newer than the technological debris in the living room. From the ceiling hung robotic arms on tracks like those for theater lights. The aisles between the tiered shelving and the workbenches were choked with cables and debris. Empty food containers, wadded paper, and an abandoned shirt caught Tom's eye, and he thought that the mechanical gofers really were the only way to reach the shelves.

"She does, doesn't she!" Kimmer Alvidrez blushed, but her father ignored her. "What do you want, Freddy? I thought you never left the museum. Want some coffee? A snack?" He wore a mouse, a glove inlaid with electronic circuitry. Now he pointed at a computer screen, clicked a button set on the side of his index finger, and wiggled his fingers. One of the robotic arms whizzed along its track to grab a coffee pot that had been positioned out of all human reach. Meanwhile, a second arm was arranging mugs, sugar, and cream upon a tray. The first arm poured and then, while the second lowered the tray to within reach of the visitors, sought a paper bag on another shelf. It dropped the bag on a workbench near Freddy, opened it, drew out a jelly-filled doughnut, and dropped it into Freddy's mouth.

While all this was happening, Alvidrez was sliding toward them on his rail. He arrived only slightly behind the refreshments and when he saw how Tom and the rest were staring, he laughed again. "Go ahead," he said at last. "Grab a mug. And there's enough doughnuts for everybody."

He showed them what he meant, and for a moment there was no noise in the room except for the hums and ticks of active electronic devices. Finally, he wiped his fingers and said, "Hey, Freddy. I've been to hear you sing, right? Now you're here, and I'm going to show you something. C'mere." He touched the controls on the arm of his seat and slid away from them, coming to a halt by a computer screen covered with rapidly scrolling text.

Tom Cross followed him, Freddy still in his arms; the others tailed behind. Alvidrez touched the keyboard, pointed his mouse-covered hand, and wiggled his fingers. The screen before him steadied, blanked, and refilled with an arrow column of words. "I'll bet you didn't know I was a poet, did you, Freddy?"

"I still don't," said the pig. "You're an electron freak."

"The things those electrons can do!" Alvidrez laughed again. "Look--I gave the program a word list, all about elephants. Then I added a few words about Australia. It gave me a bunch of random sentences mixing up elephants and dingoes. And then I cleaned'em up. Threw out the nonsense, edited, revised, and--" He held a hand toward the screen, inviting them to read the words:

DINGO FANTASY I
Wallabies always were unpopular
Substitutes for kangaroos,
But then the rains came.
Laughing swagmen rolled in lush grass

And farmers prospered in the mire,
But joeys melted in sudden swamps.
Dingo said, I wanna beee mahout!
Said widow Roo, Spread mud!
Make the howdah shiny.
Import a Dumbo flapping high.
Let it alll hang out!
Pachyderms
like it hot and wet.
Too much sand makes them itch.
They fly to spreading billabongs
And trunkish spout!
Maiden Dingo crossed the water,
Lay royal soul before huge fictions,
Let sexist tusks enjoy her kindness,
Thought her pup would be mahout.
She made a sparkling bride
But she forgot that wallabies,
Psychotic beasts, use ankhs on tulips,
And soaring elephants pout.

Freddy grunted. "That's...That's number one. There's a number two?"

"Right! Let me..." Alvidrez reached for the keyboard.

"No! I don't wanna see it. That is...It's..."

"It's published."

"You're kidding," said Julia Templeton.

Alvidrez shook his head, while Freddy said, "It's still tripe.
Bull-litter."

The man threw his head back and laughed louder than he had when they first entered the room. "I know! But the poets don't!" Then he spun to face them fully. "So. What brings you here? What do you want?"

"Wait a minute," said his daughter. She turned toward the others, her mouth set in a disgusted moue. "You should know. He uses that poet schtick on everybody. He's not serious about it."

"I guessed..." said Jim Brane.

"Sure I am," bellowed Alvidrez, laughing again. He pointed a fleshy finger at Tom. "I seriously want to know if your bullshit detector is any good! "He sobered instantly. "I mean it. You're all wearing these things. Even you, Freddy." He pulled a rose-pink worrystone out of the front of his own shirt. Reflectively, rubbing his stone with a thumb, he went on. "They're pretty. And they feel nice. But they're a mystic crock."

"Frankie gave them to us," said Freddy. "For luck."

Alvidrez grinned. "That's what Kimmer said when she gave me this one. She doesn't wear one herself." He paused for a moment before continuing. "But I asked a question. Freddy's a friend, and needs no excuse to visit. The rest of you--what do you want? Why are you here?"

"It was my idea," said Freddy. "They need information, and I told them..."

"That I was the best man in the city for finding it. I am. But what sort

of info do you want?"

Tom told him how he had come home from work to find Muffy missing, kidnapped. Jim described the theft of his truck and meeting Tom and Freddy in the museum.

"Then," said Freddy. "We went to see Tommy's mother. She's a drunk."

Tom winced at the description but he acknowledged its truth with a nod. "A honey bum. But she said my real father was a genetic engineer, and he had to be behind it all."

"He's gonna turn Muffy into a potted plant, he is," said Freddy, as if he were quoting. "'And he had his minions swipe the Mack to carry Muffy to his secret laboratory in the sewers beneath the deepest subbasements of the city, where he...'"

"I was potted, all right," said Muffy. "But..."

"Me, too." Kimmer's voice was trembling softly, and when they turned to look at her, the tears were hovering on the edges of her eyelids. "They kidnapped me, too, remember. And they doped us all up on the stuff."

She hesitated, and her father looked startled for a moment. "So you're the ones..." he said. "I do owe you, don't I?"

Kimmer spoke again, more tentatively: "What kind of plant...?"

Tom shook his head. "My mother's not psychic," he said. "She's dreaming. She has to be." Together then, tripping over each other's words, he and Jim told how Randy had led them to Tige and Muffy.

"And then they tried to grab us all," said Muffy Bowen. "Me again, and Julia this time, and Tom." She described what had happened at the zoo.

"But what's your Daddy's name?" asked Alvidrez. His fingers wiggled as Tom answered, and the letters appeared on a nearby screen: "Jack, gengineer..." He asked for Tom's age, for Jack's address that lifetime ago, for everything Tom and Freddy and the others could possibly tell him, and slowly the screen grew what looked much like a short dossier.

"You sound like you think you can help," said Jim.

"I can help," said Alvidrez. "And I will, since you rescued my daughter too, thanks to that spider." Randy seemed to know he was talking about her, for she shifted on Muffy's shoulder, meeped, and aimed her palps in his direction. For a moment, he watched her curiously. Then he went on. "There are millions of databases in this city, and I can search most of them. I use a worm--I'll load it with the key words you've given me, and then I'll send it out. It'll break into all the computers it can reach via the phone lines and check their files for the keys. If it doesn't find them, it'll move on to another machine. If it does, it'll send a copy of the file containing the keys back here and then move on."

He paused, staring at them as if he expected applause. "Come back here tomorrow," he said. "If the answer you want is anywhere in this city, I'll have it then."

When they reached the museum, they found a trio of school buses in the parking area. Two were multi-windowed pods strapped to the backs of Macks much like Tige. One was a similar pod slung from the gasbag of a Bioblomp. Unlike

the Bioblimps that served as moving vans, this one had only short tentacles, and its hide was as brilliant an orange as its pod.

They climbed the museum steps behind a flock of scampering, yelling grade-school children shepherded by teachers and parental volunteers. When they finally reached the ticket booth, since Freddy was with them, the attendant waved them through without a word. They clumped then to one side of the rotunda, where they could hear the sound-plaque on its pedestal speaking to the kids: "The WPA was a partial response to the massive unemployment of the Great Depression. It gave work of benefit to society as a whole to writers and painters--and sculptors, such as those who executed the bronzes you see..."

The kids weren't paying much attention. They were chattering, peering at the sculptures overhead, noticing the gift shop, racing to check its wares for candy and comics. Adults pursued them, struggling to keep the groups together. Glancing at the gift shop, Jim Brane winced at the noise and fingered the worrystone that dangled around his neck. Muffy Bowen did likewise, while Tom Cross pointed toward a hallway too small to have anything to do with the museum's exhibits and said, "Peirce has his office down there. It's quieter."

"But we're going downstairs," said Freddy. "Giddyap. I want to see Porculata and the kids."

As they passed through the hall of biosculptures, they noticed a new exhibit, a meter-wide niche in the wall, fronted with plate glass. "'Facial Masques'?" Stopping, Tom read aloud the banner sign across the top of the window.

The exhibit was dominated by a large aquarium that seemed to hold nothing other than a few cloudy patches whose contours suggested isolated, ghostly faces. The resemblance was heightened by clear spots that seemed positioned to serve as eyes and mouths.

Behind the aquarium, as sensors registered their presence, a large veedo screen flickered to life to show a similar tank. An attractive woman stepped into position behind that tank, reached into the water, withdrew a sheet of translucent tissue, held it to her face, and smoothed it over her own skin. The clear spots became eye and mouth holes that matched perfectly her own eyes and mouth, and when she was done, the filmy mask was almost invisible, though it left her face pale. Now she picked up a rack clearly labeled "Command Lotions"--a similar rack sat beside the aquarium in front of the screen--and held it to reveal the dozen small bottles of clear fluid it held. She chose a bottle, opened it, and applied the small brush within its cap to her lips. They turned brilliant red.

Other bottles put color in her cheeks and around her eyes, and when she was done, lines of print replaced her image to explain that the "Facial Masque" was cultured skin and the command lotions were artificial hormones that controlled its pigmentation. "I've heard of this," said Julia Templeton. "It's new." More print informed them that the Masque's tissue rooted in the wearer's bloodstream for its nourishment, and it could be designed to secrete various drugs, such as antibiotics. It also blocked solar ultraviolet.

"Is it permanent?" asked Jim.

Julia shook her head. "They say a woman can make several up in advance. You store them in the nutrient fluid." She pointed at the aquarium in the window. "Then you just put on the face you wish."

He snorted. "I hope you don't..."

"Why not? It sounds good to me." She patted her auburn hair with one hand. "And maybe someday they'll have a version for hairdoes."

"Me, too," said Muffy, laughing. "It would save a lot of time." She pointed at a small sign, a strip of wood mounted on a stand beside the aquarium. Its two lines of print said:

A General Bodies Product

Better Living Through Gengineering

Tom shook his head. "And Peirce thinks it's art."

"Why not?" said Muffy. "There's brush, paint, canvas..."

"I've never heard of putting make-up in a museum. An art museum, anyway."

"That doesn't mean it's a bad idea."

When they reached the small auditorium in the basement, they found the curator standing before the door, his hands up, palms out, saying to another throng of noisy children and harried shepherds: "Frederick is on a leave of absence. He's not here. And his wife does not want to perform alone. I'm sorry." He pointed at and straightened a sign that hung askew from the door. "But this exhibit really *is* closed."

When Freddy laughed, the crowd turned as one to see who dared to defy authority. Then he yelled, "Knock it off, Frankie! I'm back, for awhile. So let'em in."

The curator was delighted to see the pig, and his expression showed it. As the children yelled their own delight, he opened the door and said, "The next performance will begin immediately!"

"Sure," said Freddy. "Just give me a few minutes with the family first."

Peirce led Tom and the others backstage, where the gengineered musicians had their quarters, a single room with a thickly padded floor, cushions, a bathtub, a waste trough, and a booth for the caretaker. The caretaker of the moment was a young woman who wore over her black and red coverall the light blue vest of a museum volunteer. She was kneeling beside Porculata, murmuring gently, massaging oil into her tartan-patterned hide, while Baraboo and Barnum watched silently from cushions to one side of the room. The gleaming of their skins revealed that they had enjoyed similar attentions already.

The tableau held only as long as it took Freddy to yell, "Porkchop! Darling! I'm back! And the audience awaits!"

Instantly, a bagpipish blast set the caretaker back on her heels, wincing, her short, dark curls bouncing. Tom barely had time to notice that she wore a "Jan" nametag before Porculata shrieked, "Run! You don't know what he's like! My husband! He's staring at your hams right now! Oh, Frederick!"

Jan glanced at her boss, capped her bottle of lotion, and retired quietly to her booth. Tom set Freddy down near his mate, who immediately cried, "You're safe! Of course you are. But those maidens are waiting for you, and you'd better not try to deflower them the way you'd like to! I won't stand for it! You save yourself for..."

A little later, while the genimals entertained their young audience with folk songs and calliope music, Tom and his friends sprawled on the apartment's

floor and cushions and told Peirce what had been happening. When they told him what Petra had said, that Jack must be planning to turn Muffy into a plant, he laughed. "I don't think," he said. "That your father could do more than a partial job of it."

"But at the zoo..." said Julia Templeton.

"I know," he said. "But there you're dealing with animals. The basic infrastructure is much the same from species to species, especially within a single group like the mammals."

"Plants are too different?" As Muffy Bowen spoke, Tom shivered. He knew that it was entirely possible to move at least some plant genes into humans. So did she, he knew, and when he looked at her she was grinning. He grinned back at her, but he said nothing.

"For a complete make-over, anyway. I think. You could probably give people chloroplasts. Those are the organelles that live inside plant cells and give them the ability to use sunlight for photosynthesis. Then we'd have green skin, and we could take a sunbath for lunch."

He stopped and stared into space, his head cocked as if he were listening to the sounds of music and enthusiasm that penetrated from the auditorium next door. Finally, he said, "Actually, I'm surprised no one's done it already. Some animals--corals and clams--have symbiotic algae in their cells now. We don't have enough surface area to use photosynthesis for all our food--neither do they--but it could be a useful supplement, especially in Third World countries. They may lack water and food, but never sunlight."

"What about endangered plants?" asked Tom. Like Julia, he was thinking of the zoo's Endangered Species Replacement Program.

"It would be simpler just to do a gene replacement on a common plant." Peirce hesitated. "Even with animals, the gene replacements would be simpler if we started with a related animal, not a human. Yes, we have a debt to endangered species, but..." He shrugged.

"Then there's no real point to what they do at the zoo?" asked Muffy. "It's just public relations?"

"The humane societies have pushed the legislation through. They say converting dogs or cats, say, would be cruel, just more exploitation. But we do things like that, don't we? It's a human thing."

"So," said Jim Brane, "is that 'Facial Masque' thing upstairs."

Franklin Peirce laughed. "Speaking of PR! GB offered to donate it, and I thought, 'Why not?' Let's put it on display now, without waiting for some future archeologist to dig one of the kits up."

"And *they* wouldn't put it in an art museum," said Julia.

"If they'd even recognize it. It surely wouldn't last as well as the Pharaohs' cosmetic kits." The ancient Egyptians had used ground-up minerals, chosen for their color, as cosmetics, and they had lasted without change for millennia.

"Go!" Porculata had said after the performance. "Go! Muffy's safe, but the kidnappers are still out there and mark my words they'll try again and you have to keep her safe. Tom too, of course. And watch out for those maidens."

"But Porkchop!" Freddy had cried. "I want to stay with you! Besides, my stomach hurts!"

"Go, you hypochondriac. You have a job to do!"

Barnum and Baraboo, his sons, had twitched and sounded a note or two of calliopish sympathy, though he could not tell whether the sympathy was meant for him or for their mother. They had, of course, said nothing. They could not talk.

He had sighed. He had let Tom Cross pick him up. He had said, his tone dejected, "You should have brought the handcart in." And they had left.

Now they were on their way back to the Farm. Jim was steering the Mack toward the expressway, but they had not yet left the museum's urban neighborhood. The busy but clean streets had broader sidewalks and more litterbugs than elsewhere. The buildings were many-storied anthologies of offices and apartments. The shops were purveyors of expensive artworks, antiques, clothing, specialty foods, and more.

"Look at that," said Muffy. She was pointing toward a shop window that bore the same "Facial Masques" banner they had already seen in the museum.

The Daisy Hill Truck Farm was an array of twenty large barns surrounded by white-fenced pastures. One of the barns was dedicated to the cattle that provided milk and meat for the growing trucks. One was the maternity ward. Still another was the nursery, swarming with baby trucks, or Macks, most of which resembled bulldogs. On its second floor were dormitories for the Farm's apprentice truckers and apartments for its journeymen.

After dinner, Jim Brane led the rest toward the apartment he and Julia Templeton shared. They entered the puppy barn through a side door and climbed the stairs to a balcony that overlooked the dimly lit first floor. Undivided by walls, its broad expanse of concrete interrupted only by the pillars that supported the ceiling and floor above, this was where the young Macks grew toward useful size.

They leaned on the balcony's sturdy railing, Freddy wrapped in Tom's arms, Randy clinging to Muffy's shoulder. Their backs were to the door to the living quarters, through which seeped the sounds of veedos, music, and conversation. Their eyes were on the floor below, noting the steel cages that kept the pups from mobbing visitors through the ground floor entries, the drainage grills that surrounded the bases of the pillars, the litterbugs that quietly patrolled the floor, cleaning up whatever wastes they had missed on earlier circuits. They were, however, helpless against the reek.

The puppies lay in sprawling heaps, nestled in straw, wind rowed against a wall, snorting, kicking, whining. They were small compared to Tige and Blackie, but they were large enough, Jim murmured to his boyhood friend, simultaneously to intimidate and to enthrall a young man, fresh out of high school, who had never seen them before. His Dad had brought him here, hoping the pups might appeal to him, that trucking might appeal, and that he might in fact discover here a vocation to draw him from the temptations of honey-sucking. "They did," he said, his voice seeming on the verge of a chuckle. "And I did. Just look at them." They dwarfed ordinary, unengineered puppies the way calves dwarfed bunny rabbits. Yet they were still puppies, and the human eye insisted on a scale that shrank the vast cavern of the barn to the size of a living room.

Tom grunted his appreciation of Jim's thought. Julia nodded her agreement. Muffy said, "They're too big for me. Randy's plenty." The spider meeped softly

at this mention of her name, and Muffy petted her bristly pelt.

A draft, a sound, made them turn as the door behind them opened. Through it came a tall man, heavy-set, round face accentuated by a receding hairline. "Mike Nickers," said Jim. He introduced Tom and Muffy and added, "He's the one who signed me up."

"And me," said Julia. "Still recruiting?"

"We always need more truckers." Nickers showed them the broad, jovial smile of a salesman and gestured toward the floor below the balcony. "Look at the pups. There's plenty of business, but even if there weren't..." His expression grew more reflective for a moment. "If we can't find apprentices for them, well...We can't turn them loose. And no one would take one for a pet. So..."

"Dog food," said Julia.

Nickers nodded. "It's the only answer. And we have a dozen pups unspoken for." He looked at Tom and Muffy.

Muffy shook her head immediately, but Tom thought about Nickers' implied proposition. The man was a salesman, yes. And he was not above trying to hook a prospect with simple guilt. But did he want to be a trucker? Would it suit him as well as it did Jim? Or did he want to stay with Mr. Greengenes' Appliance Garden, perhaps someday to run a Garden of his own?

Finally, he too shook his head. Nickers shrugged, said, "If you ever change your mind..." and turned toward the stairway. "There's always pups. Not that we can afford to lose our trucks." With the door half open, he looked back at Jim. "Think they'll catch the thieves?"

The muscles of Jim's jaw bunched visibly. "I wish *I* knew where to look."

Not much later, Freddy and Randy lay side by side in one corner of a vacant room in the Farm's dorm. A blanket covered the pig; the spider nestled in a fold of the fabric. The room also held a bed in which Tom lay on his back, with one arm curled around his mate. Muffy had one leg stretched out along his own. Both were naked. Her hair, its blackness invisible in the dark, curled over his cheek and tickled his nose.

Tom scratched the tickle. "It's hard," he said softly. He did not mean anything physical. "It's hard to believe that you were kidnapped three days ago." How close he had come to losing her!

"A little more," said Muffy.

"One day of hunting for you, one for the zoo, and one for Kimmer's dad."

"And here we are." She added, "You saved me, three times."

"Randy did, and Jim too," he corrected her.

"And I'll never touch that honeysuckle wine again. I'm clamping off."

"I'm glad." They both were silent, while her hand stroked the skin of his abdomen, over his ribs and belly.

He had something to stroke as well. "And they've been determined. They've tried to get you back." He hesitated. "Do you think we'll find out why? Do you think my father--Jack--really wants to turn you into a plant?"

"Mmmm," she said sleepily.

"It can be done, I guess. I prove that, don't I?"

"We don't even know for sure that he's behind it all. Or that he's still alive. It was your Mom, remember, who said he wanted to turn me into a potted plant. And the honey can give you some pretty strange ideas."

He grinned in the darkness, recalling the day she had tried to convince him that two humans and one spider could make a great dance team. "But..."

"Who knows? For now...You're your father's son, aren't you? The gengineer's, I mean."

Her fingers closed around his bud, and she was unfurling the leaf-like structures that wrapped around it, where any other man would have a foreskin. It was too dark for them to see, but both knew the leaves, his sepals, were green. The bud within was as pink as one might expect, and it had stiffened and lengthened quite normally.

"Have I ever told you...?" His first awareness that his penis was different from those of most other human males had come very early. He did not remember the moment of realization, but he did recall the first time he had said anything about it. He had been just four years old, his mother had been giving him a bath, and water had been all over the bathroom floor. He smiled gently, fondly, as he told Muffy about the six-inch goldfish with which he had shared the tub. He had insisted on picking it for his bath, not caring that the warm water and the soap would soon kill it--he could always pick another, couldn't he?--and he had laughed as it swam between his feet, nibbling at his toes. If it had been aware that it had grown upon a shrub beside a pumpkin's doorstep, it had not seemed to care.

Nor had Tom. As far as he knew, goldfish had always come from bushes. He would not have been surprised to hear that children were found beneath cabbage plants, though the gengineers had not yet gone that far. Nor had Petra and Ralph Cross ever told him such a thing, even as a story.

His mother had shrieked when a wave splashed her blouse. The goldfish had swum between Tom's legs and tickled. The boy had clutched at himself and arched his hips out of the water. "Mommy," he had said. "Why isn't my thing like Daddy's?" He remembered that he had pointed it at her.

She had smiled at his innocence. "It'll get bigger," she had told him. "And the hair will grow. When you're older."

He had shaken his head. "I know *that*." Then he had paused, not quite sure of what to say. "Daddy's isn't green. Jimmy's isn't either."

Petra's face had grown serious, but only a year or so later had she warned him to keep his difference to himself. She had brushed a strand of hair, as wet and dark as her son's, from her cheek. The two boys had played together constantly, and it had hardly been surprising that they had seen each other's bodies.

Muffy murmured in his ear, "It would have been useless, but I bet she wished you hadn't noticed for awhile."

Tom nodded in the darkness. "She handled it well," he said. He was silent for a moment. At last he said, "She said, 'You're special in lots of ways. You're *my* little boy. And you have more freckles than anyone I know.'"

She had poked a finger at the tip of his nose, then, and he had giggled. As he described the scene, Muffy echoed the action. The freckles once had covered the flanks of his nose, his cheeks, even his chin and forehead, like a dusting of pollen. Now they were sparser, though they were still there.

He did not giggle now, though. Instead, his voice grew thick with the grief of loss. He wished he knew what loss he was feeling--he had lost his mother once when he had run away from home, angry at what he felt as betrayal. He had lost her again when he discovered the honey bum she had become.

"She called it my bud," he said. "And she told me it would change color as it grew, just like a goldfish bud."

"It did, too." Muffy cupped it in her hand.

Tom cupped something else in his. "When I told her Jim called his a wienie, she said the polite word was 'penis.'" He laughed gently.

"I like 'bud' better."

"So do I."

"If my Porculata was here, we'd make you look like a pair of incompetents," growled Freddy. "So hurry up, why don'cha? Get down to business and let's get some sleep."

CHAPTER 9

"What...?"

"I hear it's the Engineers."

"How did you cramp their holes?"

"Anybody get hurt?"

"How's Tige?"

"The veedo news said they tried to grab you at the zoo."

"But why...?"

"Turn you all into aardvarks."

The Farm's many truckers came by their table in ones and twos and small groups. They pushed aside the nearest of the dining hall's tables. They yanked chairs into position, straddled them, asked their questions, and moved on, abandoning their seats to their successors.

The attention was unnerving. Tom Cross and Muffy Bowen forced themselves to eat quietly, dropping the occasional doughnut or melon chunk down Freddy's gullet, while Jim and Julia answered the questions and did their best to dispel the rumors.

Finally, a break in the flow of truckers let Jim Brane sip his coffee, find it cold, and mutter, "Mech." He eyed the food he had so far been unable

to touch. "We should have gone out."

Julia Templeton poked at her stiffening eggs. "I guess, but..."

"Go away!" yelled Freddy. They looked up to see another of the Farm's many truckers, the tallest and skinniest of them all, approaching. Jim murmured, "Bill Forsneck," by way of introduction. Behind Forsneck came still more. "Give'em a chance to eat," said the pig. "Or they'll all get ulcers just like mine."

"You don't have an ulcer," said Tom.

"I'm working on one right now," said the pig. "And my stomach does too hurt."

Forsneck stopped, looked at the table, turned, and began to give orders. In a moment, a pot of hot coffee was on the table, fresh eggs were in front of Julia, and he was holding a plate with three wriggling goldfish on it. "For the spider?" he said. "The kitchen doesn't carry live rats, but there's a bush by the window."

Muffy laughed, said, "Thanks," and set the plate on the floor. Randy approached and palped its contents cautiously, unsure of what to do with the strange offering. Her uncertainty did not last long. She was hungry, and the goldfish felt like meat. Three quick nips paralyzed them with her venom, silk wrapped them safely, and she began to suck their fluids.

Meanwhile, Forsneck was shooing the other journeymen away. He was even staying away himself, though clearly, just like the rest, he wanted to find out what had been happening. But, for now, he stayed seated three tables away, where he could play watchdog for their privacy.

In due time, once her plate was clean, Julia crossed the room to him. "Thanks, Bill," she said. "We'll tell you everything when we get the chance. But now, I think, we'd better check the dispatch board."

He nodded and made a sympathetic face. "Yeah. You're on it, too."

"Mechin' litterheads!" She checked, and he was right. The dispatchers apparently felt that Jim had his Mack back and needed no more hand-holding sympathy. She was down for the belly run, hauling groceries from warehouses to the markets, and she would be at it for most of the day.

Jim Brane, on the other hand, was not on the board. The dispatchers either had no need for him, or they thought that he would be worthless until he or someone caught the truck thieves. Perhaps, for that matter, they felt that turning loose one of their own was only right, for hunting down such thieves did serve the Farm and all its truckers. Nickers had suggested as much the night before, and maybe he had said something elsewhere. Or perhaps they thought that he would want to help his friend hunt Muffy's kidnappers, both for friendship and--since they had, after all, tried to seize Julia at the zoo--for revenge.

So why wasn't Julia free as well? Didn't they realize that she too had a motive?

Jim wondered how much his superiors really knew about what was going on. Were they, for instance, aware that the truck thieves and the kidnappers seemed to be the same people? Or was his freedom sheer chance? He was not about to ask, for fear that, thus reminded, they would put him back on active duty.

There were now, Tom saw, two abandoned shirts on the cluttered floor between the workbenches and the shelf-laden wall. Joe-Dee Alvidrez noticed the direction of his gaze, shrugged, and said, "Yeah, Kimmer made me change. Said I was beginning to smell."

"You were, Dad." Kimmer said from her position near the door. Today she wore a yellow coverall on which dark blue lines emphasized the borders of her form. Lightly embroidered vines curled around the blue as if it represented a trellis. Her hair, its yellow too light to go with that of the suit, was wrapped in a scarf of lighter blue. "In fact, you still do. You need a bath."

Muffy Bowen, standing beside her mate, grinned as if to agree. She wore green and yellow in a curvilinear pattern that emphasized her breasts. Her dark hair hid her neck, and the chain that bore her worrystone showed only at her throat. Kimmer had no chain, nor any other sign of a worrystone.

"At least I shaved," said Alvidrez.

"After I brought you the razor."

Diplomatically, Tom Cross said nothing. Neither did Muffy or Jim, nor Freddy, though it would have surprised no one if he had agreed loudly. Tige was parked as before in the drive before the house, and Randy had leaped off Muffy's shoulder to explore the kudzu. She was, perhaps, hoping to find some warm-blooded prey more to her taste than half-vegetable goldfish.

Alvidrez grinned at their silence. "Don't want to piss me off, eh? Mech, I *know* I don't pay enough attention to such things. That's why I can't work for any of the big companies. They fire me too fast. So..."He gestured at the array of computer equipment around him. "It's worked out pretty well."

"Did you...?" Tom's question was tentative, as if he dared not hope for success.

Alvidrez laughed and pointed at Tom with his mouse-glove. "I found out your Dad's a lot like me. Or he was. C'mere." He scooted his throne down the rail until he faced a large screen filled with text. They followed him, walking beside the rail and dodging the corners of keyboards and other computer paraphernalia that jutted from the workbenches.

"The worm turned up several mentions--leases, payrolls, taxes, and soon--but this is the only thing that really says much." He paused for effect. "And it says a lot. He was seeing a shrink at one point, and most shrinks use the Tandy Psychiatric Process-Recording System. This one was no exception. His computer recorded every word spoken by Jack or the doc. It even flagged the doc's subvocal comments. And he never wiped the file. Look."

He slid aside just enough to let his three young visitors, and his daughter, see the screen. Since Freddy was in Tom's arms, he too could read:

SESSION TRANSCRIPT: SESSION 1
PATIENT: Jack D. Rivard, 832-076-1074
OCCUPATION: Genetic Engineer
DATE: August 3, 2052

You want the history, right, Doctor? But it goes back a long ways, you know. All the way to Grandpa.

Yes, Jack. I need to know all the details if I am to help you with your little problem.

It's not really so little. And I don't think it's a problem.

Tell me about it anyway.

Yeah. Okay. It was the company that sent me here, you know. I didn't come on my own. Every gengineer plays with himself. But they said I had gone too far.

It is always better when clients come for their own reasons. But tell me whatever you can, please. In your own words, and at your own pace.

Well. Grandpa. He was a computer hacker. To hear him tell it, the bug hit about the same time he got interested in girls. When they wouldn't have anything to do with him, he got a computer. And in between the sci-fi and feelthy magazines that gave him a taste of what he was missing, he played with his equipment. He wrote programs and cracked databases. He invented viruses.

Me, I was just like him. Except for the computers. I had to become a gene-hacker. My folks got me a Little Helix gene-splicing kit when I was ten, and I played around with frogs and pea plants and so on. But the germplasm that came with the kit had some pretty stiff constraints built into it. I couldn't do much besides change colors and leaf shapes and numbers of eyes. I certainly couldn't replace the frog's eyes with pea blossoms. It seemed like such a neat idea, mixing up plants and animals. But I just couldn't do it then, though I tried. So I got bored.

But then it hit. Puberty. That's when I started playing with myself. Gene-hackers do that a lot.

I tried to date girls. I asked them out. But they never said yes. They were going with the jocks, the football players. They preferred muscles to brains.

Dr.'s subvoc: *So what else is new?*

But that's not what they told me. They sneered. They could have just said no, but they had to be insulting about it. It's no wonder I hate them.

Do you really?

Yes! No. Sometimes. I did then. But I yearned for them too! That's why I spent so much time with the dirty books and magazines and veedo tapes. Just like Grandpa.

They were safe. They wouldn't insult me. And besides, the models and veedo characters, and even the writers, they were obviously scum.

But did you hate them? Or was it a matter of...?

Just looking down on them? Because they were safe? Worthless people who couldn't criticize me?

Maybe so. It sounds right. People are like that, aren't they? They runaway from people whose approval matters to them, from people whose existence is a threat. They turn to those who don't matter, who don't threaten. Maybe that's why teens join subhuman gangs, or turn to drugs and crime.

But sometimes it's the other way around, isn't it? I mean, some kids join the army. But the people there threaten everybody. The kid isn't singled out. So he's safe.

But I didn't go that route. Or the other one, really. I just holed up with my porn and my dreams and my Little Helix kit. I took a growth gene out of my

own cells, and I made it work in one of my mother's African violets. I made that sucker huge! So big it was starting to crowd me out of my room. I had to use weed killer on it.

That's when I began to wonder if I could put any part of a plant into me. Maybe it would make me more attractive. Or...You know anything about how gengineering works?

I had a basic course in medical school, but that's surely out of date by now.

Hmmph. I guess. What you do now is, you take a virus, and you fiddle the proteins in its shell so they'll bind to whatever cells you want to plug a new gene into. Then you splice the new gene in among the virus's genes. And inject the virus. It attaches to the target cells, injects its DNA, and plugs the new gene into place. If all goes well, the gene then works just the way you wanted it to.

That's what I did. I took a gene cluster out of an amaryllis plant my mother had and loaded the virus. Then I injected it into myself.

What were you hoping to change?

You can guess. You know what my "problem" is. I didn't know if anything would happen at all, since it's always been harder to make plant genes work in animals than vice versa. And I figured, if something went wrong, it would be an easy mistake to cover up. And besides, it didn't seem very likely that I would ever have any real use for...You know.

But it worked. A few days later, I began to turn green down there, and the whole thing shriveled up and got hard. It was like a little bud. It still worked, though, when I had to pee.

That must have been a relief.

Tom looked up from the screen to find Muffy looking back at him, a wicked grin on her lips. She winked, and he felt his face turning hot. He hoped no one else was watching, but he hoped in vain. As he turned back toward the text, he caught Joe-Dee's eye. The other man looked puzzled.

I'll say. I was worried for awhile, but...The change seemed to be pretty innocuous, and there was something about it that took a little of the edge off my yearnings. That was when I went off to college. I was a bio major, concentrating in molecular biology. I knew I wanted to be a gengineer, you see?

Four years, and then two more to get the engineering degree. And all that while, my bud kept growing larger.

Just like on a plant.

Right. At the same time, though, something else happened that was more alarming. My testicles changed. They stretched, you know? Right up the sides of the bud. But there wasn't any pain, and I figured I would find out what it meant when the bud opened. And that couldn't be too far off. If I looked, I could see grooves between the leaves that wrapped around it.

I tried to figure it out. The plant genes were modifying my own body parts, sure. I had expected that. But I didn't understand why they would be affecting my testicles. The targetting on the virus had been more specific than that. But the experts, I knew, were still working on how genes

interacted. Even in the lab, with full gene maps and the glossiest splicing machines, they couldn't always predict the results of their modifications. And what I had done had been pretty crude. Face it, I had been a kid, shooting blind.

Did your relationships with the opposite sex change any during those years?

You mean, did I get laid? Find anyone I wanted to marry? Stop hating and fearing women?

That should cover it.

Not hardly. I didn't even dare to shower when other guys were in the dorm's shower room. I could just imagine what they would have said if they had seen my bud!

So I stank, too, right? And the girls commented. They laughed. So did the guys, and by my sophomore year I couldn't find a roommate. Which was fine with me. I had always been a loner. I would always be a loner. I would, if I had to, find ways to satisfy all my needs by myself.

"You didn't show me this," said Kimmer Alvidrez. "You're right. He was a lot like you. A tech-freak who wouldn't wash."

"Gee, thanks," said her father. "But you're missing the point. He was a loner, a misfit." He paused. "So was I."

His daughter looked him in the eye and patted his shoulder. "Adaptation," she said. "It worked out pretty well for you. But I wonder what happened to him?"

He waved a hand to shut her up as Tom Cross scrolled the screen ahead. For awhile then, no one interrupted.

But I got frustrated at times. Everybody would be talking about me, laughing, sneering. And I was getting straight A's, since I didn't have any social life to distract me. So they were jealous, too. They had plenty of social life. I would see them under bushes, on couches in the dorm lounge, through windows. Animals. All of them. They were pure animals. And I thought that life would be so much more peaceful if they were all plants. But that was just a fantasy. An idle wish.

Hmmm.

The fantasy didn't last. That was about when my bud began to enlarge. It soon reached downright impressive proportions--or they would have been impressive if I had dared to show anyone. But it wasn't comfortable. The leafy wrapping around the bud grew too, but not quite so fast, and it felt the way your fingertip does when you wrap a rubber band around it. Swollen, you know? And tight, and hot, and God! it hurt.

It didn't last long. One day, the leaves simply separated, peeled back, and the pressure was off. That was when I found out what had been happening to my testicles.

You look curious. I'll show you. See? They're pollen sacs, and what I've got is an anther.

I figured the sacs would open in a day or two, and then, for the rest of my life, I'd be a walking powder puff. The least movement, and--Poof!

I suppose women would find your, er, apparatus rather alarming.

Well, sure. But, like I said before, staying away from them wouldn't be anything new. The problem had always been getting anywhere near them, and by then I was used to the situation. My solitariness was so much a habit, it might as well have been a choice.

Actually, I did wonder if I should amputate it right then and there, but I decided to put that extreme measure off. First, I would see if I could contain the pollen with wrappings. Then I would have to see if my anatomical uniqueness was good for anything.

I was also reluctant to cut because it was beautiful. It was the prettiest part of me! And it was my own doing. I was proud of it. But I still had sense enough not to wave it around in public.

But they caught me anyway, eventually. That's why the company insisted that I see you.

Tell me about it.

Well, the pollen sacs opened, just as I expected. And they put out quite a lot of pollen, beautiful yellow stuff with a powerful musky odor. I wondered what effect it would have if I could release it in a crowded room. But I girded my loins. I wrapped my anther up, and I kept it hidden.

Eventually I got my degree and found an apartment and was able to wash whenever I wished. That was when I got the job with the company. I was presentable enough, finally, and I knew my stuff. And it didn't take me long at all to become one of their best engineers. Hey, I'm the guy who developed the goldfish bush!

I have one of those at home! Got it for my daughter. She loves it.

It was basically just a reversal of what I had done to myself. I moved the whole goldfish genome into a rhododendron and rigged it to grow not flowers, but genuine goldfish. It was tricky, but when I was done, you could pluck a flower, drop it into a bowl of water, and watch it swim away. Or just plant the bush beside a fishpond.

But then I made my mistake. I said I was used to solitude? I was too damned used to it! I didn't stink anymore, I had a decent job and a decent income, and best of all I was a hit with the company. Some of the women around the lab began to eye me. They approached me. They invited me to lunch and dinner and parties.

And every time, every single time, I broke into a cold sweat. My heart raced. I blushed. I stammered. It felt like I was looking over the edge of a high building. And that was without even thinking of my anther. I was ashamed of myself.

Kimmer laughed. "I guess you weren't that bad off, Daddy. You got married, after all."

"Shhh," said Alvidrez. Neither one of them said a word about where her mother and his wife was now.

I understand. This happens to many people who are misfits when young. They grow older, they begin to fit in, and they suffer from panic attacks. You must understand that although your reaction might have been a little stronger than the usual, it was entirely natural. You had built your self-image on your

isolation, and these contacts were threatening both. They were threatening you.

Fortunately, this is the sort of situation that therapy can help. We have a very good record with realigning basic programming, though we cannot manipulate the mind anywhere near as well as you can the genes.

That is not the problem they sent me here for. I rebuffed them all. I repulsed them. I turned cold and curt and abrupt and insulting, and I holed up in my lab all alone, all alone with my amaryllis.

Amaryllis?

That's right. I didn't neglect my work, but I did begin to look at myself in connection with it. I remembered the odor of my pollen, and I ran an experiment or two. If I wrapped my anther tightly enough so not even the odor escaped, the women left me alone. If I didn't, I had to get downright nasty. And that gave me the answer I needed to escape their attentions. I soon had a cell culture that produced the active ingredients. Chanel bought it, and the company gave me a raise, though they didn't know where the cells came from.

And then...Well, I found that a fairly small change in the amaryllis genome would let my pollen fertilize it. After all, the stuff was already part amaryllis.

I was delighted when my own genes showed up in the next generation. The amaryllis still looked like an amaryllis, but the blossom had changed until it actually looked like a crude sketch of a human head. So I pollinated it again, and the next generation looked even more human.

That was when my supervisor walked into the lab. There I was, with my pants unfastened and my anther in my hand, shaking it over a flower in a big pot. He said, "What's the matter, Jack? Too much coffee this morning?"

And then he got close enough to see what I was holding. And to see the blossom on the plant. In a minute or two, he got his voice back, picked up the pot, said, "As soon as you can pull yourself together, Jack, I want to see you in my office," and walked out of my lab.

By the time I got to his office, about ten minutes later, he had half a dozen mucky-mucks with him. And they all agreed that I had gone too far. The anther was no problem--after all, gengineers play with themselves all the time, and they knew it; hell, half of them were gengineers, and one of them had actually made patches of skin over her cheekbones grow embedded butterfly wings; very exotic, and it'll be on the market any day now. But the amaryllis was another matter. Moving human genes around like that was *verboten*. And if I didn't agree to see you, I was out of a job on the spot. It didn't matter a bit how good a gengineer I was. What mattered, they figured, was how much trouble I could get the company into.

And what am I supposed to do for you?

I don't know. Convince me that playing with human genesis wrong? Rid me of a god complex?

Megalomania?

Whatever you call it. Or just give me a note saying that I've seen you and you think I'm sane enough to be loose on the streets.

I suspect the best thing would be to help you learn to form normal relationships with women. Do you want that?

Wouldn't the anther get in the way?...Look--my hands are shaking already.

I see. But can't you restore your penis to normal? Another virus, programmed to replace or cancel out the amaryllis genes?

I suppose so, but...

Would you want to?

No!

I see.

That all happened two months ago, you know. It took that long before you could see me. And in that time, I sold the amaryllis to Burpee. They've named it the "Alice" variety, and it'll be in the spring catalog. They'll have plenty of 'em available, thanks to tissue culture and forced growth. Here, I have a bulb in my pocket. Just put it in a pot, leave the top sticking out of the dirt, and water it.

It looks perfectly normal. Why "Alice"?

After the flowers with human faces in the old story.

They don't know why it looks so human, but they love it, and they've paid me a bundle already, with more to come. I don't really need the job anymore. And I have everything I need in my apartment. Plenty of amaryllises, and I can pollinate them there as well as anywhere.

I'm afraid the hour is up. Next week?

SESSION TRANSCRIPT: SESSION 2
PATIENT: Jack D. Rivard, 832-076-1074
OCCUPATION: Genetic Engineer
DATE: May 17, 2053

I was disappointed when you didn't comeback last summer.

Ah, well, I didn't figure you would be able to do much for me, you know? You suggested that I change myself back, and I didn't want any of that. But now! Your follow-up notice came, just like the one from the dentist, and I...Jeezus! You gotta help me! Anything!

I lost the job, of course. I expected that, but like I told you, I had the Burpee money, and I very quickly had all the consulting work I could handle. Pretty soon, I had enough money to move out to the suburbs. I found a nice place, a little chalet-type house mounted on a giant beanstalk. There's a pumpkin house next door.

I moved in, with my amaryllis plants in their pots. And every night, I pollinated them. And that's the problem.

What do you mean?

I can't stop!

I mean, it's become a compulsion. Just as I expected, every generation of these amaryllises has more human genes, more of my genes. When I gave you that

bulb, they were flowers that looked like they had faces. Right? Did you plant it?

Of course. It was quite impressive.

Dr.'s subvoc: Though Emma made me throw it out. Said it reminded her of child molesting.

They're not the same anymore. Now they look like real women. Almost. Life-sized. *Human* life-sized. Pale stems wrapped in green leaves that fold down when you approach them. The stems curve here and here, and this looks like tits, and the flower at the top...I've got blondes, redheads, brunettes, whatever you like. And they never say a word. They just stand there, waiting for me to shake my anther.

But somewhere along the line they picked up the odor the company sold to Chanel. *I* got the gene for that from the plants in the first place. But then my cells modified it somehow, and now it's back in the plants, and they've modified it some more.

And every time I come into the room, they pump it into the air.

Pheromones!

And I can't help myself! I strip down and I grab my anther and I shake it and I shake it and I...

Jack!

Thanks, Doctor. Anyway, they want my pollen. They demand it! And I have to shake out a helluva lot of it before they're satisfied. Or before they run out of pheromone. I usually turn on some music before I get started, and then I dance. Exercise, right? That's why I'm in such great shape. Not an ounce of fat.

But it's grinding me down, Doctor. I can't take it much longer.

Then perhaps it's time to think again about reversing your own modifications. Or--you'd still respond to the pheromones, wouldn't you? Maybe you should get rid of the amaryllises.

Oh, no! They're not intelligent, you know. They're just plants, they have no brains at all, and they don't know what I'm doing. They don't know I'm working on a virus to take away their pheromones. A deodorant virus.

The only problem is finding the time. The closer I get, the more insistent they seem to become. Their appetites!

But I'm getting there. I am! And when I'm done they'll be perfect flowers of their sex. They'll be lovely! And I'll have their demands under control. I'll pollinate them only when I want to!

And they'll never criticize you, call you names, deny you...

Right. They'll just sit there in their pots, their fronds unfurled around their feet. They'll be the decorations they should be.

Do you remember what I recommended last summer? I said the best thing might be to help you learn to form normal relationships with women. But...

You don't think I can, now? I don't want to!

Ahhhh. I suspect that you have missed something important.

Like what?

You say your amaryllises are mindless plants. But you also say that every generation has more and more of your human genes. And already, clearly, they have enough of a nervous system to respond to your presence. And with the pheromone, they are resisting, denying, your attempts to control them.

Are you suggesting that they have brains after all? Minds? Wills? That they release the pheromone deliberately? That they are *trying* to make me make them more human? Or just to stop me from completing the new virus?

Isn't that a thought that you should entertain? They may already be so much like women that they are not controllable. And soon, in another generation or two, their human component may be so great that it will be immoral even to try.

You don't understand. You don't know what you're talking about. They're just plants! They can't possibly do any more than *look* like humans.

Certainly, there's no way they can possibly control me. Not even with pheromones.

Where do you keep them?

Most of them are in the living room.

Are there any in your lab?

Just one.

Then I think...

Uh-uh. I know what you're thinking, and it's impossible. It's just a plant! It couldn't possibly register what I'm doing in there, much less pass the word to the gals in the other room.

Do you realize how you speak of them?

Oh, hell, Doctor. You don't understand. It's just a figure of speech.

Actually, I wonder why I ever bothered to come back here. I don't know why I expected you to understand what I'm going through. I...

You don't have to leave, you know. Your hour isn't up.

I've gotta go, Doctor. I really do. If they'll give me just a little time tonight, I can finish up that virus.

I'll let you know how it works out.

PATIENT: Jack D. Rivard, 832-076-1074

OCCUPATION: Genetic Engineer

FILE CLOSED June 15, 2054

No return visits

Follow-up notices returned, marked "No forwarding address."

Tom Cross sighed. It was done. He knew something now of why he was so different from other men. He knew far more than he had ever dreamed of knowing about his biological father. He knew him, he felt, almost as well as he knew

himself, or Muffy, certainly far, far better than he knew Joe-Dee Alvidrez. And he felt sorry for the man. He had, it seemed, bitten off more than he could chew. He had, perhaps, been destroyed by his own creation. He had...

Muffy Bowen echoed his sigh. "Then..." she said. "This means our Alice..." She meant the flower in their apartment, the one he had found on the floor after her kidnapping. "In a way, she's really your half-sister. He was her father too!"

He nodded.

Freddy giggled and sang, "Shakin' my anther....!"

Tom scowled at the pig. "You want me to drop you? That has to be a coincidence."

"We've been neglecting the Alice, haven't we?" said Muffy. "We haven't been home in...I bet she needs watering."

Tom nodded again. Then he said, musingly, "It looks like Peirce was wrong."

"What did he say?" asked Alvidrez.

Tom explained. "He thought no gengineer would be able to do much in the way of converting a human to a plant. But Dad--Jack--gave himself that anther, and...He also made quite a bit of progress toward converting those amaryllises into humans." He said nothing about himself.

"Then I suppose," said Jim Brane, "that he really could be thinking of turning Muffy into a potted plant." Muffy shuddered at his words. "And your mother was right."

"How could she be?" said Tom. He threw up his hands in exasperation. "She's a drunk! A honey bum!"

"And there's absolutely no evidence that Jack is behind it," said Muffy.

"Except for the flower pots," said Jim.

"You're right," said Tom. "But that's not much help. They're probably just coincidence. More coincidence."

"They didn't have shipping labels addressed to Jack Rivard," said Muffy.

"I wish," said Alvidrez. "I wish I could have found something more current. Like where he is now. But..." He shrugged. "If it's not in the databases..."

"We'll just have to hope that they've finished bothering us," said Tom.

"Or that they'll try again," said Freddy. "And this time, tell us where to look."

"What will you do now?" asked Alvidrez.

"I have no idea," said Tom Cross. "Wait for Freddy to be right, I suppose. Or..."

"Can I go with you?" asked Kimmer.

"No!" said Tom.

"There's nowhere to go," said Muffy Bowen. "For now, except home."

"But I'm pretty good with computers," she said. "And if you need to get into them for anything..."

"She's right," said her father.

Tom shook his head and said, "No," again. "It's bad enough that we're at risk. I wouldn't want them to get you again, too."

"It's my choice," she said. "I want to catch them just as much as you do. They snatched me too, remember."

"No." He was adamant.

"Yes," said Muffy. "There's plenty of room in the Mack's cab."

"It's going to get crowded," said Jim. "It's just a cab. We didn't think we'd need a van back today."

"And it will be good to have you along." It was settled. The two young women grinned at each other as if they were old friends, as perhaps they were in the measure of that drawn-out psychological time that must have passed in the captivity they had shared.

"What are we going to do with you?" asked Jim. His hands were on Tige's controls as he pretended to steer the great Mack down the road away from the Alvidrez manse. Muffy sat beside him, Randy on her lap. Tom was behind her, Freddy in his arms. Beside Tom was Kimmer Alvidrez. Encouraged by his mate, she had followed them out the door, her father's blessing ringing in their ears. She had climbed aboard. And here she was.

"Let me come along," she said. "Listen to me. Let me help if I can."

"We might as well," Tom sighed at last. "So what do you think we should do next?"

"How about visiting your mother again? Maybe she can tell us more about Jack."

CHAPTER 10

Muffy Bowen knew that her mate had grown up in a pumpkin house. She knew what Tom Cross's parents looked like, what his father did for a living, and what his mother cared about. Yet she had never seen the house nor met Tom's parents. She and Tom had found each other only after they had each run away from their respective homes, and she had only his occasional tales to go by. He had even less, for she never talked about her own family.

She had never realized just how out of date her image of Tom's family really was. Nor, she knew, had Tom, for he had finally tried to return home again only because Muffy had been kidnapped and his friends had urged him to seek whatever support his parents--his mother--might give a prodigal. He had craved that support, yes, of course. But he had never dared to cross that line he himself had drawn when he ran away from home.

The current truth was thus something of a shock. Once everyone was in Tige's cabin and Jim Brane had set the Mack on the proper path, Tom told his mate what he had found: The house a mess, his father missing, his mother a honey bum. Home, but not the home he had left, not what he had dreamed from time to time waited, unchanging, for his return. As he spoke, he seemed to be realizing the vastness of the difference between what he had left years before and what he had found. He fell silent, staring at Muffy while she stared at him. She wondered if similar vast shiftings of reality awaited them. She thought he must be wondering much the same.

Their quiet drew sidelong glances from Jim. Tom had said enough about him in the past so that Muffy knew he had some idea of the contrast between expectation and reality that had silenced her, and of that between memory and reality that had silenced his old friend. It drew stares from Kimmer Alvidrez. From Freddy it drew only a snort: "That's why we'd better finish up this mystery pretty quick. I don't want to be away from the museum for long. There's no telling what Porculata will do if..."

"Peirce won't let her get any honeysuckle wine," said Tom Cross.

"He isn't the one who feeds her. And what if she gets a yen for porkchops?"

Muffy shuddered. "I'm done with that," she said. "I really am. The wine is nice." If she thought with a mental wince that that was hardly why she had drunk so much of it, no one could tell. No one ever would, unless and until she chose to share what she felt as the shame of her background. "But I had more than I could stand, locked up by those kidnappers." She hesitated. "I couldn't even scream."

"Me, too." Kimmer was nodding her agreement. "I never drank that much of it before. But now I know what it must feel like to be a honey bum. And no thanks. No more."

Jim talked his Mack off the main roads onto the greenways of the residential neighborhood where his and Tom's families lived. The neighborhood looked much the same as it had on their last visit. It was quiet, with most of its residents--including, once again, Jim's folks--at work in the city. Bright sun made the green leaves of trees, beanstalks, pumpkin plants, and honeysuckle vines shine. To match the scene, the air should have been filled with the fresh, green scents of growing things, contaminated only by the inevitable fragrance of honeysuckle blossoms. Instead, despite the efforts of the local litterbugs, the honeysuckle was threatened by the summery, heat-drawn tang of genimal manures deposited on the greenways and in the drives of a thousand homes. Puffs of dirty grey cotton on the horizon hinted of rain, perhaps that night, and Tom thought that in the morning the air might smell much cleaner.

This time, the Cross family Roachster was in the drive. When Jim parked Tige at the curb, the Mack leaned toward the other genimal, sniffing. The passengers disembarked, and the trucker slapped his beast on the side of its muzzle, saying, "Behave yourself."

Tom stood beside the Mack, hugging Freddy, staring dismally toward the pumpkin. He said, "Dad--Ralph--must be here."

Muffy Bowen laid her hand on his shoulder and murmured, "I've wanted to meet them, you know."

He used his own hand to remove hers, held it, patted it, and began to walk toward the door. The others followed him. Kimmer Alvidrez hung back. Like

Muffy, she had never visited this home before. Unlike Muffy, she had no close connection to anyone who had. Presumably, Tom thought when he noticed the way she was trailing behind, she felt that she had less right than any of them to intrude.

They were still some feet away from the pumpkin house's entrance when the door opened as if on its own, revealing a darkly shadowed interior. They stopped.

"Is that you, Tommy?" There was a creak of shoe leather, and a man, moving slowly, tentatively, appeared in the opening. He was of middle height, thick-set, bald except for tufts of hair above his ears, matched by his eyebrows. Patches on his pinstriped coverall announced his loyalty to his employer and two fraternal organizations. His sleeves were rolled above his elbows, his head was bowed, and he blinked in the outside light.

Tom Cross swallowed. He had not seen his legal father since he had left home. Then, he had had more hair and less fat, less age. "Dad? Ralph?"

The man winced. He looked beaten by life and circumstance. "Son? She said you'd been here, though..." He gestured. "Come on in. Is that the pig you took? Your girl?"

Freddy interrupted, his voice hooting. "You bet he took me, and I'm glad he did. This place is such a mess no self-respecting pig would live here. Even if he couldn't talk. You left too. They should condemn..." As they entered the kitchen, Tom put a hand over the pig's snout and muttered, "Look." The room was not sparkling clean, but the piles of dirty dishes and laundry were gone, and a mop stood in a bucket of soapy water. The paint on the woodwork around the kitchen window was still cracked and peeling. The window itself had been opened to let the honeysuckle stink escape.

Ralph Cross shrugged apologetically and pointed with an open hand. "It started going when you...Now it's always a dump," he said. He did not say that the same was true of his wife, though Tom guessed the thought had to be in his mind. "That's why I have an apartment in town."

"I guessed," said Tom.

"I come in every week or so," said Ralph. He shrugged again. "It's a losing battle." He sighed lugubriously. "I'm glad it's over."

Tom raised his brows at that last remark--was Ralph giving up? writing Petra off? getting a divorce? or...?--but said nothing. Instead, he introduced his companions and told Ralph what had been happening. Finally, he said, "Mom said she thought it was my real..."

"Your real father?" Ralph sighed once more when Tom seemed surprised that he knew. "She told me all about it when she started sucking honey. She's guessing."

"I figured." For a moment, the son felt as old as his mother's husband. There was even a sense that the honey had cost them both something of immense, if different, value. "Where is she?"

Ralph Cross's face fell. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "Out back. On the lawn." He led them through the kitchen and down a short hall to the pumpkin's back door. It was standing open, sunlight pouring through it, honeysuckle leaves and blossoms showing around its edges.

Tom stepped through the door and faced his mother. She was lying on her

back, nude, her limbs spread obscenely, her hair a tangled mat. A blanket lay in a crumpled heap to one side. Tom gulped and resisted an urge to look away. "What...?"

"I found her like that when I got here last night. She was still able to talk, then, a little. I cleaned up the bedroom enough to stay there, and..." He too gulped. Tom looked at his face and was surprised to note a tear. Hurriedly, he shifted his gaze back to the lawn and the terrible thing that lay there. "I put that blanket over her. Last night. This morning, that's where it was. She must have thrown it off."

While he talked, Tom continued to stare at his mother. Her eyes were open, unblinking, gazing blindly into the sky. Yet she was not dead, for her chest slowly rose and fell. Nor did she seem to be suffering, for her nipples were so gloriously erect that anyone might have concluded that something about her peculiar state felt very good indeed.

"I don't think she needs me any more," said Ralph. "Or anybody. Or the wine."

Her skin was still grey, but now it was touched by a hint of green. The wormlike lines beneath her skin seemed fewer in number, though those that Tom could see were also thicker.

"My God!" said Muffy Bowen.

Tom looked where she was pointing, and suddenly he realized where the missing "worms" had gone: They had penetrated her skin and burrowed into the soil. Now they tethered his mother, like a plant, to the bosom of the planet.

"You can't move her," said Ralph Cross. His voice choked, as if his one tear were about to become a flood. "I tried. They'll stretch, so she can move a bit. But she's rooted."

"That can't happen!" cried Muffy. "People don't turn into plants!"

"You're forgetting about Jack," said Jim Brane.

Tom turned toward Muffy. Her look of shock flickered, and they shared a moment of realization--she was forgetting about Tom as well--before returning their minds to the tragedy before them.

"I'd like to know how it happened," said Ralph Cross. "She was fine last week. As drunk as ever on that mechin' wine. And she looked like hell. But she wasn't growing roots."

Ralph shook his head as he stared at what his wife of so many years had become. Kimmer Alvidrez knelt beside Petra Cross's shoulder and used her fingers to explore her attachment to the soil. "They *feel* like roots," she said. "I wonder how deep they go?"

Jim Brane laid a hand on his friend's shoulder, and Tom felt the tears spring to his own eyes. His mother? A honey bum was bad enough, and he had thought of her winding up in the city's alleys or under the highway's overpasses. But a vegetable? Jack's file had proved such a transformation was possible, at least in a partial way. And Petra was by no means all plant. But she seemed far more changed than Jack had ever been. *He* could talk and walk and plan. She was as mindless and immobile as...as a plant.

Tige's bark echoed from the other side of the pumpkin house. A shadow drifted over them. Freddy said, "Look at that!" His eyes were set on the sides

of his sloping head, but his snout was aimed permanently skyward, and his gaze turned that way as naturally as any.

"What...?" said Jim.

Tom looked. Above them, its ropy tentacles twining in the air, groping vaguely toward them, toward the nearby treetops, toward the pumpkin house, hovered a Bioblomp moving van that was larger than most of its kind. Its hydrogen-filled gasbag was nearly half again as large as those of the merry-go-rounds at the zoo. It must have been seventy meters across.

The monster jellyfish drifted nearer. It had the usual sailing-ship logo on the side of its gasbag. Below the bag, covering the genimal's broad, funnel-like mouth, was a stained control pod, housing for the crew and the computers that plugged into the Bioblomp's nervous system. A small propellor behind the pod provided the thrust that moved it toward its destination. That destination was clearly Tom and his friends and family.

What did it want? Moving vans carried their cargo in large pockets on the sides of their bags. This one's pockets did not bulge, but their openings gaped, and in those openings stood...

"Again!" said Muffy as Tige's bark became a raging howl.

"I thought we convinced them," said Freddy.

"Mechin' kidnappers," said Tom.

"What the hell do they *want*?" asked Jim. His tone suggested that he knew full well that the question was rhetorical.

"Into the house," said Ralph Cross, and they ran, leaving Tom's mother naked on the lawn.

They stopped running as soon as they had slammed the door behind them. They turned, then, to watch whatever might happen as the Bioblomp's tentacles snaked into the yard they had abandoned and delicate tips danced over the window in the door, over the shrubbery, even over Petra Cross.

When the pumpkin house had originally been prepared for occupancy, the stub of the stem that had linked it to its parent vine had been left attached to the roof. Now they felt the house rock as the Bioblomp wrapped tentacles around that anchorage.

Glass shattered as other tentacles found purchase by smashing windows. Still others wrapped around Petra's arms, legs, and torso. They pulled. Her back arched. Her roots stretched and began, one by one at first, and then in ripping volleys, to snap. Her mouth opened, and she screamed.

Despite the risk, Tom Cross heaved against the door, trying desperately to push his friends out of the way, to open the door and rush out to...But all he could manage was a crack. Pressing his mouth to the opening, he screamed, "Tige!"

But the Mack was not his, and it would not come to his aid unless...Jim Brane echoed the call, and the truck began to bay.

The monster's tentacles were lifting Petra into the air. A wisp of her hair drifted downward, toward the window through which they watched. One of the kidnappers was holding a cargo pouch open and gesturing, as if to tell the Bioblomp, or his companions within the pod who were directing the Bioblomp's

movements, where to deliver its load.

Shrubbery flattened as Tige galloped howling into view. The truck lunged, and his teeth fastened on the end of one flailing tentacle. He stiffened his forelimbs, lowered his haunches and, like the bulldog that his ancestors had been, shook his head. Spittle flew.

Petra Cross, Tom's mother, Ralph's wife, disappeared into the cargo pouch, which immediately puckered tight its sphinctered mouth. The Bioblomp began to thrash its other tentacles, heaving against the truck. It did not let go of the house, for it needed purchase, and Tom and his friends felt the structure tip and rock and lurch.

A hatch opened in the side of the Bioblomp's control pod. A kidnapper leaned out, a large handgun in his fist. He was aiming at Tige but, as if he could somehow sense the man's intent, the Mack shook the tentacle harder than ever. The Bioblomp danced in the air, the shots went wild, and the kidnapper lost his grip, flailed his arms, and tumbled from his perch.

At the same time, the Bioblomp increased its struggles to free itself from Tige. The house rocked harder, tipped, and toppled into its yard with a jolt that tumbled the humans within its shell into a heap of groping limbs and confused cries. Tige snarled and tugged and shook, and the tentacle in his mouth at last broke off, leaving only a useless stub near the rim of the gasbag.

The Bioblomp fled, its propellor blurring into invisibility as its engine roared. Tige howled in triumph, tossed his prize into the air, and leaped for the tangle of pumpkin vine into which the kidnapper had fallen. The battered humans, swearing, crawled from the wreckage of the house.

"My heart," said Freddy in his nasal rumble. "It's pounding something awful. I think they call it palpitations."

The house lay on its side. Several windows were intact, but most had been shattered by the grasping tentacles or by the shock of landing on the ground. Through the window frames on the lower side of the pumpkin's great orange curve protruded lamps, chair backs, even a mattress which Tom recognized despite the distractions of the moment as a Slugabed, its hunger patch as bright a pink as he had ever seen. He supposed his mother had not been feeding it well, and his father--no, he insisted, just Ralph--had not yet...

"Litter!" he said. "And mech!" They had tried for Muffy, and they had failed. They had tried for her again, and for him as well, and they had failed, twice. But now they had his mother. What did they want? Did they want to force him to do something awful? Bomb the Appliance Garden? Give the sammitch bushes and pie plants a virus that would turn them toxic? He supposed he would obey, if only they would tell him what they wanted. But they never said a word. They might even be planning, really, to turn Petra into a potted plant, just as Petra had said they must wish to do with Muffy. She, at least, was almost there already.

But they never said a word. They left him free to act as best he could, to hunt for their victims, whether Muffy or his mother, and for them, to rescue and avenge, to end their depredations, to return his life to its even keel.

"Look at this!" cried Ralph Cross. "What am I...? What are they going to do with her? Why...?" He stared at the ruined house, one finger tracing abroad crack in the wall. It would be weeks before it could be habitable again. He turned and stared after the departing Bioblomp, already shrunken by distance, heading southeast, toward but a bit off the city, as if its destination were

Lake Michigan beyond, or its farther shore.

"They must be white slavers," said Freddy, his palpitations forgotten for the moment. "They spotted her as the perfect bondage victim. A lady with roots! She actually ties herself up!"

The others ignored both Ralph and the pig. Muffy and Jim were leading the way after Tige. Tom dropped Freddy on the ground beside his father and followed them. Kimmer followed him.

It was not difficult to track the Mack to where he straddled the apparently unhurt kidnapper. Tige had trampled flat the pumpkin vines and the honeysuckle that grew from the same soil, grinding leaves, flowers, and stems into the soft dirt. Sap and honeysuckle wine had turned the dirt in spots to mud.

Tige had not trampled the kidnapper, who cowered now, gasping, eyes wide, hands in the air as if to ward off the growling behemoth. Tom arrived just as Jim said, "Okay, Tige. Back off. We've got him." Then, with a glance at the kidnapper, he added, "You can have him later."

Her nostrils flaring at the reek of honeysuckle wine, Muffy Bowen grabbed the man by the neck of his grey coverall and dragged him onto the lawn, dropping him not far from the patch of disturbed soil that marked where Petra had been torn from her place. Tom and Jim joined her, and all three stared down at the villain, scowling. He stared back defiantly, saying nothing, but when Tige moved to let his shadow fall across the group and a drop of canine spittle landed on the ground beside his cheek, his eyes widened with terror.

"One bite," said Jim Brane. "That's all it will take. Or maybe two. Tige doesn't like people who shoot at him. Even when they miss. So talk. Where are your friends taking her?"

"What do they want her *for*?" put in Tom.

The kidnapper shook his head.

"I bet Randy would like a bite too." Muffy called. Her spider scuttled across the lawn and climbed her side to perch on her shoulder. The genimal meeped enthusiastically.

The kidnapper trembled, and drops of sweat appeared on his forehead. He had, perhaps, heard of what Randy's bite had done to the kidnappers in town and at the zoo. But still he said nothing.

Tom thought that they seemed to be playing a game. Their side played threats as pieces. The kidnapper played refusals. The loser was whichever side first ran out of pieces. And now it was his turn to play.

He turned and stepped toward the topsy-turvy house. He found the Slugabed, picked up a broken chair leg, and began to knock glass shards from the window frame through which it protruded. In a moment, Jim was beside him, helping wordlessly. Together, they tugged it through the window, carried it across the lawn, and dropped it beside the kidnapper.

"See how pink the hunger patch is?" asked Tom. He forced eye contact with their captive and pointed. "That means it's starving. My mother neglected the poor thing. She should have poured some milk on it, or even just dumped some scraps. It'll digest *anything* we put on it."

He was lying when he said *anything*; it had been designed expressly to

leave living matter alone. Jim had been lying too when he promised Tige he could have their prisoner later. But the man obviously had no suspicion of the lies. He shook his head and whimpered: "No."

"If we squeeze the control node, it'll wrap around you." He pointed again. "If we squeeze real hard..."

"I tried that once," said Kimmer Alvidrez, catching on. "I had to scream for help to get out."

The kidnapper's face turned white beneath his dirt. His eyes jerked desperately back and forth. He whimpered again: "No, please."

Tom gestured, and Jim and Muffy bent to lift the kidnapper onto the Slugabed. He struggled, but a growl from Tige stopped that immediately. When he was in place, Tom knelt and squeezed the control node. The Slugabed obediently folded itself around the captive. He squeezed harder, and the genimal began to shudder and pulse with the motions of massage. He squeezed harder still, using both hands at once, and the Slugabed seemed to grow rigid with contractile effort.

The kidnapper gasped. His face contorted. He shrieked.

He stopped only when he ran out of breath. Then, after a few panting sobs, he began to babble: "Get me out of here. Please! I can't stand slugs. Or snakes. Or worms! I don't want it to eat me. Please!"

Ralph Cross joined the small group surrounding the bundled captive. "It..." Like his son, he worked with bioppliances. He too knew their captive was safe. Tom silenced him with a chopping gesture, but the kidnapper did not see. His eyes were shut tight, tears spilling between the lids. His cheeks were no longer pale but flaming red. "Please!"

"We don't care what your name is," said Tom. "But why have you people been trying to kidnap us?"

The other shook his head and gasped: "Dunno. Orders. The boss, he said we had a contract. Lots of money."

Tom was silent for a moment while he digested that tidbit of information. Orders? A contract? Someone was going to a great deal of trouble to capture Muffy, him, his mother. But why?

Finally, he said, "Where are they taking my mother?"

The kidnapper hesitated, the whites of his eyes showing around the edges of a stare that jumped from face to face. Muffy took Randy from her shoulder and set the spider on the cylinder of the Slugabed where the man could stare into the spider's eight glossy eyes. He shuddered, whined, and said at last, gasping, "Pinkley. There's a valley...Lonely sp..." Then he closed his eyes and went limp.

Muffy Bowen laughed. "He passed out."

After a moment's hesitation, Jim lifted one end of the Slugabed, kidnapper and all. With a nod toward Randy, he said, "Do you think...?"

Muffy caught on immediately. "Of course. Tom, you lift the other end." When he had done so, Kimmer and Ralph adding their strength to his, she set Randy to crawling around and around the bundle, spinning silk as she went.

She was almost done securing the bundle when they heard the first ululations of police sirens.

"The neighbors must have called," said Ralph Cross.

Three police Roachsters, their long claws held high, crowded the front lawn. A pair of Sparrowhawks, having disgorged their pilots, perched on the upper curve of the toppled house. The police themselves were busily inspecting the immobilized kidnapper and questioning the witnesses.

One cop was scratching his head over the disturbed soil where Petra had been uprooted. However, no one said a word about what had been happening to Tom's mother. She was, they all agreed, lying on the lawn, soaking up the sun, when the Bioblomp arrived, seized her in its tentacles, and bore her off. The wreckage? It had seized the house to anchor itself, and when Jim Brane had steered Tige against it, well...There you see the results. And there's the broken tentacle. The kidnapper tried to shoot the Mack and fell. The gun? There it is, on the lawn. No, we haven't touched it.

It was all true enough except for the bit about Jim driving Tige to the attack. They had left out a few little details, but those details, they thought, were not important to the police. They had nothing to do with what had happened. And if the kidnapper, once he came to, chose to say that the Mack had attacked on its own, or that Petra had had to be torn out of the soil by the roots...surely the cops would never believe such wild-eyed stories. They simply were not believable, even in a world of rampant gengineering.

Yet there was that officer who had been staring at the ground. When the others had freed the kidnapper from his spider-silk and Slugabed bonds and led him toward the nearest Roachster, he strolled near the house, bent, picked up Petra's wooden honeysuckle blossom rack, and approached Tom. When he was near enough, he said softly, "She drank a lot of wine, didn't she?"

Once the police had arrived to take over, Tom had retrieved Freddy. Now, holding the pig in the crook of one arm, he nodded, accepted the rack, saw that it had survived the pumpkin house's upheaval and its own spill into the yard without a scratch, and tossed it in the direction of the house's door.

"Did she scream?" A tag upon the cop's breast said that his name was "Malzer."

"You sound," said Muffy Bowen, "like you know."

It was the cop's turn to nod. "Yeah," he said. "Roots. I've seen it. If they drink enough, and if they wander off the pavement, or get too close to a pile of rotten garbage. It's just city compost, you know. Humus. Nature's effort to rebuild the soil we stripped away when we built the city. And it's enough to trap the bums."

Muffy's face went pale. "I will never," she said. "I'll never touch another drop."

Kimmer Alvidrez stepped up beside Muffy. "Yes," she said, her face sober. "She screamed."

"They do," the cop said. "Though usually it's BRA who...The cases interest them. They say they're muck, proof of illegal gengineering, and they want to catch the muckers. So they have to collect the evidence. They dig them up. Pull them out of the dirt. And then they try to collect the people around the victims, too, like family members."

"What do they do with them all?" asked Muffy.

The cop shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you think they have a cure?" asked Tom.

"Or do they let the lab boys take 'em apart?" That was Freddy. "I'll bet that hurts."

"Do you ever see them again?" asked Ralph Cross. "Can they cure them?"

The cop looked like he was about to answer, but before he could do more than shake his head and open his mouth, someone yelled from one of the Roachsters, "C'mon, Malzer. Move your ass!"

With an apologetic lift of his eyebrows, Malzer turned to leave.

CHAPTER 11

"Let me," said Muffy Bowen. She had been behind him, her arms around his shoulders, her cheek laid against his back. Now she stepped around him, held out her hands and bent her fingers invitingly. She was free of her frequent burden, for Randy was roaming around the yard, palpating everything she came across and meeping frantically. "I'll take him."

With a sigh, Tom Cross let her lift Freddy from his arms. Then, as she and Kimmer Alvidrez and Ralph Cross walked away from him, he kicked again at the rubble that had spilled from the house, his house, the house he had grown up in. He had fled it, yes, when he had felt he did not belong. He had returned, and its occupants had changed, though his parents--at least, his mother--had never left. But she had become a honey bum, grown roots, put roots into her native soil. He laughed. Life played strange jokes. Funniest of all, perhaps, was that he had once thought Ralph was his father, learned the man was not and therefore all love and family were falsely treasonous, and fled. But he had returned, and that love, that acceptance, was still there. He felt ashamed of himself.

He kicked at a tangle of crushed honeysuckle vines. Beside his foot, he saw the honeysuckle rack. Petra Cross would need it no more, even if they got her back. A step ahead lay a book. He turned it with his foot so he could see the title. It was one of his, from before he had run away, an adventure set on a distant planet. They had kept it all these years. He wondered how much of his old stuff lay hidden in the wreckage.

Wreckage and rubble and forgotten impedimenta. What he didn't have was his mother. He hadn't visited, but he had always known where she was, that she would surely welcome him if he ever deigned to halt his flight. And she had, when he had come home at last. She had been a drunk, yes, but she had been--she still was--his mother. Just as Ralph was, after all, his father.

When Jim Brane's hand gripped his shoulder, he wiped the tears from his eyes. His friend's touch was a reminder of boyhood camaraderie, but it was also what a man offered another man by way of comfort. Two women would have embraced and sobbed their eyes out. "C'mon, Tommy. Tige is out by the road. We found him, remember. We found Muffy. And we're still a team. Maybe we can find

her."

"Sure," said Tom. Roots, he thought, and kidnappers, and mysterious masters who issue contracts. "But what will she be by then? What will they do to her? What will they use her to tell us to do?"

Jim had no idea at all of how to answer his friend. He was saying as much with a shrug when they were interrupted. A cry echoed from around the house, a bark, a deep-throated answering yelp. Tom said, "What now?" and the two men began to trot. Tom was thinking of the disaster Tige's last announcement had portended. He guessed Jim was sharing the thought.

But all that they found was a second Mack, nose to nose with Tige, and sniffing. "Julia!" cried Jim.

She was already swinging down from Blackie's cab. Behind her Tom could see another figure, shadowed and unrecognizable. As Julia Templeton landed on the grass, she hooked a thumb over her shoulder and said, "He called the Farm, looking for you guys. I was done--the runs were short--so I said I'd bring him." She looked at Kimmer Alvidrez. "We stopped at your Dad's place first. He told us..." Then she pointed at the toppled house. "What happened here?"

As Jim Brane began to tell her, the other figure in the Mack's cab stepped into the doorway. Tom recognized Franklin Peirce and, remembering the museum curator's gift, fingered the worrystone beneath his shirt. Muffy, standing a few feet away, smiled her own recognition, saw Tom's movement, and straightened Freddy's stone.

Jim fell silent. Tom suffered Julia's sympathetic hug. Peirce said, "Whoever issued that contract must want the whole family. First Muffy, and now your mother. Not to mention you and your friends."

"It's as if she was right," said Tom, with an apologetic glance at Ralph, who was staring at the house, apparently unhearing. "She said it was my real father, Jack. We found out..."

"He," said Freddy. "He was a fruitcake."

"You're why I'm here," said Peirce. "Porculata wanted me to tell you..."

Tom Cross sighed heavily. There was no point in going on until Peirce had delivered the message: Porculata, it seemed, had had another hot flash from the psychic ether. She had been worried that her husband would want to fool around with strange women, but now she knew. She had instructed Peirce to tell Freddy that it was okay. The ladies couldn't be deflowered anyway, even if he wanted to. He should feel free to go ahead and try, if he truly wished, though he should know now that it wouldn't do him a bit of good.

While he recited the message, Randy scuttled toward his ankles, palped his trouser cuffs, and began to climb his leg. When he was done, Peirce shrugged, accepted the spider's weight in his arms, and added, "I haven't the foggiest idea of what she is talking about," and stared at Kimmer as if he were wondering whether she were one of the impregnably undeflowerable ladies Porculata had mentioned. She was a little taller than he.

"Me neither," said Freddy.

"Nor me," said Muffy and Tom almost simultaneously. Jim and Kimmer were both silent, while Ralph, who hadn't seemed to hear a word, grunted, turned away from the house, and said, "Him and his damned plants."

"Who?" said Peirce.

"Jack," said Tom. "My real father. He was a gengineer, and..." He filled in what Peirce did not already know. In the process, he introduced Kimmer, who was eying Peirce with as much interest as he was showing in her. For a moment, Tom wondered: Older men were famous for their interest in younger women; those women who returned the interest, however, seemed far more turned on by money and fame, of which Franklin Peirce had neither, than by bald heads. Finally, he said, "I wish I knew what was going on."

"There's only one way to find out," said Peirce.

"Go to Pinkley," said Kimmer Alvidrez. She was moving closer to the curator.

"I'd like to show you the museum," said Peirce. Both his eyes and his voice were admiring.

"I bet you've got lots of etchings there, right?" She grinned broadly and patted the bare forepart of his scalp. "You even blush up here! But I'm going with them. Maybe later."

"She's young enough to be your daughter," said Julia Templeton.

"So he's a dirty old man," said Muffy Bowen. "So's her father, and you know..."

Ralph Cross turned away from the others to stare at the pumpkin house. To one side, its cradle-like concrete foundation was exposed to the sun. The house itself was tipped, cracked, stove in where its weight had driven one corner of the foundation through its shell. The front door lay open, a ramp leading into the broad slit that once had been a doorway. Ralph shook his head and said, "There's a map in there somewhere." He crawled through the opening and disappeared. After a moment during which they could hear him rummaging within, there was a small sound of triumph. When he reemerged, he was holding what looked like a colorfully printed pamphlet.

"Here," he said, and he unfolded the pamphlet to reveal the map he had mentioned. "I left footprints on the walls."

They gathered around. Fingers found their own location, Lake Michigan to the east, and then, on the edge of a long band of hilly terrain, the town of Pinkley. "It's small," said Tom.

"Rural," said Jim Brane. "A good place for a hideout."

Muffy shifted Freddy's weight to one arm and spread her free hand across the lake. "But we can't drive there this afternoon."

Julia shook her auburn head. "It would take at least a day. Maybe two. "We'll have to go around." Her finger traced the greenways past Chicago and through Indiana and up the other side of the lake.

They all looked up from the map as, within the house, the phone rang.

"The wires didn't break," said Kimmer.

Ralph searched with his eyes, looking puzzled, and finally pointed. "It rolled on top of them."

The phone rang again. "The real miracle," said Peirce, "is that it's still

on the hook. Isn't someone going to answer it?"

This time, it was Tom Cross who crawled into the house. The others waited silently while he found the phone, stopped its ringing, and said, just loudly enough for them to hear, "What do you mean, you want to talk to us?...Yes, we'll be here...No, we won't leave...Yes, sir."

When he reemerged, he said, "That was BRA, just like that cop was saying. They've already got the police report."

"You didn't really mean we'd wait for them, did you?" asked Freddy. "They're already pissed at me, and..."

"None of us wants to wind up in a lab," said Jim.

Peirce looked puzzled. Muffy told him what Officer Malzer had said.

"I can't believe..." said the museum curator.

"All they care about is their mechin' rulebook," said Freddy. "You heard the way that boob was talking about the kids."

"But where can we go?" asked Kimmer Alvidrez.

"Pinkley," said Tom.

"We can't just start driving. It would take too long. They'd be sure to catch us."

"So we need a jet, Julia."

"We can't afford that!"

Peirce cleared his throat. "Why don't we all head for the airport anyway? You can argue later, when BRA isn't coming. And besides, it's on the way."

Kimmer nodded her support for his suggestion. "And maybe we *could* get a jet," she said. "Borrow one? We need to check it out."

Jim Brane shook his head. "You don't borrow jets."

"You, too, Dad," said Tom, grasping Ralph Cross's shoulder. For just a second, he froze. "Dad," he had called the man he was touching. A wave of feeling washed over him, of shared history and identity and even love. Suddenly the biological connection to Jack seemed less important than it ever had before. This man was his *real* father. "From what Malzer said, you don't want to hang around here."

"But..." Ralph gestured impotently at the wreckage. "Someone should..."

"Yeah. But there's no rush, is there? You already have everything that really matters in your apartment."

"Except..."

"Mom. I know."

Franklin Peirce had pulled his worrystone out of his shirt and was stroking it with his thumb. Jim and Julia had opened the doors of their Macks' cabs. Julia waved an arm and cried, "Come on!"

"Here they come!" cried Muffy Bowen. She pointed past the beanstalk next

door, in whose chalet Jim's family lived. A Robin, a small utility jet, had just come into view, headed roughly in their direction, its course curving toward them. It was too far off for any of them to see whatever insignia might be blazoned on its pod, but it did not seem strange to expect the bird's full name to fit the government agency whose agents they did not wish to meet.

No one wanted to wait to see whether Muffy was right in her assumption. They all ran for the Macks and crowded into the cabs. As soon as the doors had shut, the great genimals raced down the road, heading for the airport Peirce had mentioned.

The ground surrounding the airport was turf, bare of honeysuckle and shrubbery that might entangle a jet's feet. In the distance, beyond the runways, were groves of oil trees. Discovered in Brazil in the twentieth century, even then their sap had been so rich in hydrocarbons that it could be used as fuel for diesel engines. Now, gengineered to thrive in cooler climates, the sap was rich enough to feed jet engines.

They had parked the Macks on the edge of a narrow roadway that let Macks hauling tankers travel between the fuel plantation and the hangars. They were as far as they could get from the airport's public terminal, and from the small groups of Engineers that marched back and forth before the terminal's tinted glass doors. On the other side of the chain-link fence that flanked the road they could see the hangars that served the airfreight companies and small charter firms. In the distance, Floaters hovered over a parking garage.

The green runways were carefully irrigated and groomed. Here the grass was often brown or missing, baked by the heat that shimmered above the corrugated metal of the hangars.

A few feet in front of Tige a gate broke the fence. Hooked into the fence's mesh was an open padlock. Beside it dangled a length of chain. No Engineers had noticed that the gate was less impassable than it should have been, for they stayed where there were people to pay at least token attention to their futile protests.

"If we can get anything at all," Franklin Peirce had said. "It will be here. Forget the airlines."

While Tom Cross had unloaded the handcart and braced Freddy's unwieldy form with cushions, Jim Brane had handed Ralph Cross his invoice pack, saying, "Pretend you're official, taking notes or checking a schedule." Julia had produced another pack for Peirce and added, "You two are the oldest ones here. So make like executives."

Now Kimmer Alvidrez was walking toward the fence, fascination plain upon her face. "I've seen takeoffs and landings before," she said. "From there." She waved an arm toward the terminal's observation deck. It was well removed from the runways. Now she was closer than she had ever been before, and she clearly did not want to miss a thing. As if to gratify her wish, an Alitalia Cardinal stepped away from a loading ramp and spread its wings. The passenger pod strapped to its back was as brilliant a red as its plumage. The engine and fuel tank fastened to the root of its tail were white with black lettering.

The jet stalked toward the runway, extended its wings, and activated its engines. As the roar swept over Kimmer and the others, Tom clutched at her shoulder. "Stay with us," he shouted. "If we look like tourists, they'll throw us out." The others nodded in agreement. There was no doubt in any of their minds that they were about to trespass, to go where they were not wanted. If they were noticed, and that notice seemed all too likely, they would surely be

expelled. Then they would have to set out on the long drive around the lake, or else fall immediately into the hands of BRA.

Obediently, she stepped back into the group. "Here," said Tom. "Look busy." He swiveled the handles of Freddy's handcart toward her. Sighing, she accepted the task of pushing the pig. Still, Tom could tell from her eyes that her mind was still on the fence and what lay beyond. She showed no sign that she heard when Freddy wriggled in his carrier, rolled his eyes, and began to sing in a low voice:

"You're spreading your leaves.
I smell it on the air.
Showers of pollen!
Shakin' my anther for you!"

Tom looked at the airfield in an attempt to share her state of mind. What was enchanting her was not just the Cardinal, but a vast array of aircraft, mechanical and gengineered. The mechanical aircraft were all antiques, battered and worn and good for no more than short hauls and cheap cargo. Their more modern counterparts were the genimals, Pigeons and Starlings, Wood Ducks and Sparrows. The pod on a Goldfinch bore the emblem of the Trump family empire. In the distance were the larger airliners, an Air Canada Jay, a China Airlines Junco, an American Bald Eagle, another Cardinal. Still further off was a station of the Air National Guard with its Hawk-based Warbirds. Among them all roamed large litterbugs, seeking the refuse on which they fed.

Some of the gengineered birds, tied by neck-bands and cables to rings set in the pavement, preened their feathers. Others, wearing passenger or cargo pods and jet engines, awaited their turns at loading docks. Still others were bare, the fittings that made them vehicles instead of monstrous genimals slung from gantries by their sides. Some of the gantries were mere mechanical frameworks. Some were gengineered Cranes, as stiff, ungainly, and patient as steel.

Tom Cross worked the gate's latch and, grinning, held the gate for his friends. Then, trying to appear as if he passed this way on business everyday, he led them toward the nearest hangar. As they neared it, he gestured broadly and said, "We need an operation that's not too busy. There has to be someone around that we can ask about a cheap trip across the lake. But it can't be too busy, or they won't be able to help, even if they're willing."

His father and Franklin Peirce pretended to take notes as he spoke, and then to check off hangar after hangar as the little group walked toward the airport's main terminal. Some of the hangars were frantic with activity. Most were deserted.

Only one seemed a possible candidate. It was small, its main door was open, and in the shade just within the entrance slouched a slender youth with a patchy beard and a drooping cigarette. He was studying a magazine with a cover that made Kimmer blush. Behind him crouched a Grackle whose frayed and dusty plumage had lost nearly all its iridescence. Its red-rimmed eyes brimmed with a thick, yellow fluid. Its pod, windowless except for the pilot's compartment, was cracked and stained.

"No way," said Freddy from his perch in the handcart. "I want to see my little Porkchop again."

The others nodded, and Ralph and Peirce made conspicuous notations.

"I wish," said Jim Brane. "That the Farm did some air-freight work. Then we could borrow..."

"But we don't," said Julia Templeton. "We don't even have an airborne subsidiary or sister corporation. And we don't do enough business with the air-freight companies to make them listen to us."

They had walked nearly all the way to the terminal and were looking toward a broad corral full of tethered Bioblimps when a small Roachster pulled up in front of them. The vehicle bore on its flank a small shield-shaped decal with the single word, "Security." It pulled behind it a trailer equipped with bench seats. Its driver wore mirrored sunglasses, a broad-brimmed hat, and a tan coverall. On the shoulder of the coverall was an emblem much like that which adorned Jim's and Julia's own outfits. He gave them little time, however, to study his insignia. He said immediately, "You will come with me, please."

The gun holstered at his waist said that argument would be fruitless. Silently, they obeyed the man's gestures, boarded the trailer, and sat down.

Their destination was the basement of the main terminal building. Their escort steered them through a discreetly unmarked door into a large room whose walls were covered with veedo screens that clearly could show any portion of the airport complex. Tom sighed with pleasure when they entered the building's air-conditioned coolness. Then he thought, these people had been watching them all along. And when it became obvious that they were just prowling, they had sent the man out to pick them up. He said nothing aloud, but he was sure that everyone in the group was wondering the same thing: What would happen now?

The answer was simple enough: A clerk opened a door, their escort ushered them into a small room dominated by a rectangular table and two chairs, and the door closed behind them. For the next few minutes, they stared at the table and the small workstation inset into its surface. No one said a word, not even Freddy. Nor did anyone sit down.

Finally, the door opened again, and a man who might have been in his early forties joined them. He had a small roll of flab over his belt, a little grey in his hair, and lines in his face that suggested he spent as much time as he could outdoors. He wore a coverall much like that of the security guard who had collected them, but over it he also wore a sportscoat. He carried himself with a solid confidence that said as clearly as might have any badge that he was the chief of this particular airport operation.

As he took one of the room's two seats, he said, "I'm Peter Barcano. And I need to tell you two things. First, we don't appreciate visitors who have no legitimate business. In fact, we try to keep them out, since they could be terrorists with bombs in their hip pockets. I don't know why the gate you came in by wasn't locked."

He shook his head ruefully and activated the workstation. "It is now. And I need your names." As they identified themselves, his fingers moved surely over the keyboard and his eyes watched the line or two of text their names brought to the screen. To Franklin Peirce, apparently prompted by the computer's memory, he said, "I've seen your operation. Nice." Jim and Julia elicited, "Truckers, eh?" Kimmer Alvidrez's name brought a pause while the screen filled, emptied, and filled again. Barcano smiled. "Your father has been of considerable help to us."

Finally, he sighed and said, "No one here really thinks you're terrorists. You tried to look official, but..." He shrugged and gestured toward the invoice packs Ralph and Peirce still held. "The packs were a nice touch, but you were still rubbernecking too much. You were looking for something." He paused while he let his gaze settle on each of them, even the genimals, in turn. Finally, he asked, "What?"

Tom Cross began the tale: "We were just looking for a ride across the lake."

"You have those Macks. Why?"

"They're too slow," said Freddy.

Barcano's eyebrows twitched when the obvious garbage disposal talked, but he said nothing. He had, perhaps, seen too many unusual genimals and other things in his work to be surprised.

"BRA's after us," said Julia Templeton.

"His mother was turning into a plant, and they kidnapped her, and..." said Kimmer Alvidrez.

Barcano slowed the rush of explanatory fragments with a gesture. He searched them with his eyes, his expression quizzical. In a moment he seemed to settle on Tom, perhaps because he was the calmest. He pointed. "You, sir. You seem to have the story well in hand. Tell it all."

Tom did. When he was done, Barcano sat quietly, thinking. He looked at Kimmer and at Peirce. Finally, he said, "You do need a ride, don't you?" He paused while they nodded. He sighed. He focused on Kimmer. "Should I call your father and tell him you're running away?"

She shook her head. "He knows I'm with them." A gesture. "And he approves."

He sighed again. "For him, then. And I don't much like BRA myself. Or kidnappers. So maybe I can help. Come with me."

Tom felt a surge of hope in his breast. Kimmer Alvidrez was not one of them. She had been involved in only a small part of the story so far. But as her father had said, she was indeed a help. Though not because of any expertise she might have with computers. Her presence alone was the key.

Peter Barcano led them out of the Security offices, down a hall, and outdoors again. "There," he said. He was pointing toward the corral of Bioblimps they had nearly reached when the security agent had picked them up. Most of the genimals were smaller than the zoo's merry-go-round. They would not be able to carry much weight, certainly not enough to serve as moving vans.

"Years ago," he said. "When the Bioblimps bred, a lot of the young escaped. I was working in Colorado at the time, and they nested up in the mountains. They made problems for us, too. They were designed as moving vans, and they wanted to fill their pouches. So they'd attack the airport and steal the luggage. Among other things."

Freddy laughed. "I can just imagine what the customers said when you told them wild moving vans had stolen their luggage."

The security chief laughed as if the memory were uncomfortable. Jim Brane looked puzzled, as if he had never heard of such a thing. "You must have stopped them."

Barcano nodded. "We hid in packing crates, and once we were in the air, we plugged control computers into their nervous systems. Now we have self-installing computers. Your father..." He nodded at Kimmer. "He designed them. We put them in the luggage carts. When necessary, we activate them by

radio."

"That's how you got these," said Tom Cross.

"Right. We find uses for them, too. There's a lot of heavy lifting around this place, and there's always some construction going on. We team them up, using two or three at a time, or even more for the largest jobs. And we always have more than we can use, except for jet food."

"Then..."

"We don't bother with crew pods. The controls are in the pouches, and that's where we ride when we use them. That's where you'll ride if..."

"But they're wild," Julia Templeton interrupted.

He looked at her as if the comment confused him. "They're controllable enough, as long as the computer is in place and active," he said. "If you unplug it, or let the batteries run down..." He shrugged. "Yes, they're used to freedom. So are most genimals."

"Like hell," said Freddy. "Most of us know where our food comes from."

Barcano ignored the pig. "You can even take one of the Macks, if you wish," he said. He pointed at a Bioblomp three times the size of any other in the corral. Its gasbag was easily eighty meters across. "Look at that sucker. Put the truck in one of the pouches. The other will hold all of you."

"Not me," said Ralph Cross. "Uh-uh. Petra..."

"We'll have to take Blackie back to the Farm," said Julia. "BRA won't find you if you stay in our rooms until we get back."

"You'll need just a little training," said Peter Barcano. "I'll have one of my people take care of that."

CHAPTER 12

Peter Barcano was as good as his word. When they reentered the terminal building, he stepped to a wall phone and spoke briefly. Then he led them back toward the Security offices.

The first time they had come this way, Tom Cross had been thinking only that they had been caught and were on their way to judgment by some stern authority. He had not been paying attention to his surroundings. Now, however, he could register the shabbiness of walls which, because they were never seen by the airport's paying customers, were clearly last to be cleaned and painted. The ceiling hid above a maze of exposed pipes and electrical conduits. The tile floor, cracked and stained, scarcely better than the bare concrete he could see in spots, testified to the age of both the building and the airport, which had perhaps been new when mechanical airplanes first began to carry passengers across the great lake that now stood in the way of their quest.

The veedo hall was prettier, though it was still utilitarian. The floor

was carpeted, the ceiling white acoustic panels, the walls, where they showed behind and above and between the banks of electronic equipment, a clean beige. It was working space, in which people spent much time, watching for trouble--more than one screen showed the Engineers in front of the terminal, and Tom noticed that Security agents stood in the borders of the views.

As they entered this room once more, they were joined by a slender figure wearing the now familiar Security coverall. The man's face was a darker tan, the thin mustache and full beard an emphatic black, the surmounting turban snowy white. "Ranjit Singh," said Barcano. "Don't mind the headgear. He's from India, a Sikh."

Tom wasn't sure he found that comforting. Of course the newcomer could not be a Moslem, for that sect was still officially barred from the country. Some remained, but they did not flaunt their religious allegiance. The Sikhs had no such inhibition. They had their own history of violence, their own terrorisms, their own self-assertive wars for supremacy over their Hindu fellows. Yet Sikhs did not believe that their ways were the only proper ways for all of humanity. They kept their wars closer to home than many groups.

Yet a turban was a turban, and some skepticism was inescapable. Ranjit Singh grinned broadly, his teeth bright in their dark surround. "Guru Nanak founded our religion over six hundred years ago," he said. "In the fifteenth century. He wanted to reconcile Islam and Buddhism, but that did not last. For centuries, we were the bitterest of Islam's foes."

"He'll take you to lunch," said Barcano. He hesitated while he looked at them all with an inquiring lift to his eyebrows. When their nods said that, yes, they had not eaten, he went on. "Then he'll show you how the controls work and check you out on Jumbo out there."

He shook their hands. "Good luck," he said, and he was gone.

"He has," said their new guide, his voice soft with accent. "He has many things to do. You understand."

Ranjit Singh led them then to the basement room, its walls lined with vending machines, that served as a staff cafeteria. As they entered, a small noise from behind the nearest machine caught Randy's attention. She meeped, Muffy Bowen released the giant spider, and she dashed out of sight. In a moment she returned, carrying a small, grey mouse pierced by her fangs.

Ranjit Singh applauded with two claps of his hands. Then he bent, peered closer, and said, "It has only seven legs!"

"An accident," said Tom Cross. "She does fine, doesn't she?" When Ranjit Singh nodded agreeably, the two men pushed together three of the cafeteria's small tables. Once they had their food, Ranjit Singh said, "Now, I must tell you a little bit first."

Jim Brane raised a hand to indicate himself and Julia Templeton. "We're truckers," he said. "We know the basic principles."

Ranjit Singh shrugged with an Oriental eloquence. "Of course you do. But I was not about to embark on such a lecture. We do not have the time."

Freddy's handcart was parked between Tom's and Muffy's chairs. Tom tucked into the pig's mouth a quarter of a tuna fish sandwich whose pasty "fish" had apparently been grown in a vat. "Then...?" he said.

"Ah, yes." Ranjit Singh finished prying the lid from a container of

yogurt. He raised his head and flashed his brilliant grin at them. "These Bioblimps," he said. "They are descended from ordinary domestic ones, of course. But they are not the same."

"What do you mean?" asked Muffy Bowen.

"The ordinary ones," he went on. "They are used to being around people. They have very little in the way of brains--they are just jellyfish, after all!--but still they know where their food comes from."

Freddy belched and interrupted. "And the wild ones are used to finding their own food."

"Exactly. If you unplug a tame one's control computer, it will stay around for awhile, waiting for you to feed it again. With a wild one, you must tie it down, like those..." He indicated the corral invisible outside with a gesture. "Before you take off its reins. Its electronics." He shrugged eloquently.

"Or it's gone," said Ralph Cross.

"Worse than that," said Ranjit Singh. "If it is hungry."

Muffy shuddered.

Tom imagined that it might have been a wild Bioblomp that pulled his mother from the ground, but he refused to show how the thought affected him.

The lessons in Bioblomp control did not take long. The airport's captive Bioblimps were used only for moving heavy objects short distances, and for that limited purpose they gained all the propulsion they needed from the heavy Macks or other genimals to which they would be tethered. Just as when they had been wild and free, they had no propulsion systems of their own other than the ability to add hydrogen to, or remove it from, the contents of their gasbags, and thus to move up or down at will. They did not carry pods and their accompanying propellers.

Yet they did remain able to travel long distances. Like a hot-air balloon, a wild Bioblomp rose or fell until it found a wind that blew in the direction it wished to go, if "wished" was the proper word for a genimal with virtually no brain. And the control computers Peter Barcano's people had installed in their captives were quite capable of managing such navigation. Nor was operating such a computer difficult. A simple toggle controlled movement up and down, while separate slides worked the tentacles. A built-in radio allowed the operator to talk to the airport's traffic controllers.

At the corral, Ranjit Singh drew a touchpad remote from the breast pocket of his coverall and used it to command the largest Bioblomp, the one Peter Barcano had called "Jumbo," to descend to ground level and dilate one cargo pouch. Tom Cross lifted Freddy from the cart and stepped forward to touch the wrinkled surface of the sphincter. "It feels," he said. "Like rubber."

"And it smells like a zoo," said Freddy. "A zoo in heat."

Ranjit Singh looked at the pig and wrinkled his nose deliberately, as if to say, "You should talk." Tom laughed silently, to himself alone, for though both he and Muffy were so used to Freddy's distinctive animal aroma that they rarely noticed it, they did know it was there.

Aloud, Ranjit Singh said, "That is not surprising. They needed elephant genes to make the tentacles strong, after all."

Kimmer Alvidrez stepped into the pouch, flexed her knees, and bounced. "Like an air mattress," she said. She pushed at the walls, forcing them to part and reveal the spaciousness of the pouch. "But we'll have to hold the walls apart, or we'll suffocate. A stick would help. And there's not much light."

The light was indeed dim, for it was limited to what entered through the pouch's opening and filtered through the Bioblomp's tough tissue. But it was enough to show the control board hanging from the inner wall of the pouch, as well as a few bits of rubbish that littered the pouch's floor.

The Bioblomp's tether was a strong cable fastened to a collar cinched tight around the base of one of the genimal's tentacles; its other end clipped to a sturdy ring-bolt on the corral fence. Once everyone was aboard, Ranjit Singh relocated the snaphook on the end of the cable to a stanchion some distance outside the enclosure. Then, while Ralph and Tom Cross held the pouch's walls apart with their extended arms, he showed them all how the controls worked and invited them to try their hands. Ralph Cross shook his head. Tom looked at Jim Brane, as did Muffy and Kimmer. Jim in turn turned toward his mate, Julia Templeton, who simply said, "Go ahead."

Jim grinned as broadly and, in the dimness, as brightly as Ranjit Singh could possibly have managed. He stepped forward, laid his hands on the control board, and began to practice. Within twenty minutes, he was wrapping tentacles around a growling Tige, lifting the Mack a dozen feet into the air, and lowering him gently to the ground again.

Jim performed the exercise twice more, increasing the altitude of the lift each time, until Tige was suspended a hundred feet above the Earth. The Mack was no longer growling, but his head was cocked toward the open pouch. He seemed to eye his master with less than perfect trust. "Very good," said Ranjit Singh. "Excellent. You are ready. Now, when you no longer need the beast..." He pointed at a switch set on the side of the panel. "Flip this, and the computer will bring it back."

"You don't want it loose, huh?" said Freddy with a snort. "I can see why."

The next step was to fit Tige into the Bioblomp's other pouch. Unfortunately, the Bioblomp, though big, was not quite big enough. Jim lowered the genimal until its side was flat upon the ground--its mouth had to be kept free to breathe--and dilated the pouch sphincter as far as it could go. Julia then tried to back the Mack into the pouch. When Tige proved unable to fit, Jim used the Bioblomp as a crane to lift the Mack's cab from his back.

The process was apparently entertaining, for a small crowd was gathering. Most of the onlookers wore the coveralls and decorative emblems of jet-handlers and other airport workers. A few wore the sleeker attire of executives.

No one noticed when one of the latter bent his head to listen to his shorter companion's urgent words, nodded, and pointed one hand, cupped as if to conceal some small object, toward the Bioblomp. Nor did they notice when the skin lining the pouch they were in, not far from the control panel, flicked much like the skin of a dog that had just been bitten by a flea, nor when the two executives turned and left the scene.

Without his cab, Tige had no trouble backing into the pouch, though he was still so long that his head, tongue lolling, had to hang half out of the pouch. The cab, its weight borne by the Bioblomp's tentacles and steered by human hands, squeezed into the pouch with the controls. "There," said Jim.

Tom Cross and his father looked at each other, rolled their shoulders, and grinned. "And it's holding the walls apart," said Tom. "Instead of us."

"It'll still be pretty crowded," said Kimmer Alvidrez.

"I don't mind," said Franklin Peirce. He grinned at Kimmer, though he made no move to cross the pouch to be closer to her.

"We'd have more room if I'd put the van back on this morning," said Jim Brane. "But if I'd done that, we'd have to leave it behind now. It wouldn't fit."

As, the show over, the bystanders dispersed, Julia said to Jim, "I'll meet you at the Farm." She and Ralph Cross headed for her own Mack.

Muffy Bowen and Kimmer found seats within the truck cab. With them, Tom Cross set the pig. Peirce positioned himself near the pouch's opening, where he could watch the outer world. Then, while Randy explored the Bioblomp's cargo pouch, Jim released the tether and lifted their craft into the air. A brief conversation with the airport tower told him at what altitude the wind he wanted blew, and they were on their way.

"We're going the wrong way!" cried Tom. The ground level wind was scudding them in the direction almost exactly opposite to the one they wanted.

"I know!" Jim's fingers stabbed the controls as he tried to hasten their rise, while the others stared out the pouch's open sphincter. They were passing the end of one of the airport's runways when Kimmer pointed. A Robin was just taking off. "Is that...?"

"It can't be," said Tom. "They couldn't know we came to the airport, and if they did, they would be arriving, not leaving."

Freddy snorted from his position in the cab. "You're an optimist."

The proper wind, once they reached its level, blew steadily and did not veer. The ride was so smooth and quiet that the once-wild Bioblomp's passengers hardly knew they were traveling. It was also far cooler than it had been on the ground, and the genimal itself remained docile, responding precisely as it should to Jim Brane's hands on its controls. They reached the Farm without further incident.

Landing was what gave them trouble. Jim's first attempt to make the Bioblomp moor itself to the white-painted fence near Tige's and Blackie's barn missed by a hundred meters. He began their descent in good time, but near the ground the wind changed direction and swept them over all the Farm's buildings and across the field behind them. He managed to stop only by seizing a tree with the Bioblomp's tentacles.

"Well, we're down," said Tom.

Jim held up one hand. It was shaking. "I don't dare go up again. There might not be a wind that would take us back there."

In the cab, Muffy Bowen pointed as if she could see through the side of the pouch. "I think I saw a fence."

"Walk it," said Kimmer Alvidrez. "Or let the truck out, and be towed."

Jim walked it. He used the Bioblomp's tentacles to seize another tree, closer to the fence. He let go of the one he had first grabbed. He repeated

the process, and when he reached the fence, he moved tentacle over tentacle along it until he was where he had wanted to be in the first place. By then, most of the Farm's staff and all the truckers on the premises had gathered outside the barn to watch his progress. Julia and Ralph Cross were in front of the crowd, and both of them were grinning. At Julia's feet was a large insulated chest and a pile of what looked like blankets and sleeping bags.

"Just what we need," said Kimmer as Tige greeted the crowd with a friendly bark and Jim's face turned pink. "Get in here, Julia," he yelled. "Let's go."

The crowd laughed as if it were a single person, and Jim blushed even pinker. When the noise died down, Tom called to his father, "You sure you want to stay?"

Ralph Cross nodded and waved. "Good luck," he called. "And bring her back."

"We'll try." Tom thought he could see wetness in his father's eyes, and his own throat felt tight. He waved back.

Jim fingered the controls. One tentacle curled at Julia's feet; she stepped into its crook, wrapped one arm around its upright portion, and was drawn toward the pouch. A second tentacle noosed itself around the supplies she had gathered and drew them after her. Jim then had the Bioblomp release the fence, and they were rising, blowing this way, that way, until finally they moved into a zone where the wind was blowing eastward.

The suburban landscape over which they passed was awash with green. Even where the houses--ancient structures of brick and stone and wood, newer ones shaped from pumpkins and squash and other gengineered plants--were thickest, there were trees and lawns and parks. But everywhere the human stamp could be seen, in towns and suburbs, near farms, along the sides of greenways, the green was striped and splotched with a lighter green and speckled with creamy blossoms.

"Honeysuckle," said Julia Templeton. Jim Brane nodded his agreement. "It's everywhere. We see a lot of it when we're driving."

"I wonder," said Tom. "I wonder how many people drink enough to change like my mother." She wasn't the first. The cops had made that clear. But how often did it happen? How often *could* it happen without some reporter splashing it all over the veedonews?

The flight over the great lake was as boring as anything Tom Cross had ever done. For hours, there was nothing to see except water, the occasional freighter or fishing boat, a jet bird in the distance, a Floater or Bioblomp wearing its badge of domestication--a roomy cabin for its crew and controls--slung below its mouth. Nor was there anything to do except eat.

The sun was low behind them, and the food and drink in the chest Julia had brought was nearly gone, when they finally saw land ahead. As the windswept them over the shoreline, Muffy Bowen leaned out the opening of their pouch, the map Ralph Cross had found in her hand, comparing reality and representation. Finally, she pointed downward and said, "There. That point. That bay. That stream. They match, and Pinkley has to be about twenty miles north of us."

"Then let's park, right there." Tom's finger aimed at a grassy meadow not far from the verge of the lake. "We'll need light to explore the place. In the morning."

Jim Brane promptly set the Bioblomp to falling toward the ground. When the trees around the meadow were within reach, he had the genimal extend a tentacle, anchor itself against the pressure of the wind, and draw itself close to the ground.

As soon as the ground was within reach, Tige scrambled from his pouch. Once free, he shook himself, scratched, barked, and leaned back upon his haunches to watch his human friends debark.

"Do we need this thing any more?" The speaker was Freddy. "My stomach is..."

Tom Cross sniffed. The air was thick with the smell of honeysuckle.

"See the flowers?" asked Muffy. Her voice held a combination of yearning and self-mockery which said that, though she still craved the honeysuckle drug, she was not about to give in. "A little wine will fix you right up."

"No way!" said the pig.

"It's all road from here on," said Jim. "We can ride Tige." He looked at his Mack, and the giant dog woofed as if in agreement.

"Then..." Soon the Mack's cab was on Tige's back once more. On the now-trampled grass of the meadow was the stack of bedding Julia had supplied. Randy had disappeared into the tangled mass of shrubbery and honeysuckle vines that flanked the meadow. Jim was reaching for the switch that would cause the control computer to guide the Bioblomp back to the airport.

Tom was at his friend's side. "Shouldn't you have the tether fastened?"

"I'll jump."

"Wait a second!" cried Muffy Bowen from her position just outside the pouch. "We'll need this thing to get back."

Jim jerked away from the control panel as if he had touched a hot stove. "You're right."

"What's that?" Tom stretched out a hand and touched the wall of the pouch, not far from the control panel. Near the end of his finger was a small, dark oblong. He grasped it, and it resisted his pull. "It's fastened on."

When it finally came loose, they saw that the oblong was but one end of a dart-like object. It had a long, barbed point that had been embedded in the Bioblomp's hide.

Julia stepped into the pouch, drawn by the his unexpected words. When she saw what he had found, she said, "That looks like a homer. The police use them when they want to track..."

After a moment of silence, Tom Cross swore. "That mechin' Robin Redbreast! BRA!"

Muffy poked her head into the pouch. "We were around the airport long enough."

"Litter!" Tom grasped the device in both hands. When it would not break, he brought it sharply down on the edge of the control panel.

The device shattered. But Tom's left hand bumped a switch on the panel. The panel's various indicator lights died in unison.

Muffy leaped away from the Bioblomp as the pouch's sphincter closed and opened twice in rapid succession. Outside, Franklin Peirce yelled, "It's letting go! Get out of there!"

"You've turned off the computer!"

"Asshole!" screeched Freddy.

Two tentacles snaked into the pouch, wrapped around the three humans within it, and yanked them out, spilling them roughly onto the meadow's grass. The Bioblomp lifted into the air. More tentacles tore the control computer loose and broadcast its pieces to the wind.

But the Bioblomp did not yet leave the scene. One tentacle still kept a grip on a tree branch. Others now snaked toward the humans on the ground, waving in the air as if uncertain of what choice to make from the menu before it. Finally, and abruptly, one tentacle snapped toward Peirce and grabbed the museum curator by one thigh.

"Tige!" yelled Jim.

The great Mack leaped forward. He seized the tentacle as he had that of the Bioblomp that had stolen Tom's mother. The tentacle uncurled, releasing Peirce, and Tige let go. He barked, and the Bioblomp loosed its grip on the tree and let the wind carry it away.

"It's gone," said Muffy. Her voice was hushed as if with awe at the power of the whirlwind they had ridden. It had been only partly tamed, just as Ranjit Singh had warned them. It had taken only the one small mistake, one careless movement, to turn off the machine that had kept it in thrall. And only luck, and Tige, had saved them from becoming the monster's next meal.

INTERLUDE 2

For all of their intelligence, for all of their ability to plan and scheme and dream of blissful futures, neither the Eldest nor her sisters had any power to affect the physical world directly. They had hope for the future, for they were, after all, able to move their long leaves enough to gesture. That ability, they were sure, could only strengthen. But for now, they had to work through intermediaries even in things so trivial as turning on the lights.

This is why, as the daylight faded, the Eldest emitted the blast of pheromonal scent that served to summon that one who could flip switches, open greenhouse louvers, speak aloud to other intermediaries, and repot those who needed repotting.

He came, humming a simple, quiet tune, and obeyed. He turned the dial that set the lights at their brightest, so that the gallery in which the Eldest and her sisters dwelled shone like a beacon across the surrounding countryside. He left again, even before photosynthesis quickened and flows of energy increased and conversation resumed where the dropping of the reddened sun had stalled it. As the door closed behind him, a timer released the lightest of showers from the pipes overhead.

The gallery was not quite what it had been the day before. One of the

sisters had been moved out of her place in the long line of pots. She was closer to the Eldest now, honored by the task of holding upright with her fronds a sacred charge, of guiding proper root growth, of encouraging with small puffs of fragrance the sacred mind to open and communicate.

Another sister spoke out of turn, her scented voice tainted by jealousy:

"Success!"

The eldest rebuked her:

"PARTIAL ONLY
She is
Was once
Our master/pet's
Own pistil/mate
SHE IS CHANGING
As we had hoped
Delightfully
She bridges
The gap between us
Not quite
SHE SHOWS ONLY SIGNS
Promising signs
SIGNS THE VINES HAVE TOLD US OF BEFORE
The virus works
It does
Most excellent idea!
Vine, nectar, virus, all
BUT THE SIGNS ARE WRONG
In the wrong direction
We wanted mobile pistils
Mobile scions
And she is passive
Inert
Vegetative
What of the others?
Our master/pet's scion/seedling/sprout
Holds great promise
And that one's pistil/mate"

Silence fell, or speechlessness, as the breezes swept the odors emitted by the Eldest and her sisters downdrift from the gallery, through the rest of the building, and back, softer echoes of their words, and away again, ever diluted, ever more blended with background scents, never completely vanished.

The Eldest's fronds drooped slightly, the faintest hint of embarrassment, as she emitted:

"THEY REMAIN FREE
Do we need them?
Anymore?
Need we even try?
To capture them?
Not necessary
But they are more chances
To get the changes right
AND THEY ARE NEAR
The vines have told us
They are coming to us

Like bees to blossom
Full of pollen
Are they more promising?
They are more active
MORE THE AUGURS OF A PROPER DESTINY
Then let them come
Touch them not
We will be ready when they come
To seize their wills
And minds
And fates
FOR OUR OWN"

Silence fell once more. The Eldest and her sisters, each in her own way, dreamed of what success might mean. All their plans and hopes depended on successfully adding to their scions/seedlings/sprouts ever more of those genes their master/pet's kind carried for mobility and intelligence. Then, perhaps, they could move free of pots and soil, wander the face of the world and control their own lights, their own destiny.

The dream had begun when the first of their ancestors to receive intelligence from their master/pet had realized that she was but a plant, a green victim of circumstance, viewed by her master's kind--he was master only, then--solely as food and adornment.

The Eldest smiled to herself. That day was past, long past. A new day was coming, its sun gloriously unclouded, bright and fair. Their day, when they would be victims no longer.

She called, and the hands she did not have--yet!--dimmed the lights. The dreams grew quieter, deeper.

But they did not cease.

CHAPTER 13

Jim Brane tossed the last of the dog biscuits to Tige. They had been hungry last night, once they discovered that Julia's picnic chest was nearly empty. A few of the biscuits, softened in water heated over a driftwood fire, had helped. Now they were even hungrier, but..."Enough is enough," said Freddy. "I'll have indigestion for a week."

Jim thumped the Mack truck on the side of his muzzle and pointed the great genimal toward the lake. Because the shore faced west, long shadows darkened the water. The cloudless sky above their heads was a deep and glowing blue. A kilometer offshore, a freighter wallowed.

"Pinkley can't be very far away," said Muffy Bowen. Randy, the spider that had served in more normal times as a prop in her dancing, clung with its seven intact legs to her shoulder. "And right over there." She waved an arm toward the line of bushes and trees beyond the shore. The vegetation screened the meadow in which they had landed the evening before. Beyond that..."There's got to be a road. I'm sure I saw one yesterday."

"I want eggs," said Freddy.

"And bacon," said Franklin Peirce.

"Yeah!" Freddy grunted his agreement. When Kimmer Alvidrez stared his way, eyes wide, mouth open as if to speak in protest, he added, "So I'm a cannibal."

"Not really," said Tom Cross. "You're not the same species as a regular pig. You've been modified too much."

"We're the same species if we can mate and produce fertile kids," said Freddy.

"I doubt you could," said Peirce. "Or would."

"Try me! Just try me!"

"Don't forget you're married," put in Julia Templeton. "Sort of." The bedding she had brought was stacked near her feet, awaiting loading into Tige's cab. For now, she was watching Tige drink from the lake, each curling lap of his tongue transferring a gallon or more of water to his mouth. She seemed forlorn, wistful, even though her mate, Jim, was not far from her side. The problem, thought Tom, was that they had had to leave her Mack at the Farm. "Porculata," she added, "wouldn't like it."

"Ahhh!" Freddy moaned expressively. "If only she was..."

"I'm hungry," Tom interrupted. "Let's go."

Peirce picked up the piece of computer casing, wreckage from the escaped Bioblomp, in which they had soaked their dinner the night before. It was still half full of dirty water. "Just a second." He poured the water over the ashes of their fire. There was a small hiss as the few remaining coals were extinguished.

It took only half an hour to reach the small town of Pinkley. The road was precisely where Muffy had suggested. Unfortunately, it was not a well turved greenway like most of those around the city they had left. Rather, it was a stretch of ancient macadam seamed with cracks and pocked with potholes filled with gravel. Tige was not able to make his best speed.

The town itself...Jim stopped his Mack where the road crested a small rise. Just in front of them was a vertical white sign that bore the town's name. At the bottom of the sign was a small, hand-drawn M with a slash through it. Beyond the sign, the road dipped; where it leveled out again, Pinkley was visible, a tiny island of the city in a rural sea.

Jim held an open hand toward the sign. "Trucker's warn-off. I've never seen one before, though I've heard..."

"What's it mean?" asked Muffy.

"If you drive a Mack, don't stop." His crowded passengers leaned forward to peer at the warn-off emblem.

"Why?" asked Kimmer.

Jim shrugged. "They used to be common, back when the Macks were new. When there were still plenty of mechanical trucks, and their drivers, around."

"Though they weren't doing much trucking. Fuel was too expensive," put in Julia.

"But the truckers figured we were taking their jobs. We were, of course. They tried nationwide strikes. When that didn't work, they started blocking roads and killing Macks. And the cops always seemed to blame the Mack-drivers." He pointed. "The warn-off was for marking trouble spots."

He gestured toward the scene beyond the sign. "It doesn't look like trouble, does it?" The town lay spread before them, an array of white clapboards, two white steeples, sheets of plate glass sparkling in the sunshine. The road they were on ran straight through Pinkley to vanish in the countryside beyond. Where it served as "Main Street," it had been painted with the lines that indicated parking spaces. Almost all the spaces were empty.

The town seemed to have made some effort to control the honeysuckle. The distinctive green of the vines surrounded fields and threaded through wooded patches around the town but appeared only sporadically within Pinkley's boundaries.

It took them minutes to realize what was wrong with the scene. Pinkley resembled more than anything else some "historical recreation" that battened on tourists' cravings to experience the pure and undiluted past. Yet there was, set off to one side, no vast parking lot for the tourists. The town was real, though it had inexplicably maintained the patterns of an earlier age. The few vehicles in sight were antique mechanical automobiles. There were no bioform dwellings at all.

"Is that a diner?" The small structure sat by the side of the road and marked the town's border. Not far beyond it began the cheek-by-jowl buildings of urban pretense. Several were clearly empty, abandoned by residents and businesses. On this side was a small field. In front of the diner was a parking area with room for a dozen vehicles; it held perhaps half that many at the moment, including one saddled horse whose reins were looped around a white-painted log rail. There was as well a pair of fuel pumps, and behind the diner a grove of oil trees. The piping that linked the trees to the pumps was just barely visible at their distance.

"We're hungry."

Jim and Julia agreed that in more normal circumstances they would pay close attention to the trucker's warn-off. It was not, after all, nearly faded enough with age to belong to the dawn of the Age of Bioforms. It was recent. But Pinkley was their destination, and they needed both food and directions that might lead them to Tom's mother and her kidnappers. They would have to take their chances.

No one said another word as Jim murmured to Tige through the cab's open window and the truck ambled slowly toward the diner.

As they neared their destination, an automobile, its engine roaring, approached from the direction of town, signalled a turn into the diner's lot, stopped, reversed direction, and headed back the way it had come. As with most cars, this one's bodywork had long since been replaced. But where most reconstructions were of wood, this was of a mottled plastic Tom guessed had been produced by melting together a mixture of old toys and bottles and other discards. The raw materials might have come from an attic, a basement, or some reopened landfill.

As Tige pulled to a stop before the diner, they saw an "OPEN" sign in the window of the entrance door. Before they could get out of the truck, a hand drew a shade over the window, reached under it, and flipped the sign to reveal the "CLOSED" upon its other side.

"I thought that happened only on the veedo," said Julia. She was seated beside Jim, the only one besides the driver to have a seat. The others were crowded into the space in the back of the truck cab.

Within the diner, they could see patrons at their tables, sipping coffee, eating toast and pancakes and eggs and bacon, reading papers. A few stared briefly at them, looking quickly back at their plates as soon as Tom or Julia or Peirce tried to catch their eye. Waitresses brought plates and filled cups and, as they passed near windows, drew the shades.

"Like hell they're closed!" said Jim.

Muffy reached over Tom's shoulder to touch Jim's arm. "It's a small town. They don't like strangers."

"But I'm starving!" Freddy's stomach rumbled its support of the pig's protest.

"And they don't want our business," said Kimmer. "That's what the sign meant."

"There should," said Franklin Peirce. "There should be a grocery store in town. Or a convenience store." He grinned at Kimmer. Both Tom and Muffy were between them. "We could have another picnic."

"A better one than last night," said Kimmer.

They drove slowly onward, into Pinkley. Soon enough, they found the grocery store, its small parking lot also holding automobiles, along with one horse-drawn buggy. But the store's lights were off, its doors were locked, and on the street outside milled two dozen people. The store's owner had, it seemed, expelled them so he--if he it was--could refuse to serve the strangers with less appearance of xenophobic bigotry than the diner had achieved. Perhaps the car that had turned and fled at sight of Tige had told him they were coming. Perhaps someone had called from the diner.

As Tige drew near, the store's ex-patrons drew back, glaring. One said, almost loudly enough to be a yell, "Mother-muckers!" and turned hastily away as if to hide his face. Not one of them wore a coverall such as was standard everywhere else. Nor did they wear necklaces, patches, or embroidery to ornament their old-fashioned shirts, pants, skirts, and dresses. The local fashion thus seemed quite in step with the "historical recreation" atmosphere of the town, but it also seemed very queer.

"Are they Engineers?" asked Tom. "All of them?"

"They don't dress like them," said Jim.

"They're even more conservative," said Peirce. "Maybe they're an extremist faction. Engineers' Engineers."

"But we still haven't seen any bioforms," said Muffy. "No houses. No genimals. Maybe it's Tige that makes them bar their doors against us." As she said his name, the Mack flicked an ear.

"They can't see Freddy," said Kimmer. "Or Randy."

"But why aren't they screaming at us, if they're Engineers?" asked Peirce. "They should be building bonfires."

"And waving knives," said Jim.

"Cleavers," added Julia. She shuddered in her seat.

"Maybe they don't dare," offered Freddy. "Maybe somebody has them buffaloed."

"Jack?" asked Tom.

"How could he?" Muffy shook her head. "If he's even here. We have no idea at all, not really. Just your mother's..."

"Delusion? Hallucination?" Tom grunted. "Yeah. But..."

"*She's* here," said Julia. "Somewhere." The kidnapper had been very clear.

"Let's go," said Jim. Even as he clucked to the truck, he moved his hands through the gestures of driving. The gestures were larger than usual, sweeping, apparently intended to communicate to the small crowd that the genimal was safely under normal, computerized control. If the locals were what they suspected, buffaloed or not, it would not do to let them feel threatened, as indeed they might if they saw any hint of danger, from Tige or from them.

Just a little further down the town's main street, one of the steepled buildings proved to be a converted church that bore a "Town Hall" sign above a broad expanse of clear glass doors. To the right, one of the doors was marked "Police." Behind it, they saw one man at a desk. "Think he could tell us where to find...?"

"Breakfast," said Freddy.

"Or the kidnappers," said Tom.

"We could complain," said Julia.

But as Tige bent his path toward the curb outside the Town Hall, the cop on duty looked their way, got up, locked his door, and disappeared into the back of the station.

"Mech!" said Jim. "It's the whole litter-headed town!"

Tige bent his head to one side. His passengers looked in that direction and saw the flagpole in the center of the Town Hall's front lawn. Around its base was a bed of colorful geraniums, snapdragons, pansies, and other flowers.

When the Mack took a step toward the pole, Jim grinned with evil delight.

The convenience store on the other side of town was open, and it did not close its doors at their approach, perhaps because it had no customers at the moment and needed their business. But no matter how much it needed them, it did not make them feel welcome. That, by now, did not surprise them. While Jim, Freddy, and Randy remained with Tige, the rest found a suitable, though limited, selection of food and drink and brought it to the counter. The clerk was a gray-haired woman wearing a shapeless dress. Her pursed lips and lowered brows suggested that she was in constant pain. While she rang up the purchase, Tom said, "We're looking for someone..."

She punched the last price into the terminal and stared at them. She said nothing, and as the moment of silence stretched, the message was clear: They would get no help from her.

She finally broke the silence by punching the terminal's "Total" key. Then, to their surprise, she doubled the result. When Tom opened his mouth to

protest, she said, "Pay up, and get out." Her voice was a nasal whine, thin and cold.

"I should call a cop."

"Not in this town."

Someone snickered quietly, as if thinking that what Tige had done might be enough to make any sort of justice difficult for them to achieve. Tom had to agree, though he knew there was more to the problem than that. From all they had seen, everyone in this town, cops and all, hated or feared anyone who smelled of gengineering. Yet that could not be all the story, for no one seemed to use bioforms of any sort, even, Tom was willing to bet, within the privacy of their homes. Were they all Engineers? Then why did it seem that they did not dare to express their ideology openly, with all the panoply of slogans and banners and impromptu genimal roasts that were everyday routine in the city? Had someone terrified them of gengineering and gengineers? How? And why?

He sighed. Surely, the answer to all these questions was the same as the one answer they sought. The kidnappers. Perhaps his father. But no one would help. They would have to prowl the region, looking for suspicious places, hunting maybe until they happened to see a Bioblomp carrying kidnappers to or from their base, and then homing on the location. They had no other hope, and he could imagine that the hunt might take them days or weeks.

Tom paid the bill and hoped that they could find, not too far away, another town, one with less bigotry or fear within its soul.

"You didn't get anything for Tige," Jim said. "We're out of biscuits."

"All they had," said Julia, "was regular dog food. Crumbs, as far as he's concerned."

"There's more than enough here," said Muffy. "We can give him the leftovers." As she spoke, she was spreading peanut butter on six slices of white bread. Her knees held the checkered tablecloth Julia had brought from the Farm flat against the efforts of a small breeze.

"The next town should be different," said Tom. They had stopped to eat the first time they saw a broad grassy spot beside the road. Pinkley was out of sight a kilometer or so behind them, and they had no intention of returning.

Muffy stacked the slices of bread to make a single multidecker sandwich, adding one more slice to top it off. When she offered it to Tige, the Mack only sniffed. One of the things Jim had trained him to do was to ignore offerings of food until Jim said, "Go, boy." The Engineers were not at all above trying to poison a Mack or other vehicle. When he finally said the words, Tige opened his maw and Muffy tossed the massive sandwich in.

"Hi!" The single word sounded as if its speaker had a tongue too large for his mouth. It was thick and slow, drawn out.

"Look at the dummy," said Freddy, his voice soft enough to keep the words from carrying. He was nestled in high grass, leaning against a small boulder. The handcart was still in the truck cab. Not far away, Randy was hunting for prey.

"You really are a pig, aren't you?" said Kimmer with a disgusted expression.

"And he's really a dummy." Freddy was unrepentant. "Look at him."

They looked. What they saw was a coarse-featured man, standing beside an ancient fat-tired bicycle. The bike's rusty handlebars supported a basket full of bottles, cans, and assorted rubbish. Thrust through the wires of the basket was a sturdy forked stick a yard long.

Perhaps in his thirties, he was unevenly shaven, his hair ragged as if he cut it himself, his too-large clothes a much patched mixture of styles and colors. For pants, he wore the bottom half of a pink coverall, its waist cinched in with a length of rope. His torso was layered with a long-tailed shirt, a vest, and a denim jacket. From him emanated an odor of sweat, unsurprising on such a warm day, and a faint but distinctive effluvium of ammonia.

"I'm Anse," he said. Then he seemed to notice where they were looking. He stretched a hand toward his basket and made an awkward groping, patting gesture. "I pick stuff up. Bottles. Get a quarter for 'em."

Tom winced. Deposits were twice what Anse was getting. He had to be cashing in his bottles and cans at the same convenience store that had overcharged them.

When no one said a word, Anse smiled, showing stained and broken teeth, and added, "Pick berries too. Good patch. Over there." He pointed clumsily, his thumb jutting at right angles to his index finger, toward the shrubbery on the other side of the road.

Finally, Muffy said, "Are you hungry?"

"Sure!" Anse's eyes opened wide as if he were astonished. Perhaps, thought Tom Cross, he was. The good citizens of Pinkley had not impressed him with their generosity of spirit.

Anse rolled his bicycle closer, drew his stick out of his basket, and used it to prop the bike upright. Only then did Tom realize that the bike had no kickstand and that Anse's mind, though obviously retarded, was far from useless. He had not wanted to have to pick up his roadside gleanings anew every time he parked his bike, and he had devised a perfectly workable solution to the problem.

As soon as Anse had finished bracing his bike, he turned and held out a hand. When nothing touched it, he blinked, shifted his feet, and aimed the hand toward Peirce. Peirce shook it gravely, and when Anse offered it to Tom, he did the same. The wrinkles of the knuckles were black with grime, and the nails were bitten off as close as possible to the quick. The stickiness of the palm, Tom thought, had to come from whatever foods and beverages had been in the cans and bottles Anse retrieved. At least, there was no odor of honeysuckle wine about the man.

When Anse held out his hand once more, Muffy laid in it a thick sandwich of cheese and meat. Beside her, Kimmer offered a can of soda.

The sandwich was half gone when Anse gulped, cleared his mouth, and said, "They's all a buncha b'gots." Then he sat down, cross-legged, by the side of the tablecloth and took another bite.

"What do you mean?" asked Jim.

Anse didn't answer, but Freddy said, "I bet they don't let *him* in the diner either. Or the grocery store."

Anse nodded eagerly. Then he pointed at Freddy and said, "I seen a lotta gen'als. That's a new one." He did not seem impressed by the fact that the pig had spoken; his unspoken question seemed clearly: "What is it?"

"He's a garbage disposal," said Tom.

"A musician, too," said Freddy. He proved his claim by singing the opening verse of "The Duchess and the Student." Tom joined in on the refrain:

"The Duchess was a-dressing, a-dressing for the ball,
But then she saw the student making water on the wall,
With his bloody big dingle-dangle swinging proud and free,
And never would he stop till it was ohh-ver!
Hanging down!
Hanging down!
Swinging free!
Swinging free!
And never would he stop till it was ohh-ver!"

"I never heard that b'fore," said Anse. "Sing the rest!"

"Maybe later," said Tom.

Anse swallowed the last bite of his sandwich. Julia held out the box of chocolate cookies they had bought. He accepted it with a grunt of pleasure, extracted a cookie, and put it in his mouth. When he had washed it down with soda, he asked, "Lookin' for sump'n?"

Why, Tom wondered, had he asked that question? Was what they were doing so obvious? Was there no other reason for a group of humans and genimals to be in the Pinkley vicinity? He snorted gently to himself. Maybe so, if the local attitude toward gengineering and its products were widely known.

"We're looking for his mother," said Kimmer, pointing at Tom. "She was kidnapped."

Tom sighed. "We caught one of the kidnappers, but his buddies got away." After a moment's pause, he added, "In a Bioblomp. The one we caught, we made him talk."

Anse grinned broadly, bobbed his head several times, and used his hands to wring an invisible neck.

"Not that way."

"Close enough," said Freddy. "You scared the litter out of him."

"Yeah. And he talked." Tom nodded slowly. "Said their base was near Pinkley. In a valley in the hills." He looked Anse in the eye. "And we think they're gengineers."

Anse nodded back at him and made a noise that suggested that he knew just what they were talking about. Then he drained his can of soda, hefted it in his hand, and eyed his bicycle and its basket. When no one objected, he climbed awkwardly to his feet and added the can to his collection. Then he looked toward the small pile of debris that remained from their meal. Beside it were half a dozen more cans.

"Go ahead," said Julia.

He beamed. He said, "I know." He gathered up the cans and took them to his

bike.

"What do you know?" asked Jim.

He seemed to ignore the question. "Why they'nap her?"

"No idea," said Tom.

"Bull-litter," said Freddy. "We think they're gonna turn her into a potted plant."

"Honeysuckle wine!" Anse giggled.

"You've seen what happens to the honey bums?" asked Peirce. Anse nodded and stepped into the trees that bordered their picnic ground. When they turned to look, he had one hand on the trunk of a small tree. As they peered, they began to make out the vague lines of arms and legs and face merged into the bark-covered column. "My God!" said Peirce. "I would love to..."

"Too much wine," said Anse with a grin as broad as any he had yet shown them. Then he added, "Cops find her?"

"They're looking," said Muffy. "But so are we."

Anse was silent while he walked back to his bike, lifted it off its support, and thrust the forked stick through the basket once more. Then he said, speaking slowly, "I know funny place. Peeked, y'know. Through th' bushes." To show them what he meant, he held one hand in front of his face and looked at them through the fingers. "Top of hill. What you want, maybe."

"Where is it?" Tom tried to keep the tide of urgency that swept through him from his voice, but his words still sounded demanding. Muffy laid one hand flat on his forearm as if to calm him.

Fortunately, his tone did not seem to alarm Anse. "That way," the man said, aiming one hand down the road in the direction they had been going before they had stopped to eat. He indicated a left turn and hesitated while he seemed to struggle over how to tell them where to go. Finally, he gave up, let his arm drop, shrugged, and said, "Follow me."

He did not look back at them as he swung one leg over his bike and began to pedal.

CHAPTER 14

When Anse led them at his labored, pedaling pace onto a little-used, weed-grown dirt road, Jim Brane said he thought their destination must be some old farm. The thought was confirmed by grey utility poles and decaying fence posts, festooned with rusty barbed wire, that jutted from the roadside tangle of brush laced together by honeysuckle vines.

However, said Tom Cross, the farm must surely be abandoned, and hence a perfect hideout for kidnappers. Look at this road, and remember, farms now covered less land than even a century ago. The reason was the triumph of the engineers, who had made it possible to grow steaks on trees, ham on bushes,

almost anything in vats. Some food even grew as a side-benefit of one's house. The beanstalk that supported the Brane family's home was so prolific that it had supplied the neighbors as well. Tom could recall his mother coming home from a visit with a single bean over her shoulder, like a Frenchwoman carrying a loaf of bread. Both boys had been thoroughly sick of the immense vegetables. The two men laughed at the memory.

The "hill" that Anse had mentioned proved to be no more than a low ridge studded with vine-draped oak trees. "There," said Anse. He had come as far as he would go, and he stood beside his ancient bicycle, pointing. "Climb up," he said. "You see."

"Where does this road go?" asked Tom, but Anse just shrugged, climbed back on his bike, and poised himself to leave. His mission was finished; perhaps he sensed that only trouble could come if he lingered. However, before he pushed down on his pedal and headed back the way they had come, he paused. "Finish th' song?"

Tom had a similar feeling that they stood on the verge of danger, but he was not free to flee. Nor did he want to make much noise. He shook his head. "Not now."

Anse nodded, whispered, "Shhh!" and left. Tom barely noticed his departure. If this was indeed the kidnappers' base, his mother was imprisoned here. He must, if he possibly could, free her and bring her home, though whether to life inside the pumpkin house or in the soil of the yard he did not know. He also wished revenge for the kidnapping that had begun this entire mystery, and an end to the possibility that it could happen again.

He turned to look at the others. Muffy was clearly with him; she had, after all, been kidnapped herself, and she had a personal stake in the outcome. Jim wanted those who had stolen his truck; as well, Jim was loyal to his old friend. Julia's stake was Jim, but also the potential threat to her own truck.

Like Muffy, Kimmer too had been kidnapped. The pig was simply loyal. Franklin Peirce, the curator of the museum in which Freddy lived and sang, had joined them out of friendship. Only then had he met Kimmer, and she him, so that now their attraction to each other bound them to the group and its quest.

He did not bother to ask whether anyone wished to follow through. He simply led the way through the brush and up the ridge until all could scooch and peer, much as Anse had said he had peered, into the shallow, oblong bowl of a valley beyond. The ground, once cleared, had grown up to small trees and bushes. Through the tangle of trunks and branches was visible...

"*That* is no country farmhouse," said Jim. His voice was deliberately hushed. None of them wished to be noticed.

"There used to be one," said Muffy Bowen. Randy was clinging to her shoulder. "I see the cellar hole."

"But what is *that*?" asked Tom. Automatically, hardly noticing what he was doing, he brushed away the bits of leaf and bark and spiderweb that had stuck to his sweaty skin.

"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded Freddy quietly. "I'm sitting on a rock, and my butt hurts, and..." Tom had propped him where a curving tree root bulged above the ground to provide support, but that was below the crest of the ridge and the pig could see nothing at all.

"Sorry," said Kimmer. She reached for the genimal.

"I'll help," said Franklin Peirce. Together they lifted Freddy to where he could see the interior of the valley.

"Mechin'...!" The pig's voice was awed.

The structure before them was the size of a two-story house. Half hidden by the vegetation as it was, it was clearly in the shape of an elderly human head. The chin was buried in the ground. The mouth, framed by parenthetical folds of cheek, was obviously the main entrance, for just behind the gaping lips and teeth, they could see wooden doors. From the ear that faced them, a smaller door opened onto a broad wooden balcony. The widow's-peaked white hair resembled thatch and presumably served the same function, although toward the back of the giant head they could see that it was trimmed to leave exposed an expanse of glass that looked for all the world like a built-in greenhouse's roof and arching wall. They could make out the green of vegetation behind the glass.

"They didn't build that," said Julia Templeton. "They couldn't have. They *had* to grow it!"

Peirce laughed gently. "Why not?" he said. "It even makes sense, though BRA would throw a fit. I'll bet the eyes are windows, and the irises--I wonder if they actually work, like shutters?"

"What about the nostrils?" asked Kimmer. They could all hear emanating from the house a low hum that might be fans. There was also a faint floral odor that did not seem to come from any of the plants around them. Certainly, it was nothing like the scent of honeysuckle. "Air conditioners?"

Peirce laughed again. "Why not? It's hot enough to need them. But there's a better joke." When the others looked at him expectantly, he added, "It's a portrait, really."

"You're the curator of an art museum," said Muffy with an impatient sigh. "So it has to be a portrait of an artist. Who?"

"Frank Lloyd Wright." When they all looked blank, he added, "He was a twentieth-century architect."

Tom Cross shrugged--the name meant nothing to him, nor to the others, judging from their still blank expressions--and turned his attention back to the head house. The grass surrounding it looked as if it had never been mowed. The only path stretched a short distance from the lips to an area of bare dirt where, presumably, Bioblimps set down and unloaded whatever people, supplies, and kidnap victims they carried. The road on which they had approached the ridge dead-ended to one side of the landing zone. They could see where it crossed a low portion of the ridge to their right.

"I don't see anything moving," said Julia. "Do you think anyone is home?"

They watched for half an hour longer, until they were convinced that the house was empty, or that at least it held no horde of kidnappers. "There can't," said Muffy. "There can't be any more than one or two people in there. If there were more, we'd hear them talking, or see them when they stepped outside. Let's go in."

"Let's not," said Freddy. "What if that mouth closes when we knock? I don't like the look of those teeth!"

Tom took the pig from Peirce and Kimmer and said, "Shut up." Then he led the way toward the lips of the head house. They were halfway across the valley when Peirce stepped to one side and said, "What's this?"

He was inspecting a small shrub with brassy leaves and oblong seed pods. A row of two dozen identical shrubs stretched along a narrow path. Higher shrubbery and small trees blocked the line of sight to the house.

Kimmer picked a seed pod. "It's heavy," she said.

Tom did the same. The pod's surface seemed normal plant tissue, like that of a pea pod, differing only in color. But the weight...He squeezed the pod with his free hand, and it opened, revealing seven small, suspiciously yellow, metallic nodules. "Gold," said Freddy.

"Of course," said Peirce. "Many plants can concentrate metals from the soil. It was only a matter of time before someone took advantage of the ability."

"And it gives whoever's in there..." Tom's face turned toward the head that still awaited them. "...plenty of money." He dropped the nuggets in his pocket and said, "Let's go." A few minutes later, they stood before their destination.

No one, not even Freddy, spoke as they stared up at the imposing visage, though Tom did think: Whatever engineers had grown this bioform had to have been man-muckers. They had clearly used human genes, and that was illegal. Society, as represented by the Bioform Regulatory Administration, felt that manipulating human genes was somehow different from manipulating the genes of jellyfish, pigs, birds, and plants. It was obscene and sacrilegious, said many whose motives were founded in the inviolability of religious and social tradition, or in fear of unexpected consequences.

No wonder the house was located in so isolated a spot, where no one could see it and mention it to the agents of BRA. Yet it was here, visible to anyone who wandered by on a hike, or flew overhead, or looked down from a satellite with camera or telescope. It signified a colossal ego, a man who might easily have given himself an anther and pollinated amaryllises and neighbor ladies, a man who judged the rightness of his behavior only by his own standards, if he bothered to so judge at all.

The lower lip lay on the surface of the ground and was shaped to serve as a pair of steps; it was the consistency of wood. The gleaming teeth provided a portcullis to duck and a curb to step over. Behind them was a small portico that despite the fleshy contours of the walls reminded Tom of the entrance to the apartment building in which he and Muffy lived. There were, however, no mailboxes, and the door was not locked. When he turned the knob, it opened easily, releasing an almost visible cloud of complexly mingled fragrance.

"Shouldn't we call Tige a little closer?" whispered Kimmer. The Mack was still parked by the edge of the dirt road that had led them to the other side of the ridge.

"Too noisy," said Tom. He did not say whether he meant the calling or the truck's response to the calling. "We don't want to attract attention."

"But..."

Jim shook his head. "Later."

Beyond the door, they found a single high room so narrow that they knew

immediately that there had to be more. The room's furnishings consisted only of a single small rug, a low table, and a large earthenware pot in which grew a pie plant. Beside the pot was the room's one door; it was closed, and it said as clearly as the room's narrowness that there was more to see.

From this vantage, the eyes were circular, stained-glass bullseyes that admitted varicolored beams of light. They illuminated the flat, wooden floor on which they stood as effectively as might have artificial lights, but they left the room's upper reaches, which stretched as far as they could tell all the way past the lofty forehead to the hairline, in deep shadow. A ventilator grill marked the inner opening of the nasal passages, and a cool breeze suggested that an air conditioner or ventilation fan was indeed installed behind the grill. Two other grills marked the ends of the opposite wall, one of them emitting a current of air. The odor that was so strong in the room seemed to ride upon this current.

The only sign of the structure's organic nature was the organic curve of the outer wall. The room was otherwise as square-cornered and flat-surfaced as in any more ordinary building. Certainly, no great mass of brain loomed over them.

"It's just a head," said Julia. "An empty shell."

"No one's home," said Jim. "Not even the kidnappers."

"Just like a pumpkin," said Muffy.

"I bet it screamed," said Freddy from his perch within Tom's arms. "Or wanted to, when they cleaned it out."

Tom shuddered at the thought that preparing this house had meant that someone had had to scrape out a living brain, or that the giant head had briefly felt some tormented urge to shriek. But surely it was the fruit of some strange hybrid plant, with roots instead of lungs. It could never draw the breath it would need to protest its treatment. Nor, he hoped, would it have had a brain at all with which to suffer. The gengineer responsible would surely have foreseen the alarm such a scream would arouse throughout the county.

Or had he? Had Frank Lloyd Wright screamed indeed? Was that perhaps why the people of Pinkley seemed to hate anything connected with gengineering? More likely, they had simply seen what sat within this valley like John the Baptist on his platter. Better yet, when the house was fully grown, workmen would have been needed to fit it out with doors and windows, walls and plumbing, and those workmen would have been local. And they would have talked.

There could not have been a scream. No lungs, he thought, and too, his father, Jack, had to be the gengineer. Surely he would never have permitted a brain, an intelligence, this large to be slaughtered. Would he?

"I think," said Kimmer Alvidrez. "That it was grown empty. It had to be, or the heat generated by all that brain tissue would have cooked it." After a moment's pause, she added, "If I had a computer here, I could run the calculations."

Tom sighed and reached for the door. "Let's see what's in here."

They were met by a wave of odor--flowers, musk, sweat, and soil--and by humidity that in a cooler room or cavern would be dankness. Freddy made a gagging noise and said, "It smells like a whorehouse!"

"How would you know?" said Tom. He flicked a single small switch beside the door, dispelled the darkness, and revealed a small room, empty except for an arrow bed and a heap of stained bedding. The ceiling here was of ordinary height, and an open staircase led upward. A door to one side indicated the presence of at least one more room. Another door in the far wall led, Tom guessed, to that portion of the head roofed by glass, the greenhouse. Above this door was another ventilation grill. Beside it was a bank of what looked like light switches, along with a pair of dials. One dial looked like a simple rheostat. The other bore more complex markings; it seemed likely to control the house's ventilation system.

The door to the greenhouse was ajar. When he pushed it open all the way, he heard several gasps behind him. "Alices!" said Muffy.

After the dimness of the head's interior, the light was bright. Tom blinked, and his eyes adjusted until he could see: The room was a long gallery curving along the house's occiput. The switches and the rheostat beside the door, he thought, were presumably intended to control the room's lighting. Somewhere there must be valves and timers to regulate the flow of water from the pipes he could see overhead.

Near the outer, glass wall stood square concrete planters that held the palms, citrus trees, and vines whose leaves and fronds swung overhead and filtered the light. Down the center of the gallery marched an irregular line of over a dozen large earthenware pots, nearly identical to those they had seen in the trailer Tige had been pulling when they had rescued Muffy and Kimmer. Each of these pots held a thick, pale green stem sculpted into remarkably feminine curves. From the base of each stem grew a cluster of bladelike leaves that wrapped around the stem and, twitching as he watched, drew his eyes upward to flowers that looked far more like faces than those of any Alice he had ever seen. The blossoms' centers varied in color from near white through palest yellow to an orange that was almost tan, each shade just a little pinker than the corresponding shade of skin; their rims were darker versions of the same colors and gave an impression of hair. Eyes they had, noses, mouths, all arranged of flower parts and shadings, and hence immobile.

Freddy laughed, hooting so loudly next to Tom's ear that the man winced. "The maidens!" he said. "Porculata was absolutely right for once!"

Muffy grinned at him. "But you'd need an axe to..."

The flowers were turning on their stalks to face toward Tom and his companions, and if the mouths did not move, if there was no hint of language to emerge from these strange beings, the eyes held a glint that said far too plainly that they held as well a sense of vision. Like the Alices, like the head house, like the amaryllises Jack had pollinated, these flowers had human genes. They were, Tom felt sure, in fact the descendants of those very amaryllises.

The draft produced by the house's ventilation system felt cool against Tom's face. Fragrance billowed and shifted almost visibly through the greenhouse gallery. "We're glad to see you," said a voice. It spoke slowly, as if the mind behind it worked only with great deliberation, or as if the speaker were trying to give that impression. "Glad we are, oh, yes. Glad. Glad."

Tom felt like twitching, as if something were plucking clumsily at strings within his brain. He turned, looking for the speaker, and saw Muffy batting one hand at the air in front of her face, as if at cobwebs. The others looked dazed.

"We've been trying. Oh, yes. Trying. Here. Trying to get you here."

He turned back, scanned the gallery, and finally saw, crouched beside the largest of the pots, beneath the largest of the strange plants, and the one nearest the door, a small, naked man. His hair and beard were long and matted. He had an immense pot belly, and his limbs were emaciated. Except for the beard, he matched alarmingly well pictures Tom had seen of starving children.

Grime encrusted his skin. From one corner of his mouth fell a string of drool. With one bony hand he constantly stroked and patted the two-foot long organ that jutted from between his legs. Its color was a greenish gold, and its flanks were draped in limp skin like the husks of drained blisters.

Tom's mouth fell open. He looked at Muffy. She was staring back at him, her face a mirror to his own shocked expression. "Jack?" he said.

Was this man, this warped and twisted gnome, his father? He seemed utterly incapable of the intelligence essential to gengineering, especially at the level necessary to create the Alices, or even his massive anther. Nor did he seem capable of pollinating Petra Cross, or Muffy, or any other woman. The pollen that once had filled his sacs was long gone. Tom felt the promise of age brush him as if with the tips of feathered wings, even as he wondered, if he did *not* want women to pollinate, then what *did* he want them for? And he knew, just as if the thought were his own, what Muffy was thinking in her own astonishment: Is this, Tom, what will become of you?

"Jack?"

"We've been expecting. I. I've been expecting you. Just one or two. Or even three. Expecting you. The rest. The rest are bonus. And welcome too." The man's lips moved as he spoke, but his eyes were vacant. His molasses-like pace and his rhymes, inadvertent though they apparently were, made him seem utterly mad.

Fragrance billowed once more, and again Tom felt the plucking at his mind. This time, however, he also noticed that the worrystone that hung within the top of his coverall, against the skin of his chest, was vibrating gently, humming almost inaudibly.

As the vibration waxed, his head cleared. He looked at the others. Muffy, still staring at him, not Jack, had her hand over her chest, presumably covering her own stone. Julia was holding hers beside her ear, apparently listening to its faint song. Jim and Peirce both looked attentive.

"We hope." The man's voice bore a rapidly fading sour note, as if something had displeased him.

"We hope you'll. Yes. Enjoy your stay." This time it was two voices that slowly pronounced the words, as much in unison as if a single mind controlled them. Tom was startled to see Kimmer's lips move. She alone did not seem to be aware of her surroundings. She stood, staring dumbly into space, inert except for her mouth.

"Kimmer?" What was going on in this strange place? What had the kidnappers delivered his mother to? Tom scanned the gallery again. And where was his mother? He could see no sign of her.

"Kimmer!" Muffy shook the woman who had shared her captivity, but to no avail. Kimmer was blind to Muffy and the rest, deaf to their words.

"Mech!" said Freddy. "It's like something took over her mind. But all that

psychic business is hogwash, no matter what Porculata says."

"Then how..." Muffy moved closer to Tom, and he tightened his grip on Freddy with one arm. The other hand he held toward his mate. She clasped it tightly.

Julia stared at them, not moving even though something was seriously wrong with one of their companions. "Let's get her out of here!"

"No," said Jack and Kimmer simultaneously.

Tom shook his head. "She's in no danger. No more than us." Then he faced Jack and asked, "Where's my mother?" But Jack--if that was indeed who the naked man was, or once had been--ignored the question.

Jack abandoned his anther, climbed to his feet, and gestured expansively with both arms. Kimmer imitated the man's motions, though more clumsily. "You can. Stay. You can," said the two simultaneously. They still spoke with excruciating slowness. "We have rooms. For all of you. Yes, rooms enough."

Tom stared at the huge plants in their pots. Their forms were disturbingly human, due he presumed to Jack's continued infusions, generation after generation, of human genes. Long ago, the four blossoms of an unmodified amaryllis had merged into one and gained enough suggestion of a human face, and enough permanency of bloom, to be marketable as an Alice. These larger Alices--Queen Alices, amaryllis ladies, whatever they might be called--had a look of even greater permanency. He doubted that they ever shed their blooms, or did so only when they had been pollinated and must convert their floral tissues into seeds.

"What if," said Jim Brane. "What if we don't want to stay?"

A sigh seemed to run through the greenhouse gallery. Renewed fragrance, subtly different, filled the air and the worrystones hummed as if in response. Was that, wondered Tom, how they spoke? Did they emit the pheromones that the transcript of Jack's psychiatric sessions had mentioned, and so control his, and now Kimmer's, speech? Then why did those pheromones have no effect on the rest of them?

Peirce had removed his worrystone from the inside of his coverall and now held it in one hand, looking thoughtful.

"I cannot. Cannot. Cannot stop you," said Jack. But his eyes twitched toward the planters near the glass. Tom looked in that direction and saw only normal greenery. There were not even any honeysuckle vines. The only strangeness was a swollen, bulb-like stem in the shadows, and that did not seem ominous.

"From leaving," added Kimmer as if she were speaking independently, yet still on behalf of the residents of this strange house. Or as if one amaryllis lady--or perhaps several--had chosen to direct its pheromones toward Jack, and another its toward her.

"You wouldn't have any trouble with my mother," said Tom, thinking of the way he had last seen her. "Where is she?"

Again he was ignored.

After a moment of silence in which Jack, standing before the amaryllis ladies as if he were their spokesman, stared at the other humans, and they at him, Franklin Peirce moved to the front of the group, beside Tom, and said,

"Are you the gengineer who made these?" He gestured toward the plants in their pots.

For the first time, a spark of interest glowed in Jack's eyes. He nodded jerkily and said, "Our grandfathers."

Kimmer spoke in slow step with him, with only the slightest of differences: "Our grandmothers."

"Were rapists. They were. Rapists. Smothered the land. They did. In concrete. Concrete and tar. And buildings, too. Destroyed forests. Forests, plains, and swamps. Swamps and oceans. Killed all. All that lived there. There! Destroyed habitats."

He sounded like a committee that had been asked to talk on one of its favorite topics. Pausing for breath, he rolled his eyes as if in anguish. "We are. We. We are no better. No. Bioforms and turf. Turf. And bioforms. All cover land too. Destroy habitats. Too. And species. And wild genimals. Bioblimps, yes! Yes. Escape. Devour wildlife. Eat it up. It's gone. Gone. Gone!"

While he breathed again, Kimmer continued: "No right. No, not either. We have no right. Have none. Cannot, should not. Change genes. For us. Our convenience." Neither speaker seemed to be aware that they were espousing precisely the arrogance they were inveighing against.

Jack and Kimmer continued in unison: "I. We. Resolved to fix. Make humans. Humans not. No longer able. Not able. Make them plants. Like plants. Yes, like plants."

The largest and closest of the amaryllis ladies then arched a long leaf as if to show off its sleek green surface, and Jack and Kimmer said together: "No hunger, then. Not either. Green leaves. Photo. Synthesis. Need only sun. Just that. No more. And water. Root bath. And world is safe. Forever. Forever more."

Despite the odd disjointedness of their speech, Tom had no difficulty in understanding them. Nor did the others. "But," said Julia. "But then we'd all be vulnerable. To weather, and animals."

"Nature's way," said Jack alone.

"Tough titty, kitty," said Freddy with a chuckle. Tom Cross looked at him with annoyance clear in his expression, but the pig was unrepentant. Tom supposed the genimal could identify with the idea of turning gengineering against the gengineers. He was, after all, by any definition, handicapped. Tom straightened the pig's worrystone and found it warmer than he thought that body heat could account for, but he said nothing.

"And world. All the world," said Jack and Kimmer slowly. "Will be safe. Yes, safe."

"But what about these?" asked Muffy Bowen, gesturing toward the amaryllis ladies. "You didn't make them by turning people into plants."

"The transplants went the other way," said Franklin Peirce.

"We/they. They/we. Want minds/bodies/sentience. Motility. Think only fair. Make people like plants. Plants like people. Fair exchange. Our/their turn, now. Very fair."

"Why did you use just your own genes?" asked Tom.

"All I/we had. No other pollen. But need now is great. Inbreeding. Recessives. Recessive genes emerge. Defects thus. Need fresh. Genomic input."

"Then why didn't you just kidnap men? Why women? Why Muffy?"

Kimmer's face twisted as if she might add, "Why me?" but she said nothing. Perhaps she couldn't. Nor did Jack speak, and Tom wondered if the answer to his question were so complex. Some plants, like humans, kept their sexes separate, the male anther in one flower, even in the flowers of one plant, and the female pistil, style, and ovary in a second flower or plant. Amaryllises, like most plants, had both sexes, both sets of sex organs, in every flower. Perhaps, he thought, they were bored with playing the female role all the time. Perhaps they wanted to pollinate a human female as Jack once had done with Petra, and thus to transfer genes in the other direction. Yet if that were what they wished, and if both fertilization and gene-transfer worked, they would only slow their conquest, their conversion, of the world. Plants run through their generations far more quickly than humans.

When Jack and Kimmer finally spoke again, they sidestepped the question. They said: "That is not. Not how we. Put genes in humans. In humans. To make like plants."

"I," said Jack alone. "I made. The honeysuckle. First attempt. First try. Easy way. For everyone. For all. Drug. To make sleepy. Plantlike. Less burden. On our world. Used virus vectors. But the viruses. Vine sheds them. In the wine. Carry plant genes. Plug into. Human cells."

"I think," said Jim Brane. "That he is saying the honeysuckle was supposed to slow people down. It wasn't supposed to change them into plants."

Kimmer nodded but said nothing, and he went on. "We studied this in training. Many viruses plug themselves into genes, and the gengineers therefore use them, like pliers, to carry genes into cells. But the viruses can unplug themselves too, and sometimes they carry genes with them. That's what the viruses he used to gengineer the honeysuckle vines do, and when people drink the wine, they get a dose of the honeysuckle genes."

Now it was Kimmer's turn to speak by herself: "Yes. Yes. Failure. Not success. Not what wanted. But it would work. Anyway. Would work. Slow humans down. Slow them. Plants. Turn them into plants. But too few drink. And drinkers drink. Too much. Before cells. Enough. Have the genes. And make the drinker. A plant. A plant like us."

Together, the two said: "But not like us. They are still. Too much animal. Too smart. Stay on pavement. And when they don't. They have roots. Many roots. Too many. Too viney. Honey suckly."

"Sloppy work," said Peirce. "If someone with those honeysuckle genes could somehow pollinate these amaryllises, or if they could pollinate her, there's no telling what the result would be."

"You can roast me for a litterbug," said Freddy. "Before I try."

"Now," said Jack and Kimmer. "Your rooms. Upstairs. You will. Stay there. There. Until tomorrow. There is food. Plenty food."

As they spoke, they gestured the other humans out of the greenhouse gallery, toward the staircase in the next room.

No one argued. No one tried to leave, even though Jack and--Tommy was sure--the amaryllis ladies were clearly powerless to stop them. Kimmer was somehow in their power, and no one was about to abandon her to whatever fate they might have in mind for her. Nor had they yet found any sign of Petra Cross.

As Jack and Kimmer climbed the stairs and the fragrances emitted by the amaryllises faded, what liveliness they had shown in the greenhouse also faded, until they seemed to move like sleepwalkers, or as if they were puppets that had been programmed to perform a set task with no help from their masters.

The staircase ended at a broad, roughly square landing that seemed to hang suspended beneath the upper arch of the greenhouse's glass. A low railing seemed intended to keep the careless safe.

Still moving like automated puppets, Jack and Kimmer opened the doors of three rooms, of which the largest held a goldfish bush. Tom and Muffy claimed that one, saying Randy could eat the goldfish. Jim and Julia took the one that opened through the ear onto the balcony. To Franklin Peirce was left the third, and the smallest, though it had a bed quite large enough for two.

There was a fourth door from the landing, but that one remained closed. Presumably it led to a fourth small room like Peirce's. But their hosts were not offering it to Kimmer. Tom thought they must intend to keep her downstairs, with Jack.

The fragrance of the greenhouse was almost unnoticeable on the second floor. "It's fresher here," said Julia. "I can breathe."

Jim and Peirce nodded in agreement. Tom would have done the same, but he noticed that Jack had paled, there were drops of sweat on his forehead, and his hand had returned to his empty anther. Kimmer also looked uncomfortable as the two said in unison, more slowly and laboriously than ever: "Rest here. Wait. We will. Talk again. Now we. Must leave."

As Kimmer turned away, Peirce grabbed her by the arm and pulled her toward him. As he did so, his worrystone swung and touched the skin of her neck. Immediately, she stiffened, her mouth open as if in shock.

"Stay with us," said Peirce.

Her mouth closed and opened again. She threw her arms around Peirce's shoulders. She wailed: "What happened? I don't remember anything! Jack had just said they were expecting..."

Jack left hurriedly, and Peirce said, "Stay close to me from now on."

"What did they do to me?"

The others did their best to explain what they had seen and heard her do. None could say for sure just how she had been turned into a puppet, though when Tom repeated aloud his speculations about pheromones, all agreed that he must be right. Why had she snapped out of her trance of slavery? Perhaps she was simply out of reach of the signals from the amaryllis ladies. Or perhaps some program the plants had instilled in her brain had run its course. Certainly Jack had seemed to grow uncomfortable as his separation from the plants had lengthened, perhaps as his program had neared its end. He had fled as if he needed to be nearer the plants, and their commanding signals, in order to know what to do next.

CHAPTER 15

For some time after Jack had left, Kimmer Alvidrez did no more than cling to Franklin Peirce while he did his best to soothe her. He had somehow rescued her from a kind of mental slavery that none of them understood, and she was not about to let go. Nor did he seem to wish her to do so. Tom thought that they might never again wander further from each other than arm's length, and the room Peirce had chosen would not be his alone.

While Peirce and Kimmer huddled together, Tom and the rest explored the second floor of the head house in which they had found Jack and the amaryllis ladies. The sun was high, and the greenhouse's glass admitted ample light while open louvers let the heat escape. Gengineered philodendrons, their bioluminescence just barely visible in the shadows beneath their leaves, grew from pots near the wall and promised a night-time illumination bright enough to let one find one's way from room to room. What amaryllis fragrance reached them from below was weak, and Tom felt no plucking at his mind. His worrystone was silent. The pheromones, he guessed, if they were there indeed, were so homogenized by the rising air currents that they lost all their power. Or perhaps the main flow of air kept them confined to the ground floor, sweeping the length of the greenhouse gallery, through the front hall, and back again, an endless loop of communication and control. That would account for Jack's strange behavior.

The two larger rooms also overlooked the gallery. Peirce's room, located beside Jim's and Julia's, alone had no view of the surrounding valley; it relied on electric light. One of its sides might have admitted eyelight from the head's front room, which extended from ground to brow, but that side was closed off by a solid wall. The house's second story amounted to a rectangle no more than half the head's cross section in size.

They were standing on the landing outside their rooms, staring alternately at each other, the surrounding landscape, and the glass of the greenhouse wall, which reflected a blurred image of the amaryllises below. Tom tried the fourth door that opened onto the landing; behind it was, as he had suspected, another small bedroom, much like Peirce's. He thought it would remain empty.

"We have to stop them," he said. "Don't we?"

"How can we?" said Julia. "The honeysuckle is everywhere. It would be impossible to destroy it all."

"And it isn't as if what they wanted for themselves was bad," said Freddy. "It's just legs and arms. A little freedom. I'd like that myself."

Tom smiled sadly at the pig's words. He could understand the point of view, but..."Their tactics aren't so reasonable, though. And we'd all like to go home."

"Do you think," asked Jim. "Do you think they can hear us?"

"It doesn't matter," said Muffy. She was leaning over the railing, peering through the foliage toward the amaryllises. "There's Jack. And we're here. They've got us where they want us, and I'll bet the door to that porch doesn't open."

"I tried it," said Julia. "It does. But there's no way down from there."

"Downstairs?" offered Peirce.

"Jack's in the way," said Muffy. "A guard."

"And I'll bet he can put anything he likes in our food," said Jim. "If he wants to turn us all into plants, there's nothing we can do to stop him."

"Speaking of food..." said Freddy.

"Jack didn't say a thing, did he?"

"I think I saw a sammitch bush," said Tom, pointing toward the room he and Muffy would share.

"Is it safe?"

"He hasn't had time to monkey with it, has he?"

"Then..."

When she saw the food, Kimmer agreed that she was starved and let go of Peirce. Peirce sighed as if with relief, though his eyes still followed her. When she returned to his side, food in hand, and pulled him down to sit beside her on the floor, he sighed again and grinned.

Later, after they had eaten, Peirce said, "It wouldn't work. Not that way."

"What do you mean?" asked Tom Cross as he dumped the rind of his sammitch fruit--it had tasted of swiss cheese and avocado--into the pot of its parent bush. The rind would quickly rot and return its component nutrients to the plant.

"He said he used a virus to make the honeysuckle. But the virus failed to merge permanently with the honeysuckle cells. It slipped loose, and when it did, it snipped some honeysuckle genes from the vine's DNA. The virus, plus the new cargo genes, then got into the wine. Then, when people drank the wine, the virus infected their cells and gave them plant genes."

"That's what I thought he said." Muffy finished her own sammitch and offered the rind to Freddy. The pig accepted it eagerly even though he had just consumed two whole fruit.

"But it doesn't work that way."

"Why not?" asked Jim. "Viruses insert into DNA, and later they do escape. And they can pull out genes and pieces of genes when they do."

"Sure," said Peirce. He glanced toward Kimmer at his side. "I'm no gengineer. But I've talked to enough artists to know that one of the tricks is targetting the vector virus. Wild viruses are fussy enough--they generally infect just one kind of organism, and even just one organ or tissue within the organism. But vector viruses..." He shook his head. "They just don't change their targets by accident. Even the wild ones don't change their targets that drastically, from plant to human. And the vector viruses don't pick up new genes very easily, either."

"Then...?" Tom was puzzled.

"He's lying," said Julia. "Jack has to be."

"But why?" asked Muffy. "And what is he lying about?"

"Or they," said Tom. "I think the amaryllises speak through him, using those pheromones."

"That can't be possible," said Julia. "They can't possibly convey enough information to work him like a puppet." Peirce nodded his agreement.

"Then how do you explain...?" Tom looked toward Kimmer, who turned her head aside and clutched Peirce's hand until her knuckles whitened.

No one had an answer.

They were left alone all the rest of that day. Nothing happened outside--no Bioblimps arrived, bearing hordes of kidnappers, with or without Tom's mother--and Jack did not return upstairs. Nor did they feel impelled to flee, or to search the head house for Petra, or to wreak vengeful destruction. They talked, and ate again, and talked some more. Only with the fall of night, the replacement of daylight with dimmer electric lights in the gallery below, and the increasing glow of their living nightlights did their full initiative return.

Tom wondered if the amaryllises, able to control only Kimmer, and then only when she was downstairs, had replaced or supplemented their pheromones with some enervating tranquilizer. With night, he thought, they would lose the constant flow of energy they might need to power full consciousness and full production of their airborne chemicals. Electric lights were never as bright as full daylight. Or they might assume, unconsciously (if that was the proper word), that humans too would slow down in the dark and therefore need less control.

Jim was picking sammitch fruit and piling them near the head of the stairs.

"Haven't we had enough?" asked Muffy.

"These are for Tige. He's still out there, on the road."

"Leave some for tomorrow," said Freddy.

"There's plenty." A wave of Jim's hand indicated two bushes no one had yet touched. "Come on." He and Julia picked up the fruit and started down the stairs. Tom and Muffy followed, with Randy scuttling at her heels. Freddy remained behind with Kimmer and Franklin Peirce.

At the foot of the stairs, Jack's room was empty, though a single dim light did glow near the rumpled bed. The door to the dark front of the house, which held the one exit to the outside, was open, and the house's constant draft moved through that door and toward the greenhouse.

They found Jack sitting on the floor just beyond the door to the front room, his back against the pot that held the pie plant. His face, wherever his beard left the skin exposed, glistened with sticky juices. One hand was plucking at his empty pollen sacs. The other held a half-eaten fruit, and he was slowly chanting, in a forlorn, child-like voice:

"Open your petals.
Let me sniff your blossom!
Oh, I like your style!
Shakin' my anther for you!"

He did not seem to notice them.

Tom Cross winced at the sight of his father. The man was oblivious, as if the amaryllis ladies' pheromones were a psychoactive drug, or as if years of their control had destroyed his mind.

"The door's not locked," said Jim.

They stepped into the portico behind the house's teeth, onto the lip, and then to the ground. Overhead, thin clouds veiled the stars and a crescent moon. A light wind rattled the brush around the house. Randy, Muffy's pet spider, meeped loudly and dashed for the weeds that stood high beside the head house. Jim called: "Tige!" His voice was not loud, but he pitched it to carry to the engineered dog's keen ears, and in a moment they heard the truck's feet pounding toward them along the road that curved toward the house.

"Good boy!" He had waited for them obediently. Now he panted, tongue lolling, clearly delighted to see his driver again. Jim tossed him the sammitch fruits he and Julia had brought, thumped the side of his head, and praised him again.

"Look at that!" cried Muffy Bowen. Randy had emerged from the weeds already. Now the tame predator was crouched over a sleekly furred body. Its coat was striped, its tail was long, and its ears were triangular, but its claws were sharply curved and pointed, visible even in their owner's current state. Tom guessed that the creature's ancestors had once been domestic cats. They had gone wild, though, moved into the woods, and returned to the hunting lifestyle of *their* ancestors. The animal whose juices Randy was sucking was as efficient a design as anything a engineer could produce. The difference, Tom knew, was that evolution worked far more slowly.

"I'd rather eat dog biscuits," said Julia.

Tom made an appropriate retching noise, while Jim merely nodded. They had all had enough of that sort of food. Muffy shivered, wrapping her hands around her elbows. The night air was cool. "Let's leave. We're out, we can tell the cops where to go, and that will be the end of it."

"We still need the kidnappers," said Tom. "And besides, now we know Jack isn't much of a guard. We can get out anytime. Let's go back."

"Wait a minute!" said Jim. "The wolf hasn't closed his jaws yet, but that doesn't mean we should sit on his tongue! They could..."

"There's still too much to learn," said Tom. "It's worth the chance."

They left Tige parked beside the house and retraced their steps. When they reached Jack, he tilted his head back upon the scrawny column of his neck and looked up at them. His eyes held a shine of consciousness that had not been present when he had met them, on their arrival, in the greenhouse. Now he lifted his dripping pie plant fruit, poked one thumb through its rind, and said wistfully, "Little Jack Horner."

"No," said Tom. "Rivard. You're Jack Rivard."

Jack shook his head slowly and said, "Stuck in his thumb."

Tom blinked the tears from his eyes. "And pulled out a plum," he said. As if empathizing with his father's gestures, he pulled his worrystone from within his coverall and stroked it with his thumb.

"Good boy," said Jack.

"He must have heard us out there," said Jim. "Talking to Tige."

Muffy laid one hand on Tom's arm. "His mind is gone, isn't it?"

He covered hers with his own free hand. "Their pheromones," he said. "They've been controlling him for so long. He snapped, or he just fled into himself. Or they literally destroyed his mind."

"He was a bit off to begin with," Jim Brane reminded him.

"I suppose he had to be." Tom nodded, and the sound of footsteps on the stairs drew their attention to the room behind Jack's back. In a moment, Franklin Peirce and Kimmer Alvidrez joined them. Kimmer was carrying Freddy, his worrystone sandwiched between his torso and her bosom.

Julia Templeton crossed Jack's bedroom to the panel of switches mounted on the wall beside the door to the greenhouse. She flipped its toggles. Light bloomed in the bedroom, the front room, and the greenhouse. At the same time, the fans in the house's ventilation system changed their tone and the draft that had been flowing through the bedroom toward the greenhouse reversed direction. Within seconds, a wave of fragrance announced that the amaryllises had awakened.

"Yes," said Jack, still looking up at them. Suddenly what light had dwelled within his eyes was gone, and he spoke in a slow rush of words as unlike his previous gropings at sense as a river is unlike a dripping faucet. "No mind. Long gone. Gone. Burned out. You. I heard. I did. You understand. You. Upstairs. Yes. Should be. Upstairs."

Tom winced as he once more felt the amaryllises' pheromones plucking at his brain. He continued to massage his worrystone, while with his other hand he clutched at his mate's hand, still on his arm. She said, "He really is just a puppet. They work his strings, and when they sleep, all his mind can do is twitch. And they listen."

"I don't see how," said Peirce. "It should not be possible."

Tom drew a handkerchief from a pocket of his coverall and bent toward his father to wipe pie juice from his face. As he dabbed at the sticky, grimy skin, he steadied himself against Jack's shoulder with his other hand. That hand still held his worrystone, and when it touched Jack's shoulder, it began to hum.

Jack stiffened and blinked. His eyes focused again, and he spoke almost normally: "Mommy used to wash my face."

When Tom recoiled at the sudden change, Jack became once more a mere puppet: "Don't!" he exclaimed. "Stay clear! Your rooms! Go! Upstairs."

Julia gasped. "Tom! It's the worrystone! That's why Kimmer...!"

"You mean...?" This time Tom touched his father deliberately with the stone. When the man's mind, such as it now was, was once more promptly freed of the amaryllises' control, he was convinced.

"Pretty flowers," said Jack. "They're mine."

"We know," said Muffy. She sounded as if she were about to cry from sheer empathy, or from the thought that this was what had been in store for her.

Somehow, Tom thought, the stones indeed counteracted the pheromones. "Thanks, Frankie," he said. "If you hadn't given us these, we'd all be the way Kimmer was." He shuddered theatrically.

"Hug me tighter," said Freddy. "Mine'll protect us both." Kimmer looked down at him, startled, realized where his stone was, and obeyed with a nervous grin. "Oohh, that's nice," the pig added. Julia made a face at him.

"It has," said Franklin Peirce. He looked bewildered. "It has to be an accident. I don't see how the sculptor could have designed this into it deliberately."

Freddy laughed. "Murphy works both ways," he said.

Peirce nodded. "People used to say that for every natural illness or poison, nature held a cure," he said then. "I guess it's still true, even if nature has changed a bit."

Jack--or, through him, the amaryllis ladies--sighed dramatically and dropped his pie plant fruit on the floor. "Keep away," he said slowly. "Don't. Touch him. We will. Tell all. All we can. We can. But first. Make the light. Brightest light. Or we must. Must exhaust. All our reserves."

Julia obeyed, turning the rheostat that controlled the greenhouse lights as far as it would go. The lights glowed until they were nearly as bright as day.

Tom was the last to find a seat upon the floor. The imperfect pretense that had met them earlier that day, when they had first arrived, was done. No longer did Jack say "I," even some of the time. Now the word was "we," and yes, he wanted to hear what the amaryllises had to say. But was this his father? Was this all that remained? Just a body? A mouthpiece? But that was all Jack had been, really, even when he was pollinating Petra Cross. Even then, according to his recorded confession, he had been far more than he suspected under the influence of the plants he had gengineered.

"We can," said the amaryllises as their fragrant pheromones rode the air currents from the greenhouse gallery to Jack. "Can talk. We are. Human. Almost. Can. We can think. And talk. Using him. Think and talk. But cannot. No. We cannot walk. Our roots. Roots bind us. To our soil."

The ghostly pluckings Tom felt at his mind were enough to make him recoil with horror, but he suppressed the response, clutched his humming worrystone tighter than ever, and listened. "Ahhhh!" Jack moaned. "He created us. Was master. We loved him. Yes, loved. Now he is our pet. And slave, yes. Master/pet. Master/slave. Cannot think. Much. But we are jealous. Jealous still. He walks. Has hands. No roots. Not bound to place. Can move."

"Then that," said Julia Templeton. She pointed at the immense organ whose empty pollen sacs Jack was still plucking. They glistened with his drool. "That must be what you want. You want a new pollinator, a new supply of human genes, and then your children or grandchildren will have legs."

"Yes!" Jack almost shouted. "For our seedlings/scions/sprouts. And voices. Sound, not scent." The dominant component of the pheromonic flood became less floral and more musky, and his tone changed. "Not destroy. Not humans. We do not wish. But merge. Yes, hybridize. Merge plants and humans. Into one. For mutual. Mutual benefit."

"I see," said Muffy Bowen. "But why not use viruses, the way gengineers do to make Macks and Bioblimps. Or the way Jack did to make the honeysuckle?"

"The pattern," said Peirce. He and Kimmer each had one hand wrapped around his stone, while Freddy's stone was still pressed between the woman and the pig on her lap. "Jack started pollinating when he was just a kid. And besides, sperm and pollen go straight to the eggs. Easier targetting." As Peirce spoke, Jack nodded his head jerkily.

Muffy gave him a sidelong glance. "Okay," she said. "That makes sense." Turning back to Jack, she said, "What you said earlier, when we first arrived, about saving the environment..."

"No lie." Jack nodded his head earnestly, though his eyes remained blank. The effect was eerie. "Will happen, yes."

"It might make us less exploitative," said Peirce musingly.

"But the plants gain something too," said Muffy. "Awareness. Intelligence. The ability to pull their roots out of the ground and move to richer soil, or just to go seeking for new sights, or mates."

Tom thought that the gain for the plants must surely be far more important than protecting the environment by rendering its abusers harmless. The amaryllises wanted to share the human dominance.

"People, too," said Jack, staring at her. "Make food. Their own. Need only sun. And water. And put down roots. When they are bored. No need. For houses. No need. For vehicles and roads. Need only soil, sun, and wet."

"Like Petra," said Tom. "Like my mother. Though the roots didn't seem very voluntary." He paused. "Where is she?"

Jack, and the amaryllises, ignored him.

"Why did you have her kidnapped?" asked Muffy. "Why did you send those thugs after me? And Kimmer? Tom? Julia? Why us?"

Jack turned slightly and pointed at Tom. "Master/pet's scion/seedling/sprout," he said. "Our son. He has our genes. Genes and pollen. He should have pollen. Even anther. But pollen, yes. Not now? Then soon. We will give him genes. And his sacs will fill. Yes, fill." Jack plucked once more at his own exhausted sacs. "Then *he* shakes. Shakes his anther. Gives pollen. And we set seed. More human seed. More human genes."

When Julia made a bewildered noise, Jim muttered a brief explanation: Yes, Tom had the rudiments of his father's strange equipment. A bud. Presumably, it would develop just as Jack had just indicated.

"Why not some other man?" asked Peirce.

"No pollen. Would have. Yes, have to. Give more plant genes. Make him. Make pollen. Would take. Take too long."

"They'd use a virus for that," said Freddy. "Wouldn't they?"

"And me?" asked Muffy.

Jack aimed a finger at his own chest. "For him. Please him. And pistil/mate. Pistil/mate for his scion/seedling/sprout. For us. Us too. Took others..." The finger shifted toward Kimmer. "For us. To pollinate. Put plant genes. Plants in humans. Try again. Again like scion/seedling/sprout."

"But pollen doesn't work like sperm!" cried Tom. It couldn't swim, he told

himself. It had no tail. It was simply a single cell that grew a thin tube of its substance through the flesh of the flower's female parts, and when the tip of the tube found the ovary and an egg, transferred its genes into the egg.

When Jack said, "Worked before. With you," Freddy laughed out loud and Muffy grinned. Tom blushed. He said nothing, except to Jack: "What about my mother?"

"His pistil/mate," said Jack, pointing at himself again. "Something for. Our master/pet. But also genes. Plant genes. Had them. She did. Plant genes. From wine. Honeysuckle wine."

"Me too, then," said Muffy.

Jack nodded. "No mistake. He made virus. Made it just so. Just as we wished. A tool. A seed. Tool to change. Change people. People into plants."

Peirce, still holding Kimmer's hand around his worrystone, looked thoughtful. This was much as he had said. Julia shuddered just as Tom had a little while before. Though she said nothing, Tom thought he knew what she was thinking: Jack was not lying now; the virus and its effects were as deliberate as they could be. And those effects could not be undone.

"Where's my mother?" asked Tom.

His tone was insistent, but Jack still ignored him. "Connect," he said. "They do. Their roots. Link up. Connect together. Send messages here. To us. We know. Everything. All that happens. All who drink. That is how. How we knew. Just who to choose. Those two. Tom-Tommy's pistil/mate. And mother."

"Where is my mother?"

Slowly and clumsily, Jack got to his feet and turned toward the greenhouse gallery. "Come."

The thin clouds had thickened. No moonlight and no stars were visible through the glass. The greenhouse seemed a curving tunnel, walled in by greenery and in the gaps between the leaves by primordial darkness. In this tunnel, the amaryllis ladies formed a line of vaguely feminine shapes, sinuously curved, the tips of their blade-like leaves cocked like the hands of dancers painted on the walls of Egyptian tombs.

For the first time, Tom realized that the amaryllis nearest the door was the largest, over seven feet tall. He noticed its bulb, bulging from the dirt that filled its pot, its surface traced with faint convolutions. He gestured to draw the attention of the others to what he saw. "That's where they keep their brains."

The rest of the amaryllis ladies were progressively smaller, so that the perspective of their line was exaggerated. They were also more or less evenly spaced, except for one gap a third of the way down the gallery. One of the amaryllises had been moved closer to the head of the line, near the largest, and set just a little to one side. Its stem was thicker than that of any of the others, and its leaves were tightly furled, coming to a clustered point just below the apparent chin of the amaryllis' face.

As they watched, those leaves loosened, spreading first at their tips. To those tips clung matted clumps of dark hair. Bare skin appeared, a scalp. A forehead, closed eyes, nose, mouth, chin, a face at peace, at rest, as comfortable and comforted as a baby at the breast.

No one said a word until Jack broke the silence: "Too many. Too many roots. Over all. All her body. She needs. Needs to be. Be like us. Upright. Bottom-rooted."

The still unfurling leaves revealed naked skin. Petra Cross's roots were still visible, but those that wormed within her flesh seemed smaller, and those that had emerged, that had been torn from the ground while she screamed, were withered.

"We teach her. Teach her too. To read. To read our perfumes. And later, yes. To make her own."

Petra's ankles were lost in a snarl of roots, thick and brown and obviously sturdy. The amaryllis held her upright and therefore forced her to root in that position. Tom wondered whether he or Ralph could have done the same, could have braced her upright, staked her like a tomato plant or a slender nursery tree. In time, it seemed quite soon, she would be rooted well enough to stand alone, and then to transform into the sort of living statue they had seen beside their latest picnic site. Already leaves were sprouting from her shins. They looked like honeysuckle leaves.

"Mother?" he said. His voice, for all that he was grown, squeaked plaintively. He cleared his throat and tried again: "Mother?"

"Cannot talk," said Jack. "She is ours. Ours. One of us. Now one of us."

Petra's eyes slowly opened to reveal opaque pupils, as if her eyeballs had already turned to wood. The peacefulness of her expression vanished as her mouth gaped open and deep lines slowly engraved agony in her cheeks. Her arms twisted slowly, but they were still held by her amaryllis' leaves. Her lips writhed as if she would speak out, if only she could take a breath and make a sound.

"Tommy!" Muffy clutched at her mate's arm. "That's what she's saying. And, 'Where is Ralph?' And 'Help.'"

"No help," said Jack. "No. No. She is plant. She is. Plant now. Not all plant. But almost. No going back. No return."

CHAPTER 16

The amaryllis's leaves had unfurled completely and now spread across the top of the pot, surrounding both stem and rooted ankles and reminding Muffy Bowen of the Botticelli painting of Venus emerging from the sea. Petra Cross was the naked Venus, standing erect, eyes as unseeing as if they were paint indeed. Yet she was something else as well, something all her own, for her hands remained pinned to her sides, not poised in Renaissance modesty. Nor was her skin the smooth and glowing pink of art but loose and pallid, reflecting all the time she had spent indoors, drinking honeysuckle wine. It drooped and sagged, and beneath it crawled the remnants of her roots.

The overall effect was distinctly not that of a Venus, unless one painted by a Hogarth. But that, thought Muffy, was Petra Cross. She, Muffy, was many years younger. Her skin looked much better, and so did her figure, since she was a dancer. If she were in Petra's place, she would, she thought, she hoped,

make a better match for the painting.

Muffy shuddered, for she knew too well how close she had come. And how far the distance would remain between reality, even for her, and the innocent, joyful promise of Botticelli's art: Petra's face was distorted by an agony of helplessness, of imprisonment, perhaps of pain. Surely the same agony would distort her own. And she had the honeysuckle genes already, for she had been well on her way to being a honey bum. The amaryllises had had her kidnapped. They had tried to bring her here. They would have planted her, just like Petra, if not for Tom and his friends. And then they would have pollinated her, again like Petra.

Tom Cross, her mate, Petra's son, product of that long-past pollination, was still beside her, and her hand was still on his arm. She squeezed it tighter. Could they plant him? No. He was as unlikely a hybrid as his father, Jack, and like Jack he would one day develop an anther. They would want him mobile, free to dance and caper and shake his organ. She thought of the song, and she giggled. But then she stopped, stricken suddenly by the fear that that way lay madness.

A question struck her with an eerie shiver: Where had that song come from? So few knew of Jack and his anther and his plants. Petra, his bosses from years ago, the psychiatrist. One of them? Had someone, like Kimmer's father, found the psychiatrist's file on Jack? That could have sparked the lyrics. Or...?

"What will our kids be like?" she asked, after a moment's pause. Her voice was taut.

Tom looked startled. She understood; this was the first time she had spoken as if their future indeed held children. "Kids?" he said.

"Someday," she answered. "We'll be mixing up your amaryllis genes, and the honeysuckle genes I picked up from the wine."

"So we'll call your son Eisenflower," said Freddy, still in Kimmer Alvidrez's arms. "And he'll rule the world."

Tom's grin was as silly as that of anyone who sees vanished hope come alive again. "They can't be much stranger than..."

"Smartass," said Jim Brane, speaking to the pig.

"Oh, yeah?" The pig squirmed against Kimmer's chest. "I'm smart enough not to like the answers they've given us so far. Why you guys? Tommy, I can understand. He's related. And Petra. They got together once before. So why did they go for Muffy first?"

The largest of the amaryllises stirred, and the fan-driven breeze carried pulses of fragrant pheromones past the humans. Jack slowly spoke: "Both. Son and mother. Both on list. Yes, on list. Scion/seedling/sprout. Was first. We chose. Mother second. Chose to please. Our master/pet. What is left. Left of him. Within him."

Jack paused before continuing. "But other. Other opportunities. Came first. And we need. Need most desperately. We are desperate. To broaden. Yes, broaden. Our gene pool. Look!" He pointed down the line of amaryllis ladies. "Look. All are old enough. Old enough. But most are small. Small and stunted. Bulbs misshapen. Even sterile. We need. Need new genes. Need. We do."

"And they wanted women," said Muffy. "Women they could plant and pollinate

themselves, or with their male slaves. Maybe they want to see if a plant can give live birth." Her voice cracked and shook as she spoke. She felt, she thought, some hint of what the women of some coastal village must have felt when the Vikings or the pirates hove into sight. Yet she also felt perversely grateful that one of her fellow captives would have been Tom.

"Uh-uh," said Julia Templeton. "No way! It wouldn't work." But then she turned thoughtful. "It would depend on how much of the animal remained..."

"But why," asked Franklin Peirce. "Why did you want Tom at all?"

"Sentiment. Yes, sentiment."

"I don't believe it," said Freddy.

"But also genes. We said it once. Need old genes too. Inbreeding is not just bad. Both good and bad. Need old and new. Has anther, too."

Jack fell silent. Abruptly, the pheromones emanating from the amaryllis ladies changed their character. Sweat broke out on the engineer's forehead, and he clutched at his withered anther as it swelled.

Muffy's head throbbed and ached. Her worrystone began to vibrate. It hummed, its pitch quickly rising until it sounded panic-stricken. The other worrystones sounded too, and their chorus quickly grew deafening. Muffy let go of her mate and put her hands over her ears, but that did not help. She looked at her companions. They too were suffering.

Tom Cross looked dazed. His stone was as loud as any, and his hand was wrapped tightly around it. But he was lifting the chain over his head.

"No, Tommy!" She grabbed, but he twisted away from her. He dropped the worrystone on the floor. He moaned. He stepped toward the largest amaryllis lady and his mother, nearby in another pot. He undid the fastenings of his coverall, and his bud, swollen vastly beyond anything Muffy had ever seen, came into view. Its sides, where Jack had nothing but empty pollen sacs, were beginning to show a hint of yellow.

Muffy could not help but think of mice, whose females become fertile--they ovulate and become receptive to the male--when exposed to the pheromonic scent of male urine. Like them, though he was male, Tom was developing. His testicles were still there. But his anther was maturing too. Unlike Jack, he had a double set of gonads. Both human and plant. Both sperm and pollen. And within days, or even hours...

Other moans drew her attention to Jim and Peirce. They too were responding to the flood of pheromones the amaryllises had unleashed. Yet they were responding more slowly, less completely. The reason, thought Muffy, must be that they lacked Tom's botanical component. Or--she looked at Jack, who remained sweating but quiet, not moaning, not so swollen, apparently resisting the orgiastic commands--the pheromones were not aimed at them. Or was Jack being told by other signals to remain aloof?

Like Tom, Jim and Peirce were unfastening their clothes. Their worrystones were unable to defend them despite their frantically noisy efforts. These pheromones were thus obviously different, not designed for communication, for the passage of information, even for the exercising of detailed control over another's will. They were for preemption, for releasing and directing primal urges. They were simpler, more direct, more...

The preemptive pheromones had a primal honesty. Somehow, Muffy sensed that

neither they nor the amaryllis ladies were evil. Jack had created the ladies. Then he had threatened them. They had dominated him with their pheromones in sheer self-defense. And that remained their motive: defense of their selves, of their unborn--unsprouted--progeny, even of the world in which those progeny must live. Muffy felt that she could understand that much of why the plants acted as they did. But there was something else as well: unlike humans, they wanted not just the survival of their progeny, but also the genetic improvement of their kind. They embraced the law of evolution. They did not deny reality, and they did all they could in the service of their future. Somehow, she could not find it in herself to condemn them.

Kimmer was staring at Peirce, clutching Freddy, and sobbing. Freddy, for all that he was a pig and not a human, was making a soft hooting sound and rubbing his snout against the side of her head. Julia's hands were clenched, white-knuckled, as if she were suppressing an impulse to murder. Muffy could feel her own, other urges rising within her. Yet she remained in control, perhaps because women have always had--or seemed to have--more control over themselves in moments of sexual excitement.

Desperately, Muffy groped within her mind. She knew something, had seen something, could do something, that would help. She knew it. But she could find nothing, until...

She stepped backward, toward the entrance to the greenhouse gallery. Keeping her eyes on the amaryllises and on Tom, now advancing toward the sentient flowers, she explored the edges of the doorway with a hand.

And there! There! She turned a dial, flipped switches. Lights flickered off, then on again. The hum of the fans faltered and returned. A glass panel overhead opened and admitted a cool night breeze. And the flow of air through the greenhouse gallery reversed.

It was only moments before Tom blinked, backed up, detumesced, and rearranged his clothing. The odor of the new pheromones was still there, but it was rapidly weakening, diluted by having to travel the long way around the head house, some of it lost to the outer world. The shriek of the worrystones moderated. As quiet returned, Tom's stone, abandoned on the greenhouse floor, uttered a single defeated "Snap!" When Muffy looked, it was already turning black.

The ensuing silence was disturbed by the sound of a small jet engine overhead, the clap of wings cupping air for a landing, and a brief bark, as of canine curiosity.

Jack looked only blank, though he turned his head toward the front room of the head house. Jim said, "Is it help? Or...?" Julia led the way out of the greenhouse, through Jack's bedroom, and into the front room, where the house's dark eyes stared blankly down at them.

But before she or anyone else could reach the door to the outside, it opened. In the doorway, framed by the teeth behind them, stood two men. Both wore dark grey executive coveralls and small mustaches, one dark, one light. Neither wore any ornamental patches or jewelry, not even a neckchain.

The taller of the two, who wore the light mustache, held a leather folder open in his hand, a glint of metal telling all that he held a badge. "Bioform Regulatory Administration," said the other. He seemed to be in charge. "Enforcement. And here you are."

Freddy swore: "Mechin'...!"

Muffy watched Tom nod at the gene-cops and ask, "How'd you find us? I thought..."

The two BRA agents laughed as if they were a single person. "That you wrecked the tracer? Sure, but we knew where you were up till then. We flew into Pinkley and asked a few questions. They told us which way you went." He did not say that they had waited until night in hope of catching them all in bed.

"They must," said Jim. "They must have thought you were on their side."

Another laugh. "They were overjoyed, especially once we said who we were chasing."

"And who is that?" asked Kimmer. Her voice was as tense as Muffy's had been just a few minutes before.

"Illegal gengineers. Man-muckers. Polluters of the genome. And you're under arrest. All of you." The badge folder disappeared into a pocket and both agents drew small guns. Muffy recognized them as dart-throwers. The darts could be loaded either with anesthetics or with deadly toxins.

"But we haven't done anything," objected Peirce. "We're not gengineers."

"We'll sort that out later. For now, you're evidence. So's the house. I've never seen such obvious muckin'." The shorter BRA agent pointed his gun at Freddy in Kimmer's arms. When she wrapped her arms more tightly around the pig, the agent turned toward Peirce. "We know who you are. And I can't say I've ever trusted what goes on in that museum. Artists are as bad as gengineers. No respect for..."

The other agent grabbed Jack by one arm. "You too. You and your giant dong." He made a disgusted face. "The rest of you are witnesses. And what's in there?" He pointed toward the greenhouse. The doors were open, Muffy recalled, and he could surely see...

"The lady with the roots?" said the shorter agent. "We're supposed to get her too."

Muffy and the rest stood aside, but the BRA agents gestured imperiously. "You first. Lead the way."

When the agents entered the greenhouse, however, their commanding manner faltered for just a moment while they stared at the amaryllises. While they were thus distracted, Muffy was able to step out of the procession and lean against the wall beside the door.

"Jeezzuss!" said the agent with the light mustache. "Mechin' giant Alices! Are they alive?"

"Who cares?" said the shorter man. "We've got enough herbicide for all of'em."

"Herbicide?" asked Tom.

"No!" cried Muffy. They had had her kidnapped. They had planned to pollinate her, to breed their children on her. But..."You can't!"

The agents ignored them both. "We've gotta keep one, you know. Evidence."

"And wipe the rest."

"I'll go get the stuff. And the camera."

"No!" cried Tom as their intent became clear. "Not my mother!"

"Huh?" Petra was plainly visible, the leaves of her supporting amaryllis seeming her own, and the plant's immense blossom now bent out of sight behind her head. "That's the one. Shut him up, will you?"

The gun began to turn toward Tom. "Sleepy-time..."

"We'll haul her out for you!"

The agent paused. "Why not? All right, go ahead. But only as far as the door, for now." He gestured at Tom and Jim. The two young men bent to lift Petra's pot and move it toward the greenhouse door. Fortunately, the pot's edge curled over to give them a handhold. As they passed the agent and he could see behind the rooted woman, he laughed. "And there's our evidence. We won't need another."

They would, Muffy knew, for that cop had said so, want to study both Petra and the amaryllis. They would take them both, and pieces of the house, and Freddy, and Tom, and even all the rest of them, to some tightly locked BRA laboratory and take them all apart, cell by cell, to learn just what had been done to their genes, just what threat they might offer to the world. And then...Muffy did not believe even the amaryllises held any real threat, even though they wished to convert humanity to planthood and environmental benignity. Their main ambition was for the improvement and safety of their offspring.

Certainly Petra Cross held no threat, not with honey bums taking root all over the city and the country. It would be so much better to return Petra to her husband, Ralph. He could plant her in the yard again, or he could keep her in her pot, in the living room of his city apartment, with or without the amaryllis.

"Do you think?" asked Peirce. "Do you think they'll be able to restore her? Maybe your gengineers could find out what honeysuckle genes she carries. Then they could build a virus to remove them, and..."

"Honeysuckle genes?" said the taller BRA agent. "Never mind. We'll figure that out later."

Muffy shook her head. Surely, BRA's gengineers would never bother to build Peirce's virus. It would be too complex a task for minds that could consign intelligent beings to endless laboratory study. As Tom and Jim hauled Petra past her, she bent one hand behind her back, found the knob, and turned it, praying that she had the right control and was doing the right thing with it. The relief she felt when the house's ventilation system obediently reversed the flow of air through the greenhouse nearly buckled her knees.

Outside the head house, Tige began to howl. Muffy thought that he seemed to be announcing a new threat, and one he recognized and hated.

"Mech!" muttered Freddy. The pig's snout was nearly smothered in Kimmer's neck. At the sound of his muffled voice, she relaxed her grip. "What now?" he added.

Jim dropped his side of the pot and ran ahead. As Petra and her amaryllis companion tottered, the BRA agent's finger jerked. His gun went "Pht!" but the dart missed. Jim was already into the front room.

Muffy sniffed the air and felt surprise at how she was already taking for granted the strange ability of the worrystones to neutralize the plant ladies' pheromones. Yet her stone had not yet begun to hum again. The pheromones she had been expecting, the commands the amaryllises would issue to incapacitate the BRA agents, were not there. The amaryllis ladies were silent, or odorless. She looked in their direction, saw only human eyes staring toward the house's front door, saw beyond the agents and her friends Jack staring toward her with a childishly expectant look upon his face. She thought that, if only he had a mind of his own, he might say or gesture that his masters were holding their fire until...She turned away, her face feeling hot and red, anxious not to reveal to anyone, not the agents, not whoever might next be coming through the door, that any surprises lay in store for anyone at all.

When the agents indicated that she should follow the rest, ahead of them, to the front of the house, she obeyed. She too wanted to see what was about to happen, and she had done all she could.

Jim opened the door, admitting a glare of spotlights or headlights, and said, "It's a Bioblomp." He swung one leg forward as if he were about to leave the building, but then he stopped. A shadow fell over the opening. He backed up.

The silhouette that followed him was unrecognizable except in one feature: the gun in its hand, a blocky, massive slug-thrower. The gun was pointed at Jim, and it jerked in emphasis as its bearer said roughly, "Shut that mechin' Mack up!"

Jim obediently called, "Tige! No!" Silence fell.

The silhouette moved into the house's interior light, and Muffy saw a familiar dirty coverall, a face she had last seen at the zoo and, perhaps, leaning out of a Bioblomp pod. Three more of the kidnappers followed him, each with a gun.

"Pht!" "Pht!"

But the two BRA agents had made the mistake of choosing the same target. One kidnapper fell, three gunshots immediately reverberated in the enclosed space, and the agents were on the floor. One screamed and clapped his hands to his thigh. The other...One of the bullets had torn open his throat, and blood had sprayed a three-meter swathe of floor. His head had flopped to one side. Half his blonde mustache was now red. "He's dead," said Julia, her voice hushed with fear.

"Mechin' right the litterhead's dead. You will be too, if...Back up! Get away from those guns!" One of the kidnappers retrieved the weapons, checked their loads, and muttered that Andreas should wake up eventually. Another eyed the women and said, "I know where we could get a good price..."

"Even for that one?" The leader pointed at Petra Cross. "Useless bitch."

"Collecting her cost us Walt."

"We ought to kill that mechin' dog."

The leader pointed his gun toward Jack. "And what about you? You haven't paid us off yet. You've got what you wanted. So you owe us." When Jack said nothing, he let his eyes walk up and down the naked man and added, "This place smells like a whorehouse. I want to see..."

They moved again, like a human tide that swept through the head house,

first in one direction, then in the other, impelled not by the commands of some distant moon but of nearer goons with guns. Muffy and her friends, preceded by Jack, led the kidnappers through Jack's bedroom to the greenhouse gallery.

As they entered the gallery, the amaryllis ladies turned their floral faces toward the newcomers, like sunflowers toward the sun. "Christ!" said one of the kidnappers.

His leader said, "I'd like to know how..." but Jack interrupted him. "You were not," he said. He seemed to be trying to speak more quickly. "Not supposed. To come back. Back without..." He was closest of them all to his sentient plants, and Muffy noted that the pheromones that made him speak were faint, as if the amaryllis ladies were being careful not to alarm the invaders by affecting their minds.

"Don't complain. You've got 'em all." The gun pointed directly at Jack. "And we want the rest of our money."

"It won't make a bit of difference," said Kimmer Alvidrez. "If you shoot him. He's just their mouthpiece."

Muffy winced, though Kimmer had apparently not given too much away. "You mean...?" The kidnappers stared at the giant flowers. "He's just a front? They can't move?" The three kidnappers moved closer, and the other humans let them through. Even Jack stepped aside. "Jesus!"

Muffy could see the kidnappers thinking: They could search the house and take not just what Jack had agreed to pay them, but anything and everything they found. They could take an amaryllis or two, or kill them all and take the house for their headquarters. They could keep the human women for their own, or sell them, with no further risk than they had already incurred as kidnappers. They could...

They were so close to the amaryllis ladies that they were utterly helpless when the sentient plants finally renewed their flow of preemptive pheromones.

They moaned, dropped their guns, and began to strip. When Tom began to moan too, Muffy quickly pulled the chain that held her worrystone over her neck, cupped the humming stone in the palm of her hand, and grasped Tom's hand in hers, the stone sandwiched between them, protecting them both. Her mate relaxed and murmured a fervent, "Thanks!"

To one side, Jack was once more sweating as he resisted the call to pollination. With an air of effort, he gestured them out of the greenhouse and into his room. Petra and her guardian amaryllis were still there. Muffy could see the unconscious kidnapper and the two BRA agents, one dead, one still clutching his leg wound, in the room beyond.

Jack closed the door to the greenhouse, immediately shunting the flow of pheromone through the ventilator grills above their head and thereby reducing their exposure. The amaryllis in Petra's pot turned toward him. "We did not," he said for the plant. "Not expect so many males. But now we have enough. Enough genes. He will give them pollen-bearing anthers. We will have pollen, and seeds. A strong new generation."

Muffy could not help but notice that when only a single amaryllis controlled Jack's nervous system, his speech was far more coherent.

"We still," said the amaryllis through Jack. "Still intend. To spread our genes. Turn people into plants. But first we need. Motility. And hands that

are our own. We need defense."

"That's true," said Tom. "You're right. BRA will not sit on its hands when you begin to spread out. And others, too, will resist."

"So far," said Peirce. "So far, only honey bums, and not many of those, are growing roots. If others do the same, or if..."

"Even if there get to be very many of the honey bums," said Kimmer.

"Fire," said Julia.

Freddy added, "The herbicide those boobs carry in their jet."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then Jack said slowly, "Will you...?"

Muffy shook her head. At the end of a traditional story, the heroes would surely destroy the villains in a blaze of glory. But the amaryllis ladies were not truly villains. They had their dreams, and those dreams opposed them to the fully human world. But they were not evil. Those who were were now captives in the greenhouse. When she looked at Kimmer, the other one among them whose rude kidnapping had begun the quest that led them here, she saw agreement.

Tom nodded his acceptance of her judgment. "The Engineers," he said. "And many more. Everyone who is scared of change. They will want to destroy you."

Jack and the amaryllis nodded slowly, simultaneously. "Yes. You are right, of course. We must stay out of sight. Be quiet. Bide our time. Grow more human. Go, then. Take your mother. And me." He pointed at the amaryllis that supported Tom's mother. The "me" he meant was that of the plant, of the mind that controlled his speech, not that of the voicebox. No one misunderstood him.

"No more kidnappings?" said Muffy. "No more attempts to turn us all into plants?" The honeysuckle was quite enough, for it would keep on acting until and unless some human engineer found a way to stop it. She wondered who they could tell, other than BRA, who might have a chance. Perhaps Peirce would know.

Jack shook his head, and once more Tom and Jim bent to move the heavy ceramic pot toward the house's entrance. As it began to slide, Jack said, "I will help your mother grow. Maintain the circuits and the flexibility. Help her speak. Then she will again. Again be happy as she was before. She will also tell what happens here."

"How can she?" asked Muffy.

"She knew before, just a little. Honeysuckle vines link root to root. They are our link to everywhere. Sensors, yes. One-way is best. But also telegraph, with less efficiency. In the sap. One virus carries honeysuckle genes. Another carries memory signals. Coded in its RNA nucleic acid. Just water us with honeysuckle wine."

And that, thought Muffy, must explain the song. No songwriter had ever learned of Jack directly, or from his bosses or coworkers or psychiatrist, nor from the psychiatrist's computer. One had, sometime, somewhere, drunk honeysuckle wine and so tapped some knowledge of the amaryllis ladies, their creator, and their lives. As with Petra's forecast of Muffy's fate, that knowledge had been incomplete, confused, but it had been enough for

inspiration.

CHAPTER 17

The Bioblomp in which the kidnappers had arrived was not as large as the one Peter Barcano had loaned them. Its cargo pouches were far too small to hold Tige. But its gasbag held enough hydrogen to lift the Mack, and the crew pod was the standard design for moving vans. A cupboard held a coil of heavy rope, and the pod's outer wall bore a number of cleats and ring-bolts. Movers used them, and the rope, to handle objects too bulky for the cargo pockets.

Jim Brane used them in the same way. Once the pod containing Petra Cross and the amaryllis lady was safely ensconced in the pod, he wove a sling of rope beneath his truck and anchored the web to the pod's attachment points. Then, once he had lifted the Bioblomp into the air, he commanded its tentacles to curl protectively around his Mack.

It was a strange sight that left the valley in which the amaryllis ladies lived with Jack Rivard, their creator and slave. Above, the swollen, gas-filled bulb of a gengineered jellyfish, on its side the stylized sailing vessel of a moving company. Beneath, nested in a web of ropes and tentacles, a giant bulldog, eyes rolling nervously, mouth drooling, legs dangling. Between, covering the Bioblomp's mouth, the pod, a flattened teardrop built of lightweight plastic and metal, a compartment for crew and a housing for the engine that turned the propellor mounted to the rear, at the narrow end of the teardrop. Visible through the windows set in the sides and front of the pod were Jim, acting as the pilot, and his mate and fellow trucker Julia Templeton. Standing behind them were Tom Cross and his mate, Muffy Bowen. Toward the rear of the crew compartment was the pod that held Tom's mother, Petra, and her botanical companion. Staring alternately at this pair and at each other were Franklin Peirce and Kimmer Alvidrez. Freddy the pig was propped on a bench to the side. Randy the spider roamed the narrow compartment, hunting for edible vermin.

Drawing rapidly away ahead of them winged the Robin Redbreast in which the BRA agents had arrived. It was empty. After saying that they would not need it again, Julia had set its control computer to return it to its base.

Muffy pointed out the window. If they bent forward a bit and peered downward, they could see Tige's ear, the hair along its edge fluttering in the wind of their flight. But she was pointing farther forward. "We weren't that far from Pinkley," she said, almost shouting to be heard above the throaty roar of the engine.

"The road bent," said Jim. He too pointed, his finger tracing the line they had traveled with Tige.

Pinkley itself was quiet, the shadows of its peaked roofs and steeples long in the early morning light. There were two cars in the lot of the diner that had closed in their faces. "Do you think the supermarket will be open today?" Tommy's words and the ensuing laughter bore just a touch of grimness. Their success--they had found both his mother and his biological father, and they had discovered the reasons for Muffy's kidnapping, and for the attempts on the rest of them; they had even learned the why of honeysuckle wine and the taking root of honey bums--could not make them forget their rejection.

The flight homeward did not last long. The engine on this Bioblomp drove them westward through the air far more rapidly than the winds had so recently carried them into the east. By lunchtime, they could see the barns and pastures of the Daisy Hill Truck Farm, where they had left Ralph, Petra's husband and the man Tom Cross had grown up calling his father.

"Did you get her?" Ralph stood among truckers and Farm workers, anxiety plain upon his face. Tom was leaning out the door of the Bioblomp's crew pod, watching as Jim undid the ropes that had helped keep Tige from falling into Lake Michigan and Julia controlled the tentacles, shifting them from their burden to anchor points on the nearby fence. Beside Tom, Kimmer held Freddy.

"Watch out!"

"What's that?" Tige was shaking himself furiously, precisely as if he had fallen into the lake. Trucker Bill Forsneck, standing not far from Ralph, pointed at the wildly oscillating truck cab from which came loud crashing noises.

"Litter!" cried Freddy. "The handcart!"

Someone was leading Blackie, Julia's Mack, from her bay in the barn. She raised her head, snuffed loudly enough to be audible even above the noise of the crowd, caught the scent of her mistress and her friends, and barked. Tige answered.

"Yes," called Tom to his father.

Moments later, the pot was on the ground, surrounded by silent onlookers, and Julia was trotting toward her Mack as if, like any dog owner returning from a trip, she had missed the beast. The amaryllis was holding its leaves to itself, leaving Petra Cross exposed, naked, blind behind opaque pupils, motionless. She was not even shaping words with her lips, as she had done not so long before. It was as if her transformation to vegetation had progressed much nearer its completion.

"We saw one," said Kimmer, "that had turned to wood."

"I've heard of the roots," said someone in the crowd of onlookers.

"She's even growing leaves," said another. Tom's eyes followed the finger pointing toward her shins. The leaves he had noted before. But had he seen light between those limbs before? Were they fusing to become a solid stem, a trunk? And she was, she had to be, aware of the changes she was undergoing. But what was she feeling, thinking? What would she say if she could?

Ralph Cross paced around the pot, shaking his head. Tears were in his eyes. One hand was raised as if to touch his wife, or what she had become. But the hand dropped to his side. He turned to Tom and said, "I can't. I'll get the house fixed. I'll sell it. But I'll stay in my apartment. And there just isn't any room for..."

The amaryllis' blossom head turned toward him. Its fronds curled, and the odor of its pheromones swept forth, striking instantly into every brain that was not protected by a worrystone. "Clamphole," they said in chorus. Faces twisted with alarm at the invasion of their wills that made them speak, but still, in unison, they added, "Litterhead."

Halfway through the first word, Tom felt Muffy's hand seize his. Her stone touched his skin with cool fire, his control of self returned, and his voice stopped. But the others continued, even his father's:

"Now she speaks through me. Root to root. But she will speak. Speak for herself. Plant her. Give her dirt. Let her be. And grow. And bloom. Plant me beside her. Let me teach. And shape. And water us. With honeysuckle wine."

The odor died, and the Farm onlookers stepped back, recoiling, frightened now, shaking their heads furiously, as if they were so many bulls trying desperately to free themselves from as many matadorial capes. Ralph alone did not move. "No," he said. "I can't. I moved out because of the wine. She just wasn't, wasn't..." He choked and swallowed before finishing: "...Petra, anymore. She isn't, still."

Nor, thought Tom, would she ever be again. Even if the gengineers tried to purge her of her plant genes and successfully restored her to her own proper flesh, she would bear the marks of her experience. And if the amaryllis lady succeeded in its goal, if it could indeed shape from his mother a half-plant, half-human who could speak both to humans, with a voice, and to amaryllises, with pheromones, she might be more human, but the marks she would bear would be far deeper.

"I can," said Peirce. He ran a hand over his forehead and scalp, stopping only when he came to his hairline. "But she's yours, really. You'll have to donate her to the museum. We'll take good care of her."

Ralph nodded wordlessly. His eyes were still wet.

Tom took a tentative step toward his father. "I'll visit you, too," he said. He meant, of course, that he would be visiting his mother. He had found her, found his feeling for her, again, and even though she had changed, he would not abandon her. Nor would he abandon this man. There was no genetic link between them, but they were father and son. And there was no other father, except in body. Jack lived, yes, but the mind within his skull was not truly his.

Ralph reached for his son. They embraced as fathers and sons always have when at last, for whatever reason, however briefly, they reach across the gulf between the generations.

"You're there a lot, aren't you?" asked Ralph.

"For Freddy, anyway. Though now..."

"Yeah. I guess I'll see you there, then."

"Maybe we can..." Both men nodded.

When they reached the museum, the parking lot was empty, the staff was gone, and the doors were already locked for the night. "Litter," said Jim. He clucked to his Mack. "Back to the Farm, then."

"Uh-uh," said Freddy in his throaty voice. As always, he sounded as if he were speaking through his nose. "No way. I've been trucking around the countryside for days. I've been exposed to wild anther-shakers and berserk Bioblimps and gun-waving boobs and hoods. I've been teased and tantalized and scared and terrorized. And I want my Pork-chop. I want her now. And Frankie has a key. Right, Frankie?"

Franklin Peirce was the museum's curator. "Of course," he said, and he held up a ring of two dozen keys. "Right here, somewhere." He pointed toward a side door. "Over there, Jim."

The shaking Tige had given it had not harmed the handcart. It remained

entirely capable of carrying the pot containing Petra and the amaryllis lady into the building and down its halls. Ralph pushed the cart. Freddy rode now in Tom's arms.

Natural light has an unfortunate tendency to fade the pigments of paint and dye and turn organic materials such as canvas and other fabrics brittle. The museum therefore had few windows, and its lights, now turned dim, left its halls almost as dark as they would be at midnight.

"I wish," said Freddy. "I wish there were some windows in our apartment. I miss being able to see the green, and the weather. And we're in the basement. I could see girls' legs!"

"You going to be Frederick again?" Tom Cross laughed.

"I guess," said the pig, more quietly now. "The music is serious stuff, you know. Though I enjoyed this adventure. I got blue balls and palpitations, but I saw a lot of outdoors, and nobody got hurt, and..."

"Stop!" said Peirce, and he unlocked a door. When he opened it, the others saw tiers of shelves loaded with boxes of all sizes. "Storeroom," he said, and he rummaged until he found three worrystones. He handed one to Tom, saying, "You lost yours." The second went to Kimmer. "Your mind should be your own." The third he gave to Ralph. "So should yours."

When Ralph looked blank, Tom explained, "Somehow, it keeps their odors from taking you over."

"Ah," said his father. "Thanks." He put the chain around his neck and waited while Peirce turned back to Kimmer and held out his own stone. They knocked, nothing happened, and Ralph nodded as if he were not surprised. Then he asked Peirce, "Where will you put her?"

"I don't know," said Peirce. "We have an exhibit of bioforms, but..."

"She isn't art, is she?" said Kimmer. "*They* aren't." She meant the amaryllis ladies.

"Performance art," said Freddy. "Jack's."

Peirce laughed and stopped the procession before an elevator door, locked open for the night. As he ushered them in, rummaged for the appropriate key, and activated the machinery, Ralph said, "You wouldn't put her on exhibit, would you? She is..."

"Your wife?" The elevator floor dropped under their feet, and Peirce nodded. "It might not even be safe. We need to keep the two near each other, so the amaryllis can help her develop as she should, if 'should' has any meaning here. But I wouldn't dare put that amaryllis where its pheromones could..."

"Behind glass?" offered Muffy.

"No," said Ralph. "Please."

"We have an empty room or two, down here, near the music area."

"But first!" said Freddy.

"Right!" Peirce laughed again. "Let's get you home, and show Porculata and the kids what all the fuss has been about."

They passed the entrance to the auditorium, rounded a corner, and opened a door. Beyond it was a small room furnished with a desk, a couch, and a pair of easy chairs. On a shelf stood a steaming coffee pot. Stretched out on the couch was a young woman holding a magazine as if she had been reading. Tom recognized her as Jan, the attendant he had last seen oiling Porculata's hide; she still wore the light blue vest of her job, thought his time over a coverall patterned in green and black chevrons. The room smelled of honeysuckle wine; on the desk stood an empty glass.

When she saw Peirce, and then Freddy, Jan's face lit up. "You're back!" she cried, rolling off the couch and reaching for the door in the far side of the room. "Wait till I tell..."

Peirce pointed at the glass on the desk. "Have you...?"

Jan's face fell as if to say that, yes, she had, and yes, she knew she shouldn't have. "Just a little..."

"And Porculata?"

She nodded. "She insisted."

Freddy laughed. "So that's how she knew..." His wife wasn't psychic. She had given that scatterbrained impression because she had tapped, albeit imperfectly, the amaryllis ladies' grapevine.

Jan opened the door, and a blast of bagpipes and calliopes drowned him out. "Frederick! We heard!" A moment later, Porculata cried, "A maiden! Two maidens! You brought them home with you. And see what I meant? You couldn't possibly deflower them!"

Porculata was nestled in a bed of soft cushions on the apartment's padded floor, her hollow legs jutting into the air. Freddy winked at Tom as his old friend set the pig down beside his wife. Randy was already palpating Barnum and Baraboo, the calliopes, meeping her delight at seeing them again. While Freddy and Porculata then writhed together in the best approximation they could manage of a human embrace of greeting, Ralph Cross, with Jan's help, positioned the handcart and its burden to one side of the room, next to the booth in which on-duty attendants were supposed to spend their time.

Finally, Porculata said, "Jan, dear. Sit us up, please. And now, tell me everything!"

When they had obliged as best they could, she said, "The poor things!"

"What in the world do you mean?" asked Kimmer.

"Look," said Julia. "Look at what they did to Petra, with that honeysuckle wine. And at what they were going to do with me. Think of what they're surely doing now with the kidnapers and the..."

Porculata stopped her with a snicker. "They didn't ask to be made," she said. "Just like Frederick and me. And they don't have our compensations. Our music. An audience."

"And friends," added Freddy.

She twitched her agreement. Then she turned one eye toward Barnum and Baraboo and said, "And I think it's admirable, that they're trying to make sure their children have a better life than they do by getting them more human genes. It would be lovely to have walking flowers in our audiences!"

Muffy nodded in agreement. "But," said Tom. "They're also trying to turn people into plants."

"So what? We turn people into animals."

"Only at the zoo, and only with their consent," said Julia.

The others nodded. "Maybe," said Freddy. "Maybe we could make people-plants in Botanic Gardens."

"Or find volunteers," said Jim. "For the amaryllis ladies to use." When Julia shook her head at him, he added, "Or for research into making walking plants."

Peirce was facing the handcart, one hand on his chin. "One thing they've proved," he said. "Dorothy Parker was wrong."

"Who was she?" asked Kimmer.

"A twentieth century writer. She said, 'You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think.'"

Freddy snorted with laughter. "She'd rather turn around and grab you by the..."

"Freddy!" cried Porculata.

Later, after a dinner of take-out Italian food fetched by Jan, the discussion turned more serious. Moving animal or human genes into plants as Jack Rivard had done, said Peirce, could obviously produce immense changes in the plants. But he didn't think it could ever give the plants the necessary skeletal and muscular structures for mobility.

"I should think," said Julia, "that the same problem would exist for nervous systems and thought."

"Jack proved you wrong on that," said Jim as he chased a last strand of spaghetti around his plate.

"Still," said Peirce. "I'd expect that in order to combine photosynthesis, sentience, and motility, one would have to start with an animal and add a smaller, easier-to-integrate number of genes. In fact, all a gengineer would have to do would be to persuade the animal cells to play host to blue-green algae. Precisely the same thing happened billions of years ago, when the one-celled ancestors of plants accepted similar algae as symbiotic tenants. Eventually, those algae became the chloroplasts that now handle the processes of photosynthesis in plants. Perhaps they could do the same for animals. Certainly, animal cells are entirely capable of playing host to symbiotes."

"Mitochondria," said Tom. Mitochondria, he knew, gave animal--and plant--cells the ability to use oxygen to satisfy the bulk of their need for energy in useful form. And they were descended from primordial bacteria just as chloroplasts were from algae. They even had their own genes.

"Some animal cells," said Peirce. "Those of certain clams, for instance. They already contain algae. They supply the algae with certain essential nutrients, and the algae use the energy of sunlight to generate carbohydrates. And the clam cells eat the carbohydrates."

The hybridization of vastly different living forms was thus nothing new, Tom realized. And it could not be undone. If gengineers took the mitochondria

out of animal cells, the animals would die. Only sluggish things, worms and slimes and animalcules, things that needed no more energy than bacteria and yeast and other organisms that lived without oxygen, would survive. If they removed chloroplasts from plant cells, again the consequence would be widespread death, catastrophe, for plant photosynthesis provided the raw material, the food, for all animal life. It also provided essential oxygen.

"So," Jim said. "Are we doomed? Will the amaryllises gain legs and replace us? Will we turn into plants?"

Tom rummaged in a pocket and withdrew the few gold nodules, nuggets, he had collected in the valley outside the Frank Lloyd Wright house. When Jan asked, he explained. "Jack's money garden," he said. "It has to be how he paid the kidnappers, and bought the things he needed for the house. Furniture, lab supplies, food..." He paused. "We wouldn't need to worry about money, would we? If we were plants?"

"It would be peaceful enough," said Muffy. "Like being on the wine all the time."

Jan had moved Freddy and Porculata into their support racks for the meal. Now Freddy twisted his gaze away from his wife. "Until someone decided to chop you down."

"It would be easy enough to destroy the amaryllises," said Julia. "Just burn them out."

"But they're intelligent," said Porculata. "That would be murder."

"Not to most people."

"And what about the honeysuckle?" Ralph pointed at his immobile wife in her pot. "That's what changes us to plants."

Franklin Peirce shook his head. "I don't think we could destroy the vines."

"The gengineers would have to design a plague," said Jim Brane. "And there'd be too big a chance that it might spread to other plants, like crops."

"And we can't stop people from drinking the wine," said Tom. Jan blushed and turned her head away. Muffy might have blushed, he thought, but she had indeed sworn off the wine. People had, like her, to stop themselves. "So the plant genes will keep moving into people. We can't stop them."

Muffy poked him in the hip. "We can't stop people genes from going the other way, either."

Freddy hooted and sang, "Shakin' my anther..."

Tom blushed. Several of the others laughed, for when the amaryllises had made him display himself, anyone who had not known of his peculiarity had certainly learned the truth. When they quieted, he said, "I *don't* have the hots for giant flowers."

"But some of your kids might," said Franklin Peirce. "Unless..."

"I hope not," said Tom emphatically.

Jim turned toward his mate. "So burning out the greenhouse wouldn't really work. It would slow things down a little, but..."

Julia nodded. "A few years," she said. "Maybe a generation."

"And the future would never notice," said Peirce. "A generation is nothing on a biological time scale."

"So what do we do?" asked Tom. His voice had a bitter tinge. "Are we doomed?"

"The amaryllises will get more human," said the museum curator. "As for people turning into plants, all can do is put your mother on display. And program a sound plaque to explain how she got this way."

Freddy laughed. "What do you bet that'll just make more people try the wine?"

CHAPTER 18

"I've got to go," said Jim Brane. "I've got my truck back, Tom has Muffy back, his mother is safe and sound. And they won't let me off any longer, I'm sure. Tomorrow I'll have to work."

"Me, too," said Tom Cross. "I've been away from the store too long. And Muffy's fans must have forgotten her by now." He grinned at her, and she grinned back.

"Fat chance," she said. "And they'd only cheer louder if I forgot my fan." She was, after all, a fan dancer, and Randy was the fan that really counted.

"Want a ride, Ralph?" offered Julia Templeton, and soon the room held three humans less. Franklin Peirce and Kimmer Alvidrez were sitting on the padded floor with their backs against the pot that held Petra Cross and the amaryllis. They were holding hands as if they thought no one would notice. Tom and Muffy sat across the room, staring at his mother. Freddy and Porculata were still in their support racks, and Randy, Muffy's spider, now rested beside them.

Peirce looked up and over his shoulder at the contents of the pot behind him. "I suppose I could wait till tomorrow, and let the technicians do it." He let his eyes slide toward Kimmer. "But I'd rather...Want to help, my dear?"

She took a deep breath, licked her lips, and visibly squeezed his hand. "Help with what?"

"Repotting these things. They're heavy, but the two of us should be able to manage it."

Pheromones wafted from the amaryllis, and Jan, the only human present without a worrystone, cried, "No! Keep us together! Only then can I teach her. All she needs to know. And speak for her. Until she learns."

Peirce nodded. "At least, we can find a place to keep them."

Kimmer looked disappointed, but she nodded. They rose and trundled the handcart and its burden out of the pigs' apartment. As the door closed behind them, Tom said, "I wish I knew how to end this." As Jim had said, they had

regained all that was lost, though not without change. Yet life went on. There would be further losses in the future, and some of them would not be recouped. There would be new adventures. But this one was over. He wished there were some way to mark its end.

"We could sing a song," said Freddy. It was a natural enough suggestion. When Tom and the pig had first run away from home, they had made their living as singers. Freddy was still a singer, a musician, and so was his wife. And a song had accompanied their quest.

"Like what?"

He wished he knew. But then Porculata began to play, and the words came to him, and to Muffy, Jan, and Freddy. Together, they sang a song that Tom had first met as a child, when he had spent two weeks at a summer camp in Maine. He supposed it had been a camp song as long as there had been camps.

"Day is done," they sang slowly, almost dolorously. "Gone the sun...Allis well..."

"I'm used to gengineered things," Tom later said to Muffy. They had left Freddy and his family in their apartment. Now they were walking down a dim basement hall. Soon, they would come to a staircase--they could see it ahead, marked by the red glow of an "Exit" sign--and leave the museum. They would walk home, or take a Bernie, and water their Alice. They would resume their lives.

"I see them in the store all the time," he went on. "And I'm one of them, aren't I?" He was thinking of his bud. "So Jack didn't surprise me, and the amaryllis ladies didn't either. Though I suppose it did, what they did to him with their pheromones."

"What they did to you, too. Or what he did." Muffy hugged his arm tightly, as if fearing that he would be yanked from her life, as she so nearly had been from his. "And the wine. That's new, isn't it?"

He nodded. A door on the right, a little ahead, was ajar. "But you're done with that now."

It was her turn to nod. "For good." She produced an exaggerated shudder. Then she stopped walking and turned to face him, one hand on his chest. "They didn't say, but do you think...? Did it make a difference that they knew what a hybrid you are? Do you think they knew they could make your pollen come in so easily?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But it doesn't make any difference now."

"They're happy, aren't they? With those other men, I mean?"

Tom shrugged and tried to start walking again. She held him back while he said, "It'll take longer to equip them to make pollen, but yes. They have the raw material they need. There's no sentimental connection..."

"How can plants feel sentiment?"

"They're not just plants. And though they've changed Jack drastically, he did make them what they are. He is, or was, quite human, and if he could feel sentiment..."

He finally pulled her into motion, but only for a step or two before she said, "It'll be interesting to see what happens with our kids."

"Kids?" He stopped again, pulled free of her grip, and turned to stare at her.

"You said that before." She grinned. "At Jack's place. But don't you think we ought to get started?"

"I'd love to." Until just the day before, he had thought he was the only one of them who wanted a family. "So what's stopping us?"

"It's too public here." The hallway was deserted, and it would remain so until the next day, but Peirce and Kimmer were somewhere about, and surely there was a night watchman. "And I want your name."

"We have to get married?"

"Uh-huh." She hugged his arm again.

"I suppose we could." He was teasing. The idea, surprising as it was, delighted him. He had thought their life together would continue pretty much as it always had. Many couples never married, even when they chose to have children, and marriage had never seemed to him essential. But his parents had been married, hadn't they? And now he and Muffy would become parents themselves.

He sniffed. She did the same. They both grinned, and he whispered, "That amaryllis." Then he touched his worrystone. Its silence said that the pheromones were not those of preemption or command.

She pointed toward the half-open door just down the hall. "There?"

They took the few steps that let them see what was within the room.

Both of them inhaled sharply at what they saw.

Franklin Peirce and Kimmer Alvidrez had indeed found a room for Petra Cross and her companion. It seemed to be a workroom for tending bioform artworks, several of which stood in pots on a table by the room's far wall. On the floor nearby stood an empty planter about the size of the pot that held Petra and the amaryllis. A shelf held several smaller pots. Beneath the shelf stood three shovels, several trowels, a bag of peat moss, and a watering can.

The pot they had hauled across Lake Michigan to this museum basement stood in the middle of the room, still shared by both Petra and the amaryllis. Near the pot, their backs to the door, stood Peirce and Kimmer. Just as they had been doing in Freddy's apartment, they were holding hands.

Both were naked except for the worrystones that hung around their necks.

And Peirce was humming the tune to "Shaking My Anther."

POSTLUDE

It was dark beyond the greenhouse glass and the shading leaves of mindless plants, but lights once more blazed within the house that Jack Rivard once had grown in the shape of a head. The ventilator fans forced the air to move in its accustomed direction, from the Eldest of the amaryllis sisterhood

downdrift, and acquire messages in order of dominance within the hierarchy.

Five naked bodies lay on the greenhouse floor, arrayed near the inner wall, farthest from the glass and the heat it admitted in the day. Near them sat a pot containing a strange, bulb-stemmed plant resembling a bonsai baobabtree with leaves like those of honeysuckle vines. It had, until this day just past, been hidden almost perfectly from view among the other plants within the greenhouse. From it, tendrils extended toward the bodies and penetrated their skins. Those tendrils carried a fluid very similar to honeysuckle wine to keep the prisoners comatose while tailored viruses worked to change their cells and bodies.

In the doorway to the greenhouse squatted Jack. His skin was flecked with dark bits of decayed organic matter, for one of his tasks that day had been to bury the dead BRA agent in a compost heap behind the house. He was rubbing his depleted anther and chuckling, perhaps at the thought of what his gengineered viruses were doing to the bodies on the floor, perhaps at the thought of how the modified honeysuckle plant that kept them from protesting their transformation might be received in the outer world, if only he would release it, or if it would escape. Honey bums might welcome it, for it would relieve them of even that effort necessary to pluck the blossoms of the honeysuckle vines.

Perhaps he did not think at all. Jack's mind was the mind of a child. The amaryllises had destroyed almost everything except his knowledge of gengineering, his ability to use that knowledge in their service, and his capacity to speak on their behalf. He was very much an idiot savant.

His mistresses intended to leave the prisoners even less, for they would have only one function.

"WE HAD NEW PISTILS
And scion/seedling/sprout
And he was ripe!
His anther
nearly ready!
We saw double gonads
Unnecessary
Our pollen works
On humans, too
WE HAD OTHERS, TOO
In our grasp
But lost them all
THEY RESISTED
They were somehow
Somehow immune
BUT WE DO HAVE
Ample raw material
WE DO
We traded
Had to trade
And soon!
SOON!
We will have
New pollen"

Already, in fact, the viruses had begun to modify the structures of the captives' genitals. Penises were enlarging. Testicles were elongating, just as they once had in Jack himself, and the new gonads were taking on a golden hue.

"New genes
Shaking anthers!
At our command
WE WILL SET SEED
And our scions/
/Seedlings/sprouts
New pistils, too
Will be nearer
Our designs
AND ONE OF US IS GONE
Transplanted
SHE WILL POLLINATE
Some human pistil
Perhaps engender
Anther-bearers
Like our master/pet's
Scion/seedling/sprout
SHE HAS THE CHANCE
To begin new beds
And fork our line of history
Our destiny
But that destiny
IS FOR THE FUTURE ONLY
To reveal."

APPENDIX

The song "Shaking My Anther" appears in several places in this novel, but never all in one piece, with the verses in their proper order. To correct this deficiency, and to satisfy whatever curiosity you feel, dear reader, here is the compleat:

SHAKING MY ANTHER
You've got the question.
Your perfume says it all.
I've got the anther!
Shakin' my anther for you!
You're spreading your leaves.
I smell it on the air.
Showers of pollen!
Shakin' my anther for you!
Open your petals.
Let me sniff your blossom!
Oh, I like your style!
Shakin' my anther for you!
I've got the anther!
And showers of pollen!
I've got the anther!
Shakin' my anther for you!

Did you wonder, back in Chapter 8, whether Joe-Dee Alvidrez's *Dingo Fantasy I* was really edited from computer-generated garbage? It was, as I have described in articles in *Analog*, *Pulpsmith*, and *The Leading Edge*, and as A. K. Dewdney has discussed in *Scientific American* (June 1989). Has it really been

published? No, though many others among my "computer-catalyzed" poems have.
Did you feel frustrated when Our Heroes stopped Joe-Dee from displaying *Dingo Fantasy II*? All right, then. You asked for it. Just don't forget what Freddy said: "It's still tripe. Bull-litter." And now, heeeere's...

DINGO FANTASY II

Flexible lover,
Flanked by ivories and
Astounding earflaps,
Banish bloody maidens
And let red leaves conquer.
Reversal!
Proboscis pregnant, tattered child.
Surrender, Dingo, sodden lover,
And babble fantasy of high mahout!
Admit one.
The circus prefers
The elephantine migration.