

CHAPTER 1

Trees, birds, small furry mammals. A slow grin spread across Syv Ramos's face as he sat up in the time-travel pod.

He'd made it four centuries into the past.

Springing to his feet, Syv breathed deeply, savoring the pine-scented air of the wooded park. Eager though he'd been to play this Game, he'd hated being in the small, confined area of the travel pod. To pass the time, he'd thought of the sad farewell with his creche-mates, the extended family he'd grown up with. They'd all been there to see him off, except Ev, who was ill, and Ana, who was lost to them. Some had wept while others had attempted to smile. When he opened his arms, they'd run to him, exchanging hugs and kisses.

He'd tried to look somber, but his primary emotion had been excitement. He was heading into the past with a unique challenge ahead of him, and the prospect filled him with happiness.

Latching the door of the pod, he watched its surface sparkle, confidently waiting for it to disappear. Instead, after a few minutes the sparkles died. It lay there, long and black, something that was not a part of this time period.

<You cannot let the travel pod sit unattended,> the computer-chip in his head spoke unexpectedly in his mind. Syv was startled--the chip wasn't supposed to activate until he rubbed his neck. <If the pod is found by twenty-first century people, the results could be disastrous.>

I am well aware of that, Syv answered silently, thinking of the flying saucer and alien abduction rumors of this time period.

Huffing out his breath impatiently, he unlatched the door and lay on the hard ground to access the controls. Although more mechanically inclined than most of his fellow Siblings, he was wary of interfering with time-travel equipment. He reset the computer, watching the outside of the pod to make sure the chrono-flux sparkles didn't begin again. They weren't supposed to commence until the door was latched . . .

<This is a most dangerous procedure,> his chip warned.

I do not see any alternative, Syv answered. He rolled back fast as the sparkling started again, despite the fact that the door was open.

With a sigh of relief, he watched as the pod finally disappeared.

<It is most fortunate for you that your reflexes are good,> the chip told him. <If you had been touching the pod when time travel commenced, you would have been pulled ahead to the twenty-fifth century--without your protective pod.>

All's well that ends well, Syv responded, jumping to his feet. *Tell me how to reach the Andrew Jackson school.*

The chip told him it was four miles away--a glitch in the Game. The tech had assured him he'd land no more than a quarter mile from the school.

But Syv was used to walking.

As he strode toward the school, he became exasperated with the twenty-first century clothing he wore. The black shirt with its long sleeves, the leather boots that enclosed and entrapped his feet--all seemed unnecessary and confining. Used to no more than sandals and a filmy wrap around his loins, he had to fight the temptation to remove the shirt.

The tight denim pants rubbed against his recently modified sexual organ. Male Siblings back home had uniformly tiny organs. Since that wouldn't do in this sex-obsessed culture, his organ had been redeveloped. Syv found it irritating as he walked.

The trees rustled as he walked along the park's asphalt path, following the signs to the Green Road entrance. He looked around in wonder, amazed by the number of furry-tailed rodents that chased each other up and down the trees. Birds twittered above him in the branches. The sun was shining and the pale-blue sky was filled with fluffy white clouds, just like in the few paintings that had escaped the twenty-second century Art Cleansing.

Back home, the sky was always a somber, steely gray when glimpsed from underneath the overarching domes.

Syv had spent much of his life studying the past. In the last few months, he'd paid particular attention to the early part of the twenty-first century. He'd told the Game designers he had no need of a Secondary Artificial Memory in-head computer database to supply him with information. But when they chose him for the Game and sent him to the Body Recon facility, he'd been kept in stasis for a full three weeks. When he awoke, he had facial, body, and head hair--and a chip-database in his brain that he hadn't wanted or needed.

Leaving the park, he saw the red-brick school building in the distance, just as in the pictures the Game designers had showed him before he left the twenty-fifth century.

<There is the school, about one-eighth of a mile away,> the chip told him.

I see it. You must remain quiet while I try to secure employment, Syv thought back.

The first challenge in his Game lay inside the brick building. Squaring his shoulders, Syv entered the school.

"You won't let me plan a party to celebrate your divorce, but I bought you a present anyway," Traci said.

Bethany Abbott accepted the box from her sister, looking down at it dubiously. She'd had prior experience with Traci's ideas of "presents."

Traci grinned. "I'll give you a hint--it's long and purple."

"You bought me an eggplant?"

"This eggplant takes batteries."

Pulling off the lid, Bethany stared down at a ten-inch purple vibrator as Traci burst into delighted laughter. "I knew it would be worth the money, just to see your face when you opened it."

Bethany glanced apprehensively at her mother-in-law, Dorothy. Fortunately the older woman seemed unfazed, although her blue eyes widened. "For goodness sake, Traci!" Dorothy exclaimed. "Wherever did you find such a thing?"

"There's a store right across from Richmond Mall. I had a terrible time choosing between this one and glow-in-the-dark pink."

Bethany looked around to see if any of the fashionably dressed matrons in the upscale restaurant had noticed the unusual gift. Since none of them were fainting into their bowtie pasta,

they probably hadn't.

Somehow the restaurant's marble floors, severely framed modern art, and starched white tablecloths just didn't go with a massive purple sex toy. Bethany jammed the lid back on the box. "I'm glad I didn't open it while the waiter was taking our dessert order."

"Why not?" her little sister demanded. On a good day, two martinis made Traci slightly giddy, and she'd had three. They'd better not let her order a fourth, Bethany thought, or she'd be dancing a can-can on the table-top.

"Your divorce is gonna be final soon, sis," Tracy went on. "Flirt a little. The waiter's hot!"

Rolling her eyes, Bethany took a sip of her white Zinfandel. "Right, that's what I need. More man trouble. Include me out."

Dorothy reached over and patted Bethany's hand. "Dear, don't let my son put you off men forever. I'm very upset with Duke, and I've told him so repeatedly."

"I know, Dorothy. You've been great." Bethany smiled at her mother-in-law. "So understanding. You're always welcome in my house." *As long as I have a house . . .*

Traci took out a compact, reapplied her candy-pink lipstick, and fluffed her blonde curls. "So if you're really not interested, do you mind if I give him a try? He's just my type."

"Since when do you go for waiters?" Bethany asked. "All your boyfriends for the past ten years have been blonds in suits."

"You should talk about suits," Traci scoffed. She ticked off the list on her fingers. "Reggie--Howard--Jonathan--and Duke."

Bethany had to admit her sister was right. During her thirteen years at Parker-Hughley Accounting, she'd dated a narrow range of middle-management types, culminating in her marriage to Dennis "Duke" Abbott eleven years ago. Thirteen years of working extra hours on nights and weekends, thirteen years of memos, e-mail, business trips, conference calls--and it had all gone down the drain when their son developed his illness. All, including their marriage.

Bethany scraped up the last bite of her caramel flan. "If I ever date again, I'll look for a different type." She savored the combination of custard and sweet caramel. "Maybe someone who works with his hands. A carpenter or a farmer."

Traci snorted. "Yeah, I can see you on a farm all right. 'Let's see, what should I wear to drive the tractor? Ralph Lauren or Eileen Fisher?'"

"Perhaps Traci has a point, dear." Dorothy's lips twitched. "I can't quite see you with a blue-collar man."

"Next you'll be telling us you want to date a janitor," Traci giggled.

Bethany compressed her lips. They could say whatever they wanted, but she knew one thing. If she ever got serious about another man, he'd have to be Duke Abbott's opposite. "I doubt I'll have time to date this fall, anyway. Between my new job and Justin's doctor appointments, I've got enough to worry about without starting a relationship." Someday, when she had financial security and Justin was doing better, she might have time to look for a new man. Until then, she needed a boyfriend about as much as a goldfish needed a Maserati.

"Don't worry about the new job, dear." Dorothy gave her a smile. "I'm sure you'll do fine. You've always been good with children."

"Thanks." Bethany hoped Dorothy was right. She hadn't worked with young pupils since her student teaching days in college. She glanced at her watch. "I'd better go if I want to be on time for my appointment."

"I don't see why you have to interview just to be a substitute teacher for a day," Traci said.

"It's not really an interview. The principal asked me to come in for a short discussion,

that's all."

"Maybe he wants to check you out," Traci suggested cheerfully.

"I told you, I'm not looking for a man right now."

With a grin, Traci gave the vibrator box a thump. "Maybe you're right. Who needs a man when you've got Big Purple?"

A vibrator can't kiss you, hold you, ask you how your day was.

Bethany sighed and put the box into one of her shopping bags as Traci gave her the "okay" sign.

But on the other hand, a vibrator doesn't run off with a glamorous senior partner at the accounting firm. So maybe it has some advantages after all.

Andrew Jackson Elementary was a typical early-sixties school building--one story, flat-roofed, red brick. Ugly and utilitarian. Bethany had been here many times, as her son had attended the school since kindergarten. The principal was new this year, though, and Bethany had never met him.

The white sign in front was crooked on its posts, and tall grass sprouted up around it. Looked like the custodian wasn't doing his job. She frowned as she tried to remember something her son had said, something about Frank the custodian . . . he'd left, that was the story. Won a big prize in the state lottery, and quit.

Maybe I should spend a few bucks on the lottery. I might win millions and not have to worry anymore about making the house payments.

Entering the front lobby, she sniffed, suddenly nostalgic with the familiar institutional odor of disinfectant on vinyl tiles. Another faint, more pleasant scent lingered in the air as well--chalk dust? Maybe some child had recently clapped the erasers clean, a favorite task of Bethany's during her elementary school days.

"Get off me!" The thin, childish wail came from around the corner.

Bethany hurried toward the noise and discovered a young boy on the floor. An older boy crouched over him, fist drawn back to deliver a punch.

"What's going on here?" Bethany demanded in her sternest "teacher" voice.

The older boy jumped to his feet, took one look at Bethany's angry face, and sprinted off down the hall.

Dropping to her knees beside the younger child, Bethany helped him sit up. "Are you all right?"

The boy swiped at his bleeding forehead with his right hand. Digging through her purse, Bethany found a tissue and pressed it against the cut.

The child gasped, "He wanted my candy. I wouldn't give it to him, so he knocked me down and--and punched me." He pointed to the corner, where a half-eaten Snickers bar lay covered in dust.

He was probably a first grader, Bethany thought, and yet he was valiantly trying to suppress his tears. Her heart twisted. "Why are you still here? School let out half an hour ago." She rubbed his back soothingly.

He gulped. "My mommy's late."

Bethany rose, helping the boy to his feet. "Come on, let's go to the office." She smiled at him, and he gave her a quavery smile back.

They walked to the front office hand-in-hand. The school secretary's desk was unoccupied.

Just beyond it, the principal's door was closed. Bethany glanced down at the curly haired child clinging to her hand and knocked.

The door swung open. Bethany drew in a quick breath.

Since when do elementary school principals look like Hispanic film stars?

The tall man holding the door wore tight black jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt. He looked down at Bethany, his gaze mesmerizing, his dark eyes deeply shadowed, set beneath arched brows. Thick, wavy black hair framed his face, with one unruly lock curling over his forehead.

His intense gaze made her breathless. Too bad they hadn't met at a party--she would have been dreaming up ways to cut him out of the herd and get him to herself.

"Mrs. Abbott," she introduced herself. When the man looked puzzled, she added, "We had an appointment at four. But I'm afraid there's a more urgent problem. I found this little boy getting punched in the hall."

Instantly the man's brow creased in concern. He stooped, lifting the child up in his arms. "You are injured. You will tell me how this happened, yes?" There was a foreign lilt to his deep, pleasant voice.

"A big kid punched me." The boy drew a shuddering breath and began to cry.

The man set the child on the wide window-ledge and leaned down, carefully pulling the tissue away from the boy's forehead. He examined the cut. "This does not seem to be a serious injury. But it hurts, yes? You must be very brave to bear this pain."

"It's not so bad," the boy mumbled, sniffing back his tears. He sat up straighter, looking pleased to be called brave.

"His mother was supposed to pick him up, but she's late," Bethany said. The child nodded in agreement.

"It was much kind of you to help him," the man said, his awkward English endearing. As his eyes met hers, Bethany felt flustered. It was pleasant to have a great-looking younger man gaze at her with admiration, but slightly disconcerting as well.

Miss Jong, the school secretary who had made Bethany's appointment with the principal, peeked into the office. "There you are, Johnny! Your mother's looking all over for you. She's in the lobby."

The child jumped down from the window-ledge, taking off without a second glance or a goodbye for the adults who had helped him.

Miss Jong turned to Bethany. "Hello, Mrs. Abbott. I'm so sorry I wasn't able to reach you. Mr. Wheeler had to leave early--a little domestic emergency. He hoped you'd understand."

Bethany blinked, looking from the secretary to the tall man. "Oh! You're not Mr. Wheeler?"

"No, I am not the principal," the man answered. "My name is Syv Ramos."

Bethany felt a blush rising at her silly mistake. She wondered why the man had been waiting in the principal's office. Probably he was a parent--he seemed to be very good with children.

Miss Jong spoke brusquely. "Mr. Wheeler left you some lesson plans." Picking up a manila folder from her desk, she handed it to Bethany. "If you'll come by tomorrow at eight, before school starts, he'll talk to you then."

Bethany thanked her. Before she turned to leave, she looked back at the black-clad man and smiled. "Thank you for helping with Johnny."

He gave her a nod. Bethany felt a tiny twinge of regret that she wouldn't be seeing him

again.

Syv's eyes lingered on the lovely red-haired woman as she left the office. He wondered if the object of his Game would be as attractive as that female.

Judging by the way things were going in his Game, probably not.

He strode forward to speak to Miss Jong. "Did you say that principal Carson Wheeler has departed?"

Miss Jong smiled apologetically. "Yes, but Mr. Guilford will interview you for the position. In fact, here he is now."

A slender young man came into the office, introducing himself as Henry Guilford. He shook Syv's hand. Syv barely resisted the temptation to wipe his palm after the handshake was over. The other man's hand had been damp with sweat. It was hard to get used to the way these primitive humans touched each other constantly. Back home, only crèche-mates touched, except for the formal hand-to-forehead greeting.

Syv tried to hide his dismay as Henry invited him to take a seat. A year and a half ago, he'd been able to do Carson Wheeler an enormous favor. He'd been expecting to call in that favor. Carson owed him--therefore Carson would hire him.

But Carson wasn't here. Now Syv would have to convince this stranger to give him the position.

Syv leaned back negligently in the hard chair, determined not to let Henry intimidate him.

"Mr. Ramos." Henry looked down at the job application Syv had filled out earlier. His voice shook as he asked, "What do you consider best qualifies you to work as a custodian, here at Andrew Jackson Elementary?"

"I am skilled with rags," Syv answered. "And equally expert with a mop."

The chip in his head spoke up. <You must answer the questions seriously, or you will not get the position.>

It is hard not to play to the camera, Syv answered silently. And do not interrupt while I am talking to the interviewer.

"Well--uh, that's good to hear," said Henry. Taking out a handkerchief, he wiped his forehead. "Tell me a little about yourself."

Syv imagined Henry's face if he told the truth. *I am here from the future to play a televised reality Game for the entertainment of my fellow Siblings in the twenty-fifth century. Thousands will watch via the nano-camera in my eye as I meet and court the teacher in Room 10, my Game object. If I can convince her to date me and accept a proposal of marriage, I win my Game.*

With a twinge of regret that he had to lie, Syv told the background story the Game designers had devised for him. He was an immigrant to this country, he said, determined to pursue a college education while he worked at a menial job. He planned to study computer science.

Henry nodded, apparently accepting it all at face value. "Very interesting, Mr. Ramos. Now, can you tell me about your biggest flaw?"

Syv offered the man a charming smile. "I have more intelligence than the position requires, but I shall not let that affect my work."

He thought about the prize at stake in his Game. Ev, one of his seven creche-mates, was ill with neo-cancer. Because resources in their scarred, war-ravaged world were so scanty, Siblings with terminal diseases were not given medical attention. Their fate was an early visit to the Dissolution Chamber.

But if Syv won his Game, Ev would be treated and live out her life span with the rest of them. Syv's crèche-mates, the extended family he had grown up with and still lived with, were depending on him.

And there was one other prize as well . . .

"Do you like children?" Henry asked.

Syv had to think about that. Back home, adults did not interact with children. "I like some children," he answered cautiously, thinking of Carson's son and daughter.

Henry nodded as though that had been a profound response. Scrutinizing the nervous interviewer, Syv found himself feeling pity for Henry. The other man looked so small and frightened behind the huge walnut desk. Although he probably wasn't thirty years of age yet, Henry's sandy hair was already receding, and his mustache was barely visible, as though he hadn't really committed to growing it.

In a kind tone, Syv said, "I am aware that the previous holder of the position won the state lottery and quit." *As arranged by the Game designers.* "You need a custodian for your school. I need a position. You should hire me."

<You are talking too much,> the chip-Voice in his head told him.

You are talking too much, Syv answered. *Quiet!*

"I have your letter of reference from your last job," Henry said. "Give me a minute while I review it again."

Syv swung his booted foot gently back and forth while he waited, thinking about the events that had led him four hundred years into the past. Another crèche-mate, Ana, had preceded him into this time period. Ana's Game had been one of the most successful reality programs ever created by the Game designers at Entertainment Central. Siblings all over the system had watched, enthralled, as Ana journeyed to the twenty-first century, met her Game object, Carson Wheeler, and developed a relationship with him. When Carson proposed, Ana won her Game.

Now the designers hoped to repeat that success with a similar Game, only with the genders reversed.

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Henry said, "Your references are excellent and the criminal history information check is clean."

Good, the false documents have passed scrutiny, Syv thought. "I will labor very hard and always be here on time."

Henry smiled. "Well, it sounds like you have the kind of work ethic we're looking for, Mr. Ramos. And, as you say, we're in a bind with our prior custodian leaving unexpectedly. So I'm offering you the job. Let's see--why don't you come in around eight tomorrow morning?"

Standing, Henry smiled with a visible sigh of relief.

"I am honored by your graciousness in hiring me. Shall I return to this office?" Syv asked.

"Uh--no. This is actually Mr. Wheeler's office," Henry said. "I'll show you where my office is. You can report there tomorrow."

Syv looked around with sharpened interest. So these books, these pictures, these papers, all belonged to the primitive human who had married his crèche-mate.

As he turned to follow Henry out of the office, he noticed, on the bookcase behind the chair he'd been sitting in, a large framed photograph of Carson and his family. Syv's eyes riveted to the figure in the middle, the beautiful dark-haired woman.

Ana.

He stared at the picture longingly. Ana was his favorite creche-mate, his best friend throughout his life. And now he hadn't seen her for a year and a half.

How could you do it, Ana? How could you leave us and go back to the past, just when we thought you were home for good?

It hadn't been entirely Ana's choice, Syv reminded himself. She'd come back to save Carson's daughter, and while she was here, the timelines had shifted and she'd been unable to return. Trapped in the past, away from her real home in the twenty-fifth century.

Now Ana would have another chance to return home. To come back to him and the rest of her crèche-mates. Whatever the Game designers said, Syv didn't believe Ana had chosen to stay in the past. Surely she would be eager to return with him to her rightful home in the twenty-fifth century.

Meanwhile, the Game designers expected him to play their Game. Well, he'd do his best. He'd been hired for the custodian's position. The first hurdle was cleared.

He hoped to meet his Game Object tomorrow.

Henry walked him to an exterior door, saying, "Goodbye, Mr. Ramos." He extended his hand.

Again? Syv shook the man's damp hand once more. "I look forward to more interactions with you tomorrow, Mr. Guilford."

Following the instructions from his computer-chip, Syv walked the two miles from Andrew Jackson Elementary School to his new apartment on Belvoir Road. Watching Ana's Game from home had given him some idea of what it would be like to roam freely outside--still, nothing compared to the glorious reality.

In the twenty-fifth century, he was the only person he knew who regularly ventured Out-Dome. He'd never encountered any other people outside. Here, he passed people every few minutes, going in and out of shops, sitting on their porches, doing something to the green patches in front of their houses with noisy machines.

He saw animals everywhere. Birds lined up on the overhead wires, dogs trotted at the end of leashes, cats sprawled on the cement steps outside the houses. No one he passed seemed to take any notice of them.

<That is because Americans are used to having animals surrounding them,> the Voice said. <Many of them keep cats and dogs inside their homes as pets.>

Did I ask for that information? Syv responded. *I already know that.*

Smiling, he recognized the fourteen brick buildings of his new apartment complex. This was the same place where Ana had stayed during her Game, although she now lived with Carson in a house in Princeton Heights. Following the signs to the superintendent's office, Syv knocked on the door.

A red-haired man with small, suspicious eyes came to the door, grunting when Syv introduced himself and showed his state I.D. card. "I believe an apartment was rented for me in advance," Syv stated.

"Yeah, I remember the name. The application didn't go through." The superintendent started to shut the door.

"Wait! I do not understand. Why did it not go through?"

"Check bounced. Insufficient funds. Now get the hell off the property." The door slammed shut in his face.

Syv strode briskly away from the apartment buildings, scowling. He'd expected to have a place to live, clothing to wear, food to eat--all ready in advance. His stomach growled, reminding him he hadn't eaten since First Meal of People-Chow, early in the morning, back home.

Coming to a small block of shops, he found one with window signs advertising food. He

wandered up and down the aisles, picking out a variety of edibles: a bottle of ketchup, and a package of Slim-Jims, a pre-made sandwich. Passing an aisle of candy, he remembered Ana's enthusiasm for chocolate and added five Hershey bars.

He took everything to the cash register and pulled his credit card out of his wallet. The clerk rang up the items and swiped the credit card. Then with a frown at Syv, he said, "It says to take the card. You got cash?"

"I do not understand," Syv exclaimed.

The clerk repeated, with exaggerated emphasis, "Listen, mister, your card is declined and I got to take it. Now pony up some cash or get out of here. Don't give me no trouble or I'll call the police."

The Voice told him, <Police enforce the laws. They have the power of arrest and detainment-->

"Quiet!" Syv said.

"Okay, mister, I'm dialing," the clerk growled, picking up the telephone.

Syv jammed his hands into his pockets angrily. With a final glower at the clerk, he left the store. Now his wallet was empty, except for his state I.D. card.

He didn't know where to go. He had no food and nowhere to sleep.

He had nothing except the clothes on his back.

CHAPTER 2

Bethany sat on the edge of the chair, trying to conceal her nervousness. She had dressed carefully this morning, choosing one of her brightest outfits from her days at Parker-Hughley Accounting--a lilac skirt, flowered shell, and cream-colored jacket. Professional, yet cheerful for the students. Her light-red hair was pulled back into a neat French braid and her makeup was subdued.

Folding her hands together, she hoped the principal of Andrew Jackson Elementary wouldn't be a prick, like the one she'd worked with her during her student teaching days. The pupils liked her, the supervising teacher liked her--and the principal had given her a lousy evaluation, just because she'd refused to go out with him.

The door opened and a man stepped into the office. "Mrs. Abbott? I'm Carson Wheeler."

Bethany stood up and they shook hands. Carson was about her own age, she thought--mid-thirties. Good-looking, too, with blond hair and a short, neat beard. Just Traci's type. Bethany wondered if he was married.

"Thanks for coming in." Carson waved at the chair opposite his desk, indicating she should sit. Gold wedding ring on his left hand--yes, he was married. "So sorry about yesterday--my daughter cut herself and the babysitter was concerned."

"That's all right," Bethany answered. "I was happy to get Miss Hammond's lesson plans."

"Yes, I thought they might be helpful. I wanted to talk to you before the day started because I've got an unusual situation here. Did Joe Springer explain when he called you?"

"No, sir," Bethany answered. "The Superintendent just said I'd be teaching Miss Hammond's fifth grade today. Apparently she was in an accident?"

Carson nodded. "Yes. Jayne's expected to recover, thank God, but she's going to be in rehab at least five weeks for physical therapy. Interested in staying with us that long?"

Bethany tried not to show her emotion. Five weeks of steady work!--and early in the school year, when teachers' absences were usually sparse. She'd be able to make the house payment and have something left over, even if Duke's check never came through. "Oh, yes!" Honesty compelled her to add, "As long as my son remains healthy."

Carson raised his eyebrows inquiringly, so Bethany continued, "My son developed dermatomyositis last year--it's an auto-immune disease that affects the muscles, somewhat like muscular dystrophy, although not quite as serious."

"Are you speaking of the Abbott boy in Mrs. Robin's fourth-grade class?"

Bethany smiled. "That's right."

"Very sorry to hear that about your son." Looking thoughtful, Carson added, "Mrs. Robin and I've had several discussions about him. Please be sure to come to me if he has problems with the other students."

Bethany let out a small sigh of relief. The principal's kindness made it easier to say the next part. "Justin is being treated with prednisone, which depresses his immune system. He's prone to colds and flus, and of course I have to stay with him when he's home sick."

Carson nodded. "Understood." He gave her an easy smile. "Well, we'll just have to get a substitute for the substitute when you stay home with Justin. The rest of the time, you'll act as Jayne's replacement. Now let's talk about your class." Carson's brows drew together. "I won't beat around the bush--Room 10 is going to be a unique challenge."

It was five minutes to eight when Syv reported to Henry Guilford's small office. Although he'd straightened his clothes and combed his hair, Syv knew he wasn't looking his best.

Henry clicked his tongue when he saw him. "Mr. Ramos! I'm afraid this won't do. Our principal expects the entire staff to dress in a neat, professional manner--"

"I am very sorry." Syv decided to tell him the truth. "I believed I had an apartment to live in, but it did not work out. I spent the night in the park."

"In the park!" Henry repeated, as shocked as though Syv had admitted to rooming in the city dump.

"Yes." Syv added with a grin, "It was an adventure. Except that I would have preferred not to awaken with my clothing full of stinging ants."

Henry looked distressed. "But why didn't you go to a motel?"

"I was supposed to have a credit card that worked, but my charges were refused."

"Have you had anything to eat today?"

Syv shook his head. Yesterday he'd watched a family picnicking and scavenged a hotdog bun from the trash barrel after they'd left. It had been delicious, but one bun wasn't much for a one-hundred-eighty pound man.

"This is terrible," said Henry. "A nutritious breakfast is an important start to the day, particularly for a fellow who works with his hands. Wait here."

Syv waited, hoping Henry wouldn't change his mind about hiring him. When Henry returned, he carried a brown bag, a styrofoam cup from which arose a rich aroma, and navy-blue clothing over his arm. "I brought you a uniform from our prior custodian. He was tall like you, so I hope it'll fit. And here's something to eat."

"Thank you." Syv opened the bag to find two pieces of bread surrounding pink and yellow slices.

<Ham and cheese,> the Voice in his head told him.

Did I ask you? Syv responded, devouring the sandwich in six bites. He would have eaten the food no matter what was enclosed in the bread, but it had the advantage of being delicious. The liquid in the cup was hot and sweet, immensely satisfying. Much better than the standard-issue Nutri-Goop everyone drank back home.

“Where did this wonderful food come from?” Syv asked. *And is more of it readily obtainable?*

“Well, uh--it was my lunch.” Henry smiled. “Mother packs me a cold-meat sandwich every day.”

Syv blinked in surprise. So Henry had given up his own ration to feed him. It was an unexpected kindness. “You are most gracious to share with me.”

“Uh--sure, happy to help. I’ll give you a few minutes alone while you--uh, change.” Henry left the office.

Feeling a good deal better after the meal, Syv donned the blue uniform. The pants were several inches too large for his slim waist, but fortunately he was wearing a belt. He transferred it to the new pants and pulled it tight. The shirt was a perfect fit, although the orange name embroidered over the pocket read, “Frank.”

Henry knocked and came back in. “Much better,” he said. “Now, I’ve just got some paperwork for you to fill out before you start your duties.” To Syv’s dismay, Henry picked up a book’s worth of papers from his desk. Frowning down at the pen Henry handed him, Syv wondered why they weren’t doing this on a computer. “Let’s get started, shall we?” Henry asked with a smile.

As the principal had warned her, Miss Hammond’s fifth grade was a challenge. *Each class has its own distinct personality*, Bethany’s supervising teacher had told her during student-teaching days. If this one had a defining characteristic, it was sheer obnoxiousness.

All morning, the pupils had played a game called “test the substitute.” Coughing broke out whenever she turned to the blackboard. A boy with lime-green glasses took it upon himself to inform her, “That isn’t how Miss Hammond does it,” at least fourteen times in the first two hours. One freckled skinny girl was particularly skilled at asking silly questions with a straight face--questions that made everyone else giggle.

“Don’t hesitate to send ‘em to me if they give you any trouble,” Mr. Wheeler had told her, but Bethany was reluctant to do that. Depending on the principal for discipline was a sure way to demonstrate that she’d lost control of the class. She didn’t want to reveal just how inexperienced and unskilled she was.

When a boy in a bright-red shirt blew his nose for the tenth time in fifteen minutes, Bethany asked him if he’d like to visit the first-aid office. He answered with a belch so loud that the girl in front of him put her hands over her ears.

As the class burst into laughter, the boy smiled angelically and said, “Excuse me, Mrs. Abbott.”

Finally Bethany passed out a sheet of math problems prepared by Miss Hammond and sank gratefully into her chair. She’d been so busy dealing with the students that she’d barely had time to look around at her surroundings.

From the appearance of the classroom, it was easy to see the school district was short on funds. Princeton Heights residents had turned down tax levies several years in a row. Ceiling tiles

were stained, desks old and scarred. But Miss Hammond had decorated the two bulletin boards cheerfully--one with pupils' drawings of themselves, the other with images from Ohio history. At the back of the room, a large metal table held three computers--not very many for a class of twenty-seven.

There were two white mice back there, too, in separate cages. Bethany wondered if they still did that old experiment where one mouse ate nutritious food while the other ate junk food. Certainly one mouse was larger and sleeker than the other. Geez, they'd been doing that twenty-five years ago when she was in elementary school. Couldn't teachers come up with anything fresh?

She wondered how her son was doing, across the hall in his fourth-grade classroom. Justin had been silent at breakfast. Bethany reminded herself not to borrow trouble. His lack of chatter might mean he was mulling over one of his many interests--the next *Amazing Spider-Man* comic, classic *Star Trek*, or this year's World Series. On the other hand, sometimes he got quiet like that right before he came down with a cold.

The bell rang for recess. Bethany breathed a sigh of relief. She'd made it through the first two hours. The day had to get better from now on.

Mopping floors was dull, but the task gave Syv plenty of time to think. Despite all the setbacks, he was finally on track. He'd filled out the paperwork and was now officially working. Soon he'd come up with a way to meet his Game object--the fifth-grade teacher in Room 10. Court her, propose . . . hopefully it wouldn't take long. Then he'd go home a winner. Furthermore, he'd save Ev's life and earn the right to take Ana back with him.

As he guided the mop smoothly over the floor, he thought about the evening he had spent in the park. For several hours, he'd observed scores of people--families with children, single people with dogs, people on bicycles or running on foot. And so many couples, walking hand in hand, sitting on park benches. He'd been standing by the side of the creek, throwing pebbles in and watching the spreading ripples, when a young pair in matching CWRU sweatshirts strolled over and sat close by. They'd engaged extensively in the activity known as "kissing." Watching them from the corner of his eye, Syv had been startled by his own unexpected physiological reaction.

<It is because the hospital greatly increased your testosterone levels. They now exceed that of the average twenty-first century male,> the Voice explained.

Knowing that is not the same thing as experiencing the effects, Syv answered.

And in the morning, upon awakening, he'd discovered his body performing the same disconcerting reaction.

<It is called an 'erection,'> the Voice said. <Popular slang also refers to this physiological state as a 'hard-on,' a 'boner,' or 'getting wood.'>

I am well aware, Syv told it. *Now do not speak to me again until I ask for your help!*

<Oh, very well,> the Voice answered, sounding sulky.

At home, sexual satisfaction was achieved with the help of one's orgasm wand. He hadn't brought his along. Yet this morning, his body had demanded release.

Closing his eyes so that the camera would not record it, he'd unzipped his pants and explored his organ's new length with his fingers. Newly redeveloped or not, it seemed like it had always been part of him. Touching any area of it felt just as exciting as an orgasm wand ever had.

Syv gripped the mop handle. He'd better forgo thoughts of the morning's solitary pleasure.

He couldn't let his organ reawake at school.

The beeper he wore on his belt buzzed. Syv looked at it and smiled. Room 10 needed him. A stroke of good luck. He'd been here only three hours, and he was about to meet his Game Object.

The class was in a frenzy as they searched for Bruno, the missing mouse. Bethany wasn't afraid of mice--Justin had had mice, gerbils, and a guinea pig--but she was terribly worried that one of the frantic children would step on Bruno by accident. Then she would have traumatized pupils and a dead class pet.

"Class!" No one listened, so she raised her voice and tried again. "Class! I've called the custodian. Go back to your seats--now!"

"There he goes!" a boy cried out, taking a long dive onto the ground. Five other children converged on him as though it were a football game. A curly-haired girl shrieked and a boy in the back, over-excited, grabbed his asthma inhaler.

No one paid any attention to Bethany's orders. One tall blonde girl began to cry into a tissue. Bethany consulted her seating chart and asked, "What's wrong, Elisa?"

"It was my turn to take Bruno home this weekend," the girl sobbed.

"Don't worry, I'm sure he'll be found before then." Bethany looked up in relief as the door opened and a tall man in a blue uniform stepped into the room.

She drew in a quick breath as she realized he was the handsome man she'd seen in the office the day before.

He raised his eyebrows and nodded to her. She knew he recognized her, although all he said was, "Teacher, you called me?"

"Our mouse has escaped. Can you please help us find it?"

"I will try."

"You're not Frank," one of the boys said in an accusing tone.

The man's full lips curved into a smile. "No? Do you not see my label?" He pointed to the word "Frank" over his heart.

A ripple of laughter ran through the class.

"Do you need a--a broom or something?" Bethany asked, wondering why he was just standing there. "I hope you're not afraid of mice."

He tilted his head slightly. "I do not know if I am afraid of mice. Do they bite?"

Bethany was intrigued. Duke Abbott had never admitted to fear, even in a situation where she knew he was terrified.

"Bruno's vicious!" one of the girl students said, a slight smile lingering on her face.

"That's right," chimed in one of the boys. "Watch out for his big claws!"

The man's mobile eyebrows flew up. "Then I suppose I had better locate him immediately, before Bruno rips the entire class to shreds. But I will need perfect quiet. Please, students, you must return to your seats."

Now, why were they obeying him when they had ignored her? Subdued, they filed back to their desks.

The room grew quiet enough to hear the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Syv waited until all the children were seated, then closed his eyes briefly.

Where is the mouse? he asked the Voice.

<Oh, so now you need my help?>

Yes. Can you not send out your nano-bots and find the rodent? Syv knew that the

computer-chip utilized hundreds of microscopic robots to sense its surroundings.

<Will you ask nicely?>

Did I not just do that? Please!

Syv waited. In another minute, the Voice said, <The mouse is hiding under the heat radiator at the north end of the classroom.>

Without hesitation, Syv walked over to the radiator and fell to his knees. The small white rodent was underneath, curled into a ball. Slowly, so as not to startle it, Syv reached under and scooped it up.

He stood, holding it enclosed in his cupped hands. It was so tiny, and yet alive and aware of him. Looking into its bright eyes, he marveled at its small perfection. Its claws tickled his palm and its whiskers quivered as it sniffed him with a pink nose. He stroked its soft white fur with two fingers.

“Oh, thank goodness you found him,” the teacher said, hurrying to the table. “Please put him in this cage.”

Syv gently released the mouse into its bed of cedar shavings and turned his attention to his Game Object.

Although Siblings were bald, with skin tones ranging from dark-golden to pale brown, Syv had become accustomed to the people of the past through studying the archives and watching Ana’s Game. Thus he was able to assess the teacher’s appearance without being disturbed by her pale skin and abundant head hair, the same lovely color as sunset glimmering through the Dome.

Actually, he found her skin quite pleasing. Its smooth surface was creamy and flawless, and the faint glow in her cheeks heightened as he looked at her. As he drew closer, he saw her hair was a fascinating mixture, pale red and dark gold hues. She gazed up at him with wide green eyes.

She was even more lovely than he had realized yesterday.

“Thank you, Mr. Ramos.”

“Please call me Syv. And you are Mrs. Abbott, yes?”

She nodded, looking pleased that he remembered.

It suddenly occurred to Syv that the title ‘Mrs.’ meant she was pair-bonded already. Was this another error on the part of the Game designers?

The Voice said, <Fifty percent of all marriages of this period ended in divorce. If she is married, she will be wearing a ring on the third finger of her left hand.>

Glancing at Mrs. Abbott’s left hand, Syv saw no ring, but thought it best to make certain of her status. “And you are divorced, yes?” he asked her.

Her voice was frigid as she answered, “Excuse me?” Her eyes flashed fire and her delicate brows drew together.

Syv realized he had blundered. “It is my first day and I am trying to learn as much as possible. I offer apologies if my question was intrusive.”

“Apology accepted.” Her tone was still formal as she added, “Thank you for finding our mouse.” When she turned away, Syv left the room quickly.