

**BOWMAN'S  
WORLD**

by

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PROLOGUE

Bo Mayberry entered the basement of the World Trade Center through one of the subway entrances. He quickly slipped through the deserted station and into a stairwell. He wanted to get up pretty high. He was surprised that the terrorists didn't seem to have set any guards in the station. He thought maybe that meant there were fewer of them than he expected. Or, perhaps, they were simply relying on the police cordons five blocks around the building in every direction to keep intruders out. (Bo had slipped inconspicuously through the barricades. The officers had conveniently been distracted by a commotion in the crowd in the other direction.)

Bo didn't suppose the terrorists who were holding the building hostage would have been expecting any of his kind to be trying to get in. He smiled at that thought. They really didn't know what they were facing, did they? Bo was already beginning to feel the power mounting in him. Tho' he had to admit that he and the others didn't really know what they were going to do themselves.

They knew they were, in some ethical way, responsible for what was going on. And they weren't the kind to shirk their responsibilities. But beyond whatever rational ethical considerations they might feel, they could feel the power rising in them even stronger calling them to come together to confront this threat to their life mission.

That power that even Bo could not explain -- tho' he'd lived

in its presence all 14 years of his short life -- was what brought on this whole crisis. And Bowman Mayberry was committed to using it to resolve the crisis.

Bo stuck his head through the stairwell door on the ground floor to see if there was any activity there. Two dark-skinned men in military fatigues were standing together near the banks of elevators that led up into the building. As Bo expected, neither of them noticed him. They seemed wrapped in an occasionally vociferous conversation. Bo wondered if they were scared. If the nuclear device the terrorists were holding the building hostage with were detonated, they'd certainly be killed.

For a moment Bo's mind was filled with the image of an atomic fireball erupting out of the base of the tower and then the building slowly collapsing as its foundations were blasted away. Bo consciously expelled the idea from his mind. This was no time to be thinking of such things, he realized. He needed to stay calm himself.

He quietly pulled the door closed and headed upstairs. On two there was nothing going on.

On the third floor was all the activity. When Bo peeked through the door, he could hear voices jabbering in a language he couldn't understand and could even see several men moving about. None of them noticed him, tho' this time he didn't risk discovery by opening the door anymore than a crack.

He couldn't see very much. There were crates piled carelessly all up and down the hall. Near the elevator shafts was a large metal box. Bo wondered if that was the bomb. He had no idea what size such a device would be. He remembered reading

that atomic bombs could now be miniaturized small enough to fit in a suitcase. But he suspected it was larger device these people would be using. After all, if they were going to die in this crazy scheme of theirs, they were bound to want to make sure the World Trade Center tower really did collapse.

Suddenly, bright light flooded the corridor. And a man began speaking in english. Bo realized the terrorists had turned on their TV equipment. They were making another press statement.

Bo remembered how -- was it only a week before? -- he'd been shocked when he turned on the TV back in the recreation room at Sweetwater Farm to see the terrorist leader calmly announcing his threat to destroy the World Trade Center, along with the several thousands of workers in the building, unless the governments of the world, especially the U.S., began an immediate campaign to arrest and execute the "demon children," as he called them. Bo had been especially surprised when the man specifically mentioned his name Bowman Mayberry as the leader of what he was describing as the invasion of earth by the forces of hell.

Bo had known for years that his kind was controversial, especially with religious Fundamentalists of both Christianity and Islam. But he'd never expected it to come this far. How could they believe that about him and his friends?

"Seven days ago we made our demands known. So far, to the best of our knowledge only a very few nations have made any move at all to rid our world of this danger. In Cuba two of the demons have been put to death; in Syria, Kuwait, and Lebanon six

more; in the White State of South Africa four; and in Cambodia three.

"The major powers have made virtually no effort to assist us in saving the earth from the powers of darkness these children represent.

"Up to now, I and my men have been cooperative. We have released most of the hostages from the building. Less than thirty American government officials remain in our possession. And yet the nations of the world have not been cooperative with us.

"It is time world leaders realize we are serious. We, the chosen representatives of God's Army of Armageddon, cannot allow these unholy children to remain any longer among the living. We regret that innocent people must die to make our point. That is, however, not our responsibility.

"We give you one more day in which to begin arresting and executing those children known to possess the demonic powers. At this time tomorrow, 6 pm, if the American Federated States, Great Britain, France, Italy, the Russian Republics, and China have not begun to act on our demands we will detonate the nuclear device we have placed in this building.

"If our warning are not then heeded, those who survive the holy martyrs of this action will commandeer other large buildings, aircraft, and public gathering places around the world and repeat these demands until they are met. We stand with God and Allah on our side. We will not fail.

"As a sign of our dedication, we will now begin to execute the hostages, one each hour.

"The man you see now on your TV screens is George Putnam, Executive Director of the World Trade Corporation which manages this building."

Bo noticed the bright light go out, but the voice continued. He realized they must have switched to a different camera.

"Mr Putnam will be the first martyr in our cause. As you can probably see, he and the soldiers of God's army with him are standing near the edge of the roof of this building.

"Mr. Putnam," the leader seemed to be speaking directly to the man they were threatening to execute, his voice became soft and compassionate, "please stop resisting. There is nothing you can do now but prepare your soul. The death will not be painful. The fall will take more than two minutes, hopefully long enough for you to prepare yourself. Then it will be over almost instantaneously."

O God, Bo thought, they are going to push the poor man over the side.

There was a long, long silence. Bo wondered if, in fact, TV cameras were showing Putnam's fall all the way to the ground.

The lights came on again.

"Once each hour another of the hostages will be martyred in this same way. We hope that will impress upon those watching the seriousness of our intentions.

"Remember, their deaths will be nothing compared to the disaster that will be caused when these towers collapse.

"You have twenty-four hours. Good night and God bless you. Remember me in your prayers."

The light went out again.

Bo had been so rapt in listening to the TV broadcast, he realized, he'd lost track of the others. Now he could feel the power stirring deep in his soul. He reached out his mind to touch his brave friends who'd joined him in coming to face their detractors. The fears that had gripped him as he'd listened to the terrorist leader relaxed as he realized he was not alone. He felt surrounded by other caring minds.

"Now, here's my plan. . . ." Bo spoke mentally into the network of consciousness he'd just joined.

Suddenly, and with a force that jerked the knob out of his hand, the door Bo had been hiding behind swung open.

"O God," Bo managed to exclaim as the rush of fear tore his mind out of the network, "they've caught me. . . ."

PART I

Last Train to Paris

Brother Peregrine had realized that something was very different about David Bowman Mayberry even before he was born. His mother had survived intense radiation burns long enough to complete his gestation. Soon after he was separated from her, she died -- peacefully and painlessly.

As an infant, Bowman seemed to have a marvelous healing power over everyone around him. When he was present all contentions ceased; people felt content and loving; luck changed from bad to good; sickness disappeared.

But it was not till his ninth year that Peregrine saw that the boy possessed real power that he could actually direct.

Brother Peregrine and his long time companion Rif Koestenbaum took Bowman with them to Europe in the summer of 2010 as a belated birthday present. Peregrine and Rif, along with the rest of the semi-monastic community at Sweetwater Farm in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, had become parents for the child after his mother's death. Bowman's father had died some two months earlier on November 2, 2000 in the nuclear accident that started the whole strange string of events that changed the world forever as the third millenium began.

"But, Bo, it'd be terribly cold this time of year," Rif said to the boy.

Bowman had just answered Rif's inquiry about a present by announcing that for his upcoming birthday he wanted to go to

Europe.

"We'd have to wear snow clothes to go outside. Not good for sightseeing."

"Besides, I'm getting too old to go traveling in the middle of December," Peregrine spoke up from where he was hunkered down in front of the blazing fire in the hearth. "When I was your age, Bo, I loved to play in the snow. But now it makes me bones creak," he added in a playful pirate accent.

Bo giggled. But then turned serious again. "Yes, but it's time I see more of the world than just America."

Peri and Rif had taken Bowman with them on several trips already. They liked to travel themselves and the excuse of assisting in Bowman's education gave them added justification. They enjoyed the boy immensely. He was the child that as an all-male couple they could never have. And he was so bright. Educating him was a joy. Indeed, sometimes a real challenge. His mind seemed to absorb data like a sponge. And he was always asking questions.

The three of them had driven cross country to visit friends in San Francisco where Peregrine had lived most of his life before moving to Sweetwater Farm in the early 1990s. They went west by the northern route so they could show Bo Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis. They detoured a little out of the way to get as close as possible to Devil's Lake, the radioactive sea that now blighted what was once the farmland of North Dakota. On the way back east they went by the similar radioactive waste that was once Los Angeles. Then stopped at the Grand Canyon to show Bo a more natural wonder.

Bo made an excellent traveling companion, not just because of his interest and curiosity, but also because of his indefatigably positive personality and especially because of his incredible good luck. Virtually nothing ever went wrong when he was around.

That was why Peregrine was quite surprised when suddenly during their two day stay in Amsterdam things went awry.

"Let's go back to the hotel," Rif complained. "My feet are killing me."

"But, Rif, we've only just begun to see the sights," Bo answered. "Please don't be a drag. There's so much more to do."

Bo had been excited from the moment the trip began four days earlier when they set out by plane from Asheville to New York. He'd remained excited throughout the flight across the Atlantic to Charles DeGaulle Airport in Paris. Peri and Rif were not surprised by the boy's excitement. He was almost always happy and bouyant. But they sensed that there was something more going on, something Bo wasn't telling them about. For he seemed clearly expectant, a little antsy even.

And he even seemed to have some idea of what it was going to be about. At least, it seemed so from his obvious lack of enthusiasm for seeing Paris and obvious relish for getting on with the side trip to Amsterdam.

"Well, I'd just like to sit down for a little while and rest," Rif answered, a little petulantly.

"You sat the whole trip up here," Bo answered quickly.

"And I've been walking ever since," Rif snapped.

"Hold it, you two," Peri broke in. "No arguments. I've got a solution. Let's go have dinner. That'll give Rif a chance to rest. Me too. You know, I'm the senior citizen here," he joked. "I think it's my prerogative to get sore feet and need to rest.

"And, Bo, we'll let you select the place."

"Okay," Bo grinned.

"Sounds good to me," Rif rejoined. "And, Peri, I'm really sorry. . ." he started to apologize for precipitating the argument.

"There," Bo proclaimed, almost shouting. "Let's eat there." He was pointing toward a brightly lit red and yellow sign about two blocks down the street.

"Are you sure that's a restaurant?"

"Oh yes," he answered. "I saw it when we were coming up this way."

The threesome trekked back toward the sign. As they approached, Peri remarked, "Well, Bo, this really isn't a restaurant. There's no place to sit down."

Bo dropped his eyes and looked hurt. "But you said I could pick the place."

By this time, Rif had recovered from his momentary fatigue and remarked that the place looked interesting anyway.

They were standing in front of what seemed like a version of New York City's old Horn and Hardart's automats. Along a wall angling in from the sidewalk was an array of little compartments, each containing some sort of finger-food and each with a coin slot next to it and a price tag. Down the angled wall was a open

window from which a young man wearing a white paper cap seemed to be dispensing beverages. A crowd of people milled around in front of the compartments selecting food items or just talking with others.

The crowd of people seemed a little menacing to Ferigrine. Several young men were wearing heavy black leather motorcycle jackets. Almost all of them had their hair in the long pig tails braided with shiny metallic mylar ribbon that was the current fad among dissident youth. Marijuana smoke surrounded the crowd.

As a young man, Peregrine would have felt himself right at home among such a group of bohemian non-conformists. As a sixty-six year old, he now felt uncomfortable and out of place.

Bo had walked right up and was peering into the rows of windows, seeking to figure out what the various food items were. He didn't seem at all concerned about the make up of the other patrons.

For a moment Peri envied Bo his youth and his amazing confidence with strangers. Bo knew for certain that nobody would hurt him. And he was right!

"Let's get a bite here," Rif said softly in Peri's ear. "Then maybe we can talk Bo into sitting down with us at that sidewalk cafe down by the canal." He gestured toward a bright little cafe surrounded by a low wall of colorful potted flowers a few steps further down the street.

"Peri, Peri," Bo was calling. "Bring some coins.

"I've seen all these neat things to eat," he said gleefully,

as he tugged at Peregrine, pulling him right into the middle of crowd.

Peregrine pulled out his wallet which he'd carefully attached by a small steel chain to his belt. In the wallet he'd planned to carry not only money, but his passport and Eurail pass, items he wouldn't want to lose. He'd been warned by his travel agent about pickpockets. At first he hadn't thought anything of that warning. After all, with Bowman's miraculous good luck, he didn't think he had anything to worry about. Then he'd reminded himself of the old adage that God helps those who help themselves and thought better of relying on Bowman's good fortune. And so he'd taken the precaution of the steel chain. He'd even put a rubber band around the wallet just to be sure.

Now the rubber band was in the way of getting into the coin purse on the backside of the wallet. Bo was pulling on one hand. Peri was struggling with the other to slip the rubber band off and then get the zipper open on the coin compartment. He pulled his hand away from Bo's so he could get a proper hold of the wallet.

He emptied the coins out into his hand and was struggling to figure out what was what. He glanced up at the coin slots to see how many guilders each food item would take. They were all different amounts, he saw.

And what was he supposed to get.

He realized he'd lost Bo in the crowd. He stood there for a moment wondering what he was doing there trying to hold onto his wallet and important papers, his fingers entwined in the rubber band and his hands full of loose coins. He felt himself jostled

by a couple of punkers with green metallic braids. One of them released a puff of smoke right in his face.

"'Cuse me, Pops," the punker said with a slight sarcastic tone and a heavy accent Peri couldn't make out. The guy was darkly handsome, but his looks were spoiled by an ugly scowl.

Peri started to be offended, then thought about how he'd envied Bo's wonderful rapport with people, then thought how the pungent smell of the grass brought him back to his own rebellious youth in San Francisco.

"'S okay," he muttered as he turned away, smiling to himself at the thought that he should have asked the guy for a hit off the joint, if only just to surprise him.

He turned in a full circle, trying to avoid running into anybody else, but trying to see what had happened to Bo and Rif. All of a sudden, Bo was right next to him, hanging on to his elbow.

"Can I have some coins," the boy said.

Peri happily dumped the collection of coins into Bo's outstretched hands, quickly bundled the wallet back together with the rubber band. And, asking Bo to get him and Rif each something interesting, he extricated himself from the crowd.

"You look like you've just seen a ghost," Rif joked as Peri stumbled over to him, tripping on a step that separated the fast food shop from the sidewalk.

"Well, not a ghost exactly. But certainly a memory."

Bo came back with his hands full of tasty treats: some

things like egg rolls with a fishy sort of filling, a couple of small burgers with spicy relishes, and even a couple of fruit-filled tarts.

"Bo, mind if we sit down over there at that cafe and get a cup of coffee?" Rif asked.

"Oh, Rif, I don't think they'd like us to bring food in from outside," Bowman answered in a very adult and proper voice.

"Let's head back to the hotel. We can nibble as we walk."

"I thought you weren't ready to go back yet," Peri asked surprised.

"Oh well, I guess I'm getting pretty tired myself," the boy answered, still in the adult sounding voice, but now affecting a sort of hangdog exhaustion.

Peregrine and Rif looked at each other with a certain perplexity, as if to say "What's he up to?"

"Come on, you guys," Bo shouted to them. He was already ten steps ahead of them, his hands full of food, but walking on quite deliberately. "Don't ya want anymore of the food I bought," he shouted over his shoulder.

Rif and Peri had to step lively to catch up with him.

## 2

Bowman curled up and took a nap back in their room. They were staying in a quaint little bed-and-breakfast hotel on Kirkstrasse near the Museumplein. Their room was on the fifth floor. The steep spiralling stairway that took them up was just barely not a ladder. Peri had thought to himself he was glad they'd left their suitcases in the lockers at the train station.

when they arrived. It'd have been a bitch carrying luggage up those steep stairs.

In spite of all the walking they'd done, Peri wasn't in the least bit tired. He sat in the windowseat looking down on the street while Rif and Bo napped. He'd forgotten about Bo's slightly peculiar behavior. He was caught up in remembering his own youth.

From the window, he could watch the crowds moving on the street below. He liked the detached perspective. And yet it reminded him of his age and of his "lost youth" (he thought dramatically!).

Below the pedestrians rushed by with a speed that, now that he'd been living out in the country at Sweetwater Farm for nearly twenty years, baffled him. He recalled how once he too had rushed everywhere he went. Now he wondered why. Had the rushing around gotten him here any sooner. He was just as old now as he'd have been if he'd lived his life more slowly.

And he'd seen earlier among the flow of the pedestrians, that he couldn't keep up the pace anymore. He was getting left behind, he thought maudlinly.

Peregrine stuck his head out the window so he could look both ways. Tho' he understood from previous trips abroad how long the summer twilight is in northern Europe, he was amazed that it was still light at 9 pm. The natives had all gotten off work, come home, eaten dinner, he supposed, and then dressed up to go out for the night life. How vibrant they all look, he thought, especially from up here in my aerie.

Peri especially noticed the young gay couples. They look so pretty he thought with a pang of delight mixed with sadness. How different their lives are now from my own at their age.

Amsterdam reminded him a lot of San Francisco in the 1960s. But the whole world had changed dramatically since those times. The coming of the millenium had brought with it a whole new chapter in the life of the earth. The nuclear accident that killed several million Americans and brought a final end to the arms race between the superpowers had somehow awakened the human race to its fragility and its unity. It had somehow awakened powers deep in the soul of the planet that Peri didn't clearly understand. But that he saw maturing slowly in the boy who had become like a son to him and Rif. Who was sleeping quietly on the bed only a few feet from him.

Peregrine looked over at Bo and wondered what his dreams were like. Peri could almost literally feel waves of peace radiating out from the sleeping boy.

Bo, of course, wasn't the only child like that. Tho' he might actually be one of the most famous of them. His birth and the events coinciding with it at Sweetwater had propelled all of them into momentary notariety and renown. (Which of those you'd choose to call the publicity depended on where you stood regarding the massive changes that followed in the wake of those watershed events.)

From where Peregrine stood, the changes seemed very good. All around the world there were children like Bo. They were maybe one in a million births. That at first had seemed rare. But over nine years that was a lot of babies born with something

special about them.

What they all had in common was that their mothers had experienced some kind of emotional or physical trauma during their pregnancies and they'd all had a rather similar dream, or even waking hallucination in a few cases, of a child with deep, wise eyes appearing to them in a great aureole of light, bringing them respite from whatever the trauma was that afflicted them.

There'd been an especially large number of such births soon after the nuclear disaster of November 2000, if only because there'd been an awful lot of trauma at the time.

Once the babies were born, like Bowman, they seemed to radiate peace and goodwill around them. Even the angriest adults softened noticeably in their presence. And there seemed to be enough of them that this effect was gradually pervading the whole world.

Thus it was not only that the accidental firing of the nuclear missiles that fell on the U.S. that scared the world into disarmament, it was also the slow dawning of peace generated by these children of the light that brought the human race to recognize that there really was a brother and sisterhood of all people all over the planet.

That realization had also begun to usher out such human unpleasanties as racism and sexism and prejudice of all sorts.

From his window high over Amsterdam's Kirkstrasse, Peregrine thought how different life was now for homosexuals. Their orientation didn't seem to matter. And with that change the whole style of gay life had improved. Peri had been grateful

that in his own life those changes had come for him in moving to Sweetwater Farm and then meeting Rif Koestenbaum. He was grateful that that willingness to let themselves be respected and loved had come to all his brothers and sisters.

Noticing a tall young man in a heavy leather jacket with a glint of metallic green in his hair reminded Peri of his momentary fright back at the automat. And that reminded him that the world was still troubled. Human life was still hard. And there were still some people who got ground under. There were still dissidents and malcontents.

And he thought that was probably appropriate. He was glad he'd been a hippie himself. His own phase of dissidence had been important in his own development of strong values and personal responsibility. Besides, he thought, whatever the maturation of the planet was that is going on, it shouldn't result in a race of contented cows.

There were still lots of problems in the world. The Islamic Revolution that started in Iran was still raging, now marked mainly by skirmishes along the border between India and the United Islamic Republic of Allah that had taken over most of the middle east. The civil war in Korea was still going. The fighting in Ireland had subsided, tho' occasional terrorist acts in Dublin reminded the Irish that reannexing Northern Ireland had not solved the differences in that country. Christian militiamen from the rural countryside of Central America occasionally raided major cities of the Secular Union of Columbian America which had been formed out of the warring countries involved in the Nicaraguan War of the early 1990s.

"Grist for the mill," Peri said out loud.

"Only till we've completely sowed the leaven," he thought he heard Bo murmur in his sleep.

"Bo, are you awake?" Peregrine spoke up.

The boy rolled over. He opened his eyes and looked at Peri. For a moment Peregrine felt a rush of fear and wonder pass through him. Those eyes were not the eyes of a nine-year-old boy.

Bo blinked. Then rubbed his eyes to wake himself up. When he looked back, he was a nine year old again.

#### 4

Dinner was delicious. The threesome ate in the hotel, a small, but elegant restaurant with crisp white linen cloths, crystal goblets, and silver candelabras holding tall white tapers on every table. They ordered the ristaffel to try as many different tastes as possible.

After their rest upstairs, Peri, Rif, and Bo had showered and dressed up for a late dinner and, they planned, a walk through the, by now dark, streets of Amsterdam. Peri and Rif each had a couple of glasses of a fine German white wine with dinner, allowing Bo to sip a little. All three were in great spirits. The tiredness of the day -- the four hour train ride, the long trek from the train station, and then the sightseeing -- had passed.

After a cup of coffee and a brief chat about the city's night life with the maitre 'd, who by the time they were finished

was collecting the silver from the tables and setting up for breakfast, Peri pulled out his wallet to pay the bill. He slipped off the rubber band and was beginning to pull out several bills when he realized that the passport, with his Eurail pass tucked inside, wasn't in the wallet.

A sudden chill passed over him. He'd made such a point of protecting those documents. And now they weren't there.

"Rif," he said quietly, but with a tremor in his voice, "I don't have my passport."

"Maybe you left it in the room," Rif answered.

"Well, I doubt it, but I can check." Then to Bowman, "You're always good at finding things, do you know where it is."

Bo grinned a little knowingly, then shook his head. "No, I don't know. But I'll run upstairs and look."

"I just can't imagine what I'd have done with it. I know I didn't open my wallet at all upstairs," Peri said worriedly.

"What was that grin about, Bo?" Rif asked.

Bo stuttered for a moment, then answered, "Oh, I guess I was thinking it was funny Peri would lose those things. He's been holding onto them so carefully." He bowed his head sheepishly, "I'm sorry. I guess it's rude to laugh at misfortune."

Peregrine struggled to laugh himself. "It's okay, Bo. If this didn't get me as upset as it has, I guess I'd be laughing too.

"I'm surprised. Usually when you're along unexpected things don't happen. But you're right, Bo, it sort of serves me right. I've been so protective of the money and the papers. . ."

"Well, let's all go up to the room and look," said Rif.  
"It'll show up."

A half hour later, they'd looked through every piece of their luggage -- and there wasn't much -- several times. No passport.

"Are you sure you had it with you?" Rif asked.

"Well," Peri thought hard, scrunching up his forehead, "I've been trying to relive every moment since we got off the train. I remember showing it to the conductor. I think I stuck it in my shirt pocket then. Oh, and then I remember going to the bathroom in the station and feeling it in the shirt and thinking that wasn't safe.

"Oh, you know," he exclaimed with a great sigh of relief, "I stuck the passport in the suitcase that's in the locker at the station. I'm almost certain I remember deciding I wouldn't need it again and didn't want to be carrying it around with me."

"You're sure?" Bô quizzed.

"Well, let's take that walk we planned and stop by the station and make sure," Rif made a practical suggestion. "Then we can stop worrying."

As they walked through the dark and romantic streets, occasionally getting a little lost, Peregrine kept rerunning the memory through his mind. He was sure he was right about leaving the passport at the station. But the more he went over it the more confused he got. He couldn't tell what was memory and what was logically confabulated explanation.

He reminded himself -- and Rif and Bo -- that this really wasn't a big deal. Even if the papers were lost, they could be replaced. He guessed! But then they weren't lost, were they? They were in the locker at the station.

Bo was fascinated by all the strange things in the windows. To a nine year old who'd spent most of his life in the Smoky Mountains -- even if he was somehow magical -- this densely populated, historical city was just amazing. He was totally engrossed in his sightseeing and wasn't paying much attention to the adults.

It was a fairly long walk to the station. The night was cold. The air a little damp -- as it must always be in this city of canals. Peri enjoyed the specialness of being with Rif in a place they hadn't visited in nearly twenty years. (They'd visited Amsterdam during one of their first trips together.) This was a little like a second honeymoon for them, he thought. And then he realized he was worrying again about the passport.

What did it mean that he'd lost his identity?

By the time they got to the station it was about half past midnight. A steel gate closed the large arched entrances into the building. A sign in Dutch, French, and German explained the station was locked between midnight and 6 am.

Peregrine's heart sank. How were they going to know now?

He managed to compose himself and then commented, "Well, we're not going to accomplish our mission tonight. But, look, I'm pretty sure I'm right that I left the passport and pass in the locker. Let's head back to the hotel and sleep. We can come

down here early tomorrow afternoon, just in case. Our train doesn't leave til 4."

"You guys want take a taxi back?" Rif asked. "It's getting pretty late."

"Oh no, let's walk back," Bo answered quickly. "This place is so neat. And it's better in the dark."

"Well, I guess I can manage that," Peregrine answered. He felt a little guilty how for having led them so far out of their way and he didn't want to spoil Bo's sense of discovery of the new environment. That, after all, was why they brought him on this trip.

Curiously, even though they didn't get to look in the locker at all, Peregrine felt quite confident on the walk back. Now he knew he'd correctly explained to himself the events involved with the passport.

By the time they had climbed up the four steep flights of steps to their room, all of them were exhausted. It was 1:30 in the morning. Bo was virtually asleep on his feet. Rif was getting irritable. Peri was exhausted.

With hardly a word said, they stripped off their street clothes and piled into bed. Rif and Peri in one big bed. Bo by himself in a small single bed built into an alcove in the wall formed by a gable in the roof above. (It was obviously designed as a child's bed. Rif has suggested earlier that if the hotel had once been a private home, maybe this was the nursery.) Both beds had thick comforters and wonderfully massive goose-down pillows.

They slept later than they expected. Tho' dawn came as earlier as the dusk had been late, the windows of the room faced away from the light. Peri had awakened sometime early, but the bed had seemed so warm under the covers and the room so cold, and Rif and Bo seemed so sound asleep that he decided to allow himself to doze a little longer. After all, they were all still recovering from the jet lag of the flight over.

It was almost eleven fifteen before he awoke again. Bo was tugging at his shoulder.

"You know they stop serving breakfast at noon," he said, obviously wide awake and obviously hungry.

"We've got a big day a head of us. I can feel it," Bo said excitedly.

Peregrine wondered what that boded.

## 5

Breakfast consisted of several kinds of breads served with sweet butter, fresh fruit preserves, and, incongruous to American tastes, a pungent sliced sausage and lots of rich hot coffee with steamed milk.

Peregrine was feeling quite confident his passport was in the station locker, as he'd remembered. By now the memory of taking the documents out of his pocket for safe keeping had become quite vivid. He was able to enjoy the breakfast without concern. He entered into rambling banter with the several other guests sitting at the single large white-lined table in a side

room off the hotel lobby.

Rif and Bowman both reported feeling very rested and none the worse for wear for their late night of roaming the streets of Amsterdam. Bo, in fact, was unusually ebullient. He babbled on about things he'd seen in windows along their route to the station.

"Can we stop in the clock shop, Peri?" he asked. "Let's go see that store with all the nautical equipment?" He presented a list of things he wanted to do. "Can I go by the place with all the miniature little people in the window?"

"Our train leaves at 5:30. We've got time to do some shopping on our way to the station. But let's plan on arriving at the station early enough for me to make sure my passport and train pass really are there."

About half past two, the threesome arrived at the station. Peri promised Bo that after looking in the luggage in the locker they'd buy him some sort of fancy Dutch dessert he'd seen in a coffee shop about two blocks from the station.

"No," Peri assured him, "you won't have to waste three hours sitting in the station waiting for the train."

While Rif and Bo stood in plaza waiting a couple of mimes in whiteface panhandling with real finesse, Peregrine headed straight for the locker. He pulled out his suitcase and quickly rummaged through it. No passport.

Beginning to get anxious, he started over again. This time being more careful. He looked in each compartment of the leather case. He opened each of the pockets on the outside. No

passport. He then removed everything from the case, laying it out in little piles on the floor around him. And then repacked the case. No passport.

By now he was panicking. He kept reminding himself all this could be easily handled, even if the papers had disappeared. But he was getting more frantic nonetheless. Peregrine Stiers was just not the kind of person this happened to, he kept saying over and over again to himself.

Bowman's suitcase was also in the locker. Even though he knew he wouldn't have put his papers in there, he looked through it. Then grabbed up both cases and, beginning to worry about time, ran out to the plaza to find Rif.

Bo and Rif came back with him. Rif's suitcase hadn't fit into the one locker and was in another. He didn't think Peri would have put the passport in there. But he agreed they should look.

Nothing.

Peregrine composed himself. "Well, I can buy a ticket back to Paris -- that's no problem. But I can't enter France without the passport. So that means we ought to go to the American Embassy and find out what to do next."

Outside the station, they found a tourist assistance office where they were given directions to the American Consulate. ("The Embassy is in The Hague," they were told.) Beginning to hurry now, they found the right track for the streetcar that would take them back to the Museumplein, the square off which the Consulate was located at #2 Museumstraat.

The streetcar wasn't long in coming, but for Peregrine it

seemed to be taking forever. He could feel his heart beating fast. Earlier he'd been cold, now he felt uncomfortably hot. He was sweating under all the clothes he'd put on to stay warm.

They jumped off the train near the museums. For a moment, they were lost and couldn't find any street signs at all. Rif ran into art gallery and got directions. A few minutes later they were arriving at the formal renovated home on the street that circled a wide open park that was revealed to be the American Consulate by the American flag waving outside.

They entered, expecting to find a Dutch style home. Instead, they walked into a typical American government office. There were windows along one wall of a long narrow room with lots of space for people to queue up. A sign on a little steel pole standing in the middle of the room said "Passports" with an arrow pointing into the next room. To Peregrine's urgent inquiry, the guard sitting sleepily by the door pointed first at the sign and then toward the next room.

Again they were faced with a row of windows. Standing at one of them were two young women. The other two windows bore "Closed" signs. Peri got in line behind the women. He motioned to Rif and Bo to sit down in the chairs that lined the back wall.

While he waited he first looked around. This room still maintained some of the charm of the original home. In one wall was a large fireplace, surrounded with painted tiles depicting scenes of traditional Dutch life: windmills, fishing boats, people carrying buckets of milk with yolks over their shoulders.

He then began to overhear the conversation of the two women

ahead of him. One of them was in the same situation as he. Her passport had disappeared. He could hear the elderly lady behind the glass explaining patiently -- as, Peri guessed, she probably did many times a day -- that pickpocketing is very common in Amsterdam and passports and Eurail passes bring a premium on the black market. It takes about a day to reissue the passport she explained.

"Since it's Friday and the Consulate is closed over the weekend, I won't be able to have this for you till Monday. Is that okay?" she asked the women.

"Yes, that'll be fine," one of them replied.

Uh-oh, thought Peri. That won't be fine with me. We're supposed to meet Richard and Laura at the Gare du Nord in Paris tomorrow morning.

After the women left, the lady behind the window disappeared. She came back almost five minutes later. Peregrine began to explain his plight.

"Well, you know, you'll have to handle the train pass in Paris anyway. That's not U.S. government business. The French National Railway sells those. I can write you a letter of passage which will get you into France and you can apply for the passport in Paris on Monday."

"That would be fine," he answered.

She came back some minutes later with a letter to French border officials explaining Peregrine's situation and a form letter from the American Consul explaining how to apply for the Eurail Pass. She pointed out to Peri that he'd need to get a police report.

"Well, I don't know where it was stolen. I don't even really now if it was stolen. . ."

All of a sudden the memory of the automat surfaced. He remembered looking down at the wallet and seeing the passport and being concerned about the crowd. He vividly remembered the face of the boy with the green metallic braids puffing smoke in his face and his feelings of disorientation and fright.

"Well, you'll have to have a police report," she was saying.

Rif had stepped up to the window and inquired over Peregrine's shoulder where the closest station was. The lady marked the streetcar map Rif handed her and gave some instructions for how to catch the trains. Peri thanked her.

In only a few minutes, they were again waiting for the streetcar and in a few minutes more waiting anxiously for their stop. When the car ran into a massive traffic jam, Peri's heart dropped. "How are we going to make it on time for the train?"

"What if we miss the train?" Bo asked matter-of-factly.

"As far as I can tell this is the last train to Paris," Rif reported after struggling to make out the train schedule.

"The Last Train to Paris," Bo echoed. "The Last Train to Paris. That sounds neat . . . and eerie!"

"Well, I mean, tonight," Rif corrected himself.

"It'll be okay," Bo replied confidently.

Peregrine reminded himself of Bo's uncanny knack of winning at what had seemed no-win situations. Bowman seemed to smoothly slip right into whatever patterns of destiny or luck were at work. And he seemed to do it without really knowing how. So

even when he didn't have any basis for making predictions or judging alternatives, he usually came up with the right choice just out of his faith in his intuition. Peregrine realized he ought to trust Bo's intuition.

Those thoughts about luck and patterns of destiny made him wonder what the point of all this was. Here he was in a foreign country, knowing virtually nobody but his traveling companions and he went and lost his passport. What did that mean?

He was reminded of a dream he'd had as a young man -- one he'd recalled off and on during his life. In the dream he'd been a summer camp counselor teaching a class of youngsters to swim. Another counselor, a young woman whom in Jungian retrospect he'd interpreted as his oppositely-sex unconscious, told him that Ultimate Enlightenment lay between two mountains on the other side of the lake. She explained that the water was shallow all the way across and she could teach him a special stroke so he could swim there and not even get himself wet above the waist. He'd been enthusiastic and then realized that he was fully dressed and his billfold was in his backpocket. If he set out as instructed, he'd ruin his I.D..

He awoke feverish, realizing he'd passed up the most important opportunity of his life because he was afraid of losing his identity.

All of a sudden that message made sense now. Not that anybody had offered him Enlightenment, but that he was worrying so much because he'd symbolically lost his identity. He'd lost his ability to prove who he was.

"You know, Rif," he spoke up over the noise in the street

car, "I just realized why losing the passport has got me so upset . . ."

"Don't worry, Peregrine," Bo interjected. "I know who you really are."

Peregrine stammered. Where did that come from, he wondered.



To get to the police station they had to transfer to another streetcar line. At the transfer point, seeing how worried Peregrine looked, Rif offered to go ahead of them to the train depot and buy Peri a ticket.

"That's an excellent idea." Peri handed Rif the reservations forms he'd gotten in Paris from the French National Railway. "You may need these."

Rif hopped on the next car headed to the depot. A few moments later Peri and Bo climbed aboard the car the lady at the Consulate instructed to take.

Finding the police station was more trouble than Peri'd expected. But the officer on duty had been very cooperative and quickly filled out the forms they needed and tore off the carbon copy for Peregrine's documentation.

They had less than 15 minutes to make it back to the station for their train.

Fortunately there was a subway station nearby Bo had noticed and suggested that would get them there fastest. Bo nonchalantly said everything would work out okay.

When they arrived Rif was waiting out front. He had only one suitcase with him. "I forgot to get the key for your locker. Better run."

"Where do we catch the train," Peri asked already out of breath.

"Track 4," he announced.

The three of them rushed to the lockers and got the remaining suitcases. Then headed as fast as they could toward Track 4. The big clock in the center of the depot showed it was exactly their departure time.

As they came up the stairs from the tunnels under the tracks, they could see the train on track 4 just pulling away.

Peri exploded. All that rushing for nothing.

The last car of the train was just about to disappear out of the station.

Bo said calmly, "It'll be okay."

In his exasperation, Peregrine was about to scold Bo for being so nonchalant. After all they had an agreement to meet Richard and Laura in Paris in the morning. There was no way they could make it now. This was the last train.

"Look," Bo shouted, and started running down the platform. "Come on."

The train had stopped. Then it began backing up. A minute or two later it was almost back to its original position. As the threesome climbed aboard the closest car they could see a commotion going on a few cars ahead of them. A whole flock of nuns wearing old-fashioned wide starched wimples that looked like

geese sitting on their heads wear bundling out of the train while a conductor shouted at them in Dutch.

Peri asked another conductor who was standing at the top of the steps onto the train leaning out to see what was going on what happened.

"I do not know, Monsieur," he answered in a thick French accent, "But if this is your train, you are very lucky."

Peri showed him the reservations forms he had crumpled in one hand.

"Go through here," the conductor pointed toward the door to the car. "Your seats are up near the front in first class. You can find it?"

"Yes, I'm sure we can," Peri answered. Then as soon as they were aboard turned back to Bo -- who was grinning like the Cheshire Cat, "How did you do that?"

"Just luck, I guess," Bo answered and broke into giggles.

Rif, who was taking up the behind, ruffled Bo's hair.

"Thanks."

The train had already begun picking up speed and tossing them around a little by the time they made their way through about ten coaches crowded with people heading toward France for the weekend. In the first class section, where their Eurail passes permitted them to ride, the cars were broken up into compartments. There was room for six people in each compartment in two rows of seats facing each other.

Peri peered through the door to see four vacant places in

the compartment the reservations showed held their assigned seats. Already seated at opposite corners of the compartment were an old man wearing a beret with white hair wildly sticking out from under it and a dark complected young man in a out-of-style dark blue suit.

As they entered the car, the younger man looked up from the thick book he was holding with both hands in his lap. For a moment he looked quite surprised.

"Bon soir, bon soir," the older man said looking up at Peregrine with rheumy eyes. Even through his french his words sounded slurred. Peri could smell alcohol on his breath.

Apparently recognizing the three newcomers as Americans, the old man swtiched to heavily accented French, "Come in, come in. Perhaps you will join me in conversation. My young friend over there," he said, pointing accusingly at the young man already seated, "has been ignoring my ah, ah, protestations of fraternite."

Offhandedly, Peregrine remarked to the gentleman that they'd just barely made it onto the train as he put his suitcase in the overhead rack. He was surprised to see that the case in the rack above the silent young man looked identical to his. He slid his own down to the opposite end lest there be a mix-up later on. He continued making light banter with the old man as Rif and Bo seated themselves. Bo took the inside seat across from the young man.

"Don't you want the window," Rif asked.

"No, I'm okay here," Bo answered. Rif took the window seat opposite the old man.

Peregrine sat down between Bo and their new-found traveling companion. Maybe he'll fall asleep soon, Peri thought gently to himself.

The old Frenchman chattered on a bit then, while Peregrine was describing their itinerary, let his eyes close a moment too long and drifted off.

Peri laughed when he realized he wasn't talking to anybody anymore. He sat silently. Then for the first time noticed the young man sitting very rigidly across from him his head down so his face was almost invisible. Peri thought his position looked uncomfortable.

Soon a conductor came through to punch tickets and check passports. "He's okay," the conductor said as Rif started to rouse the sleeping old man. Rif showed his pass and passport. Peri handed the conductor his ticket and the letter from the American Consulate, hoping this irregularity would be no problem. He was surprised to notice that the silent young man raised himself up in his seat a little in what appeared an effort to read the paper as the conductor studied the letter.

"Very good, sir," the conductor said as he handed the letter back and turned to Bo who had his papers already held out for him to see.

For the first time, Peri looked closely at the young man. Funny, he thought, he looks familiar.

As the conductor turned his attention to him, the young man began speaking in very fast, but strangely accented french. Peregrine's french wasn't very good. But he thought the boy was

giving some very complicated explanation of why he wanted to change compartments.

The conductor apparently agreed readily. For as he left, leaving the compartment door wide open, the young man jumped to his feet and began wrestling down his suitcase overhead.

Peregrine was quite suprised by what happened next.

Bo reached out and touched the young man's leg. The man stood bolt upright as though he'd had an electric shock.

"Asseyez-vous," Bo said in very clear, but American sounding french.

The man turned around slowly and then sat down. His eyes were fixed on Bo's.

All of a sudden Peregrine recognized the face. And realized why he hadn't before. When he'd seen that face previously the young man had been rudely unshaven and had been sporting a pair of long pigtails braided with metallic green mylar ribbon and had puffed smoke in his eyes.

Something very odd was happening here. Peregrine didn't quite know what to make of the sudden developments. As his imagination began to run wild, he realized that though the young man had begun to sob he was speaking to Bo in broken English.

"I thought you were devil. Very dangerous. Had to be stopped. I didn't realize.

"I have sat here now, what, half-hour, and try to read Koran," he held up the thick book as Peregrine placed his accent as Arabic of some sort. "But instead I feel your eyes on me. So much love. I do not know how this can be."

He looked over at Peregrine, very guilty. "I am so sorry."

Bo said nothing. He just kept looking directly and deeply into the young man eyes.

"Quick," the man said, "you must hurry. It is maybe too late already. You must go up toward engine of train."

Peregrine was very confused. What's going on he wondered.

Bo turned to him, looking very serious -- and very mature. "Rif, Peri," he said. "Get the luggage and come with me. Now."

Bo stood up and started to leave the compartment. Then turned back and said to Peregrine, "Grab the old man and pull him along with you. He's innocent."

"Wait," the young man said. "The suitcase. . .a metal box . . .in the side pocket."

"Rif, get the box out of that suitcase. Hurry." Bo shouted. He reached over and pressed his palm on the forehead of the sobbing young man. "Allah be with you."

Then suddenly becoming a scared and excited nine year old again, Bo shouted "Come on, come on, hurry." He ran out into the hallway and started toward the front of the train. As he ran he hammered with his fists on the doors of the compartments.

Peregrine knew better by now than to try to fight whatever was going on. It was beyond what he understood. He'd never seen Bowman like this before. But he trusted there was a reason. He let Rif who was carrying his suitcase in one hand and a flat metal box, like a small money box, in the other go ahead of him. He'd grabbed his own and Bo's suitcase.

Peri and Rif both ran down the hall behind Bo, shouting to the other passengers who'd stuck their heads out to see what was

going on. "Come on, come on."

Bo led them through two cars. Then they reached the end of the train. Ahead of them was only the engine. The door was locked.

Bo was panting as he leaned up against the front wall. "I hope this is far enough away," he said.

A few other passengers had followed them. And the little crowd of bewildered people was now huddled at the front of the car while a conductor they passed along the way was sputtering at them all in angry-sounding Dutch.

"Do you know what's going on?" Peregrine asked Bo as he caught his breath.

"They weren't expecting you -- or maybe all three of us -- to make it on this train. And they planted clues so it'd look like you were responsible. Look in there," he said pointing to the metal box Rif was carrying.

Rif struggled with the box a moment and then the two sides of it slipped apart. There were several pieces of paper neatly folded. Lying on top was a passport. Peri reached down and took the passport. He didn't have any doubt it was his.

Just as he opened the little blue booklet to confirm his suspicion and just as the angry conductor managed to push his way through the jabbering crowd and grabbed Bo as if to scold him, there was a loud bang as from an explosion and the car rocked back and forth knocking them all over.

The car seemed to careen on two wheels, leaning ominously far off center. Then a ear-slipping screech began as the brakes

came on. The car righted itself and began to slow. The little crowd of people, including Peregrine, Rif, and Bo, were thrown into a pile up against the front wall as the train hurtled to a sudden stop.

For a moment there was absolute silence. Peri waited, wondering what was going to happen next.

The old Frenchman he'd pulled along with him began murmuring, "Oh merci, monsieur, merci."

Peregrine realized he smelled something burning. Then through the windows he could see clouds of smoke come billowing up alongside the train.

"Bo, what happened?"

"I guess we were pretty lucky," said the boy in a very young voice with a nervous break in it. "Thank God."

Unbeknown to Peregrine, on the other side of the world on Ward 16B at Napa State Hospital, not far from the fertile vineyards that for almost a century had produced some of California's best wines, a deformed little girl named Isabel Lorret began to scream.

Nancy Logan, the charge nurse tossed aside the chart she'd been writing in. "Oh, damn," she said under her breath. "One of the brats is throwing a tantrum against."

"Nancy, Nancy, come look at this," old Mrs. Elizando said, sticking her head through the door into Logan's little office just behind the glass enclosed nurses' station of the ward for

mentally handicapped children, "It's little Isabel."

Logan followed Mrs Elizando out into the dayroom. "Well, I'll be," she remarked. "I wonder what's got into her. This is the first time in however many years she's been here we've ever heard a peep out of her."

Mrs. Elizando had rushed over and taken the crippled little girl in her arms. Even as she brushed the stringy blond hair out of the girl's face, Isabel kept on screaming, her mouth wide open, her cries a little less strident now that she was getting hoarse. "It's okay, Isabel. It's okay."

The hunched-shouldered little girl gradually began to quiet down.

"What is wrong, Isabel?" Nurse Logan asked sternly. (She knew it was important not to coddle these kids too much. If you're too soft on them they never learn anything.)

"Scared, Mrs. Logan. Scared," Isabel stuttered. "Big explosion." She rocked back and forth in Mrs. Elizando's arms. Then suddenly started laughing. "Bo's okay. Bo's okay." She repeated in a kind of sing-song rhythm.

"Funny thing happened this morning," Mrs. Logan mentioned during report that afternoon. "Mrs. Elizando, would you like to describe what happened with Isabel Lorret."

The older Hispanic woman, a nurse's aide who'd worked on Ward 16B for profoundly retarded children and adults for nearly 15 years, explained to the meeting of the day and afternoon shifts how Isabel, who was usually so quiet and cooperative, had inexplicably become quite agitated, speaking about an explosion

of some sort.

After she finished, Nurse Logan paraphrased the write-up from Isabel's chart. "She's nine years old now. One of the Star-Child babies, born in a radiation survivor camp in the San Fernando Valley soon after the L.A. explosion. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy resulting from anoxia and forceps injury during birth. Classified as mildly retarded. But got assigned to this ward because she is so psychologically withdrawn and because it was feared her spinal deformation might be made fun of by residents on a ward for the higher functioning. She's unable to run or, apparently, walk for any significant distance."

"I thought all the Star-Child babies were supposed to be mentally-gifted," interjected Dr. Morgenstern, the ward psychiatrist and general cynic.

Louise Lovelace, an L.V.N. on the afternoon shift, answered, "I have a niece that's one of those babies. She's only about four now, but she certainly is something of a prodigy. And she's so sweet and loving. And whatever her talents, they sure didn't come from my sister or her lumox of a husband. He's the dumbest man I've ever met. But, you know, Ginny -- that's my sister -- had one of those dreams while she was carrying the baby. She'd been in a car wreck. While she was in the hospital, in critical condition, and they thought she was going to lose baby, she had the vision of the big-eyed baby in the ball of light. In just a few days she recovered from all the injuries and the baby was fine. The doctors all said it was a miracle."

"You know, this business about Star-Child babies is just a

bunch of hooley," spoke up Morganstern angrily. "It's all just a lot of hype and self-fulfilling prophecy.

"And this child, Isabel, is the obvious proof of that. Maybe her mother had some cockamamy dream, but she's a retarded basketcase nonetheless. Isn't that proof enough?"

"No, Doctor," responded Louise, "All that proves is that some obstetrician fucked up her delivery and then pulled her out with forceps and damaged her brain."

Mrs Elizando had been getting more and more anxious during the interchange. "Isabel is a wonderful little girl," she broke in with her heavily-accented English, "She's so loving. She's just no problem at all. All the other residents are so much more cooperative when she's around. They all like her.

"My priest says not to put too much belief in the stories about the Star-Child babies. He says it isn't mentioned in the Bible so it can't be.

"But he's not rude like you are, Dr. Morganstern," she added, allowing to surface her on-going dislike for the ward's psychiatrist.

"Would somebody explain what all this Star-Child baby stuff is about," asked a young student nurse who was doing a six-week rotation on this ward. "I thought all that stuff was really just National Enquirer nonsense."

"See," said Dr. Morganstern. "I was right."

"Well, Doctor, just because this young woman doesn't know what the whole thing is about doesn't make you right," answered Louise Lovelace rather abruptly.

"Here, here," Mrs. Logan shouted over the din that had

erupted as everyone began speaking at once. She turned to the student nurse. "Do you mean you really don't know what we're talking about?"

"Well," she answered, "Of course, I've heard about the babies that started appearing soon after the nuclear accident back in 2000. I know the mothers are supposed to have had some sort of dream or hallucination of an infant in a bright ball of light -- like in that old movie 2001. And that the children were supposed to be especially sweet-natured and even abnormally lucky. And I know stories about such children are always appearing in the National Enquirer and NewsFront Magazine and places. I guess I thought there was something to it, but not really all that much, mainly just media hype."

"Those were very strange times," Mrs Logan began. "I was living in Riverside then, just to the east of what was Los Angeles. I saw a lot of that first hand. . . ."

"But maybe I'm speaking out of turn," she apologized.

"No, no, go on," said the psychiatrist. "You people have been scolding me for not believing. Well, I'm certainly willing to listen. Maybe I'll learn something."

§

"I was fresh out of nursing school and working at Patton State Hospital down south," Nancy Logan continued.

"It was November 2. It was just starting to get cold as winter was approaching. But I remember it was a beautiful day.

"As you all probably know, there was tremendous political

tension between the governments then in power in this country and in Russia. Up till then both countries had had nuclear missiles aimed at each other. To protect America, we'd begun to put up a satellite defense system that would use lasers and satellite-mounted weapons to shoot down any missiles that might be fired at us -- especially by the Russians.

"The Russians strongly objected to this system because it left them virtually open to attack by us, since they couldn't retaliate 'cause we could shoot down their missiles. So they threatened to blow up all of Russia in a huge explosion that would have ruined the whole planet if we attacked them.

"Just after the satellite system was installed, by some strange quirk of fate, there was a huge explosion on the sun. The radiation stopped all radio communication on earth and, besides, caused tremendous auroral displays up in the Arctic. Some trigger-happy Russian submarine commander mistook those auroras for Russia blowing itself up. And he fired off his missiles at us.

"All but four of the missiles were shot down. One of those four destroyed Los Angeles, another exploded in the air above Washington, D.C., and the other two, carrying multiple warheads, exploded in North Dakota where our side had most of our land-based missiles in underground silos.

"As you remember, the big problems were what to do with the fallout and what to do about the survivors who'd been irradiated and were suffering from radiation sickness.

"In what seemed like an act of divine intervention -- that has still not been explained adequately -- the wind stopped

blowing all over the planet. The fallout didn't spread and there was time to precipitate the radioactive dust out by pouring tons of water into the two big fallout clouds in North Dakota and Southern California. You know, of course, that that project resulted in the two quarantine areas, Devil's Lake and the L.A. crater.

"Well, during those intensely confusing and scary two months when the wind had stopped, a number of babies were born that seemed to be be very special. Those born in hospital nurseries where they were around other infants were reported to mimic the other children's behavior, as though there were some kind of telepathic link -- at least that's what was suggested by some people. These babies were also reported to have particularly sweet dispositions and to cry very little. It was even said that adults who came around them experienced a sort of improved sense of well-being.

"What the media made a big deal over was that almost all of the mothers of these children said that they'd had the kind of dream or waking hallucination that you were talking about earlier. Many of these mothers were radiation survivors. They seemed to live much longer than should have been expected. Believers in the Star-Child stories going around said the babies were keeping their mothers alive through some sort of power of healing they had.

"Remember, those were really crazy times. The wind, of course, started blowing almost within hours of the completion of the fallout. That all looked magical enough for the press to

hail it -- and the babies -- as all part of an act of divine intervention.

"There were some priests and monks in North Carolina or West Virginia (I don't really remember) who were conducting what the government at first was calling terrorist attacks on the survivors. They were bringing suicide pills to the people who were dying the most painfully. They ended up getting a lot of publicity and even got Congress to develop a plan to help the mortally injured to die peacefully and painlessly.

"Well, they had one of these babies born at their place. At first everybody thought this was the only such child and it was touted as the Second Coming of Jesus and such things. Then, of course, other mothers reported having had the same kind of dreams. And it turned out there were several hundred of these so-called Star-Child babies all over the world.

"After a while the whole thing sort of blew over. And you don't hear much about it anymore. Several of you here seem to never even have heard about the whole thing. Dr. Morganstern is obviously cynical.

"All I will say is that it did seem like something miraculous happened on earth during the first few months of the year 2001. Government changed. The nuclear weapons were all dismantled. People started cooperating with each other. It was really quite something when you compare it with how things were before."

"I didn't mean to give the impression I'd never heard of the star-children," the student nurse spoke up. "But I guess I didn't realize how those stories fit in with the rest of the

events around the nuclear explosions. Thank you, for explaining all that, Mrs. Logan."

She then added, "Are these babies still being born?"

Louise spoke up to answer that. "Why, yes, in fact, it seems like the number of them is growing all the time. There seems to be some connection with the mother being involved in a physical or emotional trauma. And, well of course, there haven't been any worldwide traumas like the nuclear accidents, so there hasn't been as concentrated an appearance."

The student nurse answered, "Then this really isn't all just an invention of the gossip columns and the tabloids. There really is something to it?"

"Oh, definitely," answered Louise.

"Well, now, wait just a minute," Dr. Morganstern started in again.



Nancy Logan, R.N. was a conscientious nurse. In order to assure that all the residents on her ward got the best treatment available, she had reorganized the usual hospital schedule. Instead of in the morning, Mrs. Logan held the daily staff meeting in connection with afternoon report and shift change. During that hour or so, most of the residents were put to bed for a nap.

Thus, tho' she was being talked about at length, Isabel Lorret was sleeping. Usually the girl slept soundly. She was ordinarily always very docile and quiet. Today, something was

different.

Isabel was dreaming. The sort of dream she'd never had before. Instead of calmly reliving the routine life of the ward as she usually did, today she found herself riding a train, something she'd never done before. She was walking rapidly through the cars, looking into compartments, apparently searching for someone. In the dream, Isabel was aware that something very strange was happening to her. She did not feel at all like herself. She was somehow more awake than she'd ever been before. And when she caught her reflection in the windows of the train, her body was erect and her shoulders straight.

She looked into a compartment. Sitting alone was a young man with dark complexion and dark hair wearing a dark colored suit. He was bent over weeping. He looked up. His eyes met Isabel's. He looked simultaneously surprised, frightened, and desperate. Isabel smiled warmly and reached out to him. (In the dream, the glass door to the compartment dissolved to allow Isabel to reach through.)

As the young man took her hand, her attention shifted to the leather suitcase on the rack above him. A sidepocket was unstrapped and askew as though someone had pulled something out of hastily. Isabel could feel heat coming from the case. And she saw that slowly, very slowly the case was beginning to expand. As the seams ripped open flames began to force their way out.

Isabel wondered about the time sequence. Everything was happening so very slowly.

The young man had started to stand just as the suitcase

overhead burst into flame. He was thrown forward, into the door that had not dissolved for him as it had for Isabel the dreamer. The glass shattered as his head struck the window. The compartment behind was bright orange with burning, searing gases. The flames erupted in the dark suit and wrapped themselves around the young man. His mouth opened in a scream. He looked up at Isabel. She felt so sad for him. Whatever he had done, whatever had brought this on, he deserved forgiveness she felt. As this wave of compassion washed over her, she believed she saw a momentary expression of peace pass across the face of the young man before her just as the flames engulfed his head and face and his skin began to char.

In the dream, Isabel looked away. She wanted time to start moving again. She didn't want to have to watch this young man's death in slow motion.

Suddenly she was in a different car of the train. The car was swaying precariously and a crowd of people pressed up against the front door of the car were being thrown about by the motion of the car.

And then, as suddenly, as though time were passing in discontinuous spurts, Isabel was alone in the railroad car. Through the windows she could see the crowd of people now outside standing around in small clusters. She moved through the doorway to the steep steps to the ground. As she began to climb down out of the train, in a part of her mind that seemed to be observing the dream from above its reality, she realized -- almost with a start -- that ordinarily she'd never have been able to climb down

steps like these.

Isabel was hopelessly crippled, her shoulders twisted forward, her spine bent, her legs misshapen, the left several inches shorter than the right. Yet now, in this dream that seemed more real and intense than her waking life, her body was lithe and straight and agile.

As she descended from the train, she noticed two men and a boy about her own age, sitting a little apart from the crowd, on a low rock wall that paralleled the tracks. Something about them seemed familiar. She searched her memory for who they could be. And the observing part of her mind marvelled that she could even consider having recognized these people. It had been years since she'd ever been out of the MR ward at Napa State Hospital. There was virtually no one in the outside world she could possibly recognize. Yet she was sure those three looked familiar.

One was older. He was tall and trim. Snow white hair circled his balding head like a laurel wreath. (How do I know about laurel wreaths? Isabel the observer wondered.) The other was a little younger. He was thin and sharp-featured. His once bright red hair was a dull copper color with traces of distinguishing grey at the temples.

The boy looked up at her. His hair was dark, almost inky black. His skin fair and smooth. His cheeks were ruddy and flushed from the excitement. His deep blue eyes met Isabel's. She felt a shock of recognition. And as their gaze met, from the eyes of the boy, brilliant white light flooded forth. Joy filled the young girl's body.

From somewhere far away, a bell began to ring. Isabel felt

her shoulder cramp. "No, I don't want to go back," she screamed, as her consciousness began to fade and she felt herself drifting back into a dull stupor as she was pulled out of the dream into wakefulness.

"Nap time's over," said Mrs. Elizando as she came over to Isabel's bed. Now that the staff meeting was ended, she was going home for the day. She'd spent so much of the day with little Isabel she wanted to say goodbye.

Mrs. Elizando was surprised to find that crippled little Isabel was weeping profusely. How strange! That didn't seem like Isabel at all, she thought.

## 10

Peregrine was astonished by the events of the day. First he'd gone through the personally upsetting experience of losing his passport and nearly having to change all his -- and Rif's and Bowman's -- travel plans. Then he'd managed just in the nick of time to get a letter of passage from the American Consulate and file the police report needed for replacement of his Eurail Pass. Then they missed the train and were lucky enough to have it pull back into the station for a few minutes to allow them to board. Then, just when he thought the problems were over and they were on their train, headed back peacefully to Paris where they were to meet friends in the morning, it turns out the train is carrying a terrorist bomb. And the bomb was planted to look like it was Peregrine's.

The episode with the passport suddenly made sense.

Peregrine's documents had been stolen from him, probably while he was trying to fish out coins to use in the automat Bo had gotten so excited about. . .

Bo seemed to know all about this, didn't he, Peregrine thought to himself.

"Bowman," he asked the boy once the commotion had settled and the passengers were filing off the now-motionless train, "how did you know what was going on? And just how much did you know?"

"What do you mean, Peri?" Bo asked, obviously surprised by Peregrine's stern and accusing tone of voice.

"Well, son, it practically seems like you were orchestrating this whole thing. It was your idea to go to that place where I lost the passport. Your idea to stall around till the last minute to check the luggage. And, in some way I don't pretend to understand, your doing that we managed to get on the train. And most certainly your idea to get away from that bomb."

"You're not mad at me, are you?" the boy replied, looking all the innocent, powerless nine year old he seemed to be.

"Well, maybe."

"Honestly, Peri, I knew something was going on. But I really didn't know what. You know I've told you about getting ideas inside my head, almost like a voice whispering to me. Well, that's what this was. I mean, at each step, I'd get the idea to do something, like go to that automat or, later on, to talk to that man in the compartment.

"But, I wasn't really causing any of this to happen."

"I guess I realize that," Peri responded, realizing how paranoid his previous suggestions has sounded. "It's just that I

don't understand what's going on. And, I think, as soon as I can stop long enough to think about it, I'm going to get pretty worried about why somebody either just tried to blow us up or, at least, implicate me in what seems like a terrorist bombing."

"Peri, Bo," Rif shouted from outside the car. "Are you two coming out?"

As Peregrine and the boy descended, they came up Rif standing in shock and amazement at the disaster behind them. Three cars stood upright behind the engine. The next car was just a wreck of twisted steel. It was still burning. Behind it the train was broken and overturned as cars had been derailed by the concussion from the blast.

Peregrine could heard people screaming in the wrecked and crumpled cars. "Oh my God," he said under his breath.

Bowman started to cry. "I didn't think this would happen," he muttered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Rif put his arm over the boy's shoulder. "You're not responsible for this, Bo. Whatever was going on back there, you weren't responsible."

"But I'm sure this was aimed at me, at us," Bo sobbed. "We were supposed to be killed or at least get blamed."

"Do you know why?" Peri asked, realizing that it did no good to remain incredulous. Rif was right, the boy wasn't responsible. But the three of them were certainly right smack in the middle of whatever was going on. And Bo seemed to perceive the connection better than he or Rif could with their logical adult minds.

"Well, I could almost feel thoughts coming out of that man with the bomb. When we first sat down I could sense that he was real surprised. I don't think he expected us to make it on board the train. Then later I could feel hate and anger. I could almost hear him shouting at me, 'demon-child, monster' and words like that. Then when the conductor came in he looked at his watch and got real scared and tried to get away.

"That's when the voice in my head said to touch him. And I did. And it was like an electric shock." Bo started crying again.

"Let's sit down over here," Rif said as he guided them away from the crowd standing waiting for somebody to tell them what to do. There was a low stone wall along the edge of the railway's easement.

"I can feel people dying down there," Bo stuttered between his tears. "That all happened because of us, because of me."

"What did the man tell you?" Peregrine asked. He wanted to get more information from Bowman before the facts got all mixed up with the emotions.

"Well, he didn't exactly talk to me. But I could feel like I knew what was in his mind. But the thoughts all came at me so fast I couldn't make much sense of them. I'm sorry, Peri," he added apologetically.

"That's okay, Bo. Don't worry. But see if you can sort this stuff out while it's still fairly fresh."

"I clearly sensed that he was not alone. And that other people were watching him. And that he had been praying very hard. I got this memory from him of being in some kind of open

field near a church or some sort of religious building. He was with about twenty or thirty other men. They were all wearing military uniforms, I think. But they were praying. They were chanting words I couldn't understand at all and pounding their chests with their fists. Like doing calisthenics or something. Does this make any sense?"

"It might, Bo. Go on."

"Part of that memory also involved being inside a room of some sort. I think there was a real strong smell of incense. He was sitting doing another chant. And -- oh, Peri, this one seems familiar -- it was like something you all do in the chapel back home occasionally. What do you call it? Oh yeah, zikar."

Peregrine recognized the name of the Sufi Islamic practice of chanting the first principle of Mohammed's monotheism: "There is no God but God." "La illah ha il allah hu."

"And I remember that the guy was praying for martyrdom all through this . . . he's dead now, isn't he? Maybe that's why he was thinking about all that stuff when I managed that mind-link with him?"

"Bowman, what do you mean 'mind-link'? Is this something you've done before?" Rif asked.

Bo bowed his head, and grinned sheepishly. "I guess so," he answered evasively.

"Can you read my mind right now?" Peregrine asked.

"Oh no," Bo chirped. "It's nothing like that."

"What is it like?" asked Rif.

"Well, sometimes, when I touch somebody, I get these

feelings and memories from them. I don't know whether it's real or just imagination. . ."

"Why haven't you told us about this before?" Peregrine quizzed.

"Oh, I don't know," the boy again bowed his head and looked embarrassed and guilty. "It never seemed to matter very much. It was just ideas I was having."

"Well, Bo, I didn't mean to scold you. It's just that I'm surprised. And I'm real proud of you," Peregrine patted Bo on the back, leaving his arm affectionately around the boy's shoulders. He could feel Bo shivering. He realized the late twilight was getting chilly. "What else do you remember about today? Anything about my passport?"

"That man first called me a demon or devil or something in his thoughts. Then I remember telling him no, that I wasn't . . ."

Bo trembled in Peregrine's arm. "I'm not, am I?" he said obviously frightened.

"No you're not, son. You're just a boy. Maybe a very special boy. Tho' I don't think I realized how special till today."

"And then I felt this sort of wave of -- oh I don't know what to call it -- compassion? forgiveness? And I knew it was coming through me to him.

"And then, all of sudden, he sort of said out loud to me, but still just with his mind, that there was a bomb in the suitcase. And that your passport was planted with the bomb so it's look like you -- or maybe me -- wass responsible. That's when I told you to get the passport and to get away from there.

"That was the right thing, wasn't it?" Bo asked.

"Yes, Bo, you did real good. You saved several lives including ours. Don't you feel proud . . ."

Bo didn't answer. He was looking over at the train car with a surprised and intense gaze. Peregrine didn't see what had caught his attention. There wasn't anybody there. "What is it, Bo?"

"Peri, look at that girl over there. Her eyes are full of light," Bo answered excitedly.

"What girl?" Rif asked. He apparently was as baffled as Peregrine.

"Don't you see her there, getting off the train?"

"Pardon, monsieur, I must talk with you now." Their surprise at Bo's apparent vision was interrupted. "I am Inspector Maritain. I must ask you some questions about the terrorist who was in the compartment with you."

"Yes, we'll try to answer them," Peregrine replied as to his surprise he recognized the Inspector as the old drunken peasant who'd been in the compartment with them.

"I must thank you for saving my life," the old man said, now looking much less bedraggled than he had before. "What I must ask you is how you knew to leave the compartment? And what was it you took from the suitcase?"

"Yes, of course. But you must excuse my surprise, Inspector. We certainly had no idea you were. . . ah, well, just who are you with?" Peregrine asked, realizing that he'd better be cautious. After all, some very strange things were happening

here.

"I am with Interpol," Maritain answered, producing a badge and I.D., just like in the movies. "I was assigned to watch the young man in the compartment with us. He was known to have entered France illegally about a week ago. We thought he was a smuggler. We had no idea he was carrying a bomb.

"Which brings me back to my question to you, monsieur? How did you know about the bomb?"

Peri was suddenly frightened again. He realized how Bo's saving them would look to the police like foreknowledge of the bomb. Would they believe Bo's story?

Bo came out of his daze. He reached out to the Inspector to introduce himself. As he took Maritain's hand, he said, becoming a perfect little gentleman. "I am Bowman Mayberry. We knew about the bomb because the young man warned me. That is why we ran. We have no other information to give you about what happened." The last sentence Bo pronounced almost like a command.

Peregrine was just bewildered. He'd seen so much today he couldn't understand. The cute little boy they had brought traveling with them so he could expand his awareness of the world suddenly seemed like a master of strange mystical powers.

"What we grabbed from the suitcase was Brother Peregrine's passport," Rif was saying as Peregrine brought himself out of his own daze. "Peri, show Inspector Maritain you passport."

Peregrine pulled the passport from the breast pocket of his jacket. He gratefully realized Rif still had the metal box it had been concealed in. No need to tell the Inspector about that.

At least not at the moment.

"Well, we are all very lucky, are we not?" Inspector Maritain said very happily, "that the young terrorist there had the good manners to warn us about his bomb. Strange these terrorists. Never know what they are going to do?"

"Ah, but his bomb has still done much destruction and, I believe, killed several people. There will certainly be further investigation. Please give me your names and where we can reach you."

"I'm sorry, Inspector," Boman interrupted. "We are traveling and you will not be able to reach us at all. We have told you all you need from us already."

"Why yes," Maritain replied, obviously enthralled by Bowman's persuasive command. "I wish you very good travels. If you have any further information to give, please contact me at the Interpol office in Paris." He handed Bo his card. "Now I must look after the injured."

After the Inspector had walked away, Rif asked, "Bo, how did you do that?"

Again the innocent little nine-year-old, Bo started giggling. "Oh, I don't know. It was easy. I just told him the truth. The hard part was keeping a straight face . . ." the boy laughed.

"What I want to know is what happened to the girl with the bright eyes? I want to find her again."

"I didn't see her at all," answered Peregrine.

"Me neither," echoed Rif.

"She'll be back. I hope," Bowman said determinedly. Then added, "Now let's follow Inspector Maritain and see what's happened with the other passengers. After all, even if we didn't tell him, we know we're sort of responsible for all this. Maybe we can be of help."

Yes, Bo, maybe you can, Peregrine thought. What kinds of powers are developing in you?

PART II

Bowman at Sweetwater

Bo Mayberry stood in the bright summer sun at the edge of what was called "the Point." Below him the land dropped away sharply. The Point was at the tip of a steep-sided hill that protruded from one of the North Carolina Smoky Mountains tucked into a valley of which was Sweetwater Farm. From the Point, situated well outside Sweetwater's narrow valley, a wide vista opened up onto the whole of the Smokies Range. Beyond the Smokies, Bo knew, in the shadowy distance were the Blue Ridge.

It was a beautiful day, Bo thought. The beginning of June, the real start of summer. Soon it would be getting pretty hot and muggy around here. Right now the air was damp but still cool and the wind blowing down from the top of the mountain was crisp and even occasionally chilly.

Bo had walked out here to visit his friends. There was a birthday party coming up this afternoon. Thomas was ten years old today. Bo wanted to arrange a surprise for Thomas, a surprise nobody else would understand or even recognize. But Thomas would. Bo was grateful for that. He had to wonder what it would like to possess the kinds of powers and sensitivities he did and not have anyone else around like himself.

Thomas Pressman was Bo's step-brother. Thomas had been born into the Sweetwater Farm community about six months after Bo. His mother was Amy Pressman. His father, never really spoken about, was a creepy man called Billy Bob who'd apparently disappeared under strange circumstances around the time of the Star Wars accidents. Amy had been a refugee at Sweetwater, just

as Bo's mother had been. Later Amy had married Jude Pressman, one of the members of the Farm community. The couple, along with help from most of the other residents at Sweetwater, especially Peregrine and Rif, had raised the two boys together.

They made a wonderful pair, people joked. Bo was light-complected with dark black hair. Thomas was olive-skinned with bright golden hair. Bo was quiet and studious. Thomas was rambuncious and full of mischief. Bo was small, though, from chopping wood and doing farming chores, was already developing a well-muscled body. Thomas was tall and thin.

Old Father David joked that Bo would be the football player and Thomas the basketball star. The two boys just felt embarrassed by such comments. They were just beginning to be old enough to attend to their bodies. They were uneasy about such remarks.



Bo sat down in the grass at the tip of the Point. He pulled off his shirt. The sun felt good on his shoulders. And there was something about the nudity that felt adventurous and exciting, something he knew meant he should only do this when he was alone. Or maybe with Thomas. Bo still wasn't sure how he and Thomas were going to deal with their remarkable ability to sometimes merge their minds into one. Bo knew it would be hard to keep secrets from Thomas. Maybe he didn't have to. But he knew there were certain secrets, especially secrets about his body, that he was supposed to keep from his Mom and Dad and from the other adults. And there were secrets about his powers that

he knew he had to keep secret, at least for a while.

Looking very much like a diminutive yogi meditating in the woods, Bo sat straight and silent for a few minutes. He brought his mind into sync with the gentle wind blowing down the mountain, with the hum of the insects in the grass, with the flutter of the birds in the trees.

He slowly opened his mind so that all the living things around him were included in his consciousness. He could feel the grass growing up around him and swaying in the breeze. He could feel the industriousness of the insects and the exaltation of the birds as they flitted from branch to branch through the bright air.

"Today is a special day for Thomas," he thought aloud to birds. "I want you to sing a song for him."

The thrill of doing what he was planning pulled his mind away. For a moment he became self-conscious and lost the delicate mind-link (as he called it to himself) with the birds. At the same time, a rush of anxiety passed through him. Is this a stupid thing? he asked himself. Am I giving away a secret I ought to keep?

He recalled his display of powers almost a year ago while he was with Rif and Brother Peri in Europe. He'd saved their lives, he knew. And discovered some very important information -- information he still had told anyone about completely. It just wasn't time yet.

But then he'd had to carefully hide those powers 'cause Rif and Peri were treating him like some kind of royalty or maybe like some kind of freak. Was his birthday present for Thomas

going to cause them both more trouble?

Bowman calmed his mind. (He was grateful for all the instruction in meditation he'd received as a fringe benefit for having been born at Sweetwater Farm, this sort of free-lance monastery and meditation center. It had given him control over these strange abilities he was discovering in himself.)

Again he reached out his mind to the birds. He felt light and free. He could almost feel the total freedom of flying, soaring high into the heavens.

He began to hum a tune. Over and over again in his mind. Until he felt it echoing back to him from the flocks of birds

When he opened his eyes, he was startled to see that all the trees surrounding the meadow at the tip of the Point were literally packed with birds, all of them twittering excitedly.

## 2

Virtually the whole community came in for lunch today. There was going to be a party. All fifty or so of the men and women who lived in the houses scattered around in the valley around Sweetwater wanted to be present to celebrate. Thomas and Bo, of course, were not the only children at Sweetwater. Over the recent years several young families had moved onto the property joining the original foundation of older men and women who'd been well past child-rearing before retiring to the Farm. Now there were lots of children around. But Thomas and Bo were really the two natives, born during that very crucial time when Sweetwater Farm had made its mark on the world in the wake of the

Star Wars accidents. They were special then. And they were special now.

And, as well as this year being the tenth birthdays for the two boys (last December for Bo and now June for Thomas), this was the tenth anniversary of those watershed days.

Bo arrived a little late. He sneaked into the refectory and took a seat at one of the back tables. He quickly scooped up the soup that was placed before him by one of members of this weeks serving team. He passed on the rest of lunch. He was too excited by now to eat.

He spied Thomas sitting up at the head table with Father Timothy, the titular head of the community. (Father David Omar, the Abbot who'd presided over the founding and development of the community, had recently retired and passed the authority on to Timothy.)

Thomas noticed Bo and waved to him to come sit up front with him. Bo shook his head. Just then, Timothy dinged a couple of times with a spoon on his water glass.

"Today, you all know, is the birthday of our young friend here, Thomas. If I'm not mistaken, I think there's ice cream and a birthday cake about to come out. . ."

The overhead lights went out. The room was not dark, but the candles on the cake brought in from the door to the kitchen at the back of the room clearly spread of warm golden glow that moved up towards the front.

Just as the cake was placed in front of Thomas, Timothy began to sing the familiar melody. "Happy Birthday to you. . ."

(Here's goes, thought Bo.)

The rest of the community joined in with the song.

And then suddenly there was a great flurry of wings outside as a huge flock of birds descended upon the refectory. And suddenly the simple singing of the community was echoed in the chirping and squaking and whistling of the birds. Somehow the birds were singing along.

The community almost stopped singing in shock. Then someone raised their voice a little louder and lead them on and everybody finished. "Happy birthday, dear Thomas, happy birthday to you."

As the birds outside flapped their wings noisily, everybody applauded and then broke into joyful laughter.

Thomas, maybe the most surprised, looked right at Bo. And Bo got the message loud and clear "Should you have done that?"

### 3

Bowman learned how to sing with the birds over a year before his first public performance at Thomas's birthday party. From the time he was very young he'd had a special affinity with birds. Perhaps it was because, like so many other human beings, he longed to fly and envied the birds their wings. At any rate, he paid them attention and began to notice they paid him attention.

Sister Alicia, one of the community's most regular cooks, had taught Bo to feed the birds crumbs and grains from the kitchen. Alicia was one of the early members of Sweetwater. As a young woman, she'd been a Catholic school sister. During her novitiate, she'd loved cooking for the whole community.

She'd liked cooking much better than teaching, in fact. And after a couple of years had left the order and opened a restaurant. Like many of the others who first came to live at Sweetwater Farm, Alicia had remembered religious life fondly and when she had the opportunity to retire from her business, she moved to Sweetwater with its new style religious life.

Alicia was an old woman. In the absence of any such blood relative, she was what Bo grew up thinking of as a grandmother. When he was little she'd take him with her into the kitchen and tempt him with tasty treats all the while cooking for the community. She was best at pastries. And there'd always be crumbs and bits of dough and flour and sometimes seeds left over from her cooking. She'd throw them out into the yard and watch the birds devour them. At dinner time, it was not unusual to find a large flock of birds fluttering in the trees apparently waiting for Alicia to feed them.

When Bo got a little older, Alicia let him take over feeding the birds. He liked the job. It made him feel important -- especially to the birds. After a while, he began to think that the birds could recognize him. And that he could recognize some of them. He gave them names, tho' he was never really sure that he was using the names for the same birds each time. They all looked alike. A few of the birds would actually come to him.

Sister Alicia began calling Bo her "little St. Francis," after Francis of Assisi who was said to be so innocent that the birds and wild animals were not afraid of him.

There were two bright red cardinals that Bo could always recognize. Tho' it couldn't tell them apart, he named them -- at

Peregrine's abstruse recommendation -- Bonaventure and Alfredo after famous Italian Cardinals Bonaventure and Alfredo Ottaviani. They soon became Bonny and Al. And they soon became Bowman's almost inseparable companions.

Peregrine had always urged Bo to train his psychic abilities -- tho' Peregrine had had no idea that those abilities would develop as powerfully as they did. And it was Peregrine's suggestion that Bo try to establish telepathic contact with the birds. He read Bo a passage from T.H. White's version of the Arthurian Legends THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING in which the Magician Merlyn turned the young Arthur into a merlin hawk. Peri told Bo that to become a hero like King Arthur he'd have to learn such skills.

Bo tried and tried to turn himself into a cardinal so he could fly with Bonny and Al. But to no avail. Sometimes when he was trying this, in the back of his mind he'd think he was seeing what the birds were seeing, as tho' through their eyes. But since at first he had no way to check this out, he never knew if he was really seeing or just guessing.

In fact, the single biggest lesson Bowman Mayberry had had to learn in training his abilities was to trust his guessing. Even at his very best and most mature development as a seer, Bowman was never going to actually be able to transfer his consciousness to that of a bird or to read another person's thoughts or to tell the future. But what, over time, he learned was that he could begin to make guesses about such things, and his guesses would be right. It was as though the information

about the future, about another's thoughts, about an animal's experience, for instances, was really just below his conscious awareness. When he didn't try too hard to know the information, it seemed to be available to him.

"It's like looking at a faint light in the distance late at night," he once explained to Peregrine. "If you look directly at it, you can't see it, but if you look away a little, it appears in the corner of your vision."

Peregrine had answered, "That's called the Pakinje Effect."

In fact, Bo had discovered his version of the "Pakinje Effect" from listening to the birds' singing. One evening, down at the Point, while Bonny and Al were perched peacefully on each shoulder and Bo was sitting in his meditation posture, Bo was listening to the birds. He was trying to imagine that he understood what they were saying. While he was trying very hard to understand the meaning, he realized that "out of the corner" of his listening, he could hear intricate melodies and harmonies. They didn't mean anything, but they sounded rich and beautiful.

"This is how the birds hear their singing," he later tried to explain to Peregrine. "It's not all squaking and trilling and chirping. It sounds like a rich full melody. It's like the rhythm is all different, like time is going on different and so the sounds all fit together differently."

"I don't know, Peri, I guess I can't explain it," Bo finally gave up.

"Oh, Bo, you know that's how special gifts are, how insights

are. You can't explain them to other people. They're just yours. And the explanations never seem to make sense or convey the significance."

Soon, with practice, Bo learned how to focus his attention away from what he wanted to perceive and to pick it up through his intuition. And soon could listen to the complex music of the birds whenever he wanted. He even learned to sing along with them. Ironically, he did discover that the music carried a certain significance: it was not meaning the way words carry meaning. But clearly he could tell meaning in the melodies. Sometimes they sang of danger, sometimes of exultation in the bright sunlight, sometimes of impending rain or cold.

And from there he discovered they could sing along with him. If he hummed or sang a simple melody, the birds could suit their rhythm and pitch to it. The songs they sang in mimic of Bo were never as wonderful and rich as those they sang themselves. But Bo was proud to have entered into bird culture enough to make a small contribution. And he was proud to exercise this talent.

He'd shown Peregrine he could do it several months ago. And that was why to Thomas's worried query, he could say, "It's nothing to worry about." Bo had in fact revealed most of his so-called "powers" to Peregrine, if only because he'd often felt in need of a teacher or guide in how to use them. Of course, these "powers" really were more sensitivities than powers. Bo never developed anything like telekinesis. His abilities came not from an effort to manipulate the world but from an acute awareness of the consciousness of the world around him. Yet Bo was more than

just an old-fashioned "psychic." For, tho' he seemed to exercise virtually no control over the power, he was a source of healing and good fortune for those around him. Things simply went better when Bo was involved. He was lucky and his luck rubbed off on others. Neither he nor Peregrine had understood how to control or channel this.

Just as Peregrine was a sort of guide to Bo, so Bo was a guide to Thomas. Thomas's powers always seemed a little less developed than Bo's. At least, Thomas didn't seem to discover abilities before Bo pointed them out to him. But, like Bo, Thomas seemed to radiate healing and good fortune.

"Now you focus your attention on something else, maybe breathing," Bo had instructed Thomas how to learn the birds, "and then you listen sort of out of the side of your hearing."

Bo sometimes wondered if Thomas was jealous of him. Or, at least, possessive of him. Thomas as much less apt to acknowledge his sensitivities to their parents or other adults in the community. For Thomas this seemed like something very special he shared with Bo and with no one else. Thomas, in fact, seemed a little paranoid or even guilty about his powers. He didn't like to talk about them -- except with Bo.

Bo and Thomas spent a great deal of time together, often off by themselves in the woods or maybe up in the loft of one of the barns. They developed what almost amounted to a telepathic link between them that made make-believe games incredibly vivid. It was, in fact, through this kind of make-believe that Bowman discovered his abilities to mind-link. When he and Thomas touched one another or held hands they could almost literally see

inside each other's minds. They could share each other's make-believe fantasies.

As they'd gotten older, they'd grown out of make-believe. For several years, their major form of play came to be lying side by side of one another, lightly touching hands or shoulders and sharing each other's daydreams. Sometimes they even slept side by side like that during the night and shared each other's actual dreams.

For the last year or so, they'd occasionally been getting glimpses of other dreams -- apparently from other Star-Children. At first, these were very weak and fleeting.

One day, for instance, Bo and Thomas were pretending they were King Arthur's knights rescuing damsels in distress. Suddenly in the middle of their medieval fantasy, Superman flew down out of the sky and landed on the battlements of their imaginary castle. Bo, who was playing the damsel trapped atop the tower, asked what he was doing in their make-believe game. Producing a pair of Clark Kent glasses out of nowhere and placing them on his face, Superman changed into a little boy, maybe a year or two younger than Bo.

"I'm Scotty," he said. And responding to a question from Bo about where he came from answered, "I live in Cleveland."

"Who are you talking to?" shouted Thomas from down below.

"Come up and see," Bo called out over the battlements, but when he turned around, Scotty from Cleveland was just a fading ghost. "Did you see that?" he asked Thomas excitedly, opening his eyes and returning to the real world of the hayloft in the

barn at Sweetwater Farm.

And even before Thomas could reply, added, "I think we've been contacted by another Star-Child." Goose-bumps broke out on his arms and a chill ran down his spine.

Thomas was annoyed. "All I saw was a sort of hazy blur of red and blue lights. I thought you were trying to visualize a dragon or something."

"Oh, neat," exclaimed Bo. "That was the Superman outfit you saw."

"Superman?" asked Thomas quizzically.

Another time Thomas was the one to make contact with another consciousness. While he and Bo were sitting out at the Point listening to the birds, Thomas saw a little girl in a bright yellow frock dress stumble through a couple of ballet steps right there in the meadow in front of him. Bo said he hadn't experienced anything but the singing of the birds.

The contacts were not always so benign or fleeting. They were becoming more and more real.

One day, Bo and Thomas were pretending they were doctors going from room to room in a hospital making child-like diagnoses of imaginary patients. With a fit of giggling, Bo had just diagnosed a case of terminal ingrown toenail. They'd both broken up over that. In their shared fantasy of doctors' rounds, they then moved on to the next bed.

A little girl was sleeping there, all huddled under covers. Bo figured she was Thomas's contribution to the imaginary production and so allowed him to take the lead in the game. Thomas, however, did nothing. In the fantasy, he too stood

silently by the bed waiting, apparently, for Bo.

Finally, experiencing a little bit of annoyance, Bo said, "Well, Doctor, your patient, I presume." And surprised himself by suddenly reaching down and throwing the covers off the sleeping figure. He felt a shock as he saw how tiny and deformed she was. Her neck was bent forward at an improbable angle, her back was rounded and cramped, her left shoulder twisted forward as though she had a charlie horse in her spine.

Thomas shrieked.

The little girl suddenly opened her eyes looked up at them. At first her eyes seemed vacant and unfocused. For a moment, Bo wondered if she were blind. Then he realized he recognized her face.

They both seemed surprised. Something had gone wrong with the game. Neither of them seemed to be controlling the make-believe scenario.

"Help me, help me," the girl moaned. Bo reached out and touched her. And as he did pain suddenly shot up his arm and into his shoulder. His whole body began to cramp. He could feel his spine twisting in his neck. He screamed.

"Thomas, help," Bo cried out.

The other boy grabbed Bo's arm to pull him away. For a moment he too seemed to curl in on himself. His shoulder grew hunched; one leg shortened. Even though he was still aware of his own pain, Bo was mesmerized by the transformation in Thomas. He was reminded of once watching a dead squirrel burning in a pile of brush; as the flames licked at it, singeing off the fur,

the body had twisted and curled, just like Thomas now twisted and curled from the contact.

Thomas was screaming almost as if he had been caught in flames. And he was pulling on Bo's arm.

Suddenly the connection broke. Both boys were straight and normal again. "Get away from her," Thomas shouted.

Bo tried to run from the bedside, but couldn't. Instead he found himself uncontrollably reaching out again toward the girl. This time, though, he did not touch her, but only pulled the covers back over her deformed body.

She smiled at him. He was arrested by the look of her eyes. She seemed so pitiful and yet so frightening to him. What if he or Thomas had been unable to break away from her influence? Would they have come out of their make-believe game deformed and crippled as she was? How terrible to be like that all the time!

Her eyes began to shine. Radiant light streamed out at Bowman. His fears of her disappeared. Indeed, he recognized her now. She'd been on the train to Paris last year, he realized.

"Wake up, wake up," Thomas was shouting at Bo and shaking both shoulders as Bo opened his eyes and came out of the strange daydream. "Who was that?" Thomas asked shakily, adding "I don't want to ever see her again."

"I think it'll be okay," Bo responded. "She's going to be a friend."

The rest of that day, both Bo and Thomas experienced painful cramps in their shoulders that made them realize their make-believe games were getting real.

Bo decided not to tell Peregrine or his foster-mother Amy

about any of this. "Thomas," he said very solemnly and paternally with his right hand on the other boy's shoulder, "I think we're growing up. And we're going to have to cope with this on our own."

Less than a week later, Bo had the first of a series of dreams that were to get him in more trouble than he'd ever imagined possible.

#### 4

From inside the tent where she was preparing a yougurt culture from milk she'd drawn that morning, his mother called out, "Ravani, Ravani, calm the goats."

Something had startled the goats grazing on the grass near the tent. They had begun to bleat and move about.

The four-year-old boy who'd been playing with a wooden toy his father had carved for him during a recent night of goatherding stuck his head in the tent.

"Calm the goats," his mother repeated.

The boy turned around and watched the herd for a minute or two.

"Calm the goats," his mother shouted again, this time very firm.

The boy raised his head and began to croon in a hollow-sounding monotone. It sounded almost as if he were blowing across the lip of a coke bottle, though Ravani Abbas would not have understood that analog. For deep in what had been Pakistan, he'd never even heard of Coca-Cola. Indeed, since the Shiites

had brought their Islamic revolution to this country, no one had seen a coke bottle. All imports from the West had been forbidden.

Ravani Abbas had been born to a family of nomadic herders during the final stages of the Iranian Islamic invasion. His mother, now quietly stirring the yougurt, as she rolled herself around in the tent on a crude wooden platform with rubber wheels her husband had stolen from the Iranian soldiers, had lost her legs in an explosion only a month before Ravani was born.

The young father had been devastated. Not only his beautiful bride but even his unborn son, it appeared, were going to be lost because of the religious invaders who insisted on imposing their particularly strict moral code on their brother Moslems.

But his bride had lived. Unexpectedly, and in violation of the prediction of old Abdul Moab, the western-trained doctor who occasionally joined the nomadic tribe, her wounds had healed swiftly and without infection. Her baby was born whole and well.

Even from his first breath, Ravani seemed blessed. He was a wonderful child and no problem at all for his now handicapped mother. Somehow he brought out the best in her and so, instead of being rightly angry at what had happened to her, she seemed strongly motivated to cope with her injury and to make the best of it. She asked her husband to build her the little cart and quickly became proficient at getting around. "I am going to be a perfect mother," she declared, "for my perfect baby."

Ravani began to develop powers very early and very dramatically. Even as a baby, he could sometimes make his

homemade dolls move by themselves. The powers became a real problem as he reached toddler age, for, like any other child, he'd occasionally have a tantrum. And then his powers were literally dangerous. Pots and cookware would fly through the air. No one was ever hurt, but sometimes things were broken.

In much the same way that she taught him toilet habits, his mother taught him to control his powers. She worried that he'd be discovered by one of the Shiite priests and be called a demon child. She'd heard of such children -- that got called demon possessed by the priests. They were killed in the Allah.

Ravani's mother encouraged him to focus his powers in one single direction, one that would be useful for the family and that would make his father very proud. That was to control the animals. Ravani developed an uncanny ability to herd the goats, most of the time just by the sound of his voice. He learned to blow through his pursed lips to make a crooning cooing sound that immediately calmed the goats or other animals and brought them to him.

He was still a very small child, tho' in his primitive culture a four year old was not a baby. He was already beginning to assume responsibilities within the small family.

But besides his familial duties, Ravani was learning how to muster his powers -- deep down inside where no mulla or priest would ever see.

Ravani loved to shift his consciousness into the animals he herded. He could spend long hours living inside the body of a mountain goat climbing precarious paths along steep rocky cliffs. Once in a while he'd sense a wild cat or lion nearby. He

especially loved the lions. In the body of a mountain lion, he could run faster than he'd ever imagined. He loved to climb and leap, to chase prey across an open field, or to stalk an antelope or wild goat through the mountain passes, and finally to strike. And he learned to love the taste of blood in the great cats' mouths, the way the cat tasted it, sweet and rich and hot.

Ravani learned early to protect his father's herd. He never allowed the cats to come near the family's livelihood. Under Ravani's watch the herd flourished both because he protected the goats from wild animals and because, in his presence, their health and their fertility improved.

Because of his mother's stern but loving protective guidance, Ravani had almost entirely lost use of the telekinetic powers. And he never showed his abilities in any way that someone else would see. But the powers were growing down inside him. And just like the manhood sleeping in his childish body -- manhood he would never attain -- the powers were growing and building, waiting for the opportunity to manifest themselves.

## 5

Bowman turned restlessly in his sleep.

When the wind blew from beyond the rocky hills just below the sun, he could smell the rich scent of fresh blood. His mouth watered.

It reminded him it was time to eat. He would not pursue the pungent scent in the air. That was another's meal, the prey probably already dead. He would not want dead food. The hunt

was as much a part of the meal as the eating.

He licked his paws, rubbing them across his muzzle to carefully clean the dust from his face and to groom his long whiskers. Then looked out toward the horizon. It was dusk. Soon a myriad of animals large and small would begin to move about the plain as night fell. He realized he especially enjoyed the hunt at this time of day. The air was cool. The twilight brought out the moisture in the air and freshened scents.

He slowly and sensuously stretched his legs, preparing for the chase. Then he rose up on his haunches, licked his jowls, sniffed the air, and then climbed down from his rocky perch.

Bowman looked down at his lanky, well-muscled body, admiringly. But surprised. He'd never experienced a dream like this before. And he knew it. Sometimes, when he and Thomas dreamed together, the dreams had seemed as real as this. But he'd always been himself in the dream. And he'd certainly always been a human being.

In the body of the mountain lion, Bowman strutted proudly, occasionally purring roughly, occasionally roaring, just for the pleasure of feeling the roar start in the back of his throat and vibrate upwards into his mouth and out. He watched birds in the trees take flight in fear of him. And he was very proud.

He caught a whiff of prey riding gently on a current of air. Dinner he thought matter-of-factly and began to follow the scent. As he grew closer to his quarry, the smell became stronger and richer. Bo realized it was wonderfully familiar, yet could not quite experience the big cat's memory enough to know what kind of animal he was tracking.

In some ways, Bo realized, he was not in control of his dream at all -- even within the dream. He felt himself like an observer, riding with the cat, inside the cat's mind, but absolutely devoid of volition.

He bounded up a low hummock in a couple of long quick strides. The scent was now all around him. He felt the excitement course through his muscular body. Bowman was enjoying this strange dream.

As stealthily he peered over the top of the rise, he pined his prey below. The cat licked his chops.

Bowman felt a sudden rush of uneasiness. Something was very wrong he could see. He did not want to be here. He did not want to be in this animal. He did not want to be in this dream anymore.

A voice inside the cat's head shouted at Bowman, "Wake up." But Bo felt powerless. He could not rouse himself. Another voice, a strangely childish, almost gleeful voice, shouted at Bowman, "Shut up. The real fun's just starting."

True horror, as perhaps he'd never experienced it before, roared through Bowman's mind as he felt himself rise up to the top of the hill, crouch down, take one last hungry and appreciating look at the prey, and then leap high into the air.

For the prey the cat had found -- and was about to descend upon -- was a young man with a scraggly beard. He was dressed strangely in long black robes. About his head was wrapped a kind of flat and wide-brimmed turban.

"A mulla, a mulla," Bowman heard the childish voice cry,

urging the cat on. "Let's get him."

"No, no," Bowman shouted. "Don't kill him. NO."

Suddenly Bo realized he was no longer inside the cat's body. Instead he was sprawled out face-down on the road along which the mulla had been walking. He rolled over to see the mulla look up and see the cat and begin to scream. Bo jumped up and, against his better judgment and still seemingly beyond his control, threw himself in front of the mulla.

The cat came crashing down upon him. He grabbed its forelegs to hold its long sharp claws away. Bo screamed as he wrestled to keep the cat's slavering mouth away from his soft and vulnerable throat.

And then, just as suddenly, the cat changed into a young boy with olive-skin and jet black hair. The boy was raging. Though he was very small and very young, he seemed enormously strong. He snarled angrily at Bo, "You stopped me. You had no business stopping me."

Then suddenly, again, the boy was transformed. He was suddenly weak and helpless. He began to weep and clutch at Bo.

Bowman felt a wave of compassion for this strange little boy and then felt the horror rise up in his mouth as he remembered the scent and feel of bloodlust he'd relished only a few moments before. Again he started to scream.

"Bowman, wake up. Bo, wake up," Amy was shouting as she shook the screaming boy. "It's just a dream, just a dream."

"Peregrine," Bo asked, "what's a 'mullah'?"

"Oh, I don't know," Peri answered jokingly, "Don't you mean what-sa-matta?"

"No, Peri. I'm being serious," Bo responded shortly.

"Mullah. Do you know how to spell it?"

"No, I guess I don't. I just heard it as a word."

"What was the context?" Peri asked, being serious now and hopefully helpful.

"Well, it's a long story. But I heard it in a sort of dream. That was maybe about Arabia or Turkey or someplace over in the mid-east."

"Well, Bo. You know, a lot of things in dreams are just made up out of the unconscious and don't necessarily mean anything at all. But you do sort of have special dreams -- " Peri acknowledged. "Mullah, mullah. . ." he said thoughtfully. Then, "Oh, I know. A mullah is some sort of Islamic priest. Let's look it up."

Peregrine pulled out his big dictionary, searched for a moment, than announced "M-U-L-L-A-H, a Muslim of a quasi-clerical class trained in traditional law and doctrine; esp: one who is head of a mosque."

"That fits," Bo said. Then added, "Why would somebody want to kill a mullah?"

"Well, of course, that might depend upon the mullah in question. But, let's see, you know I think the mullahs are the guys in Shiite Islam that are enforcing the laws in Iran and that

whole Islamic Revolutionary Nation that has been formed out of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon (I guess), Afganistan, Pakistan, and those other countries around there. You know the Shiite Moslems are very strict and old-fashioned. They enforce some very harsh laws. And maybe some of the people who live in those countries might really hate them. After all, they could certainly be considered conquerors. And you might want to kill a particular one or maybe just one of them in general."

"Do you think that Star-Child babies get born over there?" Bo asked, seeming to change the subject.

"Well, maybe so. I don't know. You don't hear anything about it. But there's no news out of those countries anyway. The Shiite Church/government has closed off almost all contact with the outside world -- except for selling oil, of course."

Bo said nothing for a long minute.

Peregrine made the connection in his mind. "Bo," he asked, "did you get some sort of contact with a Muslim Star-Child?"

Peregrine knew that Bo and Thomas experienced some sort of telepathy at times. He didn't know about Scotty from Cleveland or the little deformed girl or about the couple of other kids that sometimes seemed to appear in Bo's or Thomas's dreams and make-believe games.

"Well, maybe," Bo said, obviously hedging. "Let's just say I had a bad dream. But it's over now."

That was as much as he wanted to tell Peregrine. He wasn't sure why he was being secretive. But he knew there were somethings you were just supposed to keep secret. It was part of

growing up. He felt the same thing about the occasional stirrings down inside his body. Whatever that was that he sometimes felt, especially when he saw another person undressed -- the dryness in his throat, the fluttering in his stomach -- or when he was touching Thomas during their make-believe games or Laurie the girl about his own age that moved onto the Farm recently with her parents -- the softness of their skin, the warmth, the electricity -- these were also things he knew he was supposed to keep secret. At least, for now.

Occasionally he'd touch one of the adults around the Farm and he'd get this telepathic rush of feelings and sensations from them that sort of scared him. He didn't really know what any of that stuff was.

He'd learned enough to suspect that that was what people called "sex," but, even though (or maybe especially because) he understood the biological and physiological facts about sexual reproduction, he couldn't quite make the connection between the scientific facts and those strange feelings.

What was going to happen if he started getting those kinds of communications from other Star-Children, he wondered? His mouth went dry with the thought. It was really scary and real exciting at the same time --

-- like the smell of the prey, he thought. And shuddered.

Over the next couple of weeks, the little olive-skinned boy appeared in his dreams more frequently. Bowman never experienced being an animal again. Tho' sometimes when the little boy made

an appearance in a dream, he could sense that the boy had that animal experience frequently.

The boy was often crying. He was often afraid.

One time Bowman found himself holding the crying boy, trying to comfort him. He felt himself merging with the boy's body and then seeing through the boy's eyes as his mother -- for some reason a very short woman who seemed to sit on the floor all the time -- was warning him about being called a demon. "Beware the mullahs," he heard her say. And for the first time really understood what that first disquieting dream of the boy had been about.

He heard the mother call the boy Ravani and so took that to be his name.

Bo tried a few times during the day to call out to Ravani and see if he could make conscious contact. It never worked.

Then it occurred to him -- and he could've kicked himself for not having thought of this before -- that Ravani lived on the other side of the world. He was asleep while Bo was awake and vice-versa. No wonder he always appeared in dreams.

That night Bo set his alarm clock to wake him up at 2 am. He figured that would have to be sometime in Ravani's waking day. It took him a few minutes to wake up completely. But once he did and remembered what he'd gotten up so early for, he got excited about the possibilities of connecting with the Arab boy directly.

Bo sat up in his bed. For atmosphere he lit a candle. It was a humid spring night. Bo had been sleeping bare-chested, but felt a little chilled with no cover. He got up and went over to his bureau to get a T-shirt. Then had an idea. He rummaged

through the bottom drawer, where he kept things he didn't often wear. He found a long white linen shirt with white lace-like embroidery around the collar. An Indian yogi who'd spent a couple of months at Sweetwater had given it to him a year or two ago. He thought wearing it might help make contact with the mysterious boy on the other side of the world.

Climbing back on top of the bed, twisting his legs into a half-lotus meditation position, and focusing his eyes on the flickering candle, he reached out with his mind. He pictured the earth on the visual screen inside his head and pictured himself on one side radiating thoughts out into the space around the planet like radio waves. He visualized the waves filling all the space above him and then being reflected back around to the other side of the planet.

Then he called out the name he'd heard, "Ravani. . .  
Ravani . . ."

Almost immediately Bowman's mind was shaken by a loud reply. He could actually hear the words that Ravani was speaking. Oh, wow, he thought; this guy's a really powerful sender.

Bo relaxed a moment and listened to the words out of the corner of his mind. And discovered that indeed he could sort of understand them. He hoped Ravani had learned the same trick.

"My name is Bowman. I live in America, in North Carolina."

"My name is Ravani Abbas. I live in Pakistan. In the mountains."

Images of rocky mountains poured into Bo's mind.

"I live in the mountains, too."

"Your mountains are greener than ours," came the reply. And Bo realized Ravani was seeing what was in his own mind as he recalled the mountainous terrain outside the house.

"Merge with me. I'm so lonely," the boy continued.

"Can we do that?" Bo asked. "I can't touch you." So far Bo had only managed a superficial mind-link with Thomas when they touched one another.

"I can," came the confident reply. "Just let me in."

Even before Bo would complete the thought "okay," the found himself sitting on the ground near a tent made of multi-colored rugs. The tent was set up in a sparsely grassed meadow. Round about steep, dessicated mountains framed a valley. Behind him he could hear a stream trickling. There were goats grazing in the meadow. And he could sense other people nearby, but who were paying him no attention.

Simultaneously, he heard Ravani ask him to open the flap to the tent so he could see where he was.

"But it's night time here. And I'm not in a tent."

"Show me. Show me," the boy demanded.

Bowman felt a little disoriented. Somehow he was in two places at once. This was something he'd never experienced before. He tried to get out of the bed to show Ravani what kind of house he was in and what it was like outside. But he couldn't tell which set of legs he was ordering to move.

All of a sudden the dry Pakistani ground rushed up to meet him, as back in North Carolina he fell out of bed with one foot twisted up in the sheet.

"Let me. Let me," Ravani said.

Bo relaxed thinking it might be better to let the boy handle such things. He seemed much more accomplished at this than Bo.

"Tell me which way," he said.

And Bo realized Ravani would probably not even know what a doorknob was. This is going to take some real cooperation, he thought.

As he allowed the boy to take control of his body, while he carefully interpreted his perceptions to himself so the boy could understand what kind of place this was they were in, Bo could feel that Ravani was much younger than he'd expected. Why he's practically a baby!

"I am not a baby," came back the injured reply. "I am four years old. And I am stronger than any of you," the boy thoughts reverberated in Bo's mind as though they'd been announced over a loudspeaker.

"Okay, okay," Bo responded. "I didn't mean to insult you."

"But I'm scared. And I'm lonely," the boy said in the tones of a four-year-old. "I didn't know you were out there. Why have you taken so long to come to me?"

Bo didn't really know how to answer that. He hadn't come to Ravani. The fact was Ravani had come to him -- in that disquieting dream of being a cat. Bo tried to explain to the boy that he hadn't known it was possible to communicate like this. He'd never done this before.

He brought to mind, for Ravani's benefit, his experiences of seeing other children in his daydreams occasionally. "But no one has ever been as strong a sender as you."

By this time, Bo had climbed down the steps of the porch and was walking in the rich green grass of the back yard of his house. There was a moon in the clear sky that lit up the night. In Pakistan the sun was shining bright. The boy continued to play with stick toys beside the tent.

"I'm so alone here. Let me come live with you," the boy called.

Bo felt his legs getting numb. "No, Ravani, no. You must stay home. But you can come to visit me . . ." Bo had realized that he had better be more cautious. What if he gave over full control of his body to this super-powerful child. Maybe he couldn't get home himself. He shuddered at the thought of getting stuck in the body of the four year old child of a family of Muslims goatherds.

A sudden rush of images poured into his mind, even as the consciousness of Ravani seemed to retreat. Bo realized he was back in control of his body -- in midstep. Walking along almost flat ground, he tripped over his own feet. He started to laugh, mainly out of embarrassment. But the humor was overridden by the scary thoughts Ravani had left like a trail behind him as he exited Bo's consciousness.

Men in heavy black robes with turbans were shaking their fists at him. Mullahs, he realized. He couldn't understand what they were saying. But he knew it was ugly and threatening. The one idea that surfaced from their imprecations was -- "Demon" --. Bo was frightened.

Suddenly he felt very chilled. What am I doing out here in the middle of the night, he said to himself and ran back inside

as fast as he could. He jumped right into his bed, wrestled with the sheet that had gotten twisted around his foot earlier and then pulled the cover up over his head and shivered himself to sleep.

7

The next morning Bowman woke up early, excited about what had happened to him. He immediately went down to Thomas's room. He wasn't sure he wanted to tell anybody else yet.

He told Thomas everything that happened. At first his foster-brother was very excited. But after a while he got sulky. "Why didn't you take me along with you?" Thomas whined.

Bo apologized. And then promised to show Thomas how to contact Ravani and let him visit on his own.

That night, again at 2 am, Bo woke to the alarm. Tonight, Thomas was sleeping in the room with him. But Thomas hadn't really been sleeping at all. He was very excited. And a little afraid. Bo had impressed upon him how important it was not to let Ravani take over his body completely.

With Bo looking on like an overseer, Thomas -- even wearing the white linen shirt -- stared into the flickering candle and called out "Ravani, Ravani."

There was no reply.

He relaxed a little. And then tried again. "Ravani. . . Ravani . . ."

Still no reply.

Thomas was obviously annoyed. Bo could sense the resentment coming out of him. For a moment Bo realized Thomas suspected this was all a prank, just to get him dressed up in this silly looking shirt.

Bo reached out and touched Thomas on the shoulder, as if to say, it's okay. Immediately, Ravani's presence flooded both their minds.

"Let me come there. Please let me come there. I'm alone. I'm so alone."

"Ravani, please calm down," Bo said firmly. "I want to introduce my brother to you. Ravani, this is Thomas."

"Can I have his body?" Ravani called.

"No, you can't," Thomas answered peremptorily. Outloud he said to Bowman, "He can't really do that, can he?"

"I don't know," Bo said. "But be careful. He's real young. And he's real powerful."

Bo spoke again to Ravani, "Thomas wanted to meet you. I told him all about you."

"Hello, Thomas," the boy answered, now sounding humble and contrite. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"What?" said Thomas. "I didn't get the end of the sentence." Bo had removed his hand from Thomas's shoulder. Without explaining anything, he reached out and touched his brother again.

"I am Ravani and I live in Pakistan. Would you like to see Pakistan, Thomas? Just close your eyes."

Bo pulled his hand away and again Thomas looked puzzled.

"Thomas, listen, I seem to have to be included in the

circuit for this to work. Ravani can transmit to me and I can transmit to you or something like that. But, look, I don't like this. I mean, if, at least right now, you don't have enough power to connect with this guy, what if you don't have enough to resist him. Maybe he'd steal your body."

Thomas certainly didn't like that idea. He didn't like that he wasn't powerful enough. Though most of his life he'd been living with the fact that his brother was six months older than he and was always developing his skills a little ahead of him. And he didn't like that Ravani might steal his body and leave him in Pakistan.

"Well, okay, but let me listen in. Just be ready to pull away if you think he's going to start anything."

Bo touched Thomas lightly on the top of the hand and then called out to Ravani.

Instantly, Bo and Thomas were both in a goat's body. The goat was squatting back on his haunches, straining. "It's taking a crap," Thomas exclaimed disgusted.

Ravani's laughter swept over them. They were out of the goat's body. "Like that?" the boy asked continuing to giggle.

"Ravani, you've got to behave yourself," Bo scolded, "or we won't visit you and you'll be even more alone."

"No-o-o-o," the boy called out as Thomas reached over and picked up Bo's hand and moved it away from him.

"I don't like this kid at all," he said as he broke the connection. "And, Bo, I think you'd better be careful."

At first, Bo thought Thomas's reaction was just sour grapes. But he realized the advice was good. Clearly there was something very wrong about Ravani's life. He wasn't like any of the other kids they'd occasionally glimpsed. For one thing he was younger. For another he was apparently many times more powerful. AND he was terribly unhappy.

For more than a year, Bo would occasionally contact Ravani. He didn't maintain the connection very long. But he hated to leave the boy so miserably lonely. And he wanted to keep watch. Sooner or later, Ravani'll get more mature, Bo told himself.

Over those visits, Bo learned that Ravani's mother had warned him that if anyone ever found out about his abilities, he'd be turned over to the priests or the police and probably be burned alive or boiled in oil. (Bo wasn't sure whether the tortures and threats Ravani was describing were coming from Ravani's mind or from Bo's own recollections of stories in the Arabian Nights.)

Whatever the reality, Ravani was not a happy Star-Child living among people whose lives his presence improved. The young Pakistani boy was in a very dangerous situation. The religion and the government of the country he lived in was totally disapproving of the Star-Children. Bo hadn't realized this before. And it made him see how sheltered he was here at Sweetwater Farm where he could be proud of the abilities he'd developed and where he could even show them off -- like he did at Thomas's birthday party almost a year and a half ago now when he got the birds to sing the Birthday Song.

Then one night, without any warning, Bo had another dream of Ravani.

He was playing by a tent of Oriental rugs. The tent was tucked into a narrow defile in one of the rugged Pakistani mountains. He sensed they were there to try to hide.

Suddenly a bright light flashed in the sky overhead and he heard a loud explosion nearby. And then there were soldiers all around. A few of them peered up into the defile, but ignored the tent up there. They were apparently on the same side in whatever the battle was.

Bo realized he knew that these were Islamic Revolutionary soldiers who were fighting along the Indian border. They were trying to advance their boundaries deeper into the subcontinent. And to spread their strict religion.

There was another explosion nearby. Bo felt very frightened. What if one of those bombs fell near the narrow canyon they were holed up in?

Soldiers suddenly rushed into the shelter of the defile, pushing each other all the way back to where Ravani's family had pitched their tent. Where are the goats? Bo wondered.

Then his perspective changed and he was inside the tent. His father was huddled against the flap, holding a flimsy looking rifle. His mother was holding him tight and crying.

Suddenly, blowing open the tent flap, a gust of flaming wind rushed toward him. Bo could feel fear roaring inside him. Ravani's presence broke through into the dream and Bo was forced

up into wakefulness. With Ravani's consciousness came a whole terrifying set of associations with fire. In a single burst, Bo experienced a rush of terrors of fire: flames burning his hand, his mother engulfed in a roaring fire, the tent burning, a hillside aflame and goats running helter-skelter, a flash of lightning striking a tree, and flashing in and out as though the central theme connecting all these terrifying associations, the image of Ravani himself being tortured with a burning brand from the fire and being burned at the stake in some Shiite version of an auto-da-fe. (Later, when in a more analytic state of mind, Bo wondered if Ravani's mother had actually burned him, perhaps repeatedly, to discipline his awesome powers and to teach him the fear of being burned as a witch or a demon.)

As the fear of fire took over Ravani's (and Bo's) consciousness, time slowed abruptly. The flames that licked at the entrance flap of the tent moved very slowly into the space inside the tent. Ravani's father was pushed slowly but inexorably away from the entry by the blast of the explosion. Burning gases began to fill the tent.

Ravani's mind reached out to the flames and, in some stupendous act of telekinesis, froze them, so that ice crystals filled the tent instead of the flames. Facing an overwhelming and survival-threatening fear, Ravani had broken through all of the carefully imposed discipline of his powers.

Bo shuddered halfway round the world at the power released by Ravani's mind.

There was a momentary lull. Then another explosion far away. Then an explosion almost at the opening of the defile.

Still in slow motion, the tent that Ravani and his mother and father huddled in rose up into the air, carrying them away from the force of the blast. The pressure of the sudden ascension collapsed the walls and top of the tent upon the ground carpet. In an instant, Ravani's powers threw aside the threatening rugs. And for a moment, almost like a vision out of the Arabian Nights, the tiny family huddled together on a single carpet riding high in the sky over the military skirmish going on below.

Screaming, "You've betrayed yourself and us" Ravani's mother began to wail and keen.

Peering over the flying carpet at the surprised soldiers below watching the spectacle of them levitating high above them, Ravani suddenly realized the folly of his frightened reaction. He'd openly exposed his powers before a whole army of Shiite zealots. Would they believe him an innocent of Allah? Or a demon-child?

Too well -- from the disciplining burns on his arms and legs -- he knew the answer.

Bowman felt Ravani's mind scream out at him, streaming through the ether, assaulting Bo's consciousness, trying to break in and take over his body as he escaped from the no-exit he'd trapped himself in.

Bowman steeled himself against the assault. He jumped out of bed and threw himself against the door of his room. The impact knocked the air out of him and momentarily tore his mind away from Ravani's urgent importuning. Bo managed to get the door open and scramble down the hall to Thomas's room.

"Don't touch me," he shouted abruptly. "He might get through me into you. But, Thomas, please help me. Keep Ravani away from me. Keep talking to me."

"What are you talking about, Bo?" Thomas answered groggily.

"Ravani's had a panic attack and is trying to escape into me."

Thomas, not quite comprehending the significance of what was happening, through a glass of water sitting by his bedside on Bowman. Bo flinched. And then collapsed on the floor.

Thomas, still a little confused, climbed out of bed to help Bowman up. As he touched him, a blast of terror struck him. For a moment, he was sailing through the air on a flying carpet. "This is silly," he exclaimed and pulled away, still thinking this was some kind of prank. Only then did the reality of the situation strike him. He remembered what Bo had said about Ravani trying to get into his body. "Bo, wake up, wake up," he began to shout.

Abruptly, Bo opened his eyes.

Thomas felt a chill go through him. What if it's Ravani and not Bowman?

"Oh, God, Thomas, thank God, I'm here."

Thomas flinched and pulled away. "Who are you?" he commanded.

"It's okay. It's okay. I'm Bo. I really am. Ravani's gone."

"Hold out your hand."

Thomas reached out tentatively and touched the tip of Bo's fingers. Nothing. No trace of Ravani.



Almost a week passed with no sign of Ravani. Bo began to suspect the Pakistani boy had been killed in the raid. Maybe the flying carpet was some kind of symbol of death, he wondered.

He slept in Thomas's room so he wouldn't be alone. The first couple of nights he could hardly sleep for fear and anticipation that some psychic event was about to occur. But then when nothing seemed to happen he began to sleep more easily. He'd gotten himself pretty tired through the couple of days of not sleeping.

Peregrine had asked Bo what was wrong, why he looked so haggard. He still didn't explain the whole story, but did say something about being afraid of psychic attack. Peri observed that getting run down might only make him more susceptible to whatever it was he was afraid of.

Bo took to taking afternoon naps. He figured that might be safer since Ravani only seemed to connect with him while Ravani was awake.

Later in the week he dreamed one afternoon that he was Ravani and that he was in some kind of jail and couldn't sleep because the cell was so forbidding. Bo wasn't sure if this was just a dream or a faint visit from Ravani.

If it was from Ravani, he consoled himself, the boy's lost most of the intensity of his powers.

Then in the middle of the next week, out of a deep sleep,

Bowman was awakened by the scorching light of a torch waved in his face. He opened his eyes and saw he was still in Thomas's room.

"Thomas," he whispered, then said louder, "Thomas, wake up. I think I need your help."

Thomas rolled over, "What is it?"

"I just got a flash from Ravani. There was a torch waving in his face."

"Can you tell anything else?" the younger boy quizzed.

Bo sat quietly for a moment, then began to describe carefully what he was sensing in the communication coming from Ravani.

"Well, I think he's in some sort of dark room, real small, maybe like a prison cell. He seems to be tied to a bed or maybe to a chair. There's a man standing over him. He has a flame in his hand. Oh, I see, it's a cigarette lighter. He's casually flicking it. And, again, he's bringing it close to Ravani's face."

"Bo, be real careful. Don't let Ravani know you're there. he's liable to try to escape into you again."

"I hear some men talking outside the cell. I can see them faintly. Two of them seem very old and feeble. I think they're these mullah guys that Ravani was so afraid of. Another one is quite young and rugged looking.

"One of the mullahs is explaining to him that Ravani's mother has admitted that the boy has been communicating with animals and consorting with devils since he was very small. She said he could sometimes make things fly through the air.

"Now the flame is very bright in Ravani's face and he's started to scream."

Bo was silent for a moment.

"Are you alright?" Thomas inquired solicitously.

"Oh yeah, I guess so. Listen, I think Ravani's about to break. He's really terrified of the fire.

"Now one of the mullahs is coming into the cell. He stands over Ravani and says something to him I don't understand . . . . Wait a minute, I got to compose myself and focus off center. . . . There, that's better. The mullah is praying over him and now is asking what devil he worships."

Bo screamed. And then pulled himself away from Ravani.

"O God, that guy just pushed the flame right into Ravani's eye.

"Ravani's screaming. The mullah asks him again where his powers come from. What demon is he in league with?

"Oh, Thomas, you won't believe this. Oh no, no," Bo uttered. "Ravani's given him an answer. He said, 'Bowman Mayberry in North Carolina.'

"Wait a minute, I think the rugged-looking guy is responding. 'That's the name of the boy we tried to get in Amsterdam a year or two ago and then forgot about. We thought the old priest with him was the real problem. Maybe not.'

"Oh, Bo, are you making this up?" Thomas asked as skeptical as usual.

"I think we'd better talk to Peregrine about this," Bo said hollowly. "I don't like the sound of this at all."

Suddenly Bo felt a huge weight fall upon him. He grabbed hold of his consciousness and kept saying his name over and over to himself. Then, just as suddenly, the weight was gone. Bo felt lighter and more relieved than he had in weeks or months.

"I think that's the last we'll hear of Ravani," he said matter-of-factly, trying to suppress both the relief he felt in having Ravani's consciousness out of his mind and the terror he felt at the idea that those crazy mullahs (whatever they were) knew his name -- and that one of the terrorists who blew up that train was right there talking about him.



"Well," replied Peregrine, "that's quite a story. I'm not sure what to make of all that."

"Are you scared?" Thomas piped up. He'd been sitting very quietly throughout Bowman's prolonged description of his contacts with Ravani Abbas.

"To tell the truth, no, I'm not.

"I don't intend to belittle Bo's experience at all. It's obviously been profound and upsetting. I'm really not so sure, tho', that some of it isn't exactly what it seemed like: a dream."

"Are you telling me you don't believe Ravani exists?" Bo responded petulantly.

"Oh no, no. I believe you did indeed contact a young Star-Child who probably really was somewhere in the Middle East. But you yourself indicated that he was pretty unstable and apparently quite young. I suspect that a lot of what you experienced,

especially last night, was more his imagination than reality. Maybe you intercepted one of his dreams . . ."

"But it was daytime over there. . . ." Bo objected.

"Well, haven't you ever dreamt during the daytime, my good man?" Peregrine replied, jokingly mocking Bo's insistence.

"What I think is probably the most important lesson to learn from this, Bo," Peregrine continued, "is that this boy Ravani is a very powerful telepath. And that you, my friend, of all the other children are probably the next most powerful."

"Oh, I don't even compare with Ravani. . ." Bo interjected.

"Well, you might not be as intense as he is. But you're the one he connected with. AND, I hasten to remind you -- and commend you -- you've learned how to control the powers, apparently much better than he."

"But how come I haven't heard from him again?"

"Well, to use your own logic, he's probably asleep now. Maybe he's doing something that interests him more than talking to you."

"Or maybe he's dead," inserted Thomas, obviously ignoring Peregrine's efforts to give a simple undramatic explanation.

"Yeah, and maybe that terrorist I saw outside the cell is on his way here right now," Bo rejoined, obviously enjoying his hysteria more than Peregrine's rationality. "Aren't you even a little bit scared, Peri?"

Peregrine laughed. He understood the boys' enthusiasm and excitement. When he was their age, he recalled, he and a neighborhood friend had put together some electromagnets according

to what they hypothesized was the structure of the anti-gravity engines of flying saucers. When the magnets shorted out after the current was turned on, they supposed that they'd interfered with the operations of a nearby saucer. And when, two days later, a fire damaged the roof -- and the attic in which they'd set up their experiment -- of the friend's house, they were convinced the saucer people were seeking vengeance and trying to stop them from revealing the secret they'd discovered.

Such is the nature of adolescence. We both grew from that, Peregrine mused. His friend had gone on to become a very successful writer of horror and science-fiction, acclaimed for his imagination and creativity. Peri had decided right then that he was going to pursue religious life instead of scientific investigation. Perhaps I thought crucifixes would ward off dangerous aliens as well as vampires, he joked with himself.

In fact, soon after that experience the young Peregrine -- then Jonathan Stiers before he adopted a monastic name -- began to channel his adolescent imagination and zeal into the practical goals of entering Catholic religious life. That was to start him on the complex journey that led him through and out of the seminary in the 1960s to San Francisco and the great mystical renaissance of the hippie years when Eastern gurus descended upon California to an education as a social worker and -- still religiously but pretty avant-gardely motivated -- community organizer to a career in social service focusing especially during the 1980s on gay men suffering from AIDS and then in the 1990s to a return to monastic life in the avant-garde variety at Sweetwater Farm.

"Well, Bo, I'm scared you're going to get carried away with the excitement of this whole thing. . ." he joked with the boy. "And I'm scared we're gonna miss lunch."

"No, seriously," Bo scolded. "Why won't you trust me about this? You did back when we were in Amsterdam. And I turned out to be right."

Peregrine sobered at the reminder. Certainly something had happened that day that seemed threatening. But maybe it was just coincidence that the terrorist had pickpocketed him, maybe it had nothing to do with Bowman and his Star-Child powers. Maybe the connection in the dream was just that: a dream.

"But nothing ever happened to us again," he answered. "If we were so important why didn't the terrorists' pursue us?"

"Well, I can't answer that anymore than you can answer why I can't get in touch with Ravani. But, Peri, you've got to admit that I'm a logical target for them -- I mean, if they're really after the Star-Children. I was one that got the most publicity at first. You even told me there were people who predicted I'd be the new messiah. If these Islamic mullahs are so hot on their religion, maybe they think I'm a threat or something."

"Yeah," said Thomas enthusiastically.

"Bo, I won't deny you've got a point. You are a very special person. Both of you are, in fact," he added, turning to include Thomas. "But I really don't think anybody believes you all are a threat anymore. That excitement all blew over a long time ago while you were still babies."

"Well, the world may have forgotten. But I have not

forgotten," Bo said, rather oracularly, standing up from the hassock he'd been sitting on in Peregrine's crowded little office. "I am going to be a messiah. Just like Jesus or Buddha."

Peregrine recalled his own commitment to such an exalted role in human life. He realized he admired the boy for it and didn't want to belittle those very noble intentions at all.

"Me too," added Thomas.

"Good for you all. I think you're right about that. And maybe I'll regret that I didn't believe you word for word. You'll have every right to say I told you so.

"Listen, this is what I will do. I'll take to Father Timothy. Maybe we should start locking the front gate, at least for the time being."

## 10

"The time being" stretched out in an uneventful year and then another. After a while the residents at Sweetwater Farm began to neglect locking the gate. No terrorists were heard from.

Bowman and Thomas even forgot their excitement. Other things began to occupy their minds.

Bo really did begin to develop sexually. And he had to learn to control his powers so that they weren't distorted by these new and confusing feelings. He didn't want to become manipulative.

At the same time he was learning his sexual feelings, he was also developing spiritually. His commitment to being a savior --

in what sense what could mean contemporaneously -- increased. Bo struggled to discipline himself properly by practicing his meditation, by studying, and by working at developing habits of virtue.

Peregrine was quite pleased with the young boy. At times he thought he could recognize himself at that age.

Though the passing years were uneventful, at least as far as terrorist attacks were concerned, they were not without major developments in the role in humanity of the Star-Children.

Bo, and then a little later and with only slightly less success Thomas, began to experience contacts with other kids. Most of these were about their own age. It seemed like Bo was right at the leading edge of a special generation within the human race. As this generation grew older they began to become more and more conscious of themselves and of one another.

And there were events, quite beyond the confines of Sweetwater Farm, that were soon going to affect the way the world thought about the Star-Children. And that were soon going to resurrect Bowman's concerns and that would even give him the chance to say to Peregrine "I told you so." But Peregrine would not be there to hear it.

**1 1**

BO HAS MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE REMEETS ISABEL

It was almost Thanksgiving. Peregrine was in the kitchen, along with old Sister Alicia and a couple of others, preparing apple sauce and canning pears and cherries for the long cold winter that would soon be upon them. Peri was musing on all the things he had to give thanks for this year.

He'd turned 69 years old last summer. In some ways, it surprised him that he'd made it that long. Yet he was still in excellent health, was almost as active, athletic, and adventuresome as he'd ever been. He was certainly thankful for that. He knew he never wanted to become an invalid. He'd been truly blessed with health and vigor.

He recalled how, in the folly of his youth (he joked to himself), he'd expected to live a much shorter life. Indeed, on his twenty-eighth birthday he'd celebrated the "midpoint" of his life. Back then he had not expected to live past fifty-six.

But he had. His life had changed dramatically that year, however, and so what he called the "mythological schedule" of his life hadn't really been disrupted. Back on that twenty-eighth birthday he'd observed that his life up til then divided nicely into two fourteen year periods. Being fascinated with mythology and symbolism, and aware that he was about to make another change in his life at the end of the second fourteen year cycle, he extrapolated another great change at age forty-two. And back then he hadn't expected to make it past fifty-six.

In fact, of course, he had. But that year had been the fateful 2001 and the whole world had changed. As a result of the

November 2000 disaster, the world had put down its nuclear weapons. The existing governments of the superpowers had collapsed. The great ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union had been ended dramatically. And all over the earth people began to realize that they were all brothers and sisters on a very small and very precarious little planet: there was simple no room for ideological disputes, especially when the disputes could kill them all. In some way, the planet had become conscious of itself. And something, still not understood, had happened in the evolution of the human race. Especially in those first days after the bombs had exploded and the winds had stopped and the fallout clouds -- half through human ingenuity and determination and half through what seemed like external intervention -- had been settled and scores of miraculous seeming babies had been born around the world, it had seemed like a new species was being created out of mankind.

Bowman and Thomas and the Star-Children had entered Peregrine's life that year. And he'd felt the shift in his own consciousness. His meditation experience changed. His sense of God and his awareness of somehow being a part or an aspect of God blossomed subtly. His sense of being responsible for his fellow beings increased dramatically.

That latter sense, of course, had developed in part because of his role in behaving responsibly toward the surviving victims of the radioactive disasters. For Peregrine and the brothers and sisters at Sweetwater had been pivotally active in forcing American society to take responsibility for the suffering and to ease that suffering by assisting the mortally exposed to die

peacefully.

As he poured a potful of stewed apples into a conical-shaped sieve and pressed them into applesauce with a wooden pestle that rotated in a cup in the bottom of the sieve, Peregrine thought to himself how ironic it was that back in '73 when he was expecting to close his life at age fifty-six he'd prepared himself to die by his own hand. Instead, that year, he delivered death, in the form of a small yellow tablet, to hundreds of radiation victims. And it had given him a new sense of purpose and understanding of the meaning of life. The activities of the those daring souls who brought the mercy of the suicide pills into the survivor camps had forced the whole country to reevaluate its ideas about life and death. Congress passed the Compassionate Death Act. Issues like abortion and euthanasia and artificial life support that had plagued the 20th Century had been resolved through a society-wide recognition of the human responsibility to assure the quality of life of all people.

Peregrine was up in the air about what the future held for him. His fifth fourteen year cycle was ending. Peri didn't expect there'd be another. He really didn't want another. Ninety-four would be just too old, he thought.

Back in the days of his youth, he recalled, doctors had prophesied that the future promised longer and longer active life-spans for every person. In fact, that whole notion had been scrapped. The change in consciousness that came with the nuclear disasters and the social reconciliation with death, along with the problem that had been growing for several decades of what to

do with the elderly who were being kept alive but pushed out of active society, allowed people to recognize that death was no great evil and that artificially-induced longevity was no real value.

The apple slices pressed smoothly through the perforations in the sieve and sweet-smelling applesauce oozed out into the pot. The job was done sooner than Peri had expected.

"Well, this is done," he announced, directing the news probably particularly to Alicia who seemed to be the unofficial head of the day's kitchen crew.

"Well, now," she said, "scoop out about half of that into a flat baking pan and we'll cook it down some more into apple butter. (I'll show you a recipe for that.) The rest you can put in the jars Bob's been sterilizing."

I'm certainly in a nostalgic mood today, Peregrine thought as he dutifully carried out Alicia's orders. This whole process reminded him of his novitiate over 50 years ago when he'd first started on the path of monastic life. Wow, he thought, what a change Sweetwater is. And yet how similar.

He thought about how he'd first met Alicia. They'd both been hippies in San Francisco back then. She was fresh out of the convent, he fresh out of the seminary. Both were exercising their revolutionary muscle. They met while attending a seminar on gestalt psychology at Esalen Institute down along the California coast near Big Sur. That was the place to be in those days, the cutting edge of evolution. Funny! I wonder how many people have even heard of Esalen any more.

Alicia and Peregrine had both been on scholarships and were

working the tuition for the seminar off by helping in the kitchen. With their religious life backgrounds, they'd both been so accomplished at large-quantity cooking that they got invited to join the permanent staff. What an adventure that had been!

Days in the kitchen and in the seminar room. Nights in the pools of the natural hot springs that overlooked the vast Pacific Ocean!

The nostalgia was an odd mixture of pleasure and pain. Peregrine was so grateful for those experiences, yet sad that they were so far gone and could never be regained. Such is life, he thought. "Things fade and alternatives exclude," he reminded himself, such is the source of the experience of evil according to Whitehead.

Back in those youthful days, Peregrine -- he was still Jonathan Stiers then, of course -- loved to get stoned and sit on the rocks above the ocean and read Process and Reality outloud. He wasn't sure he ever understood Alfred North Whitehead. But he loved the complexity of phrase and the elusiveness of thought. Especially after smoking a joint!

"Remember the hot springs?" Peri said to Alicia.

"Oh, go on with you," Alicia responded. (In her old age, Peregrine laughed to himself, she'd taken to affecting the idioms of old country grandmothers.)

"Now, Alicia, I remember perfectly well how you used bogart joints," he teased.

"G'wan," she said, happily embarrassed and blushing. "You leave those memories buried back there in the past."

"Tweren't so long ago," Peri answered mocking her country idiom with a pretended accent of his own.

Alicia affectionately bopped him on the forehead with the wooden spoon she'd been stirring her cherries with. Peregrine pecked her a little kiss on the cheek.

"It's been a grand life," she answered, smiling widely, with a little break in her voice. "We sure have seen a lot."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," Peri answered, still feigning a hayseed accent.

Alicia laughed. "What you got in store?"

"Wait 'n see," Peregrine answered, not having any idea how to complete the joke he'd started. Even as he said it, a chill ran through him.

He realized about the only thing ahead of them was death.

Rif came marching determinedly into the kitchen at about that moment. He looked into the pot of apple sauce, then stuck his finger into the sauce Peri was mixing with sugar and spices in the baking pan. "Taste's good," he said.

"Hope so," Peri answered, leaving a moment of silence for Rif to fill. He looked like he had something to say.

A similar affection to that he'd been feeling for Alicia filled Peregrine's throat as he looked at Rif and waited for him to announce whatever he'd come in here for. He and Rif had been together now almost 20 years. When they met Rif had barely been more than a boy. Peregrine had just moved to Sweetwater, back in '89. He'd been 43, Rif'd been 29 (??). What wonderful companions they'd made!

"I guess heard a news story I think you'd be interested in," Rif said very seriously.

"Uh huh?"

"The latest report on the radiation status at Devil's Lake shows that within the last year the radiation level has increased by almost 15%. It was supposed to have decreased by something a little more than.

"The Radiation Regulatory Commission said they had no explanation. They questioned the figures and suggested that there was something wrong with the instruments, that maybe the remote counters back in the center of the contaminated area have finally been damaged by the radiation.

"A scientist, identified as a staff member of the League for a Conservative Society, was interviewed. He offered the hypothesis that the radioactive particles in the Lake are developing something like critical mass that causes a low-grade reaction that breeds new radioactive elements.

"That theory was poo-poo'd by the spokesman for RRC, who said the principle of conservation of energy makes that impossible.

"The LCS guy then answered that by saying that some other kinds of energy could be being channelled into the Lake. 'Are you suggesting some kind of enemy activity?' he was asked. 'We have to consider that a possibility,' he answered, saying that it might be possible the Russians are doing this, but he didn't know how such energy could be directed like that without being detected.

"But here's the kicker, Peri, he then said that other members of the LCS are concerned that 'telekinetic' powers are being used. Those couldn't be detected. The reporter asked him who'd be doing that. 'Well, we all know what the source of telekinetic energy is,' he answered.

"The reporter asked him to be more specific, I think. Then the interview switched to a guy next to him who was wearing a clerical collar who answered something to the effect that Biblical prophecy foretold that the Anti-Christ would at first seem attractive and peace-loving, but then would secretly spread plague and 'mind pollution' (those were his words) throughout the world."

"Was that all?" Peregrine asked.

"Yup. That's all they said. It wasn't very specific. Maybe the reporters edited out something more direct, but didn't it sound like they were connecting 'telekinetic' energy with their 'Anti-Christ' and saying that everybody knows who's 'telekinetic'?"

"Well, I certainly don't know who's 'telekinetic,'" Peregrine answered. "But I sure as hell bet they think they're talking about the Star-Children."

"What are you going to say to Bo and Thomas?" Rif asked.

"I don't know. I don't think we'll have to say anything. I bet we'll hear the much more complete story directly from them — right out of the ether or wherever they get things from."

PART III

PEREGRINE IN THE AIR

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Back in the days of his youth, he recalled, doctors had prophesied that the future promised longer and longer active life-spans for every person. In fact, that whole notion had been scrapped. The change in consciousness that came with the nuclear disasters and the social reconciliation with death, along with the problem that had been growing for several decades of what to

do with the elderly who were being kept alive but pushed out of active society, allowed people to recognize that death was no great evil and that artificially-induced longevity was no real value.

The apple slices pressed smoothly through the perforations in the sieve and sweet-smelling applesauce oozed out into the pot. The job was done sooner than Peri had expected.

"Well, this is done," he announced, directing the news probably particularly to Alicia who seemed to be the unofficial head of the day's kitchen crew.

"Well, now," she said, "scoop out about half of that into a flat baking pan and we'll cook it down some more into apple butter. (I'll show you a recipe for that.) The rest you can put in the jars Bob's been sterilizing."

I'm certainly in a nostalgic mood today, Peregrine thought as he dutifully carried out Alicia's orders. This whole process reminded him of his novitiate over 50 years ago when he'd first started on the path of monastic life. Wow, he thought, what a change Sweetwater is. And yet how similar.

He thought about how he'd first met Alicia. They'd both been hippies in San Francisco back then. She was fresh out of the convent, he fresh out of the seminary. Both were exercising their revolutionary muscle. They met while attending a seminar on gestalt psychology at Esalen Institute down along the California coast near Big Sur. That was the place to be in those days, the cutting edge of evolution. Funny! I wonder how many people have even heard of Esalen any more.

Alicia and Peregrine had both been on scholarships and were working the tuition for the seminar off by helping in the kitchen. With their religious life backgrounds, they'd both been so accomplished at large-quantity cooking that they got invited to join the permanent staff. What an adventure that had been!

Days in the kitchen and in the seminar room. Nights in the pools of the natural hot springs that overlooked the vast Pacific Ocean!

The nostalgia was an odd mixture of pleasure and pain. Peregrine was so grateful for those experiences, yet sad that they were so far gone and could never be regained. Such is life, he thought. "Things fade and alternatives exclude," he reminded himself, such is the source of the experience of evil according to Whitehead.

Back in those youthful days, Peregrine -- he was still Jonathan Stiers then, of course -- loved to get stoned and sit on the rocks above the ocean and read Process and Reality outloud. He wasn't sure he ever understood Alfred North Whitehead. But he loved the complexity of phrase and the elusiveness of thought. Especially after smoking a joint!

"Remember the hot springs?" Peri said to Alicia.

"Oh, go on with you," Alicia responded. (In her old age, Peregrine laughed to himself, she'd taken to affecting the idioms of old country grandmothers.)

"Now, Alicia, I remember perfectly well how you used bogart joints," he teased.

"G'wan," she said, happily embarrassed and blushing. "You leave those memories buried back there in the past."

"Tweren't so long ago," Peri answered mocking her country idiom with a pretended accent of his own.

Alicia affectionately bopped him on the forehead with the wooden spoon she'd been stirring her cherries with. Peregrine pecked her a little kiss on the cheek.

"It's been a grand life," she answered, smiling widely, with a little break in her voice. "We sure have seen a lot."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," Peri answered, still feigning a hayseed accent.

Alicia laughed. "What you got in store?"

"Wait 'n see," Peregrine answered, not having any idea how to complete the joke he'd started. Even as he said it, a chill ran through him.

He realized about the only thing ahead of them was death.

Rif came marching determinedly into the kitchen at about that moment. He looked into the pot of apple sauce, then stuck his finger into the sauce Peri was mixing with sugar and spices in the baking pan. "Taste's good," he said.

"Hope so," Peri answered, leaving a moment of silence for Rif to fill. He looked like he had something to say.

A similar affection to that he'd been feeling for Alicia filled Peregrine's throat as he looked at Rif and waited for him to announce whatever he'd come in here for. He and Rif had been together now almost 20 years. When they met Rif had barely been more than a boy. Peregrine had just moved to Sweetwater, back in '89. He'd been 43, Rif'd been 29 (??). What wonderful

companions they'd made!

"I guess heard a news story I think you'd be interested in," Rif said very seriously.

"Uh huh?"

"The latest report on the radiation status at Devil's Lake shows that within the last year the radiation level has increased by almost 15%. It was supposed to have decreased by something a little more than.

"The Radiation Regulatory Commission said they had no explanation. They questioned the figures and suggested that there was something wrong with the instruments, that maybe the remote counters back in the center of the contaminated area have finally been damaged by the radiation.

"A scientist, identified as a staff member of the League for a Conservative Society, was interviewed. He offered the hypothesis that the radioactive particles in the Lake are developing something like critical mass that causes a low-grade reaction that breeds new radioactive elements.

"That theory was poo-poo'd by the spokesman for RRC, who said the principle of conservation of energy makes that impossible.

"The LCS guy then answered that by saying that some other kinds of energy could be being channelled into the Lake. 'Are you suggesting some kind of enemy activity?' he was asked. 'We have to consider that a possibility,' he answered, saying that it might be possible the Russians are doing this, but he didn't know how such energy could be directed like that without being detected.

"But here's the kicker, Peri, he then said that other members of the LCS are concerned that 'telekinetic' powers are being used. Those couldn't be detected. The reporter asked him who'd be doing that. 'Well, we all know what the source of telekinetic energy is,' he answered.

"The reporter asked him to be more specific, I think. Then the interview switched to a guy next to him who was wearing a clerical collar who answered something to the effect that Biblical prophecy foretold that the Anti-Christ would at first seem attractive and peace-loving, but then would secretly spread plague and 'mind pollution' (those were his words) throughout the world."

"Was that all?" Peregrine asked.

"Yup. That's all they said. It wasn't very specific. Maybe the reporters edited out something more direct, but didn't it sound like they were connecting 'telekinetic' energy with their 'Anti-Christ' and saying that everybody knows who's 'telekinetic'?"

"Well, I certainly don't know who's 'telekinetic,'" Peregrine answered. "But I sure as hell bet they think they're talking about the Star-Children."

"What are you going to say to Bo and Thomas?" Rif asked.

"I don't know. I don't think we'll have to say anything. I bet we'll hear the much more complete story directly from them -- right out of the ether or wherever they get things from."

". . . Karellen was head of the Overlords," a gravely-voiced man was saying.

Peregrine stopped his rapid scanning of the video channels to see if he heard that correctly. He hadn't been paying much attention as he sat in the TV room -- wasting time, he realized -- confirming his suspicions that there was nothing he wanted to watch among the 120-odd channel selection offered by the satellite dish up on the mountain outside. But the words "Karellen" and "Overlords" cut right through his intention. Those were deeply meaningful words to him. He flicked back a couple of channels to find that conversation.

"Arthur C. Clarke was hailed as a prophet of technology, mainly because he predicted communications satellites. During the beginnings of space development, he was called in as an "expert" to appear during news coverage of such events as the first landing on the moon. He was clearly recognized as a guru of technology by many secular humanists."

Uh-oh, Peregrine thought, there's a real buzz word.

"Few people read Clarke's novels today. Like most science-fiction, they are dated. The assumptions and world views and the circumstances of daily life have changed so much that these kinds of novels are only interesting as museum pieces.

"But Clarke's influence has long outlived him and his writings. And this is why all of us should very carefully examine Clarke's works.

"Many of Arthur Clarke's notions have been absorbed into

everyday thinking. This is especially true because a couple of his books were made into very popular movies. Of course, the most popular of these was 2001: A Space Odyssey. That film, originally made in 1967, was a favorite of the drug culture and the so-called New Age religions that flourished in the 70s and 80s. It was re-released in a holo version in 2000 as a sort of historical document of what people had predicted the year 2001 would be like. And it was remade recently. You'll recall the latest version came out in 2010 along with a holo version of the 1980s-produced sequel called 2010."

The camera pulled back from the speaker to show the whole set. Several men in darkly conservative suits, one of whom was wearing a roman collar, sat behind a long desk. Across from them on a raised dias, sitting alone in a swivel chair, was the speaker. He looked somewhat younger than the others, but was dressed similarly. The host, a familiar face on the Christian network, stalked back and forth between the panel and the guest.

"You say we should know more about Arthur C. Clarke's writings. Can you explain why?" said the host.

"Clarke's ideas are very influential. 2001 has added several notions to popular culture. On the surface, these ideas seem harmless enough. But if you really look at what Clarke was saying, you can see that he was carefully creating a socially acceptable disguise for the coming of the Anti-Christ."

"Please be specific," one of the panelists spoke up.

"One of the things from 2001 is idea of the so-called Star-Child. Remember in the story a team of astronauts has gone into space to make contact with some sort of superior race. Now first

of all, this superior race is supposed to have influenced a group of apes so they would grow into human beings. Clearly, God's act of creation is left out. Indeed, God has been supplanted by a race of 'superior aliens.'

"All the astronauts are killed by the ship's computer but one. He arrives at the alien artifact out in space and then has this psychedelic trip in which he gets very confused and is taken over by this alien race and is then changed back into a baby. This baby is called 'the Star-Child.' It supposedly represents the 'next step' in evolution. But it was also the way Clarke's "superior aliens" come to earth.

"Now, in fact, in the year 2001 we started hearing about babies that were being called 'Star-Children,' exactly what Clarke said the invaders would be."

"Are you saying that these so-called 'Star-Children' are really alien invaders?" asked the host.

"No, not at all. The Scriptures clearly do not make any prophecy about alien invaders. And they do indicate that man is the crown of creation, with dominion over the earth.

"But I want to call your attention to how Arthur Clarke used this notion of superior aliens.

"In the novel I was talking about earlier, CHILDHOOD'S END, the earth is invaded by superior aliens, which he calls Overlords. They rule over the planet and bring a sort of peace through intimidation and through absolute secularization. The Overlords abolish religion, replacing belief with science. In the end, the whole planet is absorbed into a kind of mass savage

mind and all individual personality is destroyed.

"What's most revealing in CHILDHOOD'S END is that the aliens are described as looking like devils: black scaly creatures with leathery wings, little horns, and a barbed tail.

"And, in the novel, the first people who are absorbed into this mass mind are children. And the first evidence that this is happening to them is that they have strange dreams and develop psychic powers.

"Now Clarke describes all these things to make these events seem desirable and normal.. . ."

"And that's exactly what the Anti-Christ would do," the host interrupted.

"Yes," replied the guest.

Oh my God, thought Peregrine.

From his own childhood, that novel CHILDHOOD'S END had been one of his favorites. It had inspired him with real mystical insight. He was annoyed that the Christian Fundamentalists would attack something as innocent as that allegorical vision of what humankind could be.

But he was more than annoyed, he was downright frightened that they were attacking the Star-Children.

3

"Peri," Rif called out from the TV room, "come in here. There's something on you ought to see."

Peregrine arrived to see the wide screen TV filled with a photograph of Arthur C. Clarke. "What's this?" he asked.

"CNN," somebody replied.

To which Rif added, "They're reporting on a letter that was sent out by one of the Fundamentalist Christian groups warning about the imminent appearance of the Anti-Christ."

"Clarke was a voluminous writer of the last century whose major contributions were in the area of science fiction and science prediction," the narrator was saying. "Now he is being tied into a newly arising controversy over the so-called 'Star-Children,' that is, the children you've read about in the National Enquirer and such papers who are supposed to have various kinds of psychic powers.

"It appears fairly coincidental that these gifted children are associated with Clarke. Many of their mothers reported dreaming about a baby with glowing eyes before they were born. Psychiatrists we've spoken with, however, indicate that dreams of babies during pregnancy is quite common. It appears that the reference to Clarke's character in the book and movie 2001 was invented by media reporting.

"The letter, a copy of which I have here, reads in part: 'Twentieth Century writer Arthur C. Clarke seems to have predicted that in the end times the Devil would manifest himself in the guise of children with psychic powers. Clarke was a prerunner of the events that mark the present day. That he revealed the connection between these children and Satan is beyond doubt.'"

The scene switched to a college classroom.

"Dr. Harvey Montague teaches English at Hunter College in New York City. He has written a book called The Apocalyptic

Vision of Arthur C. Clarke.

"CNN asked Dr. Montague about the charges against Clarke."

"Well, first of all, Clarke wasn't teaching religion. He was primarily a science-fiction novelist. He's best known because he made some sensible technological predictions which have proved accurate," said a dapper-looking young man in a plaid suit and plaid bow-tie, the stylish look for college professors.

"Second, Clarke was just a human being. Everybody who ever met him recognized that. He wasn't some kind of angel or devil.

"Third, during the mid-20th Century, there was a trend in science fiction to create technological metaphors for some of the ideas of the old myths and religions. Clarke's THE CITY AND THE STARS is perhaps the best example. The story follows the classical mythic form of the hero journey. It's even got a kind of computer simulation of the old idea of reincarnation.

"But that the writers in that trend were actually part of a demonic conspriacy -- well, that's just nonsense.

"There was a popular idea at the time, which we still see occasionally, that religious myths could be explained by space visitors. I think a lot of writers, like Arthur C. Clarke, were turning that around."

"What is the apocalyptic vision?" an off camera voice asked.

"That's an important point. It's the name of my doctoral dissertation. And it refers to the tendency in Clarke's novels to solve worldwide problems by dealing with them as a problem of a few individuals. It's a common enough theme in science fiction.

"At any rate, my naming my book that is not a sign that I'm

part of the conspiracy or that Clarke was really talking about the Second Coming.

"As for the real Star-Children, well, I think Clarke would have been gratified to see his coined word applied to this phenomenon. He always liked attention. And I think he'd be pleased to see that human beings are making some headway with developing their latent psychic powers. But I don't think he'd mistake these kids for his metaphor of technological transcendence. And I certainly don't think he'd mistake himself for a prerunner of the Anti-Christ."

Margaret Hampton's face then appeared on the screen.

"Well, there's a familiar face," Peregrine remarked.

"Child-psychologist Margaret Hampton was one of the first people to identify the 'Star-Children.'"

"I am absolutely astonished that anyone would suggest that these children are possessed by demons. They are just kids, normal human children. The only thing special about them is that they have very pleasant personalities, they are frequently pretty lucky, and they sometimes experience something with one another that seems like telepathy.

"What are they?" she appeared to be responding to an unheard question, "Well, they're children. Oh, you mean, what caused them to have these powers. Well, we don't know. Probably the stress around the time of the nuclear accidents caused some sort of latent human ability to surface in a small segment of the population. Maybe people have had these powers all along, but it took some publicity and popular fascination with them to get them

to admit to the powers."

"I wonder why they didn't interview Bo for this. He was certainly the best known of the Star-Children," Rif commented as the image on the screen changed to scenes of piles of letters being poured into mailboxes.

"Let's be happy they didn't remember him," Peregrine said. "This whole thing could get ugly. Let's keep a low profile this time."

That evening Father Timothy had to fend off nearly twenty reporters who wanted a statement from Bowman. His answer most every time was, "Young Mr. Mayberry is not interested in that subject anymore."

They -- including Bo -- all hoped such a message would suggest to the public that the powers had gone away or were at least of no threat to anyone.

Only Bowman was concerned that other children like himself and Thomas would be misled by that. At first he wanted to make a very strong statement in defense of himself and his comrades. Then he realized, especially when Peregrine reminded him of Ravani, that this was not the time to give credence to the allegations against the Star-Children even by trying to refute them.

"Peri, do you think God gives people signs?" Bo looked very serious.

"Well, that's a big question. When I was your age I certainly believed in signs. And used to get them," Peregrine responded, wanting to make sure he didn't belittle the boy's religious zeal, but also wanting to encourage Bowman to look beyond naive superstitious religion.

"I think most of the time 'signs' are best explained as selective perception. But, you know, my own experience tells me that that explanation just isn't always satisfying." Then, changing the direction of the conversation, he asked the boy, "Have you asked God for signs?"

"Not exactly," Bo answered, obviously a little hesitant to talk about the subject. Though since he'd brought it up Peregrine felt he had a responsibility to assist Bo in saying what he wanted to say.

"Not exactly what?"

"Not exactly asked."

"You mean you got a sign you didn't ask for?"

"Sorta."

"Do you want to explain?"

"Promise you won't make fun of me."

"Bo, have I ever made fun of you?"

"Yeah," he answered like a typical young teenager.

Sometimes Peregrine thought of Bowman almost as an incarnation of some kind of deity. Other times he had to remind

himself the boy was just a boy. And he acted like most boys. Obviously one such boyhood trait was feeling misunderstood and assailed -- even by the most innocent of adult joking.

"I apologize. You deserve to know that I've never intentionally made fun of you."

"I know, Peri," the boy said, sounding many years older than his chronological age.

"It's just, well, I need to ask you about these feelings I get now and then," Bo continued. "It's sometimes like I can just feel God right next to me, like somebody standing just behind me. And sometimes I think I hear him talking to me. And a couple of weeks ago, well, I wasn't sure what to think about this. I mean I thought I was just talking to myself -- and, you know, answering myself.

"That isn't crazy, is it?" Bo asked sheepishly.

"No, of course not. It's called 'internal dialogue' and we all do it all the time. And feeling that God is present to you is a rather common spiritual practice. But, now, what did the voice say a couple of weeks ago?" Peregrine inquired solicitously.

"It wasn't so much what it said, but that the voice offered to prove that it wasn't just me talking to myself."

"How was that?" Peregrine asked, feeling a twinge of memory into his own youth, when something similar had happened to him.

"The voice said he'd give me a sign. And then he asked me what I wanted as proof. And I didn't know. I thought about asking for the sun to go out -- or something big like that. But realized that was kind of foolish. And besides that might cause

trouble to other people."

"That was good thinking, Bo."

"So I said, 'Tell me your name.' And the voice said, "Okay, listen." Bo stopped talking.

"Well, did you hear something?"

"Peri," Bo asked, almost seeming to change the subject, "do you ever listen to the radio?"

"Sure, tho' maybe not as much anymore as I used to. I almost always play the radio or the stereo in the car."

"What kind of music do you listen to? Classical and all that," he asked with the typical teenage disdain for anything even vaguely 'old-fashioned.'

"All kinds, I guess. I'm not so old, you know, that I don't listen to pop stuff, if that's what you mean."

"Have you ever heard a song called 'Reach Out, I'll Be There'?"

Peregrine's twinge of memory turned to a deep chill of recognition running up his spine. "Uh huh," he nodded.

"When the voice offered a sign, I was up in the hayloft, you know, where I like to go and play with Bonnie and Freddie or just to think. And it was real quiet when the voice said, 'listen.' And, just then, somebody got in the truck down below and when they started the motor, the radio came on. And it was playing that song."

"And did that mean something to you?" Peregrine asked carefully, not wanting to impose his own amazement on the boy.

"Yeah. You know, I said sometimes I feel like God is right

there with me, like he's standing right behind me. And there's this line in the song, 'just look over your shoulder.' And that's how God is to me."

Peregrine thought silently for a moment. Of course, he knew that song. It was probably brand new to Bo. But he could remember it all the way back to the first version: The Four Tops, he recalled, proud of his memory. Why, that song had been remade over and over again all through his life. He remembered a disco version in the '70s, maybe by Aretha Franklin or, was it Gloria Gaynor?, he fished names out of very distant memory. And then there was a reggae version. And then in the Soul Music Revival in the '90s, the New Supremes did it.

And, now lately, there'd been a very strange version of it in this new 'Hot Chant' style that had supplanted all the nostalgias revivals around the turn of the century. The newest thing in pop music was a kind of monotone chant going on over a hard-driving synthesized percussion track. Peregrine thought he didn't like the new sound very much, but had reminded himself that that was just his age and he vowed he wasn't going to let himself get old and stodgy and complain about popular music.

And whether he'd liked the new sound of this current version of that old Four Tops song didn't matter. That song had followed him, he sometimes thought, like an anthem all through his life. Why, when he was only a little older than Bowman, that song was his 'sign.'

"Back when I was in college," Peregrine said, fighting to calm the excited pounding of his heart, "I read a book by a religious philosopher named Martin Buber. You ought to know his

name," he added as an aside. "He was famous for the idea of I-Thou relationships.

"Anyway, he said that the correct translation of the name of God revealed in the Book of Exodus is 'I will be there.'"

"You mean, 'I am who am'?" Bo asked.

"Well, that's how it's always translated. Buber's point was that in ancient Hebrew the verb 'to be' meant 'to be present to,' and not some kind of metaphysical abstraction. And he also said that the equivalent of present tense in the Hebrew that was used in that name for God implied action continuing into the future."

"So, you mean this guy Bober . . ."

"Buber," Peregrine corrected, "with a 'u.'"

". . . Buber said God's name was really 'I'll be there'?" Bo asked with a tone of trepidation in his voice.

"Well, actually I think Buber said it was something like 'I will be there as who I am will I be there.' But, yes, exactly."

"Then my voice was really saying it was God?"

"Well, you know, Bo, what I think it was saying was that whatever that presence is you sometimes feels -- that it will be with you. Just like it says.

"Bringing God in just sort of complicates things, because we really don't know what God is other than as a sort of spiritual experience people have. That's what you have occasionally, isn't it?"

"What?" Bo asked, not understanding.

"I mean, you said you sometimes feel this sense of presence of something . . ."

"Oh yeah. Sometimes I think that's Thomas or one of the other Star-Children eavesdropping on my thoughts or something. And sometimes I think it's God."

Peregrine sat back in his chair. They were in the big family room next to the refectory in the main building of Sweetwater Farm. There was a conference on Psychology and Ancient Buddhist Doctrine going on this weekend. A lot of guests were around the place. It had just started snowing this year. It was very cold outside. Most of the guests huddled inside by the fire to stay warm.

They'd all just gone upstairs to the meeting hall a little while ago, leaving Peri and Bo by the fireplace.

You're getting to be a very complex person, Peregrine thought to himself as he looked at Bowman. At almost fourteen years old -- his birthday was coming up in a week, Bo was quickly becoming a man. Already he'd started to get tall and lanky. His face was changing. The baby fat and sort of formless look of youth was going. He was developing handsome, if a little stern, features. But the real miracle was his mind. Peri realized he had no idea what it was like to be in that mind, to feel so connected with the universe around him.

Peregrine mused for a moment that when he was about Bowman's age, he already read that book of Arthur Clarke's that was suddenly getting publicity -- almost 70 years after it was written. As a boy he'd longed to enter into that Overmind as Clarke had called the state of collective awareness that the Fundamentalist preacher had misunderstood and called savagery. He remembered praying for days on end for the Overlords to come

and take him away with them so he could become part of evrybody's mind.

And one night he'd prayed very hard. And his own "voice" had said something like that one day he could have that experience. And he'd doubted the voice's promise and dared to ask for a sign. And he'd gotten the sign, just like Bo did. And just like Bo, it was in the form of a popular song. Not the same one -- that would have been too much of a coincidence, Peri thought. But one that was popular at the time and that had had some sort of religious significance to him. He'd had to turn the radio on himself, he recalled. And he laughed at himself for envying Bo's getting the music to just appear out of nowhere.

Later, as he'd matured and become less magical in his spiritual thinking, he'd lost those signs. He'd even come to doubt they'd ever been all that real to begin with, just a sort of lucky coincidence combined with a willingness to accept almost anything as the promised omen.

But now he wondered. His voice had promised him that one day he'd experience collective consciousness. (In the wake of that promise, he thought, he'd become a disciple of the French mystic-scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who predicted development of collective consciousness as the next step in human evolution, and Carl Jung, who identified a collective unconscious, which Peri had thought might one day become conscious.)

Maybe this was the fulfillment of that promise -- seeing Bowman Mayberry entering into whatever consciousness he

experienced in sometimes being in telepathic contact with other kids. Wasn't that what the young Peregrine had wanted? To see through other people's eyes, to feel what it was like to be somebody else, while still being oneself? That's what Bo could sometimes do.

And Peregrine was chilled to realize his own sign had finally been realized.

Not quite the way I wanted, he said to himself. I'd hoped to be one of the kids, not just one of the onlookers. But that's okay, he thought and then remembered the words of an old prayer from Compline, the Church's night prayer. These were the words of Simeon the old prophet who'd been promised a glimpse of the messiah who, upon seeing the infant Jesus was said to have proclaimed: "Now you can dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word, O Lord."

"Are you okay?" Bo interrupted his reverie. "Is something wrong. It looks like you're crying."

"No, Bo," Peri answered, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Nothing's wrong. I was just thinking about God and about you and, I guess, about myself. And I was thinking how happy I am for you."

Bo jumped out of his chair and, kneeling clumsily, put his arms around Peregrine's shoulders and, without saying a word, held him tightly for the longest time.

Just as Peregrine was an advisor and confidant for Bowman in areas of spiritual development, so he was to become in other areas as well. Not long after their conversation about Bo's sense of mystical companionship, the boy brought another problem to his attention.

Rather late one evening, unexpectedly Bo showed up at the door of the little cottage Peri and Rif lived in just on the edge of the cluster of dwellings that made up the main community of Sweetwater. The two men were sitting by the fire quietly reading before retiring when there came a timid knock at the door.

"I'm not disturbing anything, am I?" Bo inquired nervously when Peri opened the door.

"No, not at all. Come on in. It's cold out there."

"There's something I need to talk to you about," the boy said as he entered.

"Do you all want privacy," Rif spoke up, "I'll go in the bedroom."

"Oh no," answered Bo quickly. "I'd like you to stay."

Peregrine offered Bo a cup of spearmint tea from the pot he'd brewed earlier. When Bo declined, he offered hot cocoa. This time the offer was accepted. While Peri pattered in the kitchen, Bo and Rif made small talk about the weather and what Bo had done for the day. The boy was unusually retiscent.

Peri soon returned with a steaming mug for Bo and a pointed question, "Well, what's up?"

"You know, I'm almost 14 years old now. I'm not a kid

anymore."

"Indeed," Peregrine said, musing for a moment that Bo's birthday was coming up on December 21, only two weeks away, but in some ways this child's always been way ahead of his chronological age. He's had a magical/mystical identity that's pushed him into a very precocious maturity.

"I want you to know that I understand about the relationship between you," Bo stammered. "I mean that it's kind of the same, but different from the relationship between Amy and Jude."

"We've never made any secret of our relationship," Rif answered.

"But, I mean, I know; I mean, you know; I mean there is something different. . . ."

"Whoa," Peregrine interjected Bo's nervous jabbering. "Yes, Bo, everybody here at Sweetwater has raised you to understand about the differences and the similarities between being gay and being straight.

"Rif and I have been very honest with you. And if there are things you want to ask us about, well, we'll be very happy to tell you." Ah, Peregrine thought to himself, the boy's discovering sex. I've been wondering when this would happen. And what it would be like for somebody with his powers.

"Oh, I know," Bo answered quickly. "It's just, well . . ."

"Sex is hard to talk about, isn't it?" Rif said comfortingly, hoping to relax the boy.

"Take a deep breath and relax. Now, Bo, do you want to talk about how you feel about homosexuality?" Peregrine asked calmly.

"You guys are like another set of parents for me and Thomas.

We really love you a lot. And that doesn't have anything to do with you being gay. I mean that's okay with me. But I do know it's not okay with other people out there in the world.

"One of the day-hop boys at school the other day was talking about queers. And it made me so mad."

Ah, that's what's bothering him, Peregrine realized. I guess that was something to expect.

There'd been enough children at Sweetwater in the last few years for the community to establish its own school program and even to get local school board approval and funding. In fact, recognizing both the quality of the educators at Sweetwater and the geographical realities of the rural area, the local school board asked the community to include students from outside Sweetwater who lived in the nearby village in order to save them from having to be transported some twenty miles to school on the other side of the county. Sweetwater, of course, had agreed. From somewhere in somebody's boarding school past came the expression "day-hop" for the students who came from outside the community. (Those in charge of the school program had welcomed that expression; even if it had a slightly condescending tone, it was far better than "outsiders" or some such similar phrase.)

"You know, it's part of people's growing up and discovering who they are and what their own identity is about that they make fun of people who are different from them. Lots of boys go through a period of saying mean and angry things about homosexuals just as part of proving to themselves they're heterosexual."

"Well, I think I'm heterosexual," Bo answered Peregrine, "but I don't have to say things like that."

"No, you don't. But even you might feel some anxiety about sexual identity and things as you're learning what your sexual feelings are all about," Rif said.

"Well, that's maybe what I want to talk to you about," Bo said blushing.

"Are you thinking that maybe you're not heterosexual?" Rif asked him very gently.

"I don't know," the boy said and fell silent again.

Peregrine let a long silence ensue and then finally said, "Would you like to tell us what happened. It's sometimes real helpful to talk about things that seem embarrassing."

"You know, Thomas and I have this ability to communicate mentally sometimes. And sometimes we've even managed to reach out to other people far away and make a mind-link with them. And, you know, it usually helps if we touch one another or hold hands or something. And. . ."

"Go on," Peri urged. "It's okay."

"Well, you know, sometimes we can sort of spy on people like this . . ." Again he stammered to a halt. Peregrine had never seen Bo like this before.

"Did you come upon somebody making love?" Peregrine asked.

"Oh yeah . . . sort of. . ."

"That sounds like it might have been real exciting," Rif commented matter-of-factly, "and maybe kind of surprising."

"Well, look, I just gotta tell you guys the whole story."

"We're listening," Rif answered.

"Uh huh," murmured Peregrine. "Sounds interesting," he added hoping to set the boy at ease.

"Yesterday Thomas and I were experimenting with the mind-link. You know there's this strange little girl in California we've been occasionally connecting with and a couple of other kids. But it always happens kinda accidentally.

"So we thought we'd try to mind-link on purpose. We tried the little girl, but couldn't get any connection. Then we tried this guy Scotty in Cleveland who seems to be about my age. And it worked.

"But it was so different from before. Usually we'd sort of be able to talk to each other like on a telephone. Or maybe if we had our eyes shut we could kind of imagine seeing him. But this time it was like those dreams I had of Ravani last summer. It was like being Scotty."

"Hmm, that sounds interesting," Peri commented. "What happened?"

"Well, Thomas and I were up in the loft in the barn lying next to each other holding hands to make our own mind-link so we could combine our power. And we thought about Scotty and said his name outloud a couple of times. And then all of a sudden, we were inside Scotty. And, well, I guess we got him at a bad time."

"What was he doing?"

"Well, he was with another boy. I think I got that his name was Steve. Steve isn't a Star-child. I mean he doesn't have any powers and he wasn't doing a mind-link with Scotty or anything,"

Bo again stammered to a halt.

"But they were together?" Peri asked.

"Uh huh."

"And what were they doing?" Peri continued, beginning to realize what had happened.

"They both had their clothes off. And Scotty was lying on top of Steve and touching him all over.

"And my throat got real dry and I could feel this sort of nervous hollow feeling in my stomach. And I started to pull away from Thomas; you know, to maybe break the mind-link. But I couldn't. I mean, well, it's sort of embarrassing. . ."

"Yes," Rif answered assuringly, "it's embarrassing talking about sex, but it's really very human. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"Well, I guess so. I sure got hooked on staying inside Scotty's mind. At first I knew I was still me and I was sort of observing Scotty and Steve. But I knew what Scotty was feeling. I got this sense that he was real lonely. He doesn't know any other Star-Children. I don't even think he exactly understands his powers. He can't mind-link very well 'cause there's nobody else to do it with. You know, like Thomas and I can.

"Steve is a boy from school that Scotty's got a crush on, I guess. I don't know whether this was their first time doing this together or not. I could tell Scotty was real nervous but real excited.

"And then I was having a hard time remembering who I was and that Thomas and I were up in the barn watching. It was like we were becoming Scotty and Steve. And I got real scared, but real

excited."

"Was this the first time you'd ever experienced sex?" Rif asked.

"This was the first time in a mind-link or with anybody else. I mean, from one of the guys at school I learned about, you know, getting off. But I never did it with anybody. And I never even talked to Thomas about it."

"Did you feel guilty about sex?" Peregrine asked, thinking he and Rif -- and Jude and Amy for that matter -- had tried so hard to raise Bowman without any guilt, but that was just part of developing an adult ego, wasn't it, he realized.

"Not guilty, exactly. You guys have told me not to feel guilty," he said almost directly responding to Peregrine's personal misgiving. "But I just sort of knew this was supposed to be a secret."

"Well, welcome to adulthood," Rif said jokingly, apparently trying to relax the tension in the air. "How did you like Scotty making love?"

"There's more I have to tell you," Bo answered, obviously not ready to lighten up the conversation. "Scotty and Steve were kissing each other. And that felt so good. And then I couldn't tell whose body was which and it was like Scotty and Steve were melting into each other. And I think Scotty realized we were there about that time. I mean, he started to jump, like maybe he'd been caught by his parents or something. And then Thomas and I said our names to him and I felt this great wave of affection from him -- like he never had to be lonely again."

"And, then, well, you know I couldn't tell where my own body was anymore and I being inside everybody. It felt so good, much more than just, you know, getting myself off."

"I know," answered Rif. "That's why people do it together."

"I don't know if Steve knew what was going on. But I know I was inside him feeling I was holding Scotty and Thomas and me -- all of us all at once. And, well, then we finished. And our minds sort of separated a little. And, well . . ."

"Go on. It's okay," said Peregrine.

"Thomas and I discovered we'd apparently pulled our clothes off and were all wrapped in each other's arms and legs and, well, you know, we'd got each other sticky . . ."

"Well, I can see why that happened," Rif said. "It sounds like it was great fun. And, Bo, I understand why that might have scared you."

"Having sex the first time with anybody is scary," Peri interjected. "Whether it's with a boy or a girl. But I guess it'd be especially scary if it happened when you didn't exactly know it was going to."

"But Thomas and I are brothers," Bo said, despairingly. "Isn't that incest?"

"Well, you two aren't really brothers -- not by blood, you know. But even if you were brothers sometimes play at sex together a little. That's part of experimenting."

"What happened was that you and Thomas got caught in a telepathic experience that went way beyond having sex," Peregrine continued. "You know, if you're afraid this makes you homosexual, let me say I don't think it does. And you just

discovered a fringe benefit of your powers you never knew before.

"But I think you probably shouldn't do this -- homosexually or heterosexually -- without an invitation. It's rude to spy on other people making love, at least without their knowledge. Besides, Bo, you're still a little young yet. I mean, there's a lot about sex that's a real problem for adults. You don't want to have to add those problems to your own problems of growing up yet."

"You know," Rif spoke up, "that kind of vicarious experience of sex is what pornography and erotica is all about."

"What's 'vicarious'?" Bo quizzed.

"Oh, it means to put yourself in somebody else's position."

"Like walking a mile in someone else's shoes," Bo asked, referring to the old American cliché about compassion.

"Well, I guess so," Rif replied. And then continued, "Imagining how other people have sex is part of learning how to do it and how to appreciate that the other person might have a very different set of expectations and experiences from you."

"But, Bo, you've sure discovered something that's a hundred times more powerful than just watching other people on video."

"And, of course, that's why it was so upsetting," Peregrine added. "But there's really nothing to be worried about. You've still got your own body and your own personal sexual identity. And you can grow up to have a wife and family and all that just like every other heterosexual."

"The real reason for homophobia -- that's fear of homosexuality -- is to assist heterosexuals in establishing their

egos by making clear what they are not. You're very different, Bo, you've got both your own ego and you've got access to other minds. It seems like a great blessing, a real opportunity to experience compassion."

Continuing on his previous theme, Rif interjected, "That ability to experience sex from many different viewpoints was what promiscuity was all about -- I mean, in the most positive sense. For so many people, sex is something pretty private, all inside their own little egos.

"I think especially for gay people, because at least when they are young, their egos are very fragile since they've gotten so little support for their experience of emotional feelings, it's important to discover that they are not alone by having sex with a variety of other people. In Peri's image, I guess, maybe that's how they build their egos.

"But I felt like I was losing my ego," Bo answered, perhaps confused by the philosophizing.

"That's the paradox of sex, my son," Peregrine replied very paternally. "Because it is such an experience of being beyond your ego, of being part of the whole biological process of life, and of being connected with another person, it is surrounded by psychological mechanisms that both build ego and break it open.

"The trick is to learn to do both well."

"I'm a little confused with all this. But I'm not afraid anymore. And I realize, just from talking with you guys, that the gay side of all this isn't really much different from the straight.

"And maybe I better send Thomas over here to talk with you

two," he added as an afterthought. "And then we better go visit Scotty and make sure he feels okay about himself.

"You know, I really got from this talk that I don't have to worry about being homosexual myself -- not that that would be a bad thing -- but that I guess I am really hetero." Bo blushed, "But I have to say I really liked being in love with Scotty and Steve. Scotty's such a nice person."

"I want to change the subject," Peregrine said.

"I noticed something you said, Bo, about your powers that was just sort of incidental, but which I think is very important and that we've all overlooked before. You commented that Scotty doesn't have anybody to mind-link with. He doesn't have any other Star-children around.

"Maybe you and Thomas are rather special because you've grown up together and had each other to experiment with. Maybe many of the other kids haven't developed their powers because they haven't had the opportunity.

"You know, Bo, last summer when you were so upset about that Pakistani kid and the terrorists, I'd played down the whole issue. It seemed to me like you were just one of the special children out of hundreds, maybe thousands, around the world.

"All of a sudden I realize you -- and probably Thomas, though his powers aren't nearly as great -- might be very different from the others.

"Maybe there is a reason for us to be concerned."

6

[Peri is kidnapped]

7

"Brother, we have no intention of being disrespectful. We perceive that you think of yourself as a good man and believe that God's plan for salvation is being manifested in the events involving these, ah, quote, Star-Children, unquote.

"I want to assure you," the tall, white-haired man continued, "that we have not kidnapped you to hold you for ransom. No, my brother, we have invited you here -- and taken upon ourselves the responsibility for bringing you in your own behalf, even if seemingly against your will -- to fight for your salvation."

The old man sat in a dark red leather wing-back chair across a large mahogany desk from Peregrine. He looked stern -- stiff-backed, sunken-cheeked, dour of countenance. He also looked very rich. His black pin-striped suit was of finest Italian silk, cut traditionally but with just a rakish touch of stylish elegance. A red silk tie and matching silk scarf carelessly stuffed into the breast pocket revealed a touch of the dandy in Dr. John Weddington Simmons.

"Dr. Simmons," Peregrine answered, "In other circumstances, I think I would probably be honored to be talking with you. Even though, as I suppose you know, I don't share your particular approach to theology and interpretation of Scripture, I have at times admired you."

Some twenty years before, John Weddington Simmons, son and sole heir of multimillionaire oil baron Texas John Simmons, in an act heralded nationwide by every kind of news media, donated the entire sum of his inheritance to an Endowment for Simmons University. And though the younger Simmons was on the way to becoming a popular TV preacher, he overcame the temptation to create Simmons University -- as had so many famous preachers before him -- as a Bible college and mouthpiece for his own particular brand of Fundamentalism by creating it a non-sectarian university run by class-A educators culled from the faculties and administrations of the big Ivy-League schools. Simmons created for himself nothing more than a well-paying job (all the faculty were well-paid) as a lecturer on Sacred Scripture in the Department of Classics.

The action had impressed Peregrine. Simmons had shown himself to be truer to the intellectual roots of sacred theology than to his own narrow opinions. Besides he turned aside the opportunity to buy himself more influence, choosing to become a scholar and professor of theology rather than a popularizer and celebrity. Peregrine had truly admired him.

"I appreciate your admiration, Brother Peregrine, but what I want is not honor or praise for myself. . ."

"Well, I was about to say," Peregrine continued cutting off Simmon's slightly annoying affectation of humility, "but your involvement with the Islamic terrorists who kidnapped me and brought me here trussed up like a turkey makes me doubt whatever good things I thought about you in the past."

"Forgive me, forgive me," Simmons suddenly softened. "This

is not happening the way I intended. I have angered you and set your mind against me.

"What I wanted to do was to ask you to open your mind to me for just a moment, to let me honestly discuss with you what is happening in the spiritual world today." He bowed his head, shaking it slightly from side to side in a gesture of what looked like hopelessness.

"But I did not know how to get you to engage me in such a discussion. Besides my young friends who escorted you here were very anxious to ensure that you would come to visit. I fear they are more likely to consider what they are doing as a true kidnapping. But, Brother," he looked up abruptly -- right into Peregrine's eyes, "that need not happen."

"Do you mean if I cooperate with you?"

"Yes, precisely."

"And what does that mean, arranging to get you some sort of ransom."

"Well, you know what the men want: they want the boy. They had only wanted the boy. It was I who wanted you. They were to bring both of you back with them. But the boy had escaped already. They brought you to give them something to bargain with: you for the boy. They want the boy very badly. Their high-priest has determined that the boy has been a conduit by which an evil spirit was able to gain entry into the world and take possession of a young Pakistani who died earlier this year when an exorcism was effective.

"But I wanted you -- I wanted you both -- not to treat you

like those barbarians might, but to engage you in dialogue."

Peregrine was taken aback by the way Simmons kept referring to Bowman as "the boy," as though he were not a real person. "What do you want to dialogue about, Dr. Simmons?" he asked quizzically.

"I want to understand what the nature of these Star-Children really is. You must know that many Fundamentalist Christians -- as well as Muslims with whom, you see, we are working to development communication, all in the name of ecumenism," Simmons almost smirked, "-- believe these witch-children are precursors of the Anti-Christ or jinn-demons, in our compatriots' colorful expression.

"I myself believe that they are the first earth-bound angels of the Apocalypse and that, as yet, they have not pledged all their allegiance to the True Lord Jesus. Until they do, they are still under the sway of Lucifer with whom they fell before the Creation of the world.

"Brother Peregrine, I want you to help me understand how we can convert them. And I want you to let me convince you that this is so so that your own soul will not be pulled down into hell with them."

"Dr. Simmons, with all due respect, I think you're crazy."

Simmons reached across his desk and pushed a button on the inlaid electronics console. A moment later, two young men entered the room. One was one of the Iranians who brought Peregrine to wherever-they-were, (Simmons' estate, I suppose, thought Peri). He was darkly handsome, but had a look of madness in his eyes. The other was an American, a clean-cut, dusky-blond

farm boy.

"Show Brother Peregrine back to his room. He will be staying with us on retreat. Prayer and fasting are called for." He turned back to Peregrine, "I hope the black fast I recommend for you will quickly open your soul to the Holy Spirit's wisdom." At least to Peregrine's mind, a black fast meant the Jewish fast of Yom Kippur, neither food nor water.

"I think a macrobiotic, Zen regimen would be more to my liking, Dr. Simmons," Peri responded, half-sarcastic, half-hopeful that Simmons was being more genuine than he was being threatening.

"We'll see, we'll see," Simmons dismissed the request for leniency.

Two days later, the hunger was getting to Peregrine, tho' by now it was hard to tell that the weakness and light-headedness he felt was hunger or mystical rapture. The seemingly endless hours of debate with John Weddington Simmons had gotten to him more.

Between long periods of isolation in a small room with darkly shuttered windows and no furniture but a pre-dieu (at which a guard effectively forced Peregrine to kneel most of the time he was in the room) and long sessions with Simmons, the old Fundamentalist theologian's ideas were beginning to break into Peregrine's own thinking.

Maybe he had been deluded. He was at least becoming willing to entertain the possibility.

John Weddington Simmons read and reread the Book of

Revelations to him, insisting that every word of it was historical prediction and would one day -- soon -- be fulfilled. Peregrine found that argument naive. He believed he had studied enough about religion to realize that prophecy is not prediction and that looking for in the Bible for complex allegorical references to world history is, in its own way, just as reductionistic as ignoring all truth that isn't sensorially verifiable.

Peregrine especially thought the references Simmons insisted were based at Bowman were stretched. Simmons kept going over the first verses of Chapter 7: "After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind should blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads.'"

"You see," Simmons demanded, "fourteen years ago the winds were held back all over the planet. And during that time these so-called Star Children were born. They have the power to harm the earth and the sea. And we must seal them on their foreheads as bond-servants of the Lord lest them bring damnation down even on the saved."

"But, Simmons, the Apocalypse is full of angels. Why try to stick that reference to those particular four to these kids scattered all around the world? And the references to the seal

is to the one hundred and forty-four thousand who are supposed to be saved."

"But they won't be saved if we cannot convert these children," Simmons answered, obviously ignoring Peregrine's points entirely. "And you will not be saved. And I will not be saved. You must pray harder, Brother."

Simmons ended every discussion with those words: "You must pray harder, Brother." Peregrine realized that this was the way it was with every Inquisition. The Inquisitor always believes he has the truth and chides, punishes, tortures, and sometimes ultimately kills -- for their own good, of course -- those who are brought to him for his assistance.

Dr. John Weddington Simmons did not seem like the typical Inquisitor. He was clearly very well-motivated. Peregrine did not doubt that the man was intensely concerned about saving his soul. He did not even suspect the man was getting any kind of perverse pleasure out of any of this. If anything, poor Simmons was in agony, believing the fate of the world lay in his hands. Simmons was truly interested in learning about the Star-Children's development. And, in this area, unlike that of Biblical interpretation, Peregrine was happy to be helpful to Simmons. Certainly one big hope he had was that he could convince Simmons that he and his cohorts were wrong in believing that the Star-Children were demons.

Peregrine only neglected one basic fact in his telling of Bowman's development. That fact was that he had Thomas as a partner in his explorations. Simmons and his men did not seem to

know that there were two Star-Children at Sweetwater. And it would certainly be better, Peregrine thought, to keep them uninformed.

"Well, he's like almost any other child in most every respect," Peregrine told Simmons during one of the sessions in Simmons' plush-carpeted, dark wood-paneled office. "When he was a baby he obviously gave out 'good vibes' . . .

"What do you mean by that," the old man questioned.

"You're old enough to remember that expression, aren't you? I recall that from the mid-1960s. I mean, Bo didn't cry and fuss and when you were around him you just felt good, sort of warm and happy and content.

"I'll tell you, I have an understanding of how Bowman is developing -- and, I suppose, the other children like him. And I think the development follows a rather standard pattern, but with Bo the development is happening as a kind of efficacious oneness.

"When he was a baby -- if he was like other human babies (and he certainly looked like all other babies) -- he had no sense of ego. He was one with everything around him. And I think that his own experience of oneness sort of leaked over into anybody around him, so that we all experienced his contentment.

"Then a little later he began developing his own separate ego and withdrawing that experience of oneness. Then over the next few years he began to reestablish the oneness -- or maybe I should say the relatedness -- with each of the ascending orders of existence.

"When he was a toddler he was quite obviously in some sort of relatedness state -- or maybe telepathic state -- with plants

and insects. Sunflowers would turn their heads toward him if he stayed in one place long enough. And he used to babble about how wonderful the sun felt, almost as though he were picking up on the flowers very primitive heliotropic reflex. And butterflies would follow him, sometimes swarming in the air a few feet above his head."

"Did you not think all this strange? Didn't you feel any concern that he might be possessed by a devil?" Simmons inquired earnestly.

"Well, of course, we noticed that this was strange. But there was nothing fearful about it, nothing even slightly demonic. Bowman was a lovable boy, a very lovable boy. And he was getting to happen things all of us must have wished for when we were kids. I mean, I think, his childish fantasies came true."

"But you didn't even consider that this might be evil?"

"Dr. Simmons, one of the greatest ways you and I differ is that I look for good in the world around me, while you and your conservative friends seem to look for evil. So what happens is that I see God. And you see the Devil.

"And let me say it's obvious which one of us lives in a more wonderful world," Peregrine added, realizing, even as he said it, that he was being a bit snide.

"Well, go on, then."

"The next stage of his development seemed to be developing relatedness with birds and animals. He told us he could understand bird songs -- in fact, a couple of years ago, he got a

whole flock of birds to sing 'Happy Birthday' for a party."

"He had these kinds of powers? and they were only being used for trivial amusement?" Simmons broke in. "If these powers were from God, don't you think he'd have been using them to heal the sick or to spread the Gospel?"

"Dr. Simmons, Bowman was only a child. Even Jesus didn't work miracles or preach the gospel when he was a pre-teen."

"You said the powers were ascending the orders of life. The next order is man. Did he then develop power over others' minds?"

"You're right that the next order is human beings. But he certainly didn't develop power over other people. What he did occasionally experience -- at least what he told me -- was that he could connect with another person's thoughts. He described it about like talking to someone on the phone. Sometimes all he got were very diffuse sensory perceptions and memories. Maybe just like a very complete sense of compassion for another person. Most of the time this took touching the other person.

"Do you mean this was something sexual?" Simmons asked astonished.

"No, no, I don't mean sexual touching, just touching hands or something." I should have expected he'd think there was something sexually perverted in all this, Peregrine thought to himself and decided not to expand this area of the conversation anymore. Simmons would certainly not understand the experience of mind-linking with Scotty that Bo told us the other day.

"Apparently, the most powerful telepathic connection he ever felt was with the Pakistani kid, Ravani. And Ravani seemed to be

the one with the great power in that relationship. Bo reported that he usually couldn't contact Ravani intentionally, but even Ravani's daydreams leaked over into his."

"The case of Ravani Abbas was fully investigated by both civil and religious authorities of the Islamic Revolutionary Union. They determined that the child had dangerous powers of witchcraft. Under questioning, he told them that he was possessed by a demon. And he told them that the devil which possessed him had come into the world through Bowman Pressman.

Across the world this poor haunted little boy used the name of this freak child you are harboring. Don't you realize the impossible coincidence of that?"

"I don't think it was coincidental at all. Bowman and . . . uh, I mean, Bowman was Ravani's only friend. The boy was totally isolated and, at least according to how I'd interpret what Bo told me, the boy's mother had driven him crazy with fear that the priests would take him away and torture him for having psychic talents. It's no wonder he'd call out Bo's name while some self-righteous old priest was gouging out his eye or something equally horrible."

"Please, Brother, calm yourself. Go on, please tell me more about Bowman's development."

Peregrine composed himself. He was angry with Simmons. He thought this deluded true-believing man was just as guilty as whoever questioned Ravani.

"Well, there really isn't any more. I mean, he still only a child."

"And what will happen when his sexual appetites develop? Do you not think he might be a source of temptation for you all -- if, as you say, he gives off 'vibes'?"

"I don't know." And I don't especially want to tell you Peregrine added in his mind, hopefully making his lie into a harmless mental reservation. The truth is I don't pick up any kind of sexual vibes from Bo.

"His development isn't just anatomical," Peregrine continued, intentionally changing the subject. "It's psychological and psychic."

"Dr. Simmons, I don't imagine you've ever read anything by Ken Wilber, have you?"

"Why, yes, I have. Why would you think not?"

"Well, because Wilber's ideas about religion and evolution were very different from mainstream Christianity."

"You're quite right about that. And I did disagree with his treatment of religion. He seemed to ignore the historical fact of Revelation entirely. But, let me assure you, I am not an ignorant fool. I certainly keep up with the opposition."

"Well, okay, I didn't mean to insult you," Peregrine said, thinking to himself but you are an old fool. "Remember in UP FROM EDEN Wilbur talked about the evolution of consciousness from primitive animism to magic ritualism to mythic religion to rational thinking, and then to psychic, subtle, and then causal consciousness. Well, historically he said we've really only come through the first three and are struggling as a race with learning to be rational. And we really don't even understand psychic, subtle and causal consciousness at all. Apparently

those functions of consciousness still exist, but we aren't conscious of them.

"I think that Bowman is ascending that same evolution, but he's doing it with some kind of base consciousness that is directly part of causal consciousness. And I mean by that, Doctor, "oneness with God."

"A few weeks ago Bo described to me how he senses God's responsibility for creation, and how he feels God as a constant companion. I think already at his age he's passed through the animism and the magical and is even now passing through the mythical. I think by the time he's an adult, he'll be fully aware of being God."

"Isn't that blasphemous?" Simmons answered to Peregrine's exultation of Bowman's spiritual development.

"Isn't that what they said about Jesus?" Peregrine responded sharply.

### 3

Peregrine didn't always have good answers to Simmons. Especially when he was alone, he began to wonder if Simmons might be correct. What if Peregrine had made a serious spiritual error in his own development? What if he'd been wrong all these years and that the world really was the way the nuns had taught him in grade school? Maybe God really is testing us? And the test is very hard and only a small few will pass? And maybe we've got the criteria all mixed up?

Maybe this notion about peace and love and all that is

really a delusion foisted upon us by the Devil? Maybe evil really is so attractive it looks like good? And the only way to protect yourself from its snares is to accept the truth of the Bible without question? Because only God's revealed Word can cut through the delusion.

Peregrine realized that mental torture -- like this -- was really far worse than physical. Not that he was so sure he could stand up to physical torture. But at least then he'd know what he believed and he could protect what he valued. This way he kept fearing he was going to lose hold of his beliefs and give in to what his captors wanted.

What they really wanted, he understood, was Bowman. He believed he was being held for ransom. And he hoped to God Bo would have more sense than to surrender to them.

'Cause they'll kill him.

He knew that was the bottom line. They want to kill Bowman and all the other magical children. They're going to try to enforce their particular brand of legalistic, Fundamentalist, authoritarian religion on the world and destroy the race's next step in evolution.

We were just beginning to mature out of mythical thinking and to learn rationality. And, apparently to save us, the planetary mind or God or whatever has given us this wonderful gift of these children.

And the lovers of God are going to kill them in his name! Peregrine smashed his fist down on the top of the pre-dieu. He struck it so hard the wood cracked and one of the uprights broke. Peregrine surprised himself. When he stood up, the whole pre-

dieu fell apart.

Peregrine turned and sat down on the kneeler itself. He folded his legs into a half-lotus and assumed a familiar posture for meditation. Why hadn't I thought of this earlier he wondered.

As he slipped into a meditative state, he realized that if his captors were capable of killing Bowman and the other children, well, they were certainly capable of killing him. I'm sixty-nine years old, he thought. Seventy was going to complete the whole cycle anyway. I think I've successfully reached The End.

And I guess I'm ready.

In his meditation, Peregrine held in mind, as he had for many years now, the thought of "who I really am." I am not my body, not my mind, I am not my experiences, not my thoughts or opinions, not this, not that. That is all ego, all perspective. "I" am something beyond all that. "I" am God, "I" am the context of all my experience. And "I" can't really die. What dies is just the illusion, just the lack of broad view.

I'm scared, he kept thinking. I'm scared of dying. And he surprised himself. He hadn't thought he'd react that way when this really came to this.

Perhaps what I'm afraid of is dying horribly. What if they burn me to death? Oh my God. I hope I can keep myself composed for that.

But Peregrine also realized that they'd have nothing to gain by killing him. He was still the bait they needed for their trap

for Bowman.

He prayed that Bo's powers would somehow show him what was happening. And he prayed that there would be a way to escape with the bait without ever getting caught in the trap.

"No," there was a shout outside the door of the room Peregrine was being kept prisoner in. "This isn't right. You promised you wouldn't hurt them."

Peregrine could hear Simmons arguing loudly with somebody. A moment later he was surprised by Simmons' sudden rush into the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Brother Peregrine, I swear I am not responsible for this. I told them this was not the way to do things. . ." the old man panted. His face was red. His white hair stuck out around his head. His eyes were wild. "I beg you to forgive me. I didn't realize what I was doing. . ."

"What are you doing?" Peregrine started to say when the door flew open again and a squad of seven or eight young men in make-shift military uniforms burst into the room. Several of them carried rifles.

"You've had enough time," the apparent leader announced as he swung himself into rigid military attention right in front of Peregrine. He was a maniacal looking man. His dark Arab-like features were distorted by an angry belligerent scowl. His black hair was slicked down and held in place by a visor cap.

He shouted at Peregrine in a heavily accented voice, "You have not produced the boy. We want the boy. Now we will use you to get the boy."

"These men are not in my control," Simmons whimpered. "I'd made them promise not to use violence. But they obviously can't be trusted to keep their word," he said as an ineffectual slight at the terrorists who'd apparently somehow coaxed him into cooperating with them.

Peregrine didn't say a word. What difference would it make now anyway.

Perhaps the Arabs -- the Shiites, he corrected himself, understanding that these were the same men, or least their compatriots, who taken Bo's mindlink-friend Ravani -- had sought out John Weddington Simmons because he had money and influence and because they knew his religious views could be exploited by their own.

"Shut up, Simmons," the leader snapped. "I'm tired of your sniveling. We have a much more important job than converting this old heretic priest. The demons are invading the world. And it is up to us to stop them."

"Come on, you," he said as one of the other men grabbed Peregrine's arm.

"This isn't the way. This isn't the way," Simmons muttered. "I tell you you must convert them to Jesus. That is the only way to save us all."

"We'll save the world our own way," the Shiite leader answered, reminding Peregrine that whatever alliance had been forged between the fanatical Muslims and the fanatical Christians was obviously shaky. How could you expect true-believers to ever really cooperate he thought. And surprised himself that he was

treating the whole thing so philosophically and dispassionately. Why they might well be taking him off to burn him at the stake he realized with a palpable chill.

All of a sudden Peregrine's legs felt weak and started to give way.

"Stand up, priest," one of the men shouted. "We're NOT going to kill you," he practically answered Peregrine's anxiety. "Not yet."



The silent white landscape rushed by at near breakneck speed.

In spite of his concern for his own safety and his even greater worries for Bowman's, Peregrine could not help but admire the beauty of the earth below: covered in a sparkling coat of clean fresh snow.

The sky was overcast with grey cloud. He could not manage to locate the sun and to thereby determine what time of day it was. He'd been kept away from open windows and deprived of sleep and food so long, he had become seriously disoriented to time. Apparently it was daytime. From somewhere above the clouds the sun seemed to illumine the sky brightly. Perhaps late afternoon.

Peregrine, along with a third terrorist, was stuffed into the small space behind the seats. His hands were handcuffed behind him.

Peregrine wondered where they were going. It seemed like nearly an hour ago that he was hustled out of Simmons' mansion, into the cold air, and then into the helicopter which was

sitting, like a giant insect, in the middle of the mansion's front lawn. The copter had probably belonged to John Simmons he thought. Maybe not anymore.

Peregrine supposed they were heading toward Sweetwater Farm, because the only thing he'd managed to get out of any of the terrorists was that they were going to get Bowman.

Peregrine hoped Bo had had the good sense to flee the Farm altogether or to at least stay away from the main buildings.

They'd been flying into the mountains now for a while. The snow-covered peaks were even more beautiful than the flat plains had been. They were much closer to the ground now and Peregrine could make out individual trees and occasionally a house sitting quietly under the blanket of white.

The helicopter flew up higher to rise over a mountain and then swooped down into the familiar valley. Peri realized he'd never seen Sweetwater from the air before. And his mind flashed back to the day, just 14 years ago, when the descent of an FBI helicopter had been thwarted by the sudden gusts of wind that signalled the end of the miraculous stillness that had saved the U.S. from widespread radioactive pollution. The pilot must have seen a similar view of Sweetwater Farm Peregrine thought. Only it hadn't been snowing then.

The copter came low over the buildings of the main compound. The Shiite leader who was sitting in the seat next to the pilot reached up and took down a microphone. "Send out Bowman Mayberry."

The copter hovered in place. Snow was being blown up in huge billows below.

"We have Father Peregrine," he announced.

Peregrine wasn't sure if there were echoes. The snow would probably muffle every sound. He tried to see straight down to see if anybody was coming out of any of the buildings. There seemed to be no movement below.

"You want to see better, Father," the leader in the front seat suddenly shouted directly at Peregrine and grabbed the back of his collar, pulling him forward. Toward the door.

The copter suddenly began to ascend very rapidly. Peregrine lost his balance.

The leader slid the door open. Steely cold air struck Peregrine in the face, forcing him to close his eyes and taking his breath away for a moment. His heart suddenly jumped as he felt pressure against his backside as the man in the backseat who'd been holding him now pushed him forward. With his hands behind his back he was helpless. All he could do was squirm.

This all happened so fast he wasn't prepared.

Peregrine managed to get his eyes open enough to see that his head and shoulders were actually outside the helicopter. Reflexively, he turned to look back in at the Shiite leader, perhaps to scream to him for help.

Suddenly, he felt himself pulled back inside the cockpit. "Cold, eh?" the leaders taunted. Then, grinning, looked down. "Pretty high?"

He pulled the mike down again. "Send out Bowman Mayberry," he shouted into it. Then he made a thumbs-down gesture to the

pilot.

The copter began to drop.

"Okay, Father, your turn. Tell him to send out this boy so we can pick him up." Even as he said that, he pulled a machine gun out of a rack between the seats and checked that the ammunition clip was in place. He rested the gun, barrel down, between his legs.

"I won't do that," Peregrine said firmly then jerked as the terrorist leader began slowly pushing him out the door again.

"Call for the boy."

"No," he answered, shakily. All this was happening too fast. Peregrine couldn't think of what to do.

Then all of a sudden, as if out of nowhere and as if time stood still, a calmness passed through Peregrine. He heard a voice -- Bo's voice -- say his name. But it wasn't as though he'd heard anything audible or anything specific. But it was as though Bo was somehow with him right there in the copter. And time had stopped.

Dazzled for a moment, Peri wondered what was going on. Then turned his attention back to whatever that voice was. He realized it wasn't sound he was hearing, but intuition. And he knew that he should trust his intuition.

It was conveying to him that Bowman and Thomas were watching the helicopter from inside one of the cabins of the Sweetwater community high up on one side the valley. Actually looking down of the copter. They had seen Peregrine pushed halfway out the door. Bo and Thomas had taken each others' hand and reached out

with their mind-link toward Peri.

He could feel them all around him. And he could feel Bowman's assurances that he would surrender himself to save Peri. No, Peregrine thought, you must save yourself.

The mind-link wavered. Peregrine wasn't sure any of this was real to begin with. And, besides, he didn't think he had the ability to hold up his side of the communication. Indeed, he wasn't sure there was any communication at all.

A opening door flashed before his mind's eye. He could feel Thomas pulling back on his arm. And he realized that, with Thomas trying to hold him back, Bowman had burst out of the cabin and was going to try to save him.

Did he dare to believe any of this?

"Protect yourself, Bowman," he thought very hard. As a command. Hoping it would somehow get through.

Bo and Thomas's presence disappeared. Time began to race by once again.

"Call the boy or I throw you out."

Peregrine wondered if the snow might be soft enough to cushion his fall. Then thought that from this high up it probably wouldn't make any difference.

The wind from the downdraft of the blades was roaring against his face. It was icy cold and he could feel the skin on his face begin to burn and grow stiff.

"Call the boy," the man shouted and then slapped Peregrine across the cheek with an ungloved hand. A blast of pain poured into Peregrine's face. Through the burning of his icy skin, he managed to open his eyes a little. He looked straight out at the

valley wall. There was a tiny figure waving its arms, he could see: Bowman trying to attract attention.

They're going to see him, Peri realized. They might just shoot him right now. I've got to distract them.

Peregrine began kicking at the man in back, hoping to cause enough commotion to prevent them all from spotting Bo. They weren't expecting to find him up at this altitude and were searching the ground around the buildings for some kind of movement.

Bo is not going to obey me, Peri thought. He might not have been able to receive my thoughts back along the mind-link. Or he's going to play hero and get himself killed along with me.

Along with me. The thought struck him. They'll kill me anyway. What difference does it make now? Here's the way to free Bowman from any obligation to surrender to save me.

Peri kicked again at the man in back. Real hard this time. The man reacted by pushing Peri away from him. Peri pulled his knees up to his chest. He felt his balance shift. His head and shoulders started to drop.

"Hey," he heard the terrorist leader shout as the man grabbed at his coat to pull him back in.

Peregrine got one foot against the side of the copter's seat and shoved hard against it. The leader lost his grip on his jacket. And suddenly Peri was falling free.

The frivolous thought that he'd always wanted to try skydiving passed over him. And he laughed for a moment before he

realized he should be praying. They were only a couple of hundred feet up. It wouldn't be long before he struck the ground. He'd always hoped for more chance to prepare for death than this.

But then he'd been preparing for death the past few days he'd been held by Simmons and the terrorists. He didn't mind dying. My God, I'm going to be 70 years old this year. Time to go.

He smiled to himself as he tumbled head over heels. The pure white surface of the snow was rushing up at him. And yet it was all so clear and clean and fresh and uniform that he really couldn't tell anymore that he was falling. He wished he could extend his arms. He'd liked to have been able to control the fall a little better. He'd seen skydivers and they always kept themselves spread-eagled.

"O God, this is it," he said outloud, hoping to sound triumphant and to calm the fears that were rising in his throat.

Suddenly, he discovered his hands were free. And he stretched them out. It felt so good to stretch them after being cramped in the helicopter for so long with his hands cuffed behind him.

As he reached out, he discovered he could, in fact, gain control of his flight. He gently shifted his fall toward the right, bringing his descent into a gentle spiral.

He thought about Bowman. He realized he could manage to search the valley wall for him now. He hoped the boy had run for cover as soon as he pushed himself out of the copter.

As he looked over at the wall and up toward the top of the

ridge, he discovered he was beginning to ascend.

O God, I'm flying, he thought. A thrill passed through him. It was a strangely familiar sensation. He'd done this before in dreams. He was surprised to discover he could actually do it in real life.

"Real life," he thought. That's it, isn't it? This isn't real life anymore. And he discovered he wasn't cold anymore.

As he flew up toward the spot where he'd seen Bo, his mind seemed to suddenly shoot out ahead of him. And Bo's presence was all around him. But the presence was so much more than the 14 year old he'd helped raise. The presence seemed to fill the universe all around. And as Peri tried to make some kind of contact with Bo, he realized that also here were Thomas and Scotty and here was Ravani and countless others. All the Star-children were somehow with him. And he knew he was beginning to leave the world of men altogether.

The land around him still seemed to appear covered with snow. But as he looked more carefully, he saw that it wasn't snow at all. Everything in sight was fading into white and all merging together. He wasn't seeing individual things anymore. He wasn't seeing land and mountains and snow-covered trees. He was seeing light. The Light.

He bent his head back a little and soared upward. The Light was now above as well as below. He felt a wonderful sense of elation and for a moment allowed himself to relish the experience of flying.

He looked down to see his body and discovered he was

becoming transparent. He too was turning to light.

Then in a flash, Peri wasn't in a body at all. He felt his mind suddenly expand outward in all directions, like a bubble suddenly growing bigger and bigger. He'd escaped spatial location. He was everywhere. The surface of his skin -- which had always separated him from the world -- was gone. He was the world.

And now all along the surface of his vastly expanding bubble he could feel the consciousness of the Star-children. He felt Bo reach out to take his hand. And he somehow felt embraced all over as though little Bowman had taken him in his palm and gently closed his hand about him.

And as the consciousness of the children surrounded him, he found himself in them. For a moment he realized he could see through their eyes. In a twinkling, hundreds and hundreds of scenes on earth poured into his consciousness as at once he saw the world through ALL of the children's eyes.

His consciousness shifted from sight to sound. At first there seemed like a loud rushing sound, as though wind were pouring past him. And then he thought he was hearing singing. Perhaps Gregorian, perhaps Buddhist chants. . . then a melody clearly filled the sounding universe around him.

He was momentarily taken aback. He hadn't expected the angels to be singing this one. He laughed. And his laugh was like a peal of bells that joined right into the singing and fit perfectly into the melody.

"Reach out, I'll be there," an angelic choir of the Four Tops seemed to sing. And Peregrine felt a most awesome rush of

humility and of love. This is the fulfillment of the sign, he said to himself. The promise has come true. I have experienced the collective consciousness. I've seen through everybody's eyes. O My God. My God.

Peregrine felt an enormous gratitude for this most wonderful and hoped for boon. And even as a part of him thought it too bad that this had come only at his death, another part of him realized that death didn't matter at all. That, in fact, his consciousness had only just begun and all the time he'd spent as Peregrine was just a tiny aspect of his true consciousness. And even as he felt such gratitude to God, he felt he could not tell anymore what of him was Peregrine and what was God apart from Peregrine.

Indeed, the idea of God no longer seemed to have any meaning. God was not something separate from this very present experience. He thought for a moment to say, "I am God." And then realized that he no longer knew who or what "I" was.

"Peregrine" seemed to him to be somebody else, somebody out-there, back-then. And he looked at Peregrine's life and felt affection for that man he'd once known. What a hard, but beautiful, life that was, he thought. And he loved Peregrine and bestowed upon him all the compassion and forgiveness he could. And even as he was loving that life, he discovered he could no longer quite remember who Peregrine had been.

All the memories, all the experiences -- all were still with him. He was taking them back with him, he thought. But they were no longer him. And he wondered why it had mattered so much

to Peregrine that he see through everybody's eyes. The world one could see that way was so small and insignificant compared to the reality that was dawning upon him now as he felt his consciousness continuing to expand outward, so far out, in fact, that one could no longer tell where the center might have been.

"A circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere," a tiny voice seemed to utter as the last vestiges of the dream that had been called Peregrine faded into the bright glowing consciousness of full awakening.

Part IV

**BOWMAN ON THE RUN**

# 1

Bo and Thomas watched closely as the helicopter descended into the valley. They'd been sitting together by the blazing fire in the open Franklin stove in the little cabin high up the valley wall where they'd gone to hide several days before when the terrorists first raided Sweetwater and kidnapped Brother Peri. This cabin had been the retreat of Sweetwater's original owner Louise Ross. After the monastic community had formed around the meditation and conference center and the role of "Abbot" had been handed over to David Omar, Louise had retired to this cabin in search of even deeper solitude. Since her death, almost ten years ago, it had been preserved, in part, as a monument to her and her husband Doug as Founders of the community and, in part, as an occasional hermitage for members of the community who wanted to make a retreat away from the day to day common life of Sweetwater Farm.

The day Peregrine was taken, Bo and Thomas were quickly hidden away in the cabin with enough food and fuel to last for a couple of weeks. Of course, they were free to come back to the community. But with the danger of another terrorist raid so real, and with Peregrine held as some sort of hostage, everyone agreed the boys were safest as far from the general activity of the Farm as possible.

The cabin was pretty remote. Especially with the heavy snow, the path up the valley wall was steep and difficult to traverse. A longer and less direct, but much easier, path connected the cabin back to the main road. This was the path

used to get Bo and Thomas up to their hideout along with a Jeep full of supplies.

Bo had been concerned that the Jeep's tracks practically undid the secrecy of the cabin, but had been consoled that since the cut off to the cabin was miles down the road beyond the entrance to Sweetwater, if the terrorists came back they'd be unlikely to find it.

This afternoon, as he heard the roar of the helicopter descending, Bo realized that those tracks would have been quite obvious from the air. And he thanked God for the fresh snowfall that would have completely obscured the road around the rim of the valley.

He and Thomas had been sitting by the fire, holding hands to connect their powers and forming a mindlink with their friend Scotty in Little Rock. They'd been gossiping like typical young teenagers about movie stars, sex, favorite TV programs, and deliberating quite seriously about what they should do in the face of what appeared to be a direct attack.

They knew there were probably lots of kids like themselves<sup>6</sup> around the country, but they'd managed to contact so few. They weren't sure why this true, except that most of the time it took at least two people at one end working together to form a solid mindlink. Scotty was frequently begging Bo and Thomas to come find him. So far, he'd never met another Star-Child. He was hungry for the kind of total mindlink that Bo and Thomas had learned to achieve.

The strongest argument Scotty made for their coming to

Little Rock was that perhaps with three of them together on one end they could manage to search out connections with other kids and not have to rely on the chance connection that had brought them together.

Scotty was sharing his sexual confusion and fears of being alone in a world with nobody who could understand him when Bo was distracted by a muffled roaring sound outside the cabin. At first, he attributed it to the wind and ignored it. Then a gnawing sense of danger rose up in his mind. He allowed that into the mindlink conversation. Scotty, rather alarmistly, suggested avalanche. At that, both of them noticing that the sound was growing louder, Bo and Thomas ran to the front windows to see what was going on.

Wiping the window pane clear of condensation, Bo immediately saw the helicopter. As it descended lower, it began to churn clouds of the fresh dry snow up into the air. Bo could feel the sense of danger increasing. This wasn't just any visitor he knew. This was the terrorists returning.

He and Thomas were still holding hands to maintain their connection with Scotty. Thomas looked up at Bo and wordlessly acknowledged Bo's assessment. Promising to reconnect as soon as possible they said goodbye to Scotty.

Watching carefully through the window, they could look down on the copter hovering just above the main buildings of the compound. Bo could hear muffled sounds.

What was that, he quizzed Thomas. Let's go outside so we can hear.

"No," shouted Thomas outloud. "It's not safe. They'll see

us." Let's try to mindlink with the pilot, he suggested. Such literal mind-reading they could sometimes accomplish. But this was one skill they'd agreed not to use. Peregrine and Rif had convinced them it wasn't fair to eavesdrop on other people's thoughts.

Bo was frightened, but also angry and excited and eager for adventure. He felt himself pulled back to the fire by Thomas.

"Sit down here and let's try to scan the minds of whoever is in that copter," Thomas said as he pushed Bo back into the loveseat positioned cozily in front of the warming fire.

As Thomas led, Bo managed to compose himself. This was part of the adventure, he realized.

Suddenly they were both startled. As they'd reached out toward the copter, they'd connected with Peregrine. Bo felt a rush of joy. He's safe, he thought.

But a moment later Bo realized something was wrong. Peregrine's mind was full of fear and confusion. As he let his own mind move into Peri's body awareness, Bo could feel icy wind on his face. "They're threatening to push him out," he said aloud.

And then, "We've got to save him," Bo shouted as he jumped up and ran toward the door, breaking the contact with Thomas and losing his connection with Peregrine.

Outside, he waved his arms, trying to get the pilot's attention. He thought for a moment he'd succeeded when the copter began to rise. As it rose up above the clouds of snow it was blowing upward, Bo could see Peregrine struggling with the

man in the passenger seat. Suddenly, Peregrine's face turned toward him. Bo realized Peri had seen him. And suddenly Bo was struck with a mental warning that hit him like a blow across the face. A surge of terror passed through Bo's mind: violence, death, murder, rifle, falling, falling.

He threw himself behind a bush covered with snow and peeked out to see what was happening. He saw something fall from the copter. A bomb, he thought. And then realized it was Peri. "No," he shouted helplessly.

"Come inside, come inside. . ." Bo realized Thomas was lying flat on the ground behind him pulling at his leg.

As Thomas touched him, the mindlink formed again with Peregrine. Now it was not fear, but exaltation that Bo felt pouring out from his friend and tutor.

Still clinging tight to Thomas to keep the connection, Bo hustled back into the cabin. Thomas slammed the door shut and then the two of them grabbed each other and held tight. They pressed their cheeks together as they realized they'd been caught up into Peri's experience of dying.

For a moment they felt themselves lifting up out of their bodies and their consciousness spreading out beyond the cabin, beyond the valley, beyond the world of space and time. They felt themselves connecting with other Star-Children all over the country. Scotty was suddenly right beside them and they felt like they were inside him, being him. Other faces appeared. Look, Scotty exclaimed, there're hundreds of us; we're not alone.

Bo could feel Scotty's joy and could feel a sense of recognition as, in some dimension beyond ordinary life, they were

touching other Star-children.

Some part of him was aware of grief at the death of his friend. Yet overwhelming and burning out his grief, he sensed Peregrine's gratitude and joy at having awakened to the Light. Bo could feel Peri's consciousness escaping the mindlink as Peri expanded beyond individuality. And even as Peregrine's consciousness was fading from his, Bo could sense from him a promise: "I will be with you."

Then suddenly the experience was over. The world of the tiny cabin high on the snow-covered hillside, warmed by a blazing fire in the Franklin stove reasserted itself. Peregrine was gone. The consciousness of the hundreds of other kids was gone. Bo was still holding onto Thomas and in the bak of his mind he could feel the dazed presence of their friend Scotty. For a moment Bo was taken aback by the surge of sexual energy he felt from Scotty as Scotty's mind became aware of the smooth touch of skin where Bo and Thomas touched cheek to cheek. Then Bo let go of that concern and felt warmth and relaxation pass over him. "Wow," he said aloud.

Thomas pulled away enough to look Bo in the eyes. They were all three dazed.

Bo was suddenly forced back into full awareness by the rapid sound of gunshots. He ran to the window with Thomas following. They could see that the helicopter was diving toward Sweetwater Farm, while the man in the front seat peppered the rooves of the houses with a small machine gun.

"Get away from the window," Thomas shouted as he ran to

huddle under the heavy wooden plank table that served as dining table and all-purpose work bench.

As Bo scuttled across the floor to join him, the roar of the copter increased as it turned toward the cabin on its ascent out of the valley. Bullets struck the front wall, broke two of the panes in the window Bo had just been peering through, and exploded through the ceiling, showering the room with splinters and wood dust.

Then there was silence. The copter was gone.

Bo and Thomas huddled together under the table. Neither was hurt.

Now you gotta come here, Scotty spoke peremptorily in their minds. It's not safe there anymore.

I guess you're right, Bowman answered.

## 2

Bo and Thomas were driven to the bus depot in Asheville by Father Timothy. The bus seemed like the most secretive and safest way to travel. Air, of course, would have been faster and easier, but airplanes were still occasionally targets for terrorist attacks, and once inside a plane there was just no way out in case of danger. The bus, stopping frequently along the way, with no passenger manifest, no rigid timetables, and even the outside possibility of jumping out a window gave the two teenage boys much more control of their circumstances. Besides, travelling by air seemed to Bo like a vacation rather than an adventure.

To tell the truth, Bo was really anxious to get out and

hitchhike. That would be a real adventure. But reason and decorum prevailed, at least for this first leg of their journey into obscurity.

"We'll be in Little Rock at least a week. I'll call in a few days to let you know what's happening," Bo promised Timothy as he went over their plans one last time before saying goodbye. "We'll be staying with Scotty while his parents are away." Bo felt grateful for the good luck that seemed to go along with being a Star-child. By fortunate coincidence, for the next ten days, Scotty's parents were going to be away on vacation -- a sort of second honeymoon in Rio. And Scotty had the house to himself.

"Scotty's convinced we can connect with more kids once we're all together," Thomas reminded Timothy, "especially since we had that experience yesterday."

Bo felt a pang of grief for the loss of his good friend Peregrine. Life had suddenly changed out from under him. He was not a child anymore. He had seen death. He was being forced to become independent and take responsibility for his own life -- literally.

"If we can get together, we're sure we can prove the Star-Children are not a threat. And we can end this terrorist business once and for all," Thomas continued his account of their plan.

Bo wondered what they were getting into. Scotty seemed so sure that they could do something to prove their innocence. But what?

And he surprised himself by feeling a little annoyed with

Father Timothy. Sure, the two of them needed to get away from Sweetwater Farm. They really were sitting ducks there. But Bo thought Timothy had been much too willing to just let them leave. Yet he understood that now that the attack on Sweetwater and the serious wounding of two members of the community and gruesome sounding death of Peregrine had received a lot of media attention, and the boys' "disappearance" was announced, the Farm would be a much safer place. Timothy, he understood, had good reason to be glad to see them leaving.

"You've got the Travellers' Checks and the tickets?" Timothy asked maternally. "All set? We'll be praying for you. Have fun. And take care." He shook hands with each of the boys.

"O-kaay," said Thomas triumphantly as he and Bo, shouldering their backpacks, strode into the depot. He was obviously ready for an adventure.

Bo now felt himself annoyed with Thomas. Didn't he realize their lives were at stake?

Bo wasn't used to feeling this way. He wasn't used to being annoyed with other people. He wasn't used to being in trouble. As Thomas went off to check what gate their bus would be leaving from, Bo whispered a prayer that he calm down and manage to handle the stress of this situation.

Less than twenty minutes later, they were sitting aboard the lumbering bus as he pulled out of its berth. They were on their way.

To throw off any pursuers, they were taking a detour to start with. The bus they were on was headed for Winston-Salem, almost exactly opposite the direction they'd ultimately be headed. From there they'd double back, heading a little south, to Charlotte. From Charlotte they'd take the bus to Atlanta. And, only then, board a bus destined for Little Rock.

It was going to be a long trip.

3

Late that night, sometime just before the Braselton exit, Bo was awakened from a fitful sleep by what he thought was a young girl screaming.

He bolted right out of his seat and almost fell on his face in the aisle.

"Hey, kid, it's okay," an old black man in the row behind them muttered.

Bo sat back down and set about reconstructing the dream he'd been caught up in.

He'd been reliving the helicopter attack, he realized, tho' instead of being in the cabin at Sweetwater, he'd been in the tower of some sort of fairy-land castle. He remembered running up the spiralling stairs of the tower, occasionally catching glimpses of the helicopter through narrow windows cut through the thick stone walls of the tower. When he reached the top, he came upon what appeared to be a large square heliport atop a tall building. Instead of the crenellated walls of a medieval tower, the edges of the roof were marked with polished chrome ballustrates and bright white flourescent tubes. He looked over

the side for the helicopter and was surprised to discover the Manhattan skyline below him. Across an abyss, he could see an almost identical roof.

That must have been the World Trade Center, he explained to himself. Though since he'd never been to the top, he wasn't sure if it really looked like that.

He remembered turning around to see two men in hospital uniforms hustling a young girl toward the side of the building. He recognized her as the crippled Star-Child who occasionally broke into his dreams. He started to run toward her to save her from being pushed over the side. Suddenly a helicopter rose up alongside the building, sending gusts of winds across the flat landing surface. Bo found it almost impossible to run against the wind. As the bright spotlight from the copter zeroed in on the girl, she began to scream. Then he awoke.

The girl had become a regular part of the backdrop of Bo's awareness of being one of the Star-children. He'd been getting glimpses of her since he was little. But he still had never achieved any direct communication. The closest he and Thomas ever achieved had been marked by the apparent hallucination that they'd taken on her deformity. They'd been so scared they'd avoided trying again.

Now Bo sat restless on the bus moving swiftly through the dark night. She'd again burst into his consciousness. He was frightened of her, but curious. He was aware that things were coming to a head for the Star-children. Maybe they couldn't afford to keep her out of mind any longer.

Bo reached over and laid his hand atop Thomas's hand, lying limp in the sleeping boy's lap. He slipped into the trance state that allowed mindlinking. Almost immediately he was inside Thomas's dream. He was walking down a country road. It was high autumn. The leaves of the trees along the road were red and yellow and gold. Bo was startled for a moment when he turned to speak to his companion and saw himself. He had to remind himself that in Thomas's dream, the perspective of the observer would be from Thomas's point of view.

Bo was not used to entering a dream like that. Usually he and Thomas did these mind explorations together, both in waking consciousness. It'd probably be a little different if Thomas was asleep. Bo didn't see any reason to wake his friend. All he really wanted to do was share the mindlink power for a moment to see if he could find the crippled girl.

Then suddenly, even as he just thought about her, she was coming up the road, striding forcefully and deliberately. She was no cripple now. (This maybe just a dream image, Bo reminded himself.)

As she approached, she shouted out a jaunty greeting and manfully extended her hand. Bo reached out with Thomas's hand to exchange the handshake. As their hands clasped, suddenly, the idyllic setting of the dream dissolved. The girl seemed to shrivel. Her strong and determined countenance turned again to that of an idiot. They seemed to be surrounded by wailing ghosts, hovering nearby in a murky greenish fog. Bo fought down his fear. (When I touched her in the dream, the mindlink formed in reality, he explained to himself.)

Inside the trance consciousness, Bo looked down at the misshapen little girl holding his hand weakly. He was still seeing through Thomas's eyes. He could see his own dream body standing next to him.

Realizing that he couldn't communicate with her when she was in this idiot state and remembering, with dread, the prior experience of taking on her deformity, and thinking that he just had to take a risk, he visualized her whole and his own dream body misshapen. She seemed to blossom. Her face grew round and full, her eyes sparkled with intelligence.

Just to be on the safe side, Bo opened his eyes, breaking out of the trance for a moment. He checked his own real body, sitting in the upholstered seat of the bus, and saw he was normal. Thomas, still sleeping in the seat next to his, was also normal. (This is an interesting trick, he thought to himself.)

Bo closed his eyes and slipped back into Thomas's dream. Speaking, he realized, in Thomas's voice, he said to her, "We're Bowman and Thomas."

"I'm Isabel," she answered. "Thank you for letting me use your body's integrity. It's so hard being in my own body. It hurts and I can't manage to hold a thought for any length of time."

"I've met you before in dreams," Bo said. "But we've never been able to talk with you."

"Oh yes, I recognize you. I've been watching you two a lot lately. I'm sorry about your friend," her eyes darkened. "But following him through his death was quite an adventure, wasn't

it?" she sparkled.

"Can you see us all the time?" Bo asked quizzically.

"Well, a lot of the time when my physical body is awake, I'm distracted by the other residents on the ward here. But, often, when I'm asleep, I leave that body and look into other kids' lives."

"You're in a . . . hospital?" Bo asked hesitatingly.

"A unit for profoundly mentally retarded children and adults," Isabel answered matter-of-factly. "At Napa State Hospital, north of San Francisco. Wanna see . . . ?"

Images of the hospital passed through Bo's mind. He realized Isabel was displaying her memory to him. She seems very adept at this, he thought to himself.

"When you have a body you can't stand being in," she answered a little caustically, "you get pretty good at getting out of it," causing Bo to realize that she could see into his mind even when thoughts he wasn't projecting outward as communication.

"And I can teach you how," she added a little boastfully. "Maybe we can assist each other."

"Do you watch other Star-children?"

"I know them all," Isabel answered oracularly. For a moment a flood of faces rushed past Bowman's inner gaze. It's like the contact we made when Peregrine was dying, he thought, feeling Peregrine's presence all around him now -- at least in memory.

"Could you help us make contact with other kids? That's what Scotty thinks we have to do now to protect ourselves."

"If you'll help me to get out of this hospital ward and to

heal this body I'm in, I'll help you," she answered.

"I don't know how to heal your body," Bo responded honestly, "but I'll try."

"Help me out of here, please," she pleaded.

Bo all of a sudden felt dizzy. He discovered he was losing control over his body.

No, this is Thomas's body, he reminded himself. And Thomas must be waking up. "Goodbye, Isabel, please keep in touch."

Bo opened his eyes. For a moment a rush of terror passed through him. When he looked down at his body, he thought he saw a twisted, crippled husk instead of the tall, slender, and tightly muscled physique he was used to. One shoulder was several inches lower than the other and was pulled in toward the midline. He couldn't lift his head because of some kind of pressure on the back of his neck. His whole body felt like it was cramping.

He pulled his hand away from Thomas's to touch himself. Breaking the contact with Thomas was like bursting up through a surface of water. The world was back to normal.

Bo clasped both arms around his chest and hugged himself in relief. He'd feared for a moment that Isabel had managed to keep what she'd called the "integrity" of his body. Bo felt his thin frame, happy to be himself. He kneaded the muscles of his chest and ran his hand down along his ribcage and felt the tight washboard of his abdomen.

"Hey, Bo, don't go feeling yourself up in public," Thomas scolded him, as he roused himself and stretched.

Bo started laughing.

4

"And I really believe she can help us," Bo was concluding his account to Thomas of his meeting with Isabel just as the bus was lumbering into downtown Little Rock.

"But I don't know how to heal her and that seemed like a sort of condition. But she's got all the connections Scotty was talking about . . ."

"Well, maybe if we get a whole bunch of kids together we can manage to visualize her normal and produce that healing," Thomas answered helpfully.

"But, you know, it seemed like in order to get her whole in the dream, I had to transfer the deformity into my own body. It's almost like we have to sacrifice something in order to get the physical integrity for Isabel."

"We'll figure it out when the time comes," Thomas shrugged off the whole issue for the time being. "Take a look at this city. Isn't it pretty with all the trees? And no snow," he added with a tone of real relief.

It was still early morning. The air was cold outside. Bo could see plumes of mist forming in front of people standing on the street talking. But the sun was bright -- and probably warm, he thought, since people were standing out along the street chatting, waiting for buses, or walking to work.

It looked like a good day to start a new project.

"Well, how're we gonna get to Scotty's house," Thomas whined

as he followed Bo down the street.

"Scotty gave me directions on the phone," Bo answered confidently. "And we're gonna use a little of this 'power' of ours to get us there. It's time we start really taking advantage of this gift that has now got people after us trying to kill us."

Several blocks further down, they came to a major thoroughfare with a tree-lined margin down the middle.

"This is the way out to Scotty's neighborhood," Bo announced. "We'll start here."

"Are we hitchhiking?" Thomas asked in a tone of excitement mixed with fear and anxiety. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"Sort of," Bo answered as he positioned himself alongside the boulevard just this side of a stoplight. "But we're gonna give ourselves a little bit of an edge. When the light is red I want you to think about Scotty, okay?"

About that time the light changed. Traffic began to stack up at the intersection. Bo stuck out his right hand, his thumb in the familiar extended position asking for a ride. He casually placed the other hand on Thomas's shoulder making enough contact between them to bring Scotty into the mindlink.

Bo looked from car to car, quickly scanning each driver.

"Nothing," Scotty said. "Wait till the next light."

"Would you tell me what we're doing?" Thomas asked petulantly.

"It was going to be a surprise," Scotty answered.

"This was his idea," Bo said defensively to Thomas. "Let's see if it works."

A minute later the light changed again and traffic began to stack up. Bo again scanned the faces of the drivers.

"The lady in the second car there in the middle lane," Scotty announced. "She's coming within a block of my house."

Bo and Thomas looked straight at the young woman driver.

Thomas was about to object that that kind of driver never picked up hitchhikers, when the lady loudly tooted her horn.

"You hoo, boys," she shouted as the window on the passenger side slid down. "Come get in."

"You all must be mighty cold," she continued as the two boys climbed into the car, Thomas grinning like the Cheshire cat.

"You're classmates of my son Billy, aren't you? I recognize you from his school. Now what are nice boys like you doing out here hitchhiking? You know it isn't safe . . . . You never know who might pick you up."

"We're pretty good at judging people," Bo answered cryptically and then changed the subject entirely explaining to her just exactly where they were going.

"Oh, I think I know just the house," the lady said brightly and then continued on asking about how school was and what classes they had with Billy.

Bo and Thomas didn't say very much in response, but nodded and "uh-huh"'d enough to satisfy her.

Scotty was waiting for them on the sidewalk in front of his house.

"Now don't be late for school," the lady said as she let them off.

Thomas was giggling almost uncontrollably as she drove away. "That was quite a trick," he managed to get out between shrieks of laughter. "How come she never asked about our backpacks? We sure don't look like we're on the way to school."

"Well, I was worried about that myself," Bo acknowledged. "But I just kept presenting her with the thought that we were familiar people doing familiar things, like going to school this time of the morning. And it worked."

"See what three of us can do," Scotty exclaimed. "Well, com'on in. It's nice to finally meet you all in person."

Bo did a doubletake. And then he started laughing. In fact, he was rolling around on the living room floor in front of blazing gas fire in the ornate hearth before he calmed down enough to tell Scotty that in the mindlink he'd never noticed an accent. But now that they were here in person, Bo discovered Scotty had a very thick drawl.

At first, Scotty seemed hurt by the remark. Bo had to compose himself and then apologize. "After all, I'd had to keep my concentration all the time we were driving out here . . ."

"I just don't want you all to make fun of me," Scotty answered almost tearfully. "I get that at school all the time."

Bo and Thomas, now divested of their warm heavy coats, embraced Scotty in a big threeway hug. Bo could feel Scotty's fear and Scotty's joy. How wonderful it felt to him to be touched! How wonderful to be with other Star-children! How wonderful to be with these other boys who seemed to understand him so well!

Now that Bowman had actually met Scotty, he had to, once again, deal with his feelings about Scotty's burgeoning sexuality. He was also pushed to a major realization about how the mindlink worked.

For the Scotty whom Bo and Thomas had met in their telepathic fantasies had seemed a slightly different person from the freckled and redheaded boy they were staying with in Little Rock, Arkansas. The accent was the most obvious difference. There were others. The ones that troubled Bo at first involved Scotty's effeminacy. For this had not come across at all. Bo had not expected the boy to be quite so frail, quite so pale, or quite so feminine in his gestures as, in fact, he was.

What Bo discovered was that the mindlink presents individuals according to their internal self-experience of being "normal" as opposed to their external demeanor. Hence, since people almost always think of themselves as having no accent, speech patterns disappear in the mindlink. Scotty, apparently, didn't perceive what Bo considered his effeminacy, and so it didn't come across.

Because of the mindlink perspective Bo had also failed to discover Scotty how bold and brash the boy was. Scotty's self-concept, perhaps damaged by society's condemnation of his homosexual feelings, was weak and shy. In person, Scotty was anything but shy.

Thomas too was a little amazed to discover how different his friend was in person. Scotty was the first mindlink friend Bo

and Thomas actually met. And this was their first exposure to the psychological phenomenon that a person's internal self-perception is very different from their external presentation. Because Bo and Thomas had grown up together experiencing the mindlink with one another, they'd never noticed the difference.

Thomas did not have Bo's problems relating to the real Scotty. In fact, he seemed to become more enthralled than ever with his friend. Thomas didn't seem to have the difficulty talking about sexuality that Bo did. (Bo was a little jealous of that.) The first night, tired after a long day of roaming around the city, as they undressed, Thomas commented in all innocence that Scotty's physique was much better developed than he'd sensed during their inadvertant eavesdropping on Scotty during a sexual episode.

Scotty replied that he thought of himself as very frail, gawky, and unattractive. So that's how he came across in the mindlink. In person, though he was slender and a little pale because of his redhead's natural coloration, he was a good looking young man, who seemed to have the promise of becoming a very striking adult.

Scotty, in turn, was immensely gratified to be able to experience himself, through the mindlink, as Bo and Thomas perceived him. Bo was pleased that he could give Scotty that kind of really important gift. And he did his best to suppress his misgivings and confusion about Scotty's homosexuality.

The fact that he was apparent able to do this impressed upon him again how powerful must be the girl Isabel. He hadn't been

able to protect any thoughts from her at all.

Bo finally managed to fall asleep that first night. He'd been concerned about the sexual tension in the air. He could see that Thomas, tho' he didn't seem interested in anything as specific as having sex with Scotty, was fascinated by Scotty's sexual vibes.

Bo and Thomas had seldom ever let themselves see one another's sexual feelings in the mindlink. Maybe because they grew up like brothers, with a sort of informal "incest taboo" between them, their developing sexuality had seemed like something that should be kept quite private -- "part of your developing your own ego," Bo recalled Peregrine telling him a few months ago during their discussion of the inadvertant sexual episode with Scotty.

Bo dreamed a confusing, but strangely consoling dream that night. He'd found himself crawling around on the bottom of a tropical ocean. At first, he'd thought he was in the Caribbean, where, in fact, he'd once been taken snorkeling by Peregrine and Rif. But in the dream he soon realized that he was not a diver at all, not even a human being, but some kind of jelly fish.

He knew that he was responding to a primitive urge to return to his spawning grounds. He soon discovered that he was one of many such lumps of protoplasm crawling across the sea-bottom on their way toward some reunion. When he came close to the first other jelly fish, he discovered they were drawn into each other and merged -- like reverse mitosis. This merging was at first strangely and inexplicably sexual.

And then a moment later, frankly so.

Bo awoke, embarrassed to have had such a private indiscretion occur to him while he was sleeping in somebody else's bed -- in fact, he was sleeping in a trundle bed that pulled out from under one of the two twin beds in Scotty's room. Bo lay awake, wondering if he should get up and go to the bathroom to wash and worrying that he'd be leaving stains on the sheets.

When he heard Scotty get up and slip into the bathroom, he felt doubly embarrassed. How could he get up now? Scotty would notice. He was lying in the bed feeling uncomfortably wet and sticky, when the obvious dawn on him.

As Scotty flicked off the light in the bathroom and came back to bed, Bo whispered aloud, "Wetdream?"

"Yeah," answered Scotty, obviously also embarrassed.

"Me too," chimed in Thomas.

"Jellyfish?" Bo dared to ask cryptically.

"Sort of," answered Scotty.

"Me too," added Thomas.

The three boys started laughing uncontrollably.

That was the end of the sexual tension between them.

The next day, they rose bright and early. Scotty fixed a surprisingly professional looking and tasting breakfast of eggs and pancakes. And then they set about their task of locating other Star-Children.

Scotty pulled out a map of the United States. He suggested

that they do their search systematically, moving in a sort of growing spiral around Little Rock. "Let's hold hands," he said, "but face in a single direction and see if we can project a beam out to somebody that way."

They held hands, but huddled together so they keep their direction straight. And, adding the power of their three minds together, began searching for some return of recognition. Arbitrarily, but also symbolically, they'd started off facing toward Sweetwater Farm. Bo had been quite surprised to realize that he'd almost immediately felt Peregrine's presence. The other two acknowledged it as well. Scotty tried unsuccessfully to conjure up the collective consciousness experience they'd had during Pari's passing.

As they moved their focus south and then around toward Texas, they found virtually nothing. Occasionally they'd sense some sort of mental activity "out there," but that wasn't surprising. There was obviously lots of mental activity going on all around them. They just couldn't manage to focus on anyone intentionally.

In the direction of El Paso, they all clearly picked up the intense presence of another mind. It seemed very confused. It took them several minutes to realize that they'd keyed in on a newborn baby. The realization of that dispelled the confusion. For a moment all three of them shared an experience that was closer to them than their own egos but which they'd never experienced before: through the newborn in El Paso, they met the Star-Child hallucination itself. Their consciousnesses were swept with the image of the glowing sphere of light and the baby

with wise eyes staring up at them -- welcomingly.

They took a break after that. And then started up again. They were trying to keep the radius of their search small. They'd really been aimed toward Dallas when they picked up El Paso. Maybe mileage didn't have anything to do with it?

"Well, how come we gotta touch each other?" Scotty countered. "Let's choose a specific city and, oh, let's even look up pictures of that city in the Encyclopedia so we can concentrate right on it."

"Okay," the two agreed.

They decided to focus on Dallas. It was close and there were lots of pictures in the article for Texas. Bo was just beginning to picture the Kennedy Memorial, when he realized they'd made a contact.

Julie Swearingen, she explained her name was. She'd dreamed of other Star-Children, but had never met another one. She had practically no experience of forming mindlink. She was very excited about forming the connection. But then, before communicating much more, got very nervous and explained she was in school and the teacher was after her for not paying attention. She asked them to contact her again that night.

"See, we can do it," Scotty triumphed.

"Let's try Oklahoma City. It's about the same distance and there are pictures in here," Scotty was saying as he leafed through his encyclopedias.

Before they were even ready to start picturing oil derricks and cattle lots, suddenly a voice spoke inside their heads: "I

know them all." Scotty and Thomas were dazed. Bo realized that he recognized the voice.

"I told you I know them all already," the voice repeated, softening a little.

Bo pointed down at the map in front of them and drew an imaginary line from Little Rock to Oklahoma City and then extended it out towards California. The line passed just north of the top of the San Francisco Bay.

"Meet Isabel," Bo announced.



Isabel's presence was very strong. She was alternately solicitous and demanding. She indicated that she knew about the danger Bo, Thomas, and Scotty felt they all were in. But she didn't seem at all worried. It was as though she were so confident in her own powers that she could see no reason to feel threatened.

Yet she was quite insistent that she herself needed help. She promised to assist the boys in developing a network of mindlinks with all the Star-children whose lives she'd eavesdropped on from within her secret hiding place in the body of a crippled idiot. But only if they'd first help her straighten her body and get out of the imprisoning psychiatric hospital she was housed in.

Bo found Isabel's presence today somehow comforting and exciting. He realized he had inadvertantly become her ally after their intimate meeting in Thomas's dream. And after the strangely sexual cast that the last night's experience added to

the mindlink, Bo found himself becoming infatuated with the image of the girl projected into his mind.

He knew, in fact, that when he would come to her in the hospital, he'd not find the austerely beautiful and ghostly blond apparition that insinuated herself into his consciousness, but the crippled and mindless living cadaver that has occasionally broken into his nightmares. The tragedy and unfairness of it all made him ever more committed to the task of healing her. Bo was reminded of the Arthurian legends and the principles of chivalry wherein the beautiful lady for whose honor the quest was duly undertaken but who could never be possessed.

Bo realized he was falling in love with Isabel and there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it.

My God, what's happening to me? he puzzled. Since I left Sweetwater Farm only two days ago, my whole life has changed. And then something peculiar dawned on him: I'm 14 years old now; I've finished the stage of brahmacharia. He recalled how Peregrine had told him about the traditional Hindu stages of life. The first of these, brahmacharia, meant student, or, more literally, chastity. And he recalled how his friend and mentor had told him of his own notion of fourteen year cycles. Doing a little arithmetic in his head, he saw that the system had really worked out for Peri. And he realized that he was embarking on a new stage. His teacher had passed beyond the world of sight and sound. His commitment to chastity and the life of a presexual boy was ending.

And the phantom of Isabel hung in his mind: a Lady of the

Quest or, perhaps, a siren leading him to danger.

Bo wasn't sure he had any choice but to obey Isabel's request that he come for her.

Scotty was absolutely against the idea. He kept insisting that they didn't need Isabel and that she was just a pain in the ass for them. "You won't be able to get her out of the hospital. She'll be a basket case," he predicted. "And we just don't have the time."

Thomas wavered back and forth. He thought Isabel's request quite appropriate. "If that were me out there, I'd sure hope you guys would come rescue me." But he doubted they could do anything. They'd never yet managed a healing anymore significant than causing a wound to heal faster or disappearing a mild pain: But Thomas was committed to supporting Bo and he was very reluctant to disagree with Bo's plans.

Thomas was also swayed by Scotty's argument that the girl really might be lying. "How do we know she really can contact all these kids?" he asked Bo, practically mimicking Scotty. "After all, one of the few things we really know about her is that she's in a mental hospital."

Further debate uncovered Scotty's ulterior motives. He was afraid to leave Little Rock with Bo and Thomas -- especially since his parents were still away and wouldn't be home til the end of the week. And, though he wasn't sure how he'd explain to his parents who these two boys were who were staying with him, he didn't want to lose touch with other Star-Children. He'd never experienced mindlinking as vividly as he now could. And he

didn't want to give that up.

Their long afternoon strategy session was interrupted when Scotty noticed that the newscaster on the radio playing in the next room had used the word "Star-child." He'd rushed in and turned up the volume, but the story was finished already.

Suspecting that something important was going on, they turned on the TV continuous news. While the TV ranted through its usual litany of worrisome news, the boys formed a mindlink and tried to intuit what the story was going to be about.

They'd correctly, and perhaps obviously, guessed that the terrorists had made another demand. Indeed, the TV cast specifically displayed a photograph, now a year or two old, of Bowman, identifying him as the "alleged leader of the demon children's conspiracy."

What they hadn't intuited was that the occasion for the terrorists' demands was another strange event within the quarantined area of Devil's Lake. Within the past few days, seismographs had shown a series of eruptions or explosions in the radioactive wasteland.

"Some scientists explain these as simple geological movements to adjust for the increased heat and waterweight in the area," the newscaster explained. "Others hypothesize that, perhaps influenced by whatever forces had held the fallout cloud together fourteen years ago, some new forms of matter or of radioactivity are developing within the heat of this diluted and now dormant, but potentially eruptive nuclear furnace.

"Religious leaders warn that Devil's Lake may be quite literally the lake of fire Satan and his supposed minions were hurled into. 'It's the Anti-Christ being born,' proclaimed Reverend Truman Poteet, speaking before a New York City prayer breakfast and political fundraiser this morning.

"Meanwhile, the search continues for young Bowman Mayberry and his unidentified companion who disappeared from their home in rural North Carolina after Fundamentalist religious factions sought to kidnap Mayberry in order, according to their spokesman, Alaya Kadafy, to bring him to trial in an ecclesiastical court. During the kidnapping attempt, several people were injured by flying bullets and one man was killed when he accidentally fell from the terrorists' helicopter."

"It was no accident," Thomas shouted angrily at the TV.

"What are we gonna do now?" Scotty asked frantically. "What if somebody recognized you. We were out in public yesterday. And what about that lady that gave you the ride over here yesterday morning? She might see this newscast and call the police."

"Well, the police are on our side, aren't they?" Bowman asked innocently.

"I wouldn't trust nobody right now," Scotty answered ungrammatically but emphatically.

"Maybe we'd better keep a lookout on the front of the house," Thomas suggested.

"What good's that gonna do?" Bo answered.

"Well, it's better than nothing, isn't it?"

Two hours later the lookout idea proved its worth. Bowman was on duty. He sat in the living room of Scotty's house, peering out from behind a heavy velvet curtain that hung across the front picture window.

A car came driving very slowly down the street. Bo recognized it almost immediately as that of the young mother who'd given them a ride the day before. She was accompanied by a man, probably her husband. She was driving and carefully surveying the neighborhood, obviously trying to find the house where she'd dropped off the boys.

"Hey, you guys, come here quick," Bo shouted.

In a moment Scotty and Thomas were beside him. He grabbed their hands and, pointing out the window, wordlessly communicated his assessment to them.

Make 'em forget, make 'em forget, Scotty rejoined immediately. He was obviously threatened by the possibility he'd be exposed and his parents would be nowhere near to protect him.

How? Thomas inquired sensibly.

The same way we got her to think we were friends of her son's, Bo answered and then concentrated hard on reaching out to the lady driver with as confused and sleepy a feeling as he could manage.

The car rolled on past the house. It went on a little further, passing out of sight for a moment. Then came back, this time stopping in front of each house along the block. As the car came to a rolling stop in front of Scotty's house, the threesome again projected hard their feigned feelings of confusion and

forgetfulness.

To their great relief, the car rolled on by.

They waited there by the window for almost another hour before any of them dared to move. And when they did, Bowman announced he'd made a decision.

"They're looking for two kids. I guess I'm the only one who they might recognize. The lady might recover her memory and come back here when we're not looking. But if I'm not here, then there's no basis for her claiming she recognized us as the kids they sought. Okay?"

Thomas and Scotty nodded.

"I want to go for Isabel. Thomas, Scotty doesn't want to be left alone. I don't blame him. Why don't you stay with him? It'll be pretty easy for you all to make up a story for his folks, a lot easier to explain one friend staying over at the house than two!

"I'll go ahead and see what's up with Isabel. We can stay in touch if you two will mindlink and then search me out. We can even set times we'll link up. I'll let you know what's going on in California. Maybe I'll need you. Maybe I can handle this on my own."

Thomas seemed torn. He wanted to maintain his loyalty to Bo and yet he was afraid of going out on the road again -- especially with Bo. And he wanted to stay with Scotty. There was something about his new friend that really exhilarated him. This was his first "new friend" really in his life. He'd almost always lived pretty sheltered among the community at Sweetwater or the school kids that came in from the surrounding

neighborhood.

"Okay, Bo," Thomas replied. "I guess you're right. But how are you going to get to California and how are you going to avoid being recognized?"

"Scotty," he answered, "can you make me up some kind of simple disguise?"

"Sure," he answered, "we can dye your hair. I'm sure my mother's got stuff for that. And maybe dress you funny, maybe liker a popper."

"Okay, and I'll hitch the same way we got over here."

"It may not be so easy alone," Thomas answered. "It took two of us together to get that trick to work."

"Well, I'll rely on my luck," Bo countered the objection. "Isn't that what we're supposed to be famous for, our good luck?"

7

Bo's luck worked.

He left early the next morning for California and the unknown. He was a little frightened, but also quite confident in himself and in his good fortune.

When Scotty and Thomas walked him up the ten blocks to the freeway to see him off, he looked different. Scotty had found dark auburn henna among his mother's cosmetics. Now Bo's blond curly locks were gone. The henna changed not only his hair's color, but also its texture. So that he now sported a head of thick, unruly, slightly coperry, brown mats that Thomas kept joking looked like a toupe made of sponge rubber. Among his

father's Halloween costume collection, Scotty found a pair of black horn-rim glasses that had once been part of the Clark Kent side of a Superman costume. The lens appeared to be non-prescription, tho' Bo complained of a headache from wearing them.

With the new coiffure and the heavy frame glasses, Bo looked very little like the bright and attractive young man whose photograph had been displayed the day before in the media.

What worried him most about his imminent journey was money. He didn't want to cash his travellers' checks 'cause he might be traced back to Little Rock. (That was one very good reason for hitchhiking rather than continuing on the bus: he couldn't buy a ticket.) And he was concerned that his I.D. picture no longer looked like him. Indeed, he decided to hide the I.D. deep in his pack and just hope he'd never have to prove who he was -- or who he wasn't. His luck would just have to hold.

Scotty managed to scrounge some cash from his own piggy bank, his mother's grocery fund, and the extra "just-in-case" money his parents had left him while they were away. There was enough for Bo to eat on for a week. And he certainly hoped his trip would not take that long.

The night before they'd contact Isabel through the mindlink to let her know Bo would be coming for her. She was overjoyed. Her demanding streak disappeared for a moment and a joyous and gleeful child appeared. Bo was glad to see a more loving aspect of her. And he found the revelation sparked his growing infatuation with her.

Isabel promised to watch out for Bo during his travels and to offer help when she could. Bo was not particularly comforted

by the offer. Apparently when the physical Isabel, the crippled child, was awake, the mental Isabel, the Star-child, was unable to stay conscious.

Scotty challenged Isabel to use her seemingly more developed powers to contact other Star-children along Bo's route to assist him. She got quite defensive and frightened at that idea. She was clearly afraid she'd be tricked and get left behind once more of the kids got together and joined their powers to exceed hers. In retaliation against Scotty's challenge, she told Bo to come through Santa Fe, New Mexico. She refused to say anything more.

And she scolded Bo for not placing more trust in her, reminding Bo that Isabel could sometimes see right through his efforts to keep his private thoughts to himself. Bo wished he could see past her defenses. He wanted to know who or what was in Santa Fe and, indeed, if there was any real hope for this strange journey of his.

The three boys stood in a circle, forming a last threesome mindlink. Then, waving goodbye from across the street, Scotty and Thomas headed back home. Bo headed up the freeway ramp.

Hitckhiking had become more common, more accepted, and safer during the last decade. This was just one of the side effects of the decentralization of the U.S. and the relaxation of tensions with the Russians and end of the nuclear threat that opened the 21st Century. Bowman Mayberry understood that somehow the presence of the Star-children on earth was also responsible for the various shifts in consciousness that made modern paranoia

less prevalent and gave human life a little more joy.

There just wasn't the kind of crime that had raged through America during the 20th Century. People weren't as afraid of one another. And the obvious consequence of that was that more trustworthy people were out doing the kinds of things that only the fearsome ones were before. Hitching was a good example. The more safe hitchhikers there were, the safer it was to hitch.

Of course, Bo had a little more going for him than just the luck of the road. He carried his own luck with him.

And the luck brought him a first ride within less than five minutes. The first ride was short, just to the outskirts of town. But the friendly driver explained to Bo that he'd be much better off away from that suburban on-ramp and along a stretch of road where more long-distance traffic would be passing. And that's just where he got let off.

He thanked the guy and jumped out of the car, just as another car was pulling up to let out another hitchhiker. The driver called out to ask Bo's destination.

"I'm heading toward Oklahoma City," he shouted.

"Well, you're in luck. That's just where I'm going.

"The guy I left off," the driver explained while he helped Bo stash his pack in the backseat, "was headed for Dallas and had to change freeways. Glad to have another rider. I like to talk."

Bo was a little nervous that he might give away his identity if he talked too much. He decided it'd be better to just listen. And the driver was quite content with such an arrangement. The man obviously loved to talk. He rattled on with few pauses for

almost the entire five hours it took to get to Oklahoma City.

They made good time. The car's AutoDriver microprogram handled most of the driving. And with all the cars on the freeway computer monitored, traffic moved at an average pace of nearly 70 miles an hour. The driver, of course, had to keep conscious of the road, just in case, and to be prepared to take over if the radar-operated computer guidance system warned of an emergency.

But the car didn't require so much attention that the driver wasn't able to expound freely on topics ranging from native winter flora in the midwest plains states to Oklahoma state politics to religion.

The last topic made Bo the most nervous. He dreaded the possibility of being picked up by a Fundamentalist who might somehow pick up who he really was.

As it turned out, this guy's interest was snake-charming and Bahai -- two religious subjects Bo knew very little about but which didn't seem any threat to him. He figured that this man's peculiar religious notions would probably seem almost as objectionable to the Fundamentalists Bo feared as Bo's own peculiar religious status.

Outside Oklahoma City, the man treated Bo to a burger at a fastfood complex built like a bridge right over the freeway. He let him off there, suggesting it'd be a good place to pick up another ride going a long way.

And right he was. Just as easy as Bo's luck would have it, he found a ride all the way to Albuquerque. At the first

driver's suggestion, he made himself a sign out of cardboard from a pizza box he found in the trash. He was sitting at the bottom of the wide flight of steps that led up and down from the overhead restaurant carefully lettering a sign: "CALIFORNIA." A young couple, laughing boisterously as they bounded down the stairs almost tripping over Bo, saw the sign and invited him to join them. They were on a delayed honeymoon, having been married about six months before, and were heading toward a little resort town in the mountains about Santa Fe for a week in the winter desert.

They'd take him at least as far as the cut-off to Madrid, they promised, and maybe all the way into the mountains if he thought such an excursion worth making a short detour.

"Where's Madrid?" Bo asked as he climbed into the back of their little sports car.

"North of Albuquerque, almost to Santa Fe, I think," the young husband answered.

"Great. I'm really heading for Santa Fe right now. Thanks a lot."

Bo enjoyed his long ride with the young recently married couple. He was literally excited by the delightful sexual and romantic interaction between the two of them. They seemed so easily and casually affectionate and playfully sexual with one another. He'd really never seen anything like it before, he realized, having grown up in what was virtually a monastery.

In some ways he could see himself as the youthful husband, just starting out on the journey of life together, still a boy in many ways, but taking on himself a series of adult obligations. Bo felt pleased to have experienced a positive model of young love. Too often, he realized, he saw sexual love portrayed as something irresponsible, tainted, even wicked or else exaggerated almost to the point of pornography for the sake of selling products.

The great transformation of 2001 -- the end of nationalism and the nuclear threat and the coming of the Star-Children -- had changed the political and economic structures of the world immensely. The level of violence in the world had been drastically reduced, perhaps as people realized that other people were not the cause of their problems and that evil was not incarnated in a different nationality halfway around the world, but was just a part of the personal human psyche that had to be dealt with individually, not projected out onto other people.

Yet people still haven't got over the hangups with sex, Bo thought as he rode along sometimes chatting with the amiable and attractive young couple in the front seat, sometimes staring out

the window at the passing plains wondering what was in store for him in his very near future. The rate of crimes involving money and property was way down. The rate of crimes involving drugs and sex had held pretty steady right through the great political changes of the turn of the millenium.

Bo had heard Peregrine declaim on this subject many times. It had been one of his favorite topics: most people, probably because of -- or at least attributed to -- their religious beliefs begrudged other people sexual happiness.

Watching his delightful benefactors enjoying one another's sexual and emotional spell made Bo conscious, perhaps for the first time, of what Peregrine had always been talking about.

I guess I'm growing up, Bo thought to himself.

The husband talked off and on about his job. He was now a technical advisor for a computer financial data management service. He liked the work, he said. But didn't know if it was worthwhile.

"Well, I was your age, pardner," he said to Bo, starting to call him by that cowboy moniker, "I wanted to save the world. I'm not sure I'm doing that now."

"Oh, yes," Bo answered. "I think about that myself." To himself he thought: and I really am gonna do it.

A little later inthe conversation, the husband added, "You take my advice, and stick to those dreams about saving the world."

"Yes, sir," was the boy's reply.

A little after sunset, the husband -- Bill, Bo finally discovered his name -- offered Bo the option of getting out and hitching another ride straight through or of staying with them and stopping for the night. Bill explained, with a hint of ribaldry in his voice, that this was the second night of their honeymoon and he and June -- that was the wife's name! -- wanted to have a little time by themselves. But they'd be happy to let him sleep in the room and then continue on with them to Madrid in the morning.

"Oh, I'd like to stay with you," Bo answered immediately. "I'm pretty tired and a night's sleep and a shower sounds great." He checked over the cash Scotty had given him. Seeing that he'd had great luck with rides and could probably afford to let go of some of the cash, Bo offered to pay his own way.

Bill agreed to let Bo contribute by buying a couple of burgers for dinner but said he and June would take care of the room. There was no reason for Bo to spend his money.

As it turned out, the motel they stopped at outside the town of Glenrio just inside the New Mexico border had a special family rate which Bo's being a minor qualified them for. The desk clerk said he really didn't care that Bo wasn't really Bill and June's child. Just so long as he was a child staying with them.

"Well, Bo," Bill said jovially as they made their way to the little cafe, "you saved me enough money there to cover dinner. You keep your money. I'll treat for the burgers."

After they ate, Bo stayed on in the cafe watching TV while

Bill and June slipped off to the room for their time by themselves. Sitting in the cafe, half attending to the TV and half watching the cars passing outside the semi-mirrored windows along the front wall, Bo wondered what that family rate policy was all about. He noticed a faded old poster behind the counter which showed people floating up into the sky above a freeway full of wrecked cars. "The Rapture" proclaimed the caption at the top just above the glowing figure of Jesus welcoming the souls of the saved at the Heavenly Gates.

Bo guessed that the owner didn't like to think people were having sex in his motel rooms. The presence of a minor child was a pretty good obstacle to sex. Bo was a little tempted to explain to the clerk that since Bill and June were making love in the room, maybe he should pay back the family rate discount. But he decided that was pressing this idea of integrity and honesty a bit too far. Besides, it might really offend the motel clerk.

A little mesmerized by the flashing neon sign in the window and the blur of passing automobile lights and a little excited and anxious about the idea of what Bill and June were up to, Bo also found himself tempted to sneak back to the room and try to peek in or -- more boldly -- to try to develop a mindlink with them and eavesdrop on their lovemaking.

He decided he shouldn't do either.

A little later -- Bo had lost track of time -- Bill showed up and plopped down in the seat next to Bo.

"Well, pardner, you 'bout ready to call it a night," he said in a mock Western accent.

"Sho' nuff," Bo responded laughing.

Bill jumped up and headed over to the counter where the waitress and the cook were sitting together talking over a cup of coffee.

"Can I get a chilled bottle of Champagne?" Bill asked, "And a can of Sprite for the boy."

"No liquor for sale here," the waitress said, with a slight sneer and an unmistakable tone of disapproval in her voice.

"Well, is there a liquor store nearby?" Bill continued politely, "We're celebrating tonight."

"Ain't no liquor or spirits 'llowed in the rooms, mister," the cook spoke of.

"Mind you don't break our rules 'round here," the waitress injected, "else we'll have to be asking you to move on."

"Well, I'm sorry," Bill apologized. "Didn't mean to offend you."

"We ain't the ones offended," the cook said.

"No, indeed," the white-haired lady once again continued the man's sentence for him, "it's the Lord Himself be offended by the weaknesses of the flesh. . . ."

"Can I have a Sprite?" Bo asked innocently, coming over to Bill's side.

"Make that three," Bill said, as he pulled out a couple of bills from his wallet.

"God bless you, hear!" the waitress said as he handed him his change and then placed the cans on the counter-top.

"Thanks, Bo," Bill said as the door to the cafe closed

behind them. "I was about to tell that lady what she could do with her weakness of the flesh. Probably have gotten us thrown out of here with no refund. Once again, you saved the day, pardner."

Bo wondered if Bill had any idea who he really was and if he could possibly know how intensely Bo felt the obligation to actually say the day.

As he lay in child size bed half-sleeping and half-thinking about Bill and June cuddling together in the double bed on the other side of the room, Bo felt Isabel's mind reach out to him. As he reached back to join her, letting himself confuse his fantasy of June with his image of Isabel, he realized Thomas and Scotty were connected into the link.

Bo woke himself up enough to report in that everything was fine. The first day of his journey had been easy and fun. The four kids all seemed to drift off to sleep simultaneously.

In the morning Bo could vaguely remember a dream of running through corridors in some large building. He couldn't remember if he was playing hide and seek with the other Star-children or if he was running away from something threatening.

He didn't have any time to think about the dream. Bill and June were already dressed and starting to carry things out to the car when they woke him. "Thought we'd give you a little extra shut-eye. Bathroom's all yours now " Bill said as he urged Bo out of bed and into the shower.

Less than fifteen minutes later they were on the road again and only about ten more that they were on the Interstate and the

car's autopilot had taken over and was taking them on toward Albuquerque.

At the speed they were making through New Mexico's flat eastern plains, it was less than three hours later, still morning and still chill, that they reached the turn off for Madrid.

The road from that point was winding as it carried them up into the craggy mountains. The autopilot wouldn't do so well on this terrain and Bill enjoyed taking full control of the car and playing racecar driver up and down the hills and curves of the road.

Bo was enjoying the ride too, tho' it was giving him a little bit of a headache.

Some twenty miles up the road they came into the little town of Madrid, New Mexico.

"This place used to be mining town," June explained to Bo. "Somewhere along here you can see the old mine and the equipment. We came up here a couple of years ago with friends and just loved it.

"It was practically a ghost town til the mid 1960s when people started moving up into the mountains. In the hippie days, I hear, there were communes here. And the place got real popular and then got renovated and restored into a tourist resort. After the economic collapse of the 1990s," June continued her history lecture, talking on about things none of them were old enough to remember but which they'd sure heard a lot about as important factors in creating their world, "it became practically a ghost

town again. And then some more people who wanted to get away from civilization found it again and started another sort of commune.

"We've got friends who moved up here. We'll be staying with them. Do you want to stay longer?"

"Naw," Bo replied, "Thanks a lot. I really like you two. But I gotta be going. I got business up ahead."

"Well, you just know you're welcome," Bill added to his wife's invitation. "Guess you got a world to save or something."

"Something like that," Bo answered enigmatically.

Bo hung around Madrid with Bill and June for a couple of hours. It was a great place, Bo thought. Just beautiful in a stark way. And so quiet. The sun was bright and warm and a cold wind whistled through the hills carrying away every stray sound.

Bo ate lunch with the friends the newly-weds were visiting and then excused himself. "I'm gonna walk around a little by myself and then see if I can catch a ride out of here."

"Most anybody in town'll give you a lift," Bill and June's friend assured him. "You take it easy."

"Yeah," said Bill.

"Goodbye, Bo," June said affectionately and respectfully. "Take care of yourself."

After a couple of minutes more parting, Bo was on his way once again. He felt more confident than ever.

Staying up on a ridge above the road, he strolled through the winter bare trees for a while and kicked at rocks and leaves

as he headed toward the north end of the settlement. And then walked down to the highway and took his stand to wait for a passing car.

It wasn't long before he heard a roaring sound coming toward him. He stuck out his thumb. Suddenly he saw the car in the inside lane of the four lane highway that led out of town. The car was almost just a blur of mettalic maroon as it shot doubletime down the raod. Bo started to put down his thumb. The car was in the wrong lane and wouldn't be able to stop in time for him anyway. He'd wait for somebody moving along a little slower.

The car, a modern version of an antique Buick from the mid 1960s, squealled its brakes and came to a sudden stop almost in front of him.

"Want a ride?" asked the driver, a gray haired man who looked to be in his early seventies. "I'm going to Santa Fe."

"Me too," said Bo as he climbed in the car, a little surprised that the old man had managed to stop for him.

"Well, son, I guess here's as good a place as any if you don't know what you're looking for," said the old man as he slammed on his brakes and swerved over to the side of the street.

"Thanks a lot, mister," Bo replied as he got out of the car in the middle of downtown Santa Fe.

Bo walked around for a few minutes, stopped at a fast food cafe and bought himself a hamburger and a coke, and then decided it was time to try and find out why Isabel told him to come through this particular city. He'd noticed a public park nearby and headed back there to sit on one of the benches in the bright sun. He looked around at the various people walking along the paved walks. He watched a group of little kids playing ball while their mothers stood protectively by the sidelines.

It occurred to Bo that he ought to be in school. He hoped no one would stop him to ask why he wasn't. As he was trying to piece together a sensible story to explain what he was doing there, just in case he got asked, he realized that he was really very anxious and uncertain about what to do next. He thought he looked terribly out of place, especially because he was carrying a backpack and was dressed pretty sloppily.

He'd looked in a mirror back at the burger joint. He'd been pleased to see that his hair, though still dark auburn, was back to normal. He'd actually been surprised when he'd caught his reflection. He almost didn't recognize himself with the dark hair and heavy frame glasses. His clothes needed changing. He decided he'd take care of that soon.

Bo noticed other people sitting on benches along the paved walks. Almost directly across from him, on the other side of a small non-functioning fountain, was a little old man. He had a full head of grey hair and a short-trimmed beard. Bo guessed he was Jewish from the look of his features. The old man was reading a book and occasionally glancing up. He happened to catch Bo noticing him and smiled.

There were other people nearby. Most of them were senior citizens, not young boys. They weren't like him and that made him feel more self-conscious. What if somebody recognized him.

Well, I'll rely on my famous luck, he consoled himself.

After once more checking out the people around him and determining that there didn't appear to be any Arab terrorists, police, or truant officers, Bo closed his eyes and slipped into a trance. He reached out with his mind toward California and pictured Isabel. Maybe she'd tell him why she told him to come through Santa Fe. That is, if she knew. She might very well have been reporting some intuition that even she didn't understand fully.

Isabel didn't answer. It was the wrong time of day to get her attention.

Bo felt very lonely and lost for a moment. He thought about Brother Peregrine, wishing he could ask Peri for help. He remembered Peregrine's promise to somehow be with him. He wondered if his friend was watching over him from some spot in heaven and from within some kind of collective consciousness. Thinking about Peri was comforting. It was almost as though he

were there with him, though Bo wasn't sure that Peri's presence was anything more than a memory.

Bo directed his attention toward Little Rock and Thomas and Scotty. Maybe they'd know something.

Almost immediately, Bo felt his mind swept with sexual thoughts. He was a little disconcerted and dismayed. He opened his eyes to break the spell. Everything was normal. Across the pond from him the little old man was reading calmly. The kids were playing in the grass.

He closed his eyes again. This time the images came more slowly. But they were still frankly sexual. Bo felt himself lying on a bed or perhaps a pile of cushions. Standing up on his knees, between Bo's legs was a young man. His bare torso was well muscled. His dark eyes were partly hidden by the masses of black curly hair falling over his forehead.

Bo did not recognize the man. He thought for a moment that he'd hooked into some sexual fantasy or memory of Isabel's.

Bo felt himself sit up and look down at his own body in the dream consciousness. He was momentarily shocked to see he was in the body of another male. A surge of fear passed through him. He remembered his experience of accidentally falling into Scotty's homosexual experience.

He wondered, disapprovingly, if Scotty had involved Thomas in some act of perverse sex. And then he recalled his long and heartfelt conversation with Peregrine and Rif. His disapproval subsided for a moment.

And then the action in the dream consciousness began again. But Bo seemed to have changed places. He was now inside the body

of the young man with dark curly hair who was reaching down toward a tall, slightly balding man with features Bo recognized immediately.

His heart leaped. "Brother Peregrine," he said aloud.

The figures in the dream consciousness continued their slow embrace. Once he'd let down his resistance, Bo realized, the warm touch of flesh to flesh felt good.

And it felt good to discover Peri's presence. Though Bo was nonplused that Peregrine should appear to him thus.

The two men held one another in Bo's mind, in what seemed to be the exhausted afterglow of sex. Then the man with dark curly hair pulled away so that he could look into Peregrine's face.

Bo was sure that this was Peri. But he looked very different. He looked young -- maybe in his twenties. A very different person from the man who became Bo's mentor.

"Peregrine," Bo called out again, hoping to break out of this sexual fantasy into some real communication with his friend.

"Excuse me, son, excuse me."

Bo felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently. He opened his eyes. To his surprise, the old Jewish man was standing over him. Bo startled.

"It's okay. It's okay," the man said. "I thought I heard you calling out. Are you alright?"

Bo composed himself. There was no reason to be afraid of this guy. He was just an old man who was probably lonely and happy to have an excuse to talk to somebody.

"Oh, yeah, I'm okay. Guess I was having a dream. Must 've

fallen asleep."

"Well, the sun's certainly warm and soothing. Regular soporific."

"What was that?" Bo asked, not understanding the man's comment.

Ignoring the request for clarification, the old man asked if he might sit down. Bo nodded affirmation.

"Mind if I ask you something?"

Again Bo nodded.

"Well, this sounds a little odd, I understand. But you know I was sitting over there," he pointed toward the bench across the fountain, "and, I guess, I was maybe daydreaming myself a little. And I was thinking about a friend of mine from a long, long time ago. And -- well now I know this sounds a little crazy -- but you seemed to call out a name. And it sounded like a name my friend sometimes used. Do you remember who you were calling?"

"What was your friend's name?" Bo asked.

"When I knew him he was Jonathan Stiers. Later on he became a sort of monk and took the strange sounding name Peregrine. That's what I thought I heard you saying."

Bo heart started racing. For a moment he felt scared. This was just too strange. Then, all of a sudden, he started laughing.

"That's why Isabel told me to come to Santa Fe," he blurted out.

"Pardon me," said the old man.

"Oh," said Bo, calming himself down a little, "let me introduce myself. I'm Bowman Mayberry. I knew your friend

Peregrine very well. He was sort of like a father to me. And I was just thinking about him and, I guess, I said his name outloud."

"You really mean you knew Jonathan?" the old man said incredulously.

"Oh, yeah," Bo sparkled. "I grew up at Sweetwater Farm."

"Well, I'll be," said the man. Then added, "I should introduce myself then. I'm Guy Fortier. Maybe you remember Jonathan mentioning my name . . .?"

"No, I don't know if I recognize your name," Bo said hesitantly. Then, putting things together in his mind and recognizing the old man's face as that of the young man with the dark curly hair in his dream consciousness, Bo added, "But you and Peri were lovers, weren't you?"

"Yes, indeed. But it was a very long time ago -- way back in our hippie days in San Francisco." The old man sighed. Then asked, "Well, how is he?"

"Don't you know?" Bo said, then realized that he'd sounded callous. "I mean, it was on the national TV news and all."

"I'm not much for watching TV," Fortier answered. "But I guess you mean that he's died?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. About a week ago," Bo said, feeling quite ill-at-ease being the bearer of bad tidings.

"Well, you know, at my age it's not unusual news. And if Jon made it this long, he had a full life. What did he die of?"

"He was . . . uh . . . well . . . pushed out of a helicopter," Bo stammered.

Fortier gasped and then sort of chuckled. "Would you mind explaining?"

"It's a very long story . . ."

"Wait," Fortier interrupted. "Can I invite you over to my home? You look like you're a little roadweary. And I'd really like to hear what you have to say."

"Oh, yes. In fact, Mr. Fortier, I think I should tell you that I really came to Santa Fe to find you."

"You mean you knew about me?" Fortier asked as they stood up.

"No, not exactly. But I'd been advised to come through here 'cause there'd be somebody or something for me to do. And now, meeting you, I think I knew what that was."

"Well, son, I hope you'll explain that to me," Fortier said as he pointed Bo in the right direction. "I've got a bicycle over there in the rack. Let me get that and then we'll head for my place."

## 10

The walk was longer than Bo'd expected. He understood why the old man had a bicycle. They passed through several neighborhoods before Fortier commented that it wasn't much further. The long walk afforded them opportunity to recount their histories to one another.

Bo felt quite secure in trusting this man. Even though he'd only met him, he'd been instructed to come to this city precisely, he believed, to find this man. This was an important step in his journey.

Guy -- Bo had stopped calling him Mr. Fortier -- had been lovers with Jonathan Stiers during the early 1970s. They'd remained good friends since, tho' had somewhat lost touch with one another during the last ten years or so. They'd left San Francisco about the same time in the early 1990s. Jon had gone to Sweetwater, become Brother Peregrine, and developed his enduring relationship with Rif Koestenbaum. Guy had moved to Santa Fe and with his cousin Lucy opened a small private school.

With a faculty ranging from five to ten men and women, most of whom lived on the campus, they developed a highly respected educational program catering to gifted children and problem children. Both Guy and Lucy had been teachers most of their lives and had a special knack with kids.

Bo was reminded of the school program at Sweetwater.

About ten years ago Lucy died. Guy was in his sixties and ready to retire. Over the next two years the school was gradually phased out. Now Guy was living, along with a couple of occasional tenants, on the vacant school property.

Once Guy had explained his situation, Bo tried to explain his. This was a more complicated proposition because it entailed explaining who and what the Star-children were and what sorts of talents they possessed. Halfway into the explanation, Guy volunteered that he'd been called a couple of years ago by the mother of a Star-child who was looking for an educational program for her son. He thought he might be able to find the woman's name somewhere in his files if Bo would like to meet the boy.

"Oh yes, I would," he answered. "In fact, you know, we're trying to get a bunch of us together to fight these terrorists that are threatening us."

"Well, here we are," Guy interrupted as they reached a portal in a high whitewashed stucco wall. "And there's lots of space in here if you all need some place to gather," he remarked almost offhandedly.

Bo thought to himself that he might very well take him up on that offer.

Long before Guy bought the property for the school it had been the home and studio of a reclusive artist who'd built himself a hideaway on the edge of town, surrounded by a high wall. An upperclass neighborhood had grown up and surrounded the exotic retreat that had been built in the old native style with white adobe and red roof tiles.

The compound had been ideal for the school. There were several cottages built around a courtyard and garden. There was living space for at least five families among the cottages. For the school a modern classroom building had been constructed out of the studio at the back of the courtyard.

Bo was duly impressed as Guy unlocked and opened the heavy wooden gate and, wheeling his bicycle in and propped it against the wall, welcomed Bo into his "humble abode." Leaning against the wall just inside the gate was a worn wooden sign. Though it was dusty and faded, Bo could still make out the encarved wording: "Mariposa School."

"Mariposa means butterfly, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Ah, that was always an inside joke. We explained that we

called the school 'Mariposa' on account of the transformation of catapillars into butterflies. 'Mariposa' was also Mexican slang for homosexual. Not that there was anything sexual going on around the school, but we kinda liked the double meaning. Jonathan always got a kick out of that.

"He was here, you know. Came out to visit back before the turn of the century, I guess. Maybe I remember that he was on his way to Sweetwater Farm."

While Guy continued reminiscing, Bo was conjuring up his sense of Peri's presence. How remarkable to have discovered something like this, something strangely like Sweetwater Farm, but away from anything to do with Star-children or kidnapers or terrorist threats.

"Jonathan and I both had a very similar dream. He found his at Sweetwater. I found mine here," Guy was saying as he showed Bo through the empty houses. The place was kept up, tho' there was a thick layer of dust over everything. "I suppose I should have sold this place so it could be used for something useful. But I just haven't had the heart to leave. I guess I'm getting to be a recluse just like the guy that built this place. Maybe that's something in the walls. . ."

Bo was not altogether paying attention to Guy's nostalgic rambling. He was imagining what this place might look like cleaned up and full of kids again. And he knew just the kids he had in mind.

At least he knew two kids who he hoped would be living here real soon: himself and Isabel. This solved his problem of what

to do with her once he'd rescued her from the hospital.

His thoughts of Isabel apparently brought him to her attention. 'Cause suddenly he realized she was present in his mind.

"Well, I see you found the place," she said, sounding to him almost like an auditory hallucination.

Did you know about this? he shot back at her.

"Not exactly. I'd seen pictures of it in the future. But I wasn't sure what it was."

You mean you can foretell the future? Bo asked incredulous. This was a power he didn't know she had.

"Well, I can't exactly foretell the future. But I get dreams of things that haven't happened yet, if that's what you mean. How do you think I knew to tell you to go to Santa Fe?"

I thought you were being secretive, Isabel, Bo answered the voice in his mind. I thought you didn't trust me.

"Please don't leave me here any longer," she suddenly pleaded.

Bo could feel the desperation and fear come pouring through with her direct communication.

"Mr. Fortier," Bo said respectfully, "I'd like to ask a favor of you . . ."

## 1 1

Bo arrived in Napa by bus thanks to Guy Fortier's generosity. Fortier, in fact, had offered to buy him a plane ticket, but Bo declined, in part, arguing that he didn't want to risk having to identify himself.

He put his backpack into a locker at the bus station. And then asked how to get out to the hospital. From the downtown bus depot, he easily found a shuttle that ran to Napa State Hospital. Getting on the repainted old half-sized school bus, he noticed an empty seat in one of the first rows next to an old man with a stuffed shopping bag sitting on his lap.

Bo sat down next to the old man. At first he'd thought he should sit by himself, but decided he'd rather be able to see out the front window than have privacy. He was glad he'd made that decision. For soon after the bus started, the old man's leg jostled up against his from the bumping of the only vehicle. Almost immediately, Bo's mind was flooded with memories of nearly forty years of history of the hospital.

Though some of the early memories were shot through with anguish and confusion, Bo was grateful to have gotten this firsthand travel guide. He could easily piece together information about the hospital that might be useful for him to know.

The sprawling hospital grounds constituted virtually a small city all to itself, located on the southwest side of Napa, a bedroom community for the great San Francisco Bay Area cosmopolis some fifty miles to the south.

During the late 1990s, after the economic collapse left a whole segment of the American population homeless and many of them decompensated into clinical mental illness, the cruelty was recognized of the previous four decades' policy of "returning the mentally ill to the community."

From the recollections of the old man in the seat next to him, Bo came to understand that what, in fact, "returning the mentally ill to the community" had meant was that those who'd had some kind of psychiatric collapse usually ended up living in squalor in center city hotels, supported by meager welfare payments, and heavily drugged with psychiatric medications -- all in the name of not disrupting their lives.

As more and more people joined the ranks of the mentally ill, Bo discovered, public policy planners had apparently realized that it was both more humane and more cost-effective to return to the older model of the State Hospital as a self-contained and self-supporting asylum from the pressures of urban life. Instead of being moved into downtown slums, the chronically mentally ill were given jobs and identities within the structured environment of the hospital.

Bo's unwitting tour guide, for instance, had gratefully worked outdoors in the beautiful California sunshine on the farms and gardens that produced grain and produce crops for the consumption of hospital's population and for sale to pay the residents small wages.

Freed from reliance on debilitating doses of tranquilizers and anti-psychotic drugs and given a simple structured routine, Bo's source -- who thought of himself only as "'ol Joe" -- remembered he and his friends functioned pretty well. They had given up private property and independence and, in return, got security and happiness -- the same trade-off many citizens made by choosing careers in the military.

The hospital had grown enormous as a result of these

changes, reabsorbing the land on which Napa Community College had been built in the 1960s when the hospital's land had been sold off by California's then governor Ronald Reagan in order to reduce state budgets, 'ol Joe remembered. Now the grounds of the asylum stretched from the banks of the Napa River all the way up into the hills that formed the eastern wall of the Napa Valley.

Not all the patients of the hospital, however, enjoyed the freedom to roam the grounds or to work outdoors, Bo realized. Many, especially the brain-damaged and mentally retarded, were still housed in wards that were little more than prison units.

When the shuttle bus stopped in front of the Administration Building, Bo disembarked and went right to the information desk to ask how he could visit Isabel Lorret.

"Well, let's see. She's on Ward 16B. Young man, are you sure you got the right name? 16B isn't the kind of place you'd be wanting to visit now," said the matronly lady at the desk.

"Yes," answered Bo politely, "that's the right name."

"Are you with your parents?" she asked.

"No, I'm alone," Bo answered matter-of-factly without volunteering any details.

"Do you know why Ms. . . uh, Lorret, is in the hospital?"

"She's deformed and brain-damaged," Bo answered, realizing the truth sounded somehow very cruel.

"Oh," said the matronly lady.

"Can't she have visitors?" he pressed.

"Well, usually, only family. Are you a relative?"

"Sort of," Bo stammered. "I mean, she's a cousin," he

quickly recovered.

"Have you visited her before?"

"Not here," Bo answered truthfully. He didn't like having to lie to get through to Isabel. But this wasn't really a lie. But how could he explain that he knew Isabel better than anybody on that ward where she lived?

"Well, young man, that's a locked ward that your cousin is on. And she really can't have visitors, at least not walk-in like you. If her parents had called or something . . . well, maybe we could let you see her. But, you know, she's, well, she's not right in the head . . ."

"I know that," Bo answered. That's why I'm here, he thought to himself.

"Can you tell me where her ward is?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I'll call a doctor to come talk with you," the lady announced her decision about how to solve this irregular request.

"Oh, that's okay," Bo said as he backed away from the desk and then turned and headed outside.

He walked on down the road a little ways, hoping the lady would see him and think he was leaving. Then he doubled back behind some bushes. He started walking toward a group of large buildings nearby. He could see people out sunning on the grass. The air was cold, but the sun warm and it felt good being outside. He'd ask one of them.

Even before he reached the lawn with the sunbathers, he came across a large billboard-sized map of the hospital set up alongside the road. With only a little difficulty he found where

he was and the orange block on the map that represented Ward 16A & B. The building was quite close.

A five minute walk brought him right up to the building. He'd been feeling Isabel's presence even from before he got off the shuttle bus. It was a disturbing feeling. This wasn't the Isabel he knew. What he was sensing was the crippled retarded child that dominated her waking consciousness. He wondered if he'd have to wait till she fell asleep. It was early afternoon now. That'd be a long time and it would be getting cold. And, anyway, how would he get in and she get out?

Bo looked over the building. There were signs on the outside indicating that Ward B was on the right side of the building. It looked very imposing and secure. There was chain-link fencing over the windows. There was a playyard, he could see, but it too was surrounded by chain-link, even over the top. They sure didn't want these kids to get out, he thought. Or anybody else get in!

Bo crept behind some bushes in front of a window and peered in. He could see into a long dormitory with beds lining each wall. The room was empty of people. Staying close to the building so he was mostly behind bushes, he slipped down to the next set of windows which looked into a room beyond.

Peeping over the edge of the window he could see into what he realized must be the dayroom. There were a lot of people, all of them girls and almost all of them childsize, standing around or playing on what seemed to be foam rubber cubes covered with bright colored fabrics. A few tall adults wandered through

the crowd apparently overseeing them. There were a couple of kids who stayed apart from the others. One of them was sitting by the wall rhythmically rocking back and forth so that she banged her head against the wall each cycle; she was wearing a football helmet, apparently to protect her head.

As Bo watched the kids playing in strangely disorganized ways, he noticed something that shocked him. A few of the kids seemed to have fully formed breasts. Indeed, many of them had grey hair. Is that what being retarded meant? he wondered, getting old but not being able to ever grow up.

He wondered who in there was Isabel. He thought her name real hard and conjured up his familiar images of her. He watched carefully to see if any of the girls -- or women -- would respond. Suddenly one of them, a little blond girl with a hunched back and twisted legs, left the group playing in the middle of the room and came over toward the window.

Oh my God, Bo thought, she's much worse off than I imagined. What am I going to do with her on the bus? Can I risk being seen in public with her? Won't they come and take us both away?

The little girl -- and he was relieved to see that at least she was a little girl and not some aging woman trapped in a child's body -- peered through the window at him. Her eyes looked almost totally uncomprehending. Her expression was blank. His mouth hung open a little and occasionally saliva drooled from the lower corner of her mouth.

They looked at each other. Bo continued to reach out with his mind to her, but seemed to get no respond. He was at a loss for what to do.

Then he noticed a window further down the wall that was open a little at the bottom. He slipped along the wall, beckoning to the girl to follow. At first, she did not, but then began to limp along in his direction.

Once he reached the open window and waited for her to come up alongside him, he stuck his fingers through the chain-link mesh. His wiggling fingers caught her attention and, after a moment's hesitation, she reached out with her finger to touch him.

When she did, Bo felt what was like a mild electric shock go through him. And suddenly the Isabel he was familiar with was in his mind.

Oh thank God you've come, she said. Bo could feel something like tears of gratitude in her thoughts.

Let's not waste time, he thought to her. How are we going to get you out?

There's a shift change coming up in about half an hour. Just before that we take a nap. We can form a stronger mindlink then, Bo. Maybe we can use a little telepathic persuasion to help you slip through the door.

"Isabel, Isabel, come here," a voice called peremptorily. Bo froze. What if we've been seen?

But no, apparently one of the adults playing with the kids in the middle of the room simply wanted to get her back into the activities.

Stay here, Isabel indicated before breaking the physical touch that allowed them to communicate inspite of the crippled

body she was incarnated in.

Bo continue to watch with a mixture of fascination and horror. Soon the kids were led off into the dormitory for their nap. From the first window he'd tried he could make out which was Isabel's bed standing out about halfway down the lefthand wall.

Still staying behind the shrubs along the building, Bo sat down and tried to clear his mind. Almost immediately Isabel's presence surrounded him.

Thanks again, Bo. I'm really more grateful to you than you can imagine.

He could feel her excitement and anticipation of release.

In about fifteen minutes, she said, there'll be a shift change. They meet for about a half hour, then the day staff goes off duty. They don't wake us up till after that. Now listen, here's my plan . . .

About forty-five minutes later, Bo was croached down behind the shurbery near the back door. His heart was beating fast. He sure hoped this work.

Don't worry so much, Isabel said.

Well, I'm the one liable to get caught, not you, he shot back.

Nobody's gonna get caught, she answered confidently.

There's been a trickle of nurses arrive about a half hour before. That was the afternoon staff coming on duty, Bo realized. Suddenly now the door swung open, four women came out together talking animately. The last one out turned and inserted

her key in the door and locked it behind her. She caught up with the others as they headed down the paved walk to a bank of cars parked in a nearby lot.

A couple of minutes later, two more women came out. They were both speaking broken Spanish.

The one of the left is Mrs Elizando, Isabel said, she's been a good friend. Okay, Bo, now think hard at her.

Mrs. Elizando turned to lock the door. "Madre Dios, my purse," she said under her breath, as Bo and Isabel pictured her purse sitting on the desk in the nurses' station. "Manana, Olivia," she said aloud to the woman she with her.

Olivia continued on down the walkway toward the parking lot. Mrs. Elizando went back into the building. Bo concentrated hard on the thought that the older Mexican woman needn't bother relocking the door, while Isabel concentrated on the image of the purse.

A moment later, Bo jumped up from behind the bushes and tried the door. He'd been successful. It was not locked. He opened it just enough to slip through and dashed inside the ward.

He found himself inside a long corridor. To his immediate right was a half open closet with a slop sink. He quickly scurried inside and hid behind the door.

Listening carefully, he heard voices from the far end of the corridor. "You've got your purse over your shoulder," a woman's voice said. "Oh, mi," a Mexican-accented voice answered, followed by an embarrassed laugh. Then, "Adios." Footsteps clicked down the corridor, getting louder as they approached.

A moment later the outside door opened, then closed. Bo let out a sigh of relief. We did it, said Isabel.

He heard Mrs. Elizando insert her key into the lock and turn it. There was a noticeable click as the lock slipped shut.

Only then did Bo realize that what he'd managed to accomplish with all that effort was to get himself locked inside the ward.

## 12

Occasionally peering out the door of the utility closet, Bo could see down the long dark corridor. When he'd first hidden there he was in constant communication with Isabel. But soon naptime had ended and the residents had been roused from their beds and moved back into the day room. At that time the connection with Isabel broke off.

Bo could still feel her presence, but the clear vibrant personality he was used to -- and with which he'd become entranced and infatuated -- was missing. He was understandably worried about this phenomenon. He had been frankly shocked by his first sight of her. And seriously disappointed. (Though he tried very hard not to let that show across to her.)

He'd been imagining them as Romeo and Juliet. He'd been excited about meeting her in the flesh -- especially after the couple of experiences of picking up on Scotty's sexuality and later Guy Fortier's sexual memories of Peregrine. And though he told himself he knew better, he was a little dismayed by the predominance of homosexuality. Meeting Isabel was going to have changed all that.

But it didn't. In fact, it scared him. Or so he found himself thinking during the long wait he had til Isabel was put back to bed and the ward grew still for the night.

He'd been literally disgusted by her body. And what was he going to do about that? When she'd insisted he come out to California to rescue her, she'd been very certain that together they could transform her body. But now that he was here, Bo had to wonder just what that was all about. He'd never done anything like that before. He had managed to facilitate healing a few times. His presence in the community at Sweetwater -- along with Thomas, he reminded himself -- had probably resulted in fewer illnesses. At least, that's what people had said. Several years ago he'd thought he restored to life a bird he found lying by the side of the road, apparently dead. But as he'd grown older, he'd come to believe that the most he'd done is revive the poor creature.

But none of those feats seemed even comparable to the task of transforming Isabel's body. In his fantasies, he'd imagined that she was pretty normal except perhaps for some mild deformities in her shoulder. He'd assumed the nightmarish apparitions he and Thomas had first had of her had been amplified way out of proportion. Now he saw, they'd been dead accurate.

She was barely human, Bo found himself thinking. Maybe she didn't even have a brain. Everything about her looked wrong. Her head and face were mishapen. Her chest and shoulders were skewed beyond any hope of simple postural adjustment. Her legs were twisted.

And, oh my God! Bo was saying to himself over and over again, I thought I was in love with her.

He was afraid to go to sleep. What if somebody came along to get a mop from the utility closet and found him? At least if he were awake he might be able to hide or even to play somekind of trick the way he and Isabel did on Mrs. Elizando.

After worrying for a while and even crying a little, Bo dozed off. He awoke with a start to the sound of his name being called.

He jumped up and pressed himself flat against the wall behind the door. If anybody came in they might not think to look behind the door. He steeled himself for the blow to his head or chest if the door were flung open suddenly.

But no one came.

A moment later he heard his name called again. This time he realized it was inside his mind. What a relief! He relaxed and slumped back against the wall, letting himself slowly slide down the wall so that he was against sitting on the floor. As he relaxed, he let his mind reach out and connect into the greater consciousness. The sense of being more than just a young teenager filled him, consoling him, and strengthening him.

Have you met Isabel yet? asked Scotty.

Yeah, what's she like? echoed Thomas.

The mindlink felt so good to Bo. He casually acknowledged the contact with Scotty and Thomas, letting them see through his eyes to discover the darkening little closet he was sequestered in. The narrow window above the sink, with its translucent

pebble-surface panes, had now grown almost completely dark.

Putting aside their questions about Isabel, Bo shared with them about his trip to Napa, about 'ol Joe, about the hospital. And Scotty and Thomas reciprocated by telling him about the events of their day.

Scotty's parents had returned home that afternoon. His Dad had seemed a bit taken aback by Thomas's presence in the house. But he seemed to have bought the story that Thomas was a schoolmate. When Scotty asked if Thomas could stay on indefinitely, his Dad was first surprised, then perhaps angered. "Let's talk about that later," he'd said.

Dinner was fairly uncomfortable. Between long silences, Scotty's mother tried to make small talk with the boys, telling them about the vacation she and her husband had just been on in the Caribbean. After dinner, Scotty's Dad excused himself, saying he wanted to stop by the bar and show off his suntan to his friends.

I don't know if I can stay here very long, Thomas acknowledged the state of his welcome in that household. Where can I go?

To the Mariposa School, of course, Bo answered. He'd thought it was obvious by now that that was going to be the refuge for all of them.

And just how do I get there? Thomas asked surly. You took all the money with you.

Uh ho, thought Bo, Thomas is getting scared. Time to change the subject for now.

Oh boy, Bo began, you wouldn't believe Isabel. I mean, she's almost a monster. Except that she's real little.

Well, we knew that, Thomas answered a bit short. Bo sensed he was being scolded for his emotional reaction.

Yeah, but you never really saw what she looks like. I don't know if I even want to touch her. Bo was embarrassed by the apparent callousness of his comment. But it was the truth. It was the truth.

That's okay, Scotty answered brightly. We're gonna take care of that, aren't we?

You tell me how, Bo said. I don't know how to turn this little monster girl into a beautiful princess.

That's exactly how, Isabel's presence answered, abruptly impinging into their consciousness link.

Bo felt terribly chagrined. Had she heard what he'd been saying about her? Would she mind? Or did she think the same thing about herself?

The kids are all going to sleep now. After about twenty or thirty minutes, the staff'll turn down the lights in the day room. They usually turn on a little TV back in the nurses' station. Bo, you can probably hear it from back there in the closet.

When you do, then it's time to come down to the dorm and get me. I think if you hold my hand I can stay in touch with the mindlink and still get up and walk. We should then sneak back here to this closet. We'll be safe here for at least a couple of hours. Though sometime in the night, the night crew is supposed

to mop to dayroom and corridor, so we can't stay in there too long.

How are we going to get out? Bo inquired.

I haven't figured that out yet.

Well, that's just fine. Just fine. Bo answered, surprising himself with his hostility.

I'm sorry, Bo. I just can't figure it all out at once. We'll manage.

Yeah, piped in Scotty, obviously optimistic.

Yeah, added Thomas, sounding a little less convinced.

There was some sort of noisy talk show on the TV. Bo really couldn't make out the words, but he could hear applause and occasional laughter. It was time to go get Isabel.

His heart was beating fast as he cracked the door and peered down the hall. At the far end, where the hall opened into the day room, several bright rectangles of light fell onto the floor and up the opposite wall.

That must be the nurses's station, Scotty pointed out the obvious.

Thanks, Bo commented.

Stay calm now, Thomas urged. We'll be okay.

Who's "we"? Bo shot back.

We really are all in this together, Bo, Isabel admonished. And we're all just as scared as you.

Bo took a deep breath. He started to say: Well, it's my ass they're likely to catch. Then he realized that after all he was

a Star-child. He was lucky. He could do this.

Yeah, Bo, Scotty and Thomas both exclaimed.

I love you, interjected Isabel softly, sending a chill through Bo.

Well, here's goes. He stepped into the hall and headed down toward the lights, taking very gentle steps so as not to make a sound.

He was halfway down the corridor when suddenly the bright lights went off. He startled. Then stood absolutely still for a moment. Bo edged back slowly so he was flat up against the wall. He was aware of four hearts all pounding simultaneously. For a moment he wondered if the mindlink always synchronized body rhythms.

It's okay, Isabel said, tittering just a little. They turned off the lights to see the TV better. See you can see the pale light from the set.

She was right. The TV was still blaring and the flickering bluish light from the screen filled the end of the corridor where the bright rectangles of light had been.

Hey, this'll make it even easier, commented Scotty, once again pointing out the obvious. But this time Bo easily forgave him. He was very happy to have that positive interpretation.

See we're lucky, said Thomas, real lucky. And they just turned off the lights so you could walk by.

Then, almost as if in response to Thomas's observation, the blaring of the TV diminished abruptly as one of the staff closed the door to the station.

Piece of cake, Bo thought smiling.

As he came to the nurses' station, he croached down so he was below the window level. The door was slightly ajar, but he stepped quickly past and was beyond in a moment. He relaxed a little more and allowed Isabel now to guide his steps into the dormitory and to her bedside.

Avoiding really looking at her, Bo took the hand of the deformed child in the bed whom he knew to be Isabel but still had a hard time believing. As he touched her, the sense of the mindlink consciousness increased dramatically. He realized he hadn't experienced anything as intense as this since that last frightening contact with Ravani years ago. What would this be like sexually? he thought to himself. And then shunned the thought, feeling disgust at the idea of making love to this monster. And simultaneously he felt ashamed of letting Isabel know those feelings.

I forgive you, she said softly and matter-of-factly.

The little girl climbed out of the bed and keeping a step behind Bo, but holding tightly to his hand, she followed him obediently back out of the dorm, past the door of the nurses's station, all the way down to the utility closet by the back door of the ward.

"We don't need the light," Isabel said as Bo started to flick the switch after he closed the door. He felt relieved.

She lay down on the floor. Remember the story of Briar Rose, she asked.

Huh? answered the boys.

Oh, you know, Sleeping Beauty.

Oh yeah, answered Scotty, this beautiful princess was out under a spell by a wicked witch so she'd sleep for a hundred years.

And briars and thorns and bushes grew up all around the castle so nobody could see it was there, added Thomas. I remember the movie.

So do I, said Bo soberly.

Remember, Isabel continued, how the beautiful princess was placed in a crystal coffin. Can you picture that?

Bo had an inkling of what Isabel was trying to do. He wasn't sure he was going to like this. But he put aside his feelings for a moment, telling himself it was very important that he cooperate now.

Think of the crystal coffin like regular reality, Isabel continued, and then think about how reality opens up when we enter the mindlink. See how the crystal coffin changes.

Bo allowed the images to grow vivid in his mind. He saw the beautiful sleeping princess. She saw the crystal coffin. And, along with the others, he let himself visualize the crystal box opening into a fourth and a fifth and maybe even a sixth dimension. He wasn't sure anymore that he was able to visualize this sight in his ordinary mind. But somehow in the mindlink consciousness it made sense.

The vision of the crystal coffin was full of light. Deep inside the light he could see the beautiful princess, sleeping peacefully, but oh so distantly. It was as though she were frozen in time, locked away from him.

I am Briar Rose, Isabel intoned.

Bo saw that the beautiful princess was indeed the pale girl with long golden hair whom he'd met in Isabel's apparitions. He watched as the light pouring through the multi-dimensional walls of the crystal coffin grew brighter and brighter.

He opened his eyes for a moment. He was still in the dingy closet in the back of the ward of the mental hospital. There was just enough light coming through the translucent window in the wall behind him that he could make out the figure of the crippled girl lying on the floor beside him. He felt her gnarled hand in his. He didn't want to look at her. And yet he did. His eyes were rivetted on her face. Even though it was very dark in the closet, Bo could see how her jaw was crooked and her chin was twisted to one side so that her mouth was pulled into a grotesque smile. In the dim light, he could just make out the glisten on one side of her mouth where spittle ran out and down onto the side of her chin.

He knew what Isabel wanted. And he was not sure he could do it.

He was not sure he had the courage or the faith or just the stomach.

He felt Isabel deep in his mind. He felt the mindlink consciousness continuing to grow and brighten around him. In a way he could not quite identify he was aware of more beings present to him than just Isabel and Thomas and Scotty. He was somehow aware of other Star-children. He remembered the moment in Peregrine's passing when he felt himself part of a whole crowd of minds.

He felt a pang of grief for Peregrine's death and his own bereavement. And he felt the pain of the other Star-children, all of them scattered around the world, most of them unaware except inchoately of their powers, most of them misunderstood by parents and friends, all of them able to feel so deeply the collective suffering of mankind. And Bo felt a great pang of compassion for all beings.

And as he did, to his surprise, the brilliant light pouring from Briar Rose's crystal coffin seemed to burst forth from the visualization and to fill the tiny closet of the psychiatric ward. The tiny and twisted body of Isabel Lorret lay on the floor before him. He could see her very clearly now. He could see how prematurely old she looked and how dry and lifeless was her skin and her hair.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her eyes seemed so vacant. She did not even seem as intelligent and alive as a cat or dog. And as Bo thought that he remembered how much affection he'd felt for pets he'd had back at Sweetwater. And he realized that, even if she was a little malformed looking, she was still a human being of so much more worth than his pets.

And with that thought, he didn't mind that she was ugly or that her jaw was twisted. Indeed, he realized, she was truly beautiful in her own peculiar and particularly way. And seeing that, he bent down and kissed her gently on the lips.

As his lips touched hers, he let his eyes close. And suddenly the visualization of Briar Rose was all around him again. And he saw the sleeping beauty open her eyes and look up at him and smile and then squeeze his hand tightly in hers. A

thrill of romance and love and infatuation and puppy love and sexual innocence burned through him.

And then, as Thomas remarked befuddled, Hey something's happened, Bo realized that his eyes were open. And it was not a crippled little retarded girl lying on the floor before him, but the beautiful princess of pale skin and deep blue eyes and long, long golden hair.

And then the light was gone. The little closet was dark again, lit only faintly by lights outside the translucent window. But the girl with him was still the beautiful Briar Rose.

She sat up, looked down at her body, and then at him, and then back at herself. Then she threw her arms around him and kissed him full on the lips.

"It worked. It worked," Isabel said out loud. And for the first time, Bo realized, he heard her voice not with his mind but with his ears. And she was real.

### 13

The crowd of other Star-children were gone. There was just Bo and Isabel in their secret hiding place in Napa, California and Scotty and Thomas in Scotty's room in Little Rock, Arkansas. And in the mindlink they were together. Their shared reality was still more intense and more dimensional and expanded than normal individual waking consciousness. But the fierceness that it had possessed only a few moments before was gone.

They were back to normal within the context of their anything-but-normal telepathic connection. They were all four

excited. For the first time, it seemed, they really worked a miracle.

Scotty kept saying: I can't believe it, I just can't believe it.

And Thomas kept saying: Yeah, but it's real.

Isabel said only, very softly: Thank you, thank you.

Bo said nothing. He was beyond words by now. Exhausted but thrilled.

Then suddenly a loud crashing noise broke into their calm revery.

"Goddam faggots. I knew that's what you and your dirty little friend were up to. And in my house. Queer. Cocksucker.

"Both of you, get out of here. Scott, you are no longer my son. You're dead for all I care." The words sounded a little slurred as though the speaker had been drinking. But they were articulated well enough to know that he meant business.

"Here I come home. It's the middle of the goddam night. And I walk in here and find my son sitting on the bed with another boy. And the two of you are holding hands. Like a couple of little sissies."

Rage and fear shot across the mindlink, spoiling the beauty and wonder of the miracle that had just occurred. Bo and Isabel grabbed one another and held each other tight. And then suddenly, the mindlink was broken. The angry abusive voice was gone. The dim closet was silent.

"They must have let go of each other," Bo assessed the situation rationally. "And that broke the connection."

"They'll be back in touch," Isabel said confidently. "What

else can they do?

"In the meantime, Bo, we need to figure out how we're going to get out of this hospital ward."

14

Getting out was not as hard as either of them had thought it might be. Instead of trying anything magically or tricky, they simply walked up to the nurses' station and knocked on the door.

"We were visiting my cousin this afternoon in 16A," Isabel said. "And we accidentally got ourselves locked in one of the visiting parlors. We banged on the door awhile, but nobody came. Then we fell asleep."

"Hey, girl, you're sure in the wrong place now," commented the young Black attendant who'd stuck his head out of the station door.

"Well, a janitor just let us out of the parlor. He said he thought this was the way out. And he let us through that door back there," she pointed down a hallway at the other end of the dayroom.

"Well, that's the dining room down there," the young man said.

"We don't really know about that," Bo spoke up. "But we'd like to get out of here now."

"Well, now, maybe I'd better call the doctor on duty," the attendant answered.

"How long's that gonna take," Isabel said feigning petulance. "We've been locked in this place for a long time and we want to get home. Hey, what time is it anyway?"

The attendant looked at his watch. "Ten-thirty," he replied.

"Oh my God," Isabel exclaimed, "I told Mother we'd be home by six."

"Hey, Mister, come on, let us out of here. This place is pretty spooky," Bo added to increase the sense of alarm.

"Well, I guess you two sure aren't residents on this ward. All them is practically vegetables that can't talk worth a damn. Okay, I'll let you out down this way. Out to the parking lot. That okay?"

"That's just fine," Isabel answered.

Once outside, Isabel laughed and laughed and spun round and round. She felt her breasts and looked at her arms.

"You're beautiful," Bo said a little awestruck.

"Well, that was easy, wasn't it? But I've got to get some clothes. Look at me."

Isabel had borrowed Bo's heavy pea coat to hide the hospital issue pajamas she'd been wearing. And she was right. She'd need something more presentable to wear home on the bus than that.

Not daring to be seen leaving the hospital grounds, lest they be taken for residents trying to escape, they headed off behind some buildings through a meadow toward the main road. Along where the old highway into Napa sliced through the middle of the hospital, they came to a high fence. Walking sleathily along it, they reached the front gate. The guard house was dark and empty. There were barricades across the road to prevent

cars from entering. And a sign had been placed in the middle of the street announcing that this gate was closed after dark and instructing motorists to use the side entrance into the main medical unit in the case of emergency.

On the other side of the highway, however, watching the gate into the other part of the property, there was a guard. He appeared to be reading or working at something on a desk, for his head was bent down. Bo and Isabel took one another's hand and slipped into mindlink for a moment and reached out to his mind with thoughts of calmness and safety.

Then they quickly but lightly scampered across the road and down the highway toward the township of Napa.

"My sister and I are on our way to visit our parents in New Mexico," Bo told a slight fib to the night clerk of the Aloha Motel which he and Isabel found after entering the commercial strip on the main highway coming into Napa. "We'd like a room. Pretty cheap, please. We haven't got a lot of cash on us."

They chose the Aloha because it looked like it would be inexpensive -- and probably nobody would question who they were or why they wanted a room.

"You and the girl want it by the hour or for the night," the clerk asked matter-of-factly letting Bo know that he didn't care what they wanted the room for.

"Oh, for the night," Bo answered quickly, realizing he was embarrassed by the clerk's implication.

Isabel was standing outside the office, looking in through

a finger-smudged plate glass window. She hadn't come inside cause she didn't want the clerk to see she was wearing pajamas under the heavy pea coat. Her pale skin looked radiant under the red neon "Vacancy" sign that hung in the window, Bo realized as he looked over at her conspiratorily as the clerk checked through his registry to assign them a room.

"You said you all brother and sister?" The clerk asked without looking up, "how about one double bed?"

"Oh. . . !" said Bo, blushing. He recovered his composure to ask, "Is that cheaper?"

"Five bucks less than a double room."

"I guess, we'll take it," he said.

The clerk passed a registration card to him, adding, "Don't care much 'bout your name so long as you pay upfront." Then asked, "You got a car?"

"No, we're traveling by bus."

"Long way from the bus station," the clerk observed absent-mindedly making small talk as he waited for Bo to fill out the card.

Bo worried that he might be getting suspicious. To be safe, he made up a fake name and left the address blank.

"Yeah, well, we've been out walking. . . . you know how it gets sitting on the bus all day long. . . . How much you say it was?"

"Total's right there on the bottom of the card," the clerk answered. "How come you got off the bus in Napa anyway?"

Bo pulled out the small wad of cash he had in his pocket and counted out the money, looking down at what he was doing to

avoid the question. He couldn't think of a sensible answer. Besides, he was a little surprised to see that this was going to cost him almost half the money he had left. Well, at least he had two bus tickets back to Santa Fe in his pack back in the locker at the station.

Bo was tired. He hadn't slept much on the bus the night before. And today had been exhausting. He was also worried about Isabel's strength. He just wasn't sure what the transformation was that she'd undergone. He suspected that, at least at the beginning, it would take her a lot of psychic energy to maintain her new body. He could feel his own energy occasionally being drained by her. After all, it had taken quite an exertion by all four of them to create this change in the basic material structure of the universe.

"Hey, you two old enough to want to see the videos piped into the room?"

"You mean TV?" Bo asked innocently. "Does it cost extra?"

"The TV works. But you can have the special video movies free. You gotta tell me though so I can hook 'em up. I'm not supposed to connect those up to rooms with families and small children. You old enough?"

"I think we'll just want to go to sleep," Bo evaded the questions.

"Well, good night then." The clerk finished the conversation. Bo was glad to get out of there.

"O my God," he said a little over-dramatically to Isabel as he hustled her away from the office and down a couple of doors to

their room. "I was so embarrassed. He kept asking me questions that sounded like he thought we just wanted the room to fuck in."

"Well, we could," Isabel responded coyly.

"Oh, not you too," Bo snapped. "I just want to sleep. And, look it, I'm only fourteen years old. Since we left Sweetwater, it's just been sex, sex, sex, all the time. I don't think I'm ready to think about all this."

"I'm sorry, Bo. I was just teasing you." Isabel said apologetically. "It's just that I've never had a body like this before. . . and, I guess, I sorta want to try it out."

"Oh, yeah, well. . . ." Bo responded. "I guess you got a point there. But, Isabel, please, let's just get some sleep."

They ended up huddled together in the double bed after the radiator stopped putting out heat soon after they got to the room. The night was cold and there was only a light summer blanket on the bed.

Bo had never slept cuddled up with a girl -- or a boy for that matter. Tho' sometimes he and Thomas had slept touching each other so they could share each other's dreams.

As he lay in bed, unable to get back to sleep after waking up cold and realizing Isabel had curled up against him with her head on his bare chest, Bo wondered about why the mindlink seemed to be so dependent on physical contact. It seemed like it almost always took two people touching each other to establish a solid connection. Maybe that was just a matter of confidence. He learned his powers with Thomas and their way of agreeing to enter each other's mind had always involved some gesture of physical

contact. But maybe that wasn't really necessary. After all, occasionally he'd discovered himself in a mindlink without touching. And he could connect with the birds all by himself. As far as he hadn't figured out what the difference was. Except that without touching he didn't think he had much control over reaching into another human being's mind.

Maybe they could learn to change that.

He realized he was a little afraid of falling asleep now. What if he ended up in Isabel's dream and she was a hunchback again? He was conscious of the sweet, but slightly salty, smell of her body. How soft her skin felt against his. How beautiful her long hair looked curled in soft rings where it splayed out across his chest.

Bo became suddenly very embarrassed again as he realized his body was responding involuntarily to his thoughts of Isabel's loveliness. How am I ever going to get any sleep like this? he wondered. Besides I'm cold.

He ended up rolling over on his side, so they were lying together spoon fashion. She woke enough to reposition herself so she was pressed flat up against him soaking up the warmth from his body.

As he finally began to drift back to sleep, he realized Isabel was focusing all her energy into maintaining the appearance of Briar Rose. She wasn't particularly conscious at all of the sexual implications of sleeping together like this. Bo felt relieved.

"I need to buy some clothes," Isabel said first thing in the morning. Sunlight was shining brightly through the dingy mini-blinds on the window. The stripes of brightness lay right across their faces. Bo realized the warmth of the sun felt real good as he pulled himself out of sleep.

"I haven't got much money left," he answered. "And we ought to eat something."

"Well, I can't go very far dressed in hospital pajamas," she said. "I'd rather spend the money on clothes than food."

"Look, we gotta keep up our strength. I'm ot sure of this, but I think that maybe if you get too tired or too crazy or something, you must might lose your new body."

"I thought of the same thing," Isabel responded thoughtfully. "So, we'll eat. But I still need some clothes. And, Bo, I really want to look nice. I mean, I've never had the chance to before."

"What do you suggest we do about money?" Bo asked, pulling the sheet up around his neck and then stretching off the bed to reach his pants thrown over an uncomfortable looking wooden chair. He fished his billfold out of the pocket and then counted the money.

When he told Isabel how little he had, she asked, "Are you sure that's all you've got? How about in your pack at the station?"

Staying underneath the sheet, Bo was struggling to get his pants on. "Well, in my pack about all I've got is the bus tickets back to Santa Fe."

"We could cash those in, couldn't we?" Isabel suggested

brightly.

"How would we get back?" Bo asked and then realized that they forgotten entirely about Scotty and Thomas. Where are they?

"We could hitch," Isabel answered before he had the chance to ask about their comrades. "You made it all the way from Little Rock to Santa Fe."

"Well, maybe so," Bo answered non-committily, as he reached over to clasp Isabel's hand. "We'd better see if we can contact Thomas or Scotty."

## 15

Bo sat staring out the backseat window as the flat plainsland of the California central valley passed by. The uniformity of the terrain and the whirring rhythm of the tires on the highway seemed broken only by the occasional insertion into Bo's reverie of a highway interchange or a mileage sign or IH-5 highway marker. The roaring of the wind alongside the old car they'd been picked up by changed each time they came near a sign, Bo noticed.

In his reverie he was thinking about Thomas and Scotty. He and Isabel had found them this morning. They too were on the highway. Soon after the fiasco with Scotty's Dad, they'd gotten Thomas's pack together and packed a bag for Scotty and set out to obey the command to get out. Fortunately, they'd already been planning to join Bo sometime soon at the Mariposa School. The blow to Scotty's family allegiance didn't come completely unprepared for. Bo was happy to know he'd be seeing them again

soon.

But what was upsetting Bo was that it seemed like Scotty's Dad's accusations had not been ungrounded. This morning Thomas seemed to be overly defensive about and surprisingly protective of his connection with Scotty. Isabel, who he'd seen could sometimes see right through a misrepresentation one might be trying to foist over the mindlink, said she felt for sure that Thomas and Scotty really had a crush on each other.

"Like you and me," she said to Bo's chagrin.

But she didn't seem to think anything of it. Bo was distressed. He blamed Scotty for seducing Thomas into homosexuality. He didn't think that was right.

Of course, maybe Thomas already was "like that," Bo's interior voice challenged him.

Well, you'd think I'd have known it after being inside his mind so many times, he answered himself.

Maybe Thomas didn't even know himself, the voice answered. You remember what Peri told you. . .

Bo was uncomfortable that he couldn't have this out right now with Thomas. He'd need Isabel's help to form a mindlink to reach out to them. And right now she was in the front seat caught in some endless conversation with the driver about the inerrancy of the Bible.

When they'd gotten picked up by the wild-eyed looking old man, Bo had felt uncomfortable. Something told him this guy could be trouble. But they'd been standing by the highway at a little used on-ramp and it didn't look like they were going to get picked up at all. Bo had wondered what happened to their

famous luck. On the one hand, he thought, maybe the energy that goes into being lucky is instead going into keeping Isabel's new body together. And on the other, maybe this long wait is all part of some sort of karmic plan that will turn out to look lucky after it's all over.

The driver, a man dressed in a tight-fitting black suit who looked much older than the forty-nine years he said was his age, had introduced himself as "Brother Hubert." Bo had immediately responded by telling him about his friend Brother Peregrine.

"Well, now see here, son, my title Brother ain't like some Catholic monk. They go and call themselves Brother and Sister and Father and all that 'gainst Jesus's outright commandment, 'Call no man father.' They call me Brother in my church 'cause we all love one another. And we all worship the same God together. That's the Lord God Jehovah and his only son Jesus."

Uh-oh, thought Bo, this guy's a little nutty. He'd climbed in the back seat. At first, he'd sat up on the edge of the seat cushion so he could join into the conversation in front. But it had been hard to hear. (The car was so old it didn't have computer guidance and the air conditioner wasn't working so all the windows were wide open.) After listening to the guy preach for a while, he gave up and leaned back against the backseat and stared out the window.

Something pulled him out of his reverie a little before Bakersfield. Something Brother Hubert had said to Isabel had attracted his attention. Or maybe he was feeling something from Isabel. He had to shake himself alert for a moment.

"Last night on the TV," Hubert was saying in the same sing-song he'd been using all along, "Brother Clyde Houston, a God-fearing man if ever there was one, was preaching about the invasion of these here Demon-children."

Bo's ears picked up for that comment.

"You know who Reverend Houston is, now don't ya, little miss?"

When Isabel seemed totally ignorant, Hubert launched into a long history. "As a young man, Clyde Houston was a true sinner. There was not a woman he knew he did not try to defile. There was not a sinful thought he wouldn't try to hold in his mind. He listened to every kind of lie you can imagine. Why, he says he even believed for a while that Jesus was just your ordinary citizen and was nothing special.

"Then one day, way back a long time ago, he attended a revival meeting given by Brother Jimmy Swaggart. You musta heard his name?"

Isabel shook her head in a way that might have looked like a yes or might have looked like a no.

"Well, the story of Reverend Swaggart is another story entirely," Hubert continued. "He was some evangelist. And he healed the sin in Clyde Houston's heart in just one day. And Reverend Houston come outa that meetin' just full o' the Holy Spirit. And he was preaching up a storm. He went from town to town all the way up the coast from L.A. to Seattle calling people to repent and atone for their sins cause the end was comin' soon.

"And, indeed, he had just led a whole flock of his followers out of L.A. less than a week before the bombs fell back in 2000.

He saw that was a sign from God that he was to keep right on a preachin'. And he been doing that ever since.

"You sure, you never saw Reverend Clyde Houston on the TV?"

"My family never put on the religious shows, I guess, Mister," Isabel answered, slightly distorting the truth about why she didn't know much about TV. The nurses showed them cartoons as long as she could remember, but never any regular TV.

"You call me Brother, hear? . . . And, how 'bout you, young man, back there in the back seat? You watch God's channel or you been wasting yourself watching the sinners on the TV?"

"Never have watched much TV at all, sir," Bo answered smartly.

"Well, that might have saved you. But there's no time like right now to decide to start watching the Evangelists on the tube. There just be so much blessing comin' out of the TV set.

"You probably don't know who Clyde Houston is either."

"No sir, I'm sorry I don't."

"Well, last night, this here fine man was warning us all about the danger of these demon-children that are out there living right among us. You heard 'bout them?"

"I guess I'd like to hear what you have to say," Bo answered, evading the direct question.

"It's not what I have to say, young man. It's what the Buble says and what a man like Reverend Clyde Houston has to say. He's like a regular conduit right up to God. He kows just what God is a'thinkin'. And he tells it straight."

"And what did he say about these children you mentioned,"

Isabel seemed to inquire innocently.

"Why, back when the bombs were dropped, the devil got his chance to get into the world. All the Christians were shocked for a moment and in that time the Devil just waltzed right in and took over a whole bunch of babies. Now I hear these kids were all bad to start with. I mean they had mothers who'd gotten in the family way from some sinful liaison and wanted to get themselves abortions anyway.

"But they didn't cause they knew they had been chosen by the evil one to serve Satan and bring babies into the world that had no souls and were just taken over by demons."

"Who are these kids?" Bo asked.

"They look just like you and me. But they got powers. They got powers," he emphasized the word so strongly Isabel almost jumped. And they usin' these powers to spoil the land. It seems like they creatin' some kind of monsters up in Devil's Lake. And they spreadin' the radioactivity out of the quarantine area. Just by the power of their minds.

"Why last week, these here demon-kids made some old man jump out of a helicopter. And then they go running off so nobody knows where they are.

"See, it's all right here," Hubert held up a newspaper. "'The Christian Voice of God,' best Christian newspaper on the West Coast."

Isabel looked at the folded newspaper the man was waving. "Can I see?"

"Sure you can, little miss. The story's right there on the front page. You can read about that old guy they killed."

Isabel looked at the paper for a moment. Then handed it over the seat to Bo. As she did, Bo felt a surge of terror pour out of her. He brushed her hand as he took the paper, We have to be very careful, she communicated.

Bo looked at the paper. In ornate letters across the top it read "Christian Voice of God." Below that in bold headlines, it read, "DEVIL INVADES AMERICA FROM WITHIN." And under that, "Demons stalk the public highways." Below the headline started a long story that seemed to take up most of the front page. Halfway over the fold was printed a photograph.

Opening the paper so he could see the photo, Bo saw that it was of himself.

His heart skipped a beat.

"Brother Clyde was preachin' that these demons are responsible for the collapse of the American way of life. Why nothin's the way it was back before the bombs fell and the devil got in. All these people been fooled. They think things're better. But, just look, there's no army now. There're no nuclear weapons. We got no way to protect ourselves against an invader. We don't even have the police like we used to. The demon-children been using their powers to make all the crime disappear so the cities'd get rid of their cops. Now we haven't got hardly any left.

"But, believe you me, all this peace is just a lie. All just a trick to get us to be weak. Says so in the Bible. It says there'll be great war. And peace ain't somethin' Christian. Real peace, the peace that surpasses understandin', like St. Paul

tells us, comes only from putting your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Bo was grateful there was no autopilot in this car. That meant the driver had to keep his hands on the steering wheel and couldn't turn around any more than he already was.

"Now, look here, young man, you got that paper back there. You just read on about how they made this man jump out of the helicopter. . . . you see it? you see it?"

Bo read the story. Indeed, here was an account of Brother Peri's death. But it sounded all different from what Bo knew to have been true. The article made it sound like he and Thomas had used the mindlink to force Peri to jump out of the plane.

"What's the guy's name?" Hubert opportuned.

Bo wasn't sure what to say. He remembered that he'd mentioned Peregrine's name a while back. "Don't see it here, Mister?"

"Well, give me the paper then, I'll show you where it is in this story."

"That's okay, that's okay. Tell us more about Reverend Houston." Bo tried to get the man onto another subject and to keep him from looking at the paper again. What if he recognized Bo's picture through the glasses and brown dye of Scotty's disguise.

"Now give me that paper, son." Bo reluctantly handed it over.

The man spread the paper out across the steering wheel, half reading, half attending to the direction of the car. The road was straight.

"Here it is. This guy was named 'Brother Peer-e-grind,' 'Pair-e-grine,'" he tried a second time. "Well, don't know how to pronounce that exactly. Sounds like Latin. In fact, it sounds like the name you mentioned while ago, young man.

"This ain't the man you know, is it?" Hubert asked.

Bo felt his own heart racing. His hands were trembling. He could feel a similar wave of fear pouring out of Isabel's mind.

"I don't think so, sir," Bo answered politely.

"Well, it says here this kid -- and it shows his picture -- ran away from someplace in North Carolina. That's a long way from here.

"But, say, this picture maybe looks like it could be you." Hubert peered around at Bo.

"Watch the road, Brother Hubert," Isabel said, her voice trembling audibly.

"You scared of my drivin'. Don't need to be. Never had an accident in my life. And the road's just perfect straight right along here."

Bo felt some relief. Maybe he'll stop thinking about this subject. "Brother Hubert," Bo spoke up politely, "may I see the paper again. I guess I should read the story."

"Well, say, I'm not gonna give this back to you til I see if this maybe really is your picture on here. Wrong color hair. But same shape face."

"Now, how could it be my picture. We're in California now," Bo said. He reached out and touched the back of Isabel's neck to make contact. Can we get him to stop thinking about this? he

asked. What can we do?

I don't know, Isabel answered. I'm so scared, Bo, I can't think right. And I feel funny all over.

Hang in there, Is, Bo responded. We'll be okay.

At that moment, just as Bo was hoping to enlist Isabel's help in projecting less threatening thoughts into Hubert's mind, Isabel suddenly lost control of her body. At one moment, she was sitting there, a tall, rather attractive but pale teenager. And the next she was a gnarled, hunchbacked dwarf.

Brother Hubert looked over. He did a double take. And then began to scream bloody murder.

Without even saying another word, Hubert sped up the car as fast as it would go. He roughly folded up the paper and stuffed it into the breast pocket of his jacket. He didn't take another look at Bo.

Bo wasn't sure what to do. He sat almost paralyzed for a while, listening to the strange whimpering from the crippled Isabel. Then finally he got an idea. He sat forward and reached up to touch Hubert. Maybe I can communicate with him, Bo thought. "We won't hurt you," he said aloud.

But at that moment, a loud siren started up behind them, growing louder as it closed. Hubert slammed on the brakes. And Bo was thrown forward. He had not succeeded in establishing any kind of connection with Hubert.

"Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus," Hubert was exclaiming. "Even now when I need help to escape these devils, you send the police to protect me. Even now when Brother Clyde says there are almost no police left, you send a cop to rescue you. Thank you,

Jesus.

16

The Highway Patrolman pulled back onto the highway. Bo and Isabel were in the backseat. Brother Hubert was supposed to follow them in to the station in Bakersfield.

"Well, kid, I sure don't know what this is about. I don't have any reason to arrest you. Your sister looks pretty harmless, even if she is retarded. You look like pretty clean cut yourself. I guess I don't think you ought to be out here on the highway hitchhiking with her. But that's no crime.

"I don't know what to make of that guy's story that when he picked you all up she was a normal looking girl. I mean, he waved that religious paper in front of me, but I can't go on something like that. I mean that paper's not much different from any of those tabloids in the grocery store. 'My Sister Gave Birth to a Martian Baby,'" the patrolman laughed, "I saw that headline in the grocery store just the other day. That's all nonsense."

"Well, thank you, officer. I'm glad you came along. That man who picked us up got real crazy there and was driving superfast. And I got real scared something was going to happen to my sister." Bo held Isabel's twisted hand as though he were consoling her.

Maybe he just let us out, Isabel communicated to Bo. Then we can see about doing something about my body again.

The patrolman absent-mindedly flipped on the radio on the

dash and then, letting the car's autopilot handle the road, peered out the back window to see if Hubert was following. "That's sure an old clunker," he observed.

Bo wasn't listening to the patrolman. He'd recognized the pounding rhythm and the stacco chant coming over the radio. The song that reminded him that somehow something someone was watching over and guiding him. He thought of Peregrine. He remembered the splendor of his death. And the great sense of accomplishment he'd felt. And how that had been signified, as Bo and Isabel's accomplishment was being signified.

"Reach out, I'll be there," came the familiar lyrics, now in their newest "hot chant" incarnation.

Six hours later, Bo and Isabel were sitting on a bus, headed toward Santa Fe. The highway patrol had told Hubert they had no jurisdiction in religious matters. The kids had committed no crimes. They seemed to treat him with kid gloves, occasionally seem overly patronizing. Obviously, they thought he was crazy with his story of the girl changing the form of her body.

The patrolman who'd picked them up took a liking to Bowman right away. He said he had a small emergency fund set aside with money for worthy causes. And he thought helping them get to Santa Fe was as worthy as any other. He bought them both bus tickets all the way.

It was late night and the bus was dark. Bo had promised Isabel that once the few passengers on the bus were all asleep, he'd help her see if she could change her body back. They tried several times to contact Thomas and Scotty for assistance. But

were unable to reach them. They decided to try on their own.

Sitting in the back row, away from windows or curious fellow passengers, Bo once again looked deep into Isabel's eyes and saw beyond the physical appearances of the twisted body to the beautiful soul. Once again, as he kissed her, she changed into the beautiful Briar Rose.

In the middle of the night, they arrived in Albuquerque. There was a short layover before the bus was to leave for Santa Fe. Bo and Isabel entered mindlink together and discovered Scotty and Thomas sleeping and dreaming by the side of the road somewhere near Amarillo, Texas. Apparently they were hitching their way to the meeting place in Santa Fe.

Bo recounted to Isabel his experiences of his trip from Arkansas to New Mexico. That gave him an idea. He went away for a while and then came back with two new tickets.

"We'll have to wait til morning to leave. But this'll be great," he said. "I changed the tickets. We're going to go to Madrid first."

## 17

Bo had been surprised to find a bus that went to Madrid. But indeed there was a commuter shuttle that ran early each morning and late each afternoon into the mountain suburbs between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. He realized there must be more people than he'd thought living around here.

And as the shuttle carried him and Isabel toward their

destination, Bo could see lots of houses nestled into the hillsides. Probably all moved here back after the bombs fell, Bo thought. In fact, New Mexico and Arizona had become a major haven for people fleeing the disasters in California and in the northern Midwest.

The shuttle left them off at a large "Park 'N Ride" lot just outside the little town of Madrid. There was a large crowd of commuters waiting to get on.

"Some ghost town," Bo remarked to Isabel as they got off the bus, surprised to see all the pinstripe suits on the commuters. "I thought we'd find a real wilderness up here."

"Bo, thank you," Isabel said, ignoring his tone of disappointment. "This is real exciting for me. You know, I've never seen anything like this in person. All I've ever managed to see of the world is what I could manage to spy through other people's eyes. And it just isn't the same as really being there."

"This is so beautiful. Thank you."

Bo's heart swelled with pride and joy. He had wanted to give Isabel a special treat. He'd thought the empty hillsides and wide perspectives of the high desert would be that. And, in spite of the fact that this territory turned out surprisingly settled, he could see his treat was appreciated.

"Well, I guess you couldn't really expect a ghost town anywhere in 2014," he said lightly.

"I guess not," Isabel answered. "Except maybe around Devil's Lake," she added soberly, reminding them both that there was still a world beset with problems out there. And that, at least in some people's minds, they were being held almost

personally responsible for the problems.

"Hey, let's walk up into the hills," Bo changed the subject. He didn't want to ruin the bright beauty of the morning with unnecessary worries.

Though the sun was warm, the air was very cold. It looked like there'd been a light snowfall within the past couple of days. Under rocks and in sheltered crevices little crusts of sparkling white ice still clung where the sun's heat had not melted it. Skirting the town by staying up on the ridge Bo had discovered during his previous trip here, Bo and Isabel made their way north. High above the desert below, they had a fantastic view.

Isabel was a little cold. The coat she'd bought in Napa, though quite stylish, was not as warm as Bo's trusty old pea coat. They huddled together with Bo's arm around her shoulders whenever the wind would blow especially cold. Bo was becoming more and more comfortable with his affection for Isabel.

They came to a big tree, its gnarled arms reaching up toward the sky almost bare now, only a few dried leaves hung on here and there. "Let's sit down a minute," Isabel suggested.

The sun was warm, but Isabel still clung tight to Bo as they sat down with their backs against the tree's massive trunk. Though in fact she was taller than Bo, she sat in such a way that her head was only his shoulder. She turned his face to him and kissed him lightly on the cheek. They slipped easily into the mindlink consciousness.

I love you, Isabel communicated.

I know, Bo answered. I guess I love you too, Is, but I really don't know what to do about that.

There's nothing to do, she answered. And then laughed a little nervously, I guess I've been wanting you to make love to me. Maybe 'cause I never had a body like this that anybody could love before. And I've roamed around in so many people's minds and watched them making love . . .

You did that? Bo asked surprised.

Sure, didn't you?

Well, no, I thought that was sort of embarrassing. I mean Thomas and I caught Scotty one time having sex with somebody. But, well, you know . . .

Oh, Bo, you're so cute, Isabel responded to his shyness.

Besides, he continued, I've never had the powers quite the way you have. I mean, I couldn't just spy on other people. I had to have Thomas's help most of the time.

Bo went on to explain his questions about why the mindlink soetimes seemed to require physical contact. Isabel said she'd not always found that so, though now that she was living all the time in her body, it seemed sort of true for her as well.

This was something they ought to practice on, they both agreed.

Isabel, Bo asked, you seem to be able to communicate at a much deeper level, I mean, to get below people's conscious thoughts. Can you show me how to do that?

I don't know. I don't exactly know how I do it. But I'll let you see into my own thoughts. How's that?

Uh-oh, Bo thought, trying to keep it to himself, am I gonna get the crippled girl again?

Bo, Isabel consoled, it's not all bad. I mean, in that body I was having a hard time, I'll agreed. But there was a lot more to me than just that. Maybe especially because my body was so uncomfortable, I spent lots of time other places.

Oh, that's so confusing, Bo answered. I've never really been outside my own body, except I guess in the mindlink, but that still wasn't like escaping the body.

Maybe you were lucky, Isabel answered. I think the goal is to be onself as much as possible, and also then to be other people. You know, Bo, the wonderful thing about all this is that we can everybody.

Bo pulled her tighter to him. He could feel her presence all around him, both in his body and in his mind. And in his mind he could feel himself slipping deeper into her. It seemed almost sexual, but he knew that this was something going on at a much higher level. And he could feel her taking him into her.

Together they watched as Isabel's life played out before them in reverse, going back before her days in the hospital, back to when she was a baby and her parents still cared for her, then back even further to before she was born.

They saw her parents, a beautiful couple, two young lovers. But star-crossed. Her parents did not approve of him. But the lovers met secretly anyway, sneaking off to be together whenever they could.

Strangely without physical desire growing in them now, Bo

and Isabel watched inside their minds as this young man and woman who would become Isabel's parents made passionate love with one another. The love and affection was so beautiful. And as the passion mounted and their union with one another increased and deepened, suddenly a light burst into brightness between them.

Isabel startled.

That's me being conceived, she acknowledged to Bo. How beautiful. I never knew my parents loved one another so. They didn't later on.

And Bo and Isabel watched the tale spin out further as the lovers discovered that Isabel's mother was pregnant and how her parents condemned her and cursed her and threw her out of their home. The lovers got married, though this really did not accomplish anything to heal the hurt.

And then the bomb fell on Los Angeles. Isabel's parents had been living out near Pomona, far from the blast site, but close enough in to be caught in the turmoil and evacuation. That night Isabel's mother received the dream of the Star-child.

Oh my, said Bo, I've never seen this before.

Yes, you have, said Isabel, it's part of every mindlink.

And Bo realized she was right, but he'd never been exactly conscious of it before. He hadn't been aware of the actual image. And he saw that that image of the baby with wise eyes surrounded by a globe of light was an image for the birth of consciousness.

And, still following Isabel's life, they came to the moment of her birth when, in part because of her fear of having this baby and being burdened with it, Isabel's mother could not relax

her plevic muscles. The baby was going to suffocate in the birth canal. And a doctor, at the last moment, took a pair of forceps and reached in to grab the baby's head and pulled it between the clenched muscles.

Isabel shivered and writhed in Bo's embrace. How scary this was, seeing herself being destroyed by the fear, her birth mangled, her body ruined.

Together they wept for her.

And their weeping carried them to a yet higher level of the mindlink and they felt themselves standing before God or before some being perhaps even beyond God, a being that sometimes seemed to them to appear like the glowing countenance of the Star-Child and sometimes like wise and loving father and sometimes like a drooling monster with human blood dripping from its insatiable maw.

And they understood in that timeless moment that such evils as Isabel's ill-fortuned birth occur because of the terrible curses men and women wish upon one another. The disapproval, the resentment, the ill-wishes, the self-righteousness that some people feel about others is what creates the bad luck and the misfortune in the world. The jealousy that some feel at the thought of another's joy -- especially sexual joy -- is what ruins the world for everybody.

How sad this all seemed. How easy it appeared to the two youngsters for people to forgive one another and to wish each other happiness instead of grief.

And Isabel realized how much she must forgive her parents

for having born her a malformed and ugly monster and forgive the doctor for his rash decision to use the forceps which crushed her infant skull and even forgive her grandparents -- whom she'd never known -- who cursed her mother and wished all this evil on her.

Bo and Isabel clung to one another beneath the old tree high above the New Mexico desert. From their spirit union came forth great forgiveness and great healing. This moment, somehow folding back upon itself in time, they realized, was what gave them the great power to heal Isabel. She had forgiven the jealousy and disapproval that had resulted in her imprisonment in the sleeping body of the crippled, retarded child. She had forgiven the wicked witch for casting the evil spell upon her and surrounding her with briars and thorns. She had discovered herself again the beautiful Briar Rose and had learned how to wake herself.

By early afternoon, the two youngsters were ready to head for the new home at Guy Fortier's Mariposa School. First, they had to go back near the "Park 'N Ride" lot to get Bo's backpack which he'd carefully sequestered under a pile of brush. Then they walked out to the main highway to hitch the short distance into Santa Fe.

They stood near an intersection so they could catch traffic turning onto the highway. Since cars would have to stop at the sign anyway, they might be more likely to pick them up.

They'd been there about fifteen minutes. Two cars had come by. One of the drivers had made a gesture to them indicating he

was only going a short distance. Bo was getting antsy. Where was his good luck now? They were both hungry and had no money left at all.

They agreed that next car they saw coming they'd use a little of their power to influence the driver to pick them up. Pretty soon, they saw a red pick-up truck coming toward them down the sideroad. Bo touched Isabel's hand. They slipped into mindlink together. And suggested innocently to the driver that he'd like to give them a ride to Santa Fe. They picked up, in return, the thought that he was headed that way anyway and would be happy to.

A moment later, as the truck pulled to a stop at the sign just across the intersection, they got confirmation of their innocent manipulation. The driver waved to them. When Isabel started to cross the street as Bo was picking up his pack, the driver of the pick-up motioned to her to stay where she was. He obviously wanted to complete his turn first. Then he paused for a moment. Bo could see that he was lighting a cigarette.

Suddenly, as if from out the blue, a car came whizzing fast down the highway. The driver of the pick-up saw it and was waiting for it to pass before turning onto the highway and stopping for Bo and Isabel. Then, to Bo's utter amazement, the car slammed on its brakes and pulled over, squealing, to pick them up.

It was the same maroon Buick classic that had picked Bo up last time he was leaving Madrid. And it arrived with the same alarming instancy it had last time.

Bo waved to the driver of the truck as he and Isabel climbed into the Buick.

A couple of hours later, after the same old man who'd given him the ride before had treated them to lunch at a Truck Stop about midway to their destination, they came upon an accident on the highway. A red pick-up truck, which looked uncomfortably like the one that almost picked them, was lying flipped over on its top just off the side of the road. A couple of Highway Patrol cars were parked nearby.

Bo wondered. Would their good luck have prevented that accident? Or had their good luck saved them from what was an inevitable event? And what kind of intervention had been made in their behalf? Who was this jolly and generous old man who'd twice now given Bo a ride? And wasn't all this just too improbable to believe?

## Part V

### REUNION AT MARIPOSA

"You're late again, Christabel," her mother shouted from the kitchen as the teenage girl came bustling in through the front door, slamming it behind her to keep out the gusts of cold air.

"I'm sorry, Mama, rehearsal ran overtime."

"I was supposed to leave for work twenty minutes ago," her mother continued, following Christabel into her tiny room just across the hall from the kitchen. "If you can't come home on time, you're gonna have to quit all these extracurricular things of yours. Who's gonna watch the babies?"

"Mama, I'm only in one activity. And the twins aren't babies anymore. They're ten years old. They can take care of themselves for a few minutes."

"Well, I'm the one that has to work to support you all. And I expect your help in keeping this family together. And I don't expect you to talk back to me."

"All right, Mama, I promise to help more. And I apologize for talking back to you."

"Now, honey, look I gotta run. Mr. Gleason'll be havin' my hide if I'm a minute later, you hear. There's beans on the stove and maybe you can make some cornbread for your brothers."

"Oh, Mama, do we have to eat such stereotypic food?" Christabel answered with a teenage whine.

"It's good food and it's cheap, hear! And I'll not be havin' you ashamed of your heritage, Christabel. No daughter of mine is too good to eat beans and cornbread. 'Specially not just 'cause she's in the Glee Club." Mrs. Washington managed to

articulate the words "Glee Club" with a Bostonian accent.

"Well, you run on now, Mama. I'll leave you some cornbread for when you get home," Christabel answered, giving her mother a peck on the cheek and she pushed her out into the hall and toward the front door.

"It's not that I mind being Black or want to pretend we're rich," Christabel Washington said to herself, as she sat down on her bed after her mother had left. "It's just I want more out of life than just living like Mama."

Looking out the window to make sure her brothers were still playing in the back yard and wouldn't see her, Christabel slid to her knees and clasped her hands prayer-fashion. "Please, God, let my life be more than this. I love Mama, but she just doesn't understand . . ."

Christabel Washington would graduate from junior high this May. At 13, she was already a year ahead of her class in the Dallas public school system. She'd skipped 3rd grade when her teachers recognized her sometimes dazzling abilities to absorb information. In fact, she'd probably have been promoted further ahead of her class if her parents hadn't objected. They feared her being around the older kids. Her mother said that was just asking to have a bastard grandchild to have to raise on top of the three kids they already had.

Besides her ability to learn quickly -- which meant she was often bored at school and spent her time in daydreams that sometimes surprised her with their unusual vividness -- Christabel was gifted with music. She'd learned to play the

piano while still in second grade. There'd been an old upright in the back of the school auditorium which she'd sneak in to play on during recess. But, even more than her ability with the piano, her singing was her real musical forte. She had perfect pitch and had always seemed totally unself-conscious about performing.

She'd also shown herself deeply religious. From very early in childhood, she'd enjoyed going to church at the big, once grand but now dilapidated old Baptist church. The church was only a few blocks from where they lived in an inner-city Black neighborhood on the edge of downtown Dallas. When she was little, Christabel would sometimes run off. Her father almost always found her either inside the church or, if it were locked, sitting on the steps out in front.

Her father, a construction worker, complained that there was something wrong with the child. When she'd get around the church, it seemed like she'd go off into some kind of trance that he just didn't think was normal.

In fact, both to take advantage of her musical abilities and to keep her out of these trances while in church, her father volunteered her for the church choir. Christabel didn't mind at all. For, while she did try to keep her eyes open, when she was singing spiritual hymns, her self-learned meditation was better than ever. The music just seemed to open up her heart and her whole perception of the world changed.

Christabel once made the mistake of telling the preacher that her "trances" were like seeing into heaven. The preacher,

who'd had just enough psychology in junior college to know what catatonia was and enough practical experience with inner-city teenagers to suspect illicit drugs everywhere, called the Washingtons in for a talk about Christabel's religiousness.

Christabel never understood whether it was because her father was honestly, if a little benightedly, concerned about her welfare or if he were just insulted and embarrassed by the preacher's suggestion that she might be "getting high" before services. But when he came home from that meeting, he commanded her to drop out of the choir and never go near the church again.

After her father was killed in a construction accident two years ago, her mother relented a little from his stern decree and allowed her to join a fledgling choral group at school. Though Mrs. Washington never did relent in her own mocking reference to the Chorale as the "Glee Club."

"Please God, don't let Mama make me stop singing. You know I love to sing. You know it raises my soul up to You," Christabel finished her prayer. And then added, "Oh, and please let the insurance settlement come through soon." The family had been kept waiting since her father's death for the benefits that were supposed to be due them and that would probably relieve some of Mrs. Washington's financial anxieties.

The smell of fresh baked cornbread still hung in the kitchen after Christabel served supper to her twin little brothers. While she washed the dishes and then straightened up the house, hoping to show her mother that she was really very considerate of the family's straitened situation, she turned on the TV. The

boys wanted to watch cartoons. But Christabel insisted on the evening news. "My social studies teacher said we have to watch the news if we're going to understand the world," she said primly as she changed the channel.

"... until more is known about the strange happenings inside the quarantine area. This is David Lewis, ABC News, Minneapolis.

"In a possibly related story tonight," anchor Connie Chung continued, "the Reverend Clyde Houston of Kansas City, Kansas has reiterated his charges that the radiation leaks and the radio signals emanating from inside Devil's Lake are caused by a young boy from Asheville, North Carolina.

"Two weeks ago Reverend Houston called a press conference to announce that he'd received information from religious leader and philanthropist, John Weddington Simmons, who is still in an Atlanta hospital after suffering a stroke, that the so-called Star-children, many of whom were born after the nuclear accident in 2000 that resulted in the creation of Devil's Lake, were 'mounting a spiritual attack' on the American people.

"As evidence of this plot, Houston cited the death of Jonathan Stiers, a resident of a religious group calling itself the Sweetwater Farm Community. According to Houston, Stiers was forced to jump to his death from a helicopter by the 'psychic power' of 14 year old Bowman Mayberry, also a resident of the community who disappeared shortly after the incident. Mayberry was the most prominent of the so-called Star-Children during the flurry of excitement in 2001."

A photograph of Bowman had appeared on the screen. Christabel almost dropped the plate she was drying. The face was so familiar. She'd seen him many times in her daydreams. She realized she even recognized his name.

"Stiers, a retired theologian, was being flown back to his home in a private helicopter owned by Simmons, whom he had been visiting.

"Police were skeptical of the 'psychic power' story. One detective told ABC News that there is no precedent for prosecuting a person for murder committed by psychic powers. Besides, according to others at Sweetwater Farm, the pilot of Simmons' helicopter had fired shots randomly at the community's buildings.

"Today Houston has added a new wrinkle to the story. With that report is John Edwards."

A scene of a desolate-looking highway appeared on the screen. The camera panned around to a stern looking man in a tight-fitting black suit.

"About here is where it happened," the man said, as he held up a newspaper showing the headline: "Devil Invades America." ????

"Hubert \_\_\_\_\_, a retired lay minister of the Church of God of Jesus Christ, says he was driving from Modesto yesterday. He picked up two young teenagers, a boy and a girl, hitchhiking south. They told him they were going to visit their family in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"According to \_\_\_\_\_, when he recognized the boy as Bowman Mayberry . . ."

In the background, \_\_\_\_\_ could be heard shouting

"Demon-child, demon-child."

" . . . the girl who was riding next to him in the front seat turned into some kind of animal and snarled at him."

The scene changed to the inside of a governmental-looking office.

"Officer Louis Philips stopped \_\_\_\_\_ for speeding a few minutes later. What did you find, sir?"

The Highway Patrolman looked nervous. "I came upon the scene when I saw Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ suddenly accelerate. I pursued his vehicle with my siren and flashers on. He soon stopped. He was quite agitated. He pointed at the two youngsters he had with him, shouting 'Arrest them, arrest them.'

"When I asked what they had done, he said they were demons who were going to take over the country. He showed me with a religious newspaper which carried a story to that effect."

"What about the children?" the reporter asked.

"In the back seat was a 14 year old boy who indeed looked somewhat like the photograph accompanying the newspaper article, tho' his hair was darker and he was wearing glasses. In the front seat was a 14 year old girl whom the boy identified as his sister. She was . . .uh . . . well, she was . . . I guess, I should say . . . mentally retarded and kind of deformed.

"Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ insisted she had looked quite normal when he picked them up."

"Was the boy Bowman Mayberry?" asked the reporter.

"After we got back to the station, the boy acknowledged that that was his name and that he was from Asheville, North Carolina.

He said he was running away from all the publicity that had followed what he called the 'terrorist attack' on his home. That was why he'd changed his hair color, he said."

"Did you arrest them?"

"We ran a check on the boy. There was no warrant. We didn't have jurisdiction anyway. My boss called the authorities in Asheville. They said there was no reason to hold them. That they were not suspects."

"Well, Connie, there you have it. Does this story sound wierd or doesn't it. This is John Edwards, ABC Bakersfield, California."

"Reverend Houston decried police unwillingness to apprehend the young man," Chung continued. "He called on citizens to lobby local and federal authorities to indict young Mayberry. And he repeated is warning that unless these children are stopped, they will destroy this country."

Chung looked up from the page she was reading and made a funny face into the camera. "Oil ministers of Oman today . . . "

Christabel wasn't listening anymore. Something about that story was too real, too close to home, tho' she wasn't sure why. She was sure she recognized Hubert \_\_\_\_\_ and even the Highway Patrolman. It was as though she'd just dreamed that whole story the night before.

2

"Now, girl, I don't want you talking no nonsense about this "Star-child" business," Mrs. Washington announced as she was sitting down for a midnight snack of Christabel's cornbread and

milk. "And how come you ain't asleep. It's long past your bedtime."

"Mama, I don't know what you mean about nonsense. I don't know anything about this 'Star-child' thing except what I heard on the news tonight. And I just wanted to ask you about it."

"Well, that stuff's all magic. Not anything to think about."

"But what is it, Mama?"

"Christabel," her mother said solemnly, "There are some things in this world a Black woman just ain't got no business messin' in. I discovered that a long time ago. And it's something you've got to learn too."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the 'Star-children,' what else?"

"What's that got to do with us?"

"Well, maybe nothing. But maybe something, Christabel. Maybe something you ought not know anything about. 'Cause it'll just cause you trouble."

"Mama, on the news tonight I saw a story about a boy in California. And, Mama, I'm sure I saw him in my dream last night. I mean I knew the whole story already before the reporter told it. How could that be?"

"Oh, child, you shouldn't be telling me this."

"How come, Mama?"

"'Cause now I gotta tell you a secret I kept from you all your life."

"Please tell me."

"Well, this story goes way back before you was born. I was just a child myself, barely older than you are now. You're daddy and I were planning on getting married just as soon as we were old enough. And then there was this terrible disaster, you know, when the bombs fell on L.A. and North Dakota. And for a while everything changed and we all thought we was gonna die.

"Your daddy and me figured no use waiting to get married now, 'cause there might not be any future. The whole planet was acting real strange. Like there was no wind at all for weeks. And we all thought we was gonna die.

"And pretty soon I got in the family way with you. And we were both so happy. But we still didn't know what was gonna happen. And then the wind started again and things went back to normal. About that time we were hearing all these reports on TV and in the papers about children being born who were sort of miraculous and that made everybody feel real good just being 'round 'em. And I went to church every day and prayed that you might be like that. 'Cause I thought that'd be a wonderful blessing for our family.

"Oh, Christabel, this next part of the story is hard to tell. I don't like to remember this."

"Please, Mama."

"Your daddy and me was coming home one night from a dance. And this carload of young punk kids started following us, shouting things at us. And your daddy shouted some things back at them. And then all of a sudden they had stopped the car and jumped out and were all over us.

"And they held your daddy with a knife to his throat and,

well, one at a time, right there on the street in front of him, they attacked me. . . "

"You mean they raped you, Mama?" Christabel said tenderly, reaching across the table to grasp her mother's hand.

Mrs. Washington nodded assent. "And then during that awful thing, all of a sudden I had this vision. And it was just like what they said in the papers. I saw this light come down and it came right over me and I could see this beautiful baby in a glowing circle and the light went right into my body. And then I fainted or something.

"I woke up a while later and your father was lying on the ground unconscious. And I woke him up. And he was terribly ashamed and he cried and cried because he hadn't been able to protect me.

"And I told him I understood that there were just too many of them. And that it was okay anyway 'cause I had this vision like in the newspapers. And he didn't like that. He said I was crazy. And that I was just trying to make him look like a weakling. He made me promise never to say anything about this again.

"Christabel, maybe you are one of these Star-children. I mean I swear when those boys were raping me and I was so afraid they was gonna hurt you inside me, I saw this light and I knew everything was going to be okay."

"Thank you for telling me, Mama. I needed to now that, I mean, maybe that explains why I have these strange dreams and seem to see things that are happening far away."

"Child, I never said anything 'cause I was afraid your father would leave me if I told that story again. He said it would just get in the papers and it humiliate him. And now I'm afraid you'll leave me. . . "

"I don't know, Mama. I don't know what any of this means?"

3

Bo and Isabel and Scotty and Thomas had seen the reports on Clyde Houston's accusations. They weren't sure whether to be worried or not. On the one hand, the whole thing looked pretty silly. On the other, suddenly they'd been propelled into the forefront of the news. And they were as much a story if they stayed hidden than if they revealed themselves.

What they knew was important was to gather together as many kids like themselves as they could. They had clearly seen that there was amazing strength in numbers.

Guy Fortier's invitation to stay at Mariposa School was a godsend. It gave them a safe place to hide at least for a while and to reach out in a consistent and organized manner to other Star-children. It also provided them an opportunity to practice developing their powers. As Bo had realized in the hills outside Madrid, they were only just beginning to understand their abilities. Already, without quite understanding how they'd done it, they'd managed to perform a major miracle in transforming Isabel's body. (Isabel was quite concerned personally that the transformation might not last if they failed to understand how they'd done it. The sudden reversal in Brother Hubert's car had terrified her.)

Bo was most interested in learning why and how the abilities seemed to be facilitated by the presence of another person. So far it appeared that what each could do individually was to slip into a kind of semi-mystical trance in which certain skills were available -- like his connection with the birds. When he thought about that he missed his friends Boni and Merry immensely. It made him realize how much his life had changed. He was growing up and his powers seemed to be growing with him. The prospect of that was both exciting and scary. Bo didn't have any idea what awaited him as a full grown adult.

The four began to practice diligently several hours each day. It was at first easy. The experience of the mindlink consciousness itself was pleasant and satisfying. The practice though soon became onerous. They first practiced learning to link their powers without having to actually touch. They had failures in the beginning but soon found that there was a certain attitude of mind that accomplished the same linking that physical touch did. That attitude was something like an awareness of their presence to one another. Holding in consciousness these delicate attitudes, all of them discovered, would be hard work.

What surprised them most was that their abilities increased -- though their control of them seemed to decrease -- as they became more stressful. Bo suggested that this seemed appropriate. Hadn't their mothers all been under terrible stress at the time of the Star-Child dream? Hadn't the whole planet been under terrible stress at the time of the great

transformation that gave birth to the Star-child phenomenon? Stress seemed to have something to do with forcing the evolutionary leap.

"Maybe it's because as stress increases, need to accomplish change does too," Thomas suggested.

In the late afternoons and then again late at night, the four again met to try their outreach. As Scotty had suggested back in Little Rock, they used a map of the country to organize and focus their mindlink projection and their listening.

Isabel had previously listened in on many lives and had inklings of who the others were. Scotty had become quite angry with her, in fact, when once they all got together she was unable to tick off names and addresses. She admitted that she used to be much better at making these contacts when she was stuck in the hospital, but anyway most of those had been in dreams. Thomas pointed out that that was consistent with what they'd thought about their abilities: When she was stuck in the crippled body she had much more need to communicate to the world outside the hospital.

Isabel pouted for almost a whole day, thereby ruining most of the practice, when, after this Thomas's observation, Scotty had suggested that they put her back in the crippled body then and get some action on their outreach effort.

Surprisingly soon, the outreach began to get results. They'd discovered during one of their skills practice sessions that, just as they could concentrate on being present to one

another without actually touching, so they could hold in mind the attitude that all other Star-child were present to them through the mindlink.

Ironically, of course, their previous difficulties in making contacts except under stress or through accidental inadvertant connections, had resulted, Bo pointed out, from the very idea of reaching out and achieving communication with someone far away. The technique worked effectively by imagining that the other person was very close instead of very far.

Most of the other Star-children they developed communication with were only vaguely aware of being that. Few of them understood that the occasional articles in the tabloids or the recent TV news casts had been about other children just like them. Most of them, in fact, had felt like they were the only ones in the world who had the ability to communicate with animals or to mobilize good fortune around them. Most felt isolated and a little afraid of the powers.

Bo was honestly surprised at finding this attitude so prevalent. He understood that he and Thomas were a little unusual in having grown up together in an environment that really supported them in the development of their "mystical" intuitive and meditative skills. They'd been raised to be proud of their specialness, not to hide it lest they seem different.

Bo was shocked to discover that the great transformation he'd thought had happened in the year 2000 around the time of his birth had been mainly media hype -- and maybe wishful thinking, he realized, on the part of his elders at Sweetwater Farm.

They'd certainly wanted to believe the transformation had been real and extensive. After all, they'd risked their lives and honors to bring it about.

The other kids they contacted, then, were surprised and sometimes frightened by the proposition that the foursome made to them. Come to Mariposa School and join us was a scary proposal. None of the kids were over 14, of course, so most of them had never even begun to consider leaving home.

"What is amazing," Guy Fortier remarked to the assembled group over a festive dinner he and the original four prepared to welcome the newcomers, "is that so many of you youngster responded to the invitation to come to Mariposa School.

"It's been two weeks now since Bo and Isabel first arrived," he continued nostalgically. "I hadn't believed I'd ever hear the voices of children in these old walls again. You've brought a wonderful spirit to this place. And I am proud to welcome you my house. I am proud to participate in what appears to be a major evolutionary step in human consciousness.

"You're being here fulfills so many of my personal dreams and hopes for the world. Why back in the 60s and 70s, when I was sort of a hippie, we all talked about the Age of Aquarius and the coming transformation . . ."

Bo, sitting next to Fortier, tugged at the sleeve of his jacket. "Let's eat," he whispered.

There were fifteen of them altogether. They'd been arriving over the past week. A couple of them had literally run away from home. Most of them, however, were there with their parents'

permission and cooperation. Indeed, several parents had driven their children out to Santa Fe personally to see what Mariposa School was going to be. Others had called and talked with Guy before putting their child on a plane.

Most parents of Starchildren had been used to giving their sons or daughters a remarkable degree of personal responsibility and freedom. That just went with the special "vocation." These kids were different. They were precocious, talented, sociable, and, in most cases, extraordinarily lucky.

And most of the parents understood that there were political and social currents that threatened the kids' security. While parents and children alike were confident that they would overcome the threats, they understood that some kind of action might be required to do so. Organizing made sense.

Of course, there were many more Star-children out there, Bo was acutely aware, who couldn't or wouldn't come join them. But, even so, most of them were willing to maintain mindlink contact with the core group at Mariposa School.

No one had any idea how many such children there were. Bo had always thought there were millions. Now the effort to reach out to them seemed to indicate there were less than a hundred. Bo understood that these hundred or so they'd managed to make contact with were probably just the tip of the phenomenon. In a few years as the kids grew up and became more independent and self-reliant and self-conscious, more would appear.

In a discussion with Guy soon after his return with Isabel, Bo had expressed these same ideas. Guy had suggested an obvious

parallel with sexual orientation deviance. Gay people grow up feeling different without knowing quite how or why. Some take many years to recognize what's going on with them. Others discover much quicker. So it seemed with the Starchildren.

After dinner, Bo made a little speech of his own. "We've come here to learn to develop our talents and to prepare for the backlash that seems to be mounting against us. We need to be able to show the public that we are not a threat, that we are not demons, and that we can help bring peace to the world. None of us seems to know the future, yet I think we all know that in the mindlink consciousness we've been feeling some sort of anxieties about what's coming up.

"I don't think we need to know what that is. I guess, if we really needed to know, well, we would. What seems important is preparing ourselves to confront the hate and blame that's liable to be aimed at us . . . especially if things at Devil's Lake get worse.

"Even more than the scientists with their geiger counters, we all know something's strange up there.

"This is the start of something big. . . ."

4

Bowman had spent the afternoon sunning in the courtyard of the Mariposa School. Though, in mid-February, it was still winter, the sun was bright and warm. The air was clear and fresh. The light, shot through with the brilliance and starkness of a winter afternoon, shone into the courtyard with crystalline sharpness. Bo had taken the opportunity to absorb a little

warmth and get a little color into his pale skin.

After a couple of hours of mindlink practice after breakfast, he had pulled a book out of Fortier's extensive library. He selected a yellowed and brittle paperback by Arthur C. Clarke, the 20th century science-fiction writer who'd indirectly had such impact on his life. This was a book he'd never seen, THE CITY AND THE STARS. And though the style seemed dated, he got caught up almost immediately in the story. Bo strongly identified with Clarke's hero, a teenage boy named Alvin who was struggling to break away from age-old traditions and superstitions and to discover his personal role in the development of his society.

Bo'd gotten cold inside the shadowy library lit only by an antique banker's light with green glass shade shining from behind his shoulder. Seeing how bright the sun was as it filled the courtyard around noon, Bo carried his book outside and pulled a weathered old redwood chaise-longue out into the light. After finding a cushion in one of the storage rooms, he stretched out to read and to enjoy the warmth.

After a few minutes, he pulled off his heavy cotton sweat shirt. He was a little embarrassed, he realized, to expose his body, though he was also a little excited. He thought to himself how ironic it was that he somehow felt guilty, or at least shy, about the other kids seeing his body and yet he'd shared with them such awesome intimacies already. They had seen deep inside his mind, remembered his experiences as though they were their own, virtually lived inside him and seen through his eyes.

And yet taking off his shirt was embarrassing. How silly, he thought. It's all a kind of confusion and struggle with sexual development, he told himself rather precociously.

The sun felt good on his pale skin. The warmth made him conscious of his body. He was a surprised to realize how his body was changing. . . and a little embarrassed. It's almost like I'm becoming a new person.

Though of course he was still but a young adolescent, Bo was clearly becoming a man. Indeed, even in the month since he'd left Sweetwater, his body had changed. His irregular eating during the week or two on the road had stripped away whatever little bit of baby fat had been left on his frame. His shoulders had broadened just enough to begin to give him the V-shaped chest of a sexually mature male. He thought he might even have gotten a bit taller. He was afraid he was getting gawky as adolescent boys do.

In the late afternoon, Bo realized it was getting cold. The sun slipped behind a tree in the courtyard and was about to be eclipsed entirely by one of buildings of the school. Beginning to shiver, he pulled back on his sweatshirt. And then went into the kitchen to fix something warm to drink. Fortier had set out cocoa, tea, and coffee by the microwave boiler and told the kids they could help themselves. Bo set a cup of water under the glass dome of the boiler and while it was activated, tore open an envelop of chocolate. In a moment he had himself a cup of steaming hot cocoa which he carried into the TV room/den next to the kitchen.

Bo was surprised to find nobody there. The new kid, Joey Starkman, seemed to watch cartoons 24 hours a day. Joey was a nine year old boy who'd shown up last week after his Baptist parents kicked him out of their home in Phoenix when he acknowledged having been in mindlink with Bo and Isabel and the others. He'd apparently picked a bad time for the revelation. A TV newscaster had just reported that a Christian Fundamentalist group calling itself The Armageddon Society had called for a round up of the "children of the Anti-Christ."

Bo and the others had been appalled when they heard his story and immediately invited him to join them. Fortier had generously offered to pay for the boy's transportation, joking that he was becoming something of a one-man travel agency for the kids. They were all grateful to him for his generosity. They realized that at least for the moment they desperately needed the retreat he provided them so they could mount their strength.

Bo switched on the TV and curled up on the couch with his cocoa. He idly scanned through the channels to see what was on. He was quickly pleased to discover one of his favorite programs, "Elders of the Airways" was just beginning.

As always, the hour-long interview program, hosted by Dr. Carl Sagan, began with opening titles interspersed with an account of the origin and development of the space habitat from which the program was broadcast. The habitat, named DK after the Librarian of the Great Library at Alexandria, was both a vast repository of human knowledge and a luxury residence hotel

for some of the richest men and women of earth.

Voiced-over vivid computer-generated graphics, Sagan, now sounding aged but still nasally mellifluous, explained how billions and billions of dollars had been donated by the very wealthy soon after the nuclear accidents in 2000 to develop a space habitat off the surface of the planet in which a comprehensive library of human knowledge could be stored away from the dangers of future holocausts.

Almost everyone -- including Bo -- understood that the satellite-based archives was both a ploy by the very rich to provide themselves a secure environment and an effort by Sagan to prevent a repeat of the terrible disruption of human intellectual evolution caused by the burning of the Library at Alexandria in A.D. 000, the date that can be considered the beginning of the so-called Dark Ages. Sagan both wanted to prevent another Dark Ages (which the rise of religious Fundamentalism in the late 1900s ominously portended) and to immortalize himself in human history.

Perhaps taking a clue from one of his philosophical opponents on the Religious Right -- or so Peregrine had told Bo he suspected -- like TV Evangelist Jim Bakker who established his personal vatican as the luxury Heritage Hotel built with tax exempt and tax-deductible funds, Sagan funded DK by creating it as a non-profit, U.N.-sponsored project. Sagan himself had become curator, archivist, host, and maitre d'hotel of DK.

When space medicine research in the 1990s showed that living in zero-gravity significantly retarded aging and sometimes dramatically encouraged remissions of cancers and of cardiac and vascular diseases, aristocrats whose wealth had not protected

them from morality, but could possibly protect them from gravity began clamoring for development of a space-based hospital. Sagan capitalized on these intentions by spearheading the DK project, adroitly shifting the emphasis from hospital to residence hotel.

Then after the nuclear accident of 2000, it became evident that not only was life on the surface jeopardized by cancer, heart attacks, and aging, it was clearly vulnerable to catastrophic accidents. Thus at almost the same time that American industry was focused on the fallout clean-up effort, the aerospace industries were gearing up for the construction of DK.

The huge cylindrical satellite was built in a very high orbit so that it could survive even world-ending holocaust. While of course there was continuous shuttle-craft contact with earth, DK was touted to be virtually self-sufficient. Built as a scaled down model of the space habitat in Arthur C. Clarke's RENDEVOUS WITH RAMA, it carried its own tiny oceans and forests which processed the atmosphere and could provide at least rudimentary, algae-based food.

DK was said to be equipped with both defensive and offensive weapons in case of attack from below. It was even believed by many to be capable to launch itself into a solar orbit so that, if necessary, it could jettison planet earth and create its own niche in the solar system.

In spite of this, in fact, the real effect of the space-based residence hotel had been to further unify the earth. As Sagan himself had predicted in the 1980s and as he proclaimed in the reprise of DK's history -- in the innocently self-congratulatory

tone for which he'd become famous -- moving the richest men and women of earth into orbit had given these very influential individuals the vision of Spaceship Earth. From space, nationalism appeared meaningless, pollution of the jewel-like atmosphere was perceived as obviously undesirable, petty feuds over ownership of little parcels of land seemed ludicrous.

As the voiced-over graphics of the introductory titles concluded, the glistening blue-white globe of the earth swam into view. An announcer's face replaced the globe, "Tonight, instead of the usual interview of residents of the DK community, "Elders of the Airways" will present this special message from DK's Director, Carl Sagan. And now, Dr. Sagan . . ."

The image switched to Sagan's face. Though his hair was now salt-and-peppered with grey, he looked as boyish as ever.

"Ten years in zero-gravity have certainly preserved his youth," Guy Fortier remarked to Bo as he walked into the TV room and sat down on the sofa behind Bo.

"I guess so," Bo responded briefly and non-committally, letting Fortier know he was interested in watching the program and not in chatting.

". . . . era in human history has developed its own science," Sagan was saying as an image appeared of a primitive sundial. "Yet each laid the groundwork for further development."

As the picture changed to a piece of medieval clockwork showing the phases of the moon, Sagan continued, "Just as there was a 4th C. science, so there was a 12th C. science, a 17th C. science, a 20th C. science, and now the beginning of 21 C. science. And there will be a 24th C. and even a 34th C. science.

It is probable that from the perspective of the 34th C., our conceptions today will seem almost as primitive as those of the 12th C. do now."

Images of automobiles, airplanes, atomic explosions, and spacecraft launches flashed by quickly. "And yet in the last hundred years, the advances in human knowledge about the universe have been greater than in all the preceding centuries. That is primarily because of the development of what we call experimental method. Scientists discovered the essential technique for uncovering truth. Not by looking back to ancient authority but by looking to concrete, rigidly controlled experience in the present, experimenters have been able to tease out the basic rules of creation.

"The developments of the last century have been truly revolutionary. Nothing before is even comparable. Centuries of superstition and ignorance were ended. The question which has faced us since is whether yet another major revolution -- comparable to the development of scientific method -- is possible. And, in fact, whether it is going on right now!

"New discoveries have required new paradigms, new ways of understanding and conceptualizing reality. Sir Issac Newton gave us the first great scientific paradigm shift. His description of the motion of objects in space radically changed the way the world had been conceived. His view was held virtually sacrosanct until the early 20th C. when Einstein's understanding of the relativity of motion dramatically overturned it.

"Soon quantum mechanics supplanted some of the conceptions

of the relativity. Then string theory replaced quantum theory. And after that in the 1990s the Theory of Formative Causation and the Consciousness Field Expansion Hypothesis shifted our entire conception of what the physical universe really is and how it operates."

Over scenes of nuclear accelerators and graphics of particle interactions, Sagan explained the most current model of the universe and its subatomic constituents. "As quantum theory -- and the so-called Uncertainty Principle of Heisenberg -- began to demonstrate nearly a century ago, there can be no role of the privileged observer. We conscious human beings are an intrinsic aspect of the world we inhabit. We can never truly separate ourselves from the experiment. Indeed, our search for knowledge is itself a kind of basic "force" that influences the constitution of reality.

"According to the Many Worlds Hypothesis of quantum theory, a myriad of virtual worlds exists alongside the actual world we experience. Now virtual worlds are not just vague possibilities; it is clear in high-energy particle physics that virtual particles, even tho' they don't possess actuality, do have effects in the motion of actual particles. That is to say that virtual worlds are real in some sense. What seems to promote virtual worlds to actual world status is an observation by a conscious observer. That is to say that human experience seems to be what brings reality into creation.

"The Consciousness Field Expansion Hypothesis describes a universe of real non-physical dimensions. Prior to the four physical dimensions of length, width, depth, and duration, there

appear to be three dimensions of force and beyond them a series of dimensions which manifest themselves in human experience as consciousness itself.

"How and why the consciousness field collapsed into only four physical dimensions has not been explained. That collapse resulted in what we familiarly know as the Big Bang. Whatever force or forces are operable in the fully expanded universe seem to have brought that universe to a "singularity," that is, to an edge of spacetime. Such singularities are believed to occur in black holes."

A graphic representation appeared showing the surface of space as a two dimensional grid of intersecting green lines over which the camera appeared to be rushing at great speed. Here and there in the grid were mounds and pits around which the grid lines were distorted. These Bo recognized as so-called gravity wells -- these were familiar graphics. As a narrator explained how mass distorts spacetime and enough mass can create a virtually bottomless pit, the camera's vantage appeared to fall suddenly into a deep, tightly constricted funnel of grid lines. This cyclone-shaped bottomless cone Bo recognized as a black hole.

"Imagine a singularity so vast that the universe itself could be swept into it," Sagan continued. "Or perhaps better said, imagine the universe of super-consciousness pulling itself into such a vast singularity.

"What apparently pops out at the bottom is a new universe in

which the nine superdimensions are compressed into a non-dimensional point outside of space and time. That point of infinitely high energy and complexity and infinitely small extension and variety burst into the four physical dimensions as the Big Bang that originated our universe several billions of billions of years ago.

"It could be said that what Banged into being was Possibility. The rules of quantum mechanics describe how, through the laws of statistics, waves of possibility intersected one another in order to create the infinite variety of possible universes.

"The expansion of the Big Bang pulled the dimensions of space into possibility. The first dimensions were three vectors of Superforce. These actualized as three seemingly different forces -- the electroweak and the strong nuclear force and gravitation. The interaction of the Superforce with its projections into virtual space pulled into possibility the dimensions that we know as the directions of extension -- breadth, width, depth, and duration. With continuing expansion, these pulled into possibility the shape of the morphogenic fields that actualize as life and consciousness.

"Consciousness, by knowing and selecting among the possible virtual universes, retroactively created the cosmos we live in. This the so-called non-physical dimensions of reality appear to extend perpendicularly into what in past ages was perhaps called 'Spirit.'

"We can see that this cosmos continues to expand in space, time, and consciousness. The expansion can be perceived by human

beings both interiorly and exteriorly. Interiorly the expansion looks like acquisition of information and, over time, the evolution of mind and self-awareness. Exteriorly it looks like the stretching of space at the speed of light -- which is, of course, the rate of exchange of information.

"That is to say that, through gradual unfolding into complexity and variety, the energy and extension in the physical dimensions have become the life and consciousness of the non-physical dimensions which, in turn, selects which alternative worlds will come into actuality."

While scenes of oceans and tiny algae and then fishes and then primitive reptiles moved across the screen, Sagan continued, "The discoveries of physics in the closing years of the 20th C. turned the scientific universe upside down. Instead of life and consciousness evolving out of matter, it has come to appear the other way around. What, from inside the experience, we know as life and consciousness appear to be the basic field-surface upon the physical world is projected.

"In explaining gravity, Einstein proposed the concept of spacetime as a four dimensional surface across which activity propagates in the form of electromagnetic vibrations, i.e., light.

"Activity in any one dimension creates a field disturbance in another. The most familiar example of this is that the movement of electrons in a wire create a magnetic field around the wire. This is the principle behind the operation of both electromagnets and radio wave broadcast.

"In Einstein's universe, this spacetime surface was thought to be expanding." The familiar image appeared of the universe as a three dimensional surface on a superspace balloon. "We can see the other galaxies all moving away from us, just as polka dots on a balloon appear to move away from one another uniformly as the balloon is inflated."

"It now appears that the superspace itself is a "consciousness field" which is distorted by the presence of activity on its surface -- its "surface," of course, is our three-dimensional universe. That is to say that what's "inside" the balloon is what we call consciousness. And the activity propagating across its surface -- which in the physical universe looks like light and in the non-physical universe of our minds is information exchange."

As an image appeared of a brilliant point source of light, Sagan added, "The speed of light now appears to be the speed of God's thought."

Sagan's smiling face filled the screen. He paused for a moment and then laughed. "For most of us these ideas are impossible to conceive. Most scientists only understand them mathematically. Ironically, what had once been the arch-rival of science as a source of knowledge, that is, religion, is proving to be one of the primary sources of knowledge about consciousness fields. The images of religious myth were one of the primary ways to describe features of the consciousness field as it impinged in the minds of individual human beings."

Sagan's face had been replaced with scenes of bright sunlight pouring through the stained glass windows of a medieval

cathedral casting multi-color patterns onto the ancient stone floor.

"Of course, the mistake of the religions was to predicate material reality to the mythic images. We can perhaps now begin to understand that the images, say of the personal God or of an afterlife, were projections into physical space of the shape of consciousness.

"The effort of scientists now is to map the consciousness field into the mathematics of the nine dimensional matrix. This is a stupendous undertaking. It requires a new conception of mathematics that can measure what seem to be such non-physical qualities of consciousness as forgiveness and blame, love and hate, insight and ignorance -- eros and thanatos."

As the background music swelled, scenes appeared of the primitive earth. Volcanic eruptions gave way to crashing ocean waves followed by ferns gently unfolding. "The force that seems to propel the evolution of life is what we have always called 'the will to live.'"

In what Bo thought must have been intended as a sight gag, the screen suddenly flashed to a scene from George Lukas, Jr.'s recently released holo "Star Wars IX" as a fleet of Jedi starships soared into space, while a young Obiwon Kenobi proclaimed, "The Force be with you."

As scenes again appeared of animal evolution, Sagan explained, "One of the first scientific models of this complex process appeared in the latter half of the last century, Rupert Sheldrake's Theory of Formative Causation. Sheldrake, a

biologist, hypothesized non-temporal, transspatial "morphogenetic fields" which provide templates for the development of living matter.

"Such fields are now perhaps better understood as the distortions of the geometry of what we can call "noospace," that is, the multidimensional consciousness field of which spacetime is the physical projection.

"Sheldrake's hypothesis, now experimentally verified in several ways, argued that evolution occurred not in the structure of genetic material made up of DNA molecules, but in the morphogenetic fields that influenced the shape of the DNA.

"It appears, in fact, that it is the opening and closing of the spiral DNA molecule which distorts and loosens noospace and permits the decompression of the consciousness field.

"The complex, holographic patterns of neural activity in our brains which are layered upon the activity of the opening and closing DNA, in turn, distort the consciousness field into frames of reference which close-in upon themselves, somewhat like bubbles in soapy water. These enclosed frames of reference experience themselves as you and I."

On the screen a tiny bubble grew at the tip of an air nozzle. As it grew larger and larger, patterns of colors flashed across its surface. Suddenly it burst.

"Embedded in the shape of the consciousness fields appear to be engrams that demonstrate how to open the frame of reference without collapsing the bubbles. These engrams, we believe, are what have been experienced in the past as the myths of mystical experience.

"Where these instructions came from, we have no idea. It may be that they are simply part of the structure of the consciousness field. It may be that they have been inserted by prior consciousnesses that transcended matter altogether and left clues behind for future universes to follow.

"Outside the enclosed frames of reference, it appears the consciousness field is at least bi-polar. That means that it takes two locations in physical space to generate a distortion in noospace. In human terms, that means that it takes two people communicating with one another to change the shape of the surface of mind. In even simpler words, it means people communicate with one another."

"That's why we have to be touching each other in order to change things," Bo suddenly and excitedly announced outloud.

"What's that?" Guy asked.

Bo started to explain and then realized he was missing something important.

". . . this message tonight, because on earth the self-enclosed bubbles of consciousness appear to be bursting. A new kind of consciousness is developing."

A scene of the Infant Jesus with glowing halo appeared.

"One of the engrams on the morphogenetic field appears in human consciousness as what we now call 'the baby of light.' A variety of icons of the Divine Infant flashed by.

"In the last decade, for reasons we can only guess at, there has been a dramatic change in the shape of the noospace in which we live. The human race has been at a crossroads. We have had

the power to destroy ourselves. World consciousness has grown. We can now see the earth as a single fragile environment, not just a collection of diverse places over which individual warring nations could maintain hegemony. This has been a crucial change.

"Peace on Earth is one major example of this change. DK, where I am standing, is yet another. And yet another, and maybe the most fundamental, is the appearance among us of individual human beings who can experience rudimentary control over the distortions they create in the consciousness field.

"Most recently these children -- for they are still but youngsters -- have become the object of a vile publicity campaign to discredit them. Now, in fact, that campaign has been responsible for residents and guests of DK to recognize the reality of these children's abilities to alter noospace. But now we call upon citizens of earth to repudiate these accusations of demonism and devilry and to embrace the new generation of multi-dimensional individuals that is growing up in your midst."

Music rose as the camera moved beyond Sagan to show the view outside the windows of DK. The end credits began to scroll across the shining globe of earth.

"Wow, oh wow," was all Bowman could say for the next ten minutes.

And within those ten minutes, all of the children at Mariposa began to file silently into the TV room. After they all arrived, Bo managed to say that they had to watch this show. He accessed the instantaneous memory circuits of the TV, selected the beginning of the most recent program, and started over the episode of "Elders of the Airways."

5

The next day Christabel arrived. And the ultimatum was announced.

PART VI

ISABEL IN THE LIGHT

For a moment Bo's heart had sunk as he believed he'd been caught. The door into the stairwell where he was hiding had swung open suddenly. He'd been sure one of the terrorists had spied him. He almost screamed out loud.

But as the door was pulled closed just as quickly as it had been opened by a blur of long golden blond hair, Bo realized it was not a terrorist who'd found him, but Isabel.

"O my God, you scared me." He managed to keep his voice down to a pressured whisper.

"Well, I'm sorry," Isabel responded. "I thought you'd picked up on the sense of security I'd been sending out."

"I did, but I didn't realize that meant you were in the next room. How in the world did you get past the terrorists in there?"

"I guess my mindlink with you wasn't very clear, 'cause it was taking all my effort to focus on the invisibility technique. But it worked, didn't it?"

"I'll say," Bo responded still breathing hard. "But you scaed the living daylights out of me!"

"Come on, Bo, let's get up to the top of the building. Scotty and some of the others think that if we can position ourselves at key points around the terrorists we can create a kind of a consciousness web that'll let us get control of them -- or at least calm them down long enough to negotiate with them.

"The other kids are spreading out around the base of the

building, down in the subway and first floor. We're supposed to meet with Scotty and Thomas on the roof."

After climbing a few flights, Bo and Isabel left the stairwell and switched to an elevator. They believed they'd selected one that didn't stop on the first 9 floors and so the display over the doors on 3 were the terrorists were holed up with their bomb wouldn't show.

Once they made it to the top floor and then climbed the rest of the way on foot, they came out onto the roof. They sensed Scotty and Thomas a few floors below them huffing and puffing their way up the stairs. They hadn't trusted the elevators.

As Bo step onto the roof, he was reminded of the dream he'd had on the bus way back when they were leaving Sweetwater to meet Scotty -- that was less than a month ago, he realized, but it seemed like a lifetime.

There was a strong, cold wind blowing across the heliport. But other than that, the place looked almost exactly like the scene in his dream. He was enjoying the deja vu for a moment, until he realized that what he remembered happened in the dream was that a young girl -- Isabel? -- was about to be thrown over the side.

Almost without thinking, Bo sent out a warning to Scotty and Thomas to be careful and not to come bursting onto the roof. And another warning to Isabel that he suspected danger.

Okay, she acknowledged, but I think it's okay. She was standing almost in the center of the roof, exulting in the panormaic and breathtaking view. I've never seen anything like

this before, she communicated.

Bo stepped back away from the opening of the stairwell from below. And just as he did, he heard footsteps pounding on the stairs. And suddenly a squad of young Iranians came bounding onto the roof.

"The she-devil," one of them shouted in a heavily accented voice. "Kill her. Throw her over."

Before either Bo or Isabel had time to even realize what was happening, much less mount some kind of defense against it, another of the men had tackled Isabel and was running with her in his arms right toward the edge.

O my God, it's my dream, Bo thought. Then mustered all his psychic strength, Stop, he ordered.

The running man slowed a moment, but did not stop. Then suddenly an order rang out through the crisp air, "Wait, I want her."

At the top of the stairs was the terrorist leader.

"You are Bowman Mayberry?" he asked.

"What's it to you?" Bo retorted.

"I think you know well. And who is she?" he added, pointing to Isabel.

"Who are you?" Bo answered, ignoring the question.

"My name is Simbu Nidal," he answered. "And, you see, I will give you a lesson in cooperation. I tell you my name. Now you tell me her name."

"What difference does it make? You want to kill both of us."

"Oh no, you misunderstand. We are not murderers. We are all humble servants of Allah. We want only what is best for Allah and for his people. And I want to know who you are because I have vowed to Allah that I would free the world from your demonic powers."

Bo looked across at Isabel trying to fight her way out of the iron grip of the big man who'd grabbed her. She caught his eye and for a moment they entered mindlink consciousness together. Bo could feel Scotty and Thomas nearby. They too were obvious terrified. The fear kept rising up into the mindlink, pulling them apart, causing the altered consciousness to waver. And then finally to break apart as Nidal motioned to his man to carry Isabel toward the edge of the roof.

"Perhaps you'd rather we threw her off than tell us her name?" the dark-haired, intense looking Iranian taunted.

"No," shouted Bowman. "She hasn't done anything to you."

"Not yet," Nidal answered. "But we've seen little examples of your powers. And that's why we've got to stop you."

Bo saw that Isabel was trembling with terror as her captor slowly pushed her toward the edge of the building. He could feel eddies of that terror reverberating in his own mind.

"Don't you see we're not against your God," Bo said pleading.

"The Devil is an easier liar," Nidal answered, then again motion to the man holding Isabel.

He hiked her so she was standing on the wall around the rooftop. Suddenly Bo felt a great burst of fear and despair pour out from Isabel. And, in an instant, where the beautiful and

like the young woman had been was, instead, a twisted and crippled little hunch-backed girl.

Both the man holding her and Nidal exclaimed something in a language Bo couldn't understand.

"See what you've done," he shouted at them. "That wasn't right."

"What is she?" Nidal asked incredulous.

"Her name is Isabel," Bo answered. What difference did it make now anyway?

At that moment, there was a loud commotion in the stairwell. Several more terrorists piled out onto the roof. Two of them each held a boy tightly about the throat in his arms. Scotty and Thomas.

"Simbu, look what we have found!"

Bo tried to achieve mindlink with Thomas. It wouldn't work. He felt a terrible frustration and despair. The fear they were all feeling was preventing them from forming the connections they needed to use any of their abilities. Maybe they really were doomed.

Nidal grabbed Thomas by the jaw and shook his head violently. "How many more of you are there?"

"Let go of me," Thomas shouted.

"How many?" Nidal said again, this time slapping Thomas hard.

"There are hundreds of us," Scotty shouted. "Hundreds. More of us than you."

"I don't believe you," Nidal turned his attention to Scotty.

"The building is full of us. And we can join our powers together to overcome you."

Oh God, Scotty, shut up, Bo thought. What's he going to accomplish by saying something like that?

"Shut up," Bo cried.

"So there are many of you demon-children in this very building?" Nidal asked, almost sounding pensive.

Bo realized that his outburst had given credibility to Scotty's crazy assertion.

"Bring them all down to headquarters," Nidal ordered.

Scotty, Thomas, Bo, and crippled and now misunderstanding and terrified little Isabel were crammed into an elevator along with the four guards who were holding them tight and a couple of others armed with machine guns. The elevator descended swiftly.

At least the dream didn't go any further, Bo thought to himself with some consolation. But what's going to happen now.

Nidal was already down and, indeed, had already started the series of events that he apparently believed would rid the world of the curse of the Devils. In fact, even before the doors opened on Three, Bo realized he could hear chanting. The high pitched sing-song reminded him of videos he'd seen of Muslims being called to pray.

There were men still running about the open space on the floor, several were pulling long cords behind them. Bo could see that several of them were repositioning TV cameras so they aimed directly at where Simbu Nidal was standing in front of the large metal box he'd noticed earlier.

"Bring them over here," Nidal ordered and the men hustled the four young kids into the bright lights of the TV setup. "I have four of the demon-children here with me now. And they have told me that there are hundreds more of them in this building right now.

"I believe that they are preparing to mount a psychic attack on me and my men right now. We can wait no longer. Even if we kill only these four here we will have done much to stop the enemies of Allah and of Jehovah.

"Please pray for me and my men all of you who are watching this broadcast. We go now to Allah."

Nidal turned away from the camera and flipped open a panel on the front of the metal box. Bo could see bright red numbers on a display of some sort. Probably the timer, he thought dispassionately. Then his heart sank once again as he realized that as Nidal pressed a button beside the display, the numbers were rapidly descending toward zero.

He's going to detonate the bomb right now!

"Grab somebody," Bo shouted as he reached out with a free hand and managed to touch Thomas.

The mindlink formed. The three dimensional reality of everyday suddenly opened up into the dimensions of the mindlink consciousness. Bo could feel Thomas's presence. And then Scotty's. And then Isabel's.

And even as he became aware of Isabel, he saw the numbers on the counter freeze at zero. "STOP," the mindlink consciousness ordered in the voices of all four youth. There was a momentary

pause. And then Bo realized he could see light beginning to pour right through the metal walls of the bomb. The space all around them filled with brilliant, blinding white light.

2

"Something funny just happened," Scotty commented.

"Are we dead?" asked Thomas.

"Look around you," Bo answered. "Can you still see the room behind all this bright light?"

"I can," piped up Thomas.

"I think we just stopped time," Bo said.

"Fine time you picked to do that," injected Isabel. "And I don't even have a body anymore."

"Well, maybe you're lucky," Scotty answered. "If we start it up again we're gonna get burned to nothing."

"Is this real?" asked Thomas, ignoring that interchange.

Bo spoke authoritatively. "I don't think we can know what's real and what isn't. For right now I think we have to assume that the bomb is just beginning to explode and we have to figure out either how to stop it or how to get out of here."

"Can you move?" he asked.

"Well, no," came Scotty's reply. "I don't seem to be in y  
bnody at all."

"Welcome aboard," said Isabel. "Now you all know what it's like not being connected with your body."

"How are we going to get out of here?" Thomas almost pleaded. "I'm scared."

"My friends," Bo started, obviously about to launch into a

speech, "I think we have before us the biggest challenge of our lives. We know that we've managed to tap powers that had seemed way beyond us. We already seem to have discovered a power we hadn't ever used before. I mean stopping time like this -- whatever that means -- now we're going to have to discover yet another one right now. And if we're wrong all those people on the streets and the hostages upstairs and everybody is going to get killed."

Isabel said, "Look you all managed to somehow transform my body and healing me -- at least up til when I got scared up there -- we can do the same thing now, can't we?"

"You led that one, Is. Can you do the same now?" Bo asked.

"Well, I'd been planning that one for a long time," she answered.

"I remember Brother Peregrine talking about the possibility of dying in a nuclear explosion and saying he thought it could be neat to know it was coming and to start a meditation on the Light and then go right into it without ever knowing what happened to you."

"Let's see if we can get some help from the other kids," Scotty proposed.

"Well, how about meditating on the Light?" Bo continued.

"You mean just give up and get blown away?" countered Thomas.

"No, no, I mean, see the light from the bomb as the Divine Light shining through us all. And, like Scotty said, connecting us up with all the other Star-children."

The collective awareness of the mindlink consciousness as it was focused on the four young teenagers in the World Trade Center on the southern tip of Manhattan Island relaxed itself and then began to experience itself as part of the Light, the Great Light, the Light by which God saw himself mirrored in his creation, the Clear White Light of the Tibetan Buddhists' first glimpse of the afterworld.

"Don't go out of the Light," Bo warned.

But they could feel the Light growing and extending itself beyond them. This was no longer the light of the bomb they were experiencing, it really was the collective presence of God. And as it grew out from the small circle of four, more minds began to enter in. Almost like dominos falling in a lineup, or like distant voices running to join a crowd of singers, or like a waterfall growing as it cascades down a high mountain cliff, the mindlink spread out to gather together all of the children who were born in its sway.

Bo and the others could feel immense power surrounding them. We can overwhelm the very power of the bomb, Bo thought. And then suggested into the collective consciousness of the mindlink that they could actually use the power of the bomb to transform the bomb. They could take the Light pouring through the cracks in the fabric of spacetime and turn it toward recreating spacetime.

Even as he suggested this Bo realized he was not sure himself what it meant. But he knew that it did not matter. He wouldn't have to understand it in order to use the image to direct the powers.

Remember how we visualized Briar Rose, Isabel injected.  
Let's visualize the universe existing with no atomic bomb in it.

While part of them was bound to the geographical physical location of their bodies, another -- a greater -- part of them seemed to rise up above the earth and to hang in space. As they looked down upon their world they could see each and every thing in the world. Indeed, it almost seemed as if they could see each and every time in the world.

Bo was aware that if he let his mind reach out toward the Middle East to Jerusalem, he could see simultaneously the Israeli wars of liberation, the post World War II influx of the Jews, and also the arrival of the medieval Crusaders and the arrival of the Ottoman Turks. He realized that he could see the crucifixion of Jesus and the swelling of the ranks of His followers. And if he switched his vision only slightly to the South, he could see huge multitudes of human beings living on the plains, scratching out a meager living or else clambering boisterously in jungle trees. And he could even see back before the dawn of humanity, though now he realized his whole sense of vision was changing. As he looked further back in time he ceased to see as a man and saw instead as an animal and even as a tree basking lazily in the generosity of the warm Sun.

Visualize the world with no bomb, Isabel reiterated.

The collective mind was surprised to see that it could find a world in which there seemed to be no knowledge at all of the atomic bomb, but it was a scary world. Everything seemed rigid

and controlled. There were efficient machines everywhere and people all seemed to cower before the efficiency of their inventions.

Look, observed Thomas, the Nazis won World War II. What's happened?

We're discovering parallel time tracks or something like that, Bo rejoined.

Here's a better world, offered Scotty, and all around them was an earth that had forgotten about nuclear weapons, having decided never to build another after the first two were dropped on Japan.

This is wonderful, Isabel said. Let's make this one real.

No, answered Bo, if that one's real, we'll never have been born.

Oh, you're right, she said with a shiver of surprise.

We're got to find the world we left, they all seemed to realize together.

Here's one, said Scotty. See. And he pointed to a reality in which in the very near future, they heard Simbu Nidal exclaim, "The fucker doesn't work!"

That's perfect, said Bo.

Now, how do we stop it here, Isabel asked.

Bo realized that the sight of Nidal had suddenly angered him. He'd forgotten about the terrorists. And now he remembered and was angry.

We've lost it, said Scotty. Look the bomb's exploding again.

They tried again to settle on the universe in which the bomb

failed to explode. Again it slipped out of their reach.

Hey, exclaimed Bo, it's our anger that's detonating the bomb. We've got to remember to turn the anger around and use the power of the bomb to stop it from exploding.

How do you propose to do that? asked Thomas. And then he added half aside, I wish Peri were here.

Remember Peregrine, Bo said.

Well, of course, I remember Peregrine, Thomas retorted. I haven't lost my memory.

I wasn't asking a question, Bo said, laughing. I meant, think about Peregrine. Remember what he would have said.

Who's Peregrine? asked Isabel.

Oh you remember, Scotty answered, we experienced some kind of joining together that day when he died.

And Bo realized that somehow Peregrine was with them again. Not in the same way they were, but he could feel the sense of gratitude and compassion that was the last thought that Peregrine had had before he passed beyond individuality. And, Bo saw, that was the answer.

Compassion, he announced. We've got to forgive Nidal and his terrorists for what they've done.

Their intentions really were good, Isabel observed. They meant to love God even though they misunderstood what God is.

We've got to forgive John Simmons for stealing Brother Peregrine, said Thomas.

Who's that? asked Bo.

Look and see, answered Thomas. And Bo realized that he

could remember the week that Peri spent imprisoned in Simmons palatial home.

And Bo looked deep into Simbu Nidal's life. He saw Nidal's father and his father before that -- all were devout zealots of Allah. Both in fact had died as martyrs, one indeed as an anti-American terrorist and one as a Iranian freedom fighter.

And Bo felt sad for all the suffering of humankind. And he felt a pang of love and forgiveness rise up into his consciousness. He looked over at Isabel. And he saw her pain and her imprisonment in the twisted body and he felt the same pang of love go out to her.

And to his surprise, he saw the twisted body straighten and she became his beautiful Briar Rose once again. And he felt such a love for her. He felt how he as a man contained within himself all of the power of masculinity and he felt how she as a woman contained within herself all of the powers of femininity. And he could see how the two complemented one another -- yin and yang, he recalled, the Chinese sages called this interplay.

And the love that surged through his body, the puppy love he felt for Isabel and for his fantasy of Briar Rose -- these were all the same basic love, the will for the growth in consciousness of the other, the will to unite together with the other.

And as he basked in the love and beauty of Isabel, his mind turned to Scotty and to Thomas. And he saw that the same truth that filled and blessed his feelings for Isabel also filled their feelings for one another. And he felt chagrined for a moment for having made that scene back at the Mariposa School. And he reached out to honor the union of masculine and masculine and of

feminine and feminine -- yet more varied ways that love manifests itself and brings beings together into oneness in the collective consciousness.

The love and compassion surged through him, like a bright fiery light. And he realized that this fire was the fire of the atoms slipping in the bomb just in front of him. And he turned that energy away from the disintegration of the atoms and toward the stable union of the elements within.

Suddenly, the bright light that had almost blinded them momentarily was gone. Time was moving again and Simbu Nidal exclaimed, "The fucker doesn't work!"

"Hey," shouted Scotty. "We did it."

A few minutes later, Nidal and several of his men had disassembled the nuclear device. They were amazed. The fissionable material was simply no longer radioactive. How could that be?

Nidal was fuming about being betrayed by his own men.

Bo realized he knew better. He, once again, felt a rush of compassion for the poor man.

Come on, everybody, Bo said to the assembled Star-children, we're not afraid anymore, let's show these guys what we're really about.

A surge of love poured into the hearts and minds of the terrorists such as they could never have imagined before, Bo thought. That will open their eyes.