

THE CHILDREN OF POSSIBILITY

A NOVEL OF TIME TRAVEL



BY THOMAS T. THOMAS

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Can you go back in time and kill your own grandfather as a boy? Sure. Then someone else will spawn your genes. You will remember that person just as fondly as “grand-père.” Of course, all the details of your life will change, everything you know to be true will change, you yourself will change, and everything else will fit around these new facts.

That is the operative theory of the travelers known as “Jongleurs du Temps,” the Time Jugglers, the far-future masters of time’s ever-branching river. On a Search mission from the 11th millennium, and posing as a little girl, Jongleur Merola Tsverin hunts for genetic samples among the varied populations of 21st century San Francisco. Along the way, Tsverin retrieves an artifact for a collector: a home-run baseball from 1998. Her theft sets off a chain of consequences which threaten the very shape of life on Earth. Merola finds herself trapped in the 21st century and seeks a way forward to her own “reference now.” And when she fails to report in, her friend and mentor, Jongleur Chief Coel Rydin, works backward to find Merola, correct her mistake, and set the world right.

This novel of science fantasy spans 360 million years in a thrilling ride through intricacies of metaphysics, evolution, retribution ... and baseball.

THE CHILDREN OF POSSIBILITY

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From a 102nd-Century Dictionary:

Chassis, *n.s.*: (1) a frame and working parts, as of a machine or electronic device, exclusive of housing and external surfaces; (2) of any Silicate intelligence, one or more interchangeable physical carriers designed for some specific purpose and having shape, structure, and tools appropriate to that purpose.

Flüchtling, *n.s., m., ~e, pl.*: fugitive, refugee, runaway; *colloq.* an outcast from the reference now (*q.v.*), usually gathering in an earlier time and place as members of (*collective term*) a coven. *O.G.*

Jongleur, *n.s., m., ~s, pl.*: 1. tumbler, acrobat, juggler, street busker; *also*, mountebank, huckster, charlatan; 2. (*cap.*) an officer of the organization that consolidates and regulates travel through time, member of (*collective term*) the Troupe. *O.F.*

Möglichkeit, *n.s., f., ~en, pl.*: possibility; **Möglich**, *~en, pl.*: a sentient theoretical construct from one or more probabilistic decision points (*cf. Wahrschein Punkt*) following the “Schein” or “not taken” direction. *O.G.*

Neural imprint, *n.s.*: the process of transcribing electrochemical activity in the human brain into quantum entanglement of electrons across multiple time cones, as a means of preserving thought and memory against distortions due to alteration of the past.

Reference now, *n.s.*: current time, the actual or true “now,” as perceived from a subjective viewpoint. Colloquially, as applied to time travel, “reference now” may also refer to the traveler’s original or starting time and place, as opposed to the time and place of arrival.

Selvage, *n.s.*: 1. the edge on either side of a woven or flat-knitted fabric so finished as to prevent raveling; 2. of a fractured singularity (*q.v.*), the process of annealing the point of quantum leakage so that it does not naturally close.

Singularity, *n.s.*: 1. (*physics*) a point or region of infinite mass density at which space and time are infinitely distorted by gravitational forces; the final state of matter falling into a black hole; 2. (*mathematics*) a point at which

the derivative of a given function of a complex variable does not exist but every neighborhood of which contains points for which the derivative does exist; **fractured s~**: a singularity exhibiting quantum leakage of mass/energy into one or more temporospatial dimensions.

Temps, *n.s.&pl., m.*: 1. time; 2. weather; 3. (*grammatical*) tense; 4. (*musical*) tempo, *T. fort*, downbeat, *T. faible*, upbeat; 5. (*gymnastics, military exercises*) repetition. *O.F.*

Voyageur, *n.s., m. ~s, pl.*: traveler, passenger, explorer. *O.F.*

Wahrschein, **~lichkeit**, *n.s., f., ~en, pl.*: probability; ~
Punkt: probability node, probabilistic decision point. *O.G.*

From the Jongleur Handbook:

Chapter 1:

Gravity is a force. It is governed by the most basic equation in physics: force equals mass times acceleration [$F=ma$]. Thus, gravity is routinely measured as an *acceleration*. However, the acceleration of gravity is actually independent of any distance traveled, or *space*. By freezing the spatial variables, manipulation of the gravity equation yields one free variable: *time*. ...

Chapter 2:

... Time is not a river. Your life takes place, not in a stream, but on the surface of a membrane that stretches endlessly in three dimensions, like the surface of a bubble. The membrane itself is not static but expands outward, second by second, through a fourth dimension: time itself. Each person living on the surface of this membrane moves steadily outward along the radius of the expanding bubble.

Each person also generates circles of communication, personal action, and interpersonal action that spread, second by second, across the surface of the bubble, like ripples in water from the fall of a leaf. The spread of each circle is limited, theoretically, by the speed of information transfer in normal space—that is, the speed of light, or 300,000 kilometers per second. In practice, however, a circle of action may move much more slowly—perhaps at the speed of a horseman riding out of town.

The intersection of the expanding surface of the bubble and each spreading circle of action defines a cone. The cone always points backward toward the origin of the action along the axis of the bubble's radius. The cone of time sets the limits of possibility, the span of cause and effect, for any being that inhabits the surface of the bubble.

For beings that live *outside* the bubble, however ...

Chapter 3:

Subjectively, each self-aware being and the commune of interacting beings inhabit the surface of a single time bubble. For these inhabitants, the surface is unbroken, the axial cones of action all point in one direction, and the flow of time is continuous. Objectively, however, to any awareness that exists outside the bubble, the surface is vastly, almost fractally, uneven and carries pits and scars from the actions of those beings living inside the bubble.

Dents and craters appear at the points where individuals, interacting communes, even entire civilizations have ceased functioning and disappeared. Their time cones may continue to echo through chains of collateral cause and effect, but the cone's original focus becomes a void.

Buds of new bubbles and eventually entire new worlds appear at each Wahrschein Punkt where the potential for action is equal or reciprocal. For the subjective inhabitants of the original bubble, these buds are invisible, as they constitute the Schein fraction of the original potential.

... The universe visible to any self-aware mind concatenates thousands, millions, perhaps infinities of invisible universes, all proceeding outward from successive points of origin. Most of these unfelt universes are mutually indistinguishable, comprised of minor differences in choice and action that gradually diverge through cause and effect. However, this benign relationship is not universally true of *all* budded worlds. Some worlds bud in the chaos of war, environmental stress, and societal collapse, engendering dark spheres of aversion and rage against the original order.

... The universe is more bizarre than any single mind can imagine.

Chapter 4:

Travel through time always implies travel through space. For a Jongleur to travel forward or backward along the time axis and expect to arrive at the same point in space would be impossible.

Consider that any point on the Earth's equator is rushing eastward with the planet's rotation at approximately 1,609 kilometers per hour. The planet itself is moving along its orbit around the sun at 107,277 kilometers per hour. The sun is moving around the galaxy at 792,000 kilometers per hour. The sum of these proper motions means that a one-year trip backward through time arrives at a point in interstellar space trailing the solar system by approximately six and a half light hours.

... Of course, when crossing between two bubble worlds that happen to coincide, no spatial dimension applies. However, for the reasons stated elsewhere, this mode of travel is *not* recommended.

Backward

1. Briones Park

“All right, teams,” said Mrs. Gorage-Rhymes-With-Porridge as they filed out of the school bus. “Two by two and keep together.”

Josie Barnes was paired with Mary Jane, the strange orphan girl who had the beautiful blonde hair. No one else had wanted to team with her, because she was so quiet, so confident, and so ... self-possessed. It was almost like having a little adult among them. The other girls respected her, sure, but that didn't mean they *liked* her. Still, Josie figured it might be good to have someone so smart working with her on this assignment.

The class had come out to Briones Park, in the East Bay hills between Richmond and Orinda, to do an ecology count on the first clear and windy day of spring. Basically, that meant Mrs. Gorage and Melanie, her classroom intern, had gone out yesterday, identified a likely field full of weeds and wildflowers, and marked it off in big squares with orange tape. This morning, as they rode the bus over the Bay Bridge and through Oakland, the two teachers had passed out battered Palm Threes with data wands and explained how to use them. The computers were already loaded, they said, with the field grid and entry points. The assignment was to count the plants and animals—well, insects—and then take soil moisture and pH readings. After that, they had to study the data and draw conclusions. This was the hard part for Josie, because she never seemed to know what to think.

But she figured Mary Jane would be really good at that.

Mrs. Gorage had assigned each of the teams their own square, but right away the other girl broke the rules. And that, too, was kind of what Josie expected.

“We're supposed to be doing Square Fourteen,” Josie said as Mary Jane walked resolutely over the tapes toward the far side of the field.

“There is more growth over here,” she replied.

“That's not the point. We're supposed to count the plants in *our* square.”

“This will make a better report.”

“But ...” Josie had to follow to keep up the conversation. Very shortly, they were a long way from their square and getting farther away all the time. The only good thing was that the teams assigned to this part of the field hadn't reached their squares yet, so nobody was fighting with them, and Mrs. Gorage hadn't noticed anything. Josie still had time to reason with Mary Jane.

Before Josie could get her thoughts together, Mary Jane walked right over the last strip of orange tape and pushed on, into the underbrush.

“I'm sure we're not supposed to go in there,” Josie said, raising her voice.

“Be quiet and do what I do,” Mary Jane told her, taking Josie's elbow in a hand that was small but very strong for its size. The fingers gripped in a way that didn't exactly hurt, but Josie could feel the side of her arm tingle. She followed as Mary Jane dragged her out of sight.

Under the trees, Mary Jane looked around as if taking her bearings. She studied the twisted, leaning trunks of the live oaks—Josie was proud that she could identify them—and approached first one and then another. She put a tentative hand on the scaly bark, feeling a humped scar where a branch had broken away. Then Mary Jane nodded and plunged deeper into the thicket.

“What are you doing?” Josie asked.

“I have to find something.”

As Mary Jane climbed over and slid under the low, tangled branches, she reached into her pocket and took out something small and round. It looked like a big glass-and-metal ball, the size of the balls on her uncle's pool table. It certainly wasn't anything a girl their age ought to be carrying. But Mary Jane held it up, cupped in both hands, right below her chin. Josie thought she might be talking to it.

The ground dropped away in the direction they were traveling. Soon the two girls were standing side by side on the lip of a rocky ravine.

"We're not going down there," Josie said. "Are we?"

"This is the right way. What I want is down there."

Mary Jane put the glass ball away and started down the bank. She went facing forward, looking down and dancing from rock to rock. Josie turned around and used her hands and feet to climb down backward, feeling with her toes for each step. Mary Jane's way was faster, and she reached the bottom first.

"We're going to get in *such* trouble," Josie complained.

Mary Jane nodded absently. She was searching the narrow strip of ground alongside a rushing stream. Fifty feet further on, she stopped beside three rocks that were a very light gray, almost white. She stood in the middle of the triangle, faced the one rock that pointed most closely toward the cliff wall, then stepped over it and walked forward.

Josie, following behind, bent to touch one of the rocks. The surface was glazed white, like it had been burned to ash and then the ash fused to glass. What kind of fire, she wondered, could do that?

The gulch was steeper here and more overgrown. Mary Jane reached into the curtain of hanging branches and pushed them aside. Beneath was the entrance to a low cave. The girl crouched down, ducked her head, and crawled in.

This was where Josie stopped. Who knew what was inside? Maybe bats. Maybe a bear. Certainly squishy things that lived beside streams, like toads and salamanders. If Mary Jane wanted to go in there, let her.

After a minute, Mary Jane's feet reappeared, moving backward, then her rump, shoulders, and head. She was dragging something out of the cave. When the girl had fully emerged, Josie could see it was just a load of trash: two pieces of corrugated cardboard that were torn and bleached almost white, tattered scraps of silver foil that once might have covered them, fluttering bits of black plastic sheeting, a tangle of wire, and some clothes that resembled a pair of child's pajamas, the kind with feet attached. The clothes were grayish, splotched with mildew, and they smelled bad, even from where Josie was standing.

"Ew!" she said. "Why do you want to touch that?"

Mary Jane turned over a piece of the cardboard, and scraps of foil blew away on the breeze. She looked up with tears in her eyes. "It is ... my ..."

"It's garbage. You'll get germs."

Mary Jane tried to straighten out the clothing, but the fabric was stuck together with crud.

"Leave it," Josie insisted, pulling on the girl's arm.

"They were not like this. We left them in order and packaged against—"

"Well, then someone got to them. A homeless person. Or maybe a bear. My daddy says there are bears in these hills." Now Josie was growing really scared of the cave. She pulled on Mary Jane's arm, more gently this time. "Come on."

Mary Jane stood up slowly. She was still looking down at her trash heap. “We’ve got to get back before Mrs. Gorage misses us and sends out a search party,” Josie said.

Mary Jane nodded. “You are right.”

“Besides, you can always buy more stuff like this.”

“No,” the girl said with a sigh. “That is one thing I cannot do.”

2. In Protective Custody

Emily Windlace looked at her wristwatch. It was eight o’clock. “Time for bed, Mary Jane,” she said.

The little girl who had come into her home three days ago from Family & Children Services looked up from the coloring book. “All right.”

She put the crayons away in their box. Emily knew without looking that they would be arranged in order by color, like a rainbow, with the browns sorted below the reds and the black above the violet, like a spectrum. Mary Jane closed the book, flattened the binding with the heel of her hand, squared it with the edge of the coffee table, and stood up. She picked up the paperweight which was her only possession, the only thing she seemed to care about. It was a sphere of cloudy, layered glass, mottled greenish-gray with flecks of gold, about as big as a softball. Emily’s first impression on seeing the sphere—she never did get a chance to examine it up close, because the girl carried it everywhere, setting it carefully beside her when she sat down, keeping it always in sight—had been that the thing was not pretty enough to be a paperweight. Mary Jane now slid it into the pocket of her corduroy jumper and patted the cloth over the heavy bulge.

“Good night, ma’am,” she said with a nod to Emily, like a little adult. She turned to Emily’s husband Bill. “Good night, sir.”

He barely looked up from his magazine. “Night.”

Mary Jane turned and walked down the hall to the guest bedroom.

In her ten years of taking care of foster children, Emily Windlace had never seen anything like this girl. It was like having a maiden aunt in the house.

As soon as the bedroom door closed, Bill got up from his chair and knelt by the coffee table.

“Don’t—” Emily started to say, then shut up.

Bill opened the coloring book. Emily could see, even from where she sat, that each page had been meticulously filled in. The colors were bright and glossy, like enamels, with no gaps or scribbles. Emily had watched Mary Jane working the end of each crayon, twisting it in her fingertips to sharpen and soften the wax, so that the colors flowed like paint onto the page. She even added smudges of white to make highlights, undertones of black to make shadows. When Mary Jane was done with them, the line drawings—it was a book full of Disney characters—were beautiful, like a medieval monk’s illuminated manuscript.

“Obsessive,” Emily said quietly.

“She’s had a tough time,” Bill offered.

“Do we really know that?”

“Well, the cancer ...”

It hadn’t taken them long to discover that Mary Jane’s golden curls were a wig. It was a good one, too, probably made with real hair. But underneath, she was totally bald.

She also lacked any trace of body hair; so Emily had to use her makeup kit to fill in the girl's eyebrows and supply her with a set of false eyelashes. Being nine years old, according to the best estimate from the report forwarded by the Human Services Agency of San Francisco, Mary Jane wouldn't have to worry about growing hair anywhere else just yet.

The girl's medical condition was still a mystery. She had been found in the street after the explosion of a gas main leveled the toy store, F.A.O. Schwarz, the previous month in San Francisco. Mary Jane had been slightly injured, mostly scrapes and bruises, a mild concussion, but apparently left amnesic, with no recollection of her former life. Even her name, Mary Jane Doe, was just what the nurses at San Francisco General had put on the admitting paperwork. Because the girl fought when they tried to take blood or tissue samples, no one had been able to give her more than a cursory checkup.

Cancer was suspected only because hair loss was the commonest reaction to chemotherapy, but in all other respects Mary Jane seemed healthy—remarkably so. Almost supernaturally so, because she never complained of a sniffle, an ache, or any of the minor ills to which neglected children were usually subject. The doctors theorized her hair loss might be *alopecia totalis*, an autoimmune disorder possibly caused by stress, which foster parents sometimes saw in the children that came their way—although few arrived with their own high-class wigs. But Mary Jane was the calmest, most reserved and self-contained child the Windlaces had ever taken on. Still, Emily was rooting for the stress thing because, without diagnosis or treatment that the girl would sit still for, a cancer would remain undiagnosed and progress silently to take her before her tenth birthday, whenever that might be.

"Are you sure she's even a little girl?" Bill asked now. "I mean ... you've undressed her?"

"She's one hundred percent female," Emily said.

"But weird. Have you talked about women things?"

"She's very well informed. Maybe too much so."

The possibility that Mary Jane had been abused, used for child prostitution or worse, was something they routinely discussed with the agency about all their charges. This girl's physical person, reactions, and temperament indicated no such history. In fact, she seemed to have no history at all. She had been found with no identification, no clothing tags, no latch-key stuff. No jewelry, except for a plain metal locket with no pictures or engraving inside—not even an "inside" that anyone in Family & Children Services could discover after much tweezing and prying. And no one had shown up to claim her. Mary Jane seemed to be the little girl who dropped out of the sky.

"Strange child," Bill said, shaking his head.

"Not the worst we've had," Emily said.

"Count our blessings, I suppose."

* * *

In the guest bedroom, the girl known as "Mary Jane," whose real name was Merola, took off her clothes and laid them out on the bed. She fished the glass sphere out of the jumper pocket and set it on the nightstand. Then she hung the outer coverings, which were still in Emily's category of "not yet dirty enough to wash," inside the closet room and patted them smooth. She folded her other garments, which were of the category "need to be washed now," by halves and halves again, into neat square packages. She put

these inside the rounded box made of dried and woven vegetable fiber, which Emily called a “hamper.” That was the designated place for clothing of the latter category.

Life was strange among these people. They made distinctions where none were necessary. Take clothes, for example. The pieces in the hamper were what Emily called “underwear.” But the pieces on the hangers could not be called “overwear” or “outerwear,” which was reserved for a separate category associated with rain and storms. They actually had weather here!

Underwear was vaguely nasty and had to be cleaned incessantly. The other garments were publicly acceptable and so could be worn with accumulated dirt ... even though they were more exposed and so likely to need cleaning more often. Everything else in this culture was the same. Taboos and covenants to the right and left of her.

Standing naked beside the bed again, Merola took off her wig and set it on the bureau. Emily had apologized for not having a proper “wig stand.” Instead, she had provided a “cookie jar,” which was supposed to keep the scalp net’s shape. Merola never mentioned how much the wig had been crushed in transit when she came to this city.

She peeled the false lashes from her eyelids and rubbed Emily’s paint off her brow ridges. Merola had used better cosmetics when she first came here, but they were gone now. She rubbed her palms over the dome of her skull and sighed.

Left to her own preferences, Merola would just curl up and sleep, but there were more conventions to be observed. She reached under the pillows and took out the sleeping garments Emily had called “peejays.” Storing them among the bedclothes—an entirely new category of clothing—seemed logical enough. However, the garments themselves, sometimes also called “pajamas,” were strange lumpy coverings secured with stitched bands of rubberized material and buttoned tabs that tangled, tugged at her skin, and itched. They wholly impeded Merola’s sleep habits.

So did the layers of cloth she was supposed to pile on herself after lying down on the bed. This was so much more complicated than simply adjusting the room’s climate to begin with. Emily and Bill’s house systems were designed to maintain an ambient temperature, of course, but it was fifteen degrees below Merola’s normal body temperature. The sheets, blanket, and bedspread were a throwback to living in a cold, damp cave. And the musty construction of springs and fabric called a “mattress” was a throwback to a bunch of dried grasses wadded on the floor of that cave. Merola longed for a pair of field plates, but that was beyond hope.

Seven thousand years of so-called civilization had taught these people nothing.

Once she was installed under the coverings, Merola took the glass sphere from the nightstand and into the bed with her, clutching it under her chin. She had let everyone imagine that the sphere was no more than an ornament, a toy. Children of Merola’s assumed age and distressed situation were supposed to fixate on such irrelevant possessions. But the sphere, whose real name was Berzher, was hardly irrelevant. He was her companion in distress, her first officer, her technical assistant, her oldest friend—and her only means of getting home.

They would have to figure out a way to do that, and soon. Of course, Berzher himself was immutable in his current state. Merola could bury him in the yard outside and he would eventually find his way home, by one path or another, with all of his memories intact. Merola herself was relatively immutable, too—and that was the problem.

Emily had already enrolled Merola in the local “grammar school” in a naïve attempt at socializing what Emily half-believed to be a “runaway”—not an actual Flüchtling, but a feral child. Clearly, Emily liked Merola and harbored fantasies of raising her as a daughter. How ironic! Merola had the advantage of thirty years on this woman. Probably more than that.

This house was a good place to hide, to wait for rescue, if any was coming at this late date. But this refuge would not serve for long. In time—one year? two years?—the children in Merola’s school class would begin to change around her. These “fourth-graders” would go through puberty, grow breasts and body hair, gain inches in height, and become what Emily would call young women.

But not Merola. Not ever.

So she had to get out of this absurd situation. She must escape this overly protective society, in which she was not even a legal person, much less a citizen. But where could she go, that they would not recover her and return her to this place, or worse?

Merola knew she had made mistakes on this mission. Berzher would catalog them for her, if he could. As she drifted off to sleep, Merola recounted those mistakes ... in order to plan her next move ...

3. Medical Service

On the pediatrics floor of San Francisco General Hospital, Shannon Carter, RN, hesitated outside Room 221A. She moved the hypodermic set in her left hand around behind her back. Maybe if the girl inside didn’t see it this time ...

“And how are *we* today?” Shannon sang out as she opened the door and entered the room, moving fast and making her best effort to sound cheerful and excited.

In the far bed, the bald little girl with no name was sitting up. Her knees were drawn up under her chin, and her spine curved forward, away from the bed’s raised head portion. Her pose was an angular caricature of the fetal position except that, instead of being comatose and withdrawn, the girl was terribly, almost hyperactively, alert. Her head snapped around like a spring-loaded machine. Shannon felt the cold, gray stare of those eyes pass through her like a ghost. There was no other response.

“It’s—uh—time for your medicine,” Shannon said.

The girl’s body tensed. That is, it was already tense and now it started to vibrate.

“This won’t hurt a bit,” Shannon said, bringing the hypodermic with its pediatric dose of Seconal into view for the first time.

The girl glared at the needle as if it were a knife aimed at her heart. “No!” she said in a deep, hoarse voice that reminded Shannon of all the demonically possessed little girls in films about exorcism.

“This will help you relax,” Shannon said as she laid the needle on the tray table and opened a cotton swab saturated with orange antiseptic.

“No!” The girl pushed herself back up the slope of the bed.

“It’s on doctor’s orders, so it’s good for you,” Shannon explained carefully.

“No!” The girl had her back against the green-painted wall by this time, wedging herself among the instrument fittings and gas outlets.

“Come on now,” Shannon reasoned. “It’s on your chart. If you don’t take the injection, I could get in trouble.”

The girl looked to the left and right, seeking a way to escape. Shannon herself was leaning over the near side of the bed, blocking the path back down the mattress. The other side was obstructed by the tray table. If the girl bolted that way, she would have to go over the remains of her lunch and put her weight, however briefly, on the wheeled table—which would probably roll away and dump her. Shannon could read the calculation in the girl’s glance.

“Gotcha!” she said to herself.

She moved the swab toward the crook of the girl’s arm.

The girl froze, watching as if it were a burning brand.

Shannon touched the saturated tip to the pale skin.

The girl didn’t move, although the skin visibly twitched right at the point of contact. Taking such docility as a good sign, Shannon moved the swab in a small circle, painting loops on the skin. The girl stared down, as if fascinated by the sudden coolness of evaporating alcohol.

While she was distracted, Shannon leaned forward—to block the girl’s line of sight—and took the syringe from the edge of the tray table. She moved it slowly, almost languidly forward, toward the prepared spot above the vein.

When it came into view, the girl’s attention was instantly riveted on the needle.

“That’s okay,” Shannon crooned. “Nothing there. So tiny you can hardly see it. You won’t feel a thing.”

When the tip was still six inches from her arm, the girl heaved. With her head and shoulders braced against the wall, her feet against the mattress, she arched her back and shoved Shannon aside with a deft thrust of her stomach. Then she was making a straight run down the bed.

Without a thought for safeguarding the syringe and where the needle might stick, Shannon tackled her.

The girl rolled and kicked, accurately striking Shannon just below the sternum and knocking the wind out of her.

Before Shannon could lift her head, the girl was across the room.

Just at that moment, a Candy-Striper came through the door.

“Don’t let her get away!” Shannon ordered breathlessly.

The Candy-Striper bent her legs and spread her arms.

The girl veered toward the bathroom. Shannon let her go in, then signed to the Candy-Striper to close the door. There was no way out except back through the room. And even if there were another exit, the girl’s only possession—a skuzzy paperweight made of fused glass and metal—was still perched on the windowsill. She would never stray far from that thing.

“What’s all the fuss about?” the Candy-Striper asked.

“She hates needles,” Shannon said mildly.

“I *guess*,” the younger woman said.

Then Shannon saw that the syringe was sticking out of her own leg at an angle. Luckily, the plunger had only depressed a half-centimeter or so—maybe a third of a child’s dose of sedative. Oh well, she was at the end of shift anyway. She withdrew the needle and threw it onto the tray table in disgust.

Outside, at the nurse’s station, Shannon met her shift supervisor, Ann Maccles.

“Any luck?” Ann asked.

“Now what do you think?”

“I’m guessing she fought.”

“Like a wild animal,” Shannon agreed.

“Poor kid, her chemo must have really been bad.”

Shannon shook her head. “My experience is that children become inured to the injections, rather than fighting them. For a few cc’s of Seconal—compared to what she normally gets—this gal should be putting out her arm with a smile.”

“Not all of them become blasé,” Ann said. “Some are terrorized. It’s just an emotional reaction.”

“She was terrorized *before* she saw the needle. She was vibrating like a tuning fork even before I got to the room.”

“Well, consider what she’s been through: the cancer, the chemo, and now that awful explosion and being abandoned. It’s a hard life for a little girl.”

“Uh-huh,” Shannon said dubiously, rubbing the sore spot below her breastbone. “I’m reserving my sympathy for a patient who doesn’t kick like a mule.”

4. Essopee for Shocky

Merola woke up in a garishly lighted room that was swaying from side to side. She slitted her eyes and, without moving her head, permitted herself a surreptitious look around. This was the cabin of some sort of vehicle, perhaps a small saucer—except for the jolting gravity fluctuations. Facing her were two paired metal panels holding view screens, or was it possible they were actually doors with windows made of fragile, fused silica? The view beyond them showed gray city buildings constructed of steel beams, stonework, and mirrored glass panes—all receding at dizzying speed but still at ground level.

Not a saucer then. And this was not a rescue.

A moment of panic seized her. Whoever had taken her was physically removing her from the scene of . . . whatever had happened. And the place where she had been was also her last time on mark. According to Jongleur protocol, if she failed to return from a mission, a rescue team would be sent immediately—perhaps even before the “whatever” happened—but only to her last known location. And she was moving rapidly toward a new and unknown place.

Rydin, her section chief, would be so angry. Merola had allowed herself to be ambushed, trapped like a trainee on her first Search, separated in one stroke from her ship, the resources of her biosuit, her intelligence, and . . . nearly killed? That last part was still hazy. She almost hoped the Troupe would not send Rydin after her, because she could not stand the contempt she would see in his face. Rydin was not only her trainer and mentor; he was her friend—and maybe something more than friend, at least in Merola’s imagination. But he was also resourceful. Rydin, if anyone, would be able to find her wherever these people might be taking her.

As she watched the world slide away behind the vehicle, the city blocks where she had been picked up were replaced by less substantial dwellings of cream-colored stucco and painted wood. All of this movement was accompanied by dizzying sounds: the roaring of some kind of mechanical engine, the squealing from friction of rubber tires on pavement, and alternating, amplified wails, whoops, and chirps that were meant as warning to other vehicles.

She moved her head a bit more to inspect the insides of this cabin. To her right and left, the wall surfaces displayed oblong hatches secured by simple pressure latches, probably storage compartments—but for what? Merola herself was lying on a thin pad covered with white cloth and attached to some sort of pipework frame.

She was held in place with straps.

A needle and clear tube came out of her arm.

Berzher's naked entity was no longer clutched in her hand.

But everything depended on Berzher now. Merola's fingers moved convulsively and immediately brushed against the glass sphere, which was rolling around on the pad just below her right hip. She scooped it into her palm and held it tightly.

"You thought you'd lost that, I bet," said a voice above her head.

Merola looked up and found a dark-haired man sitting on a low bench opposite her restraining rack. He was letting his body sway easily with the cabin's movements. His hands were sorting supplies into the various hatches, but he was keeping one eye on her. The man wore a white uniform, suggesting a servant or attendant of some kind, but his manner was more watchful—like a jailer's.

"Mine," Merola groaned, tightening her hold on Berzher.

"Wouldn't touch it for the world," he said, raising his hand.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Ambulance. Going to Esseff General."

Merola digested that, trying to interpret.

"And why am I being restrained?"

"It's essepee for a concussion," he said. "You were knocked out."

"Knocked out?" she said blankly. "How?"

"Oh, I get it. Some short-term memory loss, too," the man said. "Well, it seems a gas main blew up under the toy store. Took out the whole back half of the building and pancaked the rest. Luckily, you were up near the front, actually blown out onto the street."

"What are you doing with my arm?" Merola asked suspiciously, nodding toward the needle and the transparent tube, which attached to a plastic bag hanging from a hook over her head. From what she could see, the bag and tube contained clear fluid—not the red of flowing blood. So, either these people had filters on their sample extractors to block platelets, or the flow was reversed, going *into* her arm rather than out. The position of the bag—high in the air, to let gravity assist the flow—suggested this as well. But Merola waited to hear what the man had to say.

"You looked kind of shocky, so I started a saline drip with norepinephrine." He paused. "That's a—"

"It's a neurotransmitter and vasoconstrictor," Merola said. She felt within herself to confirm the fluid was doing nothing more. As an interrogation technique, giving her salt and hormones would prove ineffective. "Just medicine," she decided.

"Say! How does a little girl like you know such big words?"

"It's essepee." She let her head fall back on the pad.

Pumping twenty-first century nostrums into her bloodstream was a harmless diversion, as Merola's body was adapted to compensate for a wide range of poisons. What she had to guard against was anyone taking samples out, whether by intention or inadvertence. When she left this cabin—this "ambulance"—she must be awake in order

to destroy that needle. Even the smallest sample, such as a tissue plug caught on its inner surface, would be enough to type her and reveal far too much about her situation.

As the ambulance careened onward, Merola closed her eyes and prepared for a convulsive thrust that would enable her to destroy the evidence. She was a prisoner now, subject to interrogation. It would take all her strength, all her sense of purpose to remain anonymous and get on with the job of connecting with Rydin or, failing that, finding a way to get herself—and Berzher—home.