

BUT IN THE NIGHT WE ARE ALL THE SAME

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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
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BUT IN THE NIGHT WE ARE ALL THE SAME

Presented by Sally Hartin-Young

A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Introduction

Over time, utopian and dystopian novels have adapted and changed to offer perspective on and criticism of the eras in which they were written. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Tom Moylan explores how utopian fiction has changed from portrayals of a perfect, unchanging society in novels such as *Looking Backward* and *Herland*, to more ambiguous novels that both present and question utopian societies, such as the later twentieth century works *The Dispossessed* and *The Gate to Women's Country*. Dystopian fiction has changed over the years as well. Traditional dystopian works can be identified as novels such as *Brave New World* and *1984*, that present societies in which a powerful state controls—and often defeats—the protagonist. In contrast to these works, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan have identified the “critical dystopia,” works that present dystopian societies yet “maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives” (Baccolini 13). Moylan and Baccolini name the identifying traits of this form of dystopia as the existence of utopian possibility within the text, a foregrounding of resistance to the dystopia (Moylan 189), inclusion of attributes of other genres (Baccolini 18), and an overall sense of hope opposed to classic dystopian pessimism (Moylan 195-6). However, the distinction between these two perspectives on the nature of a dystopian world can be further brought into focus by an examination of these novels’ differing portrayals of the dystopian power. In classic dystopia, the dystopian force is a powerful state that controls every aspect of its subjects’ lives. In critical dystopias, the dystopian force is a more fragmented power that oppresses through its absence more than its presence. This

difference results in changes not only in the form of the dystopian novel but also in its effect on the reader.

In the classic dystopias, such as *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the dystopian force is an all-powerful state that exerts a great deal of control over its citizens. In *Brave New World*, the World State asserts its dominion over its citizens even before birth through a powerful regimen of pre-natal engineering designed to fit each citizen into what will be his or her situation in life. After birth, the children raised are by the state and subjected to psychological conditioning and sleep conditioning until at adulthood each is shaped to be a perfect member of this society's caste system. After such extensive physical and emotional shaping, few individuals in this society can think or act for themselves. In *1984*, the Inner Party controls its members through fear of the Thought Police, endless monitoring through the telescreens and through the spying of other members, and through the deliberate narrowing of potential thought through the revision of the language into Newspeak. Although Winston at first asserts that he is free inside his own mind, he comes to find that torture and guilt can let the Party take control over that too. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the religious state takes over every aspect of its citizens' lives, including using their bodies for its own purposes. Offred's time is strictly regulated as well as her actions, her clothes, and her words. She is monitored to the extent of being controlled even in the bathroom—the Aunts limit the amount time she can spend in the bathroom (73) and later she is monitored to make sure she doesn't commit suicide while bathing (64).

In many of the critical dystopias, however, the dystopian force is not a consolidated state but is a combination of fragmented forces. In Octavia Butler's *Parable*

of the Sower, the dystopian world Lauren lives in is not created purposefully but arises from a combination of factors: weakened government, corporate exploitation of the natural environment, and increased poverty. As a result, citizens of this future California live in a “Hobbesian state of war, a war of all against all” (Stillman 28). It is the anarchy version of dystopia. A similar situation occurs in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Gold Coast*. In this version of California, over-development of the land, endless weapons development, and continuous consumerism have created a dystopian situation for the environment and for the protagonist, Jim, who searches for meaning in this postmodern landscape. The varied forces that create this dystopia are not under the control of any one state power, and struggle with one another as much as with the protagonist. In the critical dystopian movie *The Matrix*, the dystopian element is consolidated into a single force, but as the actions of computers, not real people, makes the dystopian power into an impersonal and objective force.

Additionally, in classic dystopias, the motivation of the dystopian state is clear—to gain power and to control the citizens. In *Brave New World*, World Controller Mustapha Mond tells John Savage “The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get” (226). In *1984*, O’Brien admits to Winston that what the Party seeks is power and that it manipulates and controls the citizens in order to keep them subsumed to it: “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake” (116). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Gileadean regime may promote itself as made up of believers in religious fundamentalism, but their real goal is power as shown by the ways those at the top of the system subvert their own rules. All of these classic dystopian regimes have as their goal stable, controlled societies with consolidated power at the top.

In many critical dystopias, however, the dystopian forces, betray no desire to control or dominate the society as a whole, but are simply out to fulfill their own desires for money or resources.

In classic dystopias, the relationship between the state power and the protagonist takes on religious overtones. In *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, Erika Gottlieb has noted the similarities between classic dystopia and the Judeo-Christian worldview showed by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, in which dystopia equals hell (Gottlieb 3). This comparison can be taken further. Classic dystopias continue in this Judeo-Christian worldview to portray a world in which the state (like God) shows an enormous amount of attention towards individuals, shaping and training them into the path favored by the state, and punishing them if they stray. In the critical dystopian universes, however, the state/God is generally absent or impersonal. This religious parallel is clearly seen in the relationship between Winston and O'Brien in *1984*. Toward the end of the novel, Winston learns that O'Brien has been carefully watching him and monitoring him for seven years. Winston has felt, and continues to feel even when O'Brien is torturing him, that O'Brien is someone who understands him. While he is being tortured, Winston feels a connection to and love for O'Brien; at one point he "clung to O'Brien like a baby" (110). O'Brien treats Winston like a "wayward but promising child" (109), refers to him as a "heretic" (112), and promises to cure (save) him and show him the truth. In *Brave New World*, the state carefully creates each individual for his or her place in life with a godlike power, while the World Controllers "function as a tiny priest class governing a vast population of blissfully ignorant babies" (Firchow 32). It also diverts religious feeling towards its founder—Our Ford/Freud—and holds religious ceremonies that take a

sexual form (the Orgy-Porgy). In *Fahrenheit 451*, Captain Beatty watches and monitors Montag's growing resistance carefully, warns him from straying—even telling him “We depend on you. I don't think you realize how important *you* are” (62)—and punishes him by forcing him to burn his own house. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, of course, religious and secular powers have merged in the Gilead state. Although Offred as an individual person is not important to the Gileadean regime, her particular body is very important to it. The state pays a lot of attention to her body—monthly doctor's appointments, guards, a careful diet—and forces her to do so as well.

In critical dystopias, however, religious motifs (at least those of traditional religion) are absent along with any representation of permanence or stability, and the dystopian forces are not invested in the citizens at all. In *Parable of the Sower*, the weak government cannot do much to help its people, and the anarchist forces such as the lack of social services, the prevalence of crime, violence, and feral dogs, environmental damages, and powerful corporations are interested in human beings only as resources to be exploited or not at all. This dystopia is a chaotic swirl of impersonal forces that have no investment in the protagonist's life. As if to emphasize the random and cruel nature of this future, Lauren's father, who led the neighborhood to work together and survive the dystopian situation, vanishes one day when he has left the community and is never heard from again. In a world without any stability or permanence, Lauren decides that the Baptist religion she has grown up with can no longer explain her experiences “My father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church” (7). Instead, she begins to develop her own religion, Earthseed, based on the philosophy that “God is change” (70). In *The Gold Coast*, the dystopian society is one of corporate capitalism,

land development, and weapons research run amok. Each of these groups is primarily interested in its own power and profit; individuals and the environment are used as necessary and then dropped aside. The novel contrasts the protagonist Jim, who is struggling to make sense of this world, with his parents, each of whom has a system that they believe is fixed and can help them understand their lives. Jim's father believes in his work as a weapons engineer and in the company he works for; Jim's mother is deeply involved in her church. Yet both of these institutions ultimately fail the people who depend on them. Jim's father is blamed for the failure of a project and is laid off, and Jim's mother is shaken when a young girl who worked with her at the church is killed in a car accident. Obviously, the traditional, stable systems of power are no longer applicable in these societies, and as a result of the differently conceived dystopian power, the shape of the dystopian novel is changed.

Classic dystopias tend to follow a typical pattern in the structure of the novel. These novels fear the "power of the modern state to not only control actions but also to . . . [achieve] total domination over the individual's private self, family feelings, sexuality, thoughts, and emotions" (Gottlieb 11). These works often focus on the protagonist's struggle to develop a selfhood that has been crushed by the state power; sexuality is often involved in developing this self. The climax of these novels typically comes during a conversation between the individual and a mouthpiece for the state (a conversation reminiscent of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor scene (Gottlieb 67)), and most commonly the individual is, in the end, defeated by the state power. Additionally, the novels often contain a focus towards the past as the site of utopian possibility. *Brave New World* and *1984* most completely fit this structural pattern. In *Brave New World*, Bernard, Helmholtz

and Lenina are faced with the problem of developing a personality out of the standard, conditioned roles they have been given by the World State. The first section of the book focuses on Bernard's struggles to find meaning in life and in relationships in a world that demands no meaning is possible. Due to his physical differences, Bernard is able to look at life differently than his contemporaries do. Since he has difficulties dating girls, he has been able to draw back from the process enough to criticize Lenina for thinking of herself as "a bit of meat" (45), and he wants to be alone with her. He also has noticed nature and its appeal of wildness and nonconformity (90). However, despite Bernard's struggles, he is never really able to escape his conditioning. Once he has become a celebrity by bringing the Savage to civilization, and he can get the girls and attention he wants, he no longer questions the society and is horrified to learn that he will be exiled. Lenina is similar. Although only an emotional rebel—she dates one man at a time for longer than is considered correct and falls in love with John Savage—she ends up having no way to express her rebellious feelings except through sexual forwardness and the voice of the state and so falls from John's unrealistic expectations. John, although he has not been conditioned, still is the victim of forces he cannot control—oedipal feelings, the pain of being ostracized by the savages, and idealization of civilization and of Shakespeare. While the inhabitants of the World State live in a middle ground without strong emotions, John has felt nothing but extremes. He fails to find a middle version of the self that can let him live happily in either world. The climax of the novel comes when John confronts the Mustapha Mond. During this scene, the goals and ideology of the World State are made clear, and Mond argues that the dystopia is actually what people really want. John, on the other hand, argues for emotion and for the right to feel pain: "Exposing what is

mortal and unsure to all that fortune death, and danger dare, even for an eggshell. Isn't there something in that?" (245). The reader is left to negotiate some kind of compromise between "insanity on the one hand and lunacy on the other" (Huxley viii).

1984 also follows this structural pattern. Winston has to struggle to develop an independent self away from the all-encompassing view of the Party. He does this through writing a diary and engaging in an affair with Julia. The diary allows Winston mental freedom: in it he questions the Party, thinks over events, remembers the past, and asserts the dominion of his own mind. In the affair with Julia, he allows himself to develop emotions and loyalties separate from allegiance to the Party. The climax of this novel comes when Winston is arrested and is tortured in the Ministry of Love. This scene very closely mirrors the Grand Inquisitor-style debate of *Brave New World*. O'Brien reveals the true nature of the Party in response to the question that had plagued Winston from the beginning of the novel: "I understand HOW; I do not understand WHY" (36). Although Winston argues for the freedom and transcendence of human nature, O'Brien eventually shows him that his arguments are hollow, as Room 101 can turn anyone into a traitor to those he or she loves.

Brave New World and *1984* both contrast their dystopian present with a more positive state of being in the past. Although the unpleasant environment of the Reservation prevents *Brave New World* from simply contrasting "natural" vs. conditioned humanity, the world of the World State is decidedly a dystopia compared to Huxley's present. *1984* also presents itself as a dystopia compared to the writer's present. In this novel, the superiority of the past is more consciously evoked. Although the childhood that Winston recalls is unpleasant, he finds another version of the past in the antique store

where he buys the notebook he writes his diary in as well as the glass paperweight, and where he meets with Julia in an old-fashioned room that has a double bed and appears to be without a telescreen. Here Winston is able to imagine that he is in a time when freedom was normal. “He wondered vaguely whether in the abolished past it had been a normal experience to lie in bed like this, in the cool of a summer evening, a man and a woman with no clothes on, making love when they chose, talking of what they chose” (63).

Fahrenheit 451 and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, though classic dystopias in their depictions of the state as the dystopian power, vary the structural pattern in the ending. In these novels, the protagonists are able to (or have the potential to) escape the dystopian society and find a better life for themselves. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag slowly begins to develop his individuality aside from his roles as fireman and as consumer that his society had assigned to him. This development occurs particularly through his conversations with Clarisse, a young girl who inspires him, and with Faber, who tells him about the past. Sexuality is not part of Montag’s personal development, but his relationship with Clarisse does help spur on his transformation. In Bradbury’s work, however, emotion needed to be superseded by intellectual rebellion, as Faber teaches Montag about the value of books. In this novel as well, there is a Grand Inquisitor scene, when Montag engages in conversations with Captain Beatty, who reveals the purpose and history of the firemen, although Montag is not free to debate back. The difference in this novel is that, instead of being defeated by the state, Montag burns Beatty to death, flees, outmaneuvers the symbol of the state’s power—the Mechanical Hound—and escapes to the country.

Even though the state manifests its dystopian power in impersonal forces such as television and the hound, there is still human power behind the dystopia as personified by Beatty and revealed by his continuous use of “we” as he explains the truth of their society to Montag (Bradbury 59, 60, 61).

However, when Montag escapes the dystopia, he does so only in the direction of the past, which the novel clearly identifies as the utopian space. Clarisse, the instigator of Montag’s awakening, contrasts her old-fashioned interests to those of her peers and even collects butterflies (23), an activity that freezes life in a moment of time. Similarly, after his escape, Montag finds refuge with the book people—outcasts who live in the woods and memorize, and actually become, sections of books (the ones named are all classics such as Plato’s Republic, Gulliver’s Travels, and the Bible). These people give up their identity to preserve a piece of the past. Bradbury never suggests that any of the book people may actually become writers and attempt to explore the significance of the events their society has undergone; instead, they are totally committed to preserving the past at the expense of their own identities. In contrast to the importance he had assumed to the dystopian state, here, Montag is told “You’re not important. You’re not anything” (163). Although the dystopian society has been destroyed, the novel’s focus on the past as the only utopian hope destroys all hope for the future.

The Handmaid’s Tale, like *Fahrenheit 451*, deviates from the traditional classic dystopian form in the ending, although it retains the classic dystopian state as the oppressive force. Throughout the novel, Offred faces the challenge of hanging onto her identity as a person after she has been forced to exist primarily as a body by the Gileadean system. Offred asserts her selfhood in small acts of rebellion, such as

switching her hips before the Guardians in remembering the past, and in articulating her own story to herself. These actions sustain Offred to the point where, towards the end of the novel, she can take steps to reclaim her body by rebelling sexually and romantically through a relationship with Nick. Like the other classic dystopian novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* contains Grand Inquisitor scenes in which Offred learns the motivations behind the state's actions from the Commander. Although, like Montag, Offred is not free to debate with her opponent, she does learn the hypocrisy behind the religious state's actions and that its true goal is to hold power. Like the other classic dystopias, *The Handmaid's Tale* places the site of utopian possibility in the past, as throughout the novel, Offred contrasts her current dystopian reality with her more ideal life in the past: "In Offred's nostalgic gaze, pre-Gilead acquires an idyllic quality" (Wilson et al, 120).

In the classic dystopian novel, the questions in the reader's mind center on what the goal of the dystopian state is and whether the protagonist will be able to assert his or her individual selfhood against the state's power. In critical dystopias, since that force has fragmented or become impersonal, the structure and focus of the novel changes accordingly. These novels fear the multiplicity of dystopian elements that postmodern consumer capitalism brings to life. In these novels, there is no dramatic confrontation between a voice of the state and the individual, correspondingly the motivation for the state's existence and the individual's loss of selfhood are not the focus of the novels, and sexuality does not play a liberating role for the protagonist. The focus of these works turns to the protagonists' efforts to discover how to resist this disintegrated power. Additionally, the locus of utopian space in these works is the future rather than the past.

In *The Gold Coast*, Jim lives in a society dominated by corporate and military power, and focused on consumption. The natural environment of this Orange County is almost completely destroyed—developed into endless multi-level highways and under-inhabited office buildings. Throughout most of the novel, Jim searches for ways to resist, especially to fight against the military sector that has led to constant wars and the development of weapons to go with them, but every path of resistance is confused and futile. He begins by trying to educate the people about all the wars, and goes on to participate in attempts to destroy military companies' weapons. But these attacks turn out to be used by the companies to destroy over-budget projects. Although Jim wants to resist and is fully aware of the problems and dystopian forces in his society, he doesn't know how to effectively fight back. Any actions he takes seem insignificant against the numerous forces that oppose him. Traditional sexuality in this society—in which participants watch themselves on television screens—only alienates Jim further, although his relationship with Hana, a young woman who devotes herself to her art instead of consumerism, inspires Jim to seek truth in his own life. The climax of the novel comes when Jim realizes how powerless his small acts of resistance are and finds a way to resist that also fulfills him as a person, by turning his writing from postmodern poetry experiments into a history of Orange County that illuminates how their society has become this way and what it has lost. Although Jim's writing explores the past of his county, the novel itself places utopian hope in the future. Excerpts from Jim's writing are placed throughout the novel, leading up to Jim's present day at the end, indicating that Orange County can't go back, it will continue into the future. Jim's power to take over the history of the county

through his writing shows that the future is in the hands of today's people, who can shape it as they want to.

Parable of the Sower also focuses on the protagonist's strategies of resistance. In this future California, weakened government and rampant corporate excesses have led to an almost complete social and environmental breakdown. As the novel opens, Lauren lives with her family in a walled community that has managed to ward off most of the chaos around them. Like Jim, however, Lauren understands the dystopian threat and warns her family that sooner or later the forces of anarchy will overwhelm their lives. She takes steps to prepare for this—learning about edible and medicinal plants (54), and burying money where she can find it later if their community is overrun (149). Lauren has less difficulty than Jim in discovering how to resist. In this dystopian world, she must manage to survive and remain free of the corporations that will take her as a slave. After her family's community is destroyed by drug addicts, Lauren continues working against the dystopian forces that surround her, first by continuing to survive and later by working against the forces of anarchy by pulling people to work together to form a new kind of community, one that can survive in the dystopian world. In this society, sexuality is not liberating to Lauren, but rather a threat: growing up, she feared the promiscuity of her peers because getting pregnant would limit her ability to survive. Although she later forms a relationship with an older man, he helps her fulfill her goals and follows her lead. This novel also focuses on the future as the source of utopian possibility. Lauren's family's community attempted to remain in the past: "They never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back" (8). The past cannot be preserved, however, and the

only hope belongs to the future. Lauren “works at imaging and developing new strategies in response to the dystopias in which she lives. She founds a utopian community, Acorn, a small community of trust and close personal ties” (Stillman 16). At the end of *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren has founded her new community and looks forward to a more utopian future.

The film *The Matrix* also follows the pattern of a critical dystopia. Although the beginning of the film focuses on revealing the how and why of the dystopian society, the rest of the movie demonstrates Neo and his friends’ struggle to resist. The film also locates hope in the future, when the computers will be overthrown. However, unlike dystopian novels, which usually use writing as part of the protagonist’s resistance, *The Matrix* uses violence and sabotages its own goal of liberating the people by showing the protagonists casually killing any who get in their way. Overall, though, the film still functions as a critical dystopia that focuses on resistance to the dystopian society and looks towards the future with hope.

As a result of the different structure and focus, critical dystopias also have a different effect on the reader than classic dystopian novels. Classic dystopias are constructed as a warning. *Brave New World* and *1984* are conscious warnings against how social movements could go horribly wrong, and have functioned as warnings to our society; *1984* is commonly evoked when the specter of totalitarianism is raised. These novels are written from a position of a world in which there are movements to create a utopia that the author believes may turn into a dystopia instead, and intend to warn readers against these utopian movements as well as against other social trends. Classic dystopias are often positioned as occurring a significant amount of time in the future,

long enough for this repressive society to develop or also, the reader hopes, long enough for actions to be put into place to avoid this particular future. However, classic dystopias may have a paralyzing effect on the reader. In the end of these novels, resistance to the state power is usually shown to be futile: Winston comes to love Big Brother and John Savage kills himself. The protagonists are defeated, and the novels offer no hope for social change from any other avenue. The fact that the authors can offer no hope for resistance to the dystopia can persuade readers that societies cannot be changed: “With a focus on story lines of alienation, revolt, and defeat, these dystopias of resignation embrace an anti-utopian pessimism that allows authors, and willing readers, to reinforce their settled preference for the status quo or to help produce their capitulation to it as all hope for change is shattered” (Moylan 181). The novels become actually anti-utopian in their belief that no better world is possible, and may convince the reader that there is no way to avoid a dystopian future, even if the novel warns them about it.

Although *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Handmaid's Tale* offer more hope for the protagonists, they still do not offer much for the reader. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the dystopian state is destroyed in the end, but it destroys itself. The dissenters do nothing to affect its collapse; Montag and Faber simply happen to be lucky enough to escape into the country before the war. Additionally, the novel's devotion to the past as utopia prevents it from holding out any hope for a utopian future. A similar effect occurs in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although at the end of this work there may be hope for Offred to escape, and the historical notes section reveals a future in which Gilead is long gone, neither of these avenues of hope lead to utopian possibility. Offred may find a better life for herself, but she has no power to change her society. Her dissent is only to escape, not to revolution.

Despite the novel's feminist tone, in Offred's experience, the personal remains personal; it cannot become political. Additionally, the final section of the novel appears to callously cast her to history, appealing to a resignation that oppressive societies will pass over in time as part of the cycle of history above the scope of human action. Like other classic dystopias, these novels offer a hopeless and powerless view of the future and may lead the reader into resignation to the status quo. Critical dystopias intend a different effect on the reader, however. These novels are often written from the perspective of a time that purports to be utopia—Jim's consumer paradise of Orange County or *The Matrix*'s illusory world—but which the author intends to reveal is actually a dystopia. Correspondingly, these dystopias are often closer in time to the writer's present. The focus of these novels turns from understanding the dystopia to resistance, and the empowerment of the protagonists to resist encourages the reader to resist as well.

However, there are some problems for the reader in critical dystopias. In classic dystopias, it is very clear how to strike back against the state. Winston, Montag, and Offred have clear, specific ways in which to rebel. However, Jim and Lauren must struggle to determine how to resist their dystopian worlds. With Jim choosing writing, Lauren survival and the creation of a religion, and *The Matrix* resorting to violence, the reader may feel inclined to resist but not know how to do so. More importantly, while classic dystopias clearly illustrate the power structure of the dystopian societies—and reveal who benefits from the system as it is, in most critical dystopias, it is often much less clear who benefits from the system. In classic dystopias, that power is typically the state, which gains social stability and power. In *The Gold Coast*, it is corporations, especially weapons corporations, and land developers who seem to be benefiting, and in

Parable of the Sower, it is corporate actions that have created the social and environmental breakdown. However, these novels do not really confront the beneficiaries of the dystopian power as classic dystopias do. This leaves out an important aspect of understanding how any social system works. Additionally, it leaves the dystopian societies open to being interpreted as natural, rather than human constructs, and societies must be seen as human constructs in order to be resisted and reformed. Finally, critical dystopias often do not address the assaults on selfhood and humanity that classic dystopias do. Post-modern consumer capitalism can be just as much of a threat to selfhood as totalitarianism can be, and critical dystopias need to address this threat. Cyberpunk, which tends to present a similarly dystopian post-modern, corporate-dominated world but without the critical overlay, does a better job of presenting the loss of self this type of society can create—such as protagonists who lose themselves in drugs, meaningless relationships, and who sell themselves to various corporate masters. Critical dystopias need to explore these aspects in a more critical format than appears in most cyberpunk.

Although *1984* and *Brave New World* are known as the canonical dystopian texts, the dystopian novel has changed a great deal since these works were written. In the late twentieth century, critical dystopias have revealed a new dystopian force and have altered the structure of the dystopian novel. The critical dystopias share the classic dystopia's efforts to highlight dangerous trends in society and to alert their readers to these trends, but the shape of the threat and how it must be portrayed have significantly altered. As a result, the effect created on the reader by these novels is different as well. *1984* and *Brave New World* have succeeded as the warnings they intended to be:

. . . the influence of *Brave New World*, like that of *1984*, has not been merely and narrowly or even primarily literary. . . . Poetry, literature, art do or at least can make something happen, or in the case of *Brave New World* and *1984*, help to prevent something from happening. These novels have shown us what may occur and have thereby given us an opportunity, however slight, to stop these particular versions of the future from being realized. (Firchow 128).

However, these novels have urged readers to fear and caution more than action. Critical dystopias, which inspire resistance in their readers, need to further highlight potential modes of resistance and to explore more deeply the hidden structures that are present in the seemingly chaotic worlds they represent to fully bring their potential to life. These novels also need to address the issues of selfhood and the individual that are raised by classic dystopias in order to fully explore the dangers of the dystopian forces. However, because of their focus on resistance and insistence that utopian possibility can be found in the future, these novels may be able to empower their readers, instead of just warning them, and may inspire the creation of a better and more utopian society.

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Part I

Chapter 1

The Citadel:

Lemon paced slowly from the quiet, gray bedroom into the quiet, gray living room, biting her lip to keep from screaming just to hear the noise. She had not spoken for forty-three days. Although compared to the thousands and thousands of days she had lived, those were less than a handful, she still was beginning to find maintaining silence impossibly unbearable. If only some other noises—televisions, footsteps, voices—filtered through the thick gray walls, maybe she could stand her own quiet better, but there was never any other sound.

Suddenly, she couldn't stand it anymore. Stupid and useless as she knew such an action was, she picked up a small glass table and swung it into the wall. The table splintered with a loud, wonderful crash, and Lemon nearly cried out with relief. But instead, she grabbed a tall metal lamp and smashed it into another glass table. Noise, beautiful noise! She banged the lamp into the wall after the table was destroyed; clanged her heavy gold bracelets together; and stomped her bare feet on the gray carpet until even it was forced to yield a muffled thump. The noise was wonderful. For a moment, she almost felt happy.

“Lemon!” A shocked voice called her name, and she spun around. Astrix stood by the door, his face a pale blur of horror.

“Lemon, what are you doing? Stop it!” She knew the accusing figure was only Astrix, but the sight of his appearance—that of the Those That man he really was—

ripped away her joy and left her feeling automatically ashamed, almost frightened. She dropped the lamp, realizing that her hands were shaking, and turned away.

“Lemon, it’s all right,” Astrix said soothingly, but, without looking back, she wandered over to the window and sank into the windowseat. She leaned her head against the cool glass of the pane. Below her, sixteen stories fell to brown prairie; brown prairie stretched out unbroken to the horizon. If she looked carefully, she could just make out the dark smudge against the sky that was the city she had come from. After all the time she had lived there in thrall to the Those That, after she had struggled and fought to rewrite herself, had dragged her mind kicking and screaming free—it didn’t matter. The world was the same and she was the same, still as much the Those That’s prisoner as she had ever been.

“Lemon,” Astrix said again, from just beside her. She reluctantly turned to look up him, or what was left of him, and her heart splintered like it always did.

The bewildered, disoriented, almost shy person she had come to know in the city was gone. The man he belonged to had claimed Astrix once again, had devoured away his personality, his confidence, his eagerness, his clothes; everything of himself had been swallowed up by the Citadel and the Those That. Even his hair was different, no longer cut in reddish-blond spikes, but clipped close and colorless, a change that matched his gray suit, matched the expression on his face—or rather, the total lack of expression, of emotion, when he was with the others of his kind.

At the moment, however, he looked anxious, his face pleading her to let him approach. He held a folded pile of fabric in his hands; this, at least, caught Lemon’s attention; it was the first thing she had seen in the Citadel that had any color.

Astrix seemed encouraged by her interest. He took another tentative step towards her and held the cloth out. “It’s a blanket,” he explained, unfolding it. “I had them make it especially for you. I knew you’d like the colors.”

As much as she wanted to deny it, Lemon did like the blanket. The broad stripes of red, orange and yellow refreshed her so much that she even felt a faint smile touch her lips. She let Astrix tuck it around her, and rubbed the edge to note the warmth and thickness of the wool. The blanket was beautiful, and would be very useful. She had felt cold ever since coming to the Citadel, even though she had been outfitted with thick wool pants and sweaters.

Encouraged by her reaction to the blanket, Astrix dropped to his knees beside the windowseat, wrapped her hand in both of his, and whispered “Lemon, please. You’ll see. This is the only way things can be. And it’s better here than in the city. You’ll come to like it here, I promise. Just please, talk to me.” For a moment Lemon closed her eyes and tried to believe that he was still the same person underneath the gray clothes, but then she pulled her hand free from his, and shut her mouth firmly. Who had taught her how to retreat into silence, after all, but Astrix himself?

She turned and stared out the window as she heard Astrix sigh and turn away, heard him clean up the mess she had made, and then finally heard the click of the door that told her he was gone. Only then did she let herself relax and sag down in the windowseat. She buried her face in her hands, but didn’t cry. She didn’t think she *could* cry anymore. She was too hollow. One by one, everything she had cared about or thought was true had been taken away from her: the Those That, her life in the city, her friend Kira, the hospital machines, Astrix. And in most cases, not only were these things

irrevocably taken away, but she had also learned that they had never been real. Each time something she had thought was true had been stripped away, part of her was lost too. Time after time she had tried to rebuild herself, only to be pulled apart again, and now she had never felt so hopeless and powerless. At least in the city she hadn't known how miserable she was.

Lemon stayed in the windowseat all afternoon, watching as the sky turned golden, then purple, then black. Shortly after sunset, a flicker of movement caught her attention, and she looked up to see a line of crystal ships fluttering over the Citadel's uneven roofs and filing away towards the city. Lemon shuddered. She could remember so clearly how it felt to have those ships appear above her, to have to wait to see what they would do to her next. She had thought that if only she could escape that torture she would be happy, but instead, she'd found that the more her mind was freed the more miserable she became.

Soon afterwards, Astrix returned to the apartment, carrying with him the heavy silver tray on which he always brought their dinner. A delicious smell filled the room and, despite herself, Lemon reluctantly rose from the windowseat. She went slowly over to the huge glass table where Astrix was setting out the dishes, trying to convince herself not to feel guilty for giving in to the temptation. Her starving to death wouldn't help anyone, however, and besides, the food in the Citadel was so incredibly wonderful, of such high quality, so well prepared and in a greater variety of forms than she had ever imagined possible. It was only fair that she take some pleasure from the Those That after they had taken so much from her.

That night there was a mixed-greens salad, mushroom risotto, and a dish of broccoli with almonds. Everything was fresh and warm and tasted like it was so much better for her body than the greasy food she'd eaten in the city that sometimes she thought she wouldn't ever have to go into a hospital machine again to stay young. She couldn't help herself from eating it all, every last bite, even the half dish of broccoli that Astrix pushed aside, making a face. It all tasted wonderful to her.

After the main meal they had bowls of fresh fruit, ice cream kept chilled in special dishes, and coffee. Even after so many days she was still not used to how wonderful the food was, and the tastes absorbed her so much that she was barely aware of Astrix miserably sitting across the table from her, meekly passing her plates, silently begging for the attention she refused to give him. Licking the ice cream spoon, savoring every taste of chocolate, she wondered how long he would wait so patient and so abject. Another seven hundred years?

While Astrix cleared the dishes away, Lemon went into the bedroom and climbed into the gigantic bed. She wrapped the blanket that had been Astrix's gift close about her body and piled the rest of the gray covers over it, so he couldn't see that she really did like it.

When he came back from putting the tray outside the door, she was wrapped in the blankets, her eyes shut. She lay still as he crawled onto the bed next to her. She felt it settle under his weight, felt the pressure of his body as he leaned close to her. "Lemon," he whispered, his voice trembling. "Please stop this, Lemon. Please be yourself again and talk to me. It's not so bad here, is it? I'll give you anything you want. You'll never have to be stroddled again. Can't you just talk to me?"

The desperate tremble in his voice brought tears to Lemon's eyes, but she steeled herself to withstand him. She wasn't going to give in. Finally he turned away, and she heard the light click on in his workroom and then the whirl of computers. Lemon sighed. She would like to forgive him, but it was impossible, as impossible as that she would forget what had come before.

The City:

Lemon had lived in the city for more than seven hundred and fifty years. Over two hundred and fifty thousand days, almost an eternity of time, but when she thought about them now, it was as if all the days had been the same. Although she moved from apartment to apartment over the centuries, dressed in stranger and stranger clothes, and dyed her hair in different colors, nothing had ever really changed. Day after day she had worked in the factory, gone through Come Out and Play, and then gone out to the bars in the evening. She had always been miserable, but her unhappiness was an unfocused, vague feeling, one she couldn't isolate or understand. She hadn't had time to think about her own emotions. Her mind had always been crowded with thoughts and feelings coming at her from outside, from the Those That or the television. Work had numbed her mind throughout the day and in the evenings she had wanted only to rest and forget.

She had lived for the ending bell at the factory; no matter how miserable the day or the afternoon Come Out and Play made her, once she heard the bell her mood began to lighten almost instantly. From her stool on the assembly line, where she worked on Dreamy Dan, one of the PlasticPerfectPeople dolls, she glanced over at Kira, and they smiled at one another. "I'm so glad this day is over," Lemon said, and her friend nodded in agreement.

Lemon was ready quickly, but had to wait as Kira brushed her hair and got her purse and her jacket. Kira always took a while to do things, and even was sometimes behind on the assembly line, but Lemon was patient. Kira was her best friend, and her roommate most of the time. When she was ready, they went together out the front door of the factory.

“Hey girls!” Dooley, an ordinary man who ran the masher machine that stamped out male PlasticPerfectPeople heads, called to them. Lately he and some other ordinary men stood near the door after work and on breaks, pretending to smoke with plastic straws. Lemon thought this fad was pretty silly. The ordinary men were only copying the Those That, who smoked thin, sweet cigarettes in the bars in the evenings. Sometimes they gave one to her and to the other girls, but the cigarettes could never be found in any of the vending machines. However, some of the ordinary men thought it looked cool, or that women would think so, to pretend to smoke too.

“Watch out that smoke doesn’t make you cough,” Lemon teased him.

“Aw, come on, Lemon.” Dooley bounced over to them, waving his plastic straw between two fingers. He flicked it at the clips hanging from her ponytail, making them swing. “Don’t you want to go down to the bar with me tonight?”

“With you?” Lemon laughed. She looked him up and down and giggled some more, so much she couldn’t talk. Dooley’s hair stuck down over his eyes, and he was scrawny underneath a dirty shirt.

“Don’t be so ridiculous,” Kira told him. “Lemon ‘n’ I are going to get some Those That men tonight, aren’t we, Lemon.”

Lemon nodded, although she wasn't sure how true it was. She got chosen to spend the night with a Those That man an awful lot more often than Kira did. She was much cuter, and Kira had an unfortunate nose.

"But I'm more fun, you'll see," Dooley protested. "You've never tried, baby, come on."

"See you," Lemon tossed off over her shoulder, marching past him. "Don't choke on your smoke."

As she and Kira went out in the street, Kira started talking about her latest favorite subject: her crush on Mean Mark. Lemon wasn't sure why Kira had chosen the bad character on the PlasticPerfectPeople show to fall in love with, but she talked endlessly about trying to reform him. Lemon had heard it all before, and she tuned her friend out as they walked towards their apartment, only listening enough to fill in the occasional "uh-huh" and "I don't know" when the silence cued her to speak.

Besides, she had enough to do just navigating through the street. Since both sides were cluttered with piles of trash, there was only a narrow corridor left in the middle to walk through. Lemon and Kira had to make their way carefully through this corridor, because the piles of trash were smelly and crowded with rats and roaches that might get on them if they got too close. It was always difficult, however. Not only was Lemon wearing heels so high they wobbled underneath her, but there was trash sliding out into the pathway, as well as broken glass that creaked and skidded underfoot. There were often broken pipes under the street too, that spilled dirty water or waste into puddles glistening darkly across the asphalt, or created holes where the city maintenance workers had dug down to work on the pipes but then forgotten to fill the dirt back in afterwards.

Sometimes there was orange tape strung around the holes, but often there was not, and the holes had a tendency to grow, anyway, as rain ate away at their edges, and then the people walking by had to detour off into side streets until the city workers finally got around to filling the hole or at least bridging it with planks or sheets of metal.

Lemon and Kira had to hang onto each other for support as they walked. The other people pushed and shoved as everyone tried to get through the narrow alleys, so it was hard to keep from falling into the trash, hard even to keep upright.

But at least the air felt clean and cool after the hot factory. Above them, the sky was darkening. The streetlights were coming on, and the bright spots of yellow light made Lemon feel happier again. Work was over; she was free; the night was the time she could be herself alone. All around her the streets were full of people she could tell felt the same way, people who were visibly brightening as they swung along back towards their apartments. The effect seemed to be strongest on the women—Lemon could see the gleam in their eyes as they planned what outfits they would wear, what jewelry to pick to make themselves stand out, to make themselves chosen! The ordinary men never seemed to brighten as much, but then, they usually didn't have as much fun, either.

They reached their own building and hurried up the steps into the lobby, where they had to slow down. The lobby was always dark, no matter whether it was day outside or not, and the air was thick and humid. The uneven floor was crowded with people resting or those who had eaten too many Happy Cookies. And there were more piles of stuff blocking the paths in here too. Looking at a Dreamy Dan doll now, jammed halfway up a stack taller than she was, Lemon wondered why, the next time she was noodled, she didn't just come to the lobby to get whatever item she was compelled to buy instead of

spending her coins in a vending machine. But the thought seemed silly. She knew that wasn't how things worked. She turned instead to the tangled nest of stairways that led away from the lobby. Kira had lagged behind, pulling at a Mean Mark doll someone had jabbed into the pile, and Lemon had to call her away from it. "It's OK, Mark," Lemon heard her soothing it as she straightened its clothes and set it up next to a Buyer Barbara, who, with her dark hair, looked something like Kira. "No one else understands you, I know. But I do, baby."

Finally, Lemon got Kira to start the laborious chore of climbing up to their apartment. There were no hand railings on the narrow, twisted stair, and, like the rest, it was crowded with trash. Luckily, they lived only on the third floor. Their apartment was four doors down on the left; when they opened the door the lights and television came on at once, making the room feel warm and homelike, even though the TV had changed itself to the education channel and was lecturing ordinary men not to fight in the bars. Kira went over at once to the giant poster of Mean Mark above her mattress and kissed it on the mouth, then flopped down on the bed to stare at it longingly.

Lemon sighed in relief to be home again, and to be able to look outside at the sky. That was one of the things she hated most about being at work: the factory didn't have any windows. But now she could look out through the large, crooked window and have a view of the sunset above the roof of the apartment building across the street. Stripes of gold, pink, and yellow were spreading up the sky, and a few small clouds caught in the light were spun pink. Only one was off-color, a bright green blob that had escaped from some smokestack. But besides that the sky was clear, the pastel colors blending upwards into the darkening blue.

After watching the sunset for a few minutes, Lemon went into the bathroom before Kira could beat her to it. Of all her many possessions, her favorites were the rows of bath soaps and gels stacked up on the bathroom shelves. She turned on a hot shower and jumped inside with three of her favorite bottles. At least she only had to share with one person, she thought as the warm water rushed over her. Some apartments did not have their own bathrooms and everyone had to share a main one at the end of the hall. Those were mostly the newer ones, though, and she and Kira had chosen an apartment in a fairly old building.

Their apartment was at least in pretty good shape. The building did not sway in the wind like some did, and they had the large window, even though it was crooked and had several cracks in the glass. And they did have their bathroom, although there was no closet, only a closet door that slid open onto a blank wall. Lemon thought sometimes of changing apartments again, but it had taken them a long time to find this one. So many had broken windows, or leaks in the pipes or the ceiling, or no bathroom, or bad smells in the walls, or were just piled too thick with layers and layers of accumulated stuff for anyone to even open the door to look inside. The apartments on the first floors of almost all the buildings were packed full, and many other ones were too. Really, they were lucky to have found this place, even if it didn't have a closet.

“Lemon, hurry up,” Kira whined, breaking in on her thoughts. Her roommate had come into the bathroom and was banging on the shower door. Lemon could see her through the steamed-over plastic—a small blurry shape with a haze of dark hair around her head. Hurriedly, she rinsed the last of the ginger-flavored shampoo out of her hair and stepped out onto the old clothes they'd spread over the bathroom floor to protect their

feet from the rough concrete. Kira squeezed past her into the shower, flinging her blue-and-yellow polka dotted dress back over her shoulder onto the floor. Lemon went to get dressed.

One thing she liked about getting dressed in the evening was how much longer she had to get ready. In the morning she was always reluctant to get up but also nervous about getting to work on time. Remembering always made her feel uneasy, but she remembered clearly when she tried to. That morning, she hadn't wanted to get up. She'd wanted to stay in bed. But the voice on TV perkily sang out "Seven o'clock! Rise and Shine," and Lemon had automatically become awake and happy. Between her deep emotions, which were obediently cheerful, and the surface of her mind, which was filled with the television's chatter, a thin layer of her own thoughts groaned in misery at the day ahead, but there was no room in her brain to pay attention to it. The TV kept singing, prodding her to sit up on her mattress and peer blearily around at the morning. It trilled "Get up! Get up! Hurry!" over and over as Lemon grabbed clothes together, with barely enough time to brush her hair before she had to run out and get breakfast. This morning it had been a Breakfast Bacon Box, and by the time she'd gotten her shoes on there was only time to drink her coffee and eat a couple of the strips of bacon, which really weren't all that good anyway.

The walk to the factory took a good twenty minutes, and every day Lemon worried the whole time about being late. People did not get into a lot of trouble for being only a little late, at least not officially, but the way the Those That supervisor looked at her from his little glass booth when she came in after the starting bell rang made her

shiver with shame and feel like she had failed. On those days, everything seemed to go wrong afterwards.

That morning, Lemon and Kira had been delayed by a fire cart that had broken down on its way to a fire at one of the apartment houses and was blocking the street. Three or four of the ordinary men who had the job of firefighter were trying to get it started again, but several minutes had passed, during which the crowd swelled, bottled up and restless, before the cart finally started and screeched and honked away down the street.

When the cart was out of the way, they ran the last three or four blocks. Lemon had been weak with relief when she finally saw the large gray building where they worked. The factories were all about half as tall as most of the apartment houses, but three or four times wider, and looked to her like an apartment building that had fallen over. Except that if they had once been apartments they would have had windows, but the factories were huge and dark inside, with only faded fluorescent lights and the TVs to give any light. To Lemon, who loved sunlight and to look at the sky, it was depressing to be inside all day. Today, when they had scurried through the sliding glass door with several minutes still to spare, Lemon had wanted to linger there inside the doorway, where a blob of sunlight played around on the concrete floor, until the absolute last second. But Kira had tugged her onwards.

In the morning everything was just hurry, hurry, hurry, in a panic, but now she had lots of time to choose the right outfit. Lemon sighed happily, planning, imagining how attractive she would look. She knew the Those That would choose her!

She decided to wear the new red string-dress she had bought two days ago and hadn't had the chance to wear yet, but first she had to find it. Since they had no closet, their clothes were kept piled on the floor, hung on a closet extender rack, and crammed in the Stak 'n' Stor boxes that lined the wall. Lemon rifled through the piles, tossing aside all the other stuff that had to share space with the clothes: toys, PlasticPerfectPeople dolls, paper crowns, hair clips, shoes, hairbands, collector plastic bottles, fingernail polish, posters, temporary tattoos, wall stencils, fingernail stickers, empty food boxes, hair dye, novelty underwear, deodorant bottles, pillows, plastic flowers in plastic vases, razors, jewelry, makeup, candles, novelty lamps, sheets of stickers, hairspray, window beads, hair curlers, window stickers, plastic plants, candy wrappers, collector teacups, tights, hats, and all sorts of clothes, until she rooted out the red string-dress. To complete the outfit she added her favorite black and white striped tights that had a mistake on one of the knees where some extra stripes had been printed on sideways, making a grid, and her red platform shoes. She had gotten one shoe strapped on, and was about to step into the next, when an ad for dinner came on TV. Lemon turned her head away, but it was too late. The Beef 'n' Bits ad had noodled her.

Suddenly she was overwhelmed by a desperate craving. She flung her other shoe aside and jumped to her feet. The urge was so strong that she barely had enough presence of mind to grab up some money. Awkwardly, she ran as fast as she could down the hall to the large room where the vending machines were. Noodles weren't so bad if you obeyed them quickly, and the food ones were never quite as strong as the ones for clothes, toys, or accessories, but still, she had to struggle to wait in line long enough for a neighbor to buy his dinner. Her hands shook with eagerness as she fed coins into the slot. Only when

she held the warm plastic box in her hands did the yearning finally break into relief and pleasure.

When Lemon got back to her room, Kira was blow-drying her hair. “What’d you get for dinner?!” she shouted over the noise of the dryer, and made a face when Lemon showed her what it was. A moment later, Kira got noodled too, for a Chicken Alexander. This was much better than a Beef ‘n’ Bits, but Lemon had to be satisfied with what she’d got.

They both sat on the floor to eat, placing the plastic containers on cardboard boxes about the right height to be tables. Lemon carefully peeled back the plastic lid, which let a whoosh of steam out as it opened, and took the plastic fork from the special compartment that was supposed to keep it cool but hadn’t. She had to use some of her underwear wrapped around the handle to keep from getting burned as she picked through her meal, choosing the orange and green things, and the stringly bits of brown, but staying away from the whitish blobby bits. When people who had gained a bit of weight went into a hospital machine, the fat was gone when they came out. Rumor speculated that the leftover fat ended up as the white bits in this meal. All through dinner, however, the education channel kept telling her the bits were not fat; a very serious-looking girl kept explaining that it was just a rumor and Beef ‘n’ Bits was *so* good! Lemon ignored this, but she liked some of the other things this channel had to tell her. It had all sorts of slogans that explained the way to behave, like “Rough play can go too far, so never get into fights at the bar.” That one wasn’t so good, really. Some commercials were scary too, like “Stop your frowning, whining, sniveling, or you’ll get a Bad Thoughts whipping.” That one came on at work a lot when people started to complain, or just when

the Those That heard a lot of whining thoughts. The channel was useful though, in reminding her of things she might forget otherwise, like “When you’re noodled, don’t run and scream, just drop a coin in a vending machine!” Sometimes she had trouble remembering what to do when she wanted something so badly, and that commercial always helped.

Halfway through eating, she was noodled again, for a drink, and then for a dessert, whimsically called strudel. Much better than most stroodles, Lemon thought cheerfully, licking her fingers. When she came back from the vending machines the second time, her favorite commercial was on. The announcer said “Stroodles happen during Come Out and Play, but in the night we are all the same,” along with a picture of a Those That man smiling right at the camera. This commercial made her go all fuzzy inside, and get all excited to go out to the bar. This, the fact that at night all of the ordinary people and all of the Those That men came together as equals, was what made the long days at work and the Come Out and Plays worth it all.

She and Kira exchanged a smile after the commercial had gone off. “He was sooo cute,” Kira said. “Even cuter than Mean Mark. Do you think I’ll get picked tonight, Lemon?”

Lemon gulped down her last bite of strudel and took a swallow of her drink before she answered. “I hope so,” she said. She looked at her friend doubtfully, but tried not to let her skepticism show on her face. “Do you want me to paint your nails for you?”

“Yeah! —I’ve got this Blueberry Banana Nail Swirl I’ve been wanting to try,” she said, but when she held her fingers out to Lemon both girls gasped. The back of one of her hands was a faint purple. “Oh no, what’s wrong with me?” Kira wailed.

Lemon knew what it was right away, but it was a subject embarrassing to talk about. Averting her eyes, she whispered “It’s paint.”

“Paint? . . . oh, from Come Out and Play . . .” Kira’s voice trailed off.

Even though Come Out and Play happened to them every day, it wasn’t considered polite to talk about it. No one was really even supposed to admit to remembering what had happened, even though when Lemon tried now, she could remember exactly.

That afternoon, she had been watching the PlasticPerfectPeople show with Kira. It was fun to watch TV at work, even if it hadn’t been a welcome distraction from the boredom of the assembly line. The televisions were so much bigger here than in the apartments. They were all over the factory, hanging from the ceiling in clumps of three that pointed every which way, so that everyone could always get a clear view. Lemon watched TV a lot at work, or else kept her eyes down on the doll heads in her hands. She didn’t like looking around the factory. The room was so big it gave her the creeps; from her seat she couldn’t even see the far wall. Out in front of her the factory floor was an overwhelming haze of columns, TVs flickering, and rows of conveyor belts marching out into a dim, vague, distance. Once she had been in a bar that had mirrors on three sides of the bathroom, and looking in had given the same effect—she had seen herself and the room reflected, over and over, receding into a green blurriness at last, but she’d known the reflection was still going on and on, even if she couldn’t see it anymore.

On screen, Dreamy Dan and the villain of the show, Mean Mark, had been in a fight. Mark didn’t want Buyer Barbara to have any more faux fur zebra-mink stoles since they were overflowing into the hallway of their apartment building, and blocking the

doorway to his apartment. “You have forty-seven! There’s no more room!” he kept complaining.

Dan was the hero. “Barbara can buy whatever she wants!” he said. The music rose dramatically. He punched Mark in the nose.

Lemon and Kira cheered. Lemon felt as if she had won an important victory.

But suddenly, the PerfectPeople had vanished from the screen in a swirl of color, and were replaced by a pulse of light and a surge of music. Lemon felt the call deep in her bones. Her heart began to beat in its rhythm. It seemed to come from everywhere, calling her, calling her. “Come Out,” it commanded. “Come Out. Come Out and Play.”

Like Kira, like all the rest around her, Lemon rose to her feet. Her stool tumbled to the ground as she stood up, but she didn’t care. Nobody cared. They were being called, and like the rest, Lemon strained forward in response. It felt exciting, it seemed glorious, to be swept up in the great call and the common movement of the crowd as it coiled through the conveyor belts past kicked-over stools and the dropped heads and bodies of PlasticPerfectPeople. In one spot a whole box of Stripper Sarah bodies, dressed only in their actually removable thigh-highs, had spilled across the floor like a horrible mass beheading.

Lemon’s whole body was pulling her onwards. She felt a desperation deep inside, raw and clawing at the base of her stomach, much stronger than a noodle, somewhere between fear and desire and nausea. They were calling. She had to come. If she had fallen, she would have crawled; if her hands and feet were cut off, she would have struggled along on the stumps; if she were bound she would have rolled and inched

towards the call. If she didn't move towards it, it would eat her up from inside, and she would spontaneously combust with denial and despair.

Finally the crowd poured through the door and filed out into the courtyard in the middle of the factory. At first it was a wonderful relief to finally come out of the dim, low-ceilinged building into the bright daylight. But as she came out into the courtyard, she saw the puddles on the concrete and began to remember what had happened during Come Out and Play the day before. It had been raining all day; she had heard it pounding on the roof as she worked, sharp clunk-clunks like the impact of stone on flesh. When they had gone outside the Those That men had stroddled them to stand out in the courtyard with their heads tipped back and their mouths open, drowning. Lemon's whole body had screamed, trying to escape, but she had been kept in place by feet fastened to the concrete, and her mouth had slowly filled up with bitter water. She had tried to swallow, but the water was coming too fast, and the Those That men had added to the deluge by peeing out the side of their crystal ship, stinging Lemon's face. Her eyes had been pinned open, she couldn't see, and it had become harder and harder to breathe. Her mouth had filled to running over, she had forgotten how to swallow, and her mind had begun to go numb when the stroodle ended. One of the scattered coins landed in Lemon's mouth as the ships moved away. She had fallen over forwards, coughing, spitting and dizzy, shaking with leftover fear. Lemon could still remember the water swelling up in her mouth, her vain struggle to move her head, just this once! to move and escape—

She hadn't really remembered what had happened until then, that was often how it worked. Sometimes she had to go into a hospital machine after Come Out and Play, to get cured of whatever had happened to her during the stroodle, and while it cured her the tall

silver machine would also dim the memory of what had happened, make it all faint and fuzzy, even if it had been terrible. Lemon was thankful that the hospital machines kept her from remembering what had taken place. She didn't want to. It was horrible enough to have to go through Come Out and Play when it was happening.

The line pooled to a stop in the courtyard. For a moment the call ceased, and Lemon rocked back in the sudden calm. Left to itself, her heart stuttered a moment before it knew how to beat again. Her ears rang even though the call hadn't been that loud. Four or five people tried to run for it, pelting back towards the building, but they were stroddled to fling themselves to the ground and hit themselves in the face. "Idiots," Lemon said out loud. "Some people just don't know when to give up." Her words were snatched suddenly away as her mouth snapped closed. Her arms raised and her head tilted back. A crystal ship was right above them.

The ship looked blue with the sky behind it. Only a paler haze marked out its shape: that of a giant, high-rimmed, almost transparent bowl that skimmed smoothly through the sky. Lemon could never tell how the Those That men controlled the ships, all she could ever see was them standing there, somehow keeping their balance as the ship moved. During Come Out and Play they would stand around the edges and peer down. Now she was staring up at the floor of the ship, at the bottom of the Those That's feet. The soles of their shoes were silver-gray too, just like their silver-gray suits. This struck Lemon as funny, and she tried to laugh, but it was trapped inside her stuck-shut mouth. Oh well, she thought, as the stroddle forced her to prostrate herself, at least they don't want to make us drown today.

Her face pressed to the cement; her nose and mouth were crushed against the cold damp hardness, but thankfully there was room enough to breathe, although each gasp tasted wet. Her arms stretched out in front of her. She heard someone moving around among the bent-over bodies; when they got to her they flipped up her dress, exposing her backside. Internally, Lemon braced herself, sure she was going to be raped again, and hoped that her dress didn't get torn, since it was a new one she particularly liked, but instead the figure moved on without so much as a pinch. A moment later, something large and wet splattered down on her behind. She squeaked in surprise—the stroodle allowed noises of surprise or pain; the Those That apparently liked sounds of alarm—and a second smack hit her on the shoulder and the side of the head. Although she still could not turn to look, she found that she was able to roll her eyes over to see with relief that, instead of the various disgusting substances that could have hit her, what had smacked against her shoulder was bright orange: nothing but paint. There goes my dress, she thought, irritated, but at least this stroodle didn't seem designed to hurt. She got hit once more, this time again on her backside, before the compulsion to kneel over began to fade. Lemon sat back slowly, relieved to find that the heavy-hanging crystal ships were beginning to move away. Coins fell down from them, along with the trail of the Those That's laughter.

Lemon scooped up a handful of the coins and tucked them carefully away in her mini-bag before she climbed to her feet. Once she was upright, the paint, still wet, began to run down her legs in yellow and purple lines that pooled in her shoes. Orange crept down her arm. The courtyard was filled with squelching sounds as the factory workers filed back into the building.

She had changed her dress for an uglier one, pink with red dots, that had been left on the table where people dumped stuff they had been nudged to buy but didn't want to carry home, but the shower was already so clogged with people with purple in their hair or blue faces that she'd decided to wait until work was over to clean up, even though the paint itched as it caked and dried. During her shower when she'd gotten home, Lemon had been able to ignore the colors washing off her body, and Kira must have too, but some of the paint must not have come off.

That was all really, just paint, Lemon thought as she stared at Kira, although deep inside her she knew it was much worse than that. She could tell that Kira was remembering too, and for a moment they recognized the horror in each other's eyes. But Lemon didn't dare to say anything, and the noise of the TV burst in upon them, and the moment was past. "I'll help you wash it off," she offered quickly, and five minutes later, after scrubbing with a loofah and fingernail polish remover, the hand and their memories were wiped clean.

Lemon painted Kira's nails, and then Kira fixed Lemon's hair, curling it and pulling it back with a bunch of little clips that had bells dangling from them, so she chimed gently as she moved. With the addition of makeup, jewelry, Lemon's other shoe and yellow knee-high boots for Kira, they were ready.

The curving stairs seemed much easier to navigate this time, now that they were going to the bar. Hand in hand, Lemon and Kira skipped through the lobby and out into the street. Lemon's thoughts were becoming more and more consumed with the Those That men. In the bars, they seemed so much more wonderful than she could ever imagine. During Come Out and Play, she didn't really dare think too much about them, it just

seemed to be something they all had to undergo. At work, they stayed in their little glass supervisor booths, removed and remote.

But in the bars, in the night, it was all different. She didn't want to think about the rest of the day, or the things about the Those That that made her uncertain or uncomfortable. She wanted to think about how wonderful they were at night, how wonderful everything was. No one was noodled or stroodled now, everyone was happy, everyone came together to enjoy themselves. All around her the crowd that swarmed the streets was joyful. People were singing, people were dancing, everyone was letting out glad cries that their long day was over. Lemon leaned over to kiss Kira happily on the mouth as she danced along too, then tipped her head back to look up at the sky. A crystal ship drifted against the orange-haze night. It no longer looked half so majestic or beautiful as when silhouetted against daytime sky, and the thought made her smile with satisfaction. "But in the night we are all the same," she said aloud.

Chapter 2

The Citadel:

When Astrix came into the apartment in the evenings, Lemon was always in the windowseat. Even though she stared firmly out the window, and never turned to look at him, he always felt a jolt of relief, lust, and happiness to see her there. In these rooms where he had lived so long alone and frozen in his heart the very sight of her was a miracle. Even if she hated him now, even if she wouldn't talk to him, she was there, and she would be there forever. He could wait for her to get over her anger. He was happy enough just to stand looking at her: the blond hair scrabbling messily down over her back, the firm set of her small chin, the hunch of her shoulders, the lump her knees made under the blanket she had tucked around her. It was the one he had brought her, the one he had had the servants make especially, and wrapped in the colorful cloth her whole figure was dazzling in its brightness. He could barely look anywhere else when she was nearby, even his computers and machine components hardly seemed to exist anymore unless he shut himself up in his workroom and shut her out.

Some days it was so hard to bring in the dinner tray and set it politely on the table, to eat across from her, to keep a distance from her in bed. He wanted to grab her and crush her close against him, feel her small body in his arms, feel the touch of her skin against him, her breath on his face, her eyes on him to make him real. He could even laugh at the irony sometimes; when for the first time in centuries his sex drive was active again, he couldn't satisfy it by simply calling a servant to his rooms. That kind of pleasure, from the frightened, cringing women and men he had brought to his apartment for seven hundred years, was not what he wanted. Even the girls in the city bars, whose

laughter and sparkles had dazzled him, had faded into insignificance now. He wanted Lemon. No one else mattered.

He approached her slowly, calling her name, but she didn't turn. Occasionally the lack of response frustrated him so much that he wanted to shake her and scream at her until she would speak to him and look at him, but he always held himself back. What were the Citizens—the Those That—good at if not self-control, after all?

“Lemon,” he said again, trying to make his voice gentle, trying to keep it from trembling. “Lemon?”

She didn't move. She sat so still he couldn't hear her breathe and she didn't answer. Astrix let his own breath out in a long sigh. “I'm going to get dinner,” he said, and turned to slide quietly back out into the corridor.

Instead of calling a servant, since it made Lemon so angry and upset to see them, he took the elevator up to the dining room on the twentieth floor himself. The dining room was on the top level of the club, one of the Citadel's few public areas.

The Citadel was officially composed of nine tall buildings, eight in a circle around the ninth, but the buildings were all connected by a nest of bridges and hallways so that the original plan had been obscured. In general, however, the rooms were used for their original purposes: the lower floors for storage, areas for private apartments and servants' quarters, several floors of one building devoted to gardens, and in the center building, the club—storerooms of wine and drugs of all kinds, a desolate and deserted golf course, card and billiard rooms, and the Citadel's main kitchen and dining room. The dining room was just above the kitchens so that food served there was at its freshest and

delivered quickly. Most of the Citizens ate their meals there instead of in their apartments, not just for the food but also for the ambiance.

The dining room was very elegant. The twenty-foot ceiling dangled elaborate glass chandeliers; the walls were lined with bookcases that housed ancient books, pieces of sculpture, and set-in speakers to bring the music played by carefully trained servants close to every corner of the room. Polished wood tables were set out across the gray carpet, each with a silver place setting that gleamed in the warm light. In the center of the room two delicate spiral staircases, carved of polished rare mahogany, crossed and re-crossed each other as they rose to the club's other rooms and finally to the Museum at the top, where historical artifacts were kept in special cases. From the middle of the dining hall, Astrix could look all the way up the stairs to the great glass ceiling far above, where the stars were beginning to come out in the dark blue sky. He had eaten in this room so many times! Uncountable times. For the first few centuries, mealtimes had been torture—the same foods over and over and over again. Everyone had gone in cycles: first eating standard food, then demanding more and more innovation until they were all eating things like turnips and cherries in maple sauce, and then swinging wildly back to the basics. One man had eaten the same dish every dinner for forty years; others had refused to eat at all—waiting until they were almost dead from starvation to totter into a hospital machine. But then, suddenly, in their late 200s or early 300s, they had gotten used to it.

In the old days when Astrix had sat down at a table, a servant had appeared instantly to fill his glass with wine and place a marijuana cigarette on the little silver dish set out for it. The Citizens had happily eaten steak, farm-raised tuna sushi, and crème brûlées, and filled the room with a buzz of conversation. But now, although his time in

the city and Lemon's enjoyment had filled Astrix with a new appreciation for the food, he couldn't bear to be in the dining room any longer than the time it took to order dinner. As soon as it was ready, he took the tray the servants prepared for him and hurried back towards Lemon.

The gently curving corridors he walked through were decorated tastefully with muted light, soft gray carpet and gray walls, and created an atmosphere of quiet, of peace and serenity. But Astrix was reminded how little here was truly peaceful or serene when he passed a small group of Citizens standing in front of one of the tall windows overlooking the country of the sun-worshippers. The manic hiss of their whispering and the predatory gleam in their eyes showed that they were immersed in some sort of plot. Astrix shivered as he hurried past, balancing his tray carefully, glad that his feet made no noise on the carpet and that he was soon around a twist in the passageway, where the granite-lined walls could keep him from sight.

In the early years of the Citadel, the coups and power struggles had been played out on a grand scale. Fifty years after their life there had begun, the Citizen women had been mindwiped and cast out into the city. Astrix had been fifty-eight at the time, with the mind and body of a ten-year-old, but he could still vividly remember that night—the masked ball, with the women in colorful, billowing dresses, the men all in gray, all dressed as death. Even Astrix had worn a small skull mask. Then there had been the dramatic seizure of the women, designed to let them know what their fate was to be before the memory-erasers were put to their heads. Such melodrama! And yet, even then Astrix had understood that with such long life, such endless time, and such complete

power over the servants as their everyday lives, only melodrama was enough to seem real.

That coup had started both the fashion of wearing only gray and a mania for more plots. A hundred years later, another coup had killed off the entire generation of their fathers, the men who had set up the whole system in the first place. Astrix personally had thought this was a waste, for some of these older men had had knowledge about how the Citadel ran, but he hadn't cared enough to start a counterplot, even if he had known how. He had watched with a degree of emotionlessness his father should have approved of when the group of young Citizens burst into the club one night and shot his father in front of his eyes. After that time, though, the plots and schemes had dwindled in scope to one group of allies working against another, with the stakes as loss of prestige, loss of control, sometimes the penalty of performing a sex act for or on the winner, or, less often, even extending to being abandoned in the city, memory erased.

Astrix had been one of those who had fallen victim to a plot, who had undergone what the other Citizens viewed as the worst humiliation possible: becoming one of the ordinary men in the city. He had never really belonged in the Citadel; he had always been far more interested in the computerized machinery that ran their lives and how it worked than the other Citizens' power games. He had thought that his knowledge would protect him, since he was the led a team of servants to repair the vital hospital machines when they broke, and held most of the actual knowledge about how the machines worked, but some of the Citizens hadn't cared about that. One of them, Castille, had decided that Astrix was vulnerable because of these differences, enough so that his life could be twisted into a game for Castille's amusement.

When he thought about that time, before he had been thrown out into the city but once Castille's plot had begun, Astrix knew he had believed he was oblivious. But he realized now that he had known what was going to happen.

For so long he had immersed himself in the study of the hospital machines. He had realized that the automated system that was supposed to keep them in good repair wasn't working correctly, and had taken it on himself to keep the machines in good working order. But the other Citizens thought he was foolish, and certainly Astrix had been—he had fixed all of the machines before their breakdowns were evident, so no one realized the worth of his work. Even when he could get a few of the other Citizens to listen to him at all, they had scoffed at his worries and at his suggestion that they could learn how to fix the machines too, had laughed at the idea that such knowledge was valuable. "I'd just have a servant fix it," more than one had blithely told Astrix, sure that his power over the servants could make one somehow gain the necessary knowledge and skills instantly, out of fear.

But Astrix had been just as cavalier about the danger to himself from Castille. His friend Julian had warned him several times, and yet Astrix had never bothered to try to protect himself. He had kept to his old ways, almost taunting Castille to act. He knew now that he had wanted it to happen, that somewhere deep inside him he had grown so desperately sick of life in the Citadel that he had been willing to do anything to escape it.

For so long he had been the one in control. In control of others and in control of himself. There had been the servants, of course, cooking, washing, cleaning. He hadn't had to lift a finger to bathe or feed himself if he didn't want to. Some days he hadn't; he had played with the idea of passivity by ordering the servants to clean and dress him, and

feed him with a spoon. But even when he let them move his body, they still knew he was in control. They were too frightened to ever forget it for a moment. If Astrix had wanted to, he could have had any of them at any time, he could have beaten, tortured, killed them only to have them brought back to life by the hospital machines to be beaten or killed again.

In the city it had been the same. The people below during Come Out and Play had been miniature toys from the height of the crystal ships, dolls to play with, crash together in one form or another, dismember, or kill, with no real harm done. No repercussions. In the bars, the women had seemed to want him and the other Citizens, but that had all been under his control too, and when he had taken them back to the pocket rooms he had lain there, still, showing his power through his lack of response, sneering inwardly at their enthusiasm, their emotion, so that even his pleasure was remote. It had not been so much about the sex as about the holding back, the superior control. What Astrix couldn't understand was why he had been the only one who had grown tired of that kind of sex, of Come Out and Play, of that life, after seven hundred years. He had grown tired of feeling less and less, while the other Citizens only wanted to make the people feel more and more—more pain, more humiliation, more debasement.

But he had grown so tired of it all, of everything but his work. He thought that Lemon wanted to believe that it was some kindness in him, or concern for other people, that made it all grow old, but he knew that wasn't true. He felt no such thing then, nor did now for anyone but Lemon. What he had felt was weariness of being in control. He wanted to be relieved of all responsibility; he wanted to be able to give himself over to the anger and hate he had been acting out for so long without the release of the emotions.

Part of him had known that Castille was plotting against him, part of him knew that he would take him down. But he didn't resist; he didn't *want* to resist. He wanted to topple over the edge in his brain. And in the city, too, he had let himself forget. He had blocked off any memory and sunk into the moment. The time, almost a year ago now, that he had woken in the city without any memory or any idea of who he was had been the most terrifying of his life. But it had also been one of the best.

The City:

Astrix had woken with a start. Gradually, he became aware that he was sprawled on his stomach on a dusty white mattress. He raised himself up on his elbows and looked around the room. There was not much to see. It was only about ten feet square, with rough stone block walls and a half-open door that revealed a dirty bathroom. The room was completely empty except for the mattress he lay on, the balls of dust along the floorboards, the television in the corner and the large window in the wall. None of it looked even slightly familiar.

“Do I live here?” Astrix asked aloud. The quietly muttering television did not answer him, and a strange twinge of discomfort bloomed in his stomach. He could not remember anything: if he had seen this room before, if he lived there, who he was, even his name. The problem seemed to merit panic, but Astrix could only muster slight worry as he studied the room. There were no identifying features, nothing unique to mark it as his own or to tell him who he might be. He closed his eyes, then popped them open again, trying to trick himself into some kind of recognition, but there was still nothing.

He sat up. The movement added nausea to the fear in his stomach and he put his head between his knees for a few moments. He had to lean on the wall to make it over to

the bathroom, which was just as unfamiliar, although the dirt filled him with disgust and when he saw the roach on top of the sink he had to turn to the toilet and throw up without pause for several minutes. Afterwards, carefully ignoring the roach, he peered into the hazy mirror above the sink and inspected his face. Blue eyes, a stubble of beard, spikes of orangish-blond hair that stuck up off his head. He did not recognize anything, and although he knew this should bother him, he felt only dazed and confused. He staggered back into the main room and went over to the window. His legs were trembling underneath him by the time he reached it and sat down on the ledge.

He was very high up in an apartment building, perhaps at the very top. Below him lay the roofs of a city, spread out to the horizon. The early morning sky was a deep blue, with clouds running in long, high streaks from over Astrix's head out to the golden light welling up from behind the other edge of the city. In between the pale clouds, he could see faint stars shining down at him. It's so beautiful, he thought, and it seemed almost a familiar thought running down a familiar groove in his brain.

When he turned to look down at the city, it was not as horrible as he had somehow expected it to be. This early, the streets were deserted and still. In the grayish-pink light, even the heaps of trash looked serene, and above them the apartment buildings stood calm and silent, their rough concrete exteriors rosy in the morning light. This view at least felt familiar. He knew this sight of the city below him, knew the early-morning sky. He felt as if he had seen this hundreds or thousands of times, knew it down into the core of his being. Obviously, the sight went so deep that whatever had wiped away the rest of his memory was unable to touch it.

As the sky began to grow lighter, Astrix's body became restless, fidgeting where he sat until he finally stood up. For the first time it occurred to him to look at what he was wearing to see if his clothing gave him any clue to who he was. But the jeans, the plain green shirt and the boots told him nothing, although something about the thick heavy cloth of his jeans felt strange. He was rubbing it wonderingly in his fingers when a loud blast of sound from the television caught his attention. He glanced up at the TV, and was suddenly noodled.

At first it felt as if someone had sneaked in behind him and smashed him on the head with something heavy. Astrix staggered, threw out his hands to catch himself as he almost fell, and by the time he caught his balance again, was consumed by the strange feeling welling through his body. It started in his knees and then raced upwards, became arousal as it shot through his groin, then a strange mixture of hunger and nausea in his stomach. It wrapped tendrils around his heart and lungs, taking over their rhythm with its own, and then burst into his brain: desperation and desire spun him around and threw him towards the door. Frantically he clawed at the unfamiliar handle, not noticing as splinters of the shoddily cut door broke off into his flesh.

Once out in the dark and narrow hall, he hesitated. To the left, there were a few more doors and then the hall ended in a stairwell going down. To the right, the passageway sloped down more gradually. Astrix looked back and forth, hoping for a memory to guide him or at least a sign of some sort, someone else headed the same way? But there was no one, and all around him there was a deserted-sounding quiet, as if none of the nearby apartments were occupied. The only sound was Astrix's own ragged breathing.

Despite his indecision, his twitching body couldn't stand still for very long. He finally gave up on thought and just ran down the slope to his right. This hallway seemed to join two buildings together; as Astrix ran by a window he got an impression of height and space that made him imagine he was in a corridor-style bridge, running from one building to another. A wide seam in the floor indicated when he came into the next building, and then the corridor sloped down sharply to become a ramp. Although he was still desperate to run, Astrix had to slow down or he would fall. He walked as quickly as he could, bracing himself against the wall to keep his balance as he kept going down. He passed the openings to several more floors, but each opened only onto halls lined with apartments. Their closed doors mocked him with their silence, with the fact that they were not what he so desperately needed.

At last the ramp slung him out into a large room, in which all of the walls were lined with tall vending machines, their glass windows lush with food, clothes, and toys. The machines swirled before his eyes as he ran from one to the next, searching. When he finally found what he was looking for, for a moment he couldn't believe it. There were coins in his pocket; he pushed them into the slot with shaking fingers. "One Big Chompy," a metallic female voice responded, and then he had to wait a horrible moment while gears whined and churned. When the package finally tumbled into his hands, he was overcome with such relief that his knees gave out and he fell to the floor, starting to cry uncontrollably.

When the fit had passed, Astrix was still too weak to get up. He stayed where he was, slumped against the vending machine, and unwrapped the package to find some

kind of meal. Now that he had it, it didn't look too appetizing: coarse, greasy bread sandwiching a fatty sausage. But he ate it anyway, sitting there on the concrete floor.

Above him, bare light bulbs swung from a ceiling held up by gray metal rafters. In each corner of the room there were televisions flashing colorful images. Besides the vending machines, the room held only two dusty tables and one other man, who was moaning and rocking back and forth in front of a display of plastic tiffany lamps, his eyes focused miserably on one. Astrix wondered if this was what happened when a noodled person had no coins. How long would he stay that way? He watched the man for a while, fascinated, then realized that he had finished his breakfast. He licked the last greasy crumbs off his fingers and climbed slowly to his feet. Although unpleasant, the food had given him strength. He felt physically restored and energetic as he started across the room.

As he reached the doorway, he was seized by another noodle. It was easy, however, to run back across the room and buy the doll named Dreamy Dan from the vending machine packed with similar dolls. This time, he escaped the room without problem, holding the doll thoughtfully as he turned down a new corridor. It was true that the meal had been tasteless and unhealthy, and that the doll was silly and useless. He set it down on a pile of trash as he walked by. But the noodle itself—there had been something about the way he had been swept out of control, something that he liked.

His body went down the corridor and turned into a stairwell automatically. Nevertheless, Astrix made himself go down slowly, kicking trash out of the way and carefully stepping over the people that were occasionally slumped across the steps, passed out. None of this appeared familiar, not even when he came out the front door of

the apartment building and stood blinking in the sudden sunlight. Here and there on other steps, people were emerging, many with packets of breakfast in their hands. The smell of their fresh food and of the older food rotting in the piles of trash along the sides of the street rushed in at him and for the first few moments he was doubled over, barely able to breathe. Slowly, as the smell receded, he straightened back up and crept down the stairs and along the street. Every now and then he hit a pocket of a new or a more rancid odor that forced him to gasp for breath.

At last, the crooked street led him to a wider one and a bus stop on the corner. Astrix's body paused at the sign, and only a few moments later a bus pulled up. The ride cost one coin, and as he moved to his seat, he worriedly felt over the few remaining in his pocket.

He tried looking out the window for a while, but the gray buildings peeling past, combined with the sudden stops and starts, made him feel ill. He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. The ride took a long time; after a while the stopping ceased but even after that they went a long way. When the bus finally began to slow down, and Astrix opened his eyes, they were no longer surrounded by tall apartment houses, but instead by low, windowless buildings that clicked by, one blankly after the other, until the bus lurched to a stop. The men stood to file off, and Astrix fell in at the end of the line.

The men ahead of him, he noticed, all wore jeans and boots like he did. They shuffled through the dust very slowly. Their faces were blank and looked sleepy. Something about the numb way they moved forward into the dark doorway of the building made him grow a little nervous. When Astrix stepped through the door in his turn, he was in a large, dim room. Shadowy forms of machinery lurked all around, but his

attention was caught immediately by the man sitting in a small glass-walled booth and watching the workers enter. This man was dressed in gray, smooth clothing, and his expression was calm and smooth too, until his eyes turned to Astrix. Then his face caught fire; his eyes blazed up and his mouth parted in the semblance of a smile, far enough for his teeth to glint in the gray light.

Astrix only felt confused and frightened. He was frozen; all he could do was stare miserably back, until finally the other man stood up, rising in an oddly fluid motion, as if he had no bones. Then somehow the spell was broken and Astrix fled, stumbling through the machinery to catch up to the end of the line, so far ahead of him now that the men were vague anonymous shapes in the dimness.

When he staggered into his place, the rest of the workers were waiting next to an elevator. In small groups, they filed in and were taken away. Astrix squeezed in with the last of the men. Once again, the smell started to overwhelm him, this time that of the unwashed, crammed-together bodies, and he was dizzy and nauseated by the time the elevator came to a stop. It took several moments of leaning against the nearest wall and taking deep, carefully controlled breaths before he could look around and see where he was.

He was standing in a large underground room that was shored up by boards and complete with a pile of pickaxes in the corner. A mine, his memory helpfully supplied the word, although he could find no recollection of ever being there before. What to do next was simple enough, however. The other workers grabbed pickaxes, and took an empty box from another pile. They put the boxes on little carts and pulled these after them down the small tunnels spiraling off from the central area. Astrix took supplies of his own and

followed one of the workers down a tunnel. The low ceiling and close walls made him very uncomfortable. He found it hard to believe that he did this every day.

When he reached the end of the tunnel and started chopping at the rock with his axe he found it even harder to accept. His arms were exhausted almost as soon as he had begun, and the small chips of rock he ended up with were nothing like the larger chunks the man next to him produced, apparently with little or no effort. Astrix's arms began to burn and felt heavier and heavier. By the time he had filled his first box halfway, the other worker had gone back down the tunnel to exchange his full box for an empty one three times. Astrix began to wonder why he was even working at all—would anyone notice if he stopped? The moment he tried to test this theory, however, and slumped to the ground, a voice came out of nowhere: “Get back to work, Astrix.”

Astrix was so startled, both by the voice and by the revelation of what his name was, that he jumped to his feet and started to work again. He didn't dare try to stop and rest anymore, so the rest of the day dragged on more and more slowly and more and more painfully. At lunchtime a bell rang, but Astrix didn't know what it was and just kept on working until the man next to him reached over and grabbed his axe. “Hey, buddy,” he said. “The lunchbell rang. Didn't you hear it?”

“Huh?” Astrix gaped at him for a moment until the words resolved themselves into sense in his brain. “Oh. Where do we eat?”

“Upstairs,” the other man answered, starting to walk back down the tunnel. Astrix dropped his tools and followed dazedly. His arms hung heavily at his sides; he felt as if his hands were still clenching the axe. Tingles ran painfully up from his wrists to his elbows. “Haven't you worked here before?” the man asked. He didn't seem to notice that

Astrix was staggering after him in contortions that should have answered his question immediately.

“No, that is, I’m not sure,” Astrix answered. “Do you remember seeing me around here before?”

The man laughed. “Hell, I don’t know. Everyone looks the same to me. What’s your name?”

“A-Astrix,” he mumbled uncertainly. The name sounded strange in his ears but it felt somewhat familiar in his mouth, and he relaxed slightly. “Astrix,” he said again quietly to himself, feeling the way his mouth moved, before he remembered that the worker might overhear. But they had reached the elevator and joined a group of other men, with whom the man was already talking. Astrix stood awkwardly to one side as they talked loudly and easily among themselves, even pushing, slapping, and punching at each other in a way that made him feel horribly uncomfortable. When the elevator came, he wedged himself into a corner and was happy to be ignored.

They were let out on a floor that was still underground, with the vague shapes of vending machines and long tables looming up in the murky darkness. The men swarming through the room looked like some kind of strange, nightmare creatures—goblins or trolls. He almost expected their eyes to glow red and it terrified him at first to walk among them. They appeared so inhuman in the semi-darkness that he wouldn’t have been surprised if they had wanted to eat him. But as soon as he had taken a few steps into the room, he got caught in a noodle and all of his worries vanished. There was only room for one thought in his mind; the men around him were insignificant, meaningless. All he wanted in the world was a LederSchnitzel Exotic Meal Pak.

Once he held it, felt the warmth in his hands and breathed in the smell, he was enveloped in a calm that lasted as he took a seat at one of the long tables. Both the bench and the table surface itself were coated with grease, but there was nowhere else to sit. Astrix opened his meal gingerly, remembering that his breakfast had contained its own fair share of grease, but the sausages and potatoes inside actually smelled good. He ate slowly, trying not to watch the workers chewing with noisy, open mouths that spilled splotches down on their clothes. They ignored the mess they were making, just kept on jabbering and poking and punching at one another. Astrix sat on the very edge of the bench, and no one tried to talk to or touch him, as if they could hear his inward voice begging to be left alone.

By the time the bell rang again and lunch was over, Astrix's head was pounding from the noise and the smell. His elbows and the back of his jeans were greasy and it was hard to pretend the men didn't exist when he was crammed into an elevator full of them. His arms still ached miserably and his throat felt scratchy and sore, either from the dust or the LederSchnitzel. Back down in the tunnel, when he picked up the axe, he thought that his arms might fall off. He wished they would. But they remained attached and somehow still chopped and hacked, bringing up clouds of dust that stuck to him where he had already been coated with grease.

He was not expecting the call. But when the rock around him came alive, and he felt the rumble deep in his bones, he recognized the sensation intimately. He felt an instinctive rush of pleasure at the sound, and he turned towards it eagerly, following the call upwards: Come Out. Come Out. Come Out and Play.

Their Come Out and Play was held in the street in front of the factory. When Astrix came out into the afternoon light, he was dazzled by the crystal ship hanging right above his head, spinning the light beneath it into a cool, cloudy, beautiful blue. The variation, at last, in the day and the rest from the horrible work and the wondrous sight before him all sent Astrix into a blissful, dreamy state. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw apprehensive frowns on the faces of the other men, but he ignored them. He felt so peaceful and happy, surely nothing bad could happen. And nothing did.

Astrix did not know this feeling; this was not something he could remember at all. It was like the noodles he had experienced earlier, but it was not the same. The noodles had hollowed him out with the desire for something else, but this filled him up, filled him to overflowing. He stood in the middle of the group of workers and suddenly realized how much larger he was than they were; he towered over all of them by at least half a head and had much more bulk. Despite the digging they must do every day, their bodies looked scrawny and underfed. If he had noticed before how small they were and how much they could dig and carry, compared to his own efforts, he might have been terribly embarrassed. But now the stroodle made him feel twice his size, gigantic and powerful. When he looked around at the workers, they screamed, they flung themselves to the ground, they cowered at his feet. It felt wonderful. Astrix smiled, and the smile was not part of the stroodle, but his own.

He looked down at the men crouched on the ground. One of them in particular annoyed him by the way he knelt; he was not tucked down as far as some of the others. Astrix walked over to the man and kicked him. He watched the pain flash across the other man's face as he slumped heavily to the side. The pain was replaced by an obvious

longing to move, to fight back, but he was unable to do so. For just a moment Astrix froze. He suddenly didn't know what to do next, he almost wanted to take back what he had just done, or at least to help the other man up. But the stroodle decided for him. Instead of reaching out to the worker, Astrix kicked him again. He dropped to his knees on the man's back and shoved his victim's face down into the asphalt, grinding it in until he could see blood seeping out across the pebbles.

When the stroodle was over, Astrix stood up slowly in the sudden hail of coins and applause tumbling down from the crystal ship. He was partly horrified by what he had done, but mostly exhilarated. His heart was racing and he felt very different from the exhausted, dirty man who had staggered out to Come Out and Play. Now every part of his body blazed with energy. He scooped up some of the coins that were scattered across the pavement, filling his pockets, as the man he had beaten was taken off to a hospital machine. Astrix saw him later—completely healed, the bruises and scrapes had vanished. All second thoughts Astrix might have had about the stroodle vanished too.

The work of the afternoon almost flew by. Before he knew it, they were lining up to go back up on the elevator and pass once more in front of the man in the gray suit. This time he was delivering coins to them, sending each man's wages out in a little metal box from his booth, and at first Astrix became even happier at the prospect of getting some more money.

When he reached the booth, however, the smooth gray man was staring at him just as intently as he had that morning. Under that gaze all the stress of the day sank back into Astrix's bones. The energy the stroodle had given him was all gone; he was exhausted. Trembling, he took his money and then fled the gleaming smile as quickly as

he could, back to the slow, weary bus ride. He was stiff and sore by the time he was back at his bus stop, and he was sure that he would never be able to find his apartment again. He wondered if anyone would notice if he just went into the first empty room he found and lay down. But he wasn't sure how these things worked, so he kept going back through the twisting streets and up the ramps and staircases until he opened the door on an empty room that looked like the one he had left that morning. The room still felt unfamiliar, but at least it was a place to rest. He staggered inside and barely had time to strip off his clothes before he collapsed on the mattress and fell asleep instantly.

When he awoke it was dark and he was being noodled for a dinner meal. He had to grab some coins and run out naked. Although there were several other people in the vending area, no one commented on, or even seemed to notice, his nudity. Astrix took his meal quickly and went back to his room, where there was no choice but to eat crouched on the floor. Hunching over the plastic box, spooning pasta and chunks of slimy chicken into his mouth, he felt so odd that he was sure, despite his missing memory, that he couldn't belong here. This was not how he ate dinner. But he was too tired to care or be worried. His brain still felt thick and fuzzy and he thought it was probably best for it to be that way. As soon as he finished eating, he took a shower and decided he would go to bed, to try to be ready for the next day's work.

This did not turn out to be quite so easy, however. He lay down on his mattress and attempted to sleep, but the light panel over his head glared in his eyes and he could find no way to turn in off. The constant light made him feel trapped and exposed; there was no darkness to hide or warm him, no darkness to erase the thoughts that crawled and squirmed like merciless bugs across his brain. He was left with himself.

But not quite alone. The walls of the room, bleak and final as they seemed, were thin and voices trickled incessantly through. At first he thought these voices were garbled from passing through the stone blocks, but after two or three times when words came through clearly, he realized that most of the twisted, gobbled sentences simply sounded like they had been spoken. For a horrifying moment images of twisted mouths, more goblin-like creatures, deformed monsters, floated in front of him. Surely people couldn't make these sounds. Surely these, these things around him could not be what people were.

And of course there was the television. Like the lights, it would not turn off no matter what buttons he pressed on the remote control or on the console itself. He could change to any of several channels, but most of them seemed to be showing the same thing, only spaced a few moments apart. The voices of the characters were all alike wherever he turned, and their screeches, shrieks, and curses were barely more human-sounding than those wavering through the walls.

He thought about smashing his head into something. Maybe he could knock himself out, into blessed, dark oblivion, or maybe he could knock himself insane. Insanity would be refreshing, safe, he could hide there as well as in the dark. But he could not quite find the courage to bash his head in, and no matter how much he struggled with the walls in his mind he couldn't break them down. He remained sane; he remained on the lumpy, filthy mattress. Occasionally he fell asleep, but it must have been for only a few moments at a time, because his dreams jabbered at him and woke him up again immediately. The night seemed as if it would never end. After a while the voices grew less frequent, and from then on he kept his eyes focused on the window, begging for the first edge of gray to the night. When dawn finally came, he was too exhausted to be glad.

He fell asleep again, for a slightly longer period of time, and woke to the TV singing happily at him to Rise and Shine. He wanted to throw something at it.

But already there was no room for such choices. He staggered to his feet, obedient although he ached horribly all over, and was swept up in a noodle. After that horrible night the feeling was bliss. The mental agony that had cramped him was gone. Everything was clear. He only had to follow the need that led him to the machines, and then, when he held the EggFluff cake in his hands, he was fulfilled. Even though part of his mind complained that the taste was bad and oily, most of him was overjoyed. With each bite he felt as if he sank lower and lower into a place inside himself where he could finally rest, where he only wanted to breathe the EggFluff cake in, smear it all over himself, wallow, crawl, tunnel into it.

That day at work he pretended to himself that the rocks he was digging were crumbs out of a giant EggFluff cake. This helped the morning pass by a little more easily than the day before, despite the fact that his arms ached almost as much and his bucket filled just as slowly. But between being half-dazed from lack of sleep and from the effects of the noodle that morning, as well as the knowledge that Come Out and Play would come later to break the tedium of the day, he was able to keep going.

When the call finally came, Astrix hurried down the tunnel. His body felt suddenly light, energetic, eager to follow the luring sound up the elevator shaft and out into the street. Once again the powerful force swept him up, swirled him into the center of the group of men. His body was almost weightless, his brain cleared of all thought, worry, and pain, filled with a freedom and a happiness that he had not known for an

unbearable amount of time. He could have laughed aloud if his mouth was not sealed shut.

When the stroodle wave slid into him, it sliced him open into pure pleasure, rippling down his body, transforming slowly and ecstatically into heavy, pulsing lust. The other workers swirled in front of him, dizzily, before one came into focus. Astrix knocked him down, straddled him, and the next moment sank into layers and layers of pleasure as if he was drowning in an EggFluff cake.

Today the stroodle was only rape, no real violence. Astrix didn't care. He collected coins afterwards just the same, reflecting to himself as he did so that what he really liked was the moment just at the beginning, like the moment right at the start of a noodle, when suddenly his own thoughts were pulled away, when there was no choice but to surrender control and accept whatever came next.

Days passed one after the other that were all the same. Astrix lost count of how long he had been in the city. Time had no meaning anyway. There was only work, and the miserable, tortured nights, and Come Out and Play. At first he saw the daily stroodle as the only good thing in his life. However, as he slowly became more and more used to working in the mine and the break for Come Out and Play was no longer such a physical relief, he began to have uncomfortable thoughts about some of the stroodles. They were all violent, a fact that, he learned from eavesdropping on conversations between the other workers, had not always been true before he had come to the mine. Although *most* of the stroodles had been violent before, occasionally they had been different, sometimes silly, such as when the men were made to sing and dance in rhythm, or stand on their heads; other times just stupid, such as the workers getting pissed on by the Those That from

their crystal ships or ordered to roll around in trash. And not only were all the stroodles violent now, but they all seemed to focus on Astrix. Most days it was he who acted, he who beat or raped or stabbed, and the other men either were his helpless victims or stood around watching just as passively. Sometimes he thought the other men looked at him uneasily in the elevator, as if wondering who he was going to attack next, and the Those That man who sat at the mine's entrance—always the same one, Astrix was convinced—smiled at him a little wider and a little more meaningfully as he left each day, as if he approved of everything Astrix had done earlier.

One day in particular he felt mixed emotions as they filed out, obedient to the call thrumming in their bones. The day before had been a particularly unpleasant stroodle, in which he had hacked off a man's head with one of the mine pickaxes. Astrix had gotten drenched in blood and the victim had to be carried off in two pieces to a hospital machine. He had seen him afterwards, walking and talking as usual, but Astrix found it hard to convince himself that the other man's head looked completely straight on his neck. He wasn't really worried about the man, but it still made him uncomfortable to think that he might have done something that couldn't be taken back.

That day was no better. Astrix actually had a brief moment of panic as the stroodle wave sank down, even tried for a moment to struggle against it, but then he was moving helplessly to another one of the workers, knocking him down and breaking back his fingers one by one, despite his screams and feeble wriggling. Afterwards, Astrix almost wanted to say he was sorry, but the man clambered to his feet at once and hurried off towards the hospital machine before he could get the words out. Astrix sat where he

was on the concrete, not even bothering to pick up any coins, feeling suddenly disoriented and dejected.

“Hey,” a voice said from behind him. Astrix craned back over his shoulder to see Jake, the man who worked next to him in the mine. “Hey,” he said again. There was a strange look on his face. Astrix had to think a moment before he could decipher it as sympathy. “These stroodles aren’t your fault. You can’t control what happens,” he went on. Then he reached out and put his hand on Astrix’s shoulder.

The world seemed to spin to a stop. All Astrix could be aware of was the warm weight of the man’s hand. He had never felt anything like it that he could remember; it struck him so forcibly that he knew for sure nothing like this had happened since long before he had lost his memory. Jake was still talking, but he could barely hear the words, he could only be amazed at the touch.

Abruptly another man’s face appeared in his memory, someone standing very close to him, talking in low, urgent tones. “He’s going to come after you,” he was saying. “Castille. He and his friends think you’re vulnerable, Astrix. Watch out.”

Astrix felt so close to his lost memories. He knew that if he wanted to, he could reach out, grab them back, be whoever he really was. But instead he turned away, he focused once again on the feeling of the hand on his shoulder: the warmth, the pressure of the fingers. He focused hard enough so that all he could be aware of was that hand.

Jake finally stepped away, and noise and movement snapped back into the world. “. . . meet you at the bus stop around nine,” he was saying. “Do you good.”

Astrix nodded numbly. He was barely able to stagger to his feet and stumble back into the mine. He worked the rest of the afternoon in a daze; for the first time he didn’t

even notice the weight of the axe or the long afternoon drag in his muscles. Only at the end of the day, when Jake once again reminded him “nine o’clock,” as he started off down the tunnel, did he start to feel normal again.

As he rode the bus back towards his apartment, he tried to remember what exactly he had agreed to do at nine. So far his nights had been spent pretty much like his first one, sitting uneasily in his apartment, listening to the noises outside and flipping miserably past one television channel after another. He had never ventured out further than the vending area after being struck by a noodle, and had usually gone to bed early in the belief that unconsciousness was his best option.

That night he ate his meal thoughtfully. He tried to turn his mind from the unpleasant food to whether or not he would actually dare to go out that night. In the end, although his stomach complained nervously more and more between noodles for a Glow-In-The-Dark Automatic YoYo and a Princess Pizza paper crown, it was the memory of that hand on his shoulder that finally decided him. He knew he had made a choice because of that hand, a choice to accept this life, even though he couldn’t bear to think about that moment directly or openly, only sideways, touching the memory gently before darting his thoughts safely away. But even half-recognized, it was powerful enough to put him in a clean shirt and send him out the apartment door.

Chapter 3

The Citadel:

When Lemon woke up she heard voices in the main room. Astrix and another man were talking together. She got up quietly, ignoring the breakfast tray that Astrix had left beside the bed for her, crept over the gray carpet to the door, and carefully opened it a crack.

Astrix was sitting at the glass dining table, his back to her. Even though the Those That weren't supposed to reveal any emotions, there was a slight slump to his shoulders that she recognized immediately—the same effect she always saw spread across his face and weigh down his body whenever Julian told him what was the right kind of behavior for a Citizen.

Julian was the other Those That man in the room, the one who said he was Astrix's friend. He was pacing back and forth, lecturing. Lemon could clearly make out the self-importance on his face—another emotion that wasn't supposed to be there but was obvious to her in everything the Those That did. "Don't be ridiculous, Astrix," he was saying. He held his hands pompously behind his back as he strutted around the room. Lemon wanted to hit him.

She knew that Astrix thought this man was his friend, the only real friend he had among the other Those That. But she wasn't so sure. Maybe Julian was as much of a friend as these men could be, but whenever she saw him he was pressuring Astrix to do whatever the Those That thought he should. When she had begged Astrix to leave the Citadel, to try and escape the unending horror they were trapped in, Julian had taken it upon himself to *remind* Astrix of the truth. Julian's truth had been that there was no way for them to escape, nowhere to go, that the only choice was to stay there and do what the

Those That wanted—for Astrix to fix all the broken hospital machines. Lemon didn't trust Julian. He and the other Those That needed Astrix so much right now; if they wanted to stay young and keep all the servants and the people in the city alive they had to have working hospital machines. She knew they would say whatever Astrix wanted to hear so that he would be convinced to stay and fix them. But what would happen when the machines were all repaired and the Those That didn't need him anymore?

"I . . . I just thought maybe," Astrix stammered. His voice was faint; Lemon had to lean closer to the crack in the door to hear him. "Maybe we could ask the other Citizens to stop killing the servants so often. It puts strain on the hospital machines," he added quickly, then immediately trailed off into uncertainty again. "You know we need them to last as long as possible"

Lemon's heart staggered with surprise and grief. Astrix was trying! He was daring at least to *think* about some of the things she had told him. But before she let hope rise too greatly she squashed it down. Julian was going to talk him out of it, she knew that.

"What?!" Julian gasped. He sounded disgusted, and turned away from Astrix to stare at the wall instead. "You can't be serious. Don't tell me you care how people play with the servants now."

"Well, no," Astrix admitted. Lemon could hear the truth of this in his voice. "But—"

"But *she* wants it." Julian finished the sentence for him. "She wants it, that thing from the city wants it and you're ready to do whatever she says, destroy our life here, just for whatever whims she might have. Are you insane? You can't make your decisions based on what this thing wants."

“I just thought she would like it,” Astrix said faintly.

“What she likes or doesn’t like doesn’t matter,” Julian told him. “At least you only said this to me. Don’t say anything like it to anyone else, or everyone’s going to think you’ve gone crazy.”

Lemon knew what would come next. Astrix’s shoulders slumped even further and he whispered “You’re right.” Julian smiled with satisfaction and Lemon turned away from the door. She went into the bathroom and started filling the tub.

She almost felt sorry for Astrix. But although he had been trying to do the right thing, he had been doing it for the wrong reason. He still didn’t realize that the servants were people, and that it was wrong to make their lives into games. He just wanted her attention. But she couldn’t give that to him as long as he was willing to remain one of the Those That. He said there weren’t any choices; that there was no way to escape, and maybe he was right. Lemon stared miserably down at the gold bracelets that the Those That had insisted she wear to label her as Astrix’s property. Horrible as the bracelets were, they only showed outside what had always been true. Even though she had changed, the Those That still controlled her life.

Lemon shucked off her gray nightshirt—she thought it was really an undershirt of Astrix’s, but it reached mid-thigh on her—and climbed into the bathtub. She spent a lot of time here. Of all the places in the apartment, the bathtub was the only one where she could feel comfortable, even for a minute. She had been skeptical when she’d first seen it. After all, she had loved the showers she’d had in the city; they had been one of the best parts of her day. And the idea of sitting in a puddle of water seemed strange. But the first time she’d tried it she had loved drifting in the warm water, feeling her limbs weightless

and floating, and her body wrapped in warmth, swaying gently. There were scented balls or jars of bubbles she could mix into the bath, but those weren't as important to her as the water itself, the lightness. She could close her eyes and drift and sometimes it was so easy to believe that she was somewhere else.

That morning, however, she had barely sunk into the warm water when Astrix came into the bathroom and sat down on the toilet lid. Lemon looked away from him, but she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. A *Those That* man sitting on the toilet! It was certainly a more undignified position than she was used to. Back in the city, she wouldn't even have been able to imagine such a sight.

"Have you remembered anything more about your parents?" Astrix asked her.

Lemon glanced up at him, surprised by the question, but she didn't answer. Astrix wasn't even looking at her; he was staring at the wall. She could see his vague dark reflection in the tiles.

"I've never killed a servant, Lemon," he told her. "Even before I knew you, I never did it. That was one of the reasons Castille thought I was different, weak. He thought I didn't do it because I couldn't. And I guess he was almost right. I *couldn't* kill them."

"Why not?" Lemon wanted to ask, but didn't speak.

He answered her anyway. "I know I don't think about the servants the way you want me to, Lemon. I did do things to them you wouldn't have liked—I did hurt them. But I couldn't kill them. I don't really know why. I just couldn't."

He was silent for a long moment. Lemon stared at the white porcelain of the bathtub. It was so white, so clean. Nothing in the city had ever been that clean.

“I don’t know how much you can remember your parents,” Astrix finally went on. “I guess I had mine around a lot longer than you did. Even so, I can barely remember my mother. She never really paid much attention to me. But my father—he was one of the people who set up the Citadel, the city, the whole system. He wanted to make it all work, so he wanted to make me work right too, wanted to make sure I was the right kind of Citizen, but I don’t think he really thought what kind of people he would end up with when he set all this up.

“He wanted me to kill servants, the men anyway, if I had sex with them. I don’t know why. It wasn’t as common back before, I guess. But when we were teenagers, for a whole century, and we could do anything we wanted to, we did everything; we tried everything. There was no awkwardness or shame when it was just with the servants.” He shrugged. “But all of that was just like masturbation. It was all with myself, Lemon, until it was with you.” He paused, looking at her, but Lemon kept staring at the bathtub. “Anyway, the first time I brought a male servant back to my rooms I was a teenager. I guess the servant was just one too. He was beautiful. I can still see his face, even after all this time My father came in just as I was getting dressed afterwards. He was like that, he would walk right into my rooms anytime he wanted, never bothering to knock. That day there was a look on his face like I’d never seen before. I still don’t know what he was thinking then. He slit the servant’s throat and wouldn’t let me take him to a hospital machine He just died forever right there, all because of me. My father told me that I always had to kill any male servants that I had sex with, but I never could kill them—kill any of them. And I don’t even know why, really. I just never could.”

After another long moment, Astrix sighed and left the room. Lemon turned her head to stare at his departing back. Once he was gone she sank down in the tub until her nose was in the water. She had never really thought about Astrix, or any of the Those That, having parents. People who could boss them around and barge into their rooms uninvited. Watch them have sex, even, with that inscrutable expression on their faces. It made the Those That seem a lot more human all of a sudden.

And of course they were human; maybe she had forgotten that too much. Although she yelled at Astrix for falling back into his old ways of thinking, maybe she had been doing that herself too since she had been in the Citadel. She had still felt so intimidated and overwhelmed by the Those That; she thought she needed Astrix to help her escape. But maybe all of this was still residue from her way of thinking in the city, where the Those That had swallowed up her world. She had cowered in fear from them, burned with desire for them, worshipped them, had them always on her mind.

The City:

The crowd swirled through the streets, and Lemon and Kira let it funnel them to the bright lights and loud roar of voices at the corner bar. Together they pushed through the clump of ordinary men at the door. Dooley was among them. “Lemon, Lemon!” he called, stumbling tipsily over towards them. “See, you’re here after all. Are you with me?”

Although he was improved greatly by a shower and a clean blue shirt, he was still ordinary, dwarfed by the glamour across the room. “Don’t you wish, Dooley,” Lemon laughed at him. “With all those sophisticated men over there?” She nodded towards the little tables where the Those That sat. “You’re only a masher worker.”

“Mashing, mashing, all day long,” Kira added in singsong. “Dooley the masher, Dooley the masher.”

“Come on, Lemon. Look, I’ve even got a friend for Kira,” he added, grabbing Thomas, an ordinary man standing next to him, who worked in their factory on the Stripper Sarah line. He looked startled.

“Neither one of you is much temptation,” Lemon told him. In comparison to the Those That, they were puny and ugly. How could Dooley even think he might have a chance? She grabbed Kira’s hand and, leaving the shouts and whistles of the ordinary men easily behind, they squeezed into one of the long tables crowded with girls that took up most of the bar. There was already a tray of penny drinks on the table; Lemon grabbed one and settled into the conversation.

The bars all had two levels. In one section were the long tables where the girls sat. The ordinary men lurked behind them, along the walls and by the door. But nobody

would look back at them, all of the girls wanted to stare down at the lower section of the room. Here the bar itself was located, with rows of bottles on the shelves behind it. Two large televisions were mounted above the shelves, cascading blue flickers of light that reflected in the bottles. On the stools in front of the bar, and at the small tables set neatly across the rest of the lower floor, the Those That men sat in their silver-gray suits, sipping their expensive drinks with hands heavy with rings and wrists adorned with thick watches. Although the jewelry was gold, it was dark and so sullen that it did not reflect the sparkle that swirled throughout the rest of the room. The men were fascinating to Lemon, of course, but she also noticed how serious they always looked. They talked calmly and smiled or laughed only rarely. They never seemed to have the kind of fun she and the other girls did.

When she looked around at all the girls chattering away, Lemon recognized most of them from work or from previous nights at the bar. But it didn't matter if some were strangers; here they were all friends. Every night the same conversation buffeted from TV shows and the PerfectPeople to the funny things that had happened at work. Tonight a girl named Dinah, who worked in a sweater factory, was explaining how she had managed to get her hair caught in the machine that wound the yarn. It had ripped out a long piece of her hair as well as some skin. "I saw bits of my scalp hanging there," she said, barely able to get the words out through her giggles. "Just hanging there," she finally managed to say, imitating with her finger how the piece of scalp had swung when her coworkers had turned the machine off. Her wild gestures knocked her drink over into the lap of the girl next to her, and the whole table collapsed into laughter. Finally, though,

their conversation swung around to their favorite topic: the Those That men, and the always intriguing question as to whether or not there were any Those That women.

That night, Lemon found herself arguing passionately against the existence of Those That women. No one had ever seen any; the Those That in the crystal ships and at the bar were all men. That was proof enough for her.

An opposing group at the table argued back, however, that the fact that the men preferred to come spend their evenings in the bar did not prove that Those That women did not exist. After all, Kira pointed out, how attractive could such women be, if they looked like the men with short motionless hair and gray suits. Why wouldn't the Those That men prefer to be with the bright colors and soft flesh of the girls in the bar?

Lemon thought to herself that the Those That women could look as different from their men as she and her friends did from any ordinary man. But the cheer that followed Kira's words drowned out any answer she might have made. Most of the girls, she knew, didn't really want there to be other women, or they wanted them at least to be ugly. They wanted to be all that the Those That men had. Lemon didn't think this really mattered. They had the bar, and that was enough.

Up on the stage in front of the low tables, red and blue lights began to flicker on, shimmering into purple in the center, where a girl was already standing. The music from the speakers changed from light poppy tunes to something slower and heavier that twined around the girl's arms as she raised them to her hips and started to dance.

The conversation trailed off into silence. Lemon and several girls from her table drifted away from their seats, still clutching their penny drinks, to lean on the railing along the edge of the upper area and watch. Lemon found herself swaying gently as she

watched the girl dance. She had stood on stage so many times herself, going through the same movements, that it was hard to tell she was not up there now, dancing and swirling while around her the lights turned everything soft and dreamy. On stage, she would forget the watching eyes and dance for herself, letting her clothes fall away bit by bit and her hands trail over her body.

However, Lemon already knew this night would not end that way. From one of the little tables a Those That man was casting glances up at her, and she felt her body beginning to grow warm in response. It took the rest of her penny drink and several more meaningful glances before she gathered up enough courage to wobble down the three steps to the lower level. Weaving her way through the clusters of little tables was not only difficult but also vaguely intimidating. For some reason, most of the Those That were frightening so close up. She thought maybe it was the way they usually didn't look at her when she passed, no matter how she staggered or giggled. But sometimes it was even worse when they did look at her, and their faces were so blank it was if they were looking at nothing at all.

She had the same experience when she had to pass by the supervisor at the factory in the morning. Every day when she came out of the sunshine into the factory, she stepped over into the darkness and looked up at the Those That man sitting there in his booth. She was never sure if it was the same one every day or not. When she saw the Those That men at the bars or in their crystal ships during Come Out and Play they all looked so much alike, all dressed in their gray suits, their gray shirts, ties, and shoes, all over gray. Their hair wasn't gray but it was somehow colorless nevertheless, and clipped very close to their heads, all of them the same. Even though they varied some in height

and size they were all so much bigger than the ordinary men that they mostly just seemed big, and their faces alone were not enough to make them distinct. Lemon tried to remember to look for the color of their eyes when she was close enough, but she never remembered, and the noses and mouths that were left over all blurred together in her mind into just one face, particularly when the expression on it was always so much the same.

What was that expression exactly? As the supervisor checked off her name on his clipboard at work she often tried to figure it out, but she didn't dare look at a Those That man closely except in the bar, and she didn't dare think too much about them either, or they might know. Whenever her supervisor's eyes flicked up and caught her she fled through the turnstile as fast as her shoes would let her. However, despite herself, she sometimes had to firmly squash down the fleeting thought that, if she had seen that expression on a woman's or an ordinary man's face, she would have thought they were looking at a rat or a roach.

Now, though, she knew one Those That man would be welcoming her. As she approached, he turned in his seat to reach out a hand and draw her towards him. Lemon collapsed on his knees and flung her arms around his neck. For a few minutes they sat there, the Those That man talking with his friends at the table, but Lemon didn't listen to anything they had to say. Her thoughts were swelling more and more with ideas quite different from talking, even though the Those That man's knees were bony and uncomfortable underneath her. When he finally stood, tipping her to her feet, she felt as if she might explode from anticipation.

Lemon knew all eyes were on her—the first that night to be chosen—as she was escorted out of the room. She tried to stand up tall and walk proudly, but she was too unsteady on her feet and had to hang onto the Those That man’s gray suit arm with both hands.

Just beyond the bar was a quiet, unobtrusive doorway. Lemon and her escort stepped through it into a hall lined with doors set closely together. Behind each was a pocket room; they went into the center one. Lemon had probably been in almost all of the rooms at one time or another, though all were alike. To Lemon they were quite elegant. They had real beds, up on legs, instead of just the mattresses that were in all of the apartments, a nice large padded chair with a matching footstool, and a small table with a fancy lamp on it. Everything was very formal and clean; the walls, which were really heavy curtains, and the blankets and sheets all matched, and the room was very empty except for the furniture. No piles of stuff here. Lemon loved it. The room itself made her feel almost as excited as the man she was with.

The Those That man lay silently down on the bed. They never took off their clothes, and this one, like the rest, lay still as she crawled up beside him. She kissed his face, the perfectly smooth shaven cheek, the dry still lips, the short hair that bristled slightly against her mouth. As she ran her hands down his body she grew more and more excited, although he did nothing to respond. But touching him was enough for her. She unbuttoned his gray shirt and ran her hands over the skin of his chest. The Those That men were never fat like the ordinary men sometimes were, but they never had much muscle either. Their chests were smooth, flat and hairless. Lemon trailed her hands over the soft skin, her breath coming faster and faster. She burrowed into his gray pants to find

his erection, the only reaction the Those That men ever showed. Even when she climbed up on him she never noticed that his rate of breathing changed at all. But then, she didn't pay much attention to him, she was consumed by her own excitement.

Although she fell asleep with her head on the Those That man's chest, when Lemon awoke the room was dark and he was gone, as they always were. The side of the bed where he had been was cold. She got dressed quickly and went through the door that led out to the bar. The little tables were empty, and most people had gone home. Only a few clustered together at the long tables, heads together in the dim light. These were girls who hadn't gotten a Those That man, who had decided to console themselves with an ordinary man or each other instead. Lemon smiled to herself and threaded her way through the tables to the door.

She was still a bit unsteady, but the air outside held the coolness of night only a few hours before morning, and she felt more awake as she started walking. Only a few other people were out, drifting homewards. Some clung together, staggering, now and then attempting to sing. When she got back to her apartment, Kira and an ordinary man were having sex on the other side of the room. They paid no attention to her. Lemon collapsed on her mattress and fell asleep with the soft mutter of the TV on the quiet channel coming down from above.

Sometime later, Lemon woke with a startled gasp. It was still dark, but the harsh snoring of the ordinary man Kira had dragged home must have woken her. Irritably, she turned over and pulled the sheet over her head, but the thin material refused to block out any sound. She felt annoyingly wide awake and alert. She lay still for a while, playing

idly with the ragged edges of a hole in the sheet, but finally gave up and scrambled off of her mattress.

She didn't bother trying to keep silent, but there was no movement from the other bed, and no pause in the snoring. Lemon walked over to the window and put her palms up against the glass to feel its coolness. Outside the sky was still dark and lights shone in many windows. Most people were scared to sleep with the lights off. They weren't really even supposed to go out if there was someone still in the room, but everyone knew how to twist apart the wires by the door to turn them off. Lemon always slept in darkness herself, and she'd talked Kira into doing so too, at least if she wasn't alone.

Everyone in the lighted windows across the way seemed to be sleeping. Lemon couldn't see anyone moving around. She peered down at the street and didn't see anyone there either. It must be just before dawn.

At first looking down at the night was peaceful, but then Lemon began to feel strange. Half-formed thoughts flickered at the edge of her mind, like the lights that fluttered in her peripheral vision when she had a migraine headache. Similarly, these thoughts made her nauseated, and she sat down on the floor, leaning her head against the cool glass.

She had explored the city some nights after work, and as far as she could tell, it went on forever. Had she lived here forever too? When she stretched her memory back as far as she could, there was still only the city, and going to work, going to the bars. She had been younger once. She vaguely remembered being smaller, growing breasts, having pimples. But no one was that young anymore, and there were no new young people in the city, so there was nothing to help her remember. She couldn't picture what she had been

like then, or how many days ago that had been. Since the hospital machines replaced everything in her body so often, she and everyone else aged so slowly there was no way to tell how long might have passed. It could have been forever.

In all that time it was only rarely that her mind cleared enough that she could wonder how long she had been there, and if she would have to stay in the city for another eternity. In these moments—the understanding times—she realized how unbearable the future stroodles seemed, stretching out in front of her in an endless cycle of embarrassment, humiliation, pain and more pain. Somehow even the nights at the bar blended into the unbearableness of it all that might go on and on. She was unable to escape or fight or do anything but bear it. Forever.

During these understanding times the misery of her life was so obvious. She could even remember other episodes when she had seemed to come awake and realized all this, but the understanding times never lasted. No matter how angry or desperate she became, the feeling always faded, the memory of it melted away and she became lost in her day-to-day life again. There had even been times she and other people had thought together about these questions; she could remember talking to Dooley, to Kira, to other friends whose eyes had swum with tears and voices had shook with desperation. How much longer can I stand it? everyone always asked. How much longer?

But what choice was there, Lemon asked herself. She couldn't run away if the city was endless. And most of the time she was, if not happy, unaware that she was miserable. In love with the worship and fear she felt for the Those That. Her life—all their lives—was simply a gigantic stroodle, and like a stroodle, when the Those That had called her,

there was no choice, no chance to escape or to change anything, no matter how scared she was or how much horror clenched her bones. She only had to bear it, whatever it was.

Sometimes, though, the fact that she didn't normally know how horrible it was made Lemon even more sick. If only she could remember that stroodles were unpleasant, were horrible, that even the bars were not enough to make up for it all, somehow it might be better. As she began to get sleepier and sleepier she tried to fix the idea in her mind, to somehow remember it once ordinary life had swallowed her up again. "Remember," she whispered to herself as her eyes drifted closed. "Remember."

The television woke Lemon up the next morning, singing out "Get up, time to go to work—isn't it exciting?! Isn't it a beautiful day?!"

Lemon felt her heart rise up cheerfully in response to the song, a happiness that was not dulled by the fact that she found herself inexplicably curled up by the window. She uncoiled her stiff limbs and staggered to her feet, looking about the room for something to wear. As she sorted through a pile of clothes on the floor for the blue imitation-velvet skirt and blouse set trimmed with real fake rhinestones she remembered buying last week, Kira sat up along with the ordinary man—it was Dooley, Lemon saw as he got noodled, jumped out of bed and ran out the door.

Soon Lemon herself was noodled for a Breakfast Pack, which was a pretty good meal consisting of eggs, fruit, and a tube of coffee. She set the pack down on the table while she finished getting dressed and put her hair into a ponytail, and then when Dooley and Kira were ready all three took their breakfasts and headed down to eat them on the building steps. They were all very quiet as they walked out into the hall; mornings were usually quiet times. Everyone was tired, and the noises of other people in the building

getting up and taking showers, as well as the occasional half-dressed person hurrying to the vending machines, with eyes blank in desire, only made Lemon feel more exhausted. She couldn't even work up any strength to tease Kira for sleeping with Dooley.

Outside on the steps the air was cool and Lemon felt more energetic as she sat down and cracked open her Breakfast Pack. Kira sat down next to her and Dooley drifted off to a group of ordinary men. All along the street, people were starting to come out, holding breakfasts or coffee in their hands and blinking themselves awake. Whenever the weather was nice enough, everyone ate breakfast on their steps. It was a peaceful, pleasant time of day, a moment to recover from the night before, and a way to avoid the televisions and the chance of being noodled for a second breakfast. The Those That didn't like when people did this, however, if one of their cars came by they would chase everyone along to work.

Lemon tipped her head back to look at the blue sky. A white wispy moon drifted just overhead and she almost pointed its beauty out to Kira. But then she remembered that Kira never appreciated such things. She glanced over at her friend, who was picking at the jelly roll on her lap and not looking up. "Are you all right?" Lemon asked her.

"I don't know," Kira mumbled, shredding the icing off into a little pile in the corner of her breakfast box. "Dooley, Lemon. How could I?"

"He's not so bad," Lemon shrugged, comfortable in the knowledge that she would never have to resort to such extremes. But, although Dooley was disgusting, he wouldn't hurt anybody.

“They never pick me, no matter what I do,” Kira sniffled. “I’m going to be stuck with ordinary men forever. Why can’t the hospital machines make me look better, fix my awful nose?”

Lemon had never wondered this herself, but the question seemed reasonable. “I’ll try to hit you in the nose if they ever make us fight in—you know,” she offered shyly. Girl-on-girl fighting was one of the more popular Come Out and Play stroodles. They usually had it at least once every ten or twelve days.

“That might work!” Kira cheered up and wiped her eyes. “We better get going before any cars come along. I’ve been wasting too much of our time. I don’t want to get us in trouble, too.”

Lemon hugged her before she tossed her empty Breakfast Pack onto the trash heap next to the steps and stood up. “I’m ready.”

They didn’t wait for Dooley, but set off down the street towards work. Just in time, as it turned out, for they had only gotten as far as the next set of steps when they saw a car coming towards them. Lemon’s breath quickened, but she wasn’t sure whether it was from excitement or fear. She grabbed Kira’s hand. “Don’t worry,” she told her. “We’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing. We’re going to work.” But still, they could do nothing but stand there helplessly, crowded against a pile of trash, as the car advanced up the street. They could hear the voice crackling through the speakers, ordering people to hurry up, threatening tickets and punishments.

Lemon trembled as she stood watching. The car itself was not so awe-inspiring. It was only a copper-colored metal box, with a pointed front and small wheels. It couldn’t even move very fast, no faster than a person running could, and was not nearly as fast as

the motorcycles the Those That sometimes raced through the city. But inside the box, behind the glass windows, sat two Those That men. The sight of them filled her with a strange combination of fear and a rush of adoration, an overwhelming desire to fall to her knees and worship. When she looked in at them through the car windows they seemed so close and so far away at the same time that Lemon thought she might faint. As the car passed by, they called out “Keep on your way,” through the crackling loudspeaker mounted on the car’s roof and the world swirled dizzily around her at the sound of their beautiful voices. She held onto Kira for balance and they stumbled together on up the street.

Other people, chased off their steps, came down to join them and everyone joined together in a crowd that rushed through the narrow streets. All walked quickly, afraid the Those That might return and hand out punishment sentences. Lemon sighed. She wished it was night, that she was on her way out of the factory instead of into it, that the bars hung glittering and enticing in front of her instead of a long and boring day at work.

On the assembly line, the day went very slowly. Her arms ached as she squirted glue onto the pink Dreamy Dan heads and jammed loops of hair onto them in short, abrupt movements. With the blond hair in place, the doll still resembled only faintly the TV character he was modeled on. All of the male PlasticPerfectPeople’s heads were from the same mold, what made him Dan were the blue eyes, often stamped on slightly crooked, or blurred, and the brown line of a goatee encircling the mouth. In this case it too had been put on crooked, cutting across the lips on one side. Lemon sighed, but she knew it really didn’t matter. They could never make the dolls look half as gorgeous as the real PerfectPeople. She grabbed the next head from the conveyor belt, trying to

concentrate on her work and not put Dreamy Dan's hair on crooked as she had done the other day after the drowning stroodle, or especially backwards. No need to add backwards hair to smeared eyes!

At lunch she and the others went to the cafeteria, where as they entered they were noodled one by one and ran off to the vending machines for lunch packets. Lemon took her plastic box of rice and beans and stood by one of the vending machines with Kira and some other girls. No one wanted to sit at the cafeteria tables that filled the center of the room; they had never been cleaned since she could remember and were coated with an inch-thick layer of sticky, greasy dust. Additionally, many of the stools were broken and anyone who tried to sit on them would clatter to the floor. So everyone just crowded along the walls, balancing lunches in their hands and talking away before the bell rang to send them all back to the lines.

Today an ordinary man was seized by one of the strange fits that sometimes hit the workers. He ran to one of the tables, flopped down on his stomach on the greasy dust, and went sliding all the way along the table's length. He finally crashed off the end and landed in a heap on the floor. Everyone laughed as he stood up, looking embarrassed and wiping futilely at the black smears on his clothes. The laughter and catcalls were so loud that at first no one could hear what Robyn, a girl from the Buyer Barbara line, was saying as she came in from the factory floor. Lemon could see her mouth moving but nothing reached her ears until the laughter faded down to the cafeteria's normal clash of voices. "It's a Punishment Day!" Robyn was announcing. She wore her hair in a ponytail so tight it strained her forehead back from her eyes, which glittered a hard, unnaturally excited green as she repeated her words. "It's a Punishment Day!"

Just for a second, Lemon was filled with a strange sensation of disgust and despair, but it vanished as quickly as it arose and she felt only excitement. Her wishes had been granted. Today there would be no long, boring afternoon of work. More importantly, even Come Out and Play itself would be canceled. Only the two selected to be punished would have to endure a stroodle. She quickly swallowed the last of her lunch and joined the movement of the crowd as it headed towards the courtyard. Unlike when they were called to Come Out and Play, when everyone shuffled in a calm line, now they jostled and pushed each other in an excited mass. More than once, people had been trampled so badly in this kind of crowd that they had to be put into a hospital machine. Lemon squeezed and pushed along with the others, trying not to fall, but it took a while before she finally got out the door and managed to find a place where she could see the center of the courtyard.

All around her voices rose and fell in a hum of excitement. Lemon had lost Kira in the crowd, but it didn't matter, she grabbed the hands of those next to her as a crystal ship lowered until it hovered just above the courtyard. The light dimmed under its shadow, making everything cloudy. Lemon stood on tiptoe to see as a stairway extended from the bottom of the crystal ship. A Those That man came down the stairway, surrounded by a circle of light from the ship that drew every eye towards him. The crowd went silent as suddenly as if they had been stroodled, although it was a mixture of awe, excitement, and fear that froze Lemon's tongue. She was trembling all over.

When the Those That man finally spoke, his voice was low. All he said was a name: "Rik."

On the other side of the courtyard from Lemon, the crowd rippled and surged forward. It spit out a short ordinary man. The fear was apparent on his face as he strained back towards the anonymity of the crowd with his upper body, but his stroodled legs brought him to the foot of the stairway, where he knelt and bowed his head.

“Laziness on the line,” the Those That man said softly. He waved his hand and the ordinary man sprang to his feet, then began going through the motions of working on an assembly line. As the crowd laughed and began to throw pieces of trash at him, Rik began to move faster and faster, his eyes bulging desperately from his face as his arms flashed more quickly than Lemon would have believed was humanly possible. Finally he fell to his knees and then to his back, his hands still moving for a few moments before the stroodle ended and his arms crashed down onto the ground.

No one moved to help him; they all stood there, watching, as Rik tried to get to his feet although his arms were too weak to push himself up. He fell onto the concrete several times before he managed to get his feet under him and stagger into the crowd. The moment he was swallowed back up into the mass of people, the Those That man turned around to face Lemon’s side of the courtyard. Her heart suddenly beat frantically in her ears. She was sure he was looking right at her, his terrible wonderful eyes and his mouth about to say her name—but he said “Tisha.”

Tisha was only a few people away from her, and as the chosen girl moved hopelessly forward, Lemon felt herself smiling in relief. Her knees were so wobbly that she had to hang onto the people around her for support. She had been so sure that he was going to pick her for—and yet she couldn’t remember for what. She just knew somehow that she must be guilty.

When Tisha came into the courtyard, the Those That man said firmly, “Bad thoughts.”

Lemon’s stomach clenched as if he had spoken to her, and around her the crowd gave a low moan. Unlike Rik, Tisha was able to speak, and as she approached the Those That man she started to beg for forgiveness. Tears were spilling from her dark eyes. “I didn’t think anything wrong I swear I swear,” she said desperately. “I would never.” Her voice went on but was muffled as she knelt, bending over her bent knees so that her back was exposed. Lemon could see the Those That man’s face as he picked up the laser whip that was dropped down to him out of the crystal ship. There was no expression on it as he looked down at Tisha crouched in front of him, no expression as he began beating her, and went on beating her.

Someone was almost always punished for Bad Thoughts at Punishment Day, for thinking bad, ungrateful things about work, or their apartments, or even maybe the Those That themselves. The punishment never varied: twenty strokes with the laser whip, leading to wounds that no hospital machine would cure, they had to heal painfully and naturally. No one was exactly sure how the Those That knew when someone thought these things. Could they read minds? Did they hear every thought? That seemed somewhat unlikely, so most people believed that the Those That had machines that would sense when a person who had thought things they shouldn’t. Lemon always thought she would be the one taken for this, for crimes she couldn’t even consciously remember committing, but so far she had escaped.

But now she couldn’t bear to see Tisha punished. She backed away through the crowd, averting her eyes as people began to throw trash and jeers. The doorway to the

factory was open and empty; no one noticed as she slipped back inside. She hid in the bathroom until the ending bell rang, and then hurried home without waiting for Kira. That night in the bars she drank as many penny drinks as she could afford before she finally felt herself drifting away, becoming lost in the music and the swaying dance as she twirled around on stage, spinning until the lights around her were only a soft dreamy blur, and all of her thoughts smoothed away to become the same.

Chapter 4

The Citadel:

Astrix had almost finished checking over and repairing the hospital machines in the Citadel. The other Citizens were pressuring him to finish as soon as possible and get started on the ones in the city; Astrix supposed that they had gotten tired of having sex with women who had only one arm, but he couldn't work up much enthusiasm for visiting the city again. The thought of going to Come Out and Play and seeing the scars and wounds of the day before made him shiver with horror. Even in the days in which he had enjoyed stroodling the people in the city, he never could have borne it.

The two Citadel hospital machines that still needed repairing were in a small room off the club's dining room. They were mostly used when one of the Citizens decided to take some amusement in throwing hot cheese or soup on a servant, or by experimenting to see how much damage could be done to one with a fork. Since the servants in the club had been carefully trained to be waiters and cooks, however, no one wanted them to be out of commission for very long. There had been some complaints lately. Astrix sighed as he unscrewed the casing to the first hospital machine. Even though they had begged him to return and help them, the other Citizens were not as grateful as he thought they should be. Instead, they were growing more and more impatient and demanding, asking that the machines be fixed faster, that Astrix improve their capabilities. But except Julian, none of them bothered to help.

If only his team of servants were still here, the work would go a lot faster. Although none of them had anywhere near the same level of knowledge about the machines as Astrix had, they had been able helpers. But when Astrix had been

mindwiped, Castille had—oddly for a Citizen, who rarely seemed to notice servants' existence—had taken his team and put them back in the sun-worshipper village. The other Citizens had never paid enough attention to realize that servants had helped Astrix, or to recognize the servants who'd been on his team, so they never thought of bringing them back to the Citadel. Astrix had seen them there, but even without Lemon's prompting, had decided to leave them where they were.

Astrix connected the hospital machine to the testing device that he had rigged up after his return to the Citadel. By turning one knob or the other he was able to test whether all the functions were working without having to wait until someone was injured. This machine only needed a replacement DNA sampler needle; Astrix swapped it out with a fresh one. Luckily, there were plenty of replacement parts in the storage levels below him. Actually, much of the Citadel really *was* storage—his father had intended it to serve in part as an archive of all of the expensive, quality items he thought would vanish. Astrix went often to the rooms that held the technical supplies; he had occasionally explored the others, although the silence and emptiness had been enough to make him nervous, despite the items the rooms contained—cars in pristine condition, jewelry, art pieces, furniture, bolts of expensive cloth. Astrix had fingered a piece of blue cloth and wondered why he and the other Citizens didn't take and use these items, but he knew no one was really interested. These things were valuable to those who lived day-to-day, but to those who lived centuries, they were meaningless. It was the play and plot and manipulation of minds that moved his fellow Citizens.

Astrix sighed and jerked himself back to the present. He moved onto the next machine. Maybe today he would have to begin on to the ones in the city, he thought, but

too soon. The second machine barely registered on his tester. He would have to fix it— what if the Citizens injured two servants at a time? They could hardly let their dinners be served two seconds late—

Assholes, Lemon's voice said in his brain. Slimy little jerkoffs who can't wait five minutes to eat their fancy food because they just want to hurt people. You shouldn't fix their stupid machine. Let them wait.

I have to fix it, Astrix argued back silently. That's my job.

The job they're rewarding you so highly for? Lemon taunted. All they're doing is letting you live in the Citadel again so you can do what they want you to. You're just another servant to them, Astrix.

No—that's not true, Astrix protested, but his inner voice died away as he took off his suit coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves to get started working. Not only had he never seen any of the other Citizens remove their coats, much less do any work, but his own arms still showed the shape of months in the mine. He was filled out with muscle in a way he had never been before; now he was bigger than most of the other Citizens too. He wondered what they thought of the appearance they had created for him.

They think you look like a servant, Lemon's voice insisted, then twisted suddenly into desperation. Please, Astrix. Help me. I don't want to be like this. Neither do you. But we can go somewhere, do something.

This was the last thing she had said to him before she had withdrawn into herself. The words always echoed back through his mind. He heard them over and over, but could only come up with the same answer to give her each time. No. We can't leave. There's nowhere to go.

Her closed, miserable face filled his memory, and he turned instead to the hospital machine computer in front of him. He pulled on the headset and goggles, part of the original hospital machine repair kit that he'd found in storage, and a great feeling of contentment came over him as he slid the main computer out of the base of the machine. Lemon's face faded from his mind when he looked at the machinery spread out in front of him, began to think about what the problem could be, the work ahead. . . . Here, at least, everything was very focused, very clear. It was a wonderful feeling—everything clear and under control, understandable, either replaceable or repairable. He worked for hours, lost in concentration, lying flat on the floor to get under the machine. But his limbs never cramped; he never got tired. Everything was smooth and clear. He knew each movement, each step, how to clean and fix every part of the machine until it was good as new again.

When he finally removed his headset, he realized that the club was serving lunch. He hadn't noticed that half the tables were filled with Citizens, many of whom were staring at him. When he sat up, they looked away, but he could feel them glance back surreptitiously as he gathered his tools and started to roll his sleeves back down. He wondered what they were seeing as they looked at him. Was his imaginary Lemon voice right, did they see him as a servant? Or were they remembering the city—the way they had tried to humiliate him with the stroodles. He thought back about the way they had watched him while he had acted out their pantomimes, acted out their emotions. They had thought they were degrading him, but they hadn't realized how good it had all felt, even the pain.

“Astrix.” One of the Citizens, Darrin, appeared at the entrance to the room, his face carefully blank.

Looking up, Astrix remembered Castille standing above him as he crouched on the floor, overwhelmed with lust and worship. He scrambled quickly to his feet and pulled his coat back on. “Hello, Darrin.”

“Have you finished?” Darrin asked, looking at the tools on the floor with raised eyebrows.

“Yes—that’s the last of the ones in the Citadel,” Astrix replied. He wiped the grease off of his hands with a RemoveRag, trying not to look self-conscious.

“So you’ll start on the city next.” Darrin’s mouth twisted in a way intended to look as if he were trying to hide his smile, but in reality making it all the more obvious. “It will be quite an . . . experience for you to go back again, won’t it?”

Astrix clamped down on himself to keep any sign of anger from showing. Darrin was just doing what Citizens did best. He concentrated on the other man’s lineless face and reminded himself that if it weren’t for the hospital machines, if it weren’t for him, that face would be an old man’s, or centuries dead.

“You should come with us to Come Out and Play this afternoon,” Darrin went on when Astrix didn’t answer. “Get you back on your feet again.”

There was no kindness, no friendliness in Darrin’s eyes despite his words. Astrix knew that he was just waiting to see how he would react, greedy to see discomfort, pain, or embarrassed guilt. Astrix did feel guilt, but not for the reason Darrin thought, not for having been one of the ordinary men. Now he felt guilt for all the Come Out and Plays he

had participated in as a Citizen, when he had stood above the city watching. Not for the reasons Lemon wanted him to. But for going so long without feeling anything himself.

“I’ve got work to do,” he told Darrin, his voice carefully controlled. Without saying good-bye, he walked around him and took a seat at one of the tables in the dining room. A servant appeared to fill his wine glass and Astrix couldn’t help but notice the long cuts that sliced up his arm. The wounds were lined with red scabs, a hideous reminder of what people had to endure without hospital machines. Astrix shuddered.

“Thank you for repairing the machines, sir,” the servant said. He did not dare raise his head to meet Astrix’s eyes, but the deep gratitude in his voice was unmistakable.

Astrix swallowed hard, staring at the scabs, as the servant turned away. The man must have been truly grateful to approach him like that; he had never had a servant speak to him first in all his years at the Citadel.

None of the other Citizens had thanked him. Their need for the machines was less immediate than the servants’; they rarely had wounds in need of a cure. But they should value the hospital machines just as much, if not more: All Citizens took several treatments a year to ward off any signs of aging. Without the hospital machines, their endless lives would be cut abruptly short.

Astrix had been eight years old when he got his first treatment in a hospital machine to slow down the aging process. He could still remember the fear he’d felt as the heavy door shut in front of him and left him in the darkness. He was surrounded by the whine and hum of machinery, the soft wet mouths of tubes, and the pressure of needles into deadened patches of flesh. Even the sweet smell of the mild anesthetic had not been enough to calm him. When he came out he had been shaking so hard that he threw up all

over himself. His father beat him so violently for this that he'd had to go back into the hospital machine again to be cured. That time he'd learned to hide his fear.

In the city, too, at first he had been terrified, alone and without memory, lost in surroundings he knew were alien. The stroodles had been both pleasure and terror, and he had been terrified of his coworkers as well until the night he went out with them to a bar. Only then had he been able to realize that he had something in common with the ordinary men. But it had not been enough. Castille had always been there, watching Astrix, manipulating him, playing with him. Astrix had never been a true ordinary man; he had always been the main character in Castille's game.

The City:

The first night he ventured out to the bar, his knees had shaken as he went out the main door into deep darkness. After the constant light of his apartment all night and the dimness of the mine all day, real darkness was strange and exciting in its own right. As Astrix stepped down the stairs and started down the street, he lost the fear and began to feel free. A cool wind was blowing night around him, and his body felt strong and easy. He felt happy, like at the beginning of a stroodle, only maybe this time nothing bad would come next, maybe there would be no price to pay.

When he got to the bus stop, Jake and two other men were already there, laughing and talking loudly. "Hey Astrix!" "Hey, we're all here!" they called out as he approached, and for once the sound of their voices didn't make his ears cringe.

"Hello," he said back, somewhat shyly, and followed along as the group began to walk together down the street. At first he held himself apart from the ordinary men, but as they kept going, the darkness and the night changed things. He forgot how alien and

disgusting he usually found them and hesitantly began to join into their conversation and their jokes, although he still kept a physical distance from their slaps and punches. By the time he found out where they were going—a bar—lines from a common commercial were swimming in his head: *But in the night we are all the same*. It was a huge surprise, but he actually thought it might be somewhat true.

He guessed what their destination must be as soon as he saw it: a small building with brightly-lit windows and a wide, open door that let music and the sound of cheerful voices spill out into the street. It all seemed almost familiar to him, as if he had been there before, as if he had had a good time there before.

The men around him began talking even more excitedly, and Astrix's own pulse quickened as they hurried the last half block. One by one they burst into the warm, welcoming air inside the building. Astrix followed, but stopped abruptly as he came into the room. Sitting at the long, low tables laughing, talking, drinking from blue and green bottles, were women. Women! He realized now that he had seen them before; he knew that they must have always existed, but he had forgotten them so completely that every nerve in his body sizzled with amazed, incredulous delight. Women! Their hair, their eyes, their lips and teeth. Their little hands and small delicate arms, their bodies so amazingly different than the coarse men he had been around for so long. Their clothes, all colors and sparkle. At first all he could do was stare and stare, wallow in looking, until finally he began to stagger towards them. He had no plan in his head really; he just knew he wanted to be as close to these amazing wonderful creatures as possible. . . . But he had barely taken two steps before Jake grabbed him back. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

Astrix could barely speak. His tongue felt swollen and stunned in his mouth, just like the rest of him. Maybe his whole body had become a giant erection. “I . . . I . . .” he stammered, then gave up on speaking and just waved a numb hand at the table of women.

“I wish, buddy. But only women are supposed to sit there. We have to hang back here against the wall. If we’re lucky, one of the girls’ll pick us up afterwards, if they don’t all get chosen by the Those That.”

Now Astrix’s tongue worked. “The Those That!” he cried in alarm, his body trembling in shock as a cold chill fought against his previous happy daze. He imagined being stroddled once again, being forced to hack apart one of the women. Was there nowhere he could escape?

“Over there.” The man pointed, and for the first time Astrix noticed that behind the women small round tables filled a lower level of the bar. Each table was occupied by two or three Those That men, talking and drinking among themselves. As he watched, one of the Those That, who looked frighteningly similar to the one who manned the guardbooth at the mine, turned his head to stare right at Astrix, with a look of intense interest and amusement on his face. Terror clutched Astrix so hard that he felt sick.

“Don’t worry,” Jake said, peering warily at Astrix’s face. “They can’t stroddle you in here. Nothing like Come Out and Play will happen. We’re all just people in the bar.”

Astrix nodded wearily. He made his way through the crowd until he could find a space against the back wall to lean on and catch his breath. After his initial fear had faded, and he saw that the Those That remained at their little tables, he began to relax and enjoy the bar. He could at least look at the women even if he couldn’t get any closer, and

although many went off with the Those That to pocket rooms, some went up on stage and stripped for everyone to watch. He was surrounded by the friendly, cheerful talk among the men, and they could buy beers for one coin at the bar.

The drinks and the smell of the thin, sweet cigarettes the Those That men were smoking sent Astrix into a dizzy, giggly state. By the end of the evening he was talking easily with the other ordinary men, and even when one of them bumped into him or jostled him accidentally he didn't mind. Later that night, after most of the women had gone off, taking only a few of the ordinary men with them, Astrix and the other leftovers staggered out into the street, wild with pent-up energy and lust. They raced each other, yelling, broke into snatches of loud, uneven song, and Astrix felt just like the rest of them, happy and unthinking.

The next morning, however, everything seemed to have changed back. Astrix was tired and irritable and the other miners disgusted him as much as ever. After an hour he was looking forward to Come Out and Play. That afternoon he battered a man with a chunk of concrete, and in the days that followed, he beat, tortured, and raped his way through the other men who worked at the mine. Almost every day the Those That singled him out to be the aggressor, and led him through a multitude of assaults. Astrix relaxed and let himself sink into the stroodles. No matter what horrible things he did, they were always taken away afterwards, the broken bodies healed, Astrix redeemed. Besides, he told himself, Jake was right, this wasn't his fault, he couldn't be held responsible. It was the Those That who chose what he did, who moved him like a puppet. Whether or not he enjoyed what he did didn't matter. Astrix didn't need to think. During the day he worked and in the afternoon he fell into nothingness; he emptied himself out into the pleasure of

hurting someone or of fucking someone mindlessly. Somehow it was all a relief, and more than a relief, to have the control of his actions taken away from him. Astrix knew that he liked this, liked it enough that if he let himself go he could fall and keep on falling down into the depths, deep enough to drown.

Every night he went to the bar, sometimes with a group of men from work, sometimes alone. He always did enjoy the camaraderie of the ordinary men, the feeling that he belonged with them. But he always enjoyed staring at the women more. None of them ever noticed him in return, and although one of the Those That men—he still thought it was the one from work—watched him every night, only once did he call Astrix back to a pocket room.

The Those That man had been staring at him intently, and Astrix had glanced back now and then, in his usual uneasy mixture of fear and fascination. But all of a sudden that changed. A huge wave of lust and hopeless longing staggered him and when the Those That man beckoned he could hardly believe it. The other ordinary men had to push him forward. He stumbled in eagerness and terror down the short steps and among the little tables. A ripple of soft laughter threaded through the Those That as he walked past, but he had no thought for the rest of them. All he could see was the one man, who was not laughing, but smiling gently, waiting, his dark eyes swallowing up the room.

When Astrix reached him, the Those That man did not speak, but rose to his feet in the familiar smooth, boneless motion, and turned towards the back hallway. Astrix followed, barely able to stand. His head was swirling with hopeless worship; in his heart he was already on his knees.

In the pocket room, however, everything went strange. Astrix felt as if the air was flooded with tension and hostility as soon as the Those That man shut the door behind them. “Get on your knees when you’re before me,” he almost snarled. He moved his hand as if to shove Astrix down but did not actually touch him.

Astrix knelt obediently, bending his head. He could see the man’s legs and feet pacing back and forth in front of him: the dull gray shoes, the gray pant-legs. Astrix suddenly knew that if he reached out to touch the cloth it would be smooth, it would run through his fingers like water. Once again his lost memories seemed to float in front of him like a ghost. He knew he knew the feeling of that cloth. But he didn’t want to think about that. He was becoming less and less able to think at all and he gratefully let himself fall into emotion.

Lust rose through his body in heavy waves, as it reached his brain he relaxed and tried to let everything become simple. All he wanted to do was worship at the Those That man’s feet, to please him any way he wanted. But all the other man did was stare. Astrix couldn’t understand; he squirmed miserably under the relentless gaze.

“Look at me,” the man finally said, and Astrix obediently tipped his head up to look at the smiling face above him. “Astrix,” he said softly. His smile was mocking. “How can you stand yourself? In these clothes, among these men. . . . The dust, the dirt. You’re disgusting, aren’t you?”

Astrix trembled. He could barely focus on the words. All he knew was that the Those That man was displeased with him. He didn’t want to let Astrix come to him. When at last the man beckoned and let Astrix crawl over, he could barely make it, he was

shaking so hard with painful desire. When he finally knelt in front of the Those That man, he broke and sobbed hysterically against his thigh.

“Astrix,” he said again. This time his voice was gentle. “Are you enjoying yourself here, my little Astrix? Have you had enough? Or do you still need more?” He tentatively stroked Astrix’s head. Dimly, through the lust and relief at being forgiven that dominated Astrix’s brain, he realized that the other man’s hand was shaking.

But abruptly, the Those That man’s hand clenched on Astrix’s hair. “You need more,” he said. He jerked Astrix’s head backwards and hit him in the face. In rough, angry movements, he pulled open his gray pants and pushed Astrix’s face down. He thrust roughly into Astrix’s mouth, all the while clenching his head in the painful grasp.

Afterwards, Astrix didn’t want to think about what had happened. Like Jake’s hand on his shoulder, the experience was a sensitive spot in his mind. He sank gratefully into the routine of work, Come Out and Play, and being ignored at the bars. He tried as hard as he could not to think, not to try to remember who or what he had been before waking up in the city.

It was raining the day everything fell apart. Astrix trudged miserably to the bus stop in the downpour, holding a damp cardboard box over his head that did little to block out the rain. By the time he climbed onto the bus and pushed a coin into the slot, water squelched in his boots and the back of his shirt and jeans—the rain had been blowing in from behind him—were soaked. The other men who got aboard were in much the same shape, and everyone sweat, and steamed, and smelled. At the mine they had to dash through the rain again, and then in the depths of the tunnels Astrix’s wet clothes turned chill and uncomfortable. All morning, Jake was racked by horrible coughs and Astrix was

haunted by images of rain seeping down through chinks in the earth to drown them or collapse the tunnels and bury them. He was too nervous to get much work done, and the Those That observing through the camera in the corner scolded him to hurry up several times. By now Astrix had grown much stronger and was ordinarily able to keep up with the men around him, but that day every time his axe struck the rock he imagined it sparking a cave-in.

When the Come Out and Play call began, he was not as relieved as usual. He felt uneasy and irritable. It was still raining outside, and the crystal ship was hovering over the factory's roof, not the street, so it did nothing to protect the workers from getting soaked again. As they came out, the rest of the men scattered away from Astrix; he ended up in the center of a loose circle. For a few moments they only stood there, getting wetter and wetter, then Astrix felt the familiar stroodle wave ripple through his body. This one was lust; his erection sprang up instantly and he trembled all over with desire so strong he could barely see. In the tiny part of his conscious mind that was left he found himself grateful that it was only this, only rape. He had acted this out dozens of times now. But still the sense of dread, of something horrible about to happen was with him. For a moment he even tried to hold back, tried to struggle for control over his own body. But all that happened was that his hand shook slightly as he reached out and grabbed Jake by the shoulder. He threw him to the ground and by then there was no room left in his mind to resist, even to want to resist. Nothing mattered except the need setting every cell of his body on fire. All that was left was lust and something Astrix didn't have a word for, something that filled him with as much pleasure to twist Jake's arm behind his back and to rip the filthy clothes off his body as to finally force himself into him.

When he staggered back from Jake at last, who lay still as he had throughout the entire stroodle, Astrix thought it was over. It was usually just one stroodle per Come Out and Play. But now he realized that the lust that filled him was not fading, it was changing, turning inside out. He looked at Jake lying there on the street. His pale bare legs. The trickle of blood spreading down his thigh. The sight filled Astrix with more rage than he could have thought possible. He leaped onto the other man's back so hard he felt the bones crunch and the sound sent ripples of pleasure along his nerves. He gripped Jake's shoulders and grew halfway hard again as he felt Jake's muscles tremble under the skin as he tried to fight against the stroodle. But he couldn't get up and fight. He couldn't do anything. He was so disgustingly impotent, so weak. Suddenly there was a knife in Astrix's hand and he stabbed Jake in the shoulder. He screamed; Astrix heard it and felt it too, felt it vibrate through Jake's body but when he stabbed again the vibration turned into a deep shudder underneath his knee. The blood was so hot on his hands. More pleasure than he had thought could exist rushed through him; it was more than he could contain. He had to let it flow out of him. He stabbed again. The smell and the sharp taste of the blood in his mouth. The slurp of the knife as it went into flesh. He had never known rage or ecstasy like this, and now they were together, breaking him open, turning him inside out, leaving him raw and burning and stabbing Jake over and over.

Somehow he lost his knife, but that didn't slow him down, he went on tearing at his victim with his hands and his teeth. He became drenched with blood; the rain washed it off onto the concrete but Astrix only became covered in it again and again. Finally, as he fumbled around, his eyes still blinded by rain and the rage that possessed him, he couldn't feel Jake's body anymore. His groping hands felt nothing, nothing at all.

Slowly, his eyes began to clear. His mind began to rise up as if from deep underwater. The first thing he saw was the ring of workers, but their faces whirled around him, too slippery to get a grasp on. He had to clench both hands down on the concrete to make them come into focus as eyes dazed with horror, mouths hanging open. Astrix kept looking up at them. He didn't want to look down, but little by little their stares forced his eyes lower and lower until he saw the pavement and what was left of Jake.

There was no body. When Astrix had attacked people before, there had always been a body. It might have been bleeding or bruised or broken, but it had always been whole enough to pick up in one or two pieces, and put in a hospital machine. But now—there was no body. Astrix was surrounded by broken pieces of bone and small bloody lumps. At first he refused to believe what the lumps must be. As if he were mesmerized, he leaned slowly closer to one until there was no doubt that what he was looking at was flesh.

Bile rose in his throat and he had to struggle to keep from throwing up. Everything began to darken in front of his eyes. When he looked back at the other workers he saw that they obviously were not going to help him. They were backing away, their faces still revulsed and horrified. "Please," he begged them anyway. "Please, put him back together."

Small, hard objects were pelting his head and arms. He realized they were coins thrown from the crystal ship but neither he nor any of the workers reached to pick any up. Panic rose through his body, mounting higher as the other men got further away. "Please," he begged again. "Fix him. You always fixed them before. Put him back together, please, please fix him. I didn't mean to do this god I swear. Please fix him!"

Hysterically, he picked up the lumps and tried to press them together with his hands. Of course it was futile, and he only ended up smearing more blood over his hands and down his arms. He lost all sense of words, and screamed now only sounds, rocking back and forth into darkness.

When Astrix came back to himself, he was alone on the street. It was still drizzling. Drops ran over his face and splashed down onto the concrete, but he didn't dare look down as they landed. There was no one anywhere around him, and he knew suddenly but certainly that if he entered the mine it would be empty, the workers fled, the Those That supervisor left in triumph. He and the others in the crystal ship had brought Astrix here, leading him through the stroodles like a bewildered insect into their web, and left him there alone.

Slowly he climbed to his feet, firmly not looking down, although it was hard not to notice the blood soaking his clothes. He took off his shirt and dropped it in the street, then took off his boots and jeans as well. He left everything there in a bloody wet pile and walked back towards his apartment naked through the slowly ending drizzle, carefully holding himself together.

His calm only lasted until he got safely back to the apartment. With the door shut behind him, he lapsed again into hysteria. The images of Jake coughing next to him that morning and what he had become later kept flashing in front of his eyes, over and over without mercy, until Astrix was screaming. He ran around the room, desperate to escape what had happened, but there was nowhere to run. He smashed everything that was breakable, all of the days and days worth of accumulated plastic junk he could crunch against the wall; he shredded and stomped and kicked all of the other trash he had been

noodled for into piles. He flung the mattress end over end, and in the bathroom, smashed the mirror into spidery cracks, ripped the sink off the wall and broke it into chunks of dirty porcelain, and kicked the toilet so fiercely that it broke. But none of it helped. He was out of his mind half the night, grief alternating with horror, with panic, with anger, with despair. Finally, after beating the concrete wall furiously with his fists but failing to knock a hole in it, he smashed his head into it instead. The blow sent him reeling backwards, dizzy, barely able to see, his head pounding as he lay down on the mattress where he had thrown it across the room. Surprisingly, he fell asleep right away.

When Astrix opened his eyes, they met blankness. For the first second he thought he had seriously injured himself when he knocked his head into the wall the night before; perhaps he was even dead. The thought filled him with a momentary, almost familiar, desperate hope, but then his searching hands met the worn cloth of his mattress. He was in his own apartment, blind.

Before he had time to wonder what had happened, or even to feel scared, the familiar, inescapable voice called to him from the window side of the room. "Astrix. Come here."

Astrix's body stood obediently. He was being stroddled, he realized, as he groped over to the wall and then to the window. But he didn't care. He felt as blank inside as his eyes. He didn't care what the Those That man was going to do to him now.

When he got to the window, his waving hands met open air. "Step forward," the voice told him, and Astrix's leg swung over the sill. He wondered remotely if he would plunge to the street below, but instead he stepped onto a slippery, slanted surface that slid his feet out from under him. He fell on a hard, cool floor and lay still.

“Get up,” the Those That man said. “Get on your knees.”

Astrix wasn't stroddled, however, so he just lay there. Even if he had wanted to follow the order, he wasn't sure he had the energy to move. His body felt unbearably heavy.

“Get up,” the man said again, this time kicking him in the ribs. He sounded irritated, but Astrix didn't move. He lay still, noticing vaguely how far away the pain in his side felt. He knew he had been kicked hard, but he could barely feel it.

“Stroodle him,” another voice said, and Astrix suddenly got the impression that he was surrounded by a number of Those That men. He heard a snicker ripple around them, and then the first Those That man cursed. “God damn it—now this thing isn't working right—”

Something clattered on the floor next to Astrix, and then he was kicked again. “Get us out of here!” the man snapped.

The other Those That laughed again, but there seemed to be an uncomfortable note in their voices. “Castille, are you sure this is a good idea?” one of them muttered, sounding anxious.

Castille, however, paid no attention. “I said, get us out of here,” he repeated, and a moment later the world buzzed and shook. This must be a crystal ship, Astrix thought dispassionately. The realization made him neither scared nor excited; he only reflected how odd it was that the whirling motion of the ship did not make him ill the way riding in the busses had at first. Perhaps it was because he couldn't see.

After a short distance, the ship paused and hovered. Astrix was left on the floor for quite a while, then the voice called to him again. This time he was stroddled to walk

down a ramp. When he reached the ground, the roar of a crowd hit his ears. “Kneel,” he was instructed, and this time his body did what it was told.

The crowd went silent. “This man,” Castille said, standing somewhere above him, “has behaved so violently within a strodle that he has killed another man permanently, ripped him into so many pieces that no hospital machines were able to restore him again.”

The crowd gasped in horror. Some began moaning, others crying out, but all Astrix could hear clearly was the voice of the Those That man, who was speaking so softly that the words must have been meant for Astrix alone. “You are a disgusting, horrible thing,” he said. “A weak, pathetic thing. You have no right to be among us.”

Something hit Astrix’s face with a wet slap and the smell told him it was some kind of rotten fruit peel. The crowd roared, and more pieces of trash smacked into him, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

Above him he could hear Castille inciting the crowd to hate him, telling them to hurt him the way he had hurt one of them. Finally, one of the people rushed forward. Astrix could hear his footsteps approach, but he could barely feel the blow to his jaw. Others ran at him, hitting him, kicking him. But even as they kept on, beating him to what surely must be death, it all seemed distant and unreal, unable to reach him through the thick, vague fog wrapped around his consciousness, until everything went black.

Astrix woke up in a hospital machine, still blind, but otherwise whole. When the door opened he was strodled again to walk down the ramp, kneel, and the process started all over again. It didn’t take long for him to lose track of how many times he was put through the punishment, especially since he was so numb he hardly felt any of it. But it seemed to go on for a long time.

At last they stuffed him back through a window. He collapsed onto a concrete floor and the blankness in front of his eyes dissolved into the dim shape of his own apartment. There was no sign of any crystal ship outside his window, his body felt strong and whole. It could have all been a dream. But he knew it wasn't a dream, he knew that Castille was determined to make him suffer as much as possible.

“What does he want from me?” he moaned out loud, asking the empty darkness. He had never heard of anything like this happening to anyone else. What had there been to him that would make Castille hate him so much? And what did it all have to do with his missing memory?

He didn't have the strength to think about it anymore. And who knew what Castille would do to him tomorrow? It could go on and on and on forever. Astrix wanted to cry, but his eyes felt numb and rubbery. There was no way to escape, nothing he could do about it. He crawled over to his mattress and went to sleep.

Chapter 5

The Citadel:

“They had to teach us to like hurting people,” Astrix said abruptly. Lemon looked at him across the table as she chewed a mouthful of toast. As always, the food was delicious, but Astrix had barely eaten. He was stirring his fruit salad idly into his eggs and staring into space. “When we first came to live in the Citadel, I mean. I was eight years old.”

She had been six when it all began. As she had done so often recently, Lemon tried to understand what it had been like to be six, to have all the years she had lived countable on her two hands. In those six years she would have learned and changed so much. Grown from the mushy-formless shape of a baby to the shape of a person. She would have learned to talk, walk, eat for herself, care for herself. Not like the next seven hundred and sixty-seven years of being the same.

“When we first moved in, everything was different. No more house, no more governess, no more outside. I hated it. And then they started giving us these lessons, that’s what they called them, in the activity room at the club. For the first one, there was this man tied up and hung from the ceiling. They had us hit him with sticks, like a piñata. There was even candy stuck on him with tape and tucked into the ropes. No one liked hitting him at first. No one. Our parents had to push us into it and I don’t think they liked it much either. Some of the mothers were crying. A lot of the children were crying. But we hit him. It was horrible at first. But then the candy fell down, and people started cheering for us, and a lot of the kids got used to it. I was still upset, but then, after we had knocked loose all the candy, they took the man away and put him into a hospital machine.

He was all battered and bleeding, but when the servants brought him back, he was healed. Everything we had done was taken away. And I felt so relieved, so incredibly relieved that it could all be taken back. And so I thought maybe I could bear it, bear hurting people, if only it could all go away again. . . .”

That man could have been her father. She could remember him now, mostly in parts: a pat on the head. A hand holding hers. A lap.

“After that it was never as bad,” Astrix said blithely. He probably didn’t stop to consider that the man could have been her father. “We rode servants like horses, beating them until they fell down. It was a contest to see whose fell down first. You got a prize. Or we played circus— knife throwing and fall-off-the-tightrope. But I always thought it was all right, it would all be fixed, none of it would stay, so it was all right.”

But her parents had really been taken away from her. And the things that had happened to her over and over during Come Out and Play were not all right, even if the wounds had healed. She wasn’t sure that Astrix, even though he had been an ordinary man for a while, really understood how horrible it had been. She thought that since the Those That allowed themselves to feel so little in their lives at the Citadel, and repressed themselves so strictly, feeling pain had been as much of a relief for Astrix as not feeling it anymore was for her.

“Our parents thought it was *necessary*,” Astrix went on. “I know you think they were wrong and I know that they didn’t care about you and your parents and all those other people, that they just used them. And that’s true. They did use them. But in the beginning it wasn’t just for fun. They thought . . . I think they thought civilization itself was at stake. I’m sorry, but your parents and the other poor people . . . there were so

many of them, using up all of the resources. My parents thought everything would be gone, used up on cheap, shoddy imitations of the things they had. Everyone just wanted more and more, and then the government wanted to pass all these laws to make my parents' companies have to give the poor people jobs, but if they gave them jobs the companies might go under and then everything would fall apart.

“So my father and the others decided to set up their own community: the Citadel and the city and the country of the sun-worshippers. They bought a whole lot of land and figured out how it would all work. The sun-worshippers would grow the food and be the servants, and in the Citadel we could keep living our lives and keep civilization healthy, and in the city—”

And in the city, Lemon thought bitterly. Astrix's explanation sounded oversimplified and easy. Maybe this was the story they had told him when he was a little boy, and maybe he believed it. But surely his parents had realized that it wasn't that simple, that what they did was wrong. . . .

“They said that the city people would get all the cheap junk they wanted,” Astrix continued. “I think they thought it was a kind of joke to noodle them. And the Come Out and Plays—they said they were *necessary*. They said that if we were cooped up together in the Citadel all day, being civilized, there had to be an outlet for all our non-civilized feelings. We had to get all the hate and energy and lust out, you see, before it ended up making us fight among ourselves and destroy everything.

“So, when it all started, it all had a *reason*.” Astrix's voice sounded sincere but he was still staring out into space, not meeting her eyes. Was he trying to explain the system to her or himself? Defending it or trying to see if he could still believe in it?

“But now everything is confused,” he went on. “ I think the original plan has been lost. No one wants to do anything useful, to work or learn anything. They just want to screw each other over and play with the people in the city. In the beginning the cruelty was supposed to protect us, but now it’s just become all about the cruelty. . . .

“It didn’t start out that way, though. There was a reason. My father understood it better. He and the other fathers set it up. Julian and I, Castille, all the other Those That men you’ve seen, we were all just children then. We couldn’t help it. Our fathers set it up, and trained us to fit into their plans. We were *shaped* to be the way they wanted. And it worked, you know it did. I got bored with hurting people, but it wasn’t that I didn’t *like* it, Lemon. They made it part of me, part of all of us. We couldn’t help it, but now I don’t think anyone’s going to be able to change, either.”

Lemon stared at him. He had been changed from whoever he had been at eight, shaped and changed into something as much as she had. But as far as she could tell, he and all the other Those That had had more power all along. They’d had their minds, they’d had room and time to think. They could have tried to escape the way they had been taught to be, as she had finally learned to. But. . . . She looked at Astrix suddenly with more compassion. Astrix had fought back a little bit, even if he didn’t know it, through his fascination with computers and machinery. And he might not have done it on purpose, but he was indirectly responsible for the way she had woken up from the state she had been in in the city. If he hadn’t been seen as strange and vulnerable by Castille because he spent all his time working, he wouldn’t have been put in the city and the hospital machines wouldn’t have broken down. And it was only after she had gone into a

broken machine, one that hadn't dulled her mind the way it was supposed to, that she had been able to wake up, to think, to realize how horrible the Those That really were.

She studied Astrix's smoothly shaven face, his colorless hair. His eyes were miserable, his lips pressed together as if he were struggling to hold his sorrow inside. If only he were brave enough to take off his gray clothes, to try to be the person he really was. She almost reached out to comfort him, almost spoke, but couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Instead, she fled to the bedroom and pulled the blankets over her head, confused to find herself crying.

Later that day, when she wandered back into the main room, Astrix was out, as usual. She was alone and unobserved in the apartment, and she was bored. There was nothing to do here! In the city she would have been working, and she would have been too stupid to care anyway. But now, time seemed hard and stony in front of her; she felt like it would be bruising to force herself through it. Suppose she lived another seven centuries, doing nothing but sitting around Astrix's apartment. What would happen to the self she had kicked and dragged out of the dazed and dumb Lemon in the city?

Suddenly filled with rebellious energy, she turned a somersault on the carpet, ran around the room several times, and finally leaped up on the couch and started jumping. It squeaked obligingly, probably glad to have some fun. The Those That would never do anything like jump on a couch, they never did anything fun. They didn't even have television. When she had asked about it once, Julian had peered snootily down his nose at her. "We don't have time for such common pastimes here," he'd said, looking at her as if one of the cats the Those That kept as pets had started demanding amusement. That's all he and the other Those That thought of her as, anyway. Crazy Astrix's crazy pet.

But maybe she could use that to her advantage. If they thought she was stupid and helpless, maybe she could use that to get the better of them or to escape. If either was even possible.

The door to the apartment opened suddenly, and Lemon was caught in mid-jump. She stared guiltily over her shoulder as Astrix and Julian walked in. Astrix looked amused, but Julian was shocked and disgusted. For a fleeting second Lemon felt an echo of the way she had thought in the city—terrible guilt for displeasing a Those That man—but then she recalled herself. He was only a man, a horrible nasty man who had lived for almost eight hundred years with a stick up his ass. She made a face at him as she landed.

“God, Astrix, what is it doing?”

The look on Astrix’s face told her that he understood, but he said nothing. Instead, he came over to her. He was moving with more confidence that she had seen in him in a long time, maybe ever, and she didn’t pull back as he put his arms around her. “I have to talk to Julian a minute,” he said. “Please don’t cause trouble.” He lifted her to the floor and Lemon sat down with a thump on the couch. She waited while he went back to the disapproving Julian and they argued briefly in whispers too quiet for her to understand. Finally Julian went out, shutting the door behind him in what was almost a slam.

To her surprise, when Astrix turned back to the room he looked happy. There was a bounce in his step and when he got to the couch she thought for a minute that he might get up on it and jump too. A wistful look crossed his face, then he shook his head. “These clothes aren’t suited to it, are they?” Instead, he took off his tie and coat and flopped down next to her. Lemon didn’t move away.

“I fixed three of the hospital machines in the city today,” he said. It was easy to see that he was proud of himself, and Lemon couldn’t help but feel happy for him. She knew that was something he hadn’t had much of a chance to feel. “I know that’s not—not a real change or anything like you want. But it really did help them. It made a difference. There were a lot of people who were in pretty bad shape. Worse than when we left the city.”

Lemon shivered. Then it had been bad enough. Astrix was right, whatever he could do to help the people there was better than leaving them with unhealed Come Out and Play injuries.

“I wish you would talk to me again,” Astrix said. “Maybe you could help me. There are a lot of machines to fix and it’s going to take a long time to get them all done. None of the other Citizens besides Julian will help at all—they’re more interested in causing wounds than curing them. And even Julian isn’t really that interested.”

Lemon sat up straight. She knew, of course, that the Those That needed Astrix to fix their hospital machines and all the other machinery that ran the Citadel. But she hadn’t really understood what that meant. No one but Astrix, and maybe Julian to some extent, knew how to control the machines that ran all of their lives. And Astrix was offering—would be more than happy—to teach her how to work them too. A chance, a hope, began to swim hazily in her mind. She looked up at Astrix. With the possibilities she suddenly saw, it was easy to halfway forgive him. “Astrix,” she said abruptly. “Tell me about the hospital machines.”

The City:

They had built the apartment buildings themselves. Lemon could vaguely remember working on the first ones; these had kept collapsing, she knew that, and had dim memories of bricks and concrete pieces crashing down on her. Eventually, however, they had built enough so that they all had apartments to live in, and only a group of ordinary men assigned to be the building crew kept on, building one apartment house after another. In all the time since the start of the city, the number of apartment buildings had grown impossibly. Lemon had no idea how many there might be now; she only knew that there seemed to be far more than people needed.

The oldest apartments had been built of square bricks or gray concrete cubes that they had made in molds. Those that were still standing were easy to recognize; not only were the bricks neat and orderly, but the windows were all square and in neat rows. Inside, there was one closet and one bathroom to each square room. In each room, they had painted the walls white, and put in a mattress. They had made the mattresses too, out of wood and cloth and stuffing that came out of large plastic bags, but she couldn't remember where those parts had come from.

But after that early time nothing had been built so carefully to plan. Now everything in the city looked shabby and haphazard. Nothing lasted very long, and was always patched up with no regard for what had been there in the first place. There were cracks, gaps, crumbles in everything. Similarly, just as her days had poured seamlessly by for the most part, they had had their own cracks, their own crumbling points when everything broke apart. Some of the strodles were so bad that the hospital machines could not numb them completely away, and then of course there were the bad days when

her mind collapsed under the strain. But her life had always smoothed over again afterwards, until the night she had first seen Astrix that had seemed to start it all.

It had been an ordinary night in the bar. She had been chosen by an irresistible Those That man, and as they were going back to a pocket room, they had walked right by another Those That, who she thought she recognized from the bar a few nights ago. They all looked so similar, but the odd, smooth way this one moved, as if he had no bones, had been distinctive. As they passed him, he raised his hand and beckoned, and she followed the point of his finger to see who was being picked. To her surprise, it was a terrified ordinary man in a blue shirt. The Those That took men rarely, and Lemon wondered what there could possibly be to this one to make him chosen. The only thing that made him stand out was his hair, which was reddish-blond and stood up on his head in odd, spiky tufts.

She hadn't thought about the spiky-haired man any more than that, her mind had been busy elsewhere. But later, when she woke up alone in the soft bed, she heard voices coming through the heavy, stiff, purple curtain that partitioned off the pocket rooms. Usually voices were not the sounds that came through.

Curious, she tiptoed quietly over to the curtain, although her attempt at silence was ruined when she smacked her head against the bedpost and cursed. She bit her tongue to quiet herself, but the voices didn't seem to notice. She slipped over to the slice of light where the curtain didn't quite meet the wall and peeked through.

The spiky-haired ordinary man was kneeling in front of the Those That man, who was sitting on the edge of the bed. He was smoking. The blue traces hung in the air, and his face, like always, showed no emotion. The ordinary man was crying; Lemon could

see it clearly. Tears splashed down on the Those That man's gray shoes, leaving dark spots.

Lemon turned away, feeling strangely troubled as she got dressed. She had never seen anything like that before. People were not supposed to act like that in a pocket room. There was something about the scene that made her think, uncomfortably, *this is how our lives are all the time*, and the thought lodged unease somewhere in her stomach.

When she emerged into the hall, the ordinary man was already coming out of his room, too. They looked at each other for a moment. He almost seemed to want to speak, then, instead, tried to smile. She could still see the traces of tears on his cheeks. Lemon felt suddenly awkward. She brushed past him and hurried home as fast as she could.

The next day during Come Out and Play Lemon had to beat up Kira. This was not the same as regular girl-on-girl fighting, this was having to beat up a terrified, screaming Kira who could only squirm weakly away, cowering with her hands over her face. Lemon beat her, scratched her, ripped her hair out. There was no chance to think about punching her in the nose to get her a new one. Lemon was overwhelmed with horrible, desperate vindictiveness. It was hard to find her own thoughts under the stroodle emotion, hard to remember that she didn't really hate Kira. She needed to hurt her, needed to hear her scream.

Afterwards, Lemon sat back dazedly as the feeling receded. She wanted suddenly to cry. Across the courtyard she saw Dooley, with a stricken look on his face, helping a badly beaten Thomas to his feet. But when she turned to help Kira, she was already on her way to the hospital machine.

Lemon felt strange for the rest of the afternoon. When she got home after work there was a program on TV showing two friends who had fought badly during a stroodle, but afterwards walked out into the street arm and arm, smiling happily. “Nothing matters from Come Out and Play,” one said. His teeth flashed white as he spoke. Lemon felt sick. She left the apartment and went out onto the steps.

The television always said that Come Out and Play didn’t matter, that the actions and feelings were not your own, so why worry? But this wasn’t true, she thought, although the words struggled with difficulty into her brain. She did feel uneasy when she hurt people that she didn’t want to hurt, even afterwards, even when their bruises were gone. She could still remember and feel sorry. And that one time she had gotten to beat up Rob, an ordinary man at the factory she couldn’t stand, she had enjoyed that. She still remembered, with pleasure, shoving the splintery piece of wood into his mouth, watching his lips break out in drops of blood. Her feelings were always there, even if they were hidden beneath the surface, below the other things the stroodle made her feel.

She sighed. In the blue, chilly twilight the street around her was almost empty. The buildings jutting up against the darkening sky reminded her of bones. She pulled her jacket closer around her and tried not to think.

The door behind her opened, spilling light onto the steps and breaking into her attempt at peace. She twisted around to see Thomas standing there. “Hello,” she said, watching her breath fog out as she spoke. “How are you feeling?” Thomas did not react to her rude mention of what had happened during Come Out and Play. He sat down heavily next to her, wrapping his arms around his body. He was only wearing a T-shirt. “It’s cold. You need to be wearing more than that.”

Thomas didn't answer for a moment. "What's the point?" he asked finally. He wasn't looking at her, but staring across the street at the lighted apartment windows.

She could make out the flicker of a TV and the shapes of people in a few of them, but nothing to keep his attention. "Are you all right?"

Slowly, he turned towards her. His eyes were blank and dazed. She wasn't sure he could really see her. "Something," he said carefully, "I think something happened to me in the hospital machine today. I feel so strange."

Lemon stared back at him, suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of *deja vu*. "Have we had this conversation before?" she asked abruptly.

Thomas ignored her. His voice dropped to a whisper and he looked carefully from side to side. "It's as if I'm up very high, on the top of a building so high that I can see everything. . . . The city, the Those That, *everything*. I can see it all now and it all makes sense, a terrible kind of sense. Don't you ever feel that, Lemon?"

His words flooded her with terror; she jumped to her feet. What if the Those That knew what they were saying? "No, I never think about anything like that." She hurried back inside, only wanting to get away from him as fast as possible. Once back in her apartment, however, she remembered the cold and took him down a jacket that had been left behind by some ordinary man either she or Kira had brought home, but Thomas was gone. She kept an eye out for him while she walked down to the bar, but he was nowhere in sight. It wasn't until she was going home—early, since she hadn't been chosen that night—that she saw him again.

She must have known, somewhere in some part of her brain that wasn't open to consciousness, because when she saw the crowd she was not at all surprised and

understood immediately what it meant. She pushed through the huddled group of tipsy, crying people, propelled by a strange sense of urgency although she knew what she would find. Somehow she felt as if she had seen it all before: Thomas's body, still in the same short-sleeved shirt, flopping lifelessly out of a hospital machine. Not far away was a pool of blood on the street, where he had landed. No one had seen him in time; it was too late now to save him with the hospital machine. He would have to stay dead.

The next day was a bad day. When Lemon awoke to the television's call she was crying, and when she tried to sit up she began sobbing so hard she could barely breathe. She fell back on her pillow, dimly aware that she was alone, that Kira had not come back last night. But it didn't matter, even if she had been there she could have done nothing to help. No one could.

Everyone had days like this, the bad days. The days when something inside Lemon erupted and kept her trapped inside a mind and body suddenly gone insane. Lemon always felt as if there was still a normal, everyday self deep inside, but this self no longer had any power to control her. It could only watch helplessly as the rest of her mind began to scream aloud and spin in hysterical circles. She felt as if there were bugs crawling under the skin of her head, rats chewing somewhere deep inside her brain. Eventually she had to smash her head against the wall to try to get them out. The third or fourth blow knocked her over and into blackness.

Strange as it was, the bad days were the only times Lemon ever dreamed. In the weeks between them, after nights and nights of hollow sleep, she sometimes wondered if the dreaming part of her brain had been lost forever. But the dreams always came back, and although vague, were almost always the same.

In her dream, Lemon was very small. —A child, she always remembered the word again each time, and she lived somewhere else besides the apartments. A different place, with green outside the windows. There was real furniture, and not so much clutter, reminding her peacefully of the pocket rooms. Sometimes it made her wonder if she had been a child among the Those That. But she wasn't wearing a silver-gray suit, she was wearing a little white dress. She was happy in the dream, excited. The people with her were going to take her somewhere, somewhere she really wanted to go. . . .

At this point Lemon always woke up. Even though she had been happy and sane in the dream, she woke up screaming. She suddenly believed absolutely that some part of her was *missing*, that there should be something more to her somewhere, some part was lost. In a desperate panic, she began running frantically about the room, scattering all of her possessions, dumping her mattress upside down, flinging all of the posters off the walls, searching desperately for whatever was lost, while a separate part of her mind was laughing hysterically, knowing all the time that her search was futile.

Lemon's hysteria was so strong that she didn't get noodled once during the morning. After throwing everything around her apartment, she went out, looking further for whatever was missing. She was vaguely aware of leaving, but then everything became a dark blur until she came back to herself staggering up her staircase. When she got to her room, she saw that her arms were bleeding from long red scratches, but she couldn't remember whether or not she had done this to herself or whether she had been caught in Come Out and Play during her wanderings. Whatever had happened, she was now too tired to go out and find a hospital machine. She simply bandaged her arms with a dress she didn't want anymore, straightened her mattress, and went to sleep.

The next morning, she realized that most of Kira's possessions were gone. She must have moved out when Lemon was asleep. Although they were roommates most of the time, now and then they split up—to spend more time with a lover, or simply to get a little space. Lemon thought she was ready for a little space now. She had heard enough about Mean Mark lately! Happily, she spread her things out over the rest of the room as she got dressed. On the way to work, she stopped off at a hospital machine and got her arms fixed. When she emerged, the skin on both arms was pink and new. At work, Kira told her that she had decided to move in with Dooley for a while. The morning was spent listening to Kira chatter about all of Dooley's sudden virtues. Lemon felt cheerful. She had her own apartment now, without the trouble of moving, and the bad day was behind her.

But after lunch, when the call for Come Out and Play came, vibrating through the metal roof of the factory and sinking deep into her bones, Lemon suddenly found herself terrified. Even as she jumped up from her stool, her body trembling in eagerness, her mind screamed in fear. There was a heaviness in the air like before a storm, and the call felt like sharp pokes in the back, forcing her forwards when all she wanted was to turn around, to run, to hide somewhere safe. But there was nowhere safe. Out in the courtyard Lemon stood still with her fellow workers, staring up at the two crystal ships that hung low in the sky. The Those That men looked down, their faces as always calm. Lemon wondered if she had ever met any of them in the bar, had ever gone off to a pocket room with any of them.

When the stroodle wave hit her, for a moment Lemon felt nothing. Then her ankles trembled, then her knees, and her stomach twisted into a heavy knot of nausea.

Her heart began to pound. Her arms jerked and danced like she was being electrocuted. The skin on the back of her neck crawled as if she were faced with something terrifying or disgusting; when the stroodle spread up into her brain she knew what it was: herself. Self-disgust and self-loathing swarmed throughout her body.

She looked down at her hands and hated them. Stupid, coarse, ugly workers' hands. Disgusting. She dropped to her knees and raked one hand over the rough concrete of the courtyard. The back, then the palm. Her knuckles. They beaded with blood and gave her a rush of deserved, forgiving pain. The other hand. Back, palm, knuckles. Better, better, the pain kept her safe, allowed some of the hatred, some of the horror of being herself to flow out onto the ground with the blood.

But it was not good enough. Self-loathing still squirmed and struggled in her chest, beat frantically in her brain like the pigeons that sometimes flew into the factory by mistake and battered themselves against the roof until they could be saved with a net. She was so disgusting, so ugly, so unworthy to eat, to breathe, to have the Those That even look at her.

Her chest first. She ripped open her dress. She didn't deserve to wear things that nice, to dress herself up, trying to be pretty. What nonsense. You might as well put trash in that dress, or a rat. She was filth, nothing, as she picked up a piece of broken glass off the concrete and dragged it over her breast. A single red line bloomed: smooth, clear, pure. The pain was sharp. She drew another line, another, another, straight and curved and swirled across her chest, down her arms, down her legs until her whole body was red and burning. The pain was agony and relief and forgiveness all in one. She couldn't stop until every inch of herself had been redeemed.

She began to scrape the flesh itself off her feet, down to the white bones, and the pain mounted, transformed from a burn into heavy waves that rippled through her body and roared in her ears. She felt dizzy, there was a red haze over her eyes, but it was still not enough. She was still a disgusting, worthless, useless thing. She fell over on her back. Her head thumped against the concrete and everything went even more dizzy. Up above her the crystal sheen of the ships winked at her in rhythm with the gleam of the watching Those That men's smiles.

She could see their faces so clearly. Everything around her was blurred away by pain, but she could see their faces as if they were only a lover's height above her. But they had no lover's expression on them. Their eyes were cool, amused, smirking. Enjoying the pain she felt, enjoying watching her twist and squirm below them, smiling as she was wracked by feelings that were not her own.

It was only a stroodle, she reminded herself, it wasn't really real, just a stroodle, nothing important. Although something was confusing her, something seemed horribly, horribly wrong, there was no room in her brain for the thought to develop. There was only disgust and despair. She was already tired of the feeling, but it was still undeniably present, undeniably powerful. The Those That men's smiles made her temples ache and she knew that her brain was going to burst, going to explode from inside. She had to let the pressure out. The last thing she saw was the even, blindingly white teeth as she raised the piece of glass and jabbed it into her eyes.

She had cracked like a dropped bottle and was spilling out into the world, and the world was pain. The stroodle was over; coins clinked on the pavement, but she couldn't move. Everything hurt. Every part of her body screamed. She knew she had to get to a

hospital machine, but she couldn't even roll over. Finally she heard Kira's voice nearby and hands half-carried her to a hospital machine. She didn't have to wait in line; she must have been one of the most badly wounded.

As the door shut, Lemon relaxed into the warm, numbing darkness and slipped gratefully into unconsciousness. The next thing she knew she no longer hurt and she could see the green light click on above the door. She was cured. When the door opened, she stepped out feeling physically fine again. Her eyes saw sharp and clear, and in the mirror they were their own shade of blue. Her skin felt soft and new, stretchy and buzzing softly still from all of the new growth it had just accomplished.

Strangely enough, however, despite her healed body, despite the new purple dress she took from the Extra Clothes box, Lemon did not feel correspondingly cheerful. Usually, having a refreshed body made her feel happy, new again, untainted, and whatever had happened during the stroodle seemed far away. But today, somehow she couldn't get the memory out of her mind. Instead of feeling invigorated by her new body, she just felt depressed, as if she had been healed only in preparation for more pain and degradation, more drownings, more rapes, more attacks on herself. The vending machine full of Happy Cookies beckoned to her with its flashing neon sign, but the thought turned her stomach. She just went quietly back to her stool and started to work.

After a while the monotony of her movements, the quiet, the thickening of later afternoon, began to soothe Lemon's troubled state away. She relaxed into the sameness of her task and let it lull and blur her mind. She felt dreamy and very peaceful as she stood up and wandered over to the masher, the large machine press that stamped out the heads of Dreamy Dan and Mean Mark with a great sizzle of hot plastic. Lemon watched

for a moment, enjoying the steady rhythm and the sight of PlasticPerfect faces appearing out of nowhere, smiling their plastic smiles. Then she stuck her arm in.

The scream seemed to come from somewhere outside herself. It had to, for all that was left inside her was pain. She could see white bones where the skin had been ripped away; the rest of her arm was blackened by lines of melted plastic coiled over it. She could hardly believe that such a horrible object could be part of her. It wavered in and out in front of her eyes, growing smaller, then larger, then finally receding far away, into a point at the end of a long dark tunnel, before the tunnel clenched shut, leaving her only in blackness.

Lemon felt her body thump against the floor, her arm inflating once more with pain. She lay where she had fallen, dimly aware of voices exclaiming in horror at her accident, giving overlapping orders of what to do to help her. At last she felt hands grabbing her, carefully avoiding her wounded arm, pulling her up off the floor.

Once again in the dark warmth, all of the pain faded away. Lemon felt unnaturally safe as heat flooded her arm and washed her into sleep. When she emerged this time, the workday was over. Most people had already gone home, except for a couple of ordinary men sweeping the concrete floor. Lemon walked very slowly out of the building. Instead of feeling reborn, with her newly healed body, she felt suddenly very, very old.

Slowly she wandered back to her apartment. Kira wasn't there, and Lemon wondered where she was. Everything in the apartment looked unfamiliar, and she thought briefly that she might have gone into the wrong one by mistake. But there was really no way to tell, and anyway it didn't matter. She stood for a long time looking down out of

the window at the figures moving along the street below. Even from the height she could tell they moved excitedly, on their way out.

It was only after she'd been noodled twice, for a drink and a Chik N Cheer meal that she felt normal enough to shower and put on a dress of stretchy blue fabric, decorated with strategic holes. She didn't have enough energy to fix her hair or do her makeup, so she just went out the way she was. She couldn't work herself up to feeling very excited about the bar, but she didn't know what else to do. So she let her feet lead her slowly in the usual path.

Once she had gone inside, however, she felt even more strange. The same girls were at her same long table, laughing and talking. Kira was among them. But Lemon suddenly couldn't go over there and sit down. She knew her mouth wouldn't form a smile even if she pushed it into shape with her fingers, and when she heard what the girls were saying, it was even worse. Emily was telling a story, waving her hands in the air dramatically: "Then she stuck her arm in! Right in the masher. What a stench!"

They were talking about her! Lemon felt her brain dim with horror. What were they going to talk about next, describe what had happened during the stroodle? And would they laugh at that too? Everything seemed so clear in her mind, so recent, not far-off and hazy the way things usually were. The table erupted in a roar of laughter, and Lemon felt dizzy. That had hurt her! Sticking her arm in the masher had hurt her terribly and they were laughing at it. How could they? It was not funny. And yet, she herself had laughed at things like that a hundred times. Why should it bother her?

Bewildered, Lemon stumbled over to the bar and sat down on one of the stools. Her head spun and she felt so strange. It was like a bad day, but not quite, it was like an

understanding time, but not quite. Pictures kept popping up in her mind: the look on Dooley's face after the Come Out and Play, when he looked at Thomas. Thomas's body, smashed and broken. The look on Kira's face after she had beat her up. Kira's voice soothing her that afternoon as she had led her to a hospital machine. Kira laughing now in her high-pitched squeak—but one time when she and Kira had shared an understanding time, Kira's voice had been thin and dimmed from its normal tone into a rough whisper, had been only the skeleton of her voice as she begged Lemon for some way to escape. The pain as she stuck her arm in the masher. Those teeth, those shining white teeth smiling down at her and glittering in her eyes. Everything swirled around her and she could make no sense of it, could only feel miserable and despairing. Desperately, she took a gulp of the penny drink the bartender set in front of her, trying to get a grip on herself.

She was staring down at the label on her drink bottle when a Those That man sat down on the stool next to hers. "What are you doing over here all alone?" he asked, his voice smooth. He placed his hand on her thigh.

For the first time, Lemon looked at a Those That man and felt a shudder of disgust. The skin on his hand was pale gray, the nails too even. The few hairs that stuck out from the end of his gray sleeve were stark and ugly. Slowly, she let her eyes rise, testing this new emotion. But it stayed the same; the thin chest wrapped in the gray shirt, the gray tie, all looked false and stupid. His throat was too pale, his chin too smooth. His face suddenly looked bland, not wonderful, not beautiful. He looked the same as all of the other Those That men, and the only expression on his face was a gleam in his eyes, a

gleam to his white teeth. The look in their eyes was always the same. How could she have possibly felt such desire, such attraction, for *that*?

And then understanding hit her as never before. She knew. The TV behind the bar winked at her and she knew. They were being stroodled at work. That was why she had stuck her arm in the masher, why the supervising Those That had not told her to go back to her seat as he would if she had gotten up to talk to somebody. He had been bored and wanted to see her do it. They were being stroodled at the bar. She looked at the penny drink in her hand. She had always thought the drinks had something to do with the strip shows she had performed, with her lust for the Those That men. But no. Nothing was different in the night. The Those That men didn't care where they were, in Come Out and Play or at work or at the bar, it was always the same.

Sick, Lemon raised her eyes to the Those That man in front of her. Repulsive as she found him now, she knew that at any moment he could stroodle her and in the next she would be in a pocket room desperate to fuck him. Even worse, she might lose the understanding she had come to, the stroodle could break her clear thinking and she would be mindless and happy again. Trapped and panicked, she peered over the Those That man's silver-gray shoulder at the door, hoping frantically for a way out. To her surprise, there at the doorway was the spiky-haired ordinary man that she had spied on in the strange pocket room scene. She stared at him, her attention suddenly riveted by the shape of his chin, the set of his eyes. Did she know him from somewhere else? He reminded her of something. . . . She was still staring at him when the stroodle wave hit her. This time she knew it was coming and she felt it: a swirl of nausea deep in her bones. Her mind went dizzy for a moment, and when it cleared there was only lust. The Those That man

reached for her, confident, but Lemon realized dimly and gleefully that the stroodle must have made her want whoever she was looking at. All of her desire was for the ordinary man.

She pushed past the gray blur, barely noticing the surprised noise it made, and marched up to the ordinary man. She was vaguely aware of the astounded look on his face as she grabbed him by the shirt and hauled him outside. Surprised as he must have been, he did not protest as she dragged him down the street, up the stairs to her apartment, and flung him onto her mattress, where she took all of her energy from the stroodle out upon him. She finally collapsed, panting, onto the mattress next to him, but was still filled with another kind of energy: triumph.

Chapter 6

The Citadel:

Astrix stepped into the elevator. It rose to the Citadel's roof swiftly, and so smoothly that he could barely feel the motion. Nevertheless, it reminded him of the jerky, stomach-plunging ride down into the mine in the city and he shuddered. Firmly he tried to force his thoughts to the present, but it was hard to stop remembering; he was on his way to start work on the city's hospital machines.

The doors opened onto the roof, and Astrix stepped out into a blast of bright sunlight. A thick blanket of warmth, in stark contrast to the Citadel's eternal chill, immediately clamped down on him. The heat made him feel trapped and smothered in his suit, but he was glad for the physical discomfort. At least it was a distraction from his memories.

Resolutely, he trudged towards the area of the roof marked out as the landing area. This time of day, few crystal ships were in use, so most of the two hundred the Citadel possessed hovered patiently eight feet above the roof. As he stepped onto the black asphalt that defined the landing area, Astrix looked up at the pale shapes over his head and imagined that he was entering a field growing gigantic mushrooms.

He walked quickly to the nearest ship and snapped out "Stairway down." There was an audible tremble in his voice. Maybe it was a mistake to go alone. Julian had offered to accompany him, but there had been such nausea in his friend's eyes at the very thought of providing sympathy that Astrix had declined. He had gone alone to the city before. Surely he could do so now.

The thin, almost invisible stairway extended from the bottom of the ship and Astrix climbed up. Castille and his friends must have led him, dazed from the brainwipe, into one of these ships. Or had he been carried? He pictured his limp body dragged up the stairs, dumped unceremoniously into the dismal, empty apartment. He would never know what had really happened; this part of his memory had never returned and it was unlikely that it would. There were several days of his life lost to him forever. And why should he mind, when he had lived so many days and they were all so horrible? Yet somehow he regretted even the loss of those few.

His preoccupation with the past faded as he stepped inside the crystal ship. Every time he went into one, he could think of nothing but the amazing knowledge and abilities they represented. The ships were capable of low-level antigravity, responsive to vocal commands, and all of the circuitry was run through tiny, translucent wires encased in the plastic walls. The ships were twenty-five feet in diameter, capable of carrying up to two tons, and practically transparent, yet more advanced than anything Astrix could understand. He had no idea how any of the technology worked; if the ships ever broke down, he would be unable to fix them without a lot of research, even if the data on them was still in existence. He wondered what had happened to the people who had invented them. Had they been purged with the rest of their parents? Astrix sighed. If only some of the inventors and scientists had been left alive. All that knowledge they must have had! He could have learned so much, could have had people to work with, maybe could have invented some new technologies instead of having to rely on the past. Sighing deeply, he said "City."

Obediently, the ship rose and began to move slowly over the Citadel's roof. There was a slight humming sound and a faint vibration under his feet, but otherwise the movement was as unobtrusive as the ship's appearance. Astrix kept his balance easily, with almost eight hundred years of practice behind him; he even paced restlessly back and forth across the ship as it skimmed over the Citadel skyscrapers and then across the long stretch of dry brown prairie.

When the ship reached the first of the low, ragged gray buildings, it paused to await further instructions. Astrix didn't tell it anything at first. He went to the side, peered over, and was plunged immediately into memory. It was all so familiar and yet so changed. The edge of the ship pressed against his sternum as it had so many times, but never before had it seemed to cut into his breathing, and make his lungs struggle. Down below the streets were miniature and still. Now they were empty, but during Come Out and Play he had stared down over the edge of the ship, even through the floor under his feet, at tiny, blurred figures. They had been so small and so far away they hadn't seemed real. From that height, from safe behind the plastic barrier of the ship, everything had been remote. But now he knew what it was like to have those tiny buildings tower above his head, for the crystal ships to drift above him in the sky, to have fear rip through him as he wondered what they would make him do next. . . . He stood there for a long time, looking down, before he finally ordered "Move on. Slowly."

More apartment buildings, factories, junkyards, piles of trash, and rubbly concrete fields peeled by below him. Everything looked deserted. This must be part of the city where no one lived anymore. Although he didn't think most of the ordinary people realized it, they occupied only about a tenth of the city's area. New apartments had been

built more or less steadily for over seven hundred years, but no new people had arrived to live there; the ordinary people migrated slowly through the buildings sturdy enough to hold them. There were approximately ten thousand people in the city; about six thousand sun-worshippers, both working on the farms and serving in the Citadel; and two thousand Citizens. Their number had decreased the most, Astrix thought, with the loss of the women and of the older men. And yet they had set up this system to protect themselves. Maybe it hadn't worked so well after all.

As the ship began to move over an inhabited area, however, it was obvious that the ordinary people were not so well off either. It had been several months since he and Lemon had left the city, and then the hospital machines had only begun to break down. Now it was clear, even from this height, that the other Citizens had not exaggerated in their complaints that life in the city was totally disrupted and that the people were too incapacitated to perform their normal functions. He could tell at once that few of the factories were working—the sky above the city was mostly smoke-free. The transportation system had come to a halt too: The busses he saw were parked on the side of the road, half-buried in trash. Even the people were not moving through the streets like normal, but were simply milling around; that is, the ones who that could still walk. There were significant numbers of people with too few or too misshapen limbs to move on their own propped up on the steps or in corners. The apartment buildings were apparently full of still others in pain, whose cries drifted out from the open windows. Additionally, some of the people seemed to have problems beyond the physical. He drifted over dozens of men and women screeching, crawling in the street, and smacking themselves in the forehead. Astrix would have thought he could have no feelings for the ordinary people,

no concern for them at all, but an unexpected pang of sympathy clutched his heart. He had thought they already represented the epitome of degradation, but even they, normally, were better than this.

The largest number of hospital machines in one location in the city was in the big distribution warehouse, which since it supported five hundred workers, had fifteen hospital machines. Astrix ordered the crystal ship to the warehouse and told it to hover above the courtyard. He descended the stairs cautiously. There were only a couple of ordinary people in the area, and when they caught sight of him they turned and fled as if frightened. Astrix followed their retreating backs into the large, dark building.

The distribution warehouse was where all the manufactured factory goods were brought to be sorted and shipped out to vending machines. He had been inside before, and knew that it was always chaotic, and that there were always huge piles of goods waiting to be parceled out to the various vending areas, but now nothing seemed to be sorted at all. Hodgepodge piles towered high above Astrix's head and slid messily into one another. Astrix had to kick a path through the junk to make any progress inside.

"Astrix! Thank god!" A Citizen named Dominic rushed up to him. Astrix was surprised; he had thought that all of the Citizens had given up trying to supervise their increasingly incapable workforce. But apparently some were still trying to keep life going in the same ordered pattern. "Everything's getting out of control," Dominic went on, disturbed enough to let his distress show visibly on his face. "We don't have the same amount of goods coming in, but we still can't keep up. There aren't enough workers anymore, and those that do show up are hardly in any condition to work. Look at that!"

He gestured, almost hysterically, at a woman trying to grab onto PlasticPerfectPeople dolls with stumps where her hands ought to have been.

Astrix stared at her silently, watching how she used such energy and concentration to move the worthless toys from the pile to a small distribution cart. It was all such junk. He wanted suddenly to go over to her, rip the dolls away, and smash them into the useless pieces of plastic that they were.

When he was still a child, one of his father's friends, a man named Lucien, had been in charge of designing all the things the people in the city would buy—the clothes, accessories, toys, and food. Astrix remembered standing next to Lucien's worktable as he laughed about the names he was creating. "Noodled for a LederSchnitzel!" he had said, almost giggling in his amusement. "What a joke!"

Astrix had laughed too. He had liked the sound of the words. But now, looking around at the piles and piles of trash, the humor seemed far too old.

"How are we supposed to get anything *done*?" Dominic asked desperately, and Astrix forced his attention back to the other Citizen.

"Are all of the hospital machines here broken?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure. The people are scared to use any of them anymore. They don't know what could happen to them. And I don't want to make them, because *I* don't know what will happen to them. I don't want to make things worse."

Astrix nodded. "I'll get started right away then," he said, smiling inwardly at the look of relief that passed over Dominic's face.

Dominic pointed him to the machines and Astrix pulled out his test unit. All fifteen were actually broken, though two only needed replacement parts. He swapped

those out as he could and called Dominic to start putting the people inside while he got to work on one of the other machines. This was the least broken of the remaining thirteen, but the work was going to take some time. The repair ended up taking even longer than he expected, since he was distracted by the constant procession of people into the two working hospital machines. Dominic ran back and forth, anxiously shepherding in those capable of moving on their own and directing a pair of mostly whole ordinary men to help the more seriously injured inside. The parade of wounds and mutilations that went by was astonishing. Astrix couldn't tell which had been inflicted during Come Out and Play and never cured, and which had been caused by the malfunctioning hospital machines.

Not only the wounds were distracting, however, but the people themselves. At first they were scared to go into the repaired machines, and Dominic had to coax them in, using tones more gentle than Astrix had ever heard a Citizen use, besides himself speaking to Lemon. After one or two had emerged cured and healthy, the people began to go in more eagerly. They all came out joyfully, exclaiming with relief and happiness, and those waiting in line echoed the happy cries. The cured dashed around, testing their new legs or renewed energy, and even though they got in his way Astrix couldn't bring himself to be irritated. On the contrary, their joy made him feel happy too, and proud. He was doing something that could really help these people, and could make everyone's lives flow more smoothly.

By late afternoon, the third hospital machine was finished, but Astrix was out of parts and exhausted. "I'll be back tomorrow to work some more," he told Dominic. "Tell the people to try to find their friends who can't make it here on their own."

Dominic nodded, and turned to instruct his workers, but they ignored him. To Astrix's surprise, everyone who had been cured was staring at him with expressions of adulation on their faces. "Thank you! Thank you!" they cried out. Some were crying, some holding out cured arms, pointing to cured eyes and stomachs and vanished third limbs. *Look at that, Lemon's voice said in his head. That's real. They're not stroodled to feel that way. It's real.*

Astrix imagined her standing among the crowd, smiling radiantly like the others. *You're amazing, Astrix, she would say. You saved everyone. You're incredible.*

It sounded so silly that he had to laugh at himself, but he still wished it could be true as he politely smiled his way through the crowd and went back to the ship. "Citadel," he said, and it rose and began to move smoothly off. He felt very happy with and proud of the work he had done, but something was still nagging at his brain. An unexplored thought. He ran over the events of the day in his mind several times before he realized what it was: the way Dominic had clucked anxiously over his workers. If Astrix had asked why, he was sure that Dominic would say he was only concerned with keeping the system running smoothly, but he didn't think that was true. Dominic had been disturbed by his workers' deformities and their pain. Maybe Astrix wasn't the only Citizen who was getting tired of all this after all.

And then there was Castille. If Dominic thought differently than the standard Citizen-line, had Castille as well? When the crystal ship landed at the Citadel, Astrix took the elevator down to the floor where Castille's apartment had been. He stood looking at the door thoughtfully. The Citizens played out plots and schemes against each other all the time, but few with the energy or dedication that Castille had shown in going after

Astrix. He had tormented him in the city for over six months, had spent every Come Out and Play targeting him. He had taken him to the Punishment Days and refused to let him go even when the other Citizens had begun to show concern for their eroding machinery. And he had brought Astrix back to the pocket rooms, over and over again, where he had treated him with an odd combination of hatred and desire. Such obsession was out of character for a Citizen—it revealed too much feeling, was too close to passion. What had been going on inside Castille?

Astrix took a step back, then rushed forward and kicked the door. The impact hurt his foot, and he wished briefly for the heavy boots he had worn in the city, but the door flew open and he stepped inside. A film of dust lay over everything, but otherwise the room was virtually identical to Astrix's own. The white carpet and furniture. The metal and glass tables. There were no clues here; the apartment was all the same as anyone's. And yet, Castille had not been the same. He had been motivated by something out of the ordinary that had forced him to take dramatic and desperate steps. Castille had not wanted to remain numb. In some ways, he and Astrix might have been very much alike.

When he stepped back outside the apartment, Julian was coming down the hall towards him. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking around," Astrix answered curtly. He shut the door with a thud, wondering about his friend's convenient appearance.

"Well you can't just break into other people's apartments and look around—"

"Why not?" Astrix walked back towards the elevator, not waiting for Julian, who didn't answer. He trailed behind, fuming silently, until Astrix opened the door to his own apartment and they found Lemon jumping up and down on the couch. She stuck out her

tongue at Julian, and Astrix wanted to laugh, but one look at Julian's face told him that this was a Last Straw. "God, Astrix, what is it doing?"

Astrix went over to Lemon, lifted her down, and asked her to wait a moment. Julian was still angry about the visit to Castille's room, but Astrix didn't want to put up with it any longer. "I hurt nothing," he told him bluntly. "I was only looking. It's not going to bring about anarchy. Now, I want to be alone."

Julian left angry, but Astrix didn't care. He sat down on the couch beside Lemon and began telling her about his work in the city that day. He was remembering the response he had imagined earlier so vividly that at first when she spoke he didn't know if it was real. But she spoke. She said his name. "Astrix. Tell me about the hospital machines."

The City:

The morning after the Punishment Day, it was late when he woke up. He knew that it was long past the time to go to work, but he didn't move. He lay still. His mind was very clear. He felt as if he had been half-asleep since the day he had first woken in this room, his body energetic but his mind dull, and now the situation had reversed itself. His body was sluggish, still in shock, and Astrix knew it had lost forever the stroodle-granted power to intimidate and destroy. Despite the strength he had gained in the mines, he was, at heart, as helpless as the rest of the workers, as helpless as the man he had killed.

But now he could see clearly what he hadn't understood before: that he must have lost his memory for a *reason*, that someone had taken it away on purpose. And everything that had happened since—the series of stroodles leading to the final, horrifying one when he'd killed Jake—had all been a manipulated, carefully orchestrated plot aimed at him. But he didn't understand why. Why had someone wanted to do this to him, to him out of all of the others?

It had to be about whoever he had been before. He tried to remember; he scraped desperately at the corners of his mind, but now, when he wanted and needed to know, his memory refused to cooperate at all. Even his days in the mine seemed faraway and distant, beyond that his mind was an empty chasm. There was no way to tell who he had been, whether he had been someone who deserved this punishment, if he was only a pawn in someone's game, or if he had once known more about what was going on. The only part he could figure out was who must be doing these things to him. There was only one group that had any kind of power at all, much less this kind of power. And it was

Castille, the boneless Those That man, who had been watching him at work, who had called him to the pocket room that night and behaved so oddly, who had taken him to the punishment days. A surge of fury flooded through Astrix's body as he pictured the Those That man's face. Castille had been doing this to him; Castille wanted to hurt him, to twist and torture him. Castille would have the answers, and Astrix would get them, in whatever way necessary. He lay still all day, thinking about how he would get revenge, moving only when he had to go buy something. The food he was noodled for he ate, the stupid toys he threw out the window and watched them crash down on the street below.

When it began to get dark outside and he could hear people going out to the bars, he finally rose from the mattress and took a shower. He knew that he must still be covered with Jake's blood as well as his own, so he kept his eyes firmly closed to avoid seeing the water splash down around his feet or anything that might wash off his body. Thoroughly, he washed his hair and scrubbed every inch of himself four times over so that nothing, no traces of the last few days, could remain. Only when the water turned cold and he was shivering did he dare to open his eyes and step out of the stall. The first few times he'd bathed here, the rough concrete floor had pricked his bare feet so badly that he'd had to stand on the mattress to dress, but now, he realized, he didn't feel a thing. He had changed; he had become shaped to this place after all. But the realization only made him more conscious than ever that he did not belong here. He had been placed here as a pawn for the Those That men in a game even more horrible than the everyday stroodles. He had been singled out for Castille's amusement, and he had to find out some answers, find out why he had killed Jake, why he had been forced into the torture of what he had done.

He held himself together very carefully as he put on clothes. He had been naked ever since removing the shirt and jeans soaked with Jake's blood, and now the first touch of cloth against his skin made him want to scream, punch his hand through the window, and rake the broken glass back up his arm to the shoulder. But he fought through the impulse, and instead dressed carefully in clean jeans and boots, and a new shirt that was dark blue with paler blue stars scattered across it, preparing himself for the confrontation.

When he left the apartment, he felt so different from the man he had been only a day or two before that at first everything looked as unfamiliar as it had that first morning. As he had done that day, he paused for a moment, unsure of where to go, then started numbly down the ramp. All around him it was silent. Normally the halls were full of the sounds of televisions or of people talking as they got ready to go out, and the eerie silence made him imagine that the inhabitants had all died or had moved away, fleeing each other's ghosts.

Out in the streets it was quiet as well. Astrix walked slowly and deliberately, trying to give himself strength. When the lights of the bar came into view, his feet moved slower and slower. No one stood in the doorway, and the door was closed. They couldn't be waiting for him, could they? —waiting to punish him again? But when he paused outside the window and peered in, everything looked normal. People were talking and laughing. Up on stage, a girl was dancing in a pink and gold spotlight. He took a deep breath.

When he pushed the door open and walked inside, nobody paid any attention to him at all. He cautiously worked his way through the crowd of men clustered around the doorway, and then forgot about them as soon as he realized they weren't going to attack.

They weren't important, anyway. There was only one person who could give him the answers he needed.

The Those That were at their little tables. They talked among themselves, like they always did, their voices low, their bodies slightly inclined towards each other, their faces betraying no expression. Except for one. Astrix stepped out from the crowd and Castille looked directly at him, smiling, then raised his drink to him. Suddenly the clink of wine glasses roared in Astrix's ears. He lunged towards the lower level, filled with strength as he surged forwards, ready to beat the answers from Castille. It was like the feeling he'd had in the stroodles at the mine, when he had been flooded with power, invincible, triumphant, so it was a great shock as he was seized and held back before he could even set foot on the stairs.

The room was silent. Astrix was held on either side by ordinary men as Castille rose seamlessly to his feet. For a long moment they stared at each other. Astrix tugged at the hands that held him, but did not dare speak until the other man gestured and he found himself being hauled away backwards. "Let me go," he demanded then, struggling. "He has to tell me—look what he's *done* to me!" There was a vague hope in his mind that he could convince the ordinary men to help him. After all, he recognized most of them from the mine; he had been one of them; and Castille had used him to kill another one of their number. They should be on his side.

But when he glanced up at the ordinary men, the words froze in his throat. They were staring at him with the same blank hatred he had felt during the Punishment Days. Their eyes reflected Jake's death and everything else that Astrix had done during the stroodles. They blamed him, not the Those That.

Frustration gave way to fear as they hauled him through the door. Astrix fought to get free, but the men who held him had strength from working the mines far longer than he had, and anyway there were too many of them. Three of the men held him as the others punched him several times in the stomach, then dropped him to the street. Once again the blows barely hurt, although he lay still until the bar's door slammed shut.

As soon as he was left alone, he rolled back to his feet and started down the street again. He might have been thrown out of one bar, but there were many in the city, with other Those That men. They might not know as much about him as Castille did, but they might know something, and maybe he could take them by surprise. Ignoring the twinges of pain in his stomach, he ran as fast as he could through the dark, twisting streets, so intent on where he was going that he ran right past several hospital machines without giving them a second glance.

At last he saw bright lights on a corner and people milling around the doorway of a small building. Cheerful chatter and laughter enveloped him as he came up to the edge of the crowd. Although he braced himself for their eyes to turn ugly, no one paid any attention to him as he went through the door and slipped into an empty place against the wall. Safely anonymous among the ordinary men, he peered down at the lower level, searching for a Those That he could approach, somehow, with his questions. It was a moment before he saw him, and then he could barely believe it. But there, sitting at one of the tables, raising his drink with a smooth fluid arm—it was Castille. It had to be.

Astrix forgot all of his questions. He forgot all of his anger. Suddenly all he knew was a mind-melting longing, lust and worship mixed together. The Those That man stood up, and Astrix moved towards him as if hypnotized. He couldn't remember why he had

been searching for Castille, only that he had been desperate to find him, and there he was. Astrix's heart wrung with grateful joy as he followed Castille into a pocket room.

This time he knew what was coming and dropped to his knees before he could be ordered to do so. He was trembling all over, shaking with the desire to please Castille, to make up for what he had done before, to not fail him—surely he had failed him. Only a dim corner of his mind realized that these were not his natural feelings, that he was being stroddled, but he could not bring himself to care, much less to fight back. It was far easier to just stop struggling, stop worrying, just give in to the powerful pull in his brain, into the pleasure of his swelling lust.

Castille sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. For a long moment he just stared at Astrix, then he flicked ash onto the floor and motioned to a spot in front of his feet. “Come here.”

Astrix crawled over and knelt. He bowed his head at first but Castille reached out, tipped his face back, and ran a hand over his chin. “Astrix, Astrix,” he said softly. “What did you do to that poor man at the mine?”

Astrix was stunned into sudden shame and guilt. “I . . . I . . . didn't want to hurt him,” he stammered, trying not to remember the terrible pleasure that had flooded his body. Had the stroddle created that? Or was it something he had truly felt? He knew he had come here seeking answers from Castille, and he stared at him now, begging silently for reassurance. Tears sprang into his eyes as he looked at the gentle smile on Castille's face, the way he softly shook his head.

“Didn’t you?” His voice was smooth as silk; Astrix was so focused on the other man that the words almost felt tangible, a soft touch sliding down over his face, making him shiver with lust and despair.

“No—I promise,” he whispered back, struggling to keep the words coherent. The act of speaking broke the tears from his eyes and he started to cry. “I didn’t—I’m so sorry.”

“But it’s too late, isn’t it? He’s dead now. He can’t be brought back. And you did it.”

“I didn’t mean to, I didn’t,” Astrix protested again. He felt the hysterical guilt begin to rise once more and rocked miserably back and forth. “I don’t know how it happened. Why did you make me do it?”

“You did it,” Castille corrected him. “You wanted to.”

“No—I don’t know,” Astrix sobbed. Had he wanted to kill Jake? He couldn’t remember. “I don’t understand. Why am I here? Why are you doing this to me? I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t, would you,” Castille went on. “You always thought you were so much better than everyone else. You went around despising people, looking down on them. You thought you were worth so much more.”

“No,” he protested again. “I just knew that I don’t belong here. My memory’s gone, I don’t know where I came from, who I am. . . .”

“I’ll tell you,” Castille promised, leaning closer to him. Astrix could feel his warm breath. “You’re someone who thinks he’s above everyone else. You used to think I was a fool. And you hated that man. You thought he was disgusting, dirty, below you.”

Astrix wasn't sure about the first part, but he knew the last accusation was true. He *had* been disgusted by Jake. "How do you know about that?" He stared up at the other man helplessly. He was split open; Castille could see into his heart, could judge him and Astrix desperately needed his forgiveness.

"We know these things," the Those That man told him calmly, sitting back. "I know all about you. It's easy to see, anyway. I know what you are. I know how weak you are, how pathetic. You killed that man because you're weak and now he's dead forever."

A great chasm of terror opened in Astrix's mind. Forever. It couldn't be taken back. He couldn't bear it. He began crying harder, sobbing, hating himself. "No, no," he moaned desperately. "I didn't—I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Please."

"You killed him and now it can't be taken back," Castille insisted. "Say it."

"No, please," Astrix sobbed. He was blinded by tears, all he could see was the gray cloth of the Those That man's pants over his knee. He stared at the way the folds fell.

"Say it." Castille slapped him across the face and Astrix recoiled miserably from the rebuff. He struggled to get his breath and then whispered "I killed him and it can't be taken back."

Castille said nothing, but put a gentle hand on Astrix's shoulder. He thought his bones would dissolve in relief, in the joy of being forgiven. The agony drained from his mind as Castille drew his head closer. At last he let Astrix give him pleasure, and in response Astrix's own pleasure swept his guilt away.

Afterwards, stumbling out into the dark and empty unfamiliar street, Astrix was confused. He still remembered the anger he had felt earlier that day, and the questions he

had been filled with. But he now knew that he was powerless. There was no way to fight any of the Those That, no way to even think about it. The ordinary men thought the Those That could read minds, and they were right. Castille could find him wherever he went; he would know what Astrix planned to do before he did.

The next few days were exactly the same. Astrix lay in bed all day, and in the evening, although he was terrified of facing Castille, went out to one of the bars. He couldn't stay away. Every night Castille called him back to the pocket room, and although Astrix begged him over and over for answers, only once did he get any kind of response to his questions. One night, all he had asked was "Am I from here?" miserably, over and over. Finally, Castille had tipped Astrix's head back and stared deeply into his eyes. "No," he'd said. "No, Astrix, you're not from here. You're the fairytale prince, cast out from his kingdom, transformed. And who's going to kiss you to turn you back to yourself again?" His mouth was very close to Astrix as he spoke, and Astrix's lips had ached for Castille to kiss him, but he had only turned away, gone on to blame him for Jake's death, beat him, fill him with confused guilt. Astrix knew that even if he had come from somewhere else, it didn't really matter. There was no way to escape. He was trapped in this endless torture, with no solution, no revelation, his only hope that someday Castille would grow tired and let the torments be over, let Astrix be forgotten, sink into anonymity, and be forever one of the unnoticed, unthinking ordinary men.

But one night everything changed. He was in one of the bars, he didn't even know which one anymore. Castille was there, of course, drinking and smiling. Any moment, Astrix knew, any moment he would be called and he would be unable to resist. Castille would torment him with the memory of what he had done, show him how easily he could

be manipulated and controlled, how little power he had over his own body, emotions, and thoughts.

He was standing by the door, staring uneasily back at Castille's glances, when all of a sudden one of the women appeared in front of him. Astrix was incredibly startled. All he had time to notice was the top of a blond head before she grabbed him by the front of his shirt and hauled him out into the street.

"Huh? What? Who?" he managed to say, with great stupidity, as she began to pull him up the block.

"Just come on," she answered, tugging harder, and he staggered dumbly after her through a dim maze of streets and up into an apartment building. She didn't say another word, just pulled him into a room, flung him down on a mattress, and threw herself down next to him.

For a moment, as she leaned over him to kiss his mouth, the situation seemed horribly, unbearably familiar, but as he returned the kiss the feeling vanished. He was lost in sensation, not just the touch of her hands that trailed electric lines down his body and stroked fire down to the burning point of his erection, but also the sensation of touching her—her small soft shoulders, her smooth back. Tentatively, shyly, he moved his hands to her breasts, to the soft warmth of her stomach. His fingers shook as he unbuttoned her fragile women's clothing and drew it off her body.

Had he ever been with anyone like this? Touching and being touched? He didn't think so, this felt new, this felt like a miracle. It was nothing like the rapes he had had to perform during Come Out and Play. He touched her and she welcomed it. It was nothing like being in a pocket room with Castille, when he was consumed by lust lanced with

terror and guilt. Instead, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief, of safety, as if this was something he had been longing for forever, as if way before his thin memory could stretch he had still been aching for someone to touch him, to hold him close, to let him feel human hands on his face and on his body. It was incredible when finally he slid into her and felt her pleasure rising against his own.

Afterwards, she curled up against his side, her head tucked under his shoulder, and fell asleep. Astrix stared at her with awe. She was so tiny, yet so amazing. She had plucked him out of Castille's very hand, rescued him from the torment that had seemed so inescapable, and turned the world inside out around him. He stared down at her, studying every tangled blond hair, every inch of pale skin down her back, across her curved hips, down her legs to her small feet. He didn't want to stop looking at her. He lay there awake for a long time, watching her breathe, letting consciousness drift, just enjoying the touch of the warm body next to his. It had been so long, centuries, since someone had held him, and then he had been a child, carried in someone's arms, they were going somewhere, it was going to be the answer, that was it, there was a man holding him, Astrix could remember the pale blue of his eyes as he told him not to worry, that this would be the answer—

He was dreaming, but he didn't realize it until the images broke apart into pale colors and starry forms, and then he suddenly woke up. The girl was still there, lying next to him and staring at him with steady blue eyes. Astrix stared back, uncertain as to what he could say to her. What would she think if he, a perfect stranger, started begging her to protect him from being destroyed by the Those That?

The girl slowly sat up. He wanted to grab her back, to crush her against his chest, but that would only convince her he was crazy. So he just looked at her instead as she stood up from the mattress, pulling a robe around her thin body, and walked to the window. She there staring out. She looked so small silhouetted against the orange haze of the night sky; her arms and hands were so tiny compared to the mine workers he was used to being around. Her blond hair was halfway pulled on top of her head in a ponytail and had halfway struggled loose, falling in tangles down her back. When she turned around to face him her eyes seemed huge and solemn, her mouth a firmly fixed line. She was beautiful, but she looked so small and so fragile. Why was he so convinced that she could somehow protect him, somehow save him from Castille, could be a dam to hold back the flood that threatened to wash him away?

The girl opened her mouth to speak, and Astrix knew that she was going to tell him to get out. He tensed, ready to grab his clothes and flee, but she surprised him. “My name is Lemon,” she said. “And I have something I have to tell you.” She took a deep breath. “Everything has changed for me today. Everything. I just realized things I never understood before, about the Those That, and us. . . . They were stroodling us so much more than we ever thought. At work. And every night, in the bars!”

Astrix had understood this all along, but he could believe that it was not so obvious to most people. He listened, trying to understand what the realization meant to Lemon but mostly just relieved that she hadn’t made him leave.

Finally he realized that she was glaring at him. She looked angry but when she spoke her voice was thin and trembly with fear. “You don’t believe me, do you?” she asked. “I shouldn’t have expected you to. There’s something that’s happened to my brain

and I just can't forget it all like normal. But on an ordinary day if somebody told me all this I'd probably think they were crazy too. Maybe you should just leave."

Instead of looking at her, when he answered Astrix let his eyes roam around her room. She had obviously been in this apartment, in this city, a lot longer than he had. Despite the piles of stuff that had collected in the corners of his own apartment, it had come nowhere near to the number of her possessions. Against one wall, a rickety tower of Stak 'n' Stor units climbed to the ceiling, packed with toys, dolls, lamps, figurines, hair accessories, jewelry, stuffed animals, PlasticPerfectPeople whose smeared eyes seemed to glare at him. The floor swam with shoes, and clothes formed silky puddles on the concrete. It all made him feel claustrophobic, and he stood and moved over to look out the window. "I don't think you're crazy," he said. "And please, don't make me leave. You're the first person who has seemed real to me in as long as I can . . . longer. In forever. Something strange has been happening to me, too. I woke up not long ago, without any memory. I'm not sure I'm even from here, from this city. Some things about it seem familiar but some—like stroodles. I know I never felt that before. I know I never had that happen to me before. And there's this one Those That man. His name is Castille and he's out to get me. He wants to hurt me. He made me do all these horrible things in Come Out and Play," Astrix swallowed hard, "and now he wants to punish me for them. He would have done it tonight, if you hadn't brought me here." When he finished talking he was still staring out the window at the darkness spotted with square blocks of light. But above, even in the night, the sky was beautiful, layered with clouds that were a surprising white against the blackness above.

Behind him, Lemon was laughing. There was a slightly unstable glint to her tone, but when Astrix focused on her reflection in the dark window he couldn't help but be distracted by her smile. Cautiously, he caught her eyes with his own and smiled back.

"This is too much at once," she said, suddenly practical, putting her hands over her eyes. "It's like the weirdest and longest stroodle ever. My head feels like everything in it is spinning in fifty directions. Right now I just want to go to sleep."

Astrix wasn't sure whether or not she meant him to go, but he couldn't stand the thought of leaving and not being able to lie next to her again. "Can . . . can I stay?" he forced himself to ask. Each word sounded heavy and loud, and he was sure it was the wrong thing to say.

"I sleep with the light off," she answered, as if this were some kind of warning, although Astrix was grateful for the darkness. Without speaking further, he lay shyly down on the mattress next to Lemon. She seemed to be already asleep, her breathing even, the warmth of her body reaching out towards his. He couldn't imagine, after how he had met her in the first place, that she would mind if he scooted closer, or put his arm around her, but he still felt somehow shy. After a while, though, he couldn't stand it anymore. He rolled over so that the length of his body was pressed up against hers, and pulled her tight with his arm. He felt comforted, at ease and natural next to her. The sense of relief once again overwhelmed him and he slept.

Part II

The City

Chapter 7

Astrix opened his eyes. At first the unfamiliar outlines of the apartment sent a jolt through his body, then he remembered where he was. Lemon was lying next to him, still asleep, and when he looked at her he felt only stunned, as if all of his emotional energy had been used up the night before. All he could isolate now was a sense of relief that she was real, that she hadn't melted away like a dream.

Lemon raised her head and peered blearily at him through a web of tangled blond hair. After a moment she gave a strange sort of half-smile and got up off the mattress. Astrix lay where he was and watched as, with complete unselfconsciousness, she took off her robe and replaced it with a staggering amount of clothing: underwear, bra, thigh-high stockings, plaid skirt, blue shirt, black boots, a bracelet for each wrist, three necklaces, earrings, and several rings. Finally she twisted her hair up into knots on top of her head, fastening each with a clip hung with little bells. After all this had been assembled, she got noodled and ran out the door, then returned a few moments later with a cold box of cereal, which she ate quickly while putting on makeup in front of the bathroom mirror. When she had finished getting ready, she set the empty breakfast box down on the edge of the sink and went out the apartment door.

She was moving so purposefully that it was obvious she was going to work. Astrix raised himself up on an elbow and stared after her as she left. He couldn't believe that she would just go on with her everyday life as if nothing had happened. Had she

forgotten so soon the epiphany she had told him about last night? Maybe she had, but he hadn't forgotten—he remembered clearly how she had saved him, how her touch had transformed him. He would wait here until she came back, all day, whatever. Whatever it took.

Suddenly, Astrix realized that he was being noodled. In fact, he had been feeling the effect for some time, but it had been faint and distant. He had been so caught up in thinking about Lemon that he hadn't really noticed. Even now, he was not overwhelmed by an irresistible desire for a Breakfast Bacon Box, but felt only a vague itching for one, a ticklish sort of hunger. Instead of being forced to jump from the mattress and run desperately from the room, he had time to get up slowly, put on his clothes from the day before, and look around calmly for the nearest vending area. The Breakfast Box took the last coin in his pocket; however, even that didn't cause him much worry. He strolled back to Lemon's room cheerfully, munching strips of bacon that were charred on one side of the box and greasily raw on the other. The weak noodle was the second miracle he had experienced in two days, but he was not that surprised this time. He knew the cause. Lemon. She was capable of anything.

She must produce miracles more easily for others than for herself, though, Astrix reflected as he settled back on the mattress. The way she had gotten dressed without looking at him, and hurried off to work as if she had no memory of the previous night worried him. He didn't want her to forget the understanding she had come to. And, he realized with surprise, it wasn't just so that she wouldn't make him leave. He couldn't stop picturing her face the night before—makeup-less, messy-haired, but with an

incredible spark lighting up her eyes. The defiant tremble to her bottom lip when she told him about the Those That man in the bar. He didn't want her to lose that revelation.

Just as he had given up on the remaining pieces of bacon and put the box down on the floor, he heard a faint jingling sound moving down the hall. The door swung gently open and Lemon came back inside. Her shoulders drooped, her bag hung despondently from one hand, and her face looked confused. She didn't seem startled to find him still there; she gave him a small, wry smile and sat down beside him on the edge of the mattress. "I forgot," she said. Her voice was high and surprised. "After all that—I didn't even think about it. I knew, still, it wasn't like I completely forgot, but I just was thinking about getting ready, about going to work—I was halfway there when I suddenly realized I didn't know why I was going there anyway. If nothing's the same as I thought why should I keep on behaving the same way? So I came home," she finished weakly. She looked troubled and uneasy as she glanced around the apartment and towards the window. "I've never not gone to work before, unless I was having a bad day."

Astrix tried to ignore the way her skirt had slid up along her thigh when she sat down, leaving an inch of bare leg between her black stocking and her skirt. He reached out a tentative arm and put it around her shoulders, trying to keep from being overwhelmed by the sensation. "I haven't been going to work lately. Nothing happened. And believe me, if Castille had been able to find a way to make me suffer for it, he would have."

"Castille," Lemon said slowly. "Does he look like he doesn't have any bones?"

The vivid picture that burst into his brain—the Those That man's smooth movements, his gently smiling face—made Astrix shiver with terror. He deliberately

stared at Lemon, burning her image into his eyes instead. “Yes,” he forced himself to answer her. “Yes, he moves like that.”

“I saw you once.” She was staring back at him, inspecting his face closely, matching it up to memory. “Yes! It was you. In a pocket room with him. The boneless Castille Those That.”

She looked at him steadily, but Astrix couldn’t meet her eyes. Internally, he writhed in shame that someone had witnessed his humiliation, had seen how he had begged Castille for forgiveness when he should have been demanding answers. She must think he was pathetic. He picked miserably at a hole in the knee of his jeans.

“It was strange,” Lemon went on. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“He wanted to hurt me,” he told her. “He made me kill Jake.” The words were out of his mouth before he realized, and his heart sank in despair. Now she was going to kick him out for sure. She was going to blame him just like the people in the Punishment Days and the other miners had, just like Castille had. Dumbly, he glanced up at her face.

She only looked confused. “What?”

Astrix took a deep breath. There was no choice but to tell her, and accept whatever fate she might give him. “It was a Come Out and Play,” he said. Lemon seemed a little embarrassed but he didn’t know why, so went on. “They always made me hurt people in Come Out and Play. Castille did. And one day, he made me kill Jake, a man I worked with, kill him dead enough so that the hospital machines couldn’t cure him again. And then, in the pocket rooms, Castille blamed me, made me beg for forgiveness, over and over again. But *he* did it really. At least he made me do it. I didn’t want to.”

The memory of Jake touching his shoulder that time made his heart break, even now. But when he thought about the killing what he saw in his mind was a picture of himself, Astrix, doing something terribly irrevocable, something that couldn't be taken back, and it was that idea that filled him with horror and terror.

"Of course he did it really," Lemon said.

He wanted desperately to believe her. But he could still feel the warm, slick blood on his hands, feel the flesh ripping apart. He couldn't believe completely that it had all come from Castille, either.

"Of course he did!" Lemon repeated. "That's what I figured out yesterday! They make us do things and then make us think we wanted to. But we didn't."

"We didn't?" Astrix echoed weakly. But, as Castille had reminded him so many times, he *had* looked down on Jake.

"No, look!" she said. The eye-glowing understanding of the night before was back. Lemon enthusiastically grabbed two PlasticPerfectPeople dolls and smacked them together. Smashing wildly, she used one doll to whack off the other's arms, legs, then head. "It's just like that! That doll couldn't do anything about it," she told him, brandishing the remaining doll towards him before cuddling it against her breast. "Poor Dreamy Dan. You couldn't do a thing to stop me, could you?" she asked it tenderly before glancing up at Astrix again. "See?"

He did feel somewhat comforted, although he felt that it wasn't quite as simple as Lemon believed. She could take away his guilt if anyone could, though, and maybe as long as he stayed with her he could remain innocent as well.

At least she didn't mention anything about him leaving; she was clearly intent on helping him. "Tell me all about Castille and why he might be after you," she instructed. "There must be clues!"

Obediently, he began telling her everything he could remember, starting with his amnesiac awakening in his apartment and going on until the events of the night before. During the whole story, Lemon was noodled four times for various pieces of junk, but Astrix decided to just ignore the dim itchings he felt for a plastic tiffany lamp, a Mean Mark doll, and a Happy Fish poster. It was easy with Lemon there, anyway. All he had to do was think about her and the noodle paled into insignificance. It wasn't until lunchtime that he listened to hunger as well as the ChewyChunx commercial and decided to give in and get something to eat. Lemon hadn't noticed his freedom from the noodles' effects until he asked her for an extra coin and went calmly out of the room. A moment later he heard her footsteps thumping down the hallway after him. "How are you *doing* that?"

"I don't know." Astrix stepped carefully over a pool of vomit on the floor, trying not to notice the two rats lapping at the puddle. He looked at Lemon instead. "It's you, I think. Ever since last night, noodles just haven't had the same power over me."

"Me?!" She looked stunned. "How could I do that?"

"You . . ." But he couldn't find the words to explain the effect she had on him. "The noodles just don't seem as important now," he said instead. They had reached the vending area, and although the itch inside his stomach asked for a ChewyChunx meal, he pushed his coin into the slot for the Rice & Beans Lunch instead. He wondered if he would keep on wanting ChewyChunx, disgusting as they were, but once he opened his

lunch, the faint cravings died off with his hunger. “Thank god,” he said aloud. If he never ate a ChewyChunx again, it would be too soon.

“That’s amazing,” Lemon said as they walked back to her apartment. “I never thought it could be possible.” She looked at him speculatively. “I’m going to learn to do it too.”

That afternoon, however, she made little progress. After lunch they both fell asleep and when they woke up she wanted to make a plan for that evening. “I want to find my friend Kira and explain all of this to her,” she said, sprawled on her stomach across the mattress, her hands tucked under her chin. “If only she could understand everything too. If she were having an understanding time I know she would, but I wouldn’t know how to stop her from forgetting again. If only I knew what made me stop forgetting.”

“Do you think it was the hospital machine, after you squashed your arm?” Astrix asked. From the story she had told him, it seemed plausible, if something had gone wrong with the machine. But Lemon was shaking her head doubtfully. “Well, maybe part of it. But it wasn’t just that. If I could figure it out and show people we could . . .”

But she never had a chance to say what they might be able to do. She fell quiet at the same moment he felt a familiar shiver slide down his spine. They stood there, silent and staring at one another as the call got louder and louder, until it turned them towards the door and marched their feet out into the hall. What use is it, Astrix thought to himself as the pulse beat fiercely in his brain, about to become the only thing he could concentrate on, what use is it to have understood all these things, both of them, to have struggled to clear their minds, when the Those That could reach out and seize their bodies

any time at all? And although he could hardly bear to consider the thought, what if Lemon hadn't saved him for good? What if Castille had found him and made him hurt her? There would be no choice, then, but to find some way to die.

He followed Lemon down the hall, as all his thoughts, even his fear, faded away into the beating in his brain. It almost felt as if he had another heart, one thumping against the sides of his skull, growing larger and louder as they headed down the steps. He struggled between placing his feet carefully around the trash on the stairs and obeying the swelling need to hurry. Lemon fell once, after stepping on a candy wrapper, and Astrix twice, but they bounced back to their feet and kept going. By the time they reached the lobby, they were running. Several other people came pounding out of nearby stairwells, and they all ran out the front doors together and came to a halt in the street.

Astrix looked around at the little knot of people who had been swept together by the stroodle. They looked so tiny and powerless beneath the great crystal ship that floated above them. It was so large it overreached the edges of the street; if it tried to land, it would be caught by the buildings on either side.

As the call faded, Astrix found himself expecting the other people to scatter away from him, as they had always done at the mine. But they just stood there. Astrix looked up at the crystal ship. He could see faces, peering down at them, but none were Castille's. None smiled meaningful smiles at him. Although on one hand it was a relief, Astrix began to feel small and frightened. Suddenly he was as vulnerable as the rest of the fragile bodies crowded around him.

The stroodle wave hit. Astrix moved to kneel beside the nearest pile of garbage. He began to root through the trash and make a small collection of some of the most

disgusting pieces: old moldy vegetable scraps, bloody rags, sponges that had been used for cleaning unimaginable dirt or grease, blobs of things too rotten or moldy to identify. Peering out of the corners of his eyes as he dug out a piece of potato skin tattooed with splotches of black, green, and red growths, he could see that the other ordinary men were doing the same thing. For a moment, ludicrously, he was almost affronted, but then he was flooded with terror instead. The things he had done to the miners—the beatings, the stabbings, the rapes—now that kind of attack might be turned on him instead.

Today looked more disgusting than painful, however. Once he had collected a pile of rancid trash, Astrix began smearing and hanging it all over his body. His stomach protested violently as he plastered moldy applesauce all over his face, but the stroodle didn't give him leave to throw up. He kept decorating himself with garbage and sludge until at last he was forced to his feet. He and the other five or six ordinary men who had been nearby formed a ragged line. Then they started to advance towards the women, holding their arms straight in front of them and walking awkwardly and stiff-legged as well. The women, who had at first looked as if they wanted to laugh, began to scream and posture with fear. They scrambled backwards, desperate to get away, but one by one tripped and fell down in the street.

Astrix was watching Lemon mostly, of course, and seeing her scream and scabble back filled him with a strange, indefinable pain. The sight of the miners' fear during a stroodle had always been pleasant, but now he was almost feeling her fear along with his own. This was such a strange and new sensation he wanted to pause and examine it further, but the stroodle wouldn't let him.

Rape was going to come next; Astrix could feel the pressure rising in his groin, and he tried to aim himself towards Lemon. Somehow, he thought, surely somehow he could protect her. All that power he used to have during the stroodles, when the other men had shrunk away from his gaze, had crumbled under his touch—that couldn't have come from the Those That alone, could it? Surely some of it had originated within him. After all, this morning he had escaped being noodled. Maybe now he could find enough control to spare Lemon completely.

But as it turned out, he didn't even have enough power to choose her. He found himself instead moving towards another girl, one with short brown hair and brown eyes that she squeezed shut as she screamed. She was scooting backwards on the asphalt, scraping her elbows, until he fell over her and grabbed her shoulders to hold her still. She screamed and squirmed underneath him but offered no real resistance. Astrix was grateful that he didn't have to hit her; what he was already doing was bad enough. He felt so different than he always had before. At the mine, no matter what he had been forced to do, no matter how far it had been from his own desires, he had still *felt* in control of himself and of the situation, full of power, larger than life. But now he was acutely aware of the manipulation of his body and of the artificiality of the lust that fueled his erection. He could feel Those That eyes burning on his back and wondered bitterly if they were more amused or aroused by the scene below them. He found the whole situation profoundly embarrassing.

In the middle of it, he managed to glance over at Lemon. The man with her was, like Astrix, covered in garbage, and the way his hands clenched her shoulders looked painful. But Lemon was watching him with a strange look on her face, not hatred, but a

mixture of anger and compassion and resolution that made Astrix feel nervous suddenly, as if he had seen so far only a hint of her power, as if she had the potential to sweep him away, out of his own control, as much as Castille had done.

When the stroodle was over, Astrix pulled away quickly from the short-haired girl. He felt very awkward and avoided looking at her face. However, she ignored him, and turned at once to search for coins. Astrix worked his way over to Lemon. He found it difficult; his legs were trembling as if they might give out on him and he felt blank, stunned and exhausted. Lemon lay where she was, staring up at the crystal ship. “Are you all right?” Worry gave him sudden energy and he hurried over to her side.

She turned slowly towards him. He could see the crystal ship reflected in the blue of her irises; for a moment her eyes seemed almost as large as the ship. “They still look the same to me,” she said slowly. “I was afraid if I saw them again it would all go away, I would forget again, love them again, but it’s just the same as it was last night. . . . It’s not going to go away.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Astrix stared down at her face, wondering how her mind worked. He suddenly felt that it behaved very differently than his did. Was it because she was a woman? Or an effect of being stroodled over and over again? He looked around at the other people in the street, who were scooping up coins and bandaging the scratches and scrapes too small to warrant a journey to a hospital machine, and felt like an alien in their midst. But it didn’t matter. Only Lemon was important. He looked down at her as she sat up and twirled a coin around on the asphalt. “It’s terrifying. I’m terrified, but I don’t want it to end. . . . I don’t want it to go away.” She raised her head and met his

eyes, lifting her chin with determination. “I’m not going to let them take this away from me.”

Lemon made their plan for the evening, and explained it step by step to him. She seemed to enjoy using her mind; even the simple matter of plotting out a strategy appeared to be new to her, a way to stretch out her brain. They were to wait until evening, when most people had come home from work but had not yet left for the bars, and then they would go as carefully as possible to the apartment Dooley and Kira were sharing. Although the Those That men were rarely seen out in their cars at that time of day, they would travel carefully, keep as much as possible within the halls and corridors of the apartment buildings, and venture into the streets only carefully and quickly. When they found Kira, Lemon would explain things to her. Hopefully she would be able to listen.

Lemon was proud of her plan, and so, once twilight had settled over the city, Astrix was happy enough to let her lead him out, although he was not at all confident that telling Kira would make her believe anything. Something must have happened to change Lemon, to make her different from the rest, and without that transformation how could any of the dull and mindless understand what she had to say?

Despite his willingness to follow, he began to feel uncomfortable as Lemon led him down one narrow, crooked passageway after the other. All were crowded with trash, and the concrete ceilings were low. From behind the doors came unsettling noises: raucous TV laughter, people arguing or crying or just screaming, occasionally mysterious crashes and thumps. It made him very nervous and uneasy, and he was glad when they finally descended to the lobby. After a brief, careful dash across the street, however, they had to work their way through a similar building, then another and another, until at last

they found the right one, which seemed to be the most dismal of them all, with darker and narrower and more crowded halls. The doors came so quickly one after the other that the rooms behind them could hardly be larger than closets.

And, just as he expected, when Lemon finally knocked on one of the doors and they were let into the apartment, it was horrible. The room was too low-ceilinged to be a cube, and the only light came from the blaring television. Lemon's apartment had seemed crowded, but this place was more so; the floor was ankle-deep not only in clothes, toys, and other junk but also in food containers, food wrappers, and empty drink cans. Even the mattress was half-buried in trash. An ordinary man, who he assumed was Dooley, lay sprawled in the filth, wearing only underwear and eating greasy chicken from a plastic container. Kira, who was small and dark-haired but possessed nothing of the beauty or vibrancy of Lemon, was sitting in a pink plastic armchair eating her own dinner, which was something that Astrix couldn't identify.

Lemon bounced enthusiastically in. He trailed after her, slouched by the door, and watched silently as she began to explain, with a great waving around of her arms, the discovery she had made. However, it was obvious from the glazed, confused expressions on the faces of Kira and Dooley that although they were paying attention to what Lemon was saying, the words weren't sinking in. Their blank eyes seemed to have no light except what was reflected from the television. They were the epitome of everything that disgusted him most about the people in the city, and after the night and day he had just had, they seemed even more repulsive. Astrix shuddered and focused instead on Lemon: how beautiful she was, the sound of her voice, the flash of her hands.

When Kira shook her head for the fourth or fifth time, obviously sad to disappoint her friend but completely bewildered, Lemon's hopeful shoulders finally sagged in defeat. "I guess we'll just be going then," she said quietly. "You probably want to get ready to go out."

"Yeah, I want to look really good tonight in case any of the Those That men notice me," Kira said, tossing Dooley a disparaging look. "See you at work tomorrow?"

"Sure," Lemon answered listlessly as she turned towards the door. Gratefully, Astrix broke away from his place against the wall and led the way out. Although the cramped and dark hallway was hardly pleasant, he felt cheerful just to be out of that apartment. When he turned to smile back at Lemon, however, he saw that her face had crumpled and she was starting to cry. He stared at her for a moment, astonished that she could actually care about those wretched people at all, let alone this much, before reflexes so deep he couldn't consciously understand them took over and he put his arms around her. "Don't cry," he said, surprised by how soft his voice became automatically. He seemed to have very clear instincts about how to comfort someone, though he had no memory of ever doing so and his arms felt clumsy and awkward wrapped around Lemon's small body.

"I knew she wouldn't believe me," she sniffled. He could feel dampness seeping through the cloth of his shirt. "But, I just hoped that somehow she could understand," her sentence ended in a wail and a fresh burst of tears.

Astrix cast about desperately for something helpful to say. "It's not your last chance," he finally pointed out. "We won't forget, and maybe you'll get a chance to tell

her again. You can find her in an understanding time sometime or something. This isn't your last chance."

"I know," she said in a small voice. She pulled away and wiped her eyes. "It just makes me so mad to think of her lusting after them, being mesmerized by them, for even one more minute." She started off down the hallway, her hands curling into fists and her feet stamping as if she wanted to beat sense into Kira. "She's not dumb, you know," she said furiously. "I know she probably seems that way but whatever they do to our minds does it. During understanding times she doesn't even talk in that squeaky voice."

"Don't worry," Astrix said again, honestly trying to make her feel better, but at the same time anxiously peering over her shoulder to see how much longer until they could get out of this godforsaken building. "You've got plenty of time to convince them."

"I hope so," Lemon answered, turning into the lobby and heading for an outside door. Astrix's heart rose in relief.

It had gotten dark outside while they were talking to Kira. Now, traveling through the streets would be safe enough if they kept to the shadows, Lemon assured him. The Those That men, like everyone else, would be headed to the bars. They started walking, had gone a few blocks in silence, and were passing what at first appeared to be a vacant lot when Astrix realized it wasn't quite empty. The light here was dim, but he could make out a . . . strange thing . . . in the middle of the lot. At first he thought that it was some kind of factory equipment, but when he looked closer, he couldn't imagine what it could be used for. A metal framework rose ten or twelve feet in the air, then spread out struts to support a large platform, as big around as a large apartment, that was set at a slight tilt.

There was a row of small protuberances around the edge of the platform, and a larger lump in the middle. It looked almost comical; it looked almost like a gigantic hat.

Lemon was walking on by, oblivious, but he reached out to grab her arm. “What the hell is that thing?”

She looked at him in surprise. “You really can’t remember anything, can you? It’s the Hat.”

“The hat? What kind of hat?” Even though he had thought it resembled one, he was still surprised.

“No, no,” she hastened to reassure him. “People just think it looks like one. There’re all sorts of silly stories about it, but nobody knows what it really is. I think it was just a piece of factory machinery that came out wrong. There are other ones, too, not the same, but things that were made by mistake—the Loop and the Tower, and maybe some I don’t know. People use them to divide the city into districts, to give directions. I’ve lived in Hat a lot.”

“What kind of stories are there?” Astrix kept staring up at it. Somehow he didn’t think it had been made by accident. It was pink, for one thing, and the protuberances around the edge looked like chairs. And, more than that, the thing was slightly familiar. He had seen it before. But when?

“Oh, just stupid stories, mostly made up by the ordinary men. Sometimes they say that because the Hat is pink, it means this is a part of the city where women are favored. If only they could find a blue hat, then there would be Those That women who would pick them in the bars and leave the regular women out. Or sometimes they say that because the pink color of the Hat is fading, that means someday soon it will turn blue, the

time of women will end, and the ordinary men will become favored. Or, and this is the silliest—they think if you climb up there and sit on those poking up parts, on a moonlit night, the Hat will start to fly like a crystal ship, and take you off to wherever the Those That live to be happy ever after.”

She was right, the stories did sound silly, but Astrix was still fascinated by the strange thing. “I’m going to climb up there.”

“What? Why?” Lemon sounded annoyed, but he ignored her and picked his way through the trash strewn across the vacant lot. The metal framework the Hat rested on looked easy enough to climb, even in the dark.

He could feel Lemon’s discomfort radiating up at him as he carefully climbed onto the structure. Occasionally a piece was missing where he expected it to be, and the insects and gritty dirt under his hands made him somewhat uneasy, but it was only a few moments before his head was bumping into the bottom of the platform.

Now came the hard part; he had to move along one of the struts that supported the Hat’s brim. Carefully, he reached out to test the bar, which thankfully seemed fairly sturdy, then swung out to dangle from it. Grateful once again for the muscles he had developed during his time as a miner, he made his way hand over hand along the strut. When it came to an end, he transferred his hands one by one to the edge of the Hat. He could hear Lemon suck her breath in sharply, but to his relief, she didn’t shriek or call out any advice as he managed to pull himself up and over, and collapsed on the platform.

For a moment he just sat still, letting his arms unclench and his heart stop pounding quite so hard, then he stood up carefully and looked around. The top of the Hat was better lit than the bottom, nearer one of the dim streetlights somehow, and he could

make out patterns of different colors against the pink: stars, swirls, stripes. The center was still a dark, vague lump, but what was downhill a few feet from him was definitely a chair.

Hanging on to his balance, he edged over to it and sat down. It was mostly constructed of metal; there had probably been some covering at one time to make it more comfortable that had since rotted away, but the plastic straps, meant to hold you in, were still there. He reached down to pick one up, rubbed it between his fingers, and the world shifted. He smelled something sweet, and something salty. The sun was blazing in his eyes. He was belted into his chair, the plastic straps were fastened securely, and underneath him the Hat moved; it rose, spun, and tilted. Astrix was shouting and laughing with delight, he loved the whirl the motion made in his stomach and in his head. There were people in the other chairs, most of them small, children, like he was. One of them, a girl with her hair in a small blond ponytail, looked very much like a miniature Lemon. But she did not look as if she were enjoying the Hat; her face was terrified, and her mouth was opening not in a squeal of joy, but a scream. . . .

“Astrix! Astrix!” It was the grown-up Lemon crying out now. Her voice shattered the vision. He was sitting on the Hat, in the dark. Everything was quiet and still, suddenly ominous.

“I’m coming down now,” he said, struggling to keep his voice steady. But when he stood up, he caught a glimpse of something on the floor of the platform, something that had been there in his memory.

He leaned forward, his eyes straining to see in the dim light. The markings under his feet were not just stars and other nonsense shapes. Some were letters.

“Citadel Amusement Park. Fun and Joy,” he made out, incredulously, and a chill of terror shot through his body at the words. He wanted to get out of there, *now*. As quickly as he could, he scrambled back down the framework, feeling nervous and shaky until there was solid ground under his feet again. Lemon came to help him as he staggered back across the vacant lot. “What happened?” she asked. Worry, curiosity, and a general disapproval of the Hat wound together in her voice.

She kept asking, but Astrix didn’t explain until the Hat was out of sight and the whole event began to seem uncertain and unreal, like a dream or a stroodle. “I don’t know if it was a memory or just a freak-out sort of thing,” he admitted as they reached Lemon’s apartment building and started slowly up the long flight of stairs. “If it’s a memory, why are things coming back to me that must be from so long ago? They don’t tell me anything about why Castille was out to get me.”

He still hadn’t told her about the words; until they were back in her apartment with the door locked and the lights on bright he could still feel the cold clench of unexplained fear around his heart when he had read them. Even when they were lying together on the mattress, he could barely force himself to say “There was something else,” and whisper out what he had seen.

Lemon’s reaction was nothing like he could have expected. She bolted upright as sharply as if she had been electrocuted and stared down at him with her mouth hanging open. “What is it,” he stammered. “Do those words mean something to you?”

“No, I . . .” She seemed hardly able to speak. “They don’t, but,” she dropped to a whisper. “I can’t read, Astrix. No one I know can.”

Instead of feeling scared again, what he mostly felt was relief, even validation. “I’m really not from here, then. Castille wasn’t lying. That’s proof.”

“You’re really not from here,” she echoed him. “But—”

“But I was here at first, when I was a child,” he said slowly. “Where have I been since then?”

“We’ll have to go look at the loop and the tower, too,” Lemon said. “I guess they’re not just mistakes. Maybe they can help us remember how we came here. But I still don’t like them.”

Astrix, remembering the terror on the small Lemon-girl’s face in his vision, couldn’t blame her. But if only he could remember more, enough to understand why.

Chapter 8

She had to have a raspberry-flavored balloon!

Lemon jumped up, ran to the door of her apartment, flung it open, and flung herself right out of it. Far, far away in the back of her mind she could hear Astrix calling after her, but he wasn't important now. Nothing was, except finding a vending machine.

The hallway was dark and she fell down twice, first over a pile of junk and then over an ordinary man lying on the floor, high on Happy Cookies, who grabbed her leg and tried to grope his way up from her ankle. Lemon, still desperate to get on with her search, kicked frantically at the grasping fingers, but it was the clump of Astrix's feet coming down the corridor that finally got through to the hand and it let her go. She didn't bother to wait for Astrix, but ran on the instant she was free, panting into the vending area. There were the food machines, six in a row, and the three drink ones, and then across the room the ones that held clothes, toys, and accessories, seven big machines. The TV on the wall above them was showing fast, shiny pictures of plastic jewelry and a new kind of shoes called Boot-Sandals, and blasting the music broadcasted all the time in vending areas, a deep, bone-thrilling chant: "Get What You Want! Get What You Want!"

Lemon raced frantically to the first machine. Only PlasticPerfectPeople. The other machines had a varied selection, but a useless one: plastic tiffany lamps, plastic jewelry, vases with fake flowers, clothes, posters, on and on, but not what she needed, nothing, nothing, nothing!

She was slamming her head into the plastic window in frustration when Astrix caught up with her and pulled her away. “Stop it, stop it! What are you looking for?” he cried.

Lemon gasped out the answer, all the while straining towards the ramp that led to the larger vending area on the first floor. “Need, need,” she panted blankly, struggling against his hands. “Let me go!” she demanded finally, pushing him away and scrambling on again. Her heart was beginning to beat fast in her chest, too fast, but her mind could only catch the palest understanding of that, her thoughts were racing on even faster. What if there wasn’t one on the first floor? What would she do without a raspberry-flavored balloon? She had to have one she had to!

The ramp curled downwards underneath her feet, spiraling, plunging her forward, faster and faster. But it wasn’t fast enough, never fast enough! She fell and rolled several yards down the slope. But rolling wasn’t fast enough. She scrambled to her feet bruised but determined. Maybe falling would be faster, there was the hole in the middle of the ramp. Yes! She could fall down to the vending area. She had one leg over the rail, ready to leap, when someone grabbed hold of her and pulled her back. Lemon kicked and struggled, but was dragged away from the railing, and she and her assailant both fell to the floor. She kept fighting, finally got away, crawled until she could get her feet back under her and run.

At last, the vending area was in sight. Lemon dove for the doorway. The machines! She pelted right past the silly, useless food machines. What she needed was on the opposite wall. There! “Get What You Want!” she cried aloud in pure joy, joining in the chant that filled the room. There was an entire machine devoted to balloons! Her hand

was fumbling in her pocket for coins even before her eyes found the raspberry-flavored one in the window. Her fingers trembled so much that she could barely feed the coins into the slot. But finally, finally, she pressed the button and was held suspended in that terrible, wonderful moment of anticipation. Would it fall?! Would she have it at last or would the machine drop the wrong one as they sometimes did? She was in agony. Her stomach doubled itself over. But the balloon fell. It fell. The blessed, blessed machine gave it to her. Lemon dropped to the floor to grab it with both hands, then once it was finally clutched to her chest, slumped pale and spent over her knees.

“Are you all right, Lemon?” Astrix’s voice came from above her. Dazedly, she felt him pet her hair. Although all she could do was nod weakly in response, she let him haul her to her feet. Exhausted, she leaned most of her weight on his arm.

“Come on,” Astrix urged her, as they went back towards the door. “You know I think they noodle you extra times in the vending areas.”

Lemon murmured assent but could go no faster than a shuffle. She shut her eyes and let Astrix guide her back up the ramp. By the time they had reached her apartment, she had finally begun to feel better, although better mostly took the form of irritation at what the noodle had done to her. She froze with her hand on the doorknob, thought about the TV inside the room, and let go. “I’m not going to go back in there just to go through that all over again,” she said firmly. She cleared a space on the floor of the hall and sat down there instead. “That was an extra-huge horrible noodle,” she told Astrix. He sat down next to her, idly taking the balloon from her hand and blowing air into it. “You didn’t feel it at all?”

“No,” he answered serenely, tying a knot in the end and batting the balloon over towards her.

Annoyed, Lemon batted it back. “All this trouble, and for what?” she complained. “What would I even do with this thing anyway?”

“It’s just more junk,” Astrix sighed, looking at her with those big, worshipful eyes. Lemon never quite knew what to make of the way he regarded her. Sometimes she was flattered by it; sometimes it made her feel wary and confused. Now she just tried to ignore him and strictly forced her thoughts back to the matter at hand.

“I’ve got to figure out how to escape being noodled,” she told him. “If you only knew how you did it. . . .”

It had been five days now since everything had changed. That first night, and the first day, she had been so happy and excited. So triumphant. She had figured everything out, she had understood and she had broken free. Free! She had been giddy, drunk with her new knowledge, and terrified of losing it. Before that first Come Out and Play she had been so scared that she wouldn’t be able to handle seeing the Those That again. What if the sight of their faces made her swoon right back into her old adoration? But she had resisted; she hadn’t forgotten her revulsion for a moment, and afterwards she had felt even more determined and powerful. She had withstood their glamour. Was there anything she couldn’t do?

But she couldn’t convince Kira. She couldn’t save her; she couldn’t get her to understand at all. Then, that evening, Astrix had come out with the stunning revelation that he could read, which proved he was from somewhere else, and Lemon had been more alone than ever.

That night she couldn't sleep. She lay there listening to Astrix breathe and felt as if she had disintegrated into a thousand swirling pieces that refused to coalesce into any meaningful shape, much less into anything recognizable as Lemon. The Those That didn't exist. Well, they did, but they were not who or what she had thought. The world as she knew it didn't exist. She wasn't sure that she existed anymore either. So much of her old mind had been taken up by thoughts about the Those That. So much of her time had been spent with them telling her who to be. She had worked obediently in the factory under their direction. She had bought things because they had noodled her to. In the nights, she had dressed so they would pick her; in the bars she had danced for them, had sex for them. And that was not even counting Come Out and Play, when she had done only what they wanted, with hardly enough room to breathe on her own. It seemed now as if it had all been a Come Out and Play. She had done everything in her life because they told her to, and now she wasn't sure she would know what to do without them. Even if she had saved herself, maybe it was too late for it to matter. With no one there but Astrix, she might fade away into nothingness.

To make things worse, when she finally fell asleep around dawn, she dreamed, and in her dreams nothing had changed. She was in a bar, with beautiful, smiling Those That men in front of her, their old selves again, and her mind was melting away into joy. Everything was easy, everything was right, the Those That were wonderful and she could worship them with her whole heart. . . .

When she woke up she had to watch them transform before her all over again, had to lose them all over again. How could she bear it? To wake up each morning like this, with everything destroyed and no way to forget? She couldn't even go to work anymore.

It was horrible. Lemon lay on the mattress all day without even enough energy to get up at all unless she was noodled. Astrix lay next to her, stroking her hair and her back, but Lemon could hardly feel his touch; it seemed so remote. She couldn't stop crying.

The next day she felt a little better. She still mostly lay on the mattress, but anger was beginning to mix in with the pain. Since she didn't know how to live without thinking about the Those That, she *would* think about them. She thought about drowning one, pouring water down his throat until his lungs swam. Or making the supervisor at work stick *his* arm in the masher. Or reaching down to one in a pocket room and strangling him. After she had reversed every Come Out and Play and every workplace accident that she could remember, she finally began to feel alive again, to feel as if she were not just a Lemon-shaped shell with only emptiness inside.

The next day, the fourth one since she had understood how things really were, she was able to get up on her own power, take a shower, and change her clothes. It no longer seemed quite as important to dress as elaborately as she had when she wanted to attract the Those That's attention. In fact, now some of her clothes looked rather ridiculous. She tossed aside an orange net-shirt and a green dress hung with little red balls and candy canes, and picked out some of her favorites instead: her striped mistake tights and a blue velour dress that she liked both the texture and the color of. She still felt awkward not going to work, though. There wasn't much to do—just get noodled, talk to Astrix, have sex with Astrix, and dread the beginning of Come Out and Play. It was all very strange, and the constant noodles grew more and more irritating.

Astrix was a big part of the strangeness. In a way it was comforting to realize that he was from somewhere else, because he was so *different* than anyone she had ever

known. Sometimes he made her a little uneasy. The way he stared at her all the time, with an expression on his face almost like hers must have been when she used to look at the Those That. And he was always saying such strange things about her, like how wonderful she was, how she had saved him. She didn't really mind hearing things like that exactly, she kind of liked it—who wouldn't?—but. . . . And he was always there. She wasn't used to being with someone all the time. She was with him even more constantly than she had ever been with Kira, since when they were roommates they split up at the bars at night and they had rarely slept in the same bed or had sex with each other. She did like having sex with Astrix. For so long she had been uninterested in ordinary men that she hadn't realized how nice it was to have sex with someone who would touch her back, who acted like he wanted to be with her, like he wanted her. And with everything around her so uncertain and unstable, in a way it was nice to have Astrix there. It didn't take long for his presence to seem reassuring to her, something familiar and fixed.

But the noodles! There were so many more on the TVs in the apartments than there had been at her factory, and she couldn't take so many of them. They were so irritating. "I have to find a way to escape them too," she said firmly.

Astrix kept bopping the blown-up balloon back and forth between his hands. "I wish I could tell you how I did it but—"

"I know, I know," Lemon grumbled, but not really angrily. "I did it to you. Well, I can do it for myself too. I can figure this out too." The problem was that she wasn't very good at figuring things out. The realization she had come to about being stroodled in the bar had just appeared in a flash of insight. If only the way to escape the noodles would just come to her too! But it didn't, so she had to think.

Idly, she began sorting the junk around her into small, organized piles. A stack of PlasticPerfectPeople, with another stack of just Buyer Barbara, since there were so many of her, and another for anonymous arms and legs. A stack of Squiggle Balls. One of empty shampoo bottles. “We get noodled to buy things,” she said out loud. “We’re noodled and we want to buy things and we go to the vending machine and we buy them.” Carefully, she put Plastik Bead Pik-Sure Frames in a neat pile. “Why do we want to buy things? Because we’re noodled.” She gathered up a handful of old peppermint candies and filed them away in an empty Toast & Tea breakfast box. “Why do we get noodled? Because we see the noodle commercials on television. On television. . . .” She paused with her hand on a pair of sequined underwear and suddenly her thoughts raced ahead of her voice. You couldn’t get noodled unless you saw a noodle commercial on television. That’s why she was safe sitting out here in the hallway. That’s why people were safe eating their breakfasts out on the apartment steps. But you couldn’t spend all your time in the hall or on the steps. You had to go into an apartment eventually, and all the apartments had televisions, so you would always get noodled. But what if there was a way to *make* an apartment not have a television? All of her violent fantasies from a few days before came suddenly roaring back, and she was filled with destructive energy. She turned to Astrix, feeling so radiant she was surprised that she couldn’t see herself glowing. “Astrix! We’re going to smash a television!”

He didn’t want to at first. He came up with all sorts of excuses. It wouldn’t work. It was too dangerous. What if the Those That came and found them? What if Castille came and found them? After all, couldn’t the Those That read minds, wouldn’t they know?

But Lemon wouldn't listen. She refused to be scared of them anymore. She'd had two ideas in just a few days. She must be a genius! She could do this. Besides, they would just think about something else, that was all. It would be simple. By the next morning she had it all figured out.

She dragged Astrix several blocks away to a large apartment building, where they searched for a long time until they found, on the fifth floor, a row of empty rooms. Lemon had agreed that after they smashed the TV in one apartment, to be safe, they would hide nearby to see if the Those That noticed. If not, they could smash the television in Lemon's apartment, and she would be free of noodling.

Astrix still looked unsure. "Won't the Those That know we're there?" he demanded. "They can read our minds. . . ."

"I'm not sure they really can," Lemon answered confidently. "They haven't got us yet, have they? And besides, if anyone comes to see who broke the TV, we'll be in another room, thinking about something else." When Astrix still looked uncomfortable, she glared firmly at him. "*You* don't have to be noodled anymore. I'm not going to put up with it either."

Reluctantly, he agreed, and they hunted through the hallways for something to bash the TV with. Lemon found a metal pole about four feet long that she thought would be perfect, but Astrix frowned and took it out of her hand. "No, let's not use this."

"Why?"

"I don't know. . . ." He looked as if he were straining to remember, but finally shook his head in defeat. "Just trust me."

Lemon wasn't too happy about it at first, but then they came across two sturdy wood rods, part of a closet extender set. After that they kept looking until they found some heavy blankets. This was Astrix's idea, something, Lemon realized to her chagrin, that wouldn't have occurred to her at all. But his insistence that they wrap themselves in the blankets as protection from falling glass was sensible, she could see that, although she was impatient to get started. Once they were ready, Lemon raised her pole and whacked at the television. A great thrill of joy shot through her at the first solid thump. It was followed by a small tinkling sound inside the television's case and she fairly danced with glee. But when she glanced over at Astrix, she found him looking confused again. "This seems so familiar," he muttered, staring up at the TV above him.

"Don't be so worried. It's fun," Lemon teased and at last he gave her a slight smile and started smashing too. His first blow resulted in a loud, satisfying crash, and glass smattered down at them. Lemon let out a screech of excitement.

They did about equal amounts of damage to the television. When they were finished, the glass in front was mostly smashed out, leaving jagged edges, and the knobs were broken off. They had dented the sides but Astrix said, again with a thoughtful frown, that it might be a bad idea to actually poke their sticks into the inner workings of the TV itself. "That could be dangerous, and at least it can't show us pictures or make any sound anymore," he told her. "This is probably good enough."

Lemon was reluctant to stop hitting, but slowly she let her stick drop and pulled the blanket from around her shoulders, shaking the bits of broken glass on the floor. She was so excited she couldn't stop smiling; she couldn't stop staring at the unbelievable sight of the broken television. She danced on the spot, overflowing with joy, spinning and

laughing, until Astrix tugged anxiously on her hand. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

They left all the evidence there and went to the other apartment, three doors down, that they had picked out to wait in. Despite the fact that they were doing very much the same thing as the day before—hanging around and watching TV—time seemed to pass by very slowly. Lemon was noodled for lunch, and Astrix bought a Chicken Alexander, and then she fell asleep for a while but still had the sensation of time passing. The music on the music channel turned heavy and thumping, accompanied by amorphous images in deep, dark red. Lemon sat halfway up, her attention caught by something strange at the window. Then she realized what it was: the lower half of a crystal ship floating past. The Those That had come to investigate the smashed TV.

She sat up a little further, to look, but Astrix flung an arm around her and pulled her back down. Visible panic was rising in his eyes; she put her arms around him and her mouth to his. “It’s all right, don’t think about them, think about me,” she whispered between kisses, and ran her hands down his body. In a moment his breathing changed and by the way his eyes lost focus she could tell it was working.

They had previously decided sex would be the best way to prevent their guilt from leaking out into their thoughts, but Lemon couldn’t help but keep part of her attention on the crystal ship outside. She didn’t feel scared at first, just curious about how the Those That would react, until the building briefly shook and a sensation of heat shot through her body.

Afterwards, they had no time to investigate. The Come Out and Play call had begun and they were busy enough trying to get back into their clothes while stumbling

down the unfamiliar stairs. But at least the stroodle was easy, just sex, no violence, so they did again what they had just done and this time got a couple of handfuls of coins for it.

Once more they pulled their clothes back on while navigating the stairs, and this time headed directly to the apartment where they had broken the TV. When Lemon put her hand on the doorknob, it was hot. She glanced at Astrix in confusion, suddenly afraid.

“I think they did notice,” he said grimly, stroking the door slowly with an evaluating finger. Lemon noticed with a jolt that the wood was wavy, and set awkwardly in the frame. Had it been that way before? “And they didn’t like it,” Astrix finished. He pushed the door gently open, and Lemon gasped in horror. The room was blackened and blistered. None of the junk that had been piled in the corners could be identified anymore; everything was charred and unrecognizable. The window was gone, along with much of the exterior wall, leaving a ragged, black-edged hole. A horrible smell hung in the air, making them both cough.

They were so mesmerized with horror that they didn’t notice the man who had come up behind them until he spoke. “That’s not the way to escape the Those That,” he said, in a voice that wavered strangely in tone and volume. Lemon spun around, picturing a Those That come in person to punish them for their disobedience, but it was only an ordinary man. As he stepped out of the shadows, Lemon thought at once that there was something odd about him, but it took her a moment to realize what: He had no ears. “My name is Bracken,” he went on in the strange, jerky voice. “There are some things I need to tell you.”

Bracken refused to tell them anything right away, however. Although Lemon was bursting with a hundred questions, he shook his head firmly. “It’s too much to say here,” he repeated. “Just follow me to a place where we can talk.”

He turned, and Lemon cried out “Wait!” But he just kept walking. “Hey!”

“He can’t hear you.” Astrix was already striding after him, and Lemon had to hurry to catch up.

“What?”

“Didn’t you notice his ears? And the way he talked? He’s deaf.”

Lemon glared at him, annoyed that once again he had understood so easily something that she hadn’t thought of, but she forgot her irritation as Bracken led her and Astrix through several corridors, then deep inside an apartment building, and finally opened the door on a windowless room wonderfully neat and empty. No piles of junk. Another ordinary man, also without ears, sat in a blue armchair, peeling an orange. As Lemon hovered beside Astrix in the doorway, Bracken went over to the other man, kissed him, and performed a strange series of gestures. The other man stood and beckoned them in. “Please sit down.” He indicated the mattress. “My name is Robert.”

Lemon didn’t know whether to be excited or terrified. Either way, she couldn’t hold still, but bounced on the edge of the mattress as Bracken began to speak. “Something has happened to you,” he said. Lemon had to concentrate to understand his strange voice. “The same thing that once happened to me, and Robert, and about twenty others that I know of. Usually, when you go into a hospital machine to be healed, it does something to your mind. It makes you forget the stroodle—but it also makes you forget, in general, about everything. It makes you not care about how awful everything is. But

the machines aren't perfect, because sometimes we had our understanding times, and sometimes, very occasionally, the machines go really wrong and reverse whatever they normally do. So we remember instead of forgetting. That's what happened to you."

"It *was* the hospital machine!" Astrix said. His voice sounded surprised and almost angry; when Lemon looked over at him he was frowning as if the thought displeased him, even though he himself had suggested it before.

Lemon didn't have time to consider his reaction, however. She turned back to Bracken. He and Robert were gesturing at one another again, but after a moment he went on. "There are usually two things people want to know first—one is how long we've been here."

"How long?" Lemon echoed in a faint whisper. She reached over to take Astrix's hand.

"I started taking count soon after I stopped forgetting," Bracken said. "That's been a long time, and I know there was a long time before that. But I have counted, in scratches I've made on the wall, thirty-one thousand, one hundred and twenty-five days."

"Over thirty-one thousand days!" Once again Lemon could do nothing more than repeat his words. She was lost in so much time, in so many stroodles. It was too much for her mind to comprehend. She felt as if she were drowning in time, and hung onto Astrix's hand as hard as she could. The men were all watching with compassion as she struggled to get a hold on herself; even Astrix, she noticed, only looked worried about her, not surprised himself at the news. Had his memory loss made all time unimportant? Or was he really so sure that he hadn't lived in the city that long, that *he* hadn't been stroodled thousands and thousands of times?

When she was calm again, Bracken continued, the expression in his eyes gentle even though he could not match his voice to it. “The other thing everyone wants to know is how to escape the noodles and stroodles. That is what you were trying to do, isn’t it, by smashing up the TV?” When they nodded assent, he went on with the explanation. “That won’t work. They can’t really read minds, like everyone thinks—otherwise they would have come and got us long ago—but they do notice if any of their machinery is tampered with. You can’t escape them by smashing up the TVs or anything. The only way to do it that we’ve found is this,” he pointed at his ears.

“You did that on purpose?” Lemon gasped. Bracken couldn’t hear her, but he could obviously understand the expression on her face.

“Yes. We cut off our ears and poke wires down inside until we can’t hear anything. Because then we can’t hear the noodles and we can’t hear the call to Come Out and Play, and they don’t affect us. Every now and then, when we’re sick or every thousand days or so, we go into a hospital machine to keep in good health, but when the machines fix our ears, we only destroy them again.”

“But that must hurt so much!” she protested. To be unable to go into a hospital machine and have the pain taken away, but simply to suffer through it. . . . She shuddered. Such a thing was almost beyond comprehension.

“Not as much as the stroodles hurt us,” Bracken said. His voice remained the same, but his eyes grew ragged, haunted, and swam with tears of frustration and rage. “The last time I was stroodled, I had to cut off Robert’s head and kick it across the street. Compared to that, my ears are nothing.”

Lemon closed her eyes and sat still, trying to absorb the new information. She couldn't decide whether to scream in horror or in triumph. There *was* a way to escape the noodles and the stroodles. But something about Robert and Bracken's way didn't seem right to her. She'd always thought, if she found somehow to escape Come Out and Play, of course she would do it, whatever it was. Yet for some reason she couldn't feel excited about this idea.

"And our minds keep growing stronger," Bracken told her. "Now when we go into hospital machines we don't forget anymore. So don't worry if you need to go in one again."

Bracken and Robert didn't know how they had come to be in the city; their memories of that time were as vague as anyone else's. "But we do know one thing, about what the Those That really are," Robert said, and Lemon's heart rose to press against her throat so hard she couldn't breathe. "They aren't human," he continued. "They're aliens. They came to Earth in their crystal ships and somehow lured us all here to the city, and then they caught us to be their pets, or their experiments, or whatever they want from us. They've left a lot of clues around. The TV shows about aliens, for one thing. And the Hat and the Tower, those are leftover bits of their technology."

"Are you sure?" Lemon asked. Once again something seemed wrong about what Robert and Bracken were telling her. She just couldn't really believe that it was true. The Those That had always seemed strange, of course, but she had had sex with them and they had human bodies, didn't they? Of course, they had that strange lack of response, but aliens? It didn't seem right.

Robert, however, nodded with firm certainty. “They can’t be human. They can’t be. They’re too horrible, too cruel. Humans wouldn’t do things like that to one another.” He paused, looking at both her and Astrix gently, studying their faces. Lemon wondered what he saw on hers. She couldn’t decide how she felt most—exhilarated, overwhelmed, or terrified. “This is a lot to understand at once, I know,” he said. “Let me take you to a room where you can spend the night, and we can talk again in the morning if you have more questions.”

She nodded. She suddenly felt mostly exhausted. Robert led them a few doors along the hallway to another windowless and mostly cleared-out room. “Get some sleep,” he advised, shutting the door behind him.

Lemon sat down on the mattress and Astrix collapsed next to her. For a long moment they were silent, not even looking at one another. “That was strange,” Astrix finally said thoughtfully.

Lemon wanted to laugh but decided that it would take too much energy. “If I knew more words,” she told him, “I could come up with a thousand different kinds of strange it was.”

“I didn’t mean everything,” he answered. “Just something about those two. They made me feel. . . uneasy. I don’t know. As if something bad was going to happen.”

“They escaped the something bad,” Lemon told him. She suddenly felt irritated with him again. “What kind of place are you *from*, anyway? Where you don’t trust people who are nice to you and you go around figuring things out first all over the place?” Weariness and confusion made her voice come out more sharply than she intended.

But Astrix wasn't even any fun to pick on. Instead of arguing back, his face crumpled. "I'm not the one who's figuring things out," he protested. "It's you. You're the one. Do you know how incredible you are? Wherever I came from, it wasn't a place like this, I know that. But you—you're breaking your mind free, rebuilding it. . . . You're amazing."

Despite herself, Lemon felt comforted. She leaned back against Astrix and let him put his arm around her. "I'm sorry. This is all very overwhelming."

"Robert's right," he told her. "We should go to sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

Without even bothering to turn the lights off, they went to sleep, and in the morning, as soon as Lemon's eyes opened to the noodle of a Better'n Bacon and Egg Supreme, she felt immediately stronger, even as she rushed through the hallways. She was pointed to the nearest vending area by Bracken, and as she made her way back to the apartment they'd slept in, she felt swollen with her new knowledge, but not in a bad way. She felt almost physically larger, as if her body had soaked in the information overnight, like a sponge taking in water, and now she was expanded and more powerful.

Meeting Robert and Bracken was so exciting. It made her feel as if what had happened to her was more real, somehow, since someone else had experienced it too. And they understood what she was going through; they had felt the same way themselves, unlike Astrix, who had come from somewhere else. And she liked them. They seemed nice. She could stay here with them and the other people they knew and not be alone with this terrible, wonderful new understanding.

But in some ways it seemed like staying there would make her be alone too. Sure there would be other people there, but not her friends, not the people she had known and suffered with all those thirty-one thousand days. What about Kira? And everyone else from the factory? How could she just forget about them and hide away while they were stroddled on and on into forever? That wouldn't be right.

Maybe there was no way to save them, no way for everyone to escape the Those That, but she couldn't give up without even trying. She had to try. She couldn't remember everything only to start forgetting stuff again.

She woke Astrix, offering him half of the large breakfast box, and after they ate was ready to get down to business. "I'm not ready yet to cut my ears off and all that," she told him bluntly. "Are you?"

Astrix's face showed a jumble of emotions. "It would be so easy," he said at last. "Painful, but easy, just to hide here for another thirty-one thousand days. I don't want to be stroddled anymore. But I do want some answers. I want to remember who I was. I want to know where I came from and how I got here. I want to know why Castille was out to get me and what the Those That are. And I don't think we'll find out anything just by hiding here, and if Castille is still looking for me . . . I would just be sitting here, waiting to get caught."

"You don't think that Bracken and Robert are right, that the Those That men are aliens?"

Astrix shook his head. "Somehow I can't believe that. They look strange, but not that strange, not as weird as aliens on TV. They have human faces and hands, and we've had sex with them. I don't know why aliens would want to have sex with us."

Lemon still wasn't sure. Astrix's logic made sense, and she knew that he was good at thinking, but Robert had seemed so convinced that he knew the truth, and he had had his mind free for so long. "I want to try to figure things out on our own," she finally decided. "We can always cut our ears off later, if we don't discover anything better."

They decided to spend the day going to look at the Tower to see if it sparked any memories for either of them. First of all, they went by Robert and Bracken's apartment and explained where they were going, speaking very slowly and carefully so that their lips made the words clear. Robert nodded sympathetically when he understood. "Good luck," he told them. "Tell us if you find anything, and we'll be here if you need us."

Lemon and Astrix worked their way slowly out of the apartment building. Outside, it was mid-morning and most of the streets were deserted. They risked walking out in the open anyway. Lemon had missed having a window last night and her body ached for sunshine, so they walked boldly down the middle of the street, acting as if they had a right to be there. Luckily, they met no Those That cars, and the few ordinary people they passed ignored them.

Lemon knew that the Tower was quite a distance away, but when they reached the bus stop, she could already point it out to Astrix. It reared up above the apartment buildings like a monster in a TV movie, and was easy to see even from a distance. The bus carried them to within a few blocks. Lemon felt immediately uncomfortable when she got off the bus, and every step towards the Tower made her feel more and more uneasy. Her skin crawled along her neck. The apartment building steps nearby were busy with people eating and talking on the steps, who must either start work late or be skipping, both of which made Lemon nervous. The Those That could appear at any

moment to hurry them along. But even that thought didn't scare her as much as the Tower did.

A circular area around the base of the Tower had been halfheartedly fenced off with chain link, but the barrier was ragged and falling. Lemon slipped through. The ground was littered with drink cans and food containers that crunched and scuffled underfoot. Even the sound made her shudder as she walked slowly towards the base of the Tower. It was made up of three gigantic poles, each wider around than a large person, larger than her arms could encircle. She stopped a few feet away and tipped her head back to look up.

The Tower rose far higher than any apartment building, far up enough to stab into the sky. Mostly it was just made of the three dark blue poles, with the zigzag of connecting struts between them, but two thirds of the way up was a little glass and metal compartment. It looked like the booth the Those That supervisor had sat in at her factory, however, this compartment, instead of sliding on a track along the walls, looked as if it must be intended to slide up and down on the poles, from the bottom of the Tower to the top.

Lemon shivered, even though the day was already warm. A horrifying sensation appeared suddenly in her mind. She could feel herself squashed into the compartment with far too many other people, more than it was designed to hold, and so pressed together that she could barely breathe; she couldn't move in the tangle of limbs and the warm, suffocating flesh all around her. And to make things worse, the compartment was shooting upwards and then back down so fast the blood in her head wasn't sure of which

way to flow. Everyone was screaming, screams of terror mixing in with a horrible crunch of machinery as the compartment moved.

The vision made her so dizzy that Lemon nearly fell. She had to sit down on the concrete, without even sweeping the trash away first, and take careful deep breaths. Was it a memory or just something she was imagining? She didn't know; she couldn't tell; she wasn't sure she would recognize a real memory when she had one. How could she tell what a real memory was?

Astrix hadn't noticed her reaction to the Tower. He was poking around the feet of the poles, kicking them to test their sturdiness. "It's some kind of elevator," he called over to her, and Lemon was still too unsettled to tell him she didn't know what that meant. She just sat quietly and watched as he inspected the poles, the expression on his face oddly professional. He studied how they were attached to the ground, knocked on them, even scratched at the paint, before he looked speculatively up at the top. "Should we climb it?"

"No!" Lemon struggled to her feet, dusting off her bottom and the backs of her legs. For a second the vision swirled in front of her again, dizzily. "No! Why would you want to?"

"It's so tall," Astrix explained, still looking up. "I thought we might be able to see the whole city, at least. Maybe if there's anything beyond it. It wouldn't be too hard. Once we got to that first crossbar it would be just like a ladder."

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. The prospect of seeing the whole city spread out before her was tempting, but the horror of her vision was still strong. "Not now,

anyway,” she compromised. “Not in the daytime. The Those That would notice us for sure.”

Reluctantly, Astrix agreed that she was right and they threaded their way back through the streets to the bus stop and back to Lemon’s apartment. She spent most of the day preparing to climb the Tower. She had to work herself up to it mentally, but more important than that, she had to find some clothes that wouldn’t get in her way climbing. She didn’t think her usual short skirts and high heels would work. After searching a long time, she decided on a pair of capri pants and a sweater. The shoes were harder. Everything she owned was too cute to be useful, all high heels or platforms. Finally, she settled on a pair of boots that had only one-and-a-half-inch heels. After all, if worse came to worst she could hook the heels around the rungs to help her hold on.

After it was dark, and they figured everyone would be safely at the bars, they set out. As they hurried through the streets, Lemon was glad that no one would see her in such a horrible outfit, but her thoughts were mostly filled with worry about the climb. As they got closer, her heart began to thud and her hands felt clammy, but once again she struggled fiercely to get herself under control. *This is nothing like a stroodle*, she counseled herself furiously. *It’s not Come Out and Play. You’ve been through a thousand worse things than climbing up a stupid ladder.* When they reached the Tower and squeezed through the chain link fence, she had worked up determination enough that she did not hesitate, but marched straight over to the base. Without pausing to think, she leaped up to catch the bottom rung. Astrix took hold of her legs to push her up, and she started climbing.

It was really quite easy. The crossbars between the three large main poles were as wide around as her forearm, solid enough to hold her securely yet still small enough that she could grab them easily. They were placed at regular, comfortable intervals, and only very rarely was one missing or unsteady. It seemed as if the poles had, in fact, been designed to be climbed.

She could hear Astrix breathing behind her, and every now and then he called up to ask her how she was doing. Lemon answered in tight whispers but did not dare turn to look down at him. She tried to keep her eyes blank and unfocused to help her ignore the space, height, everything except the rhythm of climbing and the cool bars under her hands. As they rose higher, however, despite her concentration she began to notice a wind that had not been present down below, that ruffled her clothes and sent chills across the back of her neck. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, so at least it didn't blow too much across her face, but she could feel it snapping on the back of her head like the festive flags that were sometimes hung out around the bars. Eventually, the Tower itself seemed to sway underneath her with a very slight movement, a thrumming from side to side. Lemon had to quench firmly the irrational idea that the poles might suddenly fall.

They passed the little compartment after the wind started up. Lemon could not ignore it, but she didn't want to look at it too closely either. It clung to the poles across from her, rattling and whistling in the breeze. She felt that it radiated a sort of chilly horror, and she climbed by cautiously, extra-careful not to fall.

Shortly afterwards, she reached the platform across the top of the three poles, with a halfway-open trapdoor in the center. She easily pushed the trapdoor the rest of the way open and crawled through, onto the flat platform. Compared to the ladder, it felt strong

and secure and blissfully level as she crawled out. However, the wind was even stronger up there, so Lemon remained in a crouch as she helped Astrix through the trapdoor.

They were very high up. Lemon could feel the Tower shivering beneath her and she sat down carefully, placing her hands flat on the cool metal underneath her to keep balanced. Everything was so far below! The apartment buildings were so far down she could only see the nearest ones' roofs. Beyond that were other tiny buildings, dotted with miniature, glimmering squares of light. "They look like toys," she whispered. And this was how the Those That must see them: the people and their city so small, so far below. She could almost understand the feeling that such tiny people could not be real, that their worries, pains, and pleasures were just as small and remote, almost imaginary.

"Look how far it goes on," Astrix whispered. The apartment buildings marched out until they were simply lights, too many for Lemon to count, and the lights spread on until they blended into the orange glow of the horizon. There seemed to be no end. Lemon turned slowly. The city was as large on all sides except for one. Back beyond her apartment building, the lights only stretched out halfway to the horizon and then petered out into blackness.

"The city might end there!" Astrix said. His voice sounded excited. He was not uneasy at all at the idea of somewhere where there was no city. Lemon couldn't imagine what there could be instead. When she looked at Astrix, however, his face was wistful and eager. "There is somewhere else," he said. His tone was reassuring, but she wasn't sure if he meant that for her or himself. "This isn't the only way for things to be."

Suddenly a familiar hissing noise filled the air. Automatically, Lemon ducked, falling flat on her back. A crystal ship was moving above them, dark in the darkness. She

pulled Astrix down next to her and tried to press herself into the platform, tried to quiet her breathing. The crystal ship gave no indication that anyone inside it had noticed them, but floated gently, serenely, in the air, just slightly above them. She could make out the figures of three Those That men inside. As she watched, their faces lit up somehow with a sickly greenish light, but the rest of their bodies remained in shadow. She wondered if Robert and Bracken were right and they were aliens. She almost believed it.

But then one sang out a snatch of song, “There once was a girl in the bar, whose tits were the biggest by far,” in a drunken voice, followed by the crash of something falling inside the ship. It sounded very human, very unlike the reserved and controlled Those That Lemon was used to seeing in the bars. When she turned to share her surprise with Astrix, she found him looking terrified. She reached out to take his hand as the ship moved away, glowing with the eerie green light against the night sky like a strange, unnatural cloud.

Chapter 9

That spot of darkness beyond the city's lights. It was so beautiful, so serene. He wanted to take Lemon in his arms, leap out so far they would sail over the apartment buildings, and sink down into the warm silent darkness, into somewhere other than this horrible city, into somewhere alone and safe. He wouldn't have been *that* surprised if Lemon could give him the ability to fly.

But then the crystal ship had appeared, and it was as if the Those That had come on purpose to block him, to thwart him, and make him miserable again. As he climbed back down the Tower, he was almost crying with rage and frustration. Why was he stuck in this miserable place? Why did the Those That want to keep him here? When he reached the bottom, he reached out to grab Lemon and pull her against his chest. He held her there for a long moment to remind himself that *something* good had come to him out of the city, something that was even better than everything else had been horrible. And he knew that even if there was a better place than the city somewhere out there, there couldn't be anyone more wonderful than Lemon.

They were still standing there when the hissing noise came again. Astrix looked up to see another crystal ship floating down the street towards them. A shock of fear shot through him. This one was much lower, drifting just above the roofs of the apartment buildings. It was moving very slowly. He heard Lemon gasp as she saw it too, and she tugged at his arm, pulling him behind one of the poles. It seemed a very flimsy shelter. Although they were in shadow, he could still see out clearly, could still watch the ship coming inexorably towards them. "Stay hidden," he whispered desperately to Lemon.

“Don’t let them see you. Even if they catch me, please don’t let them see you.” He couldn’t bear the thought of Castille touching Lemon, humiliating her the way he had done to him. “Just stay . . .” But the words died in his throat. His whole mouth was suddenly instantly, completely dry. He was so sick with terror that he almost passed out, and had to hang onto the pole for support. The crystal ship was right in front of them, right outside the ragged fence around the Tower. He could clearly see the forms of the two Those That men inside, and he could clearly hear the words they were saying. “Astrix!” they called out. “Astrix! Where are you?”

Oh god Castille had found him. Astrix knew that the question and the luring tone of voice were only a tease. Castille was playing a twisted game of hide and seek with him. He knew exactly where Astrix was, and any second now he would stroodle him to come forward; he would take him back up into the crystal ship and Astrix would be helpless. The only hope would be that even within the stroodle he could reach over, grab a piece of broken glass, and somehow manage to gouge an artery out of his neck.

He believed it was going to happen so strongly that he actually took a step forward before he realized that he *wasn't* being stroodled. In fact, the Those That didn't even seem to notice him. The ship kept moving down the street, and they were still calling out his name. Only when they were several buildings away did he realize with a jolt that neither of the voices were Castille's.

Trembling, he slumped against the pole. His head was spinning, and he could barely focus when Lemon spoke to him. “Let’s get out of here,” she was saying, but Astrix could only dazedly shake his head. “I can’t, I can’t move,” he finally managed to

whisper, but when he came back to himself a little more he found that they were in a dark apartment building lobby. He couldn't remember getting there.

"I think we're all right here," Lemon said. She pushed him gently towards some nearby stairs. "You'd better sit down."

Weakly Astrix did as she said. He felt nauseated and leaned over to put his head between his knees.

"Breathe slowly and deeply," Lemon advised. Her voice sounded a little shaky too, despite the comforting arm she put over his shoulder. "It's all right. He didn't find you."

"No," Astrix protested. "It's stranger than that." He raised his head to look at her face; it was only a pale blur in the darkness. "It wasn't Castille, Lemon. I'd know his voice anywhere. And neither of those was his."

"Why would other Those That be looking for you?" Her voice reflected his own puzzlement.

"I don't know. Maybe Castille asked them to?" That was the only reason he could think of, but somehow it didn't seem right. As they went back to Lemon's apartment, traveling from one apartment building to the next, carefully checking the sky before each quick, frightened dash across the street, he tried over and over again to figure it out, but could find no reasonable answer, not even any *unreasonable* answer. When they finally got to Lemon's room again, it was the middle of the night, but Astrix couldn't sleep. He couldn't even lay down. He just stood next to the window, anxiously scanning the street and the nearby apartment roofs. But there was nothing. "Why would other Those That be

looking for me?” he asked aloud, even though he knew Lemon could have no answer to give him. He couldn’t think of any idea, no matter how desperately he tried.

Lemon finally went to sleep, but all he could do was sit there peering out the window. He watched the whole night without seeing even one more crystal ship, and finally when the sky started to lighten he left his post, lay down next to Lemon, and at last went to sleep.

He woke to a clatter of organization and blearily peered up from the mattress. The sunlight was at midmorning strength and Lemon was running around the room, sorting all of her possessions into piles. If she was attempting to make the apartment neater, it wasn’t working; the small room just looked messier. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve got a plan.” Lemon grinned over at him, and despite his worries he found her smile contagious. Of course, it didn’t hurt that she was wearing only black bikini underwear and a corset-kind of top. “Actually,” she corrected herself, “*two* plans.”

“What?”

“One’s for you.” She tossed a bottle over to him.

“Magenta Hair Dye,” he read out loud. “You want to dye my hair?”

“It’s for a disguise,” she told him. “If the Those That are looking for you, then Come Out and Play is the time we have to watch out for. So I thought if we made you look different, maybe from up in the crystal ships they wouldn’t be able to tell it was you. After all, from way up there won’t they mostly see the top of your head?”

Astrix was impressed by her observation. Only a couple of days before, she had had to speak her thought process aloud, one step at a time, but now she had progressed to the ability to imagine someone else’s perspective. “That’s a great idea,” he said, allowing

his admiration to show in his voice. Lemon rewarded him with a big smile as she took an armful of possessions and dumped them out in the hall. “What’s the other plan?”

“It’s about the noodles,” she told him, dusting her hands together as she surveyed the room.

“You’re not going to smash anything else, are you?” He sat up, leaned his back against the wall, and regarded her warily.

“No,” Lemon shuddered. “Look. I’ve got one of everything here, except food. One of everything I can think of that’s in a vending machine. I’m going to watch TV, let myself get noodled, and then, real fast, I’m just going to pick up whatever it is. I’m going to see what happens when I have something almost before the noodle can get hold of me.”

At least it didn’t sound too dangerous. The Those That could hardly notice, could they? The thought reminded him of the bottle of hair dye, so he grabbed it and went into the bathroom. The instructions seemed simple enough, after all, they were just a series of pictures printed on the back of the bottle, but it was somehow harder than it should be. He ended up with hair that was magenta in patches and its old blondish color in other spots. Lemon peeked in at him, burst into laughter, and reapplied the dye, giving him strict orders to leave it on for two more segments of the PlasticPerfectPeople Show. Still laughing, she went back into the main room.

Astrix stood in the doorway and watched as she plopped onto the floor. Little piles of toys, clothes, shampoo, accessories, and of course the ubiquitous PlasticPerfectPeople were spread around her, as many as possible within arms’ reach, but there were so many things they had to cover most of the floor. Lemon sat smack in the

middle, her knees hugged to her chest, and her eyes staring wide open at the television. She looked like a tiny stiff doll herself. A plastic tiffany lamp commercial came on the screen, and Astrix imagined that he could actually see the noodle: a vibration in the air that turned into a vibration in Lemon's body. Her legs jerked underneath her, as if they were trying to rise and run, but she looked around wildly and grabbed the plastic tiffany lamp that was only a few feet away. She held it in front of her face, shaking it emphatically, then suddenly her arms dropped and she looked at Astrix with a surprised expression. "That was *strange!*"

"Did it work?"

"I . . . I think so," she said slowly. She put the lamp down carefully. She still looked puzzled. "It felt really *weird*. Like my stomach and brain turned inside out. The noodle didn't know what to do, I guess."

"But it worked," Astrix repeated.

"Yeah," she answered quietly. "It worked." She sounded so calm; her manner was so unlike the bouncy excitement of earlier that he wondered if she was finding this new step towards freedom frightening. He watched as she turned back to the television and stared at it once again, with big-eyed grim determination.

Astrix finished dyeing his hair and then tried to think of any other tactics he could take to disguise himself. His clothes weren't distinguished enough so that changing them would make any difference; he was already dressed like any other ordinary man, and even if he wanted to try to dress like a woman, he didn't think any of the clothes would fit him. He was too big. That was the main thing that would make him stand out: his size. He was bigger than everyone, all the ordinary men, everyone he could remember

standing close to enough to compare, except Castille. . . . But he didn't think about him. Instead, he forced himself to think about disguises again. How could he make himself look smaller?

He thought about it all morning, but couldn't come up with any good ideas. Lemon kept up her noodle resistance. She managed to escape having to run to the vending machines at all until lunchtime. Once a Rice & Beans ad noodled her, however, she had to go buy the meal, since she hadn't been able to pile up food. Astrix followed more slowly to buy his own lunch.

"Are you sure this is working?" he asked her when they got back to the apartment and she had settled once again into her place on the floor. "I mean, is this better?"

"I've only just started," she answered. She tossed a Squiggle Ball at him; it landed with a soft thump on his crotch and he raised his eyebrows meaningfully at her.

"You sure are impatient," Lemon frowned at him. "For a lot of things! I know this isn't going to save me from the noodles *right away*, but I thought it might get my mind used to. . . to not obeying them. If I have what I want more quickly, then I don't have to want it as long, and I don't have to get as worked up over it."

"I guess," Astrix agreed. It made as much sense as anything else around here.

Lemon worked on her noodle-resisting all afternoon. Astrix tried to figure out some way to look smaller, but all he could think of was asking Lemon to wear tall shoes. Obliging, she strapped red four-inch platform sandals to her feet, but when the Come Out and Play call came, that wasn't much comfort. Astrix knew that the Those That would spot him for sure. Magenta hair wasn't going to fool anyone! He tried to hunch

down and into himself, but it was hard when he was running. He knew it wouldn't work anyway. The Those That knew things. They would know it was him.

And yet, somehow they didn't. He and Lemon and an ordinary man and another girl at first behaved as if they were cats and dogs, chasing each other, snarling and clawing, and then it all turned into a biting- and drooling-filled orgy at the end of which they all had to act as if they thought they were stuck together. The Those That men considered this hilarious; they were laughing so hard Astrix thought they might fall out of the crystal ship. He wasn't even scared of them anymore. What kind of idiots would find crap like this so amusing after thirty-one thousand times? Castille, yes, Castille was still frightening. At least he had used his power for real, elaborate torment. Astrix almost had to admire him for that. And having experienced that, having experienced the master of torture, was it any wonder that he began to feel contempt for the other Those That, to think they seemed nothing but fools?

The next day, Lemon's noodle trick actually seemed to be working. Astrix could see it clearly, even without her proud, cheerful report. The way she reached out towards whatever she had been noodled for had changed. She could reach slowly; she didn't have to grab desperately the way she had the day before. Her legs no longer tensed under her, and even the look in her eyes was different. She was forcing her body to obey her, fighting against uncountable days' worth of conditioning.

By lunchtime they were able to stroll, hand in hand, down to the vending machine area. Lemon had to squeeze his hand several times, and at points had to keep herself back from running, but they were both proud of her control by the time she held a Chicken

Alexander in her hands. “That’s great!” Astrix kissed her proudly on the forehead. “You’re amazing!”

“I’m really going to do it!” Her eyes shone, but she looked a little scared. “I won’t have to buy all this junk—” She waved a hand at the piles of stuff in the hallway. “Astrix, what will I *do*?”

“You can choose what you want to eat for one thing,” he teased her gently. “You can’t always count on getting a Chicken Alexander, you know.”

“Yeah!” She skipped a few steps at the thought. “No more Beef ‘n’ Bits! No more ChewyChunx! No more Breakfast Bacon Boxes!”

“And you can still buy other things if you want them,” Astrix pointed out. “Clothes or shampoo or whatever. You just won’t have to buy the ones you don’t want.”

Lemon nodded solemnly, as if it were a serious task set before her, one heavy with responsibility. Perhaps to her it was. Astrix wondered again where he had come from. If only it were a good place, where he could take Lemon to continue the incredible development she had begun.

When they got back to the apartment, Lemon sat down dutifully again in front of the television. Astrix sat on the mattress and ate his lunch. Soon after he had finished, he noticed something strange. The sky outside Lemon’s window had been a pure, clear blue all morning. Perfectly clear, no clouds. But suddenly the window blinked at him. A patch of shadow had drifted over the light. Astrix sat up straight. It could have just been a cloud. Perhaps it might rain.

But then he heard the soft whoosh of air. Lemon glanced up, startled, and he put a shaking finger to his lips. Their eyes shot fear back and forth; Astrix felt his fear swell

into terror as the shadow winked back across the window. This time it stayed there. Desperately, Astrix began to try to get over to the door without stepping on something that would make a noise and without his legs giving out. Lemon stood up to join him and they took the last few steps hanging onto each other. Lemon had her hand on the knob; he saw it starting to turn; he could feel his heart pressing up in his throat with ridiculous hope when—

“Astrix.” It was his voice; it was Castille’s voice. Astrix whirled around, panicked. He thought that Castille would be right outside the window, peering through with that same expression on his face, the same power in his eyes. But all he could see was the shadow. “Astrix,” the voice came again, calling down from above. *The ship must be too big to get down to the window!* But it didn’t matter. Castille’s voice could still find him. “Come here,” he ordered, but Astrix didn’t move. He was paralyzed, not even able to shake, until Lemon pulled the door open and jerked him through it. She slammed it behind them and he staggered a few steps down the hallway, begging himself to run, run before the inevitable happened.

“I said, come here!” The voice was faint, but the stroodle that spun him around wasn’t.

“No, no, no,” Astrix muttered. He clawed at the wall in a desperate attempt to hold himself back. But although his feet dragged, they were still moving helplessly forward.

Suddenly something tangled up his legs. He pitched over and crashed onto the floor. Lemon had tripped him. “Please stop me, Lemon. It’s him. Please stop me,” he begged her, even as he was crawling forward. She was still entangled in his legs and had

her arms around him, but that didn't slow him down much. "Stop me!" he said again, almost screaming through clenched teeth, and a flash of pain shot through his knee as she kicked him. Thank god, he had to slow down a little. Lemon kicked his other knee, then rolled out from under him as he fell flat on the floor. She twisted around to lay on his back, but he was closer to the apartment door now, closer to the faint but insistent voice. "Astrix. Come here." He crawled forward on his elbows, ignoring Lemon's weight on top of him, ignoring his throbbing knees. His hands were on the door frame, they were prying at the door. . . .

Something hit him on the head. Something heavy smashed down on him, and the world spun and darkened. Gratefully, he let his head fall.

He wasn't out for very long, but it was long enough. When he opened his eyes, the stroodle had passed over. He still lay on the hall floor and Lemon was right next to him. When she saw his eyes open she put a finger to her lips, but he had no inclination to make a sound anyway. Even through the closed door he could clearly hear the Those That's voices. It wasn't just Castille anymore. There were at least two other men with him, and they were arguing.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Castille?" one said angrily. It could have been one of the voices from two nights ago, but Astrix wasn't sure.

"I told you, he's mine," Castille answered.

"Enough with these games!" the first voice spoke again. "They're not important. We need him, or there're going to be serious problems!"

“You’ve better not have done anything to harm him permanently,” another voice said. It wasn’t Castille’s, but it seemed so familiar. For some reason it made him think of Jake, from the mine, but of course it couldn’t be his.

There was a moment of silence, then Castille spoke again. “It’s all moot, anyway. He must not be here after all. We’ve lost him.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” the familiar voice responded, and then the hissing noise of the ships rose and faded off into silence. For a long time Astrix and Lemon, scared that it might be a trick, lay there without moving or speaking. Finally, Astrix dragged himself up, wincing as he put his weight on his knees. “We’ve got to get out of here,” he whispered. “Where can we hide?”

Lemon didn’t speak, just beckoned him to follow. They went down to the second floor and she led him to an apartment that was packed almost solid with trash. There was barely enough room to squeeze in and stand by the door, but Astrix was even more grateful than uncomfortable. The trash completely covered the window; even the television was mostly buried. Maybe he could be halfway safe here. Weakly, he sat down, not caring that plastic crunched underneath him. Lemon was already busy scooping some of the trash out into the hallway and pushing some to the sides so that they had a tiny cave.

“I can’t go to Come Out and Play today,” Astrix said once she had finished her organizing and sat down. She was so close to him, squeezed up next to him in the middle of all the junk, and he wanted nothing more than to hold her, touch her, lose himself in her, forget everything. . . . But he knew this cave wasn’t as safe as it felt. The Come Out

and Play call would find him here. “I can’t go,” he repeated. “They know I’m in this area somewhere. They’re going to find me if I go outside, magenta hair or not.”

“What can you do?” She stared at him, her eyes big in the dim light. “There’s no way not to go, except poking out your ears. Are you ready to do that?”

“But there *is* one other way, at least. You just knocked me out and that stopped me from being stroodled.”

Lemon frowned, as if she hadn’t realized before that the Come Out and Play call was a stroodle itself. “You want me to knock you out again?”

“No, I guess not. Not unless you have to. I think if you just prevented me from going, that would be enough. I thought maybe if you tied me up.”

“I don’t know.” She looked disturbed and worried. “It can’t be that simple. You might go crazy.”

“I know I might. But I think I can bear it, even if other people couldn’t. After all, I can resist the noodles. That must mean my brain has *some* strength. Even if I can’t resist the Come Out and Play call on my own, maybe I can withstand it enough to not go insane.”

“Well, I guess so,” she agreed doubtfully. “I’ll see what I can find.”

She slipped back out into the hallway and Astrix huddled there on the floor for what seemed a long time. Finally Lemon returned and displayed three bathrobe sashes, two pairs of tights, and one actual pair of handcuffs. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” he lied. Actually, he was terrified, but even losing his mind would be better than facing Castille again.

She snapped the handcuffs around his wrists and bent towards his feet. “Cross your ankles.” With quick, efficient movements, she began twining the bathrobe sashes around his legs. “You can’t go crazy, Astrix. I mean it.” She was still focusing down on the knots in her hands, but he could hear her voice tremble. “I can’t do this by myself.”

“I won’t,” he promised as she looped one of the pairs of tights around his wrists. “I can take it.”

“After all,” Lemon added as she used the last pair of tights to tie together the knots that held his hands and feet, fastening him in a doubled-up position, “think what Castille would be able to do to you if you were crazy and couldn’t even try to get away from him.”

She had finished tying him up just in time. They both heard the call at the same moment. Lemon jumped to her feet, and Astrix tensed against his bonds. “Remember what I said,” she gasped, shaking with the effort of standing still even that long, and then she was running through the door.

Astrix couldn’t move his lips to speak to her. He was becoming more and more convinced that he had done something incredibly stupid. For a moment he struggled desperately at the ties that held him. He was panicking so strongly that he almost couldn’t feel the stroodle. Then suddenly, completely, it flung itself over him, and was all he could feel.

He rolled over, oblivious to the weight of his body squashing his hands underneath him, until he was smashed up against the door. Then he couldn’t go any further. The most he could do was flop against the wall, flopping that turned into a

frenzied spasm but was still just as useless. He made no progress, none! But he had to go. He was being called.

Was the screaming coming from inside his brain or outside? He knew there was blood running down his chin. He couldn't see. He was going to die. He knew it. There could be no greater agony than this, than not obeying the Those That. It felt like all the cells in his body were exploding one by one. He had been squeezed, twisted out of shape. Everything was pain, and everything was *wrong*. He was going to break apart into pieces, melt into lumps of mushed flesh just like Jake. This was what Jake must have felt when Astrix had killed him.

Then suddenly it was as if he had caught the pattern of the pain. He was flowing along with it, in a quiet still space in the center, and there floating in front of him he could see his own face, but not the face he ordinarily saw in the mirror. This was a smooth, still, shaven, calm face looking back at him with no expression in the eyes or on the mouth.

Astrix felt a sick terror at the sight, a horror too deep for screaming, although he couldn't understand why. He shuddered violently, and abruptly was back in his own body, the echoes of the call marching away through him like fading thunder. His face and knees were sore from where he had battered them against the wall, and his lip was chewed into a bloody mess, but otherwise he was whole in body and mind. He was suddenly totally and completely sure that he would never have to fear the Come Out and Play call again.

“You’re all right.” Lemon stared down at him in utter astonishment as she opened the door. She was drenched in a sticky blue substance that had plastered her hair down over her forehead in matted clumps. “You look better than I do,” she added, apparently in irritation but she couldn’t maintain it; her face broke into a huge smile. “You did it! You did it. I never even imagined it was possible. . . .” She dropped to her knees beside him and kissed him happily. “I want to find whatever place you’re from, Astrix. If it can make your mind like this, I want to go there too, I want to be like that too!”

Although he had recently hoped that himself, now Astrix felt a chill run through his body at her words. “You can do it if you want to,” he told her. “Even in the city. Wherever.” Lemon laughed and kissed him again, smearing blue stuff all over his face. “You could even untie me,” he pointed out.

“I kind of like you this way,” she giggled. In the pleasurable moments that followed, he did get somewhat untied, but also spotted thoroughly with blue. He wondered if having magenta hair and blue spots would be enough of a disguise to fool Castille.

Astrix didn’t dare return to Lemon’s room at all, so she went back up to collect some clothes and the other possessions she couldn’t do without while he unearthed the bathroom from years of accumulated trash. When she came back, they took long showers—gingerly, in Astrix’s case, since although he had removed the debris from the shower stall he hadn’t cleaned away the dirt—and then slept the night wrapped in blankets on the floor.

The next morning, he waited in the room while Lemon scouted out another apartment in a building across the street, one that was also so crowded with trash that the

window was blocked off. Then, after she carefully checked the street and the sky, Astrix ran across, his heart thudding nervously until he was safe in the new apartment. As they once again scooped junk out of the way and arranged blankets and cushions neatly by the wall, Astrix pondered quietly to himself. When he had woken up the morning after the Punishment Day, he had felt as if although his memory had not returned, some of his personality and intelligence had, and now, after he had resisted the Come Out and Play call, it seemed as if even more of his old character and understanding had come back. He was his old self again, even if he couldn't remember exactly who that was.

There was one thing that he wasn't sure if it was a memory or something he had figured out. Either way, he knew now that Bracken and Robert were wrong; the Those That were not aliens. His examinations of the Hat and the Tower had made it clear to him that they weren't pieces of alien technology. But they weren't mistakes, either. It was much simpler, and much more horrible than that. They had been rides, silly things that were supposed to be fun. The Those That had brought the people there, to the Citadel Amusement Park, luring them with the idea of rides, of happy mindless fun, and then— And then something horrible had happened. Astrix couldn't remember what. Maybe an accident? He wanted to believe it had been an accident, but he knew that wasn't true. The rides and the fun had been a lie all along. A trap, a trick. The Those That had used the amusement park to catch the people and keep them here, where they could do what they wanted with them. He knew it was the truth; and somehow the knowledge filled him with guilt as much as horror.

For some reason he felt awkward about telling Lemon what he had realized. He wasn't sure why. Why did he think it might hurt her? He glanced over at her. She had

been arranging their clothes in neat stacks along the wall; he watched as she propped a Dreamy Dan doll up on a pair of spike-heeled boots. Her face was peaceful, and Astrix suddenly felt a rush of tenderness towards her. She was going to escape Come Out and Play. He was going to make it happen. She had saved him from Castille's torturous games. He could save her from this.

If only he could figure out how. He had to help her. Suddenly he was filled with a great desire to make up for something to Lemon, to make up somehow for the miserable life she must have had here in the city. He would teach her how to read.

Lemon was nervous but excited at the idea, and willingly helped him search for something to write with and on. They had to settle for lipstick and torn-up cardboard boxes. "I've never seen anyone read or write before except the Those That," she told him as he carefully printed her name.

Her statement sent a chill through him and his fingers trembled on the lipstick tube he held, but he firmly pushed the thought away. "That's your name," he told her, and she seized the cardboard eagerly.

The lesson went well. Lemon was smart and she knew a little more than she thought she did: After staring at the names on product boxes for so long, she had come automatically to associate the letters with what was inside. She hadn't realized it, but when Astrix wrote out "Dreamy Dan," she echoed the name aloud and clasped a hand to her mouth. "How did I know that?"

"That's reading," Astrix explained, laughing. "Seeing words and knowing what they mean." He went on to break down the words into letters for her and explain the

sound of each. “You have to learn to figure out ones you haven’t seen a million times before, too,” he told her.

They worked on reading all day, and Astrix became more and more convinced that he couldn’t let Lemon suffer through Come Out and Play again. When the afternoon began to deepen, she looked at him in concern. “Am I going to tie you up again today?”

“No,” he answered confidently. “I can resist it.”

“Just like that?”

He nodded. “Well, yesterday wasn’t easy, but once I went through it I think . . . I think they won’t be able to get me again.” He was watching Lemon as he spoke, and saw the mixture of excitement, fear, and envy on her face. He *was* going to help her escape. He *was*.

He didn’t tell her, however. He wasn’t sure that she could take such an idea; the whole concept of avoiding Come Out and Play seemed to be almost too much for her to handle. But once she did escape it, she would be glad, he knew she would. She would be free of the Those That’s power, free to have control of her own mind.

Surreptitiously, he gathered what he needed: a scarf, a winter hat, and four pieces of gum that he began chewing in preparation. When the call came, he was able to ignore it even more than he had dared believe possible. It didn’t create even the slightest hold on him or the tiniest pull. Lemon, however, jumped up from where she had been sitting on the floor at the first instant of sound. She staggered a minute as she got on her feet and in that moment Astrix leaped in front of her. He grabbed her arm with one hand, holding her back, while he hurriedly spit out the wad of gum and tore it into two pieces.

She struggled against him, terrified and panicked, but he blocked the door with his body, pinning her in place with his knees while he pushed the gum down into her ears. After that he let her go, experimentally, but it didn't do much to help her. In fact, Lemon seemed even more frantic than usual, probably because of the delay he had caused, as she flung the door open and raced out. Astrix ran after her and caught up after only a few paces; she was wearing some of her tall, unwieldy girl shoes again, and though she moved more quickly and gracefully in them than seemed possible, she still couldn't run all that fast. It was easy to catch her arm and hold her back long enough to stuff the winter hat over her head and pull it down firmly over her ears. This time Lemon managed to toss a look that clearly said *You are crazy* over her shoulder at him before she started running again.

He grabbed her one more time, to wrap the scarf around her head on top of the hat, but she still struggled to be free, to follow the call. They were almost at the stairs. Even combined, the gum, the hat, and the scarf seemed to have little effect on the power pulling her forward. Astrix wasn't really surprised. He hadn't expected to be able to free her from the compulsion completely, he only wanted to dim the effect enough so that she wouldn't go crazy if he stalled her. When they reached the landing at the top of the stairs, he reached out and grabbed her shoulders, not enough to stop her completely, just enough to slow her down. Lemon tugged frantically at his hands at first, but once she realized that she could keep moving, she calmed down and just kept going as fast as he let her.

He held onto her all the way down the stairs, forcing her to move about half as quickly as she wanted, but not completely preventing her obedient response. When they

got to the lobby, Astrix was beginning to get a little nervous. What if he had mistimed? But they were still several feet from the door when the call stopped.

Lemon jerked to a halt, but Astrix didn't dare let go of her. She turned around to face him. Her eyes were huge, her mouth hanging open. Her hands trembled as she reached up to remove the hat and scarf, and pry the gum from her ears. She didn't speak. Silently, they moved over to the lobby doors and peered out into the street. It suddenly all looked far away and remote, almost unreal, through the glass panes of the door. A group of ordinary people hurled bricks back and forth. They watched in silence as several were wounded and fell to the ground, as, later, they were taken off to hospital machines while coins fell like golden rain from above.

Chapter 10

Everything was quiet. Not in her ears. In her mind. No more noodles. No more Come Out and Play. No more Those That telling her what to think. Just herself in her own mind. Just Lemon.

She imagined to herself that her mind was like a little rat, sneaking cautiously out of its hole in a pile of junk when the people had left the room. Now that the Those That were gone, her mind could creep out too, peek around to see if it was safe, exist for herself only. No one would say “ugh—a rat,” and throw a shoe at her. She could do whatever rats did when they were left alone: caper about, play with the other rats, search for crumbs.

She couldn't believe it the first time Astrix had kept her back from Come Out and Play. She had been so incredibly stunned, had hardly been able to feel anything at all except surprise until the next day. It was just so unbelievable. Even when Astrix had done it, even when Robert and Bracken had told her their story, she just couldn't completely believe that it was real. It was as surprising as if she had realized that something she had believed all her life suddenly wasn't true anymore, for example, if she had abruptly noticed that the sky was green not blue, or that all the apartment buildings had really been made out of peanut butter sandwiches, not bricks. *She didn't have to always obey the Come Out and Play call!*

But once she had finally gotten used to the idea, she was ecstatically happy. Astrix still had to stuff her ears and hold her back every day, but she had escaped. She had escaped! She was so proud she kept a record of the days in lipstick marks around the

edge of a plastic tiffany lamp, just like Robert and Bracken had done. Someday she would have thirty-one thousand days' worth too. She didn't know if she would ever be able to withstand the call on her own, without Astrix's help, but this was incredible enough. She couldn't think of anything that could make her life more perfect.

Her mind was growing stronger every day that she was free. It felt as if there was more room inside her head. She was becoming a giant, super-sized rat. She was even starting to remember things, like Astrix did, from a long time ago, from when they were children. Maybe the memories were sparked by the story he had told her, about how the Hat and the Tower weren't mistakes or messed-up factory machinery at all, but rides, things that were supposed to be fun, that the Those That had used to lure the people there. She knew she had ridden the rides, including the Hat. There were memories of motion deep inside her body. But she could still feel something else too, a deep horror and betrayal when she had understood that the promise of fun had been a lie, and that the truth was only terror.

She had come to the park with two other people, she remembered that also. She had been excited and happy at first. There was a brief memory-glimpse of a street, other children with their people. But why did the very thought fill her with such horrible pain? She didn't want to think about the people, about who they might be, or what they might have meant to her.

Then she had a few different memories, ones that didn't seem to belong to the city or the amusement park. She didn't know how to understand them, what context to place them in. But she had a picture of herself sitting on a curb in the cold, cigarette butts thick in the gutter underneath her feet, huddled in a ragged black coat but wearing bright red

shoes. Sleeping squashed on a mattress with people crowding her on either side. Holding a worn, pink stuffed toy. The memories should be interesting, exciting, since they were clues to her past, but mostly they just made her sad. She didn't want to think about them too often.

Luckily, there was plenty to occupy her time. She wasn't bored like she had been before, even if she still wasn't going to work. Every day, first of all, she had to scout out a new apartment, one that was filled with enough trash to block off the window, but not one that was too smelly or so full they couldn't get inside. It was sometimes difficult to find a good one, but with Castille and the other Those That looking for Astrix they didn't dare stay in one place for more than one night. Then, once she found a room, she had to get Astrix and their bags of permanent possessions over to it, and then they had to clean it up.

For the last few days, Lemon had been thinking carefully about what she wanted, really and truly, she herself, without noodles. One of them had been a cleared-out room, clean as a pocket room, so she had begun trying to get as much of the trash out of the way as possible in every apartment they stayed in. She stacked piles of junk neatly in front of the window and along the walls, then dumped whatever was leftover out in the hall. The resulting large bare space in the center of the room filled her with an instinctive, deep joy that was not diminished when she carefully arranged their blankets and sacks of clothes in the middle. In keeping with her attempt to figure out what she really liked, she also filtered out her favorite pieces from the trash as she sorted through it. She liked red plastic tiffany lamps better than the other colors. She liked Bruno the Squid better than the other Happy Fish posters. And of course, she had a sentimental attachment to Dreamy

Dan. She took these items and set them carefully around the room. Sometimes she even played a little with the Dreamy Dan dolls. “You leave Astrix alone,” she made one say to an identical doll that was standing in for Castille. “Or I’ll kick your ass.”

“What if I stroodle you?”

“Won’t work, ha!” And the Lemon doll kicked the Castille one across the room. She thought that this game made Astrix nervous; whenever she started playing it he always called her away to continue the reading lesson. Lemon enjoyed that too. It was interesting in such a new and different way, like nothing she had ever done before. And it wasn’t too hard. She could read almost all the names of products that she came across now, even though she still had trouble with words she hadn’t seen before. She liked reading, but she wasn’t sure yet how it really mattered whether she could do it or not. After all, she already knew what the products were without reading their names. But Astrix insisted that it was important, and she thought that since the Those That did it they must have a reason. Probably a bad one, so she should read too and figure out what it was.

Making lipstick marks on the cardboard gave her an idea for something else, though. Astrix called it drawing, and it was more fun than reading. Lemon drew pictures of him, of herself, of Kira so well that Astrix said he could tell who it was supposed to be. Drawing was a lot of fun. In a way it was almost like organizing a room, only organizing lines on a piece of paper to look like someone’s face.

Even though she wasn’t usually bored, she did sometimes get lonely. She missed being with her friends at work, talking, laughing, gossiping about the latest news. And the bars! Sometimes she could almost cry, she missed those nights so much. Giggling with

the tables full of other girls, having so much fun, being so excited by the Those That men, feeling so desirable when they looked back at her. She missed that overwhelming, thoughtless delight. Now, everything she knew weighed her down and although she sometimes felt happy, it was not the same, it was not as easy. And even though she knew that her happiness had just been part of what the Those That wanted from her, she still missed it. She had lost that pure and unthinking joy forever.

Twenty stroodle-free days passed. The twenty-first day began just like the others since the end of Come Out and Play had. Lemon found a new apartment and spent the morning arranging the junk inside in neat piles while Astrix lay on their blanket and wrote a story for her to practice reading on. That day she decided to stack things according to color: a pile of red things topped off by seven Buyer Barbaras, a stack of yellow with ten Liar Lisas on top. She pondered as she piled. So she had escaped the noodles. And she had escaped Come Out and Play. Her mind was free. But what next? She had figured all this out, what was she going to do with it? Were she and Astrix going to spend another thirty-one thousand days hiding in one apartment after another? She imagined herself cleaning out the apartments one by one, leaving a trail of neatness behind her, and giggled aloud. But amusing as that sounded, she didn't think it would be *enough*. It wouldn't be any different than Robert and Bracken. What about Kira? And Dooley and all the rest of her friends? Wasn't there anything she could do to help them? But she didn't know what would happen if she did find a way. What if everyone woke up and stopped buying things from the noodles and stopped going to Come Out and Play? What would the Those That do? It was horrible but true, she realized, that the people she watched during Come Out and Play, through the lobby doors after Astrix had held her

back, were *protecting* her. They were saving her by taking the horror and the pain instead of her. Sometimes she wondered if that made her much different from a Those That. After all, she was letting people be hurt and not stopping it. But if she somehow figured out a way to wake everybody up, surely the Those That would find a way to catch them all again, make the hospital machines cause everybody to forget extra, make everything go back to the way it had been. It was all so confusing; nothing seemed right.

And what about Astrix? Ever since he had escaped the Come Out and Play call, it was as if he didn't care anymore about figuring out where he had come from and what had happened before he lost his memory. He didn't talk anymore about why Castille was after him, or why the other Those That were looking for him. All he wanted to do was hide. Whenever she brought any of her questions up, he always changed the subject as soon as possible. She couldn't understand why. Wasn't he *curious*?

Testing him, as she piled up blue things, she asked, "Astrix? Have you had any more memories come back from long ago?"

"No. . . ." he said absently. "Come on. Your story is ready."

Patiently, Lemon accepted the change of topic, and came to sit beside him. She did enjoy the stories Astrix wrote for her. They were much more interesting than the stories acted out on the PlasticPerfectPeople show, although she had to picture everything in her head, which was sometimes hard. But it made things more interesting. Sometimes the stories were adventures he made up about her and Those That men, or Kira, or rats. Today's story was making fun of the PlasticPerfectPeople show, with characters such as Stupid Sarah, Dumb Dan, and Bimbo Barbara. It was very funny, and Lemon was able to read it all the way through, only asking Astrix for help once or twice.

By the time she had finished the story, it was time for lunch. They walked down to the vending area and stared through the plastic windows. Lemon still found it very exciting to be able to pick what she wanted to eat. Sometimes it was really hard! Her stomach clamored in so many directions at once without anything to guide it, and it took her forever to pick. Today, she finally decided on a Chicken Alexander *and* a fruit box so she didn't have to eat the raisins that came with the Chicken Alexander. She and Astrix wandered slowly back, eating as they walked along.

In the afternoon, Lemon worked on her picture of the city and the sky above it that she was drawing in various colors of lipstick and fingernail polish on a huge piece of cardboard. When she wasn't drawing, she propped the cardboard against the wall of the apartment—she missed having a window so much she had to make her own! She was planning on drawing at least two more pictures: one of a happy bar scene and one of her assembly line at the factory. It was amazing what a person could miss! Astrix lay on the floor and watched her. He still did that a lot, almost all the time, in fact. At any odd moment she could look up and catch him staring at her.

As soon as it began to get near the time of Come Out and Play, she made Astrix start chewing gum in preparation. She always started worrying soon after lunch: Maybe they wouldn't be ready in time. Maybe she would outrun Astrix, even if she wore her tallest and most unstable shoes. Maybe Come Out and Play would start unexpectedly, or at an unusual time. Maybe the Those That *could* read her mind and would come find her out. That day, however, once again everything went according to plan. As soon as the call came, Astrix jumped up and held her back while he pushed the gum into her ears with what by now had become practiced, smooth movements. The gum never affected her that

much. She was still desperate to respond to the pull on her brain, still strained against Astrix's hands. When he let her go and she ran out into the hall, her heart was breaking with obedient joy. Luckily, her shoes always slowed her down, and Astrix never had any trouble catching up with her enough to push the scarf and hat onto her head. Not until that point did the call feel at all dimmed, and then only so much that her mind was almost not breaking, so that she was just safe from going crazy when Astrix reached out to grab her shoulders on the stairs.

It was such terrible, wonderful agony when he held her back. She was still so horribly desperate to answer, to obey, to respond to the summons that electrified every cell of her body; most of her mind could barely think, could just feel the panicked need, but under all that there was a small patch of herself struggling to resist, grateful for the painful bite of Astrix's hands on her shoulders. The stairs were terror and torture and ecstasy all at once. And then, the race for time as they proceeded across the lobby, step by excruciating step, and then that moment of silence, that deep immense gulf of silence when the call stopped and joy crackled slowly through her as she came to believe that she was free.

They always stood by the doors and watched, no matter how terrible it was. Lemon didn't really understand why, but she knew she had to watch. "To bear witness," Astrix explained the feeling to her, but she wasn't sure what that meant. To bear the pain, she told herself, to take as much of the pain as she could, even if it was just by watching. Sometimes she felt so guilty to have escaped and be able to do nothing but watch helplessly. But not watching would be worse, would be cheating. Today the Those That

went with the old favorite: girl-on-girl fighting. Lemon stared as hard as she could at every punch, scratch, kick, hair pull. She could almost feel each blow.

After Come Out and Play was over, Lemon moved cautiously out the door. She checked to make sure that the crystal ship was really moving away like it was supposed to, and then crept out to collect some of the nearest coins in the street. This was something else she always felt guilty for. Shouldn't she leave the coins for the people who had been stroodled? But since she wasn't going to work now, there was no other way to get money. Even if she and Astrix weren't getting noodled anymore, they did still have to buy food. So. There was no other way. She thought it was strange, though. Now her mind was free and she was thinking for herself—and now she was also troubled by questions about what might be wrong or by actions that made her feel guilty in a way she had never been before. But she couldn't figure out any other way to do things, even if they seemed wrong. Maybe the Those That felt that way about Come Out and Play too? But when she heard them laughing, as the crystal ship moved away, she couldn't believe it. Surely there was always some kind of choice? But then, what choice did she have for another way to get money?

Lemon sighed as she gathered up a handful of coins. It was all so confusing. Her thoughts ran on and on and never came to any conclusion. Maybe someday she could be smart enough to figure out some answers. She slipped back inside the lobby. Astrix was waiting for her, looking pale and nervous. He hated for her to go outside, or even for her to be out of his sight for a moment.

They went upstairs, ate dinner—Lemon picked a Rice & Beans—and then she tried to write a story herself. Astrix said all stories started with “Once upon a time,” so

she wrote that out carefully first, but then she got stuck. She was lying there thinking, idly tracing her lips with the lipstick, when she heard a terrible rumbling crashing noise. The building shook. Lemon froze. She had heard the sound only seven or eight times in all her days in the city, but she recognized it immediately, and a jolt of horror lanced through her body.

“Lemon! What was that? Lemon!” Astrix demanded, looking panicked.

Lemon sat up and began taking off her platform sandals, while at the same time fumbling around for her boots and a pair of gloves. “It’s all right, Astrix. I mean, it’s horrible, but it’s all right for us. It doesn’t have anything to do with us. But we have to go help.”

“What is it?” he repeated.

“An apartment building collapsed,” she answered tightly. She braced herself internally for the horror that she knew would be there. Mostly the injuries were no worse than a Come Out and Play, really, and a collapsed apartment building shouldn’t seem as bad anyway, because no one had caused it on purpose. But in these accidents, often the worst thing of all happened, when people were trapped under the rubble for so long that they couldn’t be revived in a hospital machine and had to stay dead. “Come on,” she told Astrix. “We have to help.”

“But . . . The Those That . . .” he protested.

“They don’t care.” Sometimes they did watch, and laugh, from the crystal ships, but they never came that close, and besides, it was dark. “They won’t be looking for us now, Astrix, and anyway it doesn’t matter. We have to help.” She jumped to her feet and quickly braided her hair back to keep it out of the way.

Astrix looked reluctant, but climbed to his feet. “Get some gloves,” she ordered him. She was already opening the door, shifting from foot to foot, waiting anxiously to be gone. Finally Astrix found some gloves and followed her out into the hall. “Why do we need these?”

Lemon glared over at him. For someone normally so smart he could occasionally be very stupid. “To protect our hands when we dig people out,” she explained, managing not to sigh in exasperation.

They hurried down the hall to the stairs. Other people were coming out of their apartments too, and everyone joined together in a crowd that funneled down the stairwell and into the lobby. Most people were wearing gloves, some had scarves wrapped around their faces to protect themselves from the dust, and everyone looked very grim. Hardly anyone spoke. The clump of their marching feet echoed around them down the stairwell and then led them out the lobby doors and into the street.

Lemon had always liked something about these times. Not the accident itself, of course, that was always horrible, but the way everyone responded. Everyone worked together and seemed so much more capable than normal. The people were more themselves, somehow, and less what the Those That wanted them to be. In fact, it was one of the few times that the Those That didn’t really matter in their lives at all. It was just the ordinary people, left alone and trying to save each other.

Lemon liked being in the middle of the crowd of ordinary people, too; she appreciated them being all together, moving in unison. She liked it especially now, after having been alone and isolated in the apartments for so long. It was like the moment at the beginning of *Come Out and Play* at the factory, when they had all marched smoothly

out of the building and she had felt swept up in something bigger than herself. If only there was some other cause for this instead of a collapsed apartment building!

As the crowd hurried through the streets, however, she forgot about enjoying the feeling. She recognized where they were headed. She recognized it all too well. They were going to the same area as the apartment building where she had lived for so long with Kira, where Astrix had lived with her until Castille had shown up at the window. That building was still standing; she could see it now, sturdy and solid, with lights on in the windows. But the more recently built apartment building nicknamed “Tiny” because the rooms were so small, the one where Dooley lived and where Kira had moved to live with him . . . No, Lemon begged silently. No, don’t let it be Tiny. Don’t let it be Kira. Please. But it was.

The crowd flowed around a corner and a groan of despair rolled back through it as everyone caught a glimpse of the devastation. Lemon moaned aloud too. “It’s Kira’s building,” she whispered to Astrix, reaching out to take his hand for comfort.

“We’ll find her,” he reassured hurriedly. “The hospital machines will save her.”

Lemon had seen hospital machines heal extreme wounds of all sorts, but it was hard to imagine what might be left of Kira to cure. Lemon stared miserably and hopelessly at the collapse. Tiny must have been built badly, as so many of the newer apartment buildings were. Lemon had always been careful, even in the last few days when she and Astrix had been hiding, to stay only in the buildings that at least *looked* sturdy, and that didn’t sway noticeably in the wind. Tiny hadn’t shaken too much, but there were all sorts of hidden problems that could have been wrong with it. Maybe the concrete for the blocks had been mixed wrong or maybe they hadn’t been put together

right. It looked like the entire lowest floor of the four-story building had collapsed and the rest of the floors had fallen down on top of it, breaking apart as they fell. Now there was just a huge pile of rubble: chunks of concrete ranging from fist-sized to bigger than a mattress, twisted pieces of metal, broken glass, even toys and other junk. The collapse was the worst Lemon had ever seen, and Kira and Dooley's apartment had only been on the second floor. Even if Kira was in enough pieces to cure, how would they ever get her out from under all that rubble in time for a hospital machine to help her? "We won't make it," she whispered miserably. "Oh no, no, no, we won't find her in time."

"Don't give up yet." Astrix squeezed her against his side comfortingly. "We have almost three hours, right? We'll use them the best we can."

Lemon looked at him gratefully. She took a deep breath, then started forward to attack the pile of rubble, but Astrix pulled her back. "Wait. Let's think a few minutes. Try to imagine how the apartment building looked when it was standing. Picture where Kira's apartment was."

"It was on the other side," she realized, and accordingly they circled around to the back of the pile of rubble. The crowd was much thinner over here, since it was very dark. Most of the rescuers were down at the other end, under two streetlights that had senselessly been placed right next to one another.

"About how wide was each of the apartments?" he asked her.

Lemon shut her eyes to concentrate. The act of thinking itself made her feel better, feel like she was doing something. "Not very big. Maybe twice me?"

Astrix raised a hand to her head and moved forward, approximating the distance. "Like this?"

“I . . . I think so.”

“Measure it out in steps, then, and we’ll walk it fourteen times, since her apartment was number twenty-eight. That should put us close to where it was. I hope,” he added under his breath, but Lemon knew that she would never have gotten anywhere near this far without him. “It’s a good idea!” she said quickly. “Let’s do it!”

Fourteen times twice Lemon led them to an area that looked very much like the rest of that side. It was also, unfortunately, very dark. “Get started,” Astrix told her. “Move what you can. I’ll be back.”

Lemon flung herself at the rubble. “Please,” she begged the universe. “Please let me find her. I’ll give anything. I’ll take her nose. Just let her be all right.” There was no time to go about digging in an organized way, or to use any more of Astrix’s thinking. She just started moving chunks of concrete, flinging and shoving and pushing and pulling everything back. It was hard work, and dangerous. Whenever she moved something, there was the chance that more rubble might tumble down at her, and it was hard to see well enough to know what might trigger a landslide, or what might be too heavy or too jagged or scattered with broken glass.

Suddenly a faint purple light glimmered over the debris. She looked over her shoulder; Astrix was standing there holding a purple plastic tiffany lamp. Somehow he had hooked it up to a plug in a nearby apartment building. “This should help,” he told her. “I’ll get more.”

Lemon kept hauling chunks of concrete and pieces of metal. She was already growing sore and tired. The air was chilly and it was starting to drizzle. Her hands hurt even through her gloves. But she kept working, while Astrix ran back and forth wedging

lamps into the rubble around her. Eventually, she became surrounded by pools of soft light in purple, red, green, yellow, blue. Shining in the colors, the rubble almost looked pretty.

Astrix finally came back again with two metal rods and showed her how to use them to move pieces that were too heavy to lift or roll by hand. He began moving rubble aside too, and together they made a lot of progress. It wasn't long after Astrix started helping when they heard a soft moan beneath the debris. Lemon's heart staggered in her chest and she flung herself to her knees. Astrix crouched beside her and they carefully but quickly scraped small rocks and pieces of broken porcelain out of the way until Lemon felt a leg under her hand. She held her breath, not daring to hope, as they eased the victim out from under the large piece of concrete that had provided a little shelter from the crash. The person squirmed and whimpered, still alive! But it wasn't her. It wasn't Kira. It wasn't even Dooley. It was a man she didn't know, his face dimly green on one side and purple on the other from the tiffany lamps.

"I'll take him to a hospital machine," Astrix told her, slipping an arm under the other man's shoulders and climbing slowly to his feet. "Keep digging."

She kept digging, even though her heart weighed as heavy as her arms. It seemed like she had been digging forever. Surely it would be too late, now, even if she found Kira.

Her hand touched something soft and squishy and she gave a squeak of surprise and hope. But it still wasn't Kira. It was only a rat, a small dead rat that had been killed in the collapse. Lemon swallowed hard as she looked at the little broken body, lit up softly blue. She had never liked rats. But now the dead one broke her heart, overwhelmed her

with unbearable sadness. She started crying. They had all lost so much, everyone in the city had lost so much. Even the rats had lost. But she couldn't bear to lose Kira.

“Lemon.” Astrix touched her hair gently. “It’s only been about an hour and a half. We still might find her.”

He stroked her head for a moment, but suddenly he stiffened and his attention drew away from her. She followed his gaze. Three crystal ships had come to watch; they hovered over the rescuers working down at the other end. “Dig, babies, dig,” a voice laughed down. Astrix looked terrified and she could tell he wanted to run, but he took another glance at her face and seemed to brace himself. “Come on,” he said. “Keep going.”

She nodded numbly and kept going. She couldn't tell how long they worked. It could have been another thirty-one thousand agonizing days. But then they heaved a big piece of concrete out of the way, and there under it was Kira's face, bloody and still and pale. She was dead. Lemon looked up at Astrix desperately. “There's time,” he told her. “I'll take her.”

He gathered Kira's body carefully into his arms and stood up. Lemon crouched where she had been, exhausted, and stared up at him. She had always known that he was large, of course, and Kira was smaller than she was, but now the contrast between them leaped sharply out at her. Astrix held Kira against his chest and she looked so tiny, like a doll. Lemon had never felt that small beside him.

“Are you okay?” he asked her, and Lemon shook herself free of her daze. She scrambled to her feet and followed him around the remains of the building. Her feet slid, but she moved as fast as she could. The hospital machine was down on the far corner,

where the other rescuers had been working. When they got there, they found several wounded people being carried towards it, but Kira's condition allowed her to go first. Lemon sighed in relief as the door shut her friend inside.

"It's all right," Astrix told her. He cast a nervous glance at the one crystal ship that was still hovering above the wreckage. They were much closer to it here, but he stood his ground. "She'll be fine."

Lemon nodded weakly and sat on the street, right where she was. Astrix settled down next to her. The hospital machine whined and churned loudly. It seemed to be making more noise than usual. Kira must be very badly hurt. Lemon dropped her head onto her knees and chewed her lip anxiously. Wasn't it taking an unusually long time? Finally, the machine chimed and the light above the door turned green. She jumped to her feet and pulled the door open. "Kira?!"

Kira didn't respond. For a second Lemon wasn't even sure that the person inside *was* Kira. Then, in the dim light inside the compartment, she was able to make out Kira's mouth, her chin, her familiar nose. It was her eyes that were missing, and her ears, and her hair. The skin on top of her head flowed smooth and unbroken down her cheeks.

The mutilated head moved, and Lemon screamed. Horror fought with relief in her chest. Kira was alive, but what had happened to her?

"What happened?" Kira said faintly in unison with Astrix, who was peering over Lemon's shoulder. "I can't hear!" "What did it do to her?" They both spoke at the same time, but Lemon's head was spinning too wildly to listen to either. Gulping for breath, she shut the door and pressed the 'Start' button again. This time the bell chimed and the green light came on again almost immediately. She jerked the door open and felt as if she

had been plunged into boiling water, as if she had been *blanched* by horror. Kira was the same. Bald. Earless. Smooth indentations of skin where her eyes should be. The hospital machine hadn't worked! Such a thing had never happened before. Never. "It didn't fix her," she whispered, trying to understand how that could be true. "It didn't fix her!"

"No," Astrix protested. To her surprise, when she looked up at him, he was staring at the hospital machine with as much horror on his face as she felt. "This isn't right," he insisted, frustration and anger warring in his voice. He reached out and slapped the machine, then shook it. "Try it now."

Willing but hopeless, she shut the door, and the same thing happened again. The machine claimed immediately that it was finished, but Kira was still the same. Lemon couldn't understand it. She couldn't bear it. Her legs trembled so hard she fell down on the ground. There was a moaning sound that she didn't realize at first was coming from her own throat. "We'll try another one," Astrix said. He still sounded angry. He bundled Kira out of the machine, more roughly than Lemon would have liked, and strode off down the street. Lemon struggled to her feet and staggered after them.

There was another machine only a block away. Some people with minor injuries from the building collapse were there, but Astrix pushed right in front of them. He grabbed the ordinary man about to step forward, shoved him away, and set Kira inside. Lemon pressed the button. Immediately, the bell, the green light. They tore the door open and stared inside at an unchanged Kira.

"No, damn it, no!" Astrix roared and behind him the crowd, realizing what was happening, began to buzz with fear and horror. Lemon couldn't listen to any of them, however. All she could think about was Kira. She had known her for so long, for all her

time in the city there had been Kira to talk to, laugh with, cry with, familiar as the sky. “Kira,” she said aloud, but of course Kira couldn’t hear her, so instead she reached out to stroke her friend’s face and take her hand.

“Dooley?” Kira asked. “Lemon?”

Lemon squeezed her hand even harder when she heard her name, and leaned over to kiss Kira on her cheek and on her mouth. Maybe she could tell by the feel of the lips who was there with her.

“I can’t see,” Kira went on unsteadily. “I can’t hear . . . I think I was dead. I can remember, I can remember being dead. Maybe I should have stayed dead. What’s happened to me, Lemon?”

Desperately, Lemon stroked her friend’s hand. She hadn’t realized that she was crying until she looked up at Astrix and he was blurred and sliding. “They can’t do this,” she cried in outrage. “They can’t take this from us too. I *won’t let them.*” She remembered the Those That men circling above the disaster in their ships, spying down, laughing, and fury shook her so hard she could barely breathe. Not the hospital machines too. The old, old feeling of horrible, excruciating betrayal ground through her and she realized that her hands were forming fists. “They can’t do this, Astrix. No. No. No. They’re not.”

“You’re right,” he said. He looked furious, too. “How could they let the hospital machines get into this state?”

Lemon looked around wildly. There in the crowd, her mouth hanging open in terror, was a girl who worked on the Mean Mark line at the factory. “Anna,” she ordered. Her voice emerged commandingly, without even the slightest tremble. “Here. Take Kira.

Take care of her.” She swallowed hard as she pushed her into Anna’s waiting arms, took one last look at her friend’s mutilated face, and touched her cheek gently. Her new knowledge would *not* go to waste. She would make the Those That give them good hospital machines back. She would make them save Kira.

“Come on,” she told Astrix. To her surprise, he didn’t argue or look scared at the thought of facing the Those That. His mouth was a grim line and his eyes were hooded with fury.

“Maybe we can ask Castille some questions while we’re there, kill two rats with one stone,” he said as they set off down the street.

Lemon glanced at his face. She wasn’t sure if he meant it or if he was joking, but it was clear to her that they would have to approach Castille. “We should talk to him anyway,” she said.

He nodded. “You’re right, Lemon. We have to. We have to make all this stop.”

The streets were very empty. Lemon led the way firmly towards the nearest bar, the old one where she used to go every night, and they drew to a stop in front of the door. Through the window, everything looked pretty normal. There weren’t as many ordinary people there as usual, but the ones at the tables were laughing like they always did. Beyond them, the silver-gray Those That men sat patiently.

“How are we going to do this?” Lemon asked. Her throat was dry, but she was not scared. She was not. She was too mad to be scared.

“We’re going to have to get Castille out here,” Astrix said. “If there’s only one of them, it might be bearable—if there were more it would be too much. And Castille will know. About the hospital machines. About everything. I think that he doesn’t want the

other Those That to find me. So, I thought maybe, if I just peeked in the door and caught his eye, he would come out and maybe we could talk to him.”

“What if the other Those That follow him?”

“I don’t think they will. It doesn’t seem like them. But then we run, I guess.”

“And what if he tries to stroodle us?”

“Hopefully, I can resist it, like the Come Out and Play call. And I’ll hold you back.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “Let’s do it.”

Astrix nodded. He still looked more grim than frightened, and although he stepped up to the door slowly, there was no hesitation in his movements. Lemon backed off a little, into the shadows, up against the wall. For a moment she felt panic, but she knew there was no choice. Even if she died here, she had to try to do something. Dying would be better than living on if the hospital machines had betrayed them too.

Astrix pushed the door minutely open, then put his eye to the crack. A long moment passed. Lemon wondered whether Castille would really be inside. Astrix had been so sure, but maybe he was just paranoid. How would Castille happen to be in that bar tonight? He couldn’t know they would look for him there, could he? Maybe Astrix was so scared of Castille that he granted him powers really out of range for even a Those That man. Yet, suddenly Astrix pushed the door the rest of the way open. He stood exposed for brief second, then jumped back into the street. “Come on,” he beckoned to her. “Let’s get back in the alley.”

Lemon ducked around the corner of the bar into the dark, narrow alley. Her legs were trembling underneath her, and she had to force herself to stand still. She thought

briefly of looking around for some sort of weapon, but the idea seemed ludicrous. This was a Those That man, after all. Nevertheless, she found that her hands had bunched themselves into fists. Astrix aligned himself next to her and they stared mutely at the mouth of the alley. Would Castille bother to come out or would he stay inside, smug and smiling? When had a Those That man ever done anything because ordinary people wanted him to?

But then it seemed as if a shadow detached from the corner of the bar. The side door, the one that led out from the pocket rooms, opened and there he was, standing before them. He was alone in the darkness, but he stepped forward with the same smooth motion she had seen in him before, the same utter confidence the Those That always had. He stopped a few feet away from them and stood there calmly for a long moment without saying anything. No one said anything. Lemon's mouth was dry. She could feel Astrix trembling beside her and desperately tried to wet her lips. "Wh . . . what," she finally managed.

Castille inclined his head slightly towards her. "Are you speaking to me, sweetheart?" His voice was soft, almost kind. For some reason, this made her even more scared, but she forced herself to keep going. "What have you done to the hospital machines?"

"The hospital machines?" He echoed her words, sounding surprised, but she was sure it was faked. "Why don't you ask Astrix about those, little one."

"Why would I," Lemon started, but Castille had turned his eyes from her and it felt almost, ridiculously, as if she had ceased to exist. He was looking at Astrix now; he even took a step towards him. "Astrix," he said.

“Castille,” Astrix responded. His voice was weak at first but then he repeated the word and sounded more sure of himself. “Castille. That’s your name.”

“Yes.” Castille sounded amused. “Do you remember?”

“No! I don’t—I don’t remember anything. But I know some things. I know that it must have been you who made me lose my memory. You made me kill Jake. It’s been you all along. I know that. But now you have to tell me why.”

“Oh, Astrix,” Castille said softly. “You don’t want to know. You’ve never wanted to know these things. You never wanted to know the truth about yourself, and now you can’t. It’s better this way, trust me.”

“No. You have to answer some questions. This has gone on long enough. Why—”

Laughing, Castille cut him off. “No, Astrix. You’ve always wanted to think you knew everything. But you never knew. You thought I was a decadent, frivolous fool. You thought I took it all as seriously as you took your ridiculous work. You were so serious, Astrix, so sure that what you were doing was so real, so important, so far above all the rest of us, but it was just as foolish as any of our games, and far more dangerous. . . .”

He paused for a moment, but Lemon didn’t know what to say. What was he talking about? She tried to think how she could make him talk about the hospital machines again, but before she could come up with anything, he went on. “I like you this way, Astrix. I like you here in the city. And, honey,” he nodded towards her, “I like what it’s doing to the hospital machines.

“Isn’t it better this way, Astrix? Don’t you like this life better? You’re not so serious. You can enjoy yourself. Play with this little one here. I almost envy you. I mean it. Think about how free you are, how easy everything is, how clear. No more questions,

no more worries. Just feelings. What if I gave you this life as a gift, Astrix? A gift, because I cared about you and wanted to show you something that you needed to see? Isn't that a possibility? Couldn't that be an explanation?" His voice had turned smooth and coaxing.

Despite her confusion, despite her fear, Lemon almost felt soothed until Castille slid his hand into his pocket. She didn't know why, but then she was suddenly frightened, and Astrix turned to her with eyes that were wide and blank and obviously stroodled. Lemon took a step backwards, but too late. Astrix grabbed her shoulders and threw her to the ground; she lay there, stunned, as he dropped to his knees, straddling her hips, and pinned her wrists to the ground above her head. Lemon struggled briefly, but her limbs felt unnaturally weak, and he was too large. Besides, she told herself, why get hurt fighting back? It was only Astrix; it was only a stroodle rape, something that had happened to her uncountable times before. This time was no different. And yet somehow, it *was* different: horrible, much more horrible than she could ever remember it being before as Astrix jerked her skirt up and raped her. He didn't hurt her really, so why did it seem to hurt. She felt a pain she couldn't understand, a pain that seemed to be in some part of her she'd never felt before and now it was ripped open. It was like the jolt that went through her and the stunned feeling in her body after she had been hit. It was like that moment at the beginning of a bad day when she knew with a terrible sinking feeling what she was in for. She found herself crying again. It seemed now that she had been crying forever.

At last Astrix shuddered and drew back. Lemon didn't move. Even though the strength was returning to her arms and legs, they felt flat and run over. She felt terribly

upset, even though she didn't understand why. But she was so deeply shaken that for a moment she forgot about Castille completely. It was a terrible shock when she looked over and saw him standing there. He was watching them, but the look on his face was something she had never seen on a Those That man's face before. Not amusement or scorn or even pleasure, but sadness. "Do you like this?" he asked, his eyes focused on Astrix's face. "Is it worth it being involved this way? Or does it all just stay the same?"

Astrix said nothing. He was still sprawled across her legs and she could feel him shaking.

"I think it's time all of this stopped," Castille said softly. He was holding something in his hand. A knife, Lemon saw the blade glint. He held it out towards Astrix; with the other hand he reached into his pocket again. "Take it," he said gently. "Go on. This has to end. Take it and put it to your throat."

Astrix's arm started to reach out. Lemon could see it out of the corner of her eye, even as she sat there paralyzed by terror. He was going to be stroddled to kill himself, and then, even if Castille would let her take him to a hospital machine, what would happen to him? He could end up like Kira; she could lose him too.

She didn't think. She didn't dare think, she just acted. In an abrupt movement, she pulled herself out from under Astrix and lunged across the alley at Castille. Although he was big, as big as Astrix, he fell back as she crashed into him and she heard the knife clatter to the asphalt. Although the immediate danger had passed, Lemon still felt enraged. An incredible amount of fury bubbled up through her and she punched him right across the jaw, and then in the stomach. He let out a soft groan, one that almost sounded like pleasure, and crashed to the ground. Lemon fell on top of him. He cried out as he hit

the street, but she kept punching and kicking and scratching with all her might, with all of her anger. Castille lay still under the onslaught, as if he didn't know how to fight back.

At first beating him up felt wonderful, filled her with unbelievable satisfaction. Finally she could punish a Those That man for everything they had done to her; she could take revenge; she could make one of them hurt the way they had made her hurt. But after a few minutes, her anger began to fade and she started feeling uncomfortable. Castille lay so still and plaint under her, not resisting at all. He let out small moans and grunts as she hit him, but nothing else. It reminded her eerily of beating up Kira when she had been stroddled to lie still, and something about hitting someone who didn't fight back seemed wrong. Even if it was a Those That man. But worst of all, the more she hit him the less he felt like the remote, aloof, cruel Those That. His flesh thumped and gave against her fists like any ordinary person's; his skin scraped away under her nails and sprang up in lines of red, human blood. His body was warm, slightly squirming, and his mouth was half-open right under hers. She could feel his breath. His eyes were shut, and so close to her. The lids looked pale and vulnerable. She wanted more and more to stop, but didn't dare.

She didn't know what to do. She was afraid to stop. She would have to keep beating him up forever. "Astrix!" she cried out desperately. "Astrix? Where are you? What should I do? Astrix!"

Finally he crawled up beside her. His face was white and numb and he was holding the knife in his hand. "Lemon," he whispered faintly.

"Help," she panted, punching Castille again. "I don't know what to do next. Help me."

“Lemon,” Astrix said again. His eyes were huge as he slowly reached out with the knife. He almost still looked stroodled as he plunged it into Castille’s chest. The Those That man shook a little, a bubble of blood came out of his mouth, and he was dead.

Lemon didn’t scream. She didn’t make a sound; it took her a moment to realize that she was holding her breath, waiting. Waiting for Castille to rear up again like a vampire from the dead and tear them to pieces with his bare hands; waiting for a crystal ship to appear above the alley and blast them with fire; waiting for the world to end. But nothing happened. This was real. She was lying on top of a dead Those That man.

It was unbelievable, but there was no time to disbelieve it. There was no time to think. They had to get out of there. There was no time to think about anything else. Lemon rolled to her feet. Everything suddenly seemed very clear and precise in her head. She knew what they had to do. “Help me, Astrix,” she said, but he didn’t move. He was huddled on the asphalt, still clutching the knife, and staring into space. She was on her own. Desperately trying to control the trembling in her hands, Lemon fished in Castille’s pocket, took out the small black object inside and shoved it in her own, then grabbed the body. It was heavy, and Astrix ignored her repeated demands for assistance, but she rolled and shoved it over against the wall of the building and shoveled handfuls of trash over it to hide it from sight. She tried not to look at Castille’s face as she worked.

Finally, the body was hidden. That might buy them a little time, but they still had to escape fast. “Astrix. We have to get out of here.”

He didn’t speak, didn’t respond, but when she pulled him to his feet he trailed obediently after her out of the alley and through the dark, winding streets of the city.

Chapter 11

Astrix remembered. The moment the knife slid between Castille's ribs with that final, deadly *snick*, he knew. He remembered everything, as if his memory had never been gone; suddenly, without transition, he knew who he was. He was a Those That.

Not only a Those That, but a man who had just killed a second person dead, a man who hadn't been strong enough to resist Castille's intensive stroodling but had given in and raped Lemon. He should have known that he couldn't protect her. He never could have helped her escape, because he was one of them.

Slowly he sat back from the body. His hands fell to his sides as a great wave of numbness clamped down on him. His arms and legs were abruptly far too heavy to lift. He couldn't move. For the first time since he had woken up in the city, he felt nothing: no emotion. Just what a Those That should feel. "No," he tried to whisper, but his lips didn't respond. He had forgotten how to connect them to his brain. He felt disconnected, disoriented, isolated from his body. Suddenly, he was over seven hundred years old. Suddenly, he was not from the city, not from some miraculous other place bright with freedom and spangled with possibilities, but the Citadel: cold, large, immutable, indifferent as a glacier.

Suddenly he was Lemon's enemy.

Oh god, oh god, oh god, a little pale voice deep inside him began to scream hysterically, but the rest of him was still frozen, stone. He watched as Lemon dragged Castille's body to the edge of the alley and began to bury it in trash. There was a sharp, hard look to her features, as if her face was transforming from vagueness into sharp

focus. He couldn't bear it if that look were turned on him; he would shatter and be destroyed. She would hate him if she knew. He wanted to cry, to sob helplessly and completely, to convulse on the ground like he hadn't done since he was a three-year-old child. That must have been seven hundred and seventy-two years ago. He almost laughed at that. Oh god.

Castille's face wavered in front of him in the dim light. The eyes were half closed and empty, but the mouth was the same as it had always been, the lips soft and ready to sneer. The same mouth that had smiled down on him in the pocket rooms, only without its power. Astrix could remember Castille from the Citadel now. He had never seemed important then. Like most of the other Citizens, maybe even more than most, Castille had been immersed in the plots and intrigues that Astrix found so ridiculous. Astrix had only a few dozen memories of the other man, but each one involved Castille whispering, plotting, triumphing over a defeated rival. In the Citadel, Astrix had always regarded him as the biggest fool of the fools, then in the city he had swollen to the size of incredible power. The two pictures were almost impossible to reconcile: the oily, smirking, spying Citizen and the smooth, confident Those That who had controlled him with the twitch of a finger. How could these be the same person? And now he was neither, but still and pale. Dead. His face was even peaceful and looked incongruously innocent as Lemon draped it with a piece of newspaper.

Then the body was hidden, gone. *Gone!* the little voice screeched and keened inside him. Castille's face gone. He had scorned and dismissed it for over seven hundred years, then worshipped it, feared it, and now . . . now. He should feel something. He must feel something; terrible emotions must churn and seethe in some small part of his brain,

but suddenly all of his sensations were physical: the asphalt under his knees, the heavy ache in his shoulders, the weight and drag of his flesh on his bones. Oh god he was so old. Almost eight hundred years. He was an old man. He should be dead, buried, rotten in his grave, only a skeleton for his descendants to dig up and paw over and put in a museum. Castille had died. He had escaped. Maybe Astrix could too. The knife was there on the street; he could pick it up and in a moment it would all be over, there would only be nothingness, an end, god could there really be an end. . . .

“Astrix.” Lemon’s voice sounded faint in his ears, even though she stood right in front of him. He could feel her touch his arm, but she looked far away, too. Tiny. Like she must have when he peered down at her over the edge of a crystal ship. Oh god oh god oh god oh god. What had he done to her in the past? Had he ever taken her back to a pocket room and lain stiff and still while—no. The thought was unbearable.

“Astrix! We have to go.” Lemon pulled on him again. He stared despairingly at her hand, the soft smooth flesh, the cracking blue polish on her fingernails. It looked so young, but she was over seven hundred years old too, years that she had endured in agony, misery, and squalor because of him and his kind. He should kill her, then kill himself, get them both out of this ridiculous eternity.

“We have to get out of here!” she repeated, and even if Astrix had been able to move his numb limbs enough to stab her he couldn’t have done it. She was so vibrant, so full of energy and life. For her, the hundreds of years had been only a blur, they hadn’t existed in creeping, unbearably heavy seconds of time. She was young and old and eternal all at once, and the wonder of it gave him enough energy to struggle to his feet.

Lemon took his hand, and he was just able to stumble after her without collapsing on the pavement. It seemed as if he was watching them from somewhere high above their heads: two tiny, scuttling figures menaced by the dark shapes of apartment buildings and piles of trash on either side. They moved quickly, apparently interested more in speed than stealth, and anyway the streets were deserted. Where would they go? he wondered absently, as if the flight had no connection to him, watching one of the little figures pull the other along. It was like being in a crystal ship again, only now he was one of the ordinary men too, both watcher and watched. The thought made him want to laugh. He almost thought he *was* giggling before he realized that his mouth was closed and the sound was only reverberating in his mind.

The little Lemon figure—the alive one, as he was beginning to think of her—pulled the dead Astrix one into an apartment building. He still floated high above them as they went through the lobby, even though he knew his perspective was higher than the roof. Maybe now he had X-ray vision. He could be Super Citizen and fly around the city showering ordinary people with kryptonite pee. Oh god he was losing his mind. Really, it was about time.

Suddenly they were in the apartment where they had slept the night before. Astrix couldn't remember getting there, but he recognized the neat piles of junk, their bags of clothes and toiletries, and their carefully rolled blankets. The apartment looked so small and pathetic now, when he could compare it with the vast, tastefully decorated rooms he had lived in at the Citadel. Lemon would love how sparse those rooms were, how neat. But, he reflected sadly, they had no yellow things or blue things to stack in color-coded

piles. Everything was white or gray or metal; there were no colors, no warmth, none of the things that Lemon had come to represent to him.

He had been so lonely there, so incredibly lonely, even if he hadn't realized it then. You couldn't have friends in the Citadel, or lovers, only allies or acquaintances or servants used for sex. You couldn't run or yell, scream, cry, laugh. You couldn't have gone to anybody—servant or so-called friend or even parents if they were still alive—and beg to be touched, held, looked in the eyes like a human being. You couldn't even know that's what you wanted.

Lemon was using quick, effective movements to stuff things into large bags. *If she knew.* If she knew. Yet how could she not know? Surely guilt seeped out of his very pores, and was no less apparent on his face. She could take one look at him and see that he was a walking eight-hundred-year-old dead man, a zombie, and she would run away from him in horror and disgust. He couldn't stand thinking about it. He wouldn't. He wouldn't think, he wouldn't move, and suddenly they were out into the street again. He was back in his body. Where was he? Where were they going?

Lemon was talking to him. Her voice was a frantic whisper, but he couldn't understand any of the words. He just followed her. That took enough of his concentration. His legs were rubbery and numb; he had to focus on keeping upright. Now he was losing feeling all over his body, except his brain, which was all too aware. He felt like he was thinking at a hundred times normal speed, or like there was a swarm of insects crawling frantically around inside his skull.

They reached a different apartment building. A lobby. Stairs. Trash. Everything looked jerky, as if he or reality itself kept blanking out for seconds at a time. They were

walking down a hall, and he couldn't remember leaving the stairs. They were standing in an apartment, and he had no memory of stepping through the door.

It was Robert and Bracken's apartment. Suddenly, as if from thin air, they appeared in front of him. "You have to help us! I don't know where else to go," Lemon said frantically, but the blank looks on the earless men's faces showed that she had spoken too rapidly and emotionally for them to understand her. "We need help," she said again, and this time Bracken responded.

"What's wrong?"

"I didn't know where else to go," she said, and then started to describe what had been happening to them. She began far back, with the Those That and Castille looking for Astrix, and the story took a long time. Lemon had to speak very slowly and had to repeat most of her sentences over and over. After a while, Astrix got bored, lay down right on the floor, and fell asleep. When he opened his eyes, she was still talking. This happened several times. Then, when he peered up from his corner, he saw that they were all starting to leave the room. Blankly, he lurched to his feet and followed close on Lemon's heels. They followed the earless men out of the room, but he was too empty to care where they were going. He only wanted to stay close to Lemon.

Robert and Bracken ushered them both into another apartment, where a man was sitting by a woman lying on a mattress. "This is Shawn," Robert introduced the first. "And Tica." More earless ones, Astrix realized dimly as Shawn began to make gestures. He waited for the woman to follow suit, then suddenly realized that she had no arms. A shiver rippled down his spine.

“Look,” Shawn said aloud, pulling the sheets back. Beneath the hem of a short polka-dotted dress, Tica’s legs ended in smooth brown curves just above her knees. “She went into a hospital machine a few days ago for her treatment,” he continued. The victim herself only stared at them in silent confirmation, tears welling up in her eyes.

“And she came out like this,” Robert said. “None of the machines we took her to would cure her—we don’t know what happened—”

“Like Kira,” Lemon whispered, then added more loudly. “What’s happening?” She sounded very confused and disturbed. For her it must be as if one of the only good, fixed things in her world had suddenly betrayed her and she had no idea why. Astrix could understand all too well. The anger he felt at what they had done to his hospital machines, although distant, was the only emotion he could be aware of besides his fear that Lemon would find out who he really was. He had worked so hard maintaining the machines, even when no one else had cared, when all the other Citizens had laughed at him. He had known this knowledge was important—especially to him, since it gave him something to do with his life—but it was valuable to everyone in the Citadel and in the city, too. The others could be cavalier about the danger if they wanted. But he knew the machines had to be kept up or there would be severe consequences. And of course, he had been right.

Through the central computer control room, he had checked every month on the status of all two thousand forty-three hospital machines that were in the Citadel and in the city. From there, he was able to make sure that the machines were stable, fix most of the problems that came up, and locate the few that actually required his physical presence to repair. In that way, even working alone, he had been able to keep all of the machines in

fairly good working order. But once he had been kidnapped and mindwiped; once he was no longer there to keep up the routine maintenance. . . . It couldn't even have been a year yet, that he had been away, and yet problems had started, serious ones. The fools! Letting all of his work go to waste! The other Citizens were so stupid and blind they thought the world would just keep going as they wanted it to, without any effort on their part. It made it even worse that now Lemon had to suffer because of their stupidity. The anger woke him up a little, but once they returned to Robert and Bracken's apartment, his energy drained away. Lemon continued her story, but he lay down and fell asleep again.

When he woke, it felt like morning. Lemon was sitting next to him, rubbing his shoulder. "Astrix," she coaxed. "Astrix, are you awake? Are you feeling any better?"

He didn't have even the slightest temptation to speak. He couldn't even open his eyes. Last night, he realized, he must have been in shock as well as sliding on the edge of insanity. Now he was just depressed. More depressed than he had thought was possible. Every word Lemon spoke made him feel more and more utterly miserable.

She was going to find out.

She would hate him.

He would be alone again.

He couldn't face it; he couldn't bear it. He just wouldn't open his eyes. He would lie there with his eyes shut for another eight hundred years and even that would be better than the first round.

"Astrix," she said again, but he didn't answer. It was easy just to lie still.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked someone else in the room, and Robert's wavering voice replied "Shock, I guess."

“Do you think we should still leave tonight? What if he isn’t better?” Lemon went on. She sounded so worried, and he longed to put his arms around her.

“I think you’d better leave,” Bracken said. “It’s not safe to stay here. To stay anywhere. I thought they would be after *us* if they knew, but you—”

“They’re just people,” she said bravely. Her voice trembled a little but she sounded certain. He wondered what effect Castille’s death had had on her. Had she been shocked by the destruction of someone who had seemed so powerful? “I wish they would all die,” she went on as if she could read his thoughts. Robert and Bracken gasped in horror, but when he peered up through half-opened eyes he saw only Lemon’s face, smiling a predator’s smile. “Maybe I’ll kill them all myself.”

He closed his eyes again and kept them closed. After a while, Lemon went away, and the room was silent except for the TV. He was left alone a long time, but it was a different sort of solitude than what had mummified him in the Citadel. Lemon cared about him. The Citizens he had been closest to, however, probably hadn’t really noticed when he’d been kidnapped to the city. Once they’d found out, they might have experienced some mild displeasure, but no doubt mostly lascivious curiosity. After all, Julian, the best friend he’d had in the Citadel, hadn’t come to rescue him, had he? Through his devoted torment, Castille had shown more loyalty to Astrix than Julian had.

Now he could recognize that Julian had been one of the Those That arguing with Castille when the two crystal ships had appeared outside the window of Lemon’s apartment. But he had no illusions as to why his friend had suddenly begun to search for him. The Citizens must have finally realized that the hospital machines were breaking down without Astrix’s upkeep. That possibility, at least, must have reached them in their

icy remoteness, and they were scared. But too bad. Astrix wasn't sorry for them. They had thrown him away and now they were stuck with that. If they wouldn't lift a finger to help him, he wasn't going to give up anything for them either, much less the most wonderful thing he'd ever found. In fact, the idea of Citizens turning bald and eyeless, or losing all their limbs, was rather amusing. He almost smiled. But then he remembered his face wouldn't move.

After a long time, Lemon returned to the room, dragging a little cart that was piled with sacks of food, drinks, and clothes. “. . . we saw a place where the city ended,” she was saying. “Maybe they couldn't find us there.”

“The city really ends?” Robert asked. Even in his voice, the incredulity was apparent.

“I think so,” she said. “The lights went on forever almost everywhere, but there was one direction where they stopped.”

“I never imagined it could end,” Bracken said. “I never thought that there could be . . . somewhere else. . . . What would it be like?”

“You could come too,” she told him. “You all could.”

“No,” both men gasped at the same time. When he peeked at them they looked scared, even panicked, by the idea. It was too much for them, too much newness. But for Astrix there was no such thing as newness. Even if Lemon led him beyond the uninhabited parts of the city to the darkness that waited there, he knew exactly what they would find. There was no danger, not even for Lemon. If the Citizens were as desperate for their hospital machines as they should be, Astrix would be able to protect her even if they were found. No danger, but no escape. Just a life that, for Lemon, would be hard to

understand. He should open his eyes, open his mouth, explain to her what she was going to face beyond the city wall, help her to comprehend it. . . .

He knew he was a coward. Selfish. Weak. For a second he was on the cusp of speaking, but then Lemon sat down next to him and stroked his hair. It felt so incredible: just that light, innocent, primitive human touch. He couldn't give that up. He closed his eyes and sank into the sensation.

Suddenly, inexplicably, more time had passed. Lemon was preparing to leave. She tried once more to rouse him, but when he still did not respond, gave up and pulled a sweater over his head herself, with quick efficient movements. Astrix knew he should be embarrassed. The situation reminded him so painfully of the times in the Citadel when he had ordered servants to dress him. The silent women had moved with as much efficiency, although less confidence, as they had washed and dried his body, put his passive limbs into clothing. He had come full circle. After almost eight hundred years, what was left except circles? Except, their touch had filled him with relief, with the sense of letting go, but Lemon's infused him with guilt. Yet even guilt was something he would have killed to feel before.

"Be very careful. They may have all sorts of alien technology we don't know about," Bracken was saying. Astrix's mood switched abruptly into scorn. The earless man's naiveté was so stupid, so pathetic. The Those That obviously weren't aliens. Lemon had seen it right away. And that silly theory about being kidnapped and brought to the city—it hadn't been like that, not at all. When Lemon hugged the men good-bye he wanted to leap up and punch them both in the face. He settled on ignoring them, however, and followed Lemon obediently down the stairs without looking back. He was

too numb, anyway. He couldn't even make any move without her direction; he didn't help her carry anything until she put it in his hands. He was beginning to wonder if he really *was* able to move or speak on his own, though most of the time he was just sure that he was the greatest bastard who had ever lived. But he couldn't stop.

Lemon grabbed onto him with one hand and pulled the cart after her with the other. She marched them firmly down the street, keeping mostly to the shadow, but betraying no hesitation or sign of fear when they had to cross a murky-orange pool of light. She was so small and upright and brave. Women always had that kind of quality: a getting things done come hell or high water attitude. He couldn't remember if his mother had had it, but his governess had, and the female servants, who even when he had had sex with them and he knew they were scared for their lives had maintained that calm efficiency. But there was something different about Lemon, something new. He had never seen such confidence in a woman, he realized, since the Citizen women had been cast out into the city. Lemon was regaining their power, their strength, only mixed in with a vitality, a kindness, and a generosity that was hers alone.

They walked through the city for a long time. The streets were deserted. "I wonder where everyone is," Lemon said, several times. She kept nervously looking up at the sky. But they didn't see any crystal ships either.

Lemon was still obviously worried, however, especially as they came into the uninhabited part of the city. Although there was not much visible change in the streets or the buildings around them—Astrix noticed only that a few more windows than normal were dark—there was something that she apparently picked up on. A deeper sort of silence, maybe, or was the trash older? Astrix couldn't really figure it out, but Lemon

kept looking more and more nervous. “There’s something wrong here,” she finally said. He wasn’t sure if she was speaking to him or if she was just trying to figure it out for herself. “I don’t think there are any people here,” she continued slowly. “Maybe the hospital machines killed them all? But no,” she concluded as they came into an area under a streetlight. “Look, Astrix. Look at the rats.”

Astrix couldn’t find the energy to turn his head and follow her pointing finger, but he could still see what she was talking about, and even through the thick blanket of his numbness felt a deep shudder. On the trash, all around them, were far more rats than in the inhabited part of the city. Hundreds of them, all frozen and alert. They must have lived there for years, centuries, even, developing their own rat kingdom in the deserted buildings and living off the trash. They certainly did not look underfed. Their sleek brown bodies were plump, and the bright eyes curiously intelligent. After living in luxury for so long, they might have developed their own civilization, their own customs—and just by staring at Lemon in quiet watchfulness they were treating her far better than her own species had.

“They’re everywhere,” Lemon breathed, either in terror or amazement. “No wonder there aren’t any people. They must have run away from the rats.”

Somewhat gingerly, they kept walking, and went on until the sky grew light. Then Lemon led him to a hiding place inside an apartment building lobby. Since the walls creaked and rattled loudly in every slight breeze, they didn’t go any further in, and anyway the piles of ancient trash with rats’ heads poking curiously out did not look all that inviting. Once they sat down, Lemon tried to get him to speak, but when he still wouldn’t or couldn’t respond, held crackers and a can of fruit juice to his mouth. He took

the food and swallowed automatically. Even though it had been over twenty-four hours since he had eaten, he felt no hunger, but he enjoyed how pleased Lemon looked to see him eat. When they had finished, she spread out the blankets and they lay down next to one another. She put her arm around him. “Don’t worry, Astrix,” she told him soothingly. “Just rest. You’ll feel better soon.”

Will I? he wondered silently. Without moving his head, he could see her blond hair, her arm, and her legs. Her feet were still in the high-heeled black boots that he knew were made out of cheap plastic, imitation leather. He could give her ones so much better. . . as well as clothes, jewelry, food. . . . What would she think of the meals in the Citadel after centuries of Beef ‘n’ Bits and LederSchnitzel? She could sleep in a bed twice as big as her old apartment had been, bathe in a real bathtub. . . . It was all within his grasp; he could give all this to her; maybe if he took her back to his old rooms and showed her what that could mean, how that could change her life, maybe she wouldn’t hate him. . . .

He couldn’t sleep. He lay there all day and watched the sunlight move slowly over Lemon’s face. At evening she woke up, fed him canned fruit salad and CandiWax, then they started walking again. Once more they saw no one, no crystal ships, and then all of a sudden Astrix realized that the crumbling wall in front of them wasn’t part of an apartment building, but the wall that separated the city from the country of the sun-worshippers. Lemon realized shortly afterward that it was something different, but she didn’t know what it was. She looked cautious and worried as they approached it slowly, hand in hand.

The concrete wall had originally been a solid eight feet tall, but the years had taken their toll in the form of cracks, gaps, and even holes. Right in front of them was a

gap almost three feet wide. Lemon left him standing in the street and stepped slowly up to the wall. He could see her trembling as she peeked through. She looked around for a moment, then stepped forward and vanished into the darkness. He almost panicked, even though he knew there was nothing on the other side that could hurt her. Nevertheless, he had taken several involuntary steps forward before her pale face appeared in the gap. “Astrix,” she called. There was an unsteady, almost stunned, tone to her voice. “Come here.”

He moved to obey her, and scrambled through the gap quickly enough, but he knew that what had surprised and astonished her could not create a similar reaction in him. He had seen it all before, so many times; even in the darkness it was familiar. They were in a field, surrounded by neat rows of some sort of vegetable plants as tall as their knees. There were no streets, no buildings, no trash. Just plants and warm darkness. Above them, the stars were bright enough to dimly illuminate the field.

“Look,” Lemon breathed, looking at the sky as well. “They’re so bright. . . . So beautiful.” She was quiet for a long moment as they both stared up at the stars. “We’re really out of the city,” she finally said very softly. “I wonder where we are.” He could say nothing, even when she turned to look at him and her eyes swam in the starlight, full of tears. “I wish you would talk to me,” she said. “I don’t know what’s happened to you. I’ve never seen someone so upset before.”

Astrix swallowed hard, but somehow it was easier than ever not to speak. The silence of the field had spread out and infused him, become a true part of him. He did manage, however, to take a few steps closer to her and she reached out to take his hand. “I guess we’ll sleep here on the ground tonight,” she said. “I’ve had enough rats for a

while.” Her voice held more of its old briskness but was still somewhat uncertain. “I’ll get the cart.”

Astrix trailed after and let her load him up with sacks. Lemon dragged the cart through the wall and then fussed around trying to find the right spot for the blankets. He suspected that she was not really being picky, but was anxious about sleeping in a strange place. Finally, she chose a spot next to the wall and laid everything out. It was still dark; they hadn’t been walking that long and it must have been only one or two in the morning.

They wrapped up in blankets and sat with their backs against the wall, although Astrix knew danger was far more likely to come from the city than the field. Lemon was looking from side to side nervously, jumping a little with every slight noise. She probably had never spent a night outside before. Come to think of it, neither had he. As a child he’d read about camping and begged to try it, but his parents had never let him. At least he knew there was nothing out here that could hurt them. No wild animals. No monsters. Just vegetables, the chilly night air, and far across the fields the sun-worshipper villages.

“It’s very dark,” Lemon whispered. “And very quiet.”

It was. It was wonderful. The city had blazed with lights everywhere all the time, and was incessantly, horrendously noisy. Now they had left the clamor far behind them and all he could hear was the soft rustle of plants in the breeze and the occasional insect buzz. It was very peaceful and the darkness felt soft and concealing. He could be safe here.

“Can’t you talk?” She reached out and took his hand. “I don’t know what’s happened to you. Are you upset about killing Castille? Don’t be, it’s all right. It’s not your fault. I told you to, really. And he was bad. He hurt you. He made you do that

before, to Jake, and think about all the other horrible things the Those That have done. It's only fair."

He managed to squeeze her hand faintly but that was all he could do.

"Come on," Lemon said. Her voice wavered. "Please talk to me. It's so strange out here. I'm not sure I like it. And all along, since that night, when everything changed and started to be different, you've been there with me to help me understand it. . . . Maybe this is the place you come from, maybe you could tell me what it's like and what it all means. And even if you're not from here either, you could help me figure out where to go next, what to do next, and I wouldn't have to be all alone. I don't think I know how to do things by myself. Please, Astrix, talk. Please."

He shut his eyes wearily. He knew what a horrible person he was. Lemon leaned against his side and she was crying, but his tongue lay like a stone in his mouth. The next thing he knew he was opening his eyes, all his bones ached, and it was dawn.

Lemon was asleep next to him, but when he stirred she jumped and her eyes jerked open. There was a panicked expression on her face, which changed almost immediately to a look of wonder. Astrix followed her gaze across the pale green fields. A morning pink haze hovered above the vegetable plants and rose out to the streaky orange, purple, and gold clouds threaded through the sunrise. Lemon had probably never seen a horizon before without apartment buildings in the way, and the only plant life he had ever seen in the city was the occasional clump of yellow-brown grass.

"It's wonderful," Lemon said aloud. Her eyes were glowing. "It's nothing like I thought last night! it's beautiful." She pulled out packages of dried fruit as she spoke. "Let's eat in a hurry. I want to go see more of it!"

The way she looked around so happily, sent a cold chill through his heart. Lemon was going to discover a new world here, very likely a new self. And then the last thing she would want was a wreck of a man shambling after her. He would lose her; and the thought brought sudden movement to his lips. "Lemon."

"You talked!" She whirled to look at him and her face was filled with joy. "That's wonderful. Are you feeling better?"

All he could manage was, "I don't know."

"Well, just look around," Lemon said happily. "That will make you feel better. Isn't it beautiful?"

It was, it was green and beautiful, but he would have given it all up to be back in the city. He looked at the plants in their neat rows and wanted to kick them all down.

He wanted that more and more as the morning progressed, as they walked down an endless row. Lemon was so excited and happy, marveling at each plant they passed, gulping in the fresh air, pointing at birds soaring above them in the smog-free sky, but he just stared at his feet, hating every inch of soil and every leaf on every vegetable. After about four hours of walking, the small, dark spot of a sun-worshipper village appeared on the horizon, and Lemon grew even more excited. She didn't walk anymore, she hopped and bounced and skipped. "There are people here!" she realized. "I wonder what they'll be like?" she kept asking. "What can they be like?"

Astrix trudged after her. He kept his eyes down on his feet, on the brown dirt peeling away, one slow step at a time, under his boots. He knew what they were like, and they were just as dull and mindless as the people in the city. They were, in fact, their great-great-great-nieces and nephews, since the parents of the poor children had all been

taken here to farm and grow raw supplies for the Citadel and the city. For the first generation or two, his father had worried that the villagers would try to revolt, and had to resort to various methods to keep them under control. First of all, of course, he had threatened the lives of their children in the city, but Astrix's father had never stopped at halfway measures. He had also used, from the very beginning, a group of guards with stroodlers implanted directly into their brains to guard the village. This style of stroodling was very effective, although it made the guards incapable of more than simple tasks. But that was all they needed to perform: They had kept the villagers from running away for the first hundred years or so, and then had been allowed to die off. Guards hadn't been necessary anymore; the descendants kept themselves under control. Astrix scoffed silently to himself. The sun-worshippers were so stupid. Now they obediently farmed, bred children, lived in small villages with fresh food but no hospital machines, and were not even as civilized as the city. He couldn't imagine what Lemon would think of them.

He was still staring at his feet when she gasped. He looked up. The sun-worshipper village was much closer, and there was a crystal ship hovering above it. "The Those That!" Lemon exclaimed. "What are they doing here?"

Astrix bit his lip. Would the other Citizens have noticed yet that Castille was dead? The passengers in the ships going to and from the city shuffled about, and Citizens usually lived isolated, separate lives. But of course Castille had been involved in so many plots. Astrix didn't know if the members held planned meetings or not. Probably they relied on carefully orchestrated chance encounters, not scheduled events—nevertheless, someone might notice Castille's absence considerably sooner than they would have noticed Astrix's. Still, Citizen emotions were slow to rouse. There might be no inquiry

into it at all yet, no pursuit after them. And even so, what would the Citizens find if they investigated? Only Astrix, another Citizen, after all. Castille's allies might possibly want revenge for his death—though more likely they would be amused. No one would care, in the end, any more than they had when Astrix had been mindwiped and cast out. No, these crystal ships must be there for unrelated reasons, just some Citizens bored enough to swoop over the village to see how the sun-worshippers spent their days.

Lemon fell flat on the ground between the rows and pulled her after him. Shrouded in the vegetation, Astrix felt peaceful and safe, but she kept anxiously asking questions. "What are they doing here? Are they looking for us? Do they run things in this place too?" She went on like this for a while but then abruptly fell silent. She had gone to sleep with her nose against a leaf. Astrix closed his eyes and slept too.

When he woke again, it was late afternoon. The crystal ship was gone and Lemon was tugging him to his feet. Resolutely he picked up his bags again and followed after her.

Chapter 12

“Lemon and Astrix arrived at the sun-worshipper village,” Lemon said aloud. She was sitting on a rock beside the tomato field, staring off across the neat rows of bushy plants spotted with green, orange, and red fruit. She still found it incredible to be able to pick something edible off of a plant, even though the sun-worshippers told her that this was where most of the food came from. She found it almost frightening to see them pick vegetables and grains and turn them into food. But she was happy to eat the end result.

The past seventy-five days, or, two and a half months in the way the sun-worshippers measured time, had been full of new, amazing things. One was the way the villagers told stories. Like the people in the city, they couldn't read or write, but since they had no television, the sun-worshippers told stories at night around the fire. Lemon had had a hard time following the stories at first. They were more complicated even than the ones Astrix had written for her, and put amazing pictures in her mind: long-ago times, actions of the gods, adventures of talking animals. She had tried to think of a story that she could tell the villagers in return, but she didn't know how to make one up. However, when she was alone with Astrix, she practiced by describing their arrival to the village as if it were a story.

“The crystal ship had gone away. Lemon was still scared, but she went into the village anyway. The people there came out to meet them.” She paused reflectively. When she saw the crowd approaching, she had known immediately that she and Astrix had come to a place different beyond her any imagining. The people wore simple clothes, pants and shirts in green, blue, and brown, but they themselves varied in ways she had

never seen. The short ones, she had realized in growing wonder, must be children. And the others were older people, people who hadn't had their bodies preserved by hospital machines but were squishy and gray-haired. And everyone just looked so different than the people in the city had. No makeup, hair color, or glitter. Just the people.

"Lemon was surprised by everything she saw," she went on. "It was all so new. There were plants, animals, old people, children, and babies." She couldn't remember having ever seen a baby before, and she found them terrifying. They were small and loud and looked like a squashed-up, formless version of a person. But she liked the children. They were small, but still recognizably people, and were so energetic and cheerful.

"The sun-worshippers welcomed them to the village." Lemon turned to look at Astrix. He too seemed strange and unfamiliar ever since he had begun talking again; it was almost as if he was a different person. She couldn't figure out why. Was he still feeling guilty about killing Castille? Was he scared of the sun-worshippers? That didn't seem to be it, however. If anything, he disliked them. He often looked openly bored when they talked about their gods or told their stories, and constantly complained that he wanted to be alone with her, to talk to her away from the villagers. But when they were alone he didn't say much of anything, he just wanted to have sex all the time. He was different then, too. He had lost the playfulness he had finally developed in the city and had reverted to a desperate intensity that made her rather nervous. She wondered sometimes if she had changed so much too, and just wasn't able to notice it, but she felt like she spent all of her time simply being astonished; there was not even a second left to change in.

“They gave them food, wonderful food, and the biggest house in the village to sleep in.” Fresh vegetables were more wonderful than she could ever believe. Squash! Peas! Tomatoes! Like the food, the little house they were given was fascinatingly new, but a strange combination of luxury and a lack of things she had taken for granted in the city. The bed consisted of beautiful, thick, wool blankets and quilts over a mattress stuffed with straw, but there was no running water, and no bathroom, just pots that the sun-worshippers insisted on emptying for her and pitchers of clean water to wash with. The floor was only dirt, but was covered with thick rugs, and the wood walls were decorated with beautiful carvings of flowers, trees, and birds, as were the storage chests and the two wooden chairs. But there were no windows, only a leather flap over a rough doorway, and no heater except a fireplace.

“The sun-worshippers took them to see their temple, and told her about their gods.” When she had stepped into the village, bewildered by the rush of people and trailed by the already sullen Astrix, a man and two women dressed in long yellow dresses had broken away from the crowd to approach her. “Honored Messengers, please follow us,” they said, surrounding her with eagerness as they led the way through the village. Lemon was looking from side to side, bombarded with new things: the little buildings—made of wood! the huge plants, higher than her head! —and was that a gigantic rat? children playing a game, their hands like small brown spiders. Her head was spinning so much she could barely pay attention to the building the sun-worshippers were ushering her towards, except to see that it was much bigger than the rest of the village’s buildings. But after the yellow-wearing people led her and Astrix forward, while the other people stayed behind, she had realized this building was something different.

It was very beautiful. At the entrance, seven stone steps led up to a large, flat courtyard paved with colored stones arranged in intricate designs. Behind the platform was the low building, built of a warm, reddish stone, with brightly colored tiles on the walls and floor, and a picture made out of mirrors representing the sun on the roof. Inside were dozens of quiet, bright rooms with huge skylights, painted and carved walls, arched doorways, flowers and fruits set around as offerings, and many small, shallow pools. She had never seen a building before that was designed to be pretty, not just functional, and she liked the idea of it. But the whole time the sun-worshippers were showing them around the temple, they kept talking about gods that lived in the sun and floated above them in the sky. Lemon hadn't been able to figure it out then, but the first of the sun-worshipper stories had begun to explain it to her.

That evening, the villagers had placed her and Astrix on a seat away from the others, surrounded them with flowers, and brought them plates of food: warm bread, chicken cooked with peas and onions, strawberries. Lemon ate and ate, in stunned ecstasy. She had never known food could taste like this!

After they had eaten, the villagers built up the fire. Lemon looked around at the ring of unfamiliar faces flickering in golden light and shadow and reached out to grab Astrix's knee, suddenly terrified. These people were so strange! *Were* they really people? Maybe Robert and Bracken were right about aliens—only they had gotten confused about who the aliens were.

“Honored Messengers.” One of the yellow-wearing women stood up. “Faithful sun-worshippers of our village. Today we have received among us two messengers of the gods. Soon perhaps they will share with us what the gods want us to know. But tonight,

let us remember how we came into this land.” She cleared her throat. “Long ago, our people lived in a world that was filled with hunger and cold and worry and suffering. But at last a messenger came out of the sun and told our ancestors of a place of fun and joy. Our people journeyed to this marvelous place, and there the gods walked out from the sun and came among the people. They looked into our people’s hearts and judged how each might best serve them. Our ancestors were brought here, to grow food and other crops for the gods. And we are luckiest of all in our village, because our temple is here, and it is in our village, in three months’ time, that the chosen ones will come and ascend to live in the gods’ home.”

Lemon liked the *idea* of a story, but she was rather bewildered by the story itself. After the villagers had led them to their house, when she was lying in bed next to Astrix and rather warily watching the fire in the fireplace, she tried to get him to explain it to her. “What did they mean?”

Astrix told her what gods were. “Beings that are much more powerful than people. Usually they are good, and people go to live with them after they die.”

“But the villagers said the gods brought them here.” Lemon suddenly understood what the crystal ship above the village had meant, and was flooded with anger. “The Those That—they think they’re these gods! They think the Those That did something *good* by bringing them here!”

“Maybe they did,” Astrix said quietly, almost dreamily. He was staring at the fire. “Maybe the world *was* filled with hunger and cold and worry and suffering. Maybe this is better.”

“Well, this place does seem to be better than the city,” Lemon poked his shoulder reprovingly. “But we know the Those That aren’t gods. They’re people. Do you think the villagers really don’t understand that—that they’re people?”

Astrix had nodded, but Lemon hadn’t completely believed him at first. Over the next few days, however, she began to realize that it was true. As much as she had loved and worshipped the Those That when she was in the city, the sun-worshippers did so even more. They would do anything the Those That wanted, *without being strodded to!* just because they thought the Those That were so wonderful. The villagers sent all the best food to them, and even brought two of their teenagers to the temple every six months and let the Those That take them away forever.

That idea—of the Those That taking people’s children away—made Lemon feel sicker with horror and more furious than anything else she could ever remember that the Those That had done. When she thought about it carefully, they had done many worse things. But she could hardly bear to think about this at all.

She finally started to understand why a few days after they arrived. She went to the temple again, and found a room that, unlike all the others, didn’t have a skylight. In the middle of this room, a huge boulder covered with markings jutted up through the stone floor. “What is this?” Lemon asked the tour guide priestess, and for the first time she looked more embarrassed than respectful.

“It was left by our ancestors, Honored Messenger,” she explained quickly. “The first ones here. They began a count of the years and we have kept it up.”

Lemon moved forward slowly to look. There, scratched in the rock, was a long list of names. Under the names were lines, a lot, more than a hundred. “How many?” she

had asked, but the answer—seven hundred and sixty-seven—had been only a number until the sun-worshippers explained to her what years meant.

Although he seemed reluctant, Astrix had helped her figure out the numbers. The thirty-one thousand, one hundred and twenty-five days Bracken had counted meant eighty-six years, which were only a tiny part of it. She had been in the city seven hundred and sixty-seven years, or two hundred and eighty thousand days. Somehow, understanding how long she had been held prisoner by the Those That—as well as the quiet of the sun worshipper village—let her begin to remember when she had lived only six years, when she and the two people who had made her from their bodies, called parents (the sun-worshippers had explained this to her, in gory detail, and she knew she would never be able to think about sex the same way again), had come happily and innocently to the Citadel Amusement Park.

She still couldn't remember much about her life beforehand, but she knew that it had been poor, that she had lived in a crowded place, and had owned fewer clothes and possessions than she'd had in the city. That's why going to the amusement park had seemed so exciting, such a treat, to her parents as well as to her. That day had come slowly back to her, piece by piece, until assembled clear and whole in her mind. The rides. The sweet food and drinks. She had been on the Tower when her parents and everybody's parents had been taken away. The feelings she'd experienced while looking at it had been a buried memory of that day.

Now she could remember that when she had finally been let off the ride, she and the other children had been immediately directed to transform the park into a city: building and furnishing apartments, organizing factories and starting to work in them.

Once everything was set up, the Come Out and Plays had begun, although it had been a while, not until she and the other children had reached their mid- to late teens, that the Those That had begun visiting the bars or that sex had been incorporated into the daily stroodles. “They must have thought they were so civilized,” Astrix said bitterly when she told him that memory, staring at a little sun-worshipper girl hopping around in the dirt. He had a strange expression on his face that made her feel unsettled and confused; she had turned away from him to stare at the prairie grass.

“The sun-worshippers thought they must have a message for them, from the gods, but were too scared to ask what it was. Lemon and Astrix have to think of what to tell them, and soon.” A large group of Those That was scheduled to come to the village again in thirteen days. Astrix and Lemon planned to be long gone by then.

The sun-worshippers said that every six months, the gods took two teenagers off to serve them in their wonderful home. It was called a sacrifice, even though the villagers promised that the sacrificed people weren’t killed, in fact, they could escape death this way by going directly to the afterlife. Lemon wasn’t sure why the Those That would want to take people away. What were they going to do with the poor innocent villagers? The ideas she could come up with made her furious.

Even though she no longer felt the sorrow and horror she knew she had experienced when her parents were taken away, she felt one thing clearly: anger and hatred for the men who had done it, who had kept her as their toy for unimaginable amounts of time. She looked at the sun-worshipper children holding their parents’ hands or sitting on their laps and felt her heart break, but it was more from a sense of loss than real sadness. She had lost this; she had even lost the pain of having her parents taken

from her. And now the Those That thought they could keep on taking people away, just as they kept toying with the people in the city, even taking away the hospital machines now! She almost doubled over in anger every time she thought about what Kira must be enduring back in the city. Her only consolation was that her friend probably wouldn't be able to hear the Come Out and Play call and so could escape something. But it wasn't enough! Lemon knew that she was small and powerless against the stroodles the Those That could wield. But she didn't care. She was possessed by fury so great that she could barely breathe, fury that made her bigger than she was. After all, she had killed one of the Those That, with only a little help from Astrix, and it hadn't been too hard. She would kill all the rest of them too if she had to, punish them and save Kira, save the sun-worshippers, even if it took her another two hundred and eighty thousand days.

“Soon Lemon and Astrix will leave the sun-worshippers,” she finished aloud. The next day a procession was going to arrive, bringing the teenagers for twelve days of purification rituals before the sacrifice itself. She shuddered with anger. “They will travel on and on and maybe somewhere they will find a place where there aren't any Those That.” The sun-worshippers didn't know anything about a world beyond their own farmland, and they didn't believe there could be somewhere where their gods didn't exist. But she knew the Those That were just people. People who controlled powerful stroodles and the crystal ships, but with human bodies just the same. Surely there were places out there in the world where the people didn't have any Those That and she could learn how they lived. Maybe that would help her figure out how to make everyone in the city, and the sun-worshippers too, understand the truth.

“Honored Messenger Lemon,” a voice said from behind her. Lemon glanced over her shoulder. One of the village’s children, a girl named Niri, was paused a respectful distance away. “It is time for the evening meal,” Niri told her. “Will you and Honored Messenger Astrix eat?”

“Yes,” Lemon answered at once. She was always ready to eat the fresh vegetables and grains the villagers prepared, and usually had some of Astrix’s portion in addition to her own, since he was never hungry lately.

She took Astrix’s hand and they followed Niri back to the village. A few of the small, peaked-roof houses had smoke drifting from the chimneys, but most of the sun-worshippers would eat together in the open space in the center of the village, where the women were cooking in a big pot over the fire and in the large mud brick oven. Lemon always had to struggle to prevent the sun-worshippers from serving her and Astrix and seating them at a special table. Tonight she stepped firmly up to the end of the line, even though it melted away in front of her, and took two bowls of squash stew. She handed them to Astrix, then helped herself to a plate of the round, brown loaves of bread. She and Astrix sat on the ground like the others, although none of the villagers dared to sit too close. Lemon ate her stew enthusiastically. Astrix left about a third of his bowl and half his loaf; she polished the rest off happily even though she worried about him. He was starting to lose weight, and she had begun to wonder now if he would ever recover completely from the shock of killing Castille.

“Honored Messenger Lemon.” The head priest for the village, a very old woman, appeared diffidently in front of them. “Honored Messenger Astrix. How do you this evening.” She spoke politely, yet even though her face was wrinkled, Lemon could still

easily read the curiosity behind the smile. *If you are messengers, where is the message? What do the gods want to say to us?*

If only she knew. Astrix refused to discuss the subject. He thought they should just ignore the sun-worshippers' expectations of a message, and leave when they wanted to, with no explanation. But she felt obligated to tell them something. Maybe there were real gods somewhere. What would they want to say to the villagers? Assuming they were nice, that is, maybe . . . don't save the best food for the Those That! eat the biggest and greenest lettuces! or maybe real gods wouldn't care about food. She didn't know anything about gods anyway. All she knew was what *she* wanted to tell the villagers, but she had no idea how to tell them anything they could understand.

She thought about it all night, it seemed even while she was asleep she was thinking about it. The next morning when she stepped outside to bring in the bowls of fruit and cups of milk the villagers left on the doorstep, she saw the procession from Village Cotton arriving with the people to be sacrificed. Two yellow-clad priests led the way, followed by a young man and woman wearing white and decked out with fruit and flowers. The sight of their eager, frightened faces made her feel sick. Had she looked like that on the night of her first trip to a pocket room? Was that what the Those That had in mind for the villagers—or something worse?

She took the breakfast tray back inside and prodded Astrix out of bed. "I think we should leave here tomorrow," she told him, not really expecting any dissent. She got none, but continued anyway. "This place isn't really any different, you know. Better in some ways, but the people are still thinking something that's not true, and they still like

the ones who are hurting them. We have to find somewhere where there aren't any Those That, and learn how to live without any. Then we can explain it to everybody.

"The question is," she went on as she swallowed a spoonful of cantaloupe, "is what to tell these people now. I don't know many stories except from TV, and I don't think the PlasticPerfectPeople show ever covered this."

"I don't see why you have to tell them anything," Astrix grumbled. He kept his face buried in his bowl, although he was barely eating. "Let's just go. We should just go. You never know what could happen. It could be too late."

"But we can't just walk out on them like that," Lemon protested. "We have to try and help them."

"Help—" Astrix groaned. His face twisted in unexplained pain, and he pushed his breakfast roughly aside.

"Yes, help them," she repeated impatiently. "Astrix, what's wrong with you?"

For a second he looked as if he might answer, then he reached out instead. "Come here," he pulled her back on the bed.

For the rest of the day, Lemon wandered around the edge of the fields, with Astrix trailing after her. The village was full of activity; the sun worshippers were decorating for the sacrifice with carved-wood sculptures and figures shaped out of straw. The two people who were going to be sacrificed sat on chairs covered with flowers and watched it all. Lemon couldn't bear to look at them.

That evening during the meal, the villagers seemed unsure who deserved more deference, the messengers or the sacrifices. But everyone's attention immediately riveted to Lemon when she stood up and cleared her throat. She felt tongue-tied at first as she

looked back at the hundreds of eyes turned towards her. She had never had to say anything in front of so many people before, and for a minute her mind was a complete blank.

“I . . . I have been sent here by the gods,” she finally said slowly. And in a way that was true, since it had been Castille’s actions and Astrix’s and her response to them that had brought her here. “And I have a message for you.” She carefully avoided saying that the message was actually *from* the gods. “This message is a story.

“Look, I don’t know much about telling stories,” she started. “Where I come from they don’t have any. Maybe that’s where I should start. Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a city where there were no stories. It was a bad place, but the worst part of it was that the people who kept her there made her think that she liked it. They made her think that she liked them, even though they had always hated her and used her and treated her like—like nothing,” she amended hurriedly, remembering the children and the rules for them. “For a long time she believed them and wanted what they told her to want. But then one day everything changed. She started to realize what had really been happening to her.”

Lemon paused. The villagers were all staring at her with blank faces. They must think she was crazy. This wasn’t a message! It wasn’t even a very good story. All she was doing was telling them what had happened to her in a way they might slightly understand. But she took a deep breath and kept going. “So she decided to leave that place. It was hard. She had to leave piece by piece. But she found someone to help her, and after their minds had left as much as they could, they took their bodies away too.

“The girl thought that maybe she could find a way to escape. But although they went somewhere that was far away and more different than any place she had ever seen, there was really no way to escape. Maybe there never would be any way to escape.

“After all, things weren’t finished behind her.” Lemon pictured Kira; felt the anger, that by now was as familiar as Astrix’s face, rush through her. “And she had to guess things weren’t finished in front of her either. Maybe that’s what gods—real gods—would want you to hear.” She struggled to pull everything together in her own mind and to find words to match her thoughts. “The girl still has to find some things out. She has to understand what else is here, what other people might be here and what has happened to them. But once she understands it all, she’s not going to forget.” Lemon glanced over at Astrix; uncharacteristically, he was looking at the ground, not at her. “She can’t forget; she has to try to help her friends; she has to stop things—as much as she can.”

There. She had stopped talking. She must be finished. The villagers were all looking at her, wide-eyed. “That’s the message,” she told them briskly, trying to conceal her awkwardness. “Astrix and I will be leaving tomorrow. Please get some supplies ready for us.” Quickly, before anyone could ask any questions, she grabbed Astrix’s hand and marched back to their little house. Everyone was silent behind her. She was sure they had no idea what to make of the story. But at least it was something.

Lemon packed up their few belongings, just in case the villagers threw them out in the middle of the night. She didn’t have much left of the supplies she had brought from the city, so it made only a small bundle. In the center was the small black object she had taken from Castille’s pocket. She still didn’t know what it was; in fact, she had been too scared to examine it or experiment with it. She just kept it. Someday she might figure out

what the object was, and how to use it. But for now it made her shiver with fear, even as she wrapped it carefully away in a wool scarf in the center of the bundle.

The villagers must have at least thought her story believable enough that they still accepted them as authentic messengers. The next morning, Niri was waiting outside the door with two large packs of supplies. Lemon took them from her solemnly. “Thank you.”

“Will you return to the gods now?” Niri asked her shyly.

“No,” Lemon sighed. “We’re going to look for other people to tell our message to.”

All of the villagers stood quietly as Lemon politely thanked the priests for the village’s hospitality. Everyone waved and stared as they started walking off; when she glanced back a few minutes later, they were still standing there staring. Lemon took one last look at the villagers herself, thinking about all the amazing things they had shown her. Even now she could still make out children held in their parents’ arms, and her heart twisted in fury and resolve. She wouldn’t forget them, or what the Those That were doing to them. Someday she would help them escape, too.

After the village had faded into the distance, they made camp. It was around noon, but they had already decided that they would sleep by day and travel by night, like they had during their escape from the city. If the Those That were going to go drifting by overhead, they preferred to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Chapter 13

The evening prairie sky was immense and limitless overhead. Astrix stared upwards, wishing that he could somehow be absorbed into the sky, and dissolved into that endless dark blue. Or be only one of these long brown stalks of prairie grass blown endlessly by the wind. Just something where he didn't have to make decisions or do anything. Whatever he did only seemed to make himself feel worse, and change nothing.

He glanced over at Lemon. She spent much of her time chattering on at him, though he felt like speaking little in response. Although he was more stable now than during the horrible night and day after he had killed Castille and during the miserable sun-worshipper months, he still couldn't talk much. After all, there was only one thing to say, and to say that would kill him.

Now, however, Lemon was quiet, staring out at the prairie with a pensive expression. What did she hope to see? What did she hope to find? Somewhere where there weren't any Those That, she had said. He almost laughed and cried at the same time, wondering if anything in Lemon's life up to now had taught her about irony. Why did he have to be the one?

He sighed, peering himself out towards the horizon. He didn't even know which way they were going. He wasn't familiar enough with the layout of the Citadel and its surroundings; he had never paid that much attention. It had never seemed important when a crystal ship had taken him wherever he wanted to go so quickly and effortlessly. They could just be going in circles, for all he knew. And even if they did find their way to some outside world, would there be anything left there? His parents had thought society

was on the brink of massive disintegration, that's why they had built the Citadel. And they could have been right; sometimes he thought they must have been, since no one had ever come looking for them and he had never seen any airplanes overhead. However, there had been no sign of a nuclear winter or other large-scale catastrophe either. Maybe it was just that no one was interested enough to look for them. If only there *was* somewhere out there, somewhere he and Lemon could go and be together, and escape this endless, endless circle. . . .

"One thing I do miss about the villagers," Lemon said, and Astrix looked down at her jealously. He hated for her to mention the sun-worshippers or the people in the city. Why did she need to think about anyone besides themselves? "Their stories," Lemon went on, oblivious to his disapproval. "They weren't the same as television, not really, but they were fun. Plus you could take them with you if you were walking across the prairie, unlike a TV."

His annoyance turned to amusement. "Are you bored?"

"A little," she smiled up at him. "It's not like the city. Or even the sun-worshippers' village. There was always something going on. It's so quiet here."

He could see how Lemon would miss the noise and chaos, but the thought of the city or the village made him shudder. It was hard enough to keep his mind together in the silence and repetitive steps of the prairie. If there was noise around him, he would shred away; he would go completely insane. During the months they had lived in the sun-worshipper village, he knew he had been very close.

Even now, his thoughts seemed to be very little under his own control. He just went over and over the same memories and worries in his head. When they had lived

with the sun-worshippers, he had felt so hopeless and trapped, waiting there for the other Citizens to come and find him. He thought he would feel better once they were moving, but it hadn't taken long before he realized that traveling was no help. Whether literally or not, they were going in circles. He could never escape. The life in the city had been just a dream; he had woken to find himself still in prison. Only one thing was real.

Filled with sudden, desperate panic and lust, he turned to Lemon and kissed her fiercely, then nudged her down into the grass. Although she lay down with him willingly enough, he thought he sensed a lack of enthusiasm on her part. Did she notice something different about him now? Something that reminded her of the Those That in the bars? He kissed her more passionately, trying to drown any of her suspicions, as well as his thoughts, in feeling.

For a while, afterwards, he did feel better. He was half-asleep as they walked along and was able to suspend himself in the moment as he had as an ordinary man. The prairie was so quiet; all he could hear was the rustle of their footsteps and occasionally the skitter of a small prairie-mouse darting away in front of them. The sky was huge, filled with stars and a shimmering half moon. He felt like he was drifting along, with only Lemon's hand to anchor him to earth.

If only the night would go on forever; maybe then he could forget. But the sky lightened unmercifully, and when dawn broke over the horizon they stopped and took out the food the sun-worshippers had given them. Although this food was obviously fresher and healthier than what they had eaten in the city, Astrix had times when he would have preferred a Chicken Alexander or a LederSchnitzel instead. Sun-worshipper food was so bland and simple: bread and vegetables, some dried meat, little flavoring or spices. None

of it could compare to the food in the Citadel. He looked across at Lemon's face as she happily ate her bread and jam, and tried to imagine setting a china plate filled with crepes or steak down in front of her. She would love it, he knew that, but the thought of Lemon in the Citadel always left him feeling unhappy and confused. Did he want to take her there? He knew it would hurt her to know the truth; he knew she would be unhappy in his gray and white apartment. He himself had felt happy there, not like he had briefly this past year. But now that he had regained his memory he didn't feel happy anywhere. And the Citadel was so inevitable, so much the truth that he had woken to. Seven and a half centuries in a place made it your home, like it or not.

Back in the beginning, Astrix had been so sure he would hate the Citadel. He could remember the day they had moved there so perfectly. Even when so many he had lived through had blurred away, the first day was forever burned into his memory. The last farewell to his house and his governess and his gerbil the night before. Astrix had cried and so had his mother. They loved their huge, white stone house, with its three stories and tiled courtyard. There had been the pool for Astrix to swim in, the vast lawns where he had walked with his governess or ridden his pony, the sunny kitchen where the cook had made him waffles shaped like circus animals. He didn't want to leave it all behind, especially to go out into the frightening streets where the poor people stared and yelled at their car as it passed by. But his father ignored his crying, and even refused to let his governess come along to the Citadel Amusement Park's first day. So Astrix had to go alone with his parents. They drove to the airport, avoiding the crowds as much as possible. For a while Astrix had been distracted and cheered up by the sight of all the old, broken-down planes—left over from when ordinary people could afford to fly—that they

wheeled past on the way to the runway. Only smaller, private planes existed now, but Astrix's father's was very large and elaborate, even outfitted with a bartender and cook. When he got tired of looking out the window, Astrix had run up and down the aisle, and pestered the cook for a snack. But after his father had made him sit down and the plane took off, he'd gotten sad again, watching the city where he had been born drift into the distance. He didn't want to live in the Citadel. He was sure he would hate it.

The centuries since had been worse than an eight year old could have understood. But somehow in all that time the air and the essence of the Citadel had sunk into his bones. He couldn't deny that part of him wanted to be there again, to have his computers and his hospital machines and his familiar apartment, to have Lemon where she couldn't leave him, even if she knew.

After they ate, they put up the tent the sun-worshippers had given them and crawled in it to sleep. Astrix felt like he slept very little. He lay still and watched the sun creep up through the blue cloth. His mind felt as if it was spinning around and around and around. He tried to take a deep breath and get his memory under control, but it betrayed him as always, this time spitting up the first days they had lived with the sun-worshippers.

After the crystal ship had left, Lemon had taken him by the hand and led him into the village. He hadn't wanted to go, although there was no real alternative, but he could not summon any will to resist. Talking again, even though Lemon took it as a sign of returning health, really only made him feel more unstable. Now, anything might slip out through his unreliable lips. He might confess to her before he realized what he was doing.

The tension and horror made him numb, made him feel as if he was stretching thinner and thinner, closer to breaking.

But Lemon had been filled with energy and enthusiasm; she bubbled over, sweeping him along into the village. Her face had lit up when she had seen the sun-worshippers coming towards them; his heart had sunk. They were all the *same*. The frightened priests. The small huts, just as primitive and ugly on the inside as they had been from the air. The same nonsense about the sun gods and their sacrifices. All the same. Not that he could expect them to change, not really, but after he had been through so many revelations and transformations, part of him expected the rest of the world to somehow mirror his experiences. But, ever since his memory had returned, he had viewed his remaining days as an ordinary man as numbered, as a fleeting daydream. It had only reinforced this feeling when he realized that he recognized two or three of the villagers as servants who had been part of his hospital-machine repair team in the Citadel. The two women and one man had stared at him in startled fear, had kept a little behind the eager rush of the other villagers. Astrix had been surprised to see them, too—he hadn't known what Castille had done with them—but he avoided looking at them and kept his surprise from showing on his face. For the first time he wondered what his team of servants had thought of him. Astrix had rarely beaten them or punished them severely; he had simply used them to assist in his work and occasionally for sex. They had just been tools to him, he realized, but although he kept his face averted from them now he knew nothing had changed. Everything was the same as it always was; there was nowhere he could ever escape. The Citadel was reality, it had been so day after

uncountable day. He knew it would become reality again, and Lemon would learn who he really was.

He couldn't get that thought out of his mind. Even while he slept it screamed beneath the surface of his dreams. When the sun-worshippers smiled he wanted to knock their teeth out. They didn't deserve to be happy. They were so stupid, just as stupid as he remembered them. But Lemon was fascinated by them, he could tell. Of course she was. They were the first people she had encountered who were different. He just hoped that she didn't think that because they were different they were automatically better. It was hard to tell what she *was* thinking these days. She had withdrawn from him and was keeping her thoughts and feelings mostly to herself. Was it because her mind was more developed now, so that she didn't have to vocalize every thought—or was it a reaction to how he was behaving? He knew he was acting strange, but he couldn't stop. He just no longer was the man she had known as Astrix.

“Astrix!” Lemon called to him. He had been sitting in the shade under a tree, watching warily as she listened to a priest prattle on about the gods, but rose obediently to his feet as she beckoned him over. She looked excited. “We’re going over to the barn to see some other kinds of animals!” she said happily. “Did you know there were other kinds?”

They had already met dogs in the village, which Lemon had mistaken for gigantic rats. She had slowly become used to them, although she was still rather wary. Cats, on the other hand, she recognized from the PlasticPerfectPeople show, where they were simply called pets, since those were the only animals allowed in the Citadel. Suddenly Astrix shuddered, flooded with the memory of how the gerbil he'd had as a pet as a small child

had run on its wheel. When they came to the Citadel, they'd had to leave it behind with the governess and the other servants. Although some people had brought cats, no gerbils were allowed even when Astrix had reminded his father about Noah's ark and asked wasn't it the same. But his father had only laughed. So. No gerbils or hamsters or ducks or dogs in the Citadel or city. He had no idea whether or not, somewhere out there, gerbils even existed, or if they had evolved into something he wouldn't recognize. If only he could have one again, feel the small warmth in his hands, the rapid heartbeat under his thumb. But he knew he couldn't. He had long since lost the innocence that would allow him to hold something that fragile without crushing and destroying it.

Later, he stood uncomfortably in the temple as Lemon crouched over the large stone where the first villagers had scratched their names. Even though Astrix knew he was the first Citizen to hear that they had done this, he couldn't care less. Some of the Citizens—Dominic and Ian in particular, he remembered—had made a game of studying the sun-worshippers from above, trying to learn as much as possible about the meaningless petty details of their culture and their primitive way of life. They called it anthropology or something like that. Astrix thought it pointless and silly, but at least it was different than the ordinary Citizen pastimes. He knew that they would want to know about this rock, so automatically he filed it away in the back of his mind in case it came in useful as bribery, cursing himself as he did so. Was this really who he was? Was the Citizen self so firmly entrenched?

It seemed so. He watched Lemon trace the names with her fingers, helped her figure out the years into days, watched the horror and understanding wash across her face, and felt only cold apprehension. For so long in the city he had wanted to help her

learn to expand her mind, and had been pleased and proud to see her do so. But now he knew the truth in his heart, and he was just as cruel as any other Those That. He didn't want her to learn more about herself if that meant she might learn who he was, too.

Over the next few days, as Lemon slowly began to remember more and more about her childhood, and about the day it all began, he felt more and more frozen. When she tried to talk about it, he tried not to listen or to change the subject or to pull her into bed or down into the warm earth behind a screen of tomato plants.

"Astrix," Lemon said hesitantly as she came into their hut one evening. She had been outside listening to the sun-worshippers tell their stories; he was lying impatiently on their bed, staring miserably at the fire as his thoughts spun in their familiar patterns. He had been imagining the girls dancing at the bars, even, guiltily, the club's dining room at the Citadel, the soft clink of silverware. Places where there was something to distract him besides the flickering lights and shadows that only forced him back into his own mind. "Astrix," Lemon said again, crawling up on the bed next to him, and putting her head on his shoulder. Automatically, he put his arm around her, feeling both pleasure and guilt at her touch. He couldn't feel her next to him without thinking that it could be the last time.

"How—how was the sun worshipper story?" he managed to say, trying to make his voice sound normal.

"It was okay." Lemon ran her hand through his hair. "You know, listening to it tonight, I think I remembered more about that day we came here. Those people, my parents, were telling me about the city, or the park or whatever they called it, before we got there. We were on a bus, I think. Yes. A bus, and they must have been to parks

before, because they were telling me what it would be like, as if it was a story. They told me about the rides and what the food there would be. They were talking about all kinds of food. And they were so excited. They said it would be fun.”

Astrix felt sick. He rolled onto his elbow and looked her in the face. “Was any of it not horrible? Any at all?”

She looked surprised. “Of course there were good parts. Lots. That’s what made it so confusing. If it had all been bad we would have realized it sooner and tried to change things. The whole thing was what was horrible.”

Oddly enough, that was what he felt about those hundreds of years too. But their experiences were so different. They should come to a different total.

“When we got to the park I think we had to wait a long time,” she continued, her face going distant. “There was a big crowd.”

Astrix shuddered. He remembered the crowd swarming in front of the entrance: dirty-faced, ragged children who stared enviously at the golf cart that wheeled Astrix and his family to the gate first. He seemed to remember each of their faces individually, yet now, pictured each one as Lemon’s. She must have been in there somewhere, she and the set of ragged dirty parents. Although it was hard to picture them, hard to believe that Lemon hadn’t sprung full grown from the forehead of the god of Ironic Justice, her parents must have been there. The betrayal his kind had committed against her wouldn’t be complete without that.

That morning must have been the only truly democratic moment in Astrix’s life. Everyone had gone into the amusement park together. For the first and only time, he ran about alongside poor children, crashed into them with his bumper car, sat beside them on

the roller coaster. Parents rich and poor alike stood on the sidelines, smiled, and waved. If Astrix's parents had taken pictures there would have been poor children smiling beside him. But it was all a lie.

At noon, the park had announced a children's hour. Only children were allowed on the rides. Astrix and the others were tucked safely onto the Tilt-A-Whirl or the Tower, and no one noticed that Astrix's parents and their friends slipped aside. The parents left standing on the sidelines were rounded up at gunpoint by the stroodle-controlled guards. The poor children screamed in terror as their families were marched away, but Astrix had barely noticed. He was riding the Tilt-A-Whirl, and from that height it had all looked make-believe, like something on television. And so it had begun.

Would it ever end? Could it ever end? Even if he and Lemon traveled far away, beyond the borders of the Citadel, could they ever leave their past behind them? He knew they could not. Even if they lived another eight hundred years, Lemon would never forgive him when she knew he was a Those That. And so, there was no way to escape. He was trapped inside himself.

Suddenly unbearably restless, he rolled off the bed. "It's too hot in here. I need some fresh air."

On the other side of the hut's door flap, however, the early summer night was warm and heavy, the air close and suffocating. He wanted to start running, to flee across the prairie, but he knew it would be hopeless. Just as in the city, when he had known that his body was powerless and pliable under Castille's stroodling, he knew that he was helpless now. He paced around the hut several times, sunk in depression that turned

abruptly to fury when he saw an adolescent boy emerging from a nearby barn. “Come here,” he ordered, his voice suddenly hoarse.

“Yes, Messenger Astrix?” The boy looked uneasy, but waited as Astrix strode towards him.

Astrix paused for a moment, but he knew what he was going to do. He suddenly felt as if there was no choice, as if giving in to who he had been taught to be was as easy as letting go and falling into a stroodle. “I have a message for you from the gods,” he said. “They want me to punish you.” He felt stupid saying the words, but he didn’t care. He had to find some way to stop thinking. If only he could feel again, like a person, like he had for that fragile, transitory moment of time he had been an ordinary man. Maybe Castille had given him a gift after all. But that line of thought made him feel confused again. He didn’t want to feel any more confusion.

He grabbed the boy by the shoulder and smashed him up against the wall of the barn. He did not resist, did not cry out, just like the servant Astrix knew he was at heart. Astrix hit him across the jaw, and then had to hold him up with the other hand to keep him from falling. The boy was not much bigger than Lemon. But he hit him again and then again, more and more desperately. It wasn’t working. He couldn’t fall into feeling; he couldn’t escape his thoughts.

When at last he drew back and let the boy crumple, he was still consumed by impotent rage. He looked down at the boy lying in the dirt and thought about killing him. But then he suddenly remembered killing Jake, remembered the hungry look in Castille’s eyes as his smooth voice persuaded “You wanted to do it.” Lemon had assured him that had only been a stroodle, but maybe she was wrong. He was a Those That; he needed

other people's pain as much as Castille had. Some feeling, at last, insinuated itself through his numb heart and he realized, astonished, what it was: shame.

But shame made no difference. He still couldn't change what was happening or who he was. He just felt more and more numb throughout the rest of the days they lived with the sun-worshippers. As much as he could, he kept apart from them, and spoke less and less, even to Lemon, although he always wanted to be near her. In particular, he refused to speak when she asked his advice about what to story to tell the villagers or where they should go from here. That had to be her decision. Maybe she could change things at last.

But now, as they crunched endlessly through brown grass, Astrix began to understand that even Lemon couldn't stop or hold back the world his father had created. There was no sign that they could escape the boundaries of the Citadel, and he knew it wasn't possible. No matter which direction Lemon led them, they would come to the same place. There was nowhere else the world would take him.

And so, he was not surprised when the familiar jagged teeth of the Citadel skyline reared up against the horizon one early morning before they stopped to rest. "Look!" Lemon said excitedly. "I wonder what that place is!"

He couldn't look at her until they had settled down on either side of a small fire to toast bread. He thought he would cry when he finally looked up. Her face was so familiar and so beloved. She was the only reason that made any of these years worthwhile, that gave him any reason that he shouldn't have died in his crib so long ago. She had made him more than the hollow shell he had been for so long. But now she was going to find out, and she was going to turn away from him forever. He started to say her name, but it

was too painful. He swallowed the word and shut his lips. He didn't speak again as they continued their inevitable journey back towards the Citadel.

Chapter 14

They walked for two and a half weeks, avoiding the sun-worshipper villages they glimpsed in the distance. For seventeen days there was just the empty prairie and the night sky, and then she saw something different. At first it was only a smudge on the horizon, far across the brown grass, visible when they woke at evening or at the end of the night's travel when the early morning sunlight spilled over the edge of the world to their right. Lemon thought it must be another wall, like the one they had climbed through into the country of the sun-worshippers, and she found herself looking forward to reaching it, to standing under its shade and feeling it, solid and human-made, above her head. She was tired of the open space: the sky that swallowed up everything and made her feel small and insignificant, the endless grass that crunched relentlessly underfoot but still made so little noise in the great circle of the prairie. She was tired of the quiet. There were no TVs, no hum of factory machinery, no click of feet or splash of water. No voices. She hadn't thought she could be able to miss the city, but she did—people and buildings and vending machines. Showers and fresh clothes. Maybe some parts of it hadn't been so miserable after all.

Shortly after they saw the wall, Astrix stopped talking again, for no apparent reason. But she kept talking to him, especially about what kind of place might be on the other side. As they trudged through the grass, under the vast spread of stars, as they lay awake in their tent in the afternoon when the heat made it impossible to sleep, Lemon tried to imagine what could possibly be there. Would this place be ruled by the Those That too? Or had she finally come to the border of their control?

As they came closer, she realized that what she was seeing was not just a wall, but tall buildings, much higher than the apartments in the city. They varied in height and gave the impression of being jagged and crumbling, possibly deserted. Yet as they came even closer, she could make out lighted windows and red and green lights blinking on the roofs. Nervousness crept into her stomach, struggling with the eagerness she'd felt at first. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to go there. But she didn't know where else to go, and they were running out of food. Besides, she had the suspicion that if she stopped, Astrix might keep on walking, too set now in the pattern to stop, and she couldn't leave him to face whatever might be there on his own.

The next few nights passed too slowly and too quickly at the same time. Finally, one morning they were close enough that Lemon could tell they would reach the buildings the next night. She felt very nervous as she set up their tent. But Astrix just stood there placidly, holding the bundles she had strapped onto him and placed in his arms. She took them one by one from him and arranged their campsite carefully. She still enjoyed the novelty of having so few possessions and it always calmed her to put them neatly into place.

Once the tent was up, she spread the blankets out and lined their bundles in a neat row along one side. Next, she coaxed Astrix to sit down while she cleared a circle of grass and built a small fire, only large enough to boil the few eggs she'd gathered along their night's hike and to toast some of their last loaf of bread. She ate eagerly, but Astrix would only nibble a little of what she held to his mouth. He really only appeared interested in water, and she couldn't let him have too much of that. Their last bottle was running low.

It was already hot when they finished their meal, and once they lay down she couldn't sleep. The little tent seemed smaller and hotter than usual. The sun lit up the blue cloth above her so bright that she wondered how she could have ever slept through it and the ground was hard and lumpy even though she had, as usual, carefully piled the area beneath the tent with handfuls of grass. It was strange, she thought, as she took a sip from the water bottle, how bored she had become so quickly. After two hundred and fifty thousand days of things happening—even if they were horrible things—she must have gotten used to excitement, to overwhelming emotion, whether it had been passion or fear. She did not think calm quiet suited her.

Astrix, on the other hand, looked peaceful and unconcerned. He lay on his blanket, his eyes closed, his mouth shut, his hands resting motionless on the baggy green pants the sun-worshippers had given him. If it were not for the slow rise of his breath, she would have thought he was dead. Had he noticed the buildings they were approaching? Was it fear of what they might find that had traumatized him, or was he consumed by guilt about Castille's death again? She sighed, feeling, as she so often had these past few days, the desire to shake him or slap him until he was himself again.

The afternoon passed slowly. She slept only in small fits and jerks. When she woke, she sweat and drank warm, flat water, and fretted at the slow movement of the sun. Only watching Astrix sleep could soothe her anxiety. She reached over to run her hand through his hair, which had grown out and no longer stood in the spiky clumps on top of his head that had looked so strange when she first saw him. Now it hung down in unwashed magenta and blond tendrils over his ears, producing a different, but also odd, effect. Her own hair must look horrible too, she knew, as well as the rest of her; they

hadn't had enough water to spare for cleaning. She kept her hair pulled back in a braid and tried to ignore it as much as possible.

Finally the long, yellow light of afternoon began to deepen into the golds and pinks of evening. Lemon got up and woke Astrix. She guided him to sit down outside while she packed up their blankets and dismantled the tent. She knew she hadn't gotten enough sleep, but despite the graininess in her bones she was wide awake; despite the nervous tremble in her knees she was eager to get started. Quickly, they ate some of the villagers' flat bread smeared with jelly, washed down by more warm water. "Maybe," Lemon said out loud, "whatever's behind that wall will have some cold water. I'd just about face the Those That for some ice!" Astrix said nothing. Lemon loaded them both up with packs, and they set off.

For the first few hours her excitement was calmed by the steadiness of walking, the heaviness of the packs, and Astrix's quiet hand in hers. The dark line of the wall grew nearer, but not too quickly, and all around them the night buzzed and whispered to itself. The first few nights of their trudge across the prairie had been torture; the packs had weighed her down and all her bones felt like they were collapsing in upon each other, creaking and squeaking in protest. Her legs had ached with weariness and then progressed to shaking—twice dumping her flat on her face in the tall grass—and her whole body had panted and groaned and rattled like something going so fast it was about to fall apart. But now, even though the packs were lighter, she was sure that was not the only reason she carried them easily. Her legs were much stronger, able to stride across the grass quickly, even with Astrix dragging behind her. She had grown strong; she had changed, at last, after so many years into something or someone new.

Her thoughts made walking pass faster, and almost before she could realize it the wall was closer, then closer, then they were almost upon it, and then there it was, right under her hand and towering above her head.

It must have been near midnight. Behind and to their left, the almost-full moon was sinking down low to the horizon. The surface of the wall was lit in pale, watery light. Astrix stood still, holding his bags patiently. He seemed to be unaware that anything unusual was happening. Lemon felt as if she were in a dream. The air slid cool and unreal along her skin like a soft but remote hand and she shivered, suddenly uneasy.

The wall itself, however, was solid, reassuring. Under her fingers the large, square blocks of rough stone were chilly. She put her nose to it and breathed in a damp, sour smell that reminded her abruptly of the bathroom in the factory where she had worked. The walls there had been built of similar stone and the floor had usually been wet. Here though, the bricks were as dry as the prairie. She walked a few steps, trailing her hand along the wall's solid presence, and tipped her head back to look up. It seemed to go on forever above her, taking over the sky.

What now? Lemon looked back and forth, but there was no way she could tell, even in the moonlight, if there were any holes, doors, or any kind of opening. She was sure that there must be people on the other side somewhere, but what they were like, she could only guess. It would be better to spy on these people and their city before trying to get through, anyway. They would have to camp again, and try to proceed the next morning. She was turning back, trying to figure out where the best place to set up the tent would be—near the wall, or back a bit in the prairie, and reluctantly deciding that putting

their tent against the wall, although it might seem safe, probably really wasn't, and they would be better off hidden in the grass—when Astrix made a noise.

She spun around, startled, and stared at him a second, before it occurred to her to wonder *why* he had made the sound. “Astrix?” she called out, starting to run towards him. But he wasn't looking at her; he was staring behind her, up over her head, into the air.

Then she understood. Suddenly, the situation was unbearably familiar. She heard a soft, gentle whirring, felt the rush of air from above her. There were voices calling down. It was a crystal ship. There was no way she could mistake it. The Those That had found them. Lemon didn't even bother to look; she simply started running as fast as she could. When she reached Astrix, she grabbed him, intending to pull him after her and keep on running, but to her intensified horror, he clutched her wrist tightly and did not move. She pulled desperately at his arm and he staggered, but braced his feet and held onto her tightly. “No,” he said, his voice sounding very tired and very far away. “Don't run.”

Bewildered and frightened, Lemon tugged against him, but he pulled her back and she was too confused and panicked to struggle anymore. She turned around at last, and her heart twisted in despair. The crystal ship hovered only a few yards away, close enough for its wind to stir their dirty hair and ripple their clothes. A stairway descended slowly from the bottom of the ship and a Those That man came down it. Lemon was so frightened at the sight of him that she felt nauseated in every part of her body. She was trembling so violently she had to hang onto Astrix with both hands to keep upright. The Those That man came closer and stopped only a few feet away, staring at them. It was a

long, excruciating moment before he spoke, and then what came out of his mouth was nothing at all like what she could have expected. “Astrix?” he asked.

Stunned, Lemon looked up at Astrix. His face, she saw in horror, was not shocked or confused. He was looking at the Those That man with *recognition*. As she stared at him, it seemed as if another face rose up from the depths of him and took over the face she knew as his own. He looked down at her with this new face, and in that look Lemon understood everything. She heard Astrix respond “Hello, Julian,” as the world spun around and darkened, and she fell.

Reluctantly, Lemon came to a blurred half-consciousness, aware of movement, of pale artificial light. After a moment she realized she was being carried; her head lay against the harsh brown cloth of Astrix’s shirt, her body was clenched tightly in his arms. He was walking quickly, as though he knew where he was going, although when she peeked out through half-opened eyelids she saw an unfamiliar hallway lined with gray stone walls and with panels of white, cold light at regular intervals along the ceiling. The brightness hurt her eyes, and she buried her face against Astrix’s shoulder.

“But she’s so dirty,” a voice said. It must have been the Those That man, and Lemon shrank up inside to know he noticed her. “Let me call a servant, at least—”

“No,” Astrix answered. Although he was holding her, his voice sounded far away, flat and emotionless. He pulled her closer to him as he spoke, as if to emphasize his denial to the other man. “No one else is going to touch her. Do you understand that?” On the last few words the icy calmness of his voice cracked, and he ended on a rising, almost hysterical note. “I mean it, Julian,” he added. “She stays with me or you don’t have me. And if anyone thinks that’s a sign of weakness, of giving in to anarchy, well then, you

can go on as you are. Or don't the Citizens think that having three arms or one leg is a sign of disorder? I do notice that you're missing a finger."

"Whatever you want, really," Julian hastened to answer. His voice also slipped slightly from its original remoteness, softening into reassurance. "We need you, Astrix. We know that."

"Castille didn't."

"I warned you. I told you what he was thinking. If you had listened to me then—but you wouldn't. And now at least the other Citizens realize how important you are to them, to us all. They're desperate. You can have whatever you want. This girl, servants, bigger rooms, the best wine and drugs, whatever. You've got them."

"This is just another game to them, I suppose?" Astrix said, and once again the smooth surface of his voice broke and dripped bitterness. Julian didn't respond, and a moment later, Astrix went on, his voice flat again. "I'm sorry. I know you tried to help me."

"I'm sorry, too," Julian answered. "I should have tried harder, I should have managed to stop Castille somehow. But I didn't believe he'd go so far—" They stopped walking, and Lemon heard the jingle of keys, the click of locks.

"Castille's dead," Astrix answered, his voice perfectly flat. "Have any of my things been touched?" He moved forward into the room, and then turned to look back at Julian. Lemon vaguely made out a blurry gray figure before she closed her eyes again.

"No, no, everything's just as you left it. Do you need any assistance? I'll send food, housekeeping staff, a barber?"

“Yes, and clothes for Lemon,” Astrix answered, “but otherwise leave me undisturbed. No Citizens. I need to work.”

The door shut and Astrix carried her a few more steps before he put her down gently on the softest surface she had ever known. She felt as if she were floating. Blankets were wrapped around her, and the warmth and unimaginable comfort sent her straight to sleep.

There was darkness, and time passed, but when she woke things were still strange, still dreamlike and blurry. Somewhere nearby she could hear Astrix’s voice, his new flat voice, calling out orders, but she never saw him. Silent women dressed in long, plain, brown dresses and wearing gold bands around their necks led her into a bathroom where they washed her in a gigantic basin, just as she and Kira had sometimes washed PlasticPerfectPeople dolls in the sink. The women scrubbed her hair, trimmed her nails, even brushed her teeth, and Lemon was too dazed and stunned to protest, really even to care. They dried her off, brushed her hair, and dressed her: soft, smooth, black underwear, loose black pants and a black shirt, which, when they noticed how Lemon was shivering with cold, they bulked up with a thick black sweater. She got black socks too, but no shoes, though she couldn’t see how that mattered on the thick gray carpet. The women led her back to the bed, tucked her under the blankets, and then brought her a bowl of warm soup on a tray. When her hand shook so much that she spilled half of each spoonful, they fed her, held a straw in a cup of cool water to her lips. After they left, she fell back asleep at once.

The next time she awoke because Astrix had called her name. For a moment all she felt was a rush of happiness at hearing him speak again. Then she remembered. She wanted desperately to just go back to sleep, but she steeled herself and opened her eyes.

A Those That man was sitting in a chair next to the bed, watching her with a calm and steady gaze. He looked like they all did, like they all had for seven and a half centuries. Like the rest, he showed no emotion. His face was perfectly composed, his lips firmly together, his colorless hair combed back. He sat casually, legs crossed, dressed in the normal gray suit. He held a drink in one hand. She knew who it was. Every nerve in her skin screamed out with revulsion. She wanted to scream in horror, to scuttle away and hide forever, to smash him across the face with all of her strength.

“Lemon,” he repeated, and all she could do was look at him. Her breath came in short gasps, and tears swam in her eyes.

Astrix gulped down the rest of whatever had been in his small glass; he set it down on the little table beside him and picked up another, taller glass. She heard the clink of ice as he held it out towards her. “You said you wanted ice,” he said diffidently. His voice was his old one again, the only thing about him that contrasted with his appearance.

Lemon tried vainly to keep her hand from trembling too much as she took the glass and sipped, remembering bitterly her recent, glib claim. The water was cold, but it seemed to burn her mouth. She handed it back.

“They wiped my memory,” Astrix said, holding her glass in both hands. The words stumbled over one another in his haste. “That’s why I couldn’t remember who I was. It was some kind of stupid power game Castille was playing with me. When we

killed him it brought everything back. At first I just blanked out, I was so horrified. And then I couldn't tell you, I knew you'd hate me.”

Lemon couldn't say anything. She felt overwhelmed with sadness, betrayal, despair. All she could do was shake her head silently.

Astrix set the water down and crawled up on the bed beside her. She scooted away, but he grabbed her shoulders with both hands. His face suddenly crumbled free from the Those That mask and was almost his own again, stricken with a look of misery. “I don't know what to do, Lemon. I know—I know how you must be feeling.” He gave a little, almost hysterical, laugh. “God—if the reverse had happened while we were in the city. . . . I had no idea then, I swear. And then, I didn't know what to *do*, tell you in the middle of the country of the sun-worshippers? I thought maybe we could find a way out, out of this whole fucked-up place, but I didn't know where we were going. Julian was right. He always told me to get out of the Citadel more often, if I had maybe I would have learned some fucking directions. . . .

“I know you must feel strange to see me like this, but I'm still the same person, I promise. And everything's going to be all right. I'll take care of you. They need me here, and I won't stay unless you're with me. They'll have to give me anything I want. You'll like it here in the Citadel. It's much nicer than the city or even the sun-worshipper village; there's much better food and drinks and drugs. No one will make you work or stroodle you or noodle you. You can do whatever you want here, and we can be together.”

Lemon's head swirled with confusion. She couldn't think straight. Cautiously, she reached out a hand to touch Astrix's face. "Is that really you?" she asked, searching his eyes. It *was* him, but Astrix was not at all who she had thought he was.

"It's me," he assured her. "I'm just the same, I promise."

Lemon nodded, although she knew he was not the same. But she was too bewildered to protest as Astrix carefully tucked the blankets around her again. "Just get some sleep," he told her. "You'll see. This is really the only way things can work out."

Only when she woke for the third time did she feel at all like herself. She was alone in the room. There was a gleam of light through the thick swatches of cloth draped over the windows. The door on the far wall was half-open and she could hear the murmur of voices, but they sounded far away. She was grateful for the calm, for the absence of people. Maybe at least she could get her bearings.

So she was in the home of the Those That. The Citadel. A place she had never expected to see, and yet the room was what she might have guessed. Elegant. Luxurious. Colorless. The bed she lay in was huge, about five or six times larger than the mattress she had slept on in the city, spread with gigantic gray sheets that were smooth as water under her fingertips, and then with a coverlet in a slightly lighter shade of gray. Behind her, against a polished wood headboard, was a row of long gray pillows.

To her left were three large windows, draped over with gray and brown cloth; to her right was a door leading into the bathroom. There were several small glass and metal tables around the room, and a couple of easy chairs, but the overall impression she got was of bland neatness. Nothing she saw made her feel comfortable or natural in the room, and there was nothing to mark the room as Astrix's in particular, no toys or clothes

visible, no pictures or posters. The white walls were bare except for some square gray buttons. When she stepped out of the bed and pressed one, a drawer filled with gray underwear slid silently out of the wall.

Her legs trembled underneath her as she walked slowly over to a window and pushed the thick cloth aside. It was bright daylight outside, and the window seemed to open onto the sky. The room she was in was much higher than any apartment she had ever been in, perhaps three or four times as high. The wall below the window plummeted down so far it made her dizzy, even though it intersected with the roof of another building before it reached the ground. There were a number of these tall buildings jutting up irregularly all around. Each was lined with rows of tall windows. For a moment the sight made her feel comforted. It looked like the city; this was what she was used to, even if the buildings were taller. But then, she saw the doll-sized city on the horizon: small buildings, a blur of greenish smoke drifting up into the sky. That was the place she had come from. Even if she didn't belong there anymore, she belonged here even less.

Suddenly, the view made her feel sick. She turned away and went to the door that led to the rest of the apartment. Her stomach twisted, but she took a deep breath and stepped through, emerging into a large, gray sitting room furnished with gray couches and glass tables. The room was empty, but she could hear voices coming through another doorway. She couldn't tell for sure if any of them was Astrix's. They were all Those That voices, if he spoke it was lost among the others. Slowly, however, she moved towards the door, abruptly overwhelmed by a desire to see Astrix. Even changed as he was, he was familiar, he was the only thing that kept her anchored in this foreign place. Without him,

she felt she might lose her grip on reality and go spiraling off into the empty space outside the window.

No one noticed her at first, when her soft push slowly opened the door into a narrow room. To her left was another of the tall windows; otherwise the walls were bare. A desk crowded with pieces of machinery, TV screens, tools, and papers ran around the room. Other machine parts were stacked in the corners and spilled off a tall shelf. Lemon almost smiled. At least *somewhere* in this place was cluttered. Astrix sat in front of one of the TV screens, pointing to the picture with a pencil and explaining something to the five other Those That men in the room.

As she took another step forward, some small sound must have betrayed her presence. The man standing closest to the door turned to look at her and then one by one, as if signaled by something invisible, the others swiveled their faces towards her.

Lemon felt as if she might melt under their gaze, might be shriveled up and rot by the disgust in their faces. It wasn't only the way they looked at her, but also the way they looked *to* her, now that she understood how they had treated her in the city, how they had played with her like a toy for so long, while she had worshipped them and lusted for them, and they had thought of her as nothing. For a long moment they just stared at each other. Astrix kept on talking, oblivious. Lemon looked at the back of his strange head, at the faces of the others. She thought the Those That man standing next to Astrix was Julian from the night before. Only his face was different in the way he regarded her—he seemed to have curiosity mixed in with his disgust, as if he was searching to figure out what Astrix saw in her.

Finally, one of the Those That men lowered himself to speak. His mouth twisted with scorn and distaste, as if it repulsed him to even mention her, although his voice was unconcerned and remote. “Astrix . . . is this,” he hesitated, apparently unsure of how to refer to her and decided not to do so at all, “is this yours?”

Astrix turned and broke into a wide smile when he saw her. “Lemon!” For a minute he seemed only glad to see her, unaware of the suppressed amusement and disgust of the others in the room; for a moment he looked like her old Astrix again, but then he noticed the other Those That and his face chilled over. “Lemon, maybe you’d better wait in the bedroom until we’re finished here.”

Her first reaction was relief, giving one glance around at the roomful of cold faces, but once back in the bedroom she couldn’t help but wonder what exactly living here would be like. Astrix seemed to think it would all be wonderful. But what if all of the Those That only looked at her openly the way they had done so secretly before? She didn’t think she could take that.

“They’ll get used to it,” Astrix assured her later. “Don’t let it bother you. You have a right to be here, as much as they have. More. If they give you any trouble I’ll leave and they can all turn into eight-hundred-year-old mutants.” His voice was light. She could tell he didn’t really expect this to happen. “Besides,” he went on, “you won’t have to see them much. They’re not exactly friendly. You and I will probably be here most of the time. We can be together, and the rest of the Citizens don’t matter.”

And for the next few days, this was true. Lemon stayed in the apartment and rarely even saw Astrix himself, much less other Those That except Julian, who came by now and then to consult with Astrix. At first she didn’t mind. She rested and tried to get

used to her new surroundings, but one afternoon she couldn't stand sitting still any longer.

Astrix was working in his study, alone except for his machines, but these absorbed him completely. When she peeked in he didn't notice her, and she turned away, feeling uneasy and at a loss.

She went to the door that led out to the main corridor and slowly pushed it open, unable to resist even though a shiver of horror crackled down her spine. The home of the Those That. How horrible, how wonderful could it be? But it was only a hallway, the same one she remembered from the night of their arrival, with gray stone walls and the silver-gray carpet that was everywhere. No one was in sight, so she stepped out and let the door close softly behind her. She turned left, running one hand along the wall as it curved away from her, and keeping close to it as if she could blend into it if necessary.

For a while all she passed were more doors, all silent and shut. Everything was very quiet; no sound escaped from any of the apartments, and the carpet muffled her own footsteps. All she could hear for a long time was the thud of her heart in her throat, and when she finally did hear voices around the curve of the corridor in front of her, she felt a jolt of terror that shook her whole body. Instinctively she drew even nearer the wall, and crept forward inch by inch until she could just see the group of four Those That men standing and talking together, laughing behind their hands. Lemon wanted to run, but she forced herself to hold still. "They need Astrix so they can't hurt me," she told herself quietly. "And I'm different now. They shouldn't scare me anymore." She took a deep breath and kept walking. The Those That stopped talking as she went by, but she didn't dare look at them until she was past them. Then, she flicked a glance over her shoulder.

They were all staring after her, with the closest thing to expressions on their faces that she had ever seen—amazement, hunger, and hatred all rolled into one. She walked faster, but was trembling with the effort of not running until she was out of sight behind a corner and could hear their voices start up again. Tears of terror were flooding her eyes, she was flustered, half-panicked, and half-running as she stumbled around the next corner and jolted to a stop.

Another Those That man was standing by the wall, practically facing her, though no change of expression revealed that he even knew she was there. A man dressed in plain brown, with a gold collar around his neck, was kneeling in front of him. Lemon didn't know what to do, so she just stood there as the kneeling man began to tremble more and more violently. "Don't, please," he whispered to the Those That. Lemon barely had time to wonder why he was so frightened before the Those That man pushed him against the wall and put a little cylinder against his chest. The brown man screamed, there was a loud pop, and then he slumped over with blood pouring from his chest. Lemon screamed too, but the Those That man only walked away.

Lemon rushed forward. The wounded man was almost dead already, but there was still plenty of time to get him to a hospital machine. She grabbed him under his shoulders and began to drag him along, calling for help as she went. The man was heavy, but she had gotten him several feet along the corridor before she was seized from behind, one hand over her mouth and the other arm around her waist, and pulled roughly away from the wounded man. "Leave that alone! What the hell do you think you're doing?" a voice demanded from over her shoulder. Lemon twisted around to see Julian, his face unusually enlivened by fury. She tried to explain, but he wouldn't take his hand from her mouth and

he ignored the pushes and pulls she made at his arms. He half-dragged her up the corridor, muttering furiously, until they reached Astrix's apartment. Julian didn't even bother to knock, he just barged in and flung her at the couch. "Astrix!"

Astrix came out of his study, looking confused, but Julian didn't wait for him to speak before starting to shout. "She went out! Wandering around in the corridors as if— my god! You can't just allow her to roam around wherever she wants, as if!" Julian's voice, which had been rising almost to hysteria, cut off abruptly, although his shock still hung in the air.

"As if what," Astrix answered, his flat voice cutting through the silence. "As if she were one of us? She is one of us now."

"No. No, Astrix. You can have her here, no one's going to deny you that. But like a servant, like a pet. Not like one of us."

Astrix just stared, his empty, expressionless face somehow conveying as much misery as if he had been crying. When Julian spoke again he had softened his voice, but Lemon knew it was only for his friend's benefit, not through any understanding of the situation. "It's for her own protection," he went on. "I know she's not quite like a servant to you. But the others don't understand that, and they might treat her like one." Astrix blanched back in horror, and Julian paused a moment. "If only you had her marked somehow, so that people could know, and her place would be clear. No one would touch her then, and if she got into trouble they would know to speak to you. It would make things much more orderly, and keep the right appearance for people. No one minds if you keep her, and no one wants to know how you act with her in private. They'll ignore what

they can't see. But you can't show them anything like this. You'll make them start going after you all over again, Astrix."

"Going after me again!" Astrix sneered, and for a moment Lemon thought he might break, might punch Julian in the face or jump up and grab her, take her away from this place—but the moment fell away and instead he sagged all over, hanging his head. "You're right," he said quietly. "Leave us, Julian."

The Those That man looked as if he might protest, but then he nodded and left the apartment. Lemon stayed where she was, hanging onto the arm of the couch for support. Astrix still stood by the doorway to his study, looking exactly like one of the blond mice she had seen on the prairie at night, poised on the edge of its hidey-hole, ready to bolt. She knew he was confused and upset by Julian's reaction, but that had bothered her much less than what she had seen happen in the corridor. "Who are those other people here?" she asked bluntly.

He looked surprised. Clearly this was not what he had expected her to ask. "Who?"

"The other people. Not the Those That men."

"The servants?" His tone of voice indicated that they were not important. "Just servants, Lemon. We bring them here from the country of the sun-worshippers, through the sacrifices, to cook and clean and so on."

"But I saw one get killed." Lemon's voice wavered in spite of herself. She took a deep breath and tried to speak as calmly as Astrix now did. "A Those That man in the hall had a weapon and he killed this man. I tried to take him to a hospital machine but—"

“*That’s* why Julian was so upset. The other Citizens won’t like it if you start making a fuss about these things. They happen all the time. The servants usually get each other to a hospital machine in time, but if not, we can always get more.”

His words were like fingers reaching down her throat. She threw up onto the gray carpet, and fell trembling to her knees beside the puddle. Astrix rushed to her side, trying to help her up, full of reassurance, but Lemon drew away from him. She didn’t speak until he went to the door to call a servant to clean it up, and then snapped “No. I’ll do it myself.” When he protested, she cut him off again, and went to the bathroom to find cleaning supplies. When she had finished, she left Astrix where he was, and went into the bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind her.

The next day they came to mark her as something that belonged to Astrix. She hadn’t expected it to be quite so horrible. Whatever her life in the Citadel would be like, it would be better than the servants’, better than her life in the city had been, so she felt she had no cause to complain. But somehow it was still awful, more awful than she would have thought after everything else.

Julian, a servant, and two other Those That men came into the apartment. Astrix looked apprehensive as he gestured them inside. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but Julian shook his head warningly. “We’re here to see that all of this is done properly,” one of the other men informed Astrix, and he only nodded.

When they were all in the doorway and she across the room in the windowseat, Lemon only felt numb except for a flutter in her stomach, but when they actually started coming towards her like a solid wall of gray suits and stone faces, the nervousness spread

all over her body. She got up from the windowseat and stood with her back against the wall. Her legs were trembling.

“Lemon,” Astrix said reassuringly as they came up to her. “It’s all right. The servant here is just going to put some bracelets on you so that everyone will know not to bother you. It won’t hurt. It’ll keep you safe.”

Lemon knew that for her to live in the Citadel this was probably necessary, but from the way Astrix spoke she could tell that she looked absolutely terrified. She felt terrified. And trapped. The Those That men made her skin crawl. They were all so large. Her head didn’t even come up to any of their smoothly shaven chins. Even the man from the country of the sun-worshippers was tall. Having healthy food and not having to go into the hospital machines all the time must make a difference, she thought bitterly. She felt like a toy in front of them, a PlasticPerfectPeople doll. Little Loud Lemon, maybe, she told herself, and let out a desperate kind of giggle just as one of the Those That men reached out to grab her wrist. With suddenly no room for thought left in her brain, she bolted.

She barely got two steps away before they grabbed her. Astrix held her arms with hands that were so much larger than she had ever realized they were. He dragged her over to a chair, ignoring her kicks, and sat down with her on his lap. With an expression of disgust on his face, Julian bent over and held her legs still. She couldn’t move, and on either side the other men stood, blank and silent. She was terrified too deeply to scream as the servant worked to fasten the wide gold bracelets, marked with “Astrix” in sunken letters, on each of her arms. The gold was heavy and dull; as she had noticed before in the city, the jewelry the Those That men wore never sparkled.

Only when each bracelet was soldered on did Julian stand back up and Astrix relax his hold. One of the other men picked up her arm to examine the bracelet and nodded in satisfaction, but Lemon jerked forward and sunk her teeth into his hand. He let out a high scream and rushed from the room, clutching his hand as if he'd received a terrible wound.

“That’s it!” Julian said sharply. “She can’t be allowed out again. Keep her in your room, Astrix.”

He and the other man swept out, the servant trailing behind. Lemon was not really disappointed by their words, and she was strangely elated to find that there was blood in her mouth. Its saltiness tasted sweet as it reminded her that the Those That were human.

The triumph, however, faded, when she thought about what Astrix had just done to her. Slowly she climbed to her feet and stood facing him. “Let’s leave here,” she whispered.

Astrix stared at her from his Those That face. Only his eyes were his own, and they looked miserable. “We can’t,” he whispered back. “There’s nowhere to go. Nowhere we can escape.”

“Astrix, please.” Lemon’s voice broke and she nearly burst into tears. She thought her heart might explode from misery. “Please, Astrix. Help me. I don’t want to be like this. Neither do you. But we can go somewhere, do something. . . .”

He let his eyes fall. “I can’t do anything. This is the only way things can be.”

Lemon sealed her mouth. She climbed into the windowseat and leaned her head against the cold glass. She didn’t move again until she heard Astrix leave the room.

Part III

The Citadel

Chapter 15

For a moment Astrix's face looked as if he couldn't believe what he'd heard her say, then his face broke into a huge smile. "Lemon!" he cried out. "You talked to me!" He flung his arms around her, crushing her against him, catching her in an all-too-familiar complex web of tangled emotions: Did she feel engulfed, surrounded, by his gray Those That arms? or did she focus on the human flesh inside the suit jacket, on the beat of his heart, and feel glad to have Astrix next to her again? For so long, she had been trained to think in only simple emotions, to have small packets of straightforward desires. It was confusing to feel several things at once, but she knew it was truer to her own self, too.

"Lemon?" Astrix repeated, sitting back and holding her at arms' length. "You're talking to me—you are talking?!"

For a second she bit her lip and said nothing, testing the power she held over him as he waited for her to speak. A very Those That sensation. Did she like it? She tried to be honest with herself, but the answer was still no. Was Astrix right? Was this feeling something you had to be *taught* to like? "Yes," she said, watching his face break into joy all over again. Even though she was still mad at him, surely this was a better feeling. "I want to learn about all this machinery you spend your time on." She still wasn't very clear on the idea that had prompted her to speak, but suddenly the first step at least seemed perfectly clear. *If she could understand something the Those That didn't know!*

“I knew you’d talk to me sooner or later,” he continued happily, hugging her again. “And you’ll love learning about the hospital machines. You’ll really be able to help the people in the city; we can save Kira together.”

Every time she thought of Kira, she felt like her heart would splinter with pain and guilt. It had been so long since they had left her there in the city, helpless and miserable. Over a hundred days that Kira had had to endure, unable to see or hear, while Lemon had experienced unbelievable things. It would be wonderful to give her friend back her eyes and ears and hair, but that would still not be enough, would not really save her, because when the hospital machine cured her body, it would dull her memory and make her satisfied with the life the Those That wanted to give her. But if Lemon could understand how the hospital machines did that—

“Not just the hospital machines,” she told Astrix quickly. “The stroodles and the noodles and the thing they used to take your memory away. I want to know how it all works, exactly what all those things did to me.” This much, at least, really was true. Suddenly she wanted to know not just because the Those That didn’t, but also because they had used these tools for so long to manipulate her body and her thoughts. She wanted to know *how*.

“Of course!” Astrix exclaimed. “That’s only natural. I should have thought to explain it to you before.”

“You know how all those things work?”

“Yes, of course all the technology is related, although the hospital machines have always needed the most frequent repairs.” He frowned. “It’s not just that they’re more complicated; they are, but not so much so. I’ve never been able to explain it. The noodle

boxes, the stroodlers, and the mind eraser tools, they need occasional repairs, but the hospital machines—you saw how badly they broke down, after not much more than a year. But I can teach you about them all.”

“Good. I want to learn about them all.” Lemon fell silent, staring at his smiling face. He looked so strange to her: part Those That, part the Astrix she had known in the city. Which was his real self? Or were somehow both him, even if they seemed to contradict each other? And then suddenly he looked like neither, but was a third man she didn’t know, who was shy and uncertain as he reached out to gently take her hand.

“I’ve really missed you, Lemon.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” she echoed, although it wasn’t really that simple. The Astrix from the city had been such a good friend, closer in some ways even than Kira. But she couldn’t think of that man now without the rush of betrayal, the knowledge of the inevitable gray Those That truth behind Astrix’s city face. She missed the Astrix she had thought she knew; she missed someone he could become, if only he were brave enough. “Isn’t it almost time for supper?” she asked, changing the subject. “Can we have that roast turkey with mushroom stuffing again?”

“Of course!” Astrix beamed. “I’ll go right now.”

Once he had gone, Lemon went into the bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror. “Have I done the right thing?” she asked her reflection aloud. “Should I have kept not talking?” Her mirror image retained its own silence, so Lemon answered the question herself. “But that hasn’t helped anything so far—and I don’t see how it would.” She studied herself for a moment. Her eyes looked bright; her face was more animated than it had been for a long time. Not talking to anyone had been *boring!* She had felt unnatural

and alone being silent and waiting for Astrix to come to his senses. No more waiting. She was going to *act*.

“What do I want?” she asked herself, repeating the question she had tried to figure out in the city. Then, the answer to that question had been simple: no more noodles, no more stroodles, a clean empty room and good food. Now she had all of those things, but except for the food, it was not enough to sustain her forever, only a starting point.

“To begin with,” she announced aloud, “this place is too neat and too white. I’ll change that first.”

When Astrix came back with the food, she asked him if he could bring some lipsticks and eyeliners from the city so she could draw, but instead he handed her a box of colored, waxy sticks. Lemon pulled the red one out and looked at it curiously. “What’s this?”

“Crayons. For drawing,” he explained. She reached out boldly and drew a red line on the white wall, then had second thoughts and darted a guilty look at Astrix. But he only laughed down at her. “Go ahead. They could use more color.”

Happily, she dumped the box out on the carpet and picked out a handful of browns to draw the prairie grass. Astrix sat down on the couch and watched her. When she glanced back at him a moment later, he looked so relaxed and comfortable without his Those That jacket and tie that for a second she felt like they were back in the city again. Then she had talked to him easily, but now that she had started talking again she wasn’t sure what to say. How did you talk to a Those That man, after all? She imagined herself back in a pocket room, trying to talk to a Those That man, or a Those That Astrix.

“What are you thinking about?” Astrix asked her.

“The pocket rooms,” she said truthfully. “Do you suppose we were ever in one together, Astrix? Before the night we met?”

“Don’t ask me that!” He sounded horrified. “I don’t know. I guess it’s possible. But I didn’t go to the bars very often, not since I was young.”

It was strange to picture them there together when Astrix would not have been anything like who he was now, but would have been the same as all the other Those That men. It wasn’t until Castille had wiped his memory that Astrix had become free enough to let himself care about her. “Don’t you ever think about the city?”

“Yes, of course, but not those days. When I was an ordinary man, and when we were hiding in one apartment after another. . . . Are you homesick?”

“I miss Kira.” Lemon turned to a new section of wall and began to sketch in her friend’s face. The gold bracelet on her wrist got in the way; she pushed it firmly up her arm. “And my other friends. It seems lonely here, for everyone.” When she was in the city, all the Those That appeared exactly alike. She never could have imagined that they would differ so widely as Astrix and Castille, that the Those That would have their own popular, in-groups as well as left-out ones, like Astrix. But that was more proof that they were just people.

“We’ll help Kira,” Astrix promised her, “and maybe we can bring her here to the Citadel too.”

He looked so happy that Lemon didn’t have the heart to tell him that even she knew the other Those That would never let this happen. She suddenly felt a rush of love for him. Poor Astrix, having to live here for so long, to be surrounded and shaped by these gray walls and expressionless people. She smiled at him. “I’ll give Kira a Mean

Mark doll,” she said, drawing one in her friend’s hand. “When she’s cured we can buy her a hundred of them.”

She felt easier talking to Astrix then, although they chatted about nothing important as she finished putting the factory in around Kira, and then went on to draw the sun-worshipper temple. She couldn’t wait to see Julian’s face when he saw her pictures. Astrix didn’t blink at any of it, however, not even when she drew prairie wildflowers all over a white armchair. How could she have ever thought the Those That were all the same?

Around midnight, she put up her crayons and went into the bedroom. Talking had made the strangeness of the Citadel come back, and she was tired. Astrix trailed after her. He usually came in as she got ready for bed and begged her to speak to him again, but tonight, as she put on her gray nightshirt, she saw another kind of hope in his eyes. “Lemon?” he asked hesitantly, putting an arm around her and pulling her against him.

Why not, after all? she asked herself. Astrix was solid and warm, and she felt so strange and lonely here. But she couldn’t. To the Lemon in the city, sex had been nothing: only sex. But she had changed since then, even this had changed, she realized with some surprise. Her body felt more her own than it ever had been before, and she was not ready to share it yet. She had to find out more of who she was first. “No,” she said, resisting his arm, and Astrix dropped it at once.

“Can I sleep next to you, though?” he asked, and this, at least, was something that she found she wanted, too.

“Sure,” she told him, and he went into the bathroom while she climbed into bed. She pulled the gray sheets around her, and this night, left the blanket Astrix had given her on top of the bedding, where he could see it.

Every previous night that they had been in the Citadel, Astrix had always gone to bed after she was asleep and had gotten up before she was awake, so she had never seen the shiny silver-gray pajamas he wore out of the bathroom before. Lemon couldn't help it; she burst out laughing. She fell face down on a gray pillow and sobbed with laughter.

Astrix looked surprised and slightly offended. “It's not just me,” he protested. “All the Citizens wear these pajamas.”

That only made her laugh harder, until finally Astrix looked down at himself and laughed a little too. “I suppose these would have seemed silly to me when I was in the city, wouldn't they?” He took off the gray pajama top and got in bed. Lemon leaned back against him, realizing that she did feel happy to have him next to her, happy to talk to him again. Yet her happiness only made her feel more full of energy, more ready to act, to somehow stop the Those That forever.

“And then you attach this tube here,” Astrix mumbled. He was lying flat on his back, his sleeves rolled up, his head inside the bottom of a hospital machine. Lemon had to stifle a giggle every time she looked over at him; she didn't think she would ever get used to seeing a Those That man in such a silly position! But there was a lot to get used to now.

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the hospital machine. She was supposed to be handing Astrix tools and listening to him explain what he was doing,

although most of it was too hard for her to follow. Everything about the hospital machines was more complicated than she had anticipated, and Astrix said she had to learn so many things before she could really even begin: more reading, math, something called electronics. All this *first!* “You have plenty of time. It’s too complicated to understand right away,” Astrix said over and over again, happily. She could tell he was imagining another one or two hundred years going on in the same pattern as the last two weeks: In the morning, Astrix would teach her about all the knowledge he treasured so much; in the afternoons, they would work together on the broken hospital machines he had brought in from the city.

But she wasn’t willing to wait a hundred years, not even one year. Although it was interesting to learn about the hospital machines and to read the books Astrix gave her, she wanted this knowledge for a *reason*. She needed to use it to help Kira, the other people in the city, the sun-worshippers, and to stop the Those That. If Astrix was more his own real self now, so was she more herself, more than ever, and her own real self was restless, filled with struggling emotions and confused thoughts. Sometimes she felt so powerful, so sure that she could somehow save everyone and change everything, but most of the time she was aware of how small and weak she was, trapped here in the Citadel. Astrix still would not let her out of his rooms, and even if he did, where would she go? How could she help Kira by running endlessly around the gray hallways—and most likely getting lost!

‘What have I learned about the hospital machines so far?’ she asked herself, surreptitiously spinning a small wrench around her finger, hoping Astrix wouldn’t notice. He was particular about his tools.

She at least knew basically how they worked, and so she also knew that she could not, as she had vaguely hoped, learn enough about the hospital machines to change them so that they would make everyone in the city wake up to the truth, or make the Those That become nice. Yet she knew there was something there. . . the beginning of an idea. Something there that she couldn't give up on.

Once again, her thoughts drifted uneasily towards the small black object she had taken from Castille's body and that was hidden in her pack, which was tucked away in a drawer in Astrix's bedroom. She had not dared to look at it, even now, but she was beginning to wonder if she could figure out what it was used for . . . and maybe how to use it herself. Maybe she didn't have to understand how everything worked in order to understand how to use it.

"Astrix," she said cautiously. "Astrix, remember I wanted to learn about the other machines the Those That have, besides the hospital machines? Like the noodles and the stroodles?"

"Sure!" Astrix said happily, sitting up and brushing dust off his forehead and short colorless hair. In the days since she had started talking to him again, he was always so happy. He acted as if he thought everything was all right now, as if everything had been resolved. He didn't see that she felt completely the opposite. "We'll take a look at some of these tomorrow. Now, this afternoon, we can finish replacing these connecting tubes."

She thought he might be trying to avoid looking at the other kinds of machinery, maybe even suspecting something in her motives, but the next day he brought in a large box, which he put down on the dining table. "Here they are."

Lemon took a nervous half-step towards the table. Astrix handled the box so casually, spoke so cheerfully. “You mean—”

Without fanfare or hesitation, he pulled a blue, rectangular object from the box. “This is what was inside the televisions and created the noodles.”

“That?” She didn’t know whether to feel more astonished at the noodler’s innocuous appearance or horrified to lay eyes on it. She leaned on the back of an armchair and didn’t go any closer. “How does it work?”

“Well, as you know, not all commercials are noodles,” Astrix began, assuming the distracted air he always took on when he was explaining technology. “But any can become one. There’s a noodler in each television that goes off randomly, transforming commercials into noodles; there is nothing specific in the commercial to make it a noodle. Now, a noodle works on both audio and visual levels. A person has to both hear and see the commercial to really get caught by it, but just hearing the commercial is often enough to make someone look at it and then get caught all the way.”

“Why did one person sometimes get caught by a noodle and another person in the same room not?” Lemon asked, struggling to follow Astrix’s explanation.

“Good question!” He beamed at her briefly before going on. “Well, the noodles are simple. They work by sending a short pulse into the area of the brain that controls desire, but the pulse is very narrow, so normally only one person is affected at a time.

“Now the memory-eraser,” he went on, “is more complicated.” He pulled a small black cylinder out of the box. Lemon stepped a little closer. The memory-eraser, after all, was something that the Those That used on each other, not on the people in the city. For the first time, this struck her as strange. The Those That had always seemed so above the

reach of even their own technology, so inviolate. But of course they could be affected by it too. Astrix had had his memory erased, and then, in the city, at least at first, he had been as vulnerable to the noodles and stroodles as any ordinary man.

“One end is a microphone,” Astrix continued. “You speak into it, and list whatever you want the person to forget. You have to be pretty specific. For example, when they erased my memory completely, they must have said something like ‘Forget your name. Forget you’re a Citizen. Forget everything you know about the Citadel. You won’t know who you are, where you came from, or where you are.’ It can make you forget most of what you know,” he continued, “but who you are, your basic personality, is still there. That’s not something that can go away.

“Anyway, after you record the instructions, you place the cylinder against the back of the victim’s head,” Astrix indicated the base of his skull, “and press the yellow button. The cylinder transforms the vocal instructions to mimic the victim’s own brain activity, and gradually take over it, rewriting the brainwaves.” Lemon felt a little confused, and it must have shown in her face. “Basically, it takes over your thoughts,” he explained again. “It makes you think that what it tells you is your own thought. Or lack of thought, lack of memory. That’s how the stroodlers work, too,” he went on, pulling a small black object from the box.

Lemon couldn’t help herself; she gasped aloud. Partly it was just seeing the machine that had caused her so much misery, pain, and mortification over the years, and realizing how small it was. It looked like she could crush it with one good stomp. But even more than that was the fact that she recognized it. She should have known all along. She must have known all along, in some part of her mind that didn’t want to admit it. She

had taken a stroodler out of Castille's pocket. She had one now, hidden in the bedroom. And no one, not even Astrix, knew anything about it.

"How—how does it work?" she asked, licking her suddenly dry lips and trying to keep her legs from shaking enough to let her take a step or two closer to the table.

"Well, it's really very similar to the memory eraser," he told her. "They're really the same technology, only the stroodlers can work without physical contact. There's a little microphone here, on this knob, and you say what you want the person to do, like 'Dance around and wave your arms,' or 'Beat people up.' Then it transforms that into brainwaves. You point this yellow knob at the person or people to be affected. See, there's this hook on the top to help you hold it in the right position and not stroodle yourself by accident. On the other side is a dial you can use to adjust the beam—narrow if you want to stroodle one person or to get a more intense effect, wider to get a whole group. Each stroodler can affect about two hundred people at most."

By now Lemon had made it over to the table, and she peered cautiously at the small object that was lying so innocently in Astrix's hand. Terror, almost as powerful as a stroodle wave, rippled through her. But the stroodler just lay there, without affecting her, small and powerless without a Those That. She reached a trembling finger out but didn't dare to touch it.

"The Come Out and Play call was a special kind of stroodle," he went on. "It had to reach everyone at once, so all the Citizens participating had to coordinate and send out the same stroodle at the same time. The sound of the call helped reinforce the stroodle, kind of catch people's attention and then let the stroodle grab their brains."

Lemon shivered. Astrix spoke in such a matter-of-fact tone, but she couldn't forget what was hidden behind the simple words. The Those That had worked up such an elaborate system to hurt the people in the city! She felt sick. "I don't want to look at them anymore," she told him, and Astrix at once looked concerned and took the box away, out of the apartment.

She didn't even think about the stroodler for the rest of that day. She immersed herself in practicing math, in helping Astrix fix the hospital machines, in painting pigeons on the wall and in eating fettucine alfredo. But the next morning, when Astrix had gone into the city to get some more machines to fix, she went straight into the bedroom and pulled Castille's stroodler out of her bundle. "You can't see me," she said into the microphone, turning the beam to wide. "You can't see me, you can't hear me, you don't know I'm here." Without pausing, without daring to stop and think about what she was doing, she pulled the trigger back and stepped out into the main hallway.

Julian was right there, just coming around the curve of the corridor. She almost tripped over him, and let out a small yelp of surprise as she staggered and tried not to fall down. But he looked through her. She couldn't believe it. She stood not two feet from him, from a *Those That man*, and he couldn't tell that she was there. She was stroodling him. It felt like dream, and yet she knew it was real, and so incredible she couldn't contain a scream of pure astonishment, right in his ear. But he didn't wince or yell or anything. All he did was walk up to Astrix's door and knock briskly. Lemon held her breath, afraid that he would walk right in, as he often did, and find her missing, but he only knocked again. "Astrix," he muttered aloud. "Astrix, where are you? What am I going to do?" he added as he turned around, sounding very worried and not at all like a

Those That should. As he turned and went back the way he had come, she followed on his heels.

She could barely dare to believe it, but it grew more real with every step. Julian paced on, oblivious. A few moments later, they passed some other Those That men standing together, and Lemon tensed as she pointed the strodler at them, remembering the way they had looked at her the first time she had explored the hallways, but their eyes slid over her without a pause, unblinking. Giddiness swept through her and she started to laugh, suppressed it, then laughed again, defiantly and openly. She even hung back a moment to stick her tongue out at the group, then danced and made faces at them before running to catch up with Julian.

They went through the gray corridor for a long time. Lemon felt more and more confident, happier and happier. Finally Julian came to another apartment door and unlocked it. “Don’t notice me,” Lemon whispered, stroodling him again as she ducked under his arm into a room that could have been Astrix’s before she had drawn murals on the walls. The same furniture, the same gray carpet, the same windows. Didn’t the Those That ever get *bored*?

She wondered if she could strodle Julian to answer some questions and then forget all about it, but she didn’t dare, so she just stood against the wall and watched as he sat down in a gray armchair, displaying an unusual amount of agitation as he did so. He seemed to be thinking, rubbing a hand through his colorless hair. She was getting bored of watching him and was starting to hope that he would do something more interesting soon, when he suddenly cried out “Damn it!” and sprang to his feet. He pressed a button on the wall, then paced back and forth as he waited. When a soft knock

came on the door, he drew himself up sternly. A young servant walked in, and Lemon forgot herself and gasped aloud. She recognized him as one of the sun-worshipper sacrifices to the gods. Although Astrix had told her that the servants came to the Citadel through the sacrifices, it was still a shock to see the boy again, so pale and frightened, coming humble and trembling to stand before Julian. The last time she had seen him he had been flushed with excitement, sure he had been chosen for a special honor.

Lemon felt a surge of compassion for him, which intensified when Julian abruptly punched him in the face. The boy fell to the floor, and Lemon's mouth fell open in shock. After all Julian's lectures to Astrix on how a Those That should behave—how they should never express any emotions where anyone could see. But probably to Julian the servant didn't count; to him, it was no doubt just like punching a pillow.

Julian dragged the boy up and knocked him down again. Lemon stared in horror, wishing that she was big enough to go over and stop it. Then, with a start, she realized that she *did* have a way to stop it. "Stop hitting him!" she whispered, and pressed the stroodle button. Julian stopped at once, without looking alarmed or confused, *as if he thought stopping was his own idea!* Her heart gave a joyful bounce in her chest. "Be nice to him!" she said, out loud this time.

She was expecting Julian to help the servant up, maybe pat him on the shoulder, but all he did was step back, sigh, and turn away. "Go on, get out of here," he said, staring at the wall. The servant scrambled to his feet, looking relieved. Lemon wanted to make Julian do more, but she knew that if *this* was his idea of being nice, anything else would make him suspicious.

She decided to follow the boy out of the room, and was turning back towards Astrix's apartment when Julian came out into the hallway as well. He brushed past her, walking quickly, a determined look on his face. Where was he going now? She followed him back past Astrix's door and through the gray halls for several minutes. Finally they nearly collided with a Those That man coming out of another corridor. "Why, hello, Park," Julian said, falling into step with him. Even though his voice was calm on the surface, Lemon imagined that she could hear a note of tension in it. Julian was worried. About Astrix? Somehow, she knew it had to be.

"Hello," Park replied, his voice cold even for a Those That.

"Off to the club for lunch?"

"No," Park replied, smirking. "As you well know, Julian."

Julian seemed to be at a loss for words. Perhaps he, like Astrix, wasn't really very good at Those That intrigue. "Don't do this," he said finally, and Lemon knew he had lost. Julian knew it too, he was turning back even before the amused, triumphant smile broke across Park's face.

"Don't rush off," Park called after him, but Julian hurried away. Lemon followed Park, her curiosity rising, along with a slight return of the glee she had felt when first following Julian. After all, she had peeked at Julian before, through doorways or from behind curtains or through the wall of his indifference towards her. This was a new Those That, as far as she knew a stranger, and she felt another surge of power to walk behind him, invisible.

They walked along the hallway for several more minutes, then another Those That man appeared and joined the first. The two proceeded silently along the corridor

together until they came to a row of tall windows, where two other men were waiting. When all four had assembled, they turned and faced out the windows as if simply enjoying the view. Lemon carefully stroodled all four again, then stood next to Park and looked up and over at the line of calm faces. Everyone was quiet for a long moment. Finally, the man at the other end spoke.

“The purpose of our life here,” he said finally, “is being disturbed.”

“We must gain back what we have lost,” the second man said.

“We cannot allow contamination of the Citadel,” the next one said.

“Astrix must be taken down again,” Park added, almost sadly, and a terrible shiver bit through Lemon’s body. The way they had spoken was so like a performance that at first she wondered if they *could* see her after all and were screwing with her mind. How could they mean this? How could it be true? She reached out and jabbed a finger into Park’s ear, testing, but he didn’t react at all. It must be true.

“Tomorrow, same time,” the one who had spoken first told them, and they all turned away. Lemon trailed after Park, feeling numb and shocked. It wasn’t that she was surprised that the Those That would act this way. But poor Astrix! that was all she could really think. Poor Astrix. He thought he had found something that made everyone happy with him and finally value his work. But it hadn’t been true after all. The Those That were still after him. But why? Why would they want to lose their hospital machines?

Lemon took a deep breath and gripped the stroodler tightly as she followed Park. She kept right behind him as he went through his apartment door. How had Astrix explained stroodling to her? *It makes people think it’s their own thought.* “Think aloud,” she whispered when the door was shut behind them. “Tell me your plan.”

Did Park look suspicious? For a second she almost thought so, then a gleeful smile spread across his face. “Oh, Astrix,” he whispered. “First we’ll have you kill that little city bitch of yours, then wipe your memory again, all but the part that tells you how to fix the hospital machines. And we won’t let you go out into the city this time, no, this time we’ll keep you here in the Citadel as a servant, where we can make sure your memory never comes back.”

What he said seemed reasonable enough, for a Those That plan, but somehow Lemon didn’t entirely believe him. There was a hesitant look in his eyes, as if his mouth was repeating something his deeper mind wasn’t convinced of. Maybe this was what he had told himself was the plan, but. . . . She pressed the stroodler’s trigger harder, pointing it at his brain. “Tell me the *truth*,” she insisted. “What do you really want to do to Astrix?”

Park’s eyes glazed over. He swallowed hard. It was so strange to have a Those That man standing face to face with her, talking to her in a close whisper, that she almost couldn’t follow his words. “Astrix,” he mumbled. “We’re going to kill him.”

“What?!” Lemon gasped. “Why?”

Park’s face twisted and he stomped his foot. “I don’t *know*!” he whined, looking just like a sun-worshipper toddler, just like the toddler he must have been centuries before. It reminded her sharply of how Astrix had said who a person is didn’t change. Was there something else to Park, too, something more than the Those That he seemed?

“Yes, you know,” she pressed, trying to make her voice coaxing. “Tell me.”

He still looked like a two-year-old, struggling to voice concepts that he couldn’t quite understand. “It was Castille,” he finally said. “He started it all.” Now that he began,

he seemed eager to talk, and was looking at her in a calm and almost friendly way, almost as if he really saw her. “He had a way about him. Everything here is so much the same. When I was a child, there were things to learn, to do, and things changed. But here—there were so many days, and they were all alike. All the plots were the same. I felt as if they would blur me away to nothing. But Castille could make even ordinary plots different. More exciting, more dramatic, more meaningful somehow. And when they weren’t ordinary plots. . . .

“It was Castille who came up with the idea so long ago to kill all of our fathers,” he went on. “We really did something then, something real, and things changed.” Lemon involuntarily shivered with horror, but Park kept talking, oblivious. “After that nothing changed for a long time. Most of the Citizens don’t mind. They like things the same. But to some of us it started to get like water torture. Each day a drop, on and on, all in the same rhythm. Every moment seemed like an eternity, and there were an eternity of moments. . . . And then Castille wanted to go after Astrix.” He smirked. “Astrix was so foolish, so vulnerable, playing with his machines and disregarding all of us as fools. It could have been a simple plot. But Castille changed it. He made everything that happened in the city build on itself, add up to something, come to some *point*.

“I think Castille had some reason that he didn’t tell us,” he said, looking straight at her. “Something that made it even more meaningful. Sometimes I thought he wanted to punish Astrix for something, to torture him and get revenge for something. . . . But then, once, after Astrix killed the worker at the mine, Castille said no, our plot hadn’t been just to lead up to that, killing that worker had only been a rehearsal, a practice test. I thought maybe Castille was going to have Astrix kill him next. And Astrix did.”

“Castille wanted to die?” It was an incomprehensible thing to want, but when she remembered how still he had lain under her attack, how he had seemed to welcome the blows, how he had not screamed or fought when Astrix had appeared with the knife. . . . “Castille wanted to die.”

“Yes,” Park said. “When we found his body, it was amazing. I felt transformed. Something, at last something real had changed; Castille had shown us. . . . That was what it had all led up to. And that’s when we realized ourselves. All those years of stroodling the people, of Come Out and Play, of plots, of sun-worshipper sacrifices, they have to be leading up to something too. They have to build up to something, mean something too.”

“And if you kill Astrix, then everyone will become mutated and die,” Lemon said.

“Yes,” Park answered obediently. “Everyone will finally die.”

Lemon knew she’d better stop asking him questions before she was caught. “Nothing happened,” she told Park once more and slipped back out into the corridor. She found her way without problem back to Astrix’s apartment.

When she opened the door, Astrix was standing in the middle of the room, looking panicked. She let the stroodler fall to her side, so he saw her clearly; she could tell he knew with a glance what she had been doing. He opened his mouth to speak, but Lemon cut him off. “Wait.” she said. She took a deep breath.

Chapter 16

He wasn't going to yell at her for leaving his room, or for using the stroodler to explore the Citadel, either. Of course not. That was part of what he loved most about Lemon: the way she struggled to make her mind and horizons stretch and grow. And besides, she wasn't his to scold, like a child or a recalcitrant servant. Yet still, here in the Citadel she *was* his to protect. And going out alone, stroodler or not, wasn't safe. . . .

He just wanted to explain that to her, but she cut him off. "Wait. Wait, Astrix." She took a deep breath. There was a troubled look on her face that made him fall obediently silent and sent a cold shiver down the back of his neck. "I saw something when I was out there. Julian was worried about you, and talking to this other Those That, and I followed him when he went to this meeting. He was named Park."

He knew Park; he was one of those Citizens who had trailed around after Castille, providing a ready audience, a chorus, almost a live reflection. Park had helped, no doubt, in the mindwipe and the kidnapping, he too must have watched and manipulated Astrix in the city. But on his own—surely without Castille, Park was nothing, was powerless and ineffective. "Park?" he asked Lemon, voicing his thoughts aloud. "He's nothing to worry about. He and his friends followed Castille around, but now they're no danger."

"But they are," Lemon protested. She was frowning, looking at him patiently and sadly, as if she understood something he could not. "They're upset about Castille's death, though at the same time they think he wanted it. But they still want revenge. It's very confusing." She paused, sighed, and tried to explain herself again. "They seem scared and mad about everything. I think they want revenge for everything. They want to destroy the

people in the Citadel and the city. They want us all to die. And they want to make that happen by ruining the hospital machines. . . by killing you, Astrix. By killing you dead forever.”

When his memory had returned in the city, he had felt a huge shock and yet also a jolt of recognition. He felt the same way now. Nothing had changed. The same forces had won that had always won, and Astrix was in the same place he had always been in, only now even that position was beginning to crumble away underneath him.

“Astrix.” Lemon put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

And now, strangely enough, perhaps he was more like a true Citizen than he had ever been. He felt nothing. The world had fallen away beneath him, and yet it was as if he had known it all along. “I’m fine,” he told her calmly. And it was almost true, despite the sudden conviction that some part of him, at last and finally, had turned to grim stone. At the same time, he felt like he had been freed in some way. Now he really had no reason to care what the others thought, what their rules of behavior were, what any of their stupid customs were. He felt a rush of fierce elation. Now he could do something he had always wanted to do.

“Let me have that,” he told Lemon, reaching a hand out towards the strodler. She looked as if she didn’t trust him, but didn’t pull away. “It’s all right,” he reassured her. “You had a good idea.” He took the strodler from her and held it to his mouth. “You can’t see us,” he said. “You don’t know we’re here.” Lemon’s eyes and mouth grew round with astonishment, but he didn’t pause to explain. He simply took her hand and led her down the corridor towards the club.

Lemon followed, silent, but she held back a little as they came to the doors that led into the club's dining room. Astrix could understand her anxiety; the room was scattered with Citizens ready for lunch, however, he knew the capabilities of his tool and wasn't nervous. He stroddled the entire room with a lavish sweep of his arm and pulled Lemon forward. "I don't know exactly when it was that I started wanting to know how the hospital machines worked," he said out loud. They were walking boldly past tables full of Citizens, whose faces betrayed no signals that Astrix, skilled at reading subtle Citizen body language, could detect. One of them was Darrin; Astrix reached out and tapped the other man on the nose. Nothing. He laughed aloud. Why hadn't anyone ever tried this before? Or perhaps everyone had but him?

"At first going into them scared me," he went on. The words began suddenly to pour out of him, unquenchable. "We had to go in regularly for treatments to slow down our growth, and I always found that frightening. But then, once we had to abuse the servants and I felt so guilty, and I realized that the hospital machines could take all that away, keep everything the same, I started to feel differently, to realize how miraculous they really were.

"I was fascinated by them for a long time, but while I was a child and a teenager I tried to act like the other Citizens. I went to Come Out and Play, I went to the sun-worshipper sacrifices, I started going to the bars at night. . . ." He swallowed, remembering the hunger, the restlessness, that had possessed him during that long century. "But somehow all that never seemed to be enough. And then, when my father died—" He paused again, picturing the young Citizens racing through the halls, their eyes alight, their weapons alive. What had driven them to act? Had they been consumed by

fury or triumph? It was hard to imagine any Citizen now filled with as much energy. The six centuries since then had worn everyone down; hospital machines or not, they had grown old.

“When my father died it was as if a force that had been pushing me forward suddenly ceased and I drifted to a stop,” he continued. “The things I was supposed to be interested in were so boring.” They had reached the spiral staircase in the center of the Club and started to climb. Astrix looked down at the tops of Citizen heads rotating below him. They all looked alike; from above he had no way to tell who was who. “So one day I pulled up this old book about engineering. I probably read for fifty years,” he admitted, laughing. “We have millions of books in the digital library, but most of the time no one pays any attention to them.”

They reached a landing two-thirds of the way up the staircase and paused. Lemon had been so quiet it was almost as if she wasn’t talking to him again; he glanced over at her anxiously. She was staring down at the dining tables, transfixed. “This must be like a crystal ship,” she said softly. “High above everything. . . . They don’t even know we’re here. I could kill them all and they wouldn’t even know what was happening.” A fierce, terrible light gleamed in her eyes, and he could see her mow the Citizens down as casually as they had each other. The stone in his body seemed to spread towards his heart.

He had sat in that chair—he could still pick it out—the night his father had been killed. At the time, although his face had been calm, he had felt impotent and weak that he had not been the one to do it himself. Back then, he had been glad for his father’s death. He had hoped things would change, even though he hadn’t really known anything specific to hope for. But instead he had found the hospital machines, and a way of

making everything stay the same. What would have happened, he wondered suddenly, if he and the other Citizens of his age had had children of their own. Would they have been killed in turn by their own children, and so on? At least that had never been possible, and most likely never would be. The hospital-machine treatments had kept all the people in the city and the Citizens sterile; he suspected permanently so. It was probably for the best.

“Astrix,” Lemon said abruptly. When he turned to look at her he found that she was leaning far out over the railing, far enough to make him nervous. “Astrix,” she said again, then spat carefully. Astrix reached out to grab the back of her sweater and gave the Citizens below an extra dose of stroodling as the small *plop* landed in a bowl of soup. Lemon laughed aloud, unworried, then sat down, dangling her legs over the edge. “I guess there aren’t any here now,” she went on. “But there must have been some once. Where are they?”

“Who?” Astrix sat down next to her, moving slowly. His legs felt unnatural hanging in the air.

“The Those That women,” she said with an air of repeating something she had mentioned many times before. “Your mother. People’s sisters. You didn’t have a sister, did you?”

“No!” he answered, startled. “No, I was an only child. Most of us were. But of course there were some girls. And mothers.” His own mother was only a tall, distant form in his memory. She had never been very interested in him, and correspondingly, he could barely remember when she had vanished smoothly out of his life. “The women got mind-

wiped and put into the city. Like I did, only a long time before that, when I was still a pretty young teenager.”

“All of them? And they never came back? They were there with us all the time?”

Lemon looked shocked and horrified.

“Yes. You could even be someone’s sister, for all I know.”

“No!” she protested. “I’m not. I can remember I’m not. But anyone I know could be, even Kira maybe! And the Those That—and you—you didn’t mind, you didn’t want to go look for them sometime?”

It had never occurred to him to look for his mother among the faces of the women in the bars; they seemed too vastly different sorts of beings to ever be reconciled into one. Yet, the men who had cast the Citizen women out must have believed that they were all fundamentally the same. He frowned, considering. “Now that I think of it, though,” he told her, “none of the women I’ve seen in the city look like they could be our mothers. Most of them should still look a little older than any of us do, or at least a little more modified by plastic surgery. I don’t know. Maybe they’ve vanished. But our sisters, they must just be there with the women in the city. There aren’t any Citizen women left now, Lemon, unless it’s you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you know, in some ways now you really remind me of them. You’re nicer, of course, but in the ways you’ve changed, as you’ve become stronger and more confident and more intelligent. . . . The people in the city aren’t like that, or the sun-worshippers. Only the Citizens.” He stood up, pulled Lemon to her feet, and they continued up the stairs in silence. The last flight was so thick with dust their feet made

tracks. “We’re climbing up to the Museum,” Astrix finally remembered to explain. “The place where all the records about the Citadel and the original Citizens are kept. No one ever comes up here, as you can see. But I’ve always wondered, ever since I started being interested in the hospital machines, about the person who invented them. I don’t remember much about him; I know he wasn’t one of us, he wasn’t one of my father’s regular associates, but somehow they persuaded him to bring the machines and come here. I don’t think I ever met him, though, and he must have been killed when our fathers were.”

The stairs came to an end. There was no door; they simply stepped forward into a large, round room crowded with dusty glass-topped tables, dusty books, dusty portraits on the walls, dusty computer screens. Could this be seven centuries worth of dust? Astrix could not remember seeing anyone go up to the room before, not even a servant to clean. “My father insisted on this museum,” he told her absently. “He wanted his accomplishments to be remembered.”

“What exactly is up here?” Lemon looked intrigued by the Museum. He watched as she used her sleeve to wipe dust off of one of the glass-topped tables and peered down into it. “This is a model, I think,” she reported a moment later. “There’s the Citadel, and there’s the city. And this must be the country of the sun-worshippers, only it’s called farmland here.”

“They didn’t plan on the sun-worshipping,” he explained, taking a handkerchief from his pocket and gingerly wiping dust off another table. This one was a map of the Citadel; Astrix briefly located his own apartment, in the area marked as “Children’s wing.” How like his father to have labeled him a child for eternity!

But the map wasn't going to show him what he wanted to know. He turned to the edge of the room, instead, where a row of photographs hung on the wall. Astrix peered at the nearest and saw the twelve men who had developed the original idea of the Citadel. His father stood in the front row, his black and white face solemn. "Look," he called Lemon over. "That's my father."

He wasn't sure what reaction he expected or wanted from her, only that he was for some reason waiting tensely for it. But Lemon surprised him again. "Your *father*?" she said incredulously, peering at the picture and bursting into laughter. "Your father!" she repeated herself, hopping up and down, looking back and forth from his face to the photograph. "He doesn't look like you," she said finally. "Are you sure he's your father?"

"I'm pretty sure," Astrix said ruefully, looking at the picture. He realized that his father had lived only two hundred years before he was killed. Astrix had lived almost four times that long now, so why did he still feel younger?

"You can't ever really be positive with fathers, though, can you?" Lemon giggled. He could tell that she found the whole idea of Citizen parents almost unbelievable.

"I don't suppose there are any records of the regular people who came here," he told her, "but there might be. Maybe we could find a picture of your parents."

Lemon stopped hopping around and looked terrified. "I . . . I don't know," she said uncertainly. "I don't know if I'd recognize them. There isn't anything like a memory eraser only the opposite, is there? Something to bring memories *back*?"

"No," he told her, putting his arm around her. "No." He took one last look at his father's face and turned away. "I'm afraid that when they're from that long ago, they're gone if they're gone."

“Astrix,” she asked suddenly, “when you were teaching me about the hospital machines, you never said what it was that made us forget things.”

“What do you mean?” He had been in the hospital machines often enough, even the ones in the city, but they had never made him forget anything; only the memory erasers could do that.

“It made us forget things,” Lemon said, stubbornly but with a wave of uncertainty creeping into her voice. “When we went in after a stroodle, it made us forget about how horrible the stroodle had been, and forget how horrible everything was. . . .”

Astrix looked at her face and felt so guilty and sorry he almost cried. “There’s nothing in the hospital machines that can do that, Lemon,” he said as gently as he could. “Probably you just wanted to forget the bad parts of your lives. That’s natural. And the hospital machines were a way to explain that wish. But they couldn’t have made you do it.”

“But—” she protested. “That was what went wrong that time, the time I woke up and realized everything. How did it happen if the machine wasn’t broken?”

“I told you,” he said. “It was you, Lemon. You couldn’t take forgetting anymore. You couldn’t take any of it anymore. And your mind refused to let it go on. That’s what happened to Robert and Bracken and the other earless ones, too.”

Lemon looked stunned. Briefly she pressed her face against the front of his jacket. He expected to see wet spots when she drew back, but although her face was solemn, she was not crying. He squeezed her against his side, but she wiggled away. “What should we look for?” she said firmly, obviously changing the subject. “Where would the records be kept?”

“Maybe here.” Astrix opened a cabinet onto an old computer screen. He tapped the surface and it blazed to life.

“The History of the Citadel,” Lemon read over his shoulder.

Below the words was an table of contents: Original Idea, Architectural Plans, Photographs, Inhabitants. Astrix clicked on Inhabitants and a long list of names appeared. With last names, Astrix realized with a start. He had forgotten about them. He scrolled down through an alphabetized list of rich family names, passing his own: St. John; Julian’s—West; Dominic’s—Church; but nothing was promising until he reached the bottom and the listing *other inhabitants*. When he pressed the line, another screen popped up asking for a password.

“What’s that?” Lemon demanded.

“A password,” Astrix answered, confused. Was this just his father’s mania for secrecy manifesting, or something worse? “I’ll try my father’s,” he told her, typing it in. “He didn’t really like that I knew it, but when he needed computer assistance, I was the only one he could ask for help. He may have thought I was a flake, but at least he thought I was too lazy to ever sabotage him—there.” The screen cleared to reveal a list of several dozen unfamiliar names. After each name was a designation, such as Chief Architect, strodle manufacturer, and finally, inventor of the hospital machine. Astrix glanced briefly at the name, Alexander Carlo, but it was the word “Deceased” below this and every other name on the list that really caught his attention. He touched the word to call up the footnote. The inventor of the hospital machine, it told him, had been stroddled to kill himself. The note was signed FMSJ, Astrix’s father’s initials. With a trembling hand, he called up the rest of the footnotes. All forty-eight men and women had been murdered

in some form or another in the first two weeks after everyone had moved into the Citadel. Some had been straightforwardly shot, some pushed out of crystal ships, some poisoned. Each footnote was signed with the same initials. Astrix swallowed hard, feeling a sudden rush of nausea

“They were all killed,” Lemon gasped, peering over his elbow. “Why?”

“I have no idea.” Astrix stared numbly at the screen for a moment before he clicked it off. “Wait a minute. Maybe we can find something out. . . .” He went back over to the map and wiped away more dust.

On one wing were marked the names of almost all the people who had been on the list he had just seen. He tapped his finger on Alexander Carlo’s name. “Let’s go look at his room, Lemon. Maybe we can find something there. Some clue.”

They retraced their steps through the dining room and went across the corridor to the main elevators. Not surprisingly, the inventors and builders had been placed on one of the lower floors, on the north and west side of the Citadel. There, the rooms would be coldest and would have a view of the loading zone where the food was brought in from the country of the sun-worshippers, which no one else would have wanted.

When the elevator opened onto the hall, the air felt stale and heavy. The walls and ceiling were coated thickly with dust and cobwebs. Astrix shivered, imagining giant spiders, but as they walked down the hallway he thought more and more of ghosts instead. The light was dulled from the dust over the fixtures, and everything was so incredibly quiet. He had thought the other floors in the Citadel were quiet, but he hadn’t realized the presence of small background noises: the hum of his computers, the soft going to-and-fro of the servants. Everything here felt like death, like the heaviness in the

air was the weight of his father's betrayal of the people who had created the Citadel with their incredible knowledge and abilities. And why? Astrix couldn't understand it anymore than Lemon could.

When they got to Alexander Carlo's door, Astrix couldn't do anything but just stand there and stare at it for a long moment. His heart was pounding very loudly in his ears. This man had created the machines he had spent so many years working on. Astrix himself had never created anything. All he could do was perpetuate what others had started—and even that not very well.

Lemon reached out and tried the doorknob. "It's locked."

"Don't worry, I'll get it." Astrix remembered how he had kicked Castille's door down and stepped back a few paces. He felt, even though he knew it was foolish, a sudden desire to show off the power of his body to her. After all, his size and strength were one of the few things that only he had; the ordinary men and the other Citizens and even the sun-worshippers couldn't match him there. And since Lemon wasn't interested in having sex with him anymore, maybe this way he could at least remind her that men were good for something. . . .

Yes, he mocked himself as he rushed forward. Your people have oppressed her for centuries, but she's going to be impressed by your ability to kick down a door. What's your next trick? Nevertheless, when the door burst cooperatively open on his first kick, he couldn't resist glancing over to see her reaction.

He couldn't read Lemon's face, however. Was that a frown or a smirk? And then he became too overwhelmed with curiosity about Alexander Carlo's apartment and hurried into the room. He expected it to look just like all the other apartments in the

Citadel, but it was obvious at once that this wing had not been furnished by the same arctically-inclined decorator. Although little of the original furniture remained, he could still see the occasional patch of color or print in what were primarily piles of rust and dust. There were ancient shelves piled with ancient dust and clutter, ancient trash on the floor. He didn't see how they could find any clues. Anything that Alexander Carlo could have left behind must surely have fallen to pieces long ago.

“Astrix!” Lemon was across the room, hands on her hips, inspecting what looked to him like an enormous dust bunny. “I think there’s a hospital machine under all this!”

“Really?” He was coming towards her, looking skeptically at the tower of dust, when Lemon reached out tentatively to touch it.

Immediately several pieces of machinery in the room began to hum. Astrix jumped forward and pulled Lemon against him. They shouldn't have come here . . . this crazy man could have set traps. . . .

But all that happened was that a TV screen blazed to life in front of them. A cracked, fuzzy image of a man appeared on the screen and began to speak with an audio recording that emanated from a nearby metal filing cabinet. “My name is Alexander Carlo,” the man said.

“That’s him!” Lemon squirmed away from Astrix’s arm, giving him a strange look.

Astrix only glanced at her for a second; his eyes dragged themselves automatically back to the screen. He had known the man who had invented the hospital machines had not been rich, but his poverty was so blatant it struck Astrix like a blow, bringing a powerful wave of the past with it. Involuntarily, he was flooded with disbelief.

This was the man who had invented the hospital machines? He looked like a servant! Astrix shivered. Suddenly the seven and a half centuries felt like nothing.

“I am the inventor of the hospital machine,” the man went on, but his face suddenly blanched and he looked down at his feet. He sighed raggedly, and when he looked back up, there were tears in his eyes. “This is a confession of a kind,” he said, “though probably no one will ever hear it. But I suppose my last words should not be a lie. The truth is that I had a partner, Dr. Elizabeth Paris, but once I heard about the men developing the Citadel I sold the idea to them on my own. I didn’t want to share the money, so I used one of those memory-erasers they had and made Elizabeth forget all about the hospital machines. She’s still out there in the real world somewhere, and now I think I’m going to be paid back for what I did to her. . . .

“When they first asked me to come live here, I thought it was a wonderful opportunity. The rest of the world seemed to be going to hell so quickly, and I knew the hospital machines could never be sold for anything near what they were worth. And the new laws might have made us give them away for almost free. Elizabeth didn’t seem to care that much, but I did. I couldn’t stand the thought of not making money on something we had worked so hard on. I knew that all of my potential customers were going to the Citadel, and I had the opportunity to go as well. It seemed to be the only solution.

“We have been here for a week now, and already ten of us who are architects or builders or otherwise not part of the elite have died mysteriously. They didn’t want us here, they just wanted us to be useful to them, and now they’re picking us off one by one. I know they’ll get to me soon enough. There’s no way to escape, and after how I treated

Elizabeth, after I watched those wretched children and their parents without saying a word, this is probably what I deserve, after all. But not at their hands, not at their profit.

“So I’ve found a way to get revenge. Mr. St. John, the founder of the Citadel, asked us to create a secret room from which he could send a stroodle out to everyone in the Citadel at once. He wanted a way to control his own people, if necessary. The room was built, right underneath the hospital machine central control room, but I don’t think any of the rich people know it’s there, except for Mr. St. John. It’s not on any of their maps.” Alexander Carlo held up a hand-drawn map that Astrix quickly fixed in his mind. “And I have a key.” The man laughed aloud. “On my key ring, inside the hospital machine you touched to start this tape, in case whoever you are is interested. Anyway, besides the stroodle equipment that Mr. St. John wanted, I set up a special system connected to the hospital machine central computer just above.”

“Oh my god,” Astrix said aloud, horribly shocked, but bit his words back so he could hear what came next.

“It might take a while to begin to take effect,” Alexander Carlo went on. “But once it starts they’ll see what happens when they kill off the people who invented this technology, and who understand it. My system will interact with the central computer to cause the hospital machines to break down more and more often. They will not cure wounds. They will cause mutations. They will not prevent aging. All of this will come to an end and they will see how they have profited from killing us.”

The screen went black, and Astrix sat down right on the dusty floor, overwhelmed by despair. “Oh my god,” he said again. “It’s my fault. I did this, Lemon. If I hadn’t fixed the hospital machines, we could have all died five hundred years ago. *I* made it last this

long.” For a second he was horribly aware of all the miserable days in the city Lemon had endured, all the humiliating stroodles. And what could make that worthwhile to her? Certainly not him. For an even more fleeting second he thought of the others he had known in the city. Jake. Kira. Dooley. The men in the mine. Even the other Citizens. All of them. Trapped in this horror endlessly because of him. He had created the Citadel as surely as his father had.

Chapter 17

Lemon looked down at Astrix where he had collapsed on the floor. She felt a rush of sympathy for him. Poor Astrix! He had had to face a lot of shocks in the past year, after seven and a half centuries of living in a calm and unchanging world. She reached out to stroke his head. He must feel as if all this were his fault. In a way it was, but not really. She couldn't say the hospital machines were bad. They may have made everything last longer, but without them she would have been tortured to death long ago, without ever having the chance to get even.

"Astrix," she soothed him. When he turned to look up at her, something inside his eyes looked broken, an effect more disturbing even than the blankness that had filled him in the country of the sun-worshippers. "It's all right. It's not your fault," she assured him. "I was glad for the hospital machines in the city. We all were. And that man told us something really important, about the secret room." Her thoughts were racing. A secret room with the power to stroodle everyone in the Citadel at once! It was amazing! There were so many possibilities of things she could do. Any way she had been stroodled in the past, she could do back to them all at once, or she could just make it end. Kill all the Those That.

Astrix still looked upset, though, as he climbed to his feet. He was visibly shaking. "What have I done?" he said, aloud but softly. He was staring into space, not looking at her.

"It's all right," she said again, feeling a little impatient with him. "We have a way to fix everything now, change everything!"

“Change everything?” Astrix looked down at her with glazed-over blue eyes. “Change everything? What do you mean?”

“That secret room,” she explained, forcing herself to be patient. How could he not *see*? The answer was so clear! “The stroodle that can get everyone in the Citadel at once. Just imagine what we could do with that!”

Astrix only looked at her blankly, but he followed when she left the room. The air in the hall was eerily cool; she could almost feel it drift along her cheek. The sensation distracted her a moment until Astrix tugged at her hand. “Lemon.”

“Yes?” She was still trying to figure out. . . . Something was different. . . .

“Lemon.” He stopped and held her by the shoulders, looking her in the eyes, although she still felt as if he wasn’t really seeing her. “Lemon. It’s all my fault. Can you ever forgive me?”

She tugged against his hands. “For what?” She tried not to sound irritated, but there was so much to *do*!

“I did all this!” he repeated. “Can you forgive me?”

Lemon sighed. In her opinion, there wasn’t any time for Astrix to feel guilt, not when there was a chance to solve the problem. What good would forgiving him do? It wouldn’t fix things. “Forgiveness isn’t what matters,” she told him. “Saving everybody—that’s what matters.”

“But I can’t—” Astrix looked as if the world had fallen in and crushed him. She felt another surge of sympathy for him, and reached up to pat the hand on her shoulder. “I can’t go on, Lemon, without . . . if you. . . .”

“It’s all right, Astrix. What matters to me is that we have to change things. Forgive yourself if you need to. But we have to find that secret room. Come on.” She started down the hallway again, but just before the elevators she suddenly realized what was wrong and pushed Astrix back against the wall. He stayed where she put him, without asking any questions, and she rolled her eyes inwardly, remembering the placid Astrix on the prairie, but she was really relieved that he kept out of sight as she slid carefully along the wall and peeked around the corner. “I knew it!” she whispered to herself. The elevator doors were just clicking shut. Someone had been watching them.

“Someone was spying on us,” she reported breathlessly when she got back to Astrix. “Do you think it was Park and those others?”

Astrix swallowed and looked even sicker. “It had to be,” he whispered. “Are they gone?” She nodded, and his face gained a little strength. “I have an idea,” he told her. “Follow me.”

They went back down the hall, looking carefully around, but now there was no one in sight and the air was falling back into the same places it had lain for centuries.

They stepped inside an elevator, and Astrix pressed twenty-one, the top floor. Lemon had never been above seventeen, where Astrix’s apartment was, and she couldn’t hold back a thrill of curiosity as they shot upwards. She didn’t really like heights; even looking out the window on Astrix’s floor made her feel as if she might, impossibly, fall. Yet at the same time she felt greedy to explore the heights, to try to claim for herself the position the Those That had always held. As they floated above the city, their power had always seemed linked to their height; but it was more than that: she thought that if she

stood in their position maybe she could somehow understand them, learn how they could have acted as they did, and gain a power over them.

The hallway on the twenty-first floor seemed just the same as all the others, except there was something different about the light. She realized, to her delight, that there were windows in the ceiling. She could stand on the gray carpet and look up at blue sky and the high, thin clouds drifting above. “This is wonderful!” she exclaimed out loud. “I wouldn’t think the Those That would want to have anything so beautiful.”

Astrix looked up too, but remained unmoved. “They’re not inhuman,” he told her, sounding weary. “They wanted the same things everyone else wants. Only they got it too often. But maybe no one really meant any harm.”

She couldn’t believe that. Astrix had meant well most of the time, but the others. . . . At the very least, they hadn’t thought about what they were doing. That was not how normal people behaved to everyone else, and at the worst they had been unbelievably horrible, she told him.

Astrix shook his head. “I wish it was that easy, Lemon, but it’s not. You don’t know. Maybe you would have behaved the same way if you were a Citizen.”

She glared over at him in shock and disbelief, but he was staring at the carpet. “I wouldn’t act like that!”

Astrix seemed barely to hear her. Instead of responding, he pointed at a door just ahead. “That’s where we’re going.”

“Will you have to kick this door in too?” She tried not to giggle. She hadn’t known quite what to think of Astrix kicking down the door to Alexander Carlo’s

apartment. It still looked silly when he did anything physical in his Those That clothes, but at the same time it made her see the real Astrix struggling to emerge.

“No,” he answered shortly. “I have a key.” He opened the door and Lemon followed him inside. The air in the room was stale, but when Astrix flicked the lights on she saw no corresponding dust on the furniture or tables. This room had been maintained, and, she thought as she looked more closely, it was worth it. Although it still had white walls and white furniture, there was somehow more beauty in the lines of these chairs and the curves of the couch. There were beautiful, delicate pictures hanging on the walls, and the curtains over the windows, instead of being dark, heavy cloth like in Astrix’s rooms, were something pale and softer, that let a gentle, muted light through even when closed. The changes throughout the room from the ordinary Those That style were subtle, but overall the apartment produced a very different effect: beauty, elegance, and calmness instead of the sterile impersonality Astrix’s had held before she drew on everything. “This was your parents’ apartment,” she said out loud.

“Yes.” Astrix didn’t look around, but strode quickly through the room to a far door. Lemon had to half-run to keep up as he hurried into a bedroom that was even more elaborate and beautiful than the main room. There was a huge bed, of course, but this one was framed by tall carved wooden posts that ended in sharp spikes. Instead of the drawers sunk into the walls like in Astrix’s bedroom, his parents’ had large pieces of wood furniture, kept polished even now so that the deep tones and shades of the wood were evident. “How pretty!” she exclaimed, but once again Astrix did not pause to notice. He went on into the bathroom; when Lemon followed a moment later, she found him

rummaging wildly through the medicine cabinet, throwing boxes and bottles onto the floor as he searched.

“Your parents really slept here? Your father? In that bed?” She couldn’t get the image of those carved spikes out of her mind. How could you put a Those That man wearing his Those That pajamas into that picture? It would be like a smear of green-black factory smoke across a sunrise, or spilled Beef ‘n’ Bits sauce on a drawing.

“Yes, for a hundred and fifty years, give or take a few,” he said, though he didn’t sound like he was really listening. He flung some more bottles on the floor, irritably. “That’s what I’m telling you, Lemon,” he went on. “All of this was part of the Citadel too. Preserving this. You’ve only seen the other half. *There* it is.” He grabbed a bottle and rattled it.

“What is that?” Lemon was more interested in looking around the bathroom. The floor was made of polished stone; there was a waterfall in the bathtub, and the sink was made purely of glass, so smooth and seamless it looked as if it was floating in midair. “Astrix, how come you never wanted to live here?”

“It was my parents’ apartment,” he said, sounding startled. “I haven’t even been back, since—”

“But it’s so pretty. So different. Didn’t you want any of this stuff?”

“No, that was theirs. Our parents’. You saw what we got. Here.” He handed her a pill from the bottle and took one for himself before tucking the bottle away carefully in an inside pocket of his jacket. He swallowed his pill and Lemon followed suit, washing hers down with water from the invisible sink. At last Astrix’s shoulders relaxed a little.

He locked the bathroom door and sat down on a padded stool. “We’ll have to stay here for about an hour,” he told her. “But then we should be safe.”

“What was that?” Astrix was acting so oddly; maybe it hadn’t been the best idea to swallow the pill he gave her without asking what it was first.

“My father used to take them every day.” He laughed hoarsely. “He didn’t trust anyone. Ever. Maybe he was right. Those pills keep you from being stroodled.”

“Really?!” She concentrated on her brain, but it didn’t feel any different. “I don’t feel anything.”

“You won’t. But in about an hour, stroodles just won’t affect us, that’s all.”

Lemon shivered. Bit by bit she had broken free of the Those That’s mind control, and this seemed to be the final step, into invulnerability. What would come next? For a moment the thought of such freedom was scary. But then again, she had been uneasy at first at the idea of being able to choose what she wanted to eat out of a vending machine, and now she would hate to even *look* at a Chicken Alexander. Who knew what she might be capable of next?

There was an hour of time to kill, so she turned on the waterfall bathtub and dropped her clothes to the floor. “You want to come in, too?” she invited Astrix, trying to cheer him up. But he only shook his head.

Lemon stretched out in the tub and wiggled her toes under the waterfall. She could understand Astrix feeling overwhelmed. She felt that way too. Only yesterday it seemed as if nothing could ever change, and now they had both a way to resist the stroodles and a way to manipulate all the Those That in the Citadel at once. She could barely believe it either. But she couldn’t understand Astrix’s guilt. He hadn’t known

about Alexander Carlo's plan to destroy the hospital machines, after all, and the repairs he had done had kept her alive. Now she could get revenge. She leaned her head back against the pale green tiles of the bathtub and closed her eyes, smiling to herself. There were so many possibilities! The Those That themselves had given her a different idea each day. She could do every stroodle, each one she remembered, or make up her own. Or she could just have them all kill each other. After Astrix had told her how they had killed their fathers, surely it wouldn't be hard to make them think such a thing was their own thought. She happily began to picture one death after another, and must have fallen asleep, because the next thing she knew Astrix was shaking her shoulder to wake her up. "It's been an hour," he told her quietly, handing her a towel. "Do you want to test the pill?"

Lemon nodded, although when Astrix pointed the stroodler at her she shivered and wanted to cry. But it was as if she was only feeling the memory of fear as he said "Touch your nose." There was no compulsion to obey. She was free.

"Now check me." Astrix held the stroodler out, and she turned it on him. "Cheer up."

But he only shook his head sadly. "The pills work."

Lemon climbed out of the bathtub and began to dry off. "Will Park and the other Those That guess that we took these pills? Will they try something else instead of stroodling us? Like hitting us on the head or something?"

"I don't think so." Although his words were reassuring, he still looked grim as he unlocked the bathroom door. "None of their fathers were among the original twelve founders of the Citadel, and I'm not sure the rest of those men had any of the pills. It may

have been only my father; I don't think even my mother knew about them. I only found out by accident."

Lemon shivered. How could Astrix say the Those That were human? It sounded as if his parents had barely spoken to or cared about him. Had they even loved him? Her parents must have loved her, she reassured herself, even if she didn't really remember it, because she knew how to love people: Kira, her friends in the city, Astrix. Surely loving people had to be part of being human, but she couldn't see any evidence that the Those That ever did that. Except Astrix. But how had the other Those That felt when they were children?

She ran to catch up with Astrix. Despite his words, he looked from side to side cautiously as they went out the main door. But in the hallway everything was empty, still. Lemon suddenly realized that it was late; darkness had replaced the sunshine in the windows and the skylights. "Maybe they've all gone out to the bars."

Astrix nodded, relaxing a little as they stepped onto an empty elevator. "Neither Castille or his followers were ever ones to pass up a night of pleasure."

They went back down to the seventeenth floor and to the apartment without incident. Astrix locked the door behind them with a sigh of relief, but Lemon ran around and checked in all the possible hiding places before she felt comfortable. They were all safely empty, however, and she skipped back over to Astrix, who had collapsed on the couch with his hand over his face. With a jolt, she realized how gray his skin looked, as if everything that had happened to him, everything he had learned, was destroying him and eating him up from the inside out. She didn't understand. Why should he feel guilty for things that weren't his fault? that he had no control over? and why now, when he finally

had a chance to fix things and save everybody. He would be a hero, not the monster he thought himself to be. “It’s all right,” she said, trying to sound patient, even though she felt as if she could barely sit still, she was so full of excited energy.

“I can’t talk right now,” he said faintly. “And we’d better not go out to get dinner. If you’re hungry you’re going to have to call a servant.”

Lemon patted him soothingly on the head and went over to the door. The idea of calling a servant was disturbing, but she was hungry, and she thought she might need her strength to get through whatever might come next. Guiltily, she pressed the bell. She had never called a servant before, and was surprised when the soft, hesitant knock came after only a few seconds. She opened the door onto a dark-haired servant girl, who looked surprised to see Lemon, but took the order obediently and scurried away. Lemon watched her go. Abruptly it occurred to her that even though she was now invulnerable to the Those That’s stroodles, there were still ways they could make her do what they wanted. Suppose they held a knife to that servant girl’s throat? She knew that wouldn’t be beyond the scope of their imagination. And what would Lemon do then? Was the only way to be really free of them to be as cruel as they were? She wouldn’t want to do that. She shivered. The Those That had been doing this for so long; they had all their years and years of plots and tricks and being mean to each other. Although she had really lived as long too, she knew the years hadn’t been as solid or real to her. They had all been the same moment, and she hadn’t been able to use them to change or grow or learn to be mean and sneaky. How could she—or even Astrix, who had used his centuries of time so differently—fight against them? But even through her worry, she knew it didn’t matter,

anyway. She had no choice. If she didn't fight them, the Those That would kill her and Astrix dead forever, and let everyone die miserable deaths. She couldn't let that happen.

She stood in the doorway, staring out at the empty corridor, until the servant girl returned with a tray of food. "Thank you," Lemon said, taking it, then hesitated as a sudden idea struck her. She wavered a moment, glancing back at Astrix, but he lay still with his eyes closed. She pulled the door open a little farther. "Come in."

"Yes, sir," the girl answered obediently, her eyes downcast. She followed as Lemon stepped into the room and locked the door behind them. "What do you wish, sir," she asked, still looking at the carpet.

The Those That liked this, Lemon thought. They liked telling scared people what to do, liked beating them up or doing whatever they wanted to with them. In the time before she knew him, Astrix had had sex with the servants—maybe even with this girl here—and hadn't cared whether they wanted to or not. Even if he hadn't been as cruel as the others, she knew that was still wrong. And was that desire to control others a human or an inhuman one? Lemon didn't know. All she knew was that, looking at the girl's fearful face, she felt tremendously sad. "What's your name?" she asked gently.

"Dawn," the girl answered, still looking at her feet.

"What do you want, Dawn?" she asked her.

"Sir?" Surprise made the girl's eyes dart up to Lemon's face.

Lemon caught the eyes with her own. This girl was almost her own height, short for the sun-worshipper raised servants. "I can give you a few hours, I think, at least," she told her. "You can do whatever you want with them."

Dawn looked incredulous for a moment, then the answer burst out of her. “Sleep. I’m so tired. They never let us have more than half an hour at a time.”

“There’s the bedroom.” Lemon pointed awkwardly with her elbow, since she was still holding the tray. “Please, go be comfortable.”

“Are you sure?” She hovered, indecisive, a moment before hurrying gratefully through the door.

Lemon put the tray down on the table, looking somewhat guiltily over at Astrix, but he still hadn’t moved. She sat down and ate vegetable lasagna thoughtfully, then went into the bedroom. Dawn was asleep on the floor; Lemon put a blanket around her and climbed into bed, still thoughtful.

She woke up early, as she had hoped she would. The light coming through the crack in the curtains was a gray-blue, and Dawn was still asleep. Lemon got up and went into the main room, where Astrix was asleep on the couch. He did not move as she ate some of the leftover bread from her dinner tray and made a pot of coffee. Finally she went over and poked him. “Astrix. How long do those pills work? Is it time to take another?”

“Yes, good idea,” he mumbled.

In the ashtray on the table next to him were the ends of several marijuana cigarettes, obviously his sleep was not entirely natural. Good. That would keep him out of her way for what she wanted to do next. Nevertheless, he woke up a little as she rifled his jacket pocket for a pill. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” she told him soothingly. “Don’t worry. I’ll be right back.”

He muttered something and passed out again. Lemon swallowed her pill and sat down to wait for an hour. She couldn't afford to be stroodled now.

When the first actual beams of sunlight poked into the room, she decided she had waited long enough. Astrix was still asleep, and when she went into the bedroom Dawn was too. "Wake up," she told her, gently shaking her shoulder.

The girl jolted up, her face flushing red. "I'm sorry, sir, I overslept." She cowered away as if she expected to be beaten.

"It's all right," Lemon told her. "Nothing's wrong. Tell me, Dawn, do you know the Those—the Citizen, named Park? Do you know where his apartment is?"

"Yes," the girl nodded, hesitantly watching her face.

"Good," Lemon said briskly. She was sick of all of this nonsense. She wanted people to start acting like people, no cowering, no cruelty. "I need you to do something for me. I need you to take me there, to his apartment. And you have a key, don't you, to get inside all the apartments?"

"Yes, to do the cleaning when no one is there," she told her. "But what . . ."

"I need you to let me inside his apartment. You won't get in trouble."

"Yes, sir," Dawn answered readily enough.

As they passed through the main room, Lemon picked up Astrix's stroodler and put it carefully in her pocket. She left her hand there, resting comfortably on the trigger, and led Dawn out of the apartment. "Where now?" she asked.

"This way." Dawn turned right. She looked guilty and uncomfortable, even though from the way she called Lemon "sir," she seemed to consider her one of the

Those That in disguise. Maybe she was confused by the fact that Lemon had been nice to her.

They walked in silence for several minutes. Lemon strode along boldly, not even bothering to run the stroodler until it was necessary. Let them see her. She could stroodle them and they wouldn't be able to do anything to her. But they encountered no one, and she almost felt disappointed when Dawn stopped in front of a gray door and pressed a key into the lock. The door clicked softly open.

“Thank you,” Lemon said, and once again Dawn's eyes automatically darted to her face in startled amazement. “You can go,” she added. “But I'll help you again. I promise.”

“Thank you for letting me sleep,” the girl whispered and scurried away.

Lemon waited until Dawn had vanished around the curve of the corridor before she put her hand on the knob. She took a deep breath, but she didn't even really feel scared. She opened the door.

Not only Park, but another Those That man as well, lay sprawled in the ubiquitous white armchairs, apparently passed out if the collection of liquor bottles on the coffee table was anything to go by. Lemon shut the door with a snap.

Even so, it took the men a few moments to awaken. She had to thump the door again and rattle the bottles on the table before Park half-opened his eyes. “Shut up and get out of here,” he slurred.

“But I can't,” she said loudly and clearly. “Astrix isn't enough for me. He's boring. I need some men who are more . . . stimulating.”

Park's eyes flew open, and he sat bolt upright. "You!" he exclaimed. "Stephen, wake up," he added to the other Those That man. "It's Astrix's little toy," he went on as the other man sat up and stared at her, blinking in surprise. "What is she doing here?"

"The servants let me in," Lemon said, looking down, then up through her eyelashes in a pretense of shyness. "I told them what I wanted and they said I should come to you. They find you very impressive," she added, and had to stifle a giggle as Park looked pleased with himself. This was ridiculously easy. They really just had no idea that anyone could feel or think anything on their own.

Park and his friend exchanged glances, smiling. "She came to us!" Park said. "This will be easier than I thought."

"Should we kill her?" Stephen asked.

"There's no need to hurry," Park smiled. His eyes traveled up and down her body. "No. No reason to hurry." He tapped his pocket, and this time she knew what he was doing: reaching for his stroodler. She should feel scared that the drugs wouldn't work. But it felt like she had used all of her being scared up. "Take your clothes off," Park told her, and she felt absolutely no inclination to obey.

Smiling, she put her left hand to the neck of her sweater, fiddled with the collar, let her fingers brush across her breasts. The Those That watched that hand, oblivious to the other as it slid into her pocket and pressed the trigger of her own stroodler. "You don't notice anything," she said aloud as she pulled it out and drenched them both in a wide beam. "Sit there and think I'm obeying you."

They sat there as if she had not spoken, watching her; the look in their eyes and the half-smile on Park's face told her what they thought they were seeing. She couldn't help but giggle. "Come here," Park told her, smiling wider.

"No," Lemon answered. "You come here. Kneel down in front of me. You still don't notice that anything is wrong." She noticed that her voice automatically took on the smooth, hypnotic cadence the Those That had used when calling her over to them in the bars. A thrill shot through her as Park obediently got out of his armchair and knelt on the carpet. "You too," she said, waving the strodler at Stephen. "Kneel down here and be quiet, both of you."

He did as she had ordered, and Lemon stood there staring. Even kneeling, the top of the men's heads reached her chin, she only had to glance just down to look into their faces. With a start, she suddenly realized that Park's eyes were light blue, and Stephen's were dark brown. In the city, she had never known whether or not the Those That men's eyes had color. Even when she was close enough, she hadn't remembered to look. Back then, she never could have imagined a moment when she would have stroddled Those That men kneeling in front of her; that she could have the power to do anything she wanted to them.

She reached out a cautious hand and stroked Park's hair. Unbidden, he leaned into the touch and let out a soft sigh of pleasure. Lemon jerked her hand back, but she couldn't help but remember how Astrix reacted when she had first touched him. Now she could understand how he must have been starved for voluntary, kind, human contact. But the other Those That didn't feel the same way—did they? She reached out again, more boldly this time, and unbuttoned Park's gray shirt to reveal his thin, pale chest. How

many times had he peered at her body in a mixture of lust and disgust? She could feel disgust for him, but no desire, and even revulsion was not the name for what she was feeling now. She didn't know what she felt.

“Would you kill yourself if I told you to, Park?” she asked him.

“Of course,” he answered immediately. His eyes were fixed on her face. Which Park meant that, she wondered. The stroodled Park? Or the real Park underneath the surface of the stroodle? Hadn't he told her that he wanted to die?

A strange feeling washed through her as she stared down at him. Her veins were blazing alive, and a wonderful pleasure rushed through them towards her brain. “What else would you do?” she prompted him, struggling to control her voice, which had suddenly grown harsh and trembling. “Kill your friend Stephen? Drink his blood? Break one of those glasses on your head?” She was breathing quickly. At long last, she was starting to understand. It felt so good. “What else would you do?” she repeated thickly.

“Anything,” Park assured her, his blue eyes staring steadily into hers.

But suddenly the pleasure turned inside out, and Lemon felt trapped and enclosed by their blank stares. She took a step back. “Crawl around on the floor,” she said wildly, unable to focus her mind. “Mess your hair up. Kiss each other.” They did as she told them, each step, obediently, and she felt more and more panicked. “Stop it.” They stopped, just as she said, kneeling frozen on the carpet, blank-faced. She had backed up so far only the door behind her made her stop.

“Go back to your chairs,” she said quickly. “Fall back asleep. When you wake up, don't remember I was here; don't remember that any of this happened.”

They shuffled back to their chairs, and Lemon dashed out into the hallway. Her head was spinning as she walked, soon she broke into a run, running faster and faster, trying to leave something behind her.

Chapter 18

Astrix:

After Lemon and the servant girl she had dragged into the apartment had gone to bed, he had attempted to get stoned out of his mind, lying on the couch and smoking one cigarette after another. But it didn't help. He was still trapped in a suffocatingly small space, where there was no room to breathe, to think, to be the person he had thought he was. There was nowhere he could hide, nothing he could do to erase the actual past like his memory had been erased. All he could do was try to forget, now, but even that was harder than it seemed.

When his memory had returned after he had killed Castille, it had been horrible to realize who he really was, to see again the walls and limitations and merciless truth that held him prisoner. But now, it was even worse. Instead of finding himself, he was unraveling beyond all recognition. Everything he had thought he was doing, everything he had thought he *was*, was all a lie. Seven hundred and sixty-seven years, and he had only been wallowing in his own filth, just like all the others. Just like he had been supposed to. He had been nothing but a Those That all along; he had been his father's true son. He smoked another cigarette, and another. Seven hundred years had given him a lot of tolerance, but at last he passed out.

When he came to again, Lemon was entering the apartment. She slammed the door behind her, looking flustered. Astrix sat up slowly. His body felt dried-out and achy. "Where were you?"

"Just out," she mumbled, and ran past him into the bedroom. He thought he heard her crying, but couldn't bring himself to care. He had woken up consumed by a grim,

numb determination. Lemon was alive, and she would stay that way. His people had done enough to her. He would make sure she stayed safe, and all the rest of them could go to hell.

Luckily, there was coffee already made. He staggered over to the coffeemaker and drank half of the pot as well as his stroodle-proofing pill before he felt equal to the day. For the first time ever in his life in the Citadel, he did not shave or put on his suit jacket. It all was pointless. He just picked up his stroodler from where Lemon had dropped it on the coffee table, thrust it into his pocket, and strode into the bedroom.

Lemon lay on the bed, her face buried in the gray coverlet, but he picked her up and set her on her feet without preliminaries. “Come on.” He grabbed her hand and started towards the door of the apartment, hauling her after him. “We’re leaving.”

“What? Where are we going?” Lemon protested as he shut and locked the door. Astrix pulled his stroodler out and repeated the invisibility order, turning the beam to wide. He waved it down the hallway with one hand and grabbed Lemon again with the other. Double-protected by invisibility and the pills, they should be able to make it to the crystal ships. Then they would just go. Get away from all of this forever.

The hallways were empty. Maybe it was a sign. Maybe they would be able to escape, after all; maybe the Citadel would actually let him go. “Where are we going?” Lemon asked again as they got into the elevator, but he ignored her. She tried to squirm her hand free but he gripped it tighter and pulled her after him as the doors opened onto the roof. There was no one around. The crystal ships were waiting patiently. “Come on,” he said again. They had to seize the moment, or it would be too late.

“No,” Lemon dug her heels in and pulled back. “I’m not going any farther unless you tell me what’s going on.”

He was tempted just to pick her up and carry her onto the ship, but he tried to be patient. “We’ve got to get out of here,” he told her. “The Citadel is too big for us to fight. All of this has existed too long for us to change it. It’s just the way things are now. All we can do is try to escape, if that’s even possible.”

“What?!” Lemon looked shocked. She tried to get her arm free, but he wouldn’t let her go. “We can’t just leave.”

“We have to. And we’re going to. There’s no other choice. I’ll pick you up and carry you up the ramp if I have to.”

Lemon glared at him furiously. “You can’t do that! Do you want to act like a Those That? That’s what they do, make other people do whatever they want. That’s what they did to you, when they wiped your memory. You’re different. You can’t act the same.”

“This isn’t the same,” Astrix protested, although even to his ears the words sounded flat. But it wasn’t the same. “I’m not trying to hurt you. I want to keep you safe.”

“I know.” Lemon softened for a moment. “But we can’t just run away. We have to stop this if we can.”

“We can’t.” His hand tightened on her wrist. How could they stop it? It was too big, too powerful, too old.

“We have to try,” she protested, but he shook his head. They had to escape. He pulled her towards him, ready to put her on the ship whether she wanted to go or not, but she kicked him in the groin and wrenched away.

As always, pain was both torment and pleasure as it knocked him to his knees. The flood of sensation suddenly brought back the man he had been in the city, who had knelt helpless before Castille, who had been forced to kill Jake, had been made to want Jake’s death even though that had not been his real desire. No wonder Lemon wanted this depravity to end. And did he? He tried to search his heart for the truth, but there was no truth inside him. He was too much a creature of the Citadel, of this world. He could not believe it could be destroyed or that there could be anything else, at least for him. He was too implicated in this horror; unlike Lemon he could not peel off layers of illusion to find a true self. There was none. He had always been only clay to be manipulated and shaped by outside forces: his father, Castille, the hospital machines themselves. There was no real difference between when he had been an ordinary man and when he was a Citizen.

He looked up. Lemon hadn’t gone too far; she was standing by the elevator with her hand on the button, ready to flee if he came towards her. If he was not going to be allowed to choose, he might as well let himself be shaped by her. “All right,” he said, climbing carefully to his feet. “I’ll help you.”

They managed to get to the hospital machine central control room without any trouble, anything overt, at least—Astrix had a prickly feeling along his spine that made him believe Park and the rest of Castille’s followers were not too far away. He knew they were watching, planning their attack, their revenge upon him for making everyone live

almost forever. He could feel their eager anger looming closer. Events were coming to a crisis, tumbling inevitably towards a climax, whether Astrix wanted them to or not. It was the midnight of their almost millennium-long decadent ball; time for the unmasking. Lemon would be revealed in her true power, and he would take off his mask to the nothingness underneath.

“Where are we going? Is this the secret room?” Lemon hopped up and down beside him in a child-like movement he knew was deceptive. In planning for the Citadel, how could his father have forgotten that although the people in the city seemed to be foolish children, there was power waiting latent within them? His father seemed stupid suddenly, as well as cruel. He had always been overconfident in his own intelligence; now Astrix knew he had been the same way.

“This is only the regular hospital machine control room,” he explained to her. “I told you, I’ve never been to the other one. I think the equipment will be very similar, though, so I wanted to explain it all to you. This way we’ll be ready for whatever happens when we go to the secret room. We don’t know what it will be like then, and we might have to hurry.”

Lemon nodded. She still looked excited, although she had stopped hopping around. He wondered why she didn’t show any of the grim despair he felt. But she didn’t seem to be scared at all.

He opened the door to the small room. He had been there thousands of times over the years, working, keeping up with a task he now knew had been futile all along. He almost expected to find that Park and the others had been there and destroyed the room in the hope that it would lead to an even quicker breakdown of the hospital machines, but

everything was still normal and untouched. He shut the door behind them, wedging the chair carefully under the doorknob.

“This is it?” Lemon looked around as if searching for more than the rows of computer terminals on a desk and the chair, which was now in service as a makeshift lock.

“This is all,” Astrix said. “I don’t know if the secret control room will look *just* like this, probably not, since there will have to be something to send the stroodle out through the Citadel, but the interface will probably be set up the same way.”

Lemon went over to the central computer and poked cautiously at the keyboard. “Don’t you have computers just like this in your apartment?”

“Those have a simpler keyboard, and use a different system,” he explained. “Let me show you.”

They spent most of the morning practicing, interspersed by breaks to stretch and sit down, since they had to work crouched over the keyboard. Astrix wanted to make sure Lemon knew how to use the equipment perfectly. He didn’t want to admit the reason to himself, but he knew it nonetheless: he wasn’t going to be able to program the great stroodle that would change their world, he wasn’t strong enough to take such a dramatic step, to unfold the forces that had created him. All of his years of life had made him too slow, too filled with inertia, too scared of anything new. Lemon was going to have to do it herself; he could only hope to manage to help her.

Finally, he was assured that she was comfortable with the computer. They went back to his apartment and sent a servant to bring them some food. “Will we go do it now, this afternoon?” Lemon asked. She looked excited but incredulous, as if she couldn’t

really believe what was happening. The only thing he felt was stunned, stunned and hollow. Nothing of him was left.

But he had to forget all that now. It didn't matter. Lemon had laid a purpose in front of him, and he had to follow the steps one by one that would lead him there. "There's no reason to wait," he told her. "That only gives them more time to plan against us."

Lemon nodded, her eyes huge, but he wasn't able to think about her possible feelings anymore. His focus had narrowed; the world had narrowed. They each took another anti-stroodling pill. The food came. They ate. Then there was nothing to do but leave.

It felt like a dream. Although he had walked through these hallways uncountable times, now they seemed eerily unfamiliar. He felt lost and disoriented, even though his feet walked steadily down the hall, following the map Alexander Carlo had showed them; his fingers pressed the elevator button without trembling. Lemon was a little bouncing blur in the corner of his eye, but his vision was tunneled and twisted. He had to concentrate on where they were going. He had to concentrate, or he would fade away into thin air.

The elevator doors opened. The hallway stretched out before them, coiling and knotting in upon itself. Time was turning in upon itself. This was the end.

"Astrix, come on." Lemon tugged on his hand. Her touch jolted him halfway back to reality. She was real. He followed her, chasing hopelessly the jangle of the keys she held in her hand, the keys that would unlock the truth inside the Citadel.

“What will you do when we get there?” he asked her, humbly. He should be humble. They had not yet discussed what words she would type, what fate she held in her hands for them all.

“I don’t know.” Her eyes looked troubled. “Astrix—”

“This is it,” he interrupted. “This is the door.”

Lemon smiled at him excitedly as she tried the first key in the lock, but his attention was caught by movement down by the elevators. Four Citizens spilled out of the doors, the men he had expected to see, Castille’s followers: Park, Tor, Evan, Stephen. Even from this distance he could see the eager tension in their bodies, the smiles on their faces those of people who had always had power, who had always won.

Lemon:

“Hurry,” Astrix said. Somehow even his voice sounded pale. “They’ve found us.”

Lemon risked a glance over her shoulder. Park, Stephen, and two other Those That were down at the other end of the corridor, apparently arguing over what to do next. “How did they know where we were going?” she cried, outraged.

“They probably went back to Alexander Carlo’s apartment,” Astrix said. One of the men was pulling something from his jacket that she recognized from Astrix’s books as a gun and she forced her hands not to shake as she tried another key. There were five left, and she couldn’t help but worry that maybe they’d gotten it wrong, maybe none of these keys would open the way after all. . . .

The first one didn’t. “Can’t you strodle them?” she gasped. Her heart began to pound in her throat. The Those That couldn’t stop them. Not now!

Astrix pulled the strodler out of his pocket. "I think they're still too far away. But I'll try it." He held the strodler up, then cursed as a gunshot rang out. Lemon looked back in time to see the strodler fall to the floor, smoking. "Not anymore!" he cried. "Hurry!"

The second key didn't work either. But on her third try, the door clicked smoothly open and she tumbled over onto dusty carpet. Astrix leaped through behind her before she had even gotten to her feet, and slammed the door. "Lock it," he urged her. "Hurry."

The lock clicked comfortingly, and Lemon was relieved, but Astrix pulled her onwards. "That won't stop them for long. They'll shoot through it. Maybe we should have brought a gun, too."

She could tell that he didn't mean to shoot the doors, he meant to shoot the Those That who were after them. The idea should have made her happy, but instead Lemon shivered with uneasy stubbornness. "No," she told him. "That's how they do things. Not us."

"But what about me, Lemon?" he asked her in that familiar miserable tone. "Aren't I one of them too?"

"I don't know," she said crossly, growing impatient with his endless need for reassurance. "Just decide who you want to be."

This new corridor was unlike any others in the Citadel; it was easy to see that Alexander Carlo and the other workers had created it secretly. Although it had the same gray carpets and gray walls, it was narrow and low, and twisted and turned so sharply it seemed to just zigzag back and forth. The ceiling was only slightly above Astrix's head; she saw him duck several times to avoid the long strands of cobwebs and dust hanging

down. There was dust everywhere, and half of the light panels in the ceiling had burned out, so it was very dark, too. Lemon even saw a few roaches scuttling past. Oddly enough, the sight of them cheered her up. There were no roaches anywhere else in the Citadel, the fact that they could live here proved that this place was beyond the borders of the Those That's power.

The hallway was beginning to feel like a tunnel when they reached another door. This one unlocked easily with the same key. They slid through and locked it again just as a muffled shot rang out from behind them. "That's the first door," Astrix said, his voice Those That flat. "We're not going to make it."

"Don't say that yet!" Lemon grabbed his hand and started running. This corridor was straight in front of them, but so dimly lighted she couldn't tell when they would reach another door. Once again she felt a flash of panic. Maybe they were wrong; maybe this was all a lie; maybe the corridor would never end and they would just run and run around the hidden walls of the Citadel forever. There was another shot behind them, and she glanced back over her shoulder. Even through the jolting half-darkness, she could somehow clearly see the door burst open and the Those That coming towards them. The four men were running; their faces were lit up with fury and lust for the chase, and they let out cries of excitement that startled Lemon as much as they frightened her. The Those That were so anxious to find them, or so aroused by the hunt, that they were losing their characteristic calm. What would that mean for Astrix and her if they were caught?

They reached another door and Lemon frantically unlocked it. At least the Those That were still far behind. She could tell that they weren't used to running. When she and Astrix slammed this door shut, their pursuers were still a good distance away.

This door had opened, for the first time, onto a passageway that ran at right angles to the previous one. “Which way?” she asked, suddenly confused and disoriented.

Astrix didn’t answer aloud, just tugged her silently to the right. He put a finger to his lips. They walked quickly and quietly, and soon the passage curved around and hid them from sight. Lemon felt better briefly, but then she realized how stupid that was. Their feet were leaving tracks in the dust; there was no time to stop and try to obscure them. They just had to walk faster.

A few moments later she heard the Those That burst through the door. “Where have they gone?” one of them demanded. Lemon couldn’t tell whose voice it was, but he sounded amused as much as angry. She remembered how relieved Astrix had always been to feel *something*, no matter what, and realized that, on some level, the Those That were probably having the time of their lives.

“There! Look at the footprints,” another one howled with glee. Lemon struggled to contain her frightened breathing and walked faster.

They came to another door. Lemon struggled to unlock it with hands that were suddenly shaking harder and harder. They ran through the next hallway, brushing thick swaths of dusty cobwebs out of their way, then through another door. This one opened onto a flight of narrow stairs that reminded her of the apartment buildings in the city. She smiled as she ran up; the Those That would not climb them so easily!

And, when they reached the top, they could no longer hear their pursuers. At least having to exercise occasionally in the last seven hundred years was coming in useful now, she thought, and then, abruptly, the corridor dead-ended into a small, dusty door.

“This is it,” Astrix said quietly. In the shadows his face was expressionless. Lemon felt both excited and terrified, but she knew there was no time to worry about how she felt. She unlocked the door, and it opened into a small room, about the same size as her apartment had been in the city. She shut the door and locked it before she felt free to look around. In the center of the room was a large block of machinery, covered with dust, but she could make out the unmistakable shapes of a screen and keyboard like Astrix had shown her how to use, as well as knobs, panels, and switches that she couldn’t identify. A thick metal column rose from the center of the machine to the ceiling, where it branched out into several thick, fat trumpets. Hundreds of wires ran out of the trumpets, zigzagged across the ceiling, and then vanished into the walls. “Those wires must take the stroodle to the rest of the Citadel somehow,” Lemon said, glancing over at Astrix, waiting for him to explain how it worked.

But he wasn’t looking around at the machinery; he was staring into space. He didn’t turn to her until she tugged on his arm. “Lemon,” he finally said. His voice shook, and his eyes looked huge. “Lemon, I don’t know. I don’t know if we should do this. It can’t be taken back, Lemon, we do this and it’s done, done forever. . . . Everything will change.”

“We want it to,” she told him. “Things *have* to change. It’s been like this far too long.” Once again she was overwhelmed by awareness of the immense gulf of time she had lived through worshipping the Those That and felt sick.

“But I’m like this,” he protested. “This has made me. I’m scared, Lemon.”

“Astrix, that’s not—” she started, but a not-so-distant bang cut her off. “They’re coming,” she said instead. She reached out and touched Astrix’s face, feeling the very un-

Those-That-like bristle of unshaven whiskers against her fingers. She forced him to look at her. “We have to do this.”

He seemed to come to some sort of decision inside himself. “I’ll try to slow them down. You . . . you do it.”

Astrix turned towards the door, and Lemon focused back towards the room. Her heart was suddenly in her throat. Could she really do this? Change everything? Some of the stories Astrix had given her to practice reading on had been about people who had been chosen for a special destiny or who had been suddenly revealed to be princesses or goddesses. Lemon knew that this was not the same. No one would tell her she was a princess. She was not a chosen one. She had to choose herself.

She took a step forward, beginning to feel more and more excited. Here she was, in what had been all along the secret heart of the Citadel. Through all those years and years and days and days as they had manipulated her and toyed with her, as they had drifted through time that had held still for them, they had revolved in their slow, fascinated spiral around this very room. She knew the Those That imagined that all these centuries of detached violence must have been adding into one another, building up to something, to some explosion or some transformation of violence into ecstasy and transcendence. If it had just been the Those That, she wouldn’t have cared, but they wanted to take the ordinary people and the servants with them. She couldn’t let that happen. So the Those That would just have to share in what *she* planned. Whatever that was.

There was no time to think, however. Quickly, she wiped as much dust off the console as she could. No wonder the Those That had never come to use this place! They

wouldn't know what to do with the dust. She had to wipe off thick smears to find the control panel and the keyboard. She pressed the button to wake the machine from "standby" mode and, to her great relief, despite the dust, it came to life, one light after another clicking alive in red, yellow, green. It even began to hum, soft and deep. It was working!

But there was little time left. She heard feet running up the stairs outside, and then there was a loud pounding on the door. "Get back! Get out of here!" Astrix yelled at them, but the Those That only beat harder and shouted back. They must have run out of bullets for their gun, since no one shot the lock, but the way the door shuddered under the blows flung at it did not make her feel any better. "Hurry, Lemon," Astrix told her, pushing back on the door. It seemed to be bending inwards.

But her mind was a terrible blank. In the city making decisions had been easy. Everything had been very clear. But now nothing was clear. *I don't know what to do!* she cried silently. She could hear the Those That pounding and yelling outside the door; they grew louder and louder. Any second they would break through and win, drag everyone into a cataclysm of death, because she wasn't able to think of an alternative.

Lemon took a deep breath. Suddenly, everything was very quiet. Two hundred and eighty thousand days' worth of stroodles wheeled through her mind. She could remember them all. She could do them all back. She hesitated, and suddenly the silence in the room reminded her of the little core of Lemon that had always been there, deep under the surface of a stroodle, no matter how overpowering it had been. And then she knew what to do. She began to type as fast as she could. At least everything was familiar,

the machinery was just as they had practiced it. She knew what to do. If only she had the time.

With a loud crack, the door flew open. She looked up wildly to see Astrix leap back out of the way, then dart forward to kick at the men rushing into the room. Astrix was still much bigger than the other Those That, and he looked ferocious and powerful as he fought them back, but there were four men against him. She knew he couldn't last long.

Desperately, she turned back to the computer, typing furiously. Her hands were shaking hard, but somehow the words forced themselves out through her fingers. She heard Astrix cry out in pain, but she was on the last few letters. "Forget everything," she typed. "Forget who you have been for the last seven hundred and sixty-seven years. You don't remember the stroodles or the noodles or the bars or the people in the city. You're only that child you were when all this began."

She had finished the last word, and had her hand on the Enter key, when a cold, flat voice snapped out from behind her. "Stop."

Lemon spun around. Park was standing there, staring at her. "Stop," he said again. "Don't push that key." The momentum to push it was still in her fingers, but when she looked at him all of the years she had obeyed the Those That's every word rose up and grabbed her in paralyzing hands.

"Don't push it," Park repeated, and Lemon realized he was shocked by the realization that she'd gotten this far. He had never believed that she could really do anything to affect him and the other Those That. His astonishment should have made her feel triumphant, but instead it staggered her own confidence. For so, so long she had

worshipped Park and the men just like him, worshipped them all the time, every single minute. She had been nothing except what they had created. Now she had broken her mind free, yes, but for such a brief moment in comparison! How could she believe that she could change these people? After so many days under their control, it was almost impossible to believe that she could assume that power.

But then she took a closer look at Park. His face was flushed from running; he was breathing heavily. “Move away from there,” he told her, and his voice was cracking with panic. She could tell that he wasn’t quite sure what to do if she didn’t obey. He was scared. She was already changing him, and yesterday when she had stroodled him he had knelt before her just as helpless as she had once been. She looked into his eyes and the memory of the wonderful, terrible feeling that had swept through her made her shudder. It was that memory, at last, that gave her fingers strength. This had to be stopped. Right now.

Park must have seen the resolution in her face. “No!” he cried out, and dove towards her. One of the other Those That men was moving in at her too; there was a gray blur in the corner of her eye, plunging towards her, but they were both too late. She pushed the button.

She felt the memory wipe ripple through her, in the old stroodle wave feeling, *the last one*, she thought feebly, but there was no room for thought. The stroodle was changing the world and she felt it change, felt it wrench underfoot and suddenly there was silence everywhere.

Astrix:

Stephen had stabbed him, a long deep slice across the stomach—why, he wondered in a detached, almost amused corner of his mind, did Citizens have such an affinity for knives?—but he was still able to fall across the doorway and block it, even to raise an arm and shove against Tor’s knees until he toppled too, taking Evan along with him. But Park and Stephen bolted past, into the room. Astrix flung himself backwards, unable to hold back the cry of pain as landing jarred his wound, but his fingertips barely grazed Stephen’s heel. He cried out again, sure that for the final and most horrible time he had failed Lemon, failed her yet *again*, then suddenly he felt the stroodle wave sweeping over him.

The hairs prickled on the back of his neck and he felt like he was crouching under a low, powerful thundercloud. He shivered, terrified, aware of the thin line of the protective drugs he had taken holding back that huge weight, that incredible power. For a second he was sure the drugs wouldn’t work and was ready to give in to the memory eraser once again—but it rolled over him and was gone.

Everything was very still. Astrix was suddenly aware of the pounding of his heart, of the immense pain biting through his body. He tried to scream but there wasn’t enough air in his lungs to let out more than a groan. He coughed and spat blood on the dusty gray carpet.

“Astrix!” Lemon flung herself to her knees beside him. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“Not really,” he gasped, trying to breathe shallowly. The pain was chewing him up, taking bites and chomps out of him, becoming more and more of the world. There

was no way to fight it, he just had to give himself to it, plunge into the pain and just thank god he could feel *something*. . . .

Lemon put her arm under his shoulders and hauled him to a sitting position. “Come on,” she told him. “We have to get to a hospital machine. It’s all right, Astrix, we did it, we did it!”

Somehow he was on his feet. He looked down dazedly and saw Stephen, Tor, Park, and Evan sitting on the floor. Their eyes were wide and their faces blank and confused. Stephen even reached out a shaking hand towards the wound he had caused, his face twisting in confusion and worry. “You’re hurt?” he said carefully.

Neither Astrix nor Lemon responded. “Come on,” Lemon said again. “We have to get to a hospital machine. You’ll be all right.” She led him firmly towards the door, even though he tried to hold back. “No,” he muttered, trying to push her arm away. “No, Lemon.” The temporary energy and euphoria that had filled him while he was fighting had drained away, and he knew that underneath the veneer of pain the numb despair had returned. He realized now that pain was all there was to him, if it vanished there would be nothing left at all. The world he knew was gone, and had never been. He was useless now; the hospital machines wouldn’t need repairing because they wouldn’t be in constant use anymore, and Lemon. . . .

“No,” he said again, trying to hold back. Every step jolted his stomach into higher and higher agony. It had been so long since he’d felt this much pain, and it was such a relief. If only he could give in to the pain, follow it to where it wanted to take him. “No. Don’t take me to the hospital machine,” he muttered.

He looked down at his stomach. The blood was soaking his gray shirt and gray pants, bright red against the gray. It looked like it must belong to someone else, not a Citizen. They didn't die; they lived on and on: sterile, frozen, preserved, mummified. But he had always been different. Maybe he could die; like Jake, like Castille, let pain sweep him up and over and out of the world into whatever hell waited for him in the next. "I'm just going to die," he told her softly. He put his hand on the wound and watched blood seep through his fingers. He was starting to get lightheaded; he had better make Lemon understand quickly. "I don't want to go in the machine," he said as clearly as he could. "I've had enough." To have lived seven hundred and seventy-five years in such numbness that getting stabbed in the stomach was a form of ecstasy—that was ridiculous. He didn't deserve to live any longer, and he didn't want to. No more. He couldn't bear it. "I just want to die," he told her. The hallway was wavering in front of his eyes and he peered dimly down at Lemon's concerned face. Let that be the last sight he saw.

But the next thing he knew he was opening his eyes in the darkness of a hospital machine, which was once again in good working order because he had fixed it. He had saved his own life, even if he didn't want it back.

The door swung open and Lemon peered in. She was silhouetted dark against the light but he could still see her gigantic smile. "Astrix! You're healed! And it worked! Everything's changed! They've forgotten everything!"

Astrix sighed heavily, stepping out of the machine. Lemon danced around him but her joy could not touch his heart. "Look, Lemon," he told her. "The machine healed the knife wound, but that doesn't change anything. I can't take anymore. I mean it. I can't go on." He looked down at his shirt, still ripped, bloody, and dusty. That hadn't been healed

either; he knew that whatever was inside him was in much the same state. He thought briefly of looking for a clean shirt, but then remembered there was no more need to wear gray. One way or the other, he would never need to wear gray again, so he just took the shirt off and dropped it on the gray carpet. For the first time, he realized how much the two were the same color.

“What do you mean?” Lemon seemed to really hear him for the first time, and her happiness cracked into panic. “Astrix, you can’t mean that!”

“Yes,” he said again. He looked down at her face and felt incredibly, unbearably old and tired. Lemon was not going to save him. Nothing could. “You should have wiped my memory too. I shouldn’t have had the drugs. I don’t deserve them. But now it’s too late. There’s really no choice left anymore. I can’t start over. I should just let it all end.”

“No,” Lemon said. “No!” She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. “It’s only the other Those That who deserve to have their memories erased. Not you.”

“But I’m just as guilty as they are!” Astrix said. He laughed briefly, a short despairing bark. “You know what I was, Lemon, what I did.”

“But you were different,” Lemon said. She looked into his eyes and he looked back at her. Her hair was its natural blond, her eyes their own blue. She was wearing black Citadel clothes, but she stood straight and tall. She had changed. She had decided what she wanted the world to be like and had made it over according to her ideas. “You were always different. The others let the Citadel, what your fathers planned, take them over and become them completely. You were always different.”

“But nothing I did helped. It only made things worse.”

“That’s not true. It kept us alive this long. And I’m glad. Now everything can change, and we can all discover who we are and what is happening outside of here.” She reached up and grabbed his chin, forcing him to look at her. “Maybe you didn’t stop things or change things,” she told him. “Maybe you couldn’t do anything like that. But you weren’t the same. You were more not the same than I was, and none of this could have happened if you were like all the rest.”

“But maybe I am like all the rest. Don’t the Citizens want to die?”

Lemon frowned. “In the city I wanted PlasticPerfectPeople, even when I wasn’t noodled, because they had told me so many times that’s what I wanted that I believed it. But I didn’t really want them, even when I thought I did. All this time, you were trying to keep everyone alive, even when they’ve been telling you for so long that you wanted to die. But you never believed them. Don’t start now.”

Chapter 19

Astrix:

There was no sudden revelation, no sudden surge of self-worth. But he looked into Lemon's eyes and a small space bloomed in his heart; maybe he could bear to keep on living after all. "All right," he said faintly. He took a deep breath. "What's next?"

Lemon beamed happily at him, but thankfully accepted his change of conversation without comment. "We have to get a lot of stroodlers together," she told him. "It's probably best to get them away from the Those That anyway."

For the first time, Astrix looked around and really saw where he was: in the small hospital machine alcove off of the club's dining room. Beyond Lemon, he could see Citizens—including Park and his friends—and servants scattered throughout the dining room. Some were talking together, others were sitting alone with their faces in their hands. The sight of the affected servants startled him; he had forgotten that they would be included in the memory-wipe, too. "It really worked then," he said out loud.

Lemon nodded, and took his hand as they went out into the club. "I think it's dinner time," she told him. "Are you hungry?"

Incredibly, he was. "But there's no one to cook it. The servants won't remember how." The thought was oddly funny; he found himself giggling.

"I'll find something." Lemon pushed him into a chair. "Stay right there."

Astrix sat where she had left him, watching the people in the room. It was so strange to see Citizens and the servants talking together, each one as helpless as the other. He couldn't stop staring until a hesitant hand touched his bare arm. "Astrix? Is that your name?"

He spun around. Julian was standing there, without a coat or tie, his face looking softer and younger. “Astrix?” he asked again.

“Julian? Do you remember?” He felt a flash of terror. It hadn’t worked!

“I think I remember you,” Julian said doubtfully, and Astrix suddenly understood. He had known Julian before they came to the Citadel; his friend must be hazily recognizing him from that long-ago time.

“Yes,” he answered gently. “I’m Astrix. You’re Julian.”

“Julian,” he repeated wonderingly. “Do you remember anything else? Do you know where we are?”

“No,” Astrix hastened to answer. He saw Lemon approaching the table and wondered uneasily how she would react to the transformed Julian.

“Here, I found this,” she reported cheerfully, placing a tray holding cheese, rolls, fruit, and a fourth of a chocolate cake down on the table. She glanced at Julian, but only smiled. “Do you want some, too?”

Julian nodded, and, to Astrix’s surprise, Lemon peacefully gave him a share of food before she sat down and began to eat herself. When Astrix looked at her, she made a face back. “They’re all around, being confused,” she told him. “I don’t think we’re going to be able to do the rest of my plan just yet. We’re going to have to stay here and organize things a little first.”

Over the next few days that this organization took, he watched in amazement as Lemon calmly and competently took charge. He and Park, who had followed Lemon out from the secret room, helped her carry the unconscious Astrix to a hospital machine, and who now worshipfully followed Lemon’s every move, acted as her assistants. Astrix

wasn't sure what to think of Park's obvious crush on Lemon. He had never—even in his most wildly jealous fantasies—imagined that Lemon might prefer another Citizen to him. But she treated Park just like she did all the other Citizens now, with an odd, gentle patience.

After Astrix had removed the gold bracelets from around Lemon's wrists, he showed her how to take the collars off of the servants. Lemon decided she would stay in the club's dining room, taking off people's collars and directing things, and sent him off on a task only he could accomplish: to find all of the Citizens and servants scattered throughout the Citadel. "They'll die if they can't find the kitchens," Lemon said. "We'll have to bring them all back here for now. Astrix, can you search?" she had asked discreetly.

He led a team of people, including Julian and Dominic, systematically through the almost endless levels and wings of the Citadel. They used servants' keys to search every apartment, and found many alive, frightened people. More chillingly, they also found the bodies of three Citizens who had been dead for a long time, and had been mummified in the dry Citadel air: one hanged, two with their wrists cut. Otherwise, it was disturbing enough just to pass through room after room after room with the same white and gray furniture, all sterile and neat. When they came to Astrix's own apartment, he was relieved to see the bright murals Lemon had painted on his walls. The other men with him seemed enchanted by the pictures; they gathered around and stared. Astrix had to stifle a laugh to see Julian enraptured by what would have enraged him before.

Finally, all of the Citadel inhabitants had been gathered together, shown where the kitchen was, and had begun to sort themselves into new living quarters, although many

set up temporary pallets in the club dining room. The memory-wiped Citizens were unbelievably different than the men Astrix had known. Everything—the way they dressed, moved, and talked, not to mention the fact that they laughed, cried, and touched one another—was different. At times it was impossible to believe they were the same. Even the servants were different, now that they had forgotten their terror and awe.

As he had collected the people throughout the Citadel, he had also carefully gathered up all of the stroodlers. Lemon kept back six for use in the next part of her plan, but she wanted the others removed from her sight as quickly as possible.

“Here.” Lemon shoved a small cart piled with stroodlers towards him. “That’s the last of them, except for the ones we need. Can you take care of these like you did the others?”

“Should I help?” Julian asked. He kept as close to Astrix, the one thing familiar to him, as Park did to Lemon. But Astrix shook his head. “I’ll do this myself.”

Lemon had asked him to get rid of the stroodlers, but somehow Astrix had been unable to smash or destroy them. Instead, he had taken them all to Alexander Carlo’s secret room.

When he arrived with the last cartful, he had to leave it in the hallway just outside. The little room was so crowded with carts of stroodlers that it looked like an apartment in the city. He smiled to himself, remembering Lemon’s organizing. But he hadn’t told her about taking the stroodlers to the secret room. He knew she would rather have them broken and unusable, even though she could not have won her own victory without them.

He took his father’s bottle of anti-stroodling pills out of his pocket and swallowed one. Then he began to shut down the system that could stroodle the entire Citadel at once.

This he did want to destroy; he not only shut the computer down but took out the most vital components and smashed them. One section of the computer controlled the program that Alexander Carlo had set up to sabotage the hospital machines; Astrix just sat there and watched it for a moment. It was, in its own way, beautiful vengeance. But when he finally cut the cords and destroyed the machine he felt a greater sense of triumph than he had ever known.

An hour had passed when he had finished. He took one of the strollers and stepped out through the broken door. He stood facing down the dim, dusty corridor. “There’s nothing down this way,” he said aloud. “Just a dead end. Turn back. Don’t come this way again.” He fastened the stroller’s trigger back with a piece of wire, then balanced it carefully on top of the last cart, so it beamed down the hallway. As he walked away, he could feel the stroller washing around his head, then sliding shivering down his body, before it finally dropped away.

“We’re ready for the next part of my plan,” Lemon told him that night. They too had set up a pallet in the dining room. Lemon had placed theirs under the skylight, so they could look up at the stars like they had on the prairie.

“We are?” He wasn’t sure whether to feel wary or happy, since her last plan had actually worked out rather well.

“Yes!” Lemon rolled over and propped herself on her elbow. He felt the length of her body against his, and savored how wonderful she felt. “We can do it tomorrow morning. And then . . .”

“And then?” he prompted her after a moment of silence.

“And then I don’t really know,” she laughed a little nervously. “I guess maybe it won’t be up to us anymore. We’ll have to do something else. What else *do* people do?”

“We’ll figure out something,” Astrix told her. He thought about the crystal ships, and the other kinds of technology that he didn’t understand. Maybe he could even begin to develop something new himself. He leaned over and kissed Lemon, suddenly grateful that she hadn’t let him die. “Good night.”

In the morning, he felt calm and almost happy as Lemon gathered together their closest group of assistants: Julian, Park, Dominic, and the servant girl Dawn. Astrix led them all onto the roof and into a crystal ship. “City,” he told it, without having to ask Lemon.

She stood beside him, squeezing his hand excitedly as the ship moved over the prairie. The others huddled on the floor, without asking questions. Astrix didn’t ask any either for a long time. But finally, as the city loomed closer, he turned to Lemon. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to do the same,” she answered softly, so that the others couldn’t hear. “Wipe all their memories. Let them start over.”

“Do you ever want to wipe ours too?”

Lemon stared out at the prairie, but he watched her face. “Sometimes. It would make things easy. But things were easy in the city, and that wasn’t right. After how you and I fought to be different, bit by bit. . . . I don’t want to give that up. But the others, I don’t know how to make them change themselves. This is the only way I know to free them. And at least Robert and Bracken, and the others who woke up, won’t hear the stroodle because of their ears. They deserve to remember too.”

“And Kira?”

“And Kira,” she nodded. “I wish we could just make everyone understand what has been happening to them for so long. But, if they did, what would they want to do to the Those That? It took me so long to realize that the Those That could be different from one another. And we don’t have a long time. It’s taken too long already. And I already wiped their memories,” she added with a glance back at their assistants. “I can’t let the city people kill them now.”

Astrix looked back at the men hunched on the floor of the crystal ship, their memories of those endless days vanished. He was still not sure he deserved a better fate, or even if this was any better. But now, he found that he didn’t want to erase his own memory after all. Transforming the Citadel had been the hard step. But changing the city—that was different, almost liberating. He and Lemon showed their assistants how to hold the stroodlers, and they flew around for almost an hour, broadcasting down at the crumbling apartment buildings below. Then he took the stroodlers, smashed them under his foot, one by one, and he felt, suddenly, only happy.

Lemon:

The stroodle had passed over her and rewritten the world, but when she had turned away from the keyboard and seen Park and his friends sprawled stunned and transformed on the floor she had found herself strangely hollow. Even when she had gone into the club’s dining room and taken in the fact of almost a hundred memory-wiped Those That, she had not felt a real sense of triumph.

The problem was that it was hard to see the Those That *as* Those That anymore. Almost immediately, the men had started shedding pieces of their characteristic suits and had begun displaying very un-Those-That-like emotions: confusion, panic, fear. She found herself in the odd position of not only bringing Those That men food and comforting or calming them, but even directing their transition into their new life.

She wanted desperately to get to the city and the people there, but she knew that she had to help the Those That first. It wouldn't be fair to wipe their memories and then let them all die, so she began resolutely to figure out what to do next. Astrix helped her, but he was still coming out of his depression, and was not up to planning or decision making. However, it wasn't hard to see that first they had to find all of the Those That and servants who were scattered in all the rooms and hallways of the Citadel, then show them where to get food, and make sure everyone had enough memory left to take care of themselves. In addition to Astrix, the servant girl Dawn and several Those That became useful helpers. One was Julian; she especially enjoyed telling him what to do, but he always almost ruined it by obeying so cheerfully.

Astrix led the explorations into the Citadel, since he was the only one who remembered how to get around. His team brought anyone they found back to the club's dining room. Lemon, the now obviously infatuated Park, and Dawn stayed there to calm them, show them where the kitchens were, and help them figure out how to cook. Lemon had no idea how to cook either, but Park had taken to it naturally, guided by helpful books they found in the kitchen, and was now teaching the others. Many of the Those That and servants had decided to make temporary beds there in the club, others had

moved to nearby apartments in pairs or groups. None of them wanted to be alone, and the Citadel was beginning to seem far too big for its inhabitants.

There were times, when Park had been following too close on her heels or when some of the Those That squabbled over something, that she wished she had killed them after all. She would have at least felt a sense of achievement, of true revenge, and now she would have been in the city. But . . . “That would have given you what you wanted,” she said aloud to Park. This way was harder, but probably the right way.

“What?” Park asked her. Already there was a blondish tinge to his hair, he wore no coat or tie, had his sleeves rolled up, a dusty coating of flour on his pants, and looked more human and more likable than she could have imagined he could be. She knew Astrix didn’t like Park’s crush on her, but she just found it amusing. Park had always seemed like a child to her, and that was true now more than ever.

“Nothing,” she reassured him quickly. She suspected that many of the Those That had guessed that she and Astrix had not lost their memories, but none of them ever asked.

It took almost a week to get the Those That organized. But finally they had brought together all of the scattered people, and had gotten them started on relearning how to live and how to become themselves. Lemon was almost proud sometimes, watching as they changed and developed, but mostly she was just anxious to get out of the Citadel. When Astrix finally led her and their team of assistants onto the roof and into a crystal ship, she thought she might burst with excitement and anticipation.

She could not remember the crystal ship that had brought her to the Citadel, so this was her first real ride in one. It was amazing to stand on what looked like thin air, and she must have acquired some of the Those That’s power after all, because she wasn’t

scared, not even when the ship began to move towards the city. But she could barely think about the height, anyway; she couldn't take her eyes off the smudge of smoke on the horizon. Her heart was beating louder and louder. When they finally floated over the first of the apartment buildings, she thought she might faint. She had to hang onto Astrix's hand to keep on her feet.

"What . . . What do we do now," she managed to say. That *she* would be in a crystal ship, about to strodle the people below. . . . She couldn't feel anything, except overwhelmed.

"We'd better get to an area of town where there are more people, to start with," Astrix told her.

Lemon peered down past her feet. Her head was whirling as she began to make out recognizable shapes in the buildings below. That was the Happy Fish factory. There was the Loop. That was the apartment building she had lived in long ago with an ordinary man named Neel. There was her old factory. Astrix stopped the crystal ship above the courtyard, and handed out strodlers. Lemon heard him explaining to the others in a low voice, but the blood was roaring in her ears. Her hands shook as she received her own strodler.

"Now," Astrix said, and the world rocked to a halt. Once again powerful forces rolled out from her fingertips, transforming everyone. For over an hour they flew above the city, until her fingers were stiff from pressing the strodler buttons. Finally, Astrix dropped his strodler to the floor and smashed it. "That's all," he said, smashing everyone's strodlers. Their trip around the city had brought them above her old factory again, and Astrix landed the crystal ship in the courtyard. Lemon felt dazed as the

familiar walls settled around her. Now they looked so short and so badly built and dirty. Even in the courtyard there were piles of discarded toys and empty food containers in the corners. She tried to feel like she was coming home, but instead she just felt claustrophobic. Nevertheless, she scrambled out of the ship with eagerness. Kira! At last—

She led the way into the factory. It seemed incredible that after she had seen so many changes and *caused* so many changes, her old coworkers would still be dutifully gluing on Dreamy Dan's hair and Buyer Barbara's red high heels. And, actually, the assembly lines they passed were deserted, although the machines were still on. Maybe everyone had left? But then she saw people milling around outside the door to the cafeteria. A small group was sitting on the floor, eating. One of them was feeding another, and Lemon's heart caught in her throat. That was Kira; and there was Anna, and Mint, and Mila, and even Dooley—he too must have escaped from the building collapse. She recognized almost all of them. As she ran up to the group, they fell silent and turned to face her. She started to cry out in welcome reunion, but bit back her words just in time. They wouldn't know who she was. Abruptly her eyes swam with tears. They were gone, her past was entirely gone. No wonder Astrix had been scared.

"We're here to help you," Astrix said from beside her. He was talking to the factory workers; she could hear an unusual gentleness in his voice. "These people will try to answer your questions." He indicated their assistants, then added "We're going to take this girl away and help her." He stepped over to Kira and picked her up. "Come on, Lemon," he said. "The hospital machines here aren't fixed yet. We'll have to go somewhere else." For a second Lemon gaped at him, feeling just as blank as her old

coworkers looked. It all felt so unreal. She looked at Kira, lying in Astrix's arms, her eyes and ears and hair still gone. The last time Astrix had held her that way, she had been dead.

"Come on," Astrix told her again, and Lemon shook off her daze and followed. "Take care of them," she ordered her helpers. "We'll be back soon."

Kira was silent when Astrix lay her on the floor of the crystal ship. Lemon sat down beside her and held her hand, also silent. Astrix only muttered directions throughout the short flight to the central distribution warehouse. When they landed this time, they were immediately surrounded by people clamoring for help and explanation. Once again, Astrix spoke to them in a firm, gentle voice, explaining that they were there to help Kira, and that anyone else with medical problems should follow him. Then, they would help the rest of them.

Astrix waded confidently through the crowd and into the warehouse. Lemon followed him, clutching herself in pain and worry. This was so like that last horrible night. When they finally reached a hospital machine, and Astrix put Kira inside, Lemon leaned against him and cried.

"It's all right." He stroked her hair. "I fixed this machine. It will cure her."

His confidence was reassuring. Lemon took a deep breath, wiped her face, and tried to smile up at Astrix. He squeezed her hand. "It feels like before," she told him. "But now everything's so different—"

"It's hard to take in," Astrix said. "It was easier for you in the Citadel, but now this is your home that's being changed. Even though there were things you didn't like, it was part of you for so long. It's disorienting to have all that gone."

“And to be the only one who remembers,” Lemon said, feeling sorry for Astrix. At least the earless ones, and hopefully Kira if she was cured, would remember the city too. But none of the Those That remembered Astrix’s past.

“But don’t forget why you wanted to do all this in the first place,” he told her, smiling. She had never seen Astrix look so cheerful.

The light over the door clicked to green. Suddenly, Lemon almost dared to believe Astrix. She pulled the door open, and Kira’s healed, familiar face stared back at her.

“Kira!” she cried joyfully, reaching out for her friend, but Kira drew back into the machine with an expression on her face that Lemon confusedly recognized as horror.

“No, Lemon,” she protested. “No, don’t cure me. Let me stay in my own mind where it’s quiet.”

Lemon sighed in exasperation. Was she going to spend the rest of her life with people begging her *not* to cure them? “It’s all right,” she told Kira impatiently, hauling her bodily out of the machine. “I changed everything. It’s all right now. There aren’t any stroodles or noodles anymore. And no one will remember that there ever were any.”

“What?” Kira blinked in the light and at the shape of Astrix beaming down at her.

Lemon took a deep breath and started telling her what had happened. She talked as Astrix directed the few distribution warehouse workers who needed medical attention into the hospital machines and then told them all how to go to the PlasticPerfectPeople factory, where someone would help them. She kept talking as they got back in the crystal ship and flew to Robert and Bracken’s apartment building. There, Lemon had to tell the story all over again to a hastily gathered group of earless ones.

Even Kira's face looked stunned and disbelieving, but to Lemon the story grew more and more real with each word she spoke. When she finished, she beamed happily around the room. "Come on. We'll show you."

She and Astrix took Kira, Robert, Bracken, and few other earless ones with them in the crystal ship back to the PlasticPerfectPeople factory. Inside, it was even more chaotic than before. Many of the workers from the distribution warehouse had arrived, along with other people they had collected as they had gone through the city. Their assistants from the Citadel were trying to calm the people down, and had apparently pried open the vending machines in an effort to feed them. As they made their way into the crowd, Dominic rushed up to them with a box of LederSchnitzel. "Look at this!" he cried in disgust. "This isn't food. They can't eat this. We can't leave these people here."

"He's right, you know," Astrix told her. Lemon looked around the dismal room. Even to someone who couldn't remember being there for centuries, it surely was not an attractive place to be. Maybe especially to people who couldn't remember being there before. "I guess so," she agreed. "But where can we take them?"

"The Citadel is really the only place."

Lemon made a face. She hated to think of repopulating the gray apartments. But at least there the city people could get real food and have space to live in. "All right," she agreed. "We'll have to start all over finding people, curing them, and taking them to the Citadel."

On the first trip, they left Julian, Park, and Dawn behind with a no longer deaf Robert and Bracken to begin organizing search teams. Astrix, Lemon, Dominic, and Kira flew back to the Citadel to get more crystal ships. Lemon watched in amused amazement

as Dominic helped Kira politely aboard the crystal ship and put a steady arm around her as it rose. Kira, apparently undisturbed by Dominic's *Those That* past, seemed to welcome his attention. "Well, Dominic *was* the model for the Mean Mark character," Astrix said in her ear.

"*What?!*" Lemon spun around to face him, then realized he was grinning at her. "Astrix! I've never heard you make a joke before!"

"I'm not sure I ever have. But a lot of things are different now."

That became more and more true over the three weeks it took to find and transport everyone from the city to the Citadel. But finally, everyone had been moved and was starting to organize into a new life.

On one of these trips, she and Astrix had stopped by the country of the sun-worshippers. They looked surprised to see her emerge from a crystal ship, but had agreeably convened a meeting when she asked for it. "I have something else to tell you," Lemon had told them. Thinking of the names carved on the rock in the temple, she went on. "I'm not just a messenger from the gods. I'm also one of your ancestors. The gods have sent me here to tell you that they must return to the sun. those of your people sent to serve them have lost all memory of the gods and their time of service, but other messengers will take you to visit them. It will be a new time," she told them, smiling at their anxious faced. "A different time. But you will still be serving the gods by helping those who have lost their pasts." Robert and Bracken had already brought the village leaders to the Citadel, and were discussing what their relationship might be like in the future.

Lemon had enjoyed all of these changes, but as more and more of her old friends began to settle into the gray walls, she began to feel a little confined. Even though people were starting to paint and change the furnishings, she still couldn't forget what this place really was. One evening she went up on the roof to watch the sunset in the space and air.

“What are you going to reform next?” Astrix asked from behind her.

Lemon smiled back at him. “There's no one left! Besides, I've had enough changing people. They're all on their own now. They can figure it out.” After she and Astrix had told them there was an end to the city so long ago, Robert and Bracken had begun thinking up all sorts of possibilities for a different kind of life. They were full of plans that had only expanded as they explored the Citadel and talked to the sun-worshipper leaders. The development of a new society was all very exciting and challenging to them, but somehow Lemon did not find it very interesting.

“It feels like we've been here a long time, doesn't it?” Astrix stared out at the horizon too.

“We have been,” Lemon sighed, looking at the prairie waving out to the purple edge of the sky. She knew that she could never again find the youth and mindless happiness that had flooded her in her years in the city, when she had spun and danced to the eternal shine of the empty objects around her, and had been one of those shiny, empty objects herself. And she didn't want that state of being back. But now, living among the memory-wiped, she felt old, she felt all of those days dragging behind her like a long, heavy tail. She didn't want that either. The best days of her life, she realized, had been those when she was breaking her mind free, bit by bit, when she was learning new things

and exploring. She wanted to keep doing that. “Astrix,” Lemon suddenly felt energetic and happy. “We could go see what’s outside this place. We could explore!”

Astrix turned to her with a smile that surprised her with its eagerness. “I wanted to learn more about the crystal ships anyway. This will give me incentive.”

Lemon grinned back. “That’s what I wanted to do, anyway, before we started all this changing everything. We can see how people live who never had any Those That.”

It took several days to get ready. Their assistants from the Citadel, and Kira, wanted to go along too, so it turned into a rather large expedition, with four crystal ships loaded with provisions, clothes, tents, and even guns and a hospital machine. “We could find almost anything,” Astrix told her.

But finally the morning came that they were packed and ready, and Lemon stood in a crystal ship, waving good-bye as the Citadel roofs fell away below her.

“Which way?” Astrix asked her, laughing. “They’re all the same to me.”

All directions led to something new, so Lemon pointed the way she was facing. “Why not?”

She took Astrix’s hand and tipped her head back to peer into the cloudless, blue sky above as the ships began to move slowly off. She had never thought she could belong to these heights, but here she was, so far up and moving so steadily along that it seemed as if she could already see new shapes on the horizon; mountains maybe, and the line where brown prairie began to transform into green.

VITA

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