



ANGEL WITHOUT WINGS

CHAPTER ONE

I

WHAT'S THAT?" Chris wanted to know. He crumpled up his empty half-pint milk container and stuffed it into the paper bag that had held his lunch.

Sandra Cheyne sat back on the grass and flicked her long, aggressively blonde hair back from her face. Her dark eyes glinted from between unruly strands.

"It's my seal on you." She emphasized the point with her favorite wicked grin.

Chris dabbed with what was left of a paper napkin at the whiskers about his mouth, then leaned back against the tree trunk and pulled his right knee up to get a closer look at Sandra's latest doodling. Black and red ink marked a complex symbol against the faded blue denim.

Sandra tapped the capped end of one of her ballpoint pens against her cheek. With her mouth slightly open, it created the clapping of distant, sedate hoofbeats. But they were muffled in the sounds of not-so-distant city traffic.

"I'm not Jewish," Chris pointed out.

She giggled and raised an eyebrow. “So nu? Is that my fault?” she asked with her best native New York inflection. “But that’s not really the Star of David. It’s the Seal of Solomon.”

Looking up, he cocked his head and raised an eyebrow.

“The intent, mostly,” she responded, interpreting him correctly. “I tried to emphasize that some by weaving the lines in and out, from point to point, see? But notice the circle inscribed in it? And the cross inside that?”

She leaned forward to point, and Chris found his gaze diverted by the loose dance of her breasts against the fabric of her oversized teeshirt.

“Covering all the bases, eh?” he mused. “No sickle moon and star? No pentagon?”

“Gram.” She slapped playfully at his shoulder, perhaps aware that his attention had strayed. “Pen-ta-gram. All of them are mystical power symbols. The cross was an ancient earth symbol long before Cap— before Jesus was crucified...”

Chris twisted her a grin. “Captain Jesus? I wouldn’t have taken you for a Seeker, Sandy.

“But no,” he continued before she could respond. “I know about the cross, and the circle is the symbol of the Dao, the Oneness of All, right?”

“I’m not a Seeker, either. I told you. I’m a witch.” She gave him the standard quick grin and appraising glance that accompanied this declaration. “Never mind. Yes, Mr. Know-it-all Leighton, the circle is a symbol of Dao, and it’s a protective circle, too. But this one—”

“Way-ull,” he interrupted. “Draw all the wagons in a circle, Pil-grim—”

“But this one—”

“Oh! Yeah, now I remember! The circle is feminine; the cross is masculine, and what you’ve drawn here, with the cross in—”

“It’s an earth sign,” she interjected with a dangerous calm. “The circle is the Worm Ourobours, the serpent that circled the world. The serpent is also a symbol of wisdom, and in this case combines with the protective circle in an ever-renewed cycle, because it’s swallowing its own tail. There, see?”

“I thought that was just a lump in your drawing. The serpent is another phallic symbol, too, isn’t it? Now, swallowing its own—”

“Stop it!”

“Or, are you telling me to go—”

“I said cut it out! Or I’ll put a lump in *your*—”

“Okay, okay,” Chris capitulated hastily. “So, what are these musical notes in the points?”

Sandra sought help from somewhere in the branches over Chris’ head. “These—” she said, finally, pointing, “—are my name in Hebrew letters; it’s an old style common to arcane symbolism. This is shin, aleph—”

“I thought you said this wasn’t—”

“It’s not Jewish,” she said, too patiently. “But Hebrew characters are good for this kind of thing. They’re really loaded with symbolism in their own right, and it also has a lot to do with the Kabbalah and that whole branch of the— never mind. Take my word for it. This is nun, dalet, resh, and—”

“Where’s Dr. Who when we need him?”

“What?” She squinted, then got it. “Oh. Come on, Chris!” She was annoyed. “I’m trying to tell you something. It’s not Dalek, it’s dalet, and it’s like a D, okay? S-A-N-D-R-A, see?”

“Seriously,” Chris said, looking at his knee and back to her. “I thought Hebrew didn’t use vowels. I mean...”

“Aleph— no, well. This isn’t quite the same thing. We’re not really writing in Hebrew. Like I say, all the letters have symbolic meanings in addition to— are you really following all this?”

Sandra had a cute, almost childlike face, save for a rather imperious arch to her nose. This was slightly offset by her short upper lip, which tended to make the tip of her nose bob as she spoke. Chris found it an endearing but distracting trait.

“Um,” he said, switching his attention back to his knee. “Why does your name run counter-clockwise? If it were Hebrew, I could see the point, but...”

“If you’re writing Hebrew words in English you don’t write them backwards, Dummy.” She leaned forward, draping her arms over his raised knee and resting her chin on her interlaced fingers. This made her whole head move as she spoke. “It’s not in Hebrew, but when you’re using Hebrew letters, it makes sense to use them right-to-left, doesn’t it?” Her yellow hair fell forward and covered her face. Her eyes, peering at him through this golden veil, were dark, accentuated by liner and some kind of bruised-looking shadow.

“I see,” Chris said. “And these in the middle, here, and the letters around the cross? Those look Greek. Yeah, sigma, omega, tau, iota—” Sandra sat back, eyes hiding behind her hair.

“—‘Sotsi’? What’s—wait, there’s kappa—is that a kappa or a chi? Oh, it’s Kristos, backwards, like your name. I thought—”

Sandra shook her head. “It’s too complicated,” she said.

He looked at her, cocked his head with a thought. She claimed she was a witch, sometimes... “Widdershins?”

He saw her eyes widen behind the blonde veil, and he wondered if there wasn’t something a little evasive about her shrug.

He shrugged back. “Hm. Kristos? Is that supposed to be me or— If it’s me, it should be something like ‘Kristophoros,’ shouldn’t it?”

She tossed her hair in her own version of a shrug. “Not necessarily. Just making it more mystic.” She grinned, perhaps

a little tentatively. “I call you Chris, right? Not Christopher. Are you really the Christ-bearer? Kristophoros?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.” He had been raised Unitarian-Congregationalist, but as a child he’d been told the story of his namesake, once the patron saint of travelers, but controversially deposed from the Roman Catholic canon a few decades ago. As he remembered the legend, the original Christopher, then called Reprobos, had offered to carry the Christ-child across a stream. And the burden had grown heavier and heavier, the deeper he went...

“It all has to do with names of power and like that,” Sandra said. “So, what do you think? Do you think you’re Captain Jesus?” She said it a shade defiantly, blowing a strand of hair out of her mouth, revealing the tip of her nose to the sun. But he noticed that she lowered her voice on the last. You never quite knew when there might be a Righteous Seeker around.

Chris failed to resist the temptation. He reached out a caught her nose gently between curled fore- and middle fingers and pretended to tweak it violently.

“Ow!” she yelped before she realized that no damage was being done. She sat back on her heels and, after a first, reassuring touch at the offended feature, she put her hands on her hips, elbows winging akimbo, and glowered at him, pouting outrageously. With her hair hiding most of her face, the effect was ludicrous—and when she essayed to blow the strands away, the puff turned into a raspberry wheeze.

With that the balloon broke. Their uncontrollable laughter sent her back on the grass in the sun, he with his shoulders against the tree, both oblivious to passers-by.

Languor pervaded him as their mirth soothed away into grins and then to smiles. She rose slightly, propped on her elbows, and shook her hair. Through half-lidded eyes he gazed at her, wondering what she was to him, and he to her.

The teeshirt she wore was decorated with a parody of the poster for a recent science-fiction spectacular. He and Sandra had collaborated on the design. A bug-eyed monster, ugly-but-cute, was menaced by a ray-gun toting, square-jawed spacewoman, while a namby-pamby Earthman fluttered fainting to one side—roughly reversing the general situation on the original—which in turn had been something of a take-off of the old pulp magazine covers from early in the last century. The movie, released last Christmas, had been a highly-touted attempt to return to the halcyon days of Lucas and Spielberg, now that the last of the *Star Wars* movies had been released and faded into memory, but it turned out to be a seriously cliché-flawed clunker in what may have been the last gasp of a dying breed. Even the great Peter Jackson versions of the *Lord of the Rings* fantasy sequence were generally considered dated, though the cult following remained strong—and vocal.

They had silk-screened a couple of the teeshirts for themselves and a few for friends, but resisted subsequent importuning from a number of others to make even more and sell them. As students, of course, they could have used the money, but by the same token they had neither the time nor, in the long run, the inclination, to go into the teeshirt business.

Sandra's bosom, although hardly over-developed, nonetheless was making the already pop-eyed creature even more so, as well as adding an unwonted three-dimensionality to the spaceman. Chris, musing how he might point this out to her without coming across as boorish, noticed that the effect was becoming even more enhanced at points on either side. Then he realized that even as he was gazing at her, so was she gazing back at him. His felt his face flush, and his mind darted.

"I'd better get going," he said, not wanting to. "The LeBlanc lecture's at two."

Sandra didn't respond. She seemed to be whispering to herself. His first thought was that he hadn't sounded as convincing as he should.

Meanwhile, he felt rooted to the spot where he was sitting, to the earth and to the tree he leaned against. The very striations of the bark were tangible and somehow belonged to him, while the ground and the thin grass formed a perfect cushion.

Bemused, he noticed that she was again leaning forward toward him, timeless features like a nymph's framed in golden hair, her eyes a sudden focus for his, though somehow his awareness seemed expanded.

Her hand was weaving a kind of pattern, there, over his knees. The design was one that must have been going on all the time without his being aware of it, perhaps forever. Random it seemed, yet there was an odd polarity about it, with one base off in some direction he'd never noticed before, and another that somehow included the two of them. But the core was just above the symbol she had so painstakingly drawn on his thigh.

He thought he heard the echo of her voice murmuring huskily for him to stay, stay, stay, though certainly she hadn't actually spoken aloud. Still, she was telling him something, if he could just...

Like a bird of prey, her hand hovered and wove. The focus sharpened. Her forefinger and thumb were oddly pinched together; it was reminiscent of the way he and she were, or could be, together, like that. The hither pole of the nexus. Did that make sense?

There was something he almost understood about the world and the way things were, but he felt reluctant to make the extra effort to cross that line of knowledge. Had Adam felt that way just as he was about to bite into the apple Eve offered him?

Sandra's fingers swooped to the center of the mark. A pinprick spread from his thigh; it morphed into a bomb-burst encompassing his world.

With vague surprise he heard himself muster the energy to inquire, "What are you doing?"

He looked at his leg, and saw a delicate, dark red pearl at the center of the symbol. He admired the perfection with which it seemed to complete the design.

Whatever it was he had been about to understand was here with him, now. Something profound was ready to be discovered. It was there, in the ruby globe—

Sandra reached out to the drop of blood. Before he could protest, she touched it with the tip of her third finger. The drop smeared, darkening the denim and staining her fingertip. Something infinitely precious was lost.

Why?

"Just completing the Seal," Sandra said softly, as though answering his unformed plea. Her fingertip vanished behind the veil of her hair, into her mouth. He saw the tip of her tongue touch it; he saw her taste the blood. She shook her hair back.

Neither her voice nor her eyes held a hint of a joke. Instead, something else crept into her expression.

She sucked at her finger sensuously, gazing at him. Something groped inside, reached down to the base of his spine and then forward, filling him, cramping the space between his thighs—

He brushed at his face. When had he walked through a cobweb? Suddenly, his leg stung where she had pricked him, and he felt it as an offshoot of the pressure in his groin. He shivered, chilled. Was a cloud crossing the sun?

The world tilted.

Someone stood over him, someone tall—awesomely tall. The sun was behind that one, shining golden through hair like a

halo. Rather than blocking him from its light, it seemed the figure was focusing back into him some of the dissolving warmth, something precious he thought he'd lost— And all for just the length of a single heartbeat like a drum: there was nothing but the sound of that—

— beat.

Then the nearby traffic and voices were there like old friends that had never really been gone. The sun dappled him with its warmth through green leaves.

The sun. But wholly different from when it— from—
What?

Sandra— She was sitting there, in front of him, drooping, looking thin and forlorn, almost— for a moment he thought she looked insubstantial, like a ghost, but of course, there she was, certainly solid enough, her chin resting on his knee, her eyes closed.

Something—

"Are you ready to meet the Lord?"

Chris looked up. A bespectacled young man stood on the sidewalk next to them, gazing at them earnestly. Chris looked around. Hadn't there been someone—?

"What?"

"This is the Year of His Coming," quoth the young man. "It is the Jubilee, the End of the true Millennium, when Captain Jesus shall Come Forth from Heaven to Choose the Worthy and the Righteous. Are you Ready? Have you Surrendered your Soul to the Keeping of the Lord and His Corporeal Ministers? Will you Join in the Search for the Righteous?"

He wore a grey houndstooth suit with a white shirt and pale yellow tie. It was barely an approximation of the Seeker uniform; nor was the boy's hair cut to regulation length. But the fervent anxiety in his eye was authentic, and his words were from what Chris thought of as the Standard Seeker Spiel.

"Don't worry about us," Chris said. "We're doing just fine."

He looked at Sandra, who appeared to be coming back from some inner contemplation. Her jaw dropped as she saw the Seeker. Chris put his hand out to her, but she didn't notice.

The boy was terribly concerned. "Don't Yield to False Complacency!" he cried, bending across the pipe railing that separated the sidewalk from the grass. His tie swung loosely out, framed by imploring arms, hands emerging from oversize sleeves, one grasping the inevitable Seekers' Handbook, the other a clipboard. Both handbook — a frayed, paperback edition—and clipboard threatened to shed their worn contents.

Chris sighed, eased himself up from where he'd been sitting. Without quite planning it, he found himself looming over the young Seeker, who stepped back, looking up into his face, already wide eyes substituting alarm for concern.

"You don't Understand," the boy said. "The Fires of Hell are Everlasting. You Must be Redeemed. You Must Join Those Who Seek After Righteousness, or be Doomed for All—"

"Bless you," Chris interrupted. The boy stepped back.

"And thank you," Chris continued. "But why do you believe we are not redeemed and saved? Why do you think we are not among those called to serve the Lord in our way? Must we wear the uniform you wear to march behind Captain Jesus in the ranks of the Righteous?"

The seeker's eyes remained wide, his mouth open, moving, but with nothing coming out.

"Don't you think," Chris said, grasping the young man's shoulders, overriding his attempts to reply, "that there are those of us who must hide our light beneath the bushel so that we may work and live with the worldly and bring them to the true understanding?" He gestured away along the sidewalk. "Go on, you have found in us brothers. Seek out and find those who need your help and your guidance and bring them to the Way of the Righteous, for His Name's sake! Praise the Lord!"

"All Praise His Name!" the boy responded automatically, his eyes alight—albeit somewhat unfocused. "Thank you, Brother!"

He stumbled off, glancing back perplexedly. Chris thought the young Seeker didn't look entirely convinced.

But he was moving in the right direction: Away.

When Chris looked back down at Sandra, she reached to take his hand. Hers was cool, but as they touched something passed between them—a tentative jolt of *déjà vu*, like the recollection of a strange, warm moment long past. But it faded.

"That was some performance," she said, a little wonderingly.

"Had to do something," he said as he pulled her to her feet. "Doubt if I could have convinced anybody more experienced."

She started to speak, reconsidered, shrugged and went ahead. "You almost had *me* convinced." He grinned.

As she joined him, stepping over the iron piping onto concrete, the top of her head barely came to his shoulder. Around them was the laconic bustle of a weekday noontime in Washington Square Park. They were near MacDougal Street, west of the fountain and the arch, close to the concrete echoes of children in an open playground. An ice cream vendor stood patiently at a junction of sidewalks.

On the benches sat secretaries and businessmen, clerks and housewives and drifters. Some lunched out of brown paper bags from home, white ones from nearby delis and lunch counters, or plastic of a variety of hues and sources. Some gossiped while watching the children in the playground. Some read, or simply sunned themselves. Others were just there—bench-lichen, Chris had christened them, another lunchtime. No doubt some of them among the ever-present homeless.

Not far off, in an open space under the sun, a ragged, bearded ancient—he could have been anywhere from 40 to

70—lay on his back. A crumpled, leaking wine carton lay by his hand. An almost buttonless grey shirt gaped to the sunlight; his deep tan was streaked with grime.

Young men in white shirts with bow ties and narrow-cut slacks—occasionally slightly belled over rancher boots—walked with long-skirted young women, whose pastel hose flashed through slits that often reached the hip; high-button-look shoes matched or complemented their skirts in color and texture.

There were some kids who affected tank tops, head bands and designer jeans in one of the recurring efforts to recall the psychedelic love generation of the late 60s and early 70s, in reaction to the Middle Eastern war.

One occasionally saw the baggy, pegged trousers and wide-shouldered look of the 40's swing revival on middle-aged men and women who seemed to think these were still the rage—or never had the income to move into the 21st Century. Chris had even seen the occasional turtleneck, beret and shades on some senior citizens. He assumed their image of Greenwich Village had been formed more than half a century ago or more, in the days of the legendary beats and bohemians.

And then there were the Nokkers, which were sort of counter-culture Seekers, but without even the bogus respectability of having the radical religious right behind them. “Creationism” would be too long a word for Nokkies to pronounce.

They tended to wear a kind of quasi uniform of white shirt and camouflage khakis, covered with pins and buttons and imitation military ribbons. Most carried noksticks, a kind of doubled nightstick, one piece weighted. If one wasn't careful one could find oneself the target of them. These painful descendants of the vaudevillian's slapstick didn't give rise to the Nokkerdown name, however. The Nokkers' greatest joy

was to put anything and everything down, by word or by action. The stick was adopted to enhance either.

None of these were in evidence at the moment, however. Like the radical skinheads who were spiritually their previous generation, the Nokkers mainly came out in packs at night.

Chris fingered his vaguely disreputable beard with his free hand. He wore it at Sandra's behest rather than his own preference, although it was true he'd had it longer than he'd known her. Since as soon after his graduation from Berkshire High in '06 as he'd been able to sprout it, in fact. And he hadn't been totally immune from the 60s nostalgia, himself, though the era predated him by a few decades.

“He was wrong, you know,” he remarked. “This thing about the True Millennium. No one really knows the actual date Jesus was born, but the usual guesses still would put the millennium a few years ago.”

Sandra groaned. “Oh, don't get into that. I know technically you're right, but I got so sick of the Y2K thing when we were kids. You remember how that turned out.” She tugged at his arm. “You still have twenty minutes 'til you have to audit that lecture, Chris. What's your hurry?”

“For Theo LeBlanc?” He looked down at her, then around them. It would be pleasant to stay. He didn't want to pursue the millennium argument. That was a Seeker aberration. There was something in their relationship that was coming to a head, and he liked the thought. So why was he anxious to go? Something was nagging at him, but he couldn't focus on it.

Maybe it was that Seeker kid. He looked around, saw the boy on another sidewalk, buttonholing a young couple. They appeared to be listening. He shrugged.

The day was splendid, with a few curly clouds drifting in the pale New York City sky—about as clear as it ever got, here. The trees were lush with their new spring foliage. The people were no more frantic than usual, if perhaps no

less—and it looked as though they were enjoying it more, today.

He slipped his arm over Sandra's shoulders, noticing how frail they seemed, enjoying the feel of her hair across his skin. "I dunno, Sandy," he said. "I guess I'm just restless. And I'll be lucky to get a seat at the back of the hall, as it is."

She wiggled out from under his arm. "Don't call me Sandy." But she stayed by him as they walked, long enough to make her point, he thought, before she slipped her arm around his waist again.

Her hand rested on his wide, leather-textured vinyl belt as they walked. Their rhythms were slightly off, so they alternately bumped hip against thigh. They strolled through light and shade, crepe-soled shoes absorbing the harshness of the concrete. He swerved to lay their crumpled lunch bags atop an overlaid trash basket.

Sandra patted his waist, nudging him with her shoulder. "Look who's buying a Good Humor," she said.

He looked at the ice cream wagon ahead of them. Towering over the Hispanic vendor was Maryanne Anderson, a fellow art student. Skinny as a greyhound, her shoulders in a perpetual hunch, she was wearing a fresh-looking print dress that was either too short or too long on her.

She actually looked furtive about buying the ice cream, though Chris thought a little extra weight would do her good. Her short hairdo formed a pale fringe of curls that bobbed about her face as she fumbled through her handbag. Her arms were sunburned.

She turned as Chris and Sandra came up to her, almost pushing the wrapped ice cream bar into his face.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" she cried. Her soft Southern voice stretched the vowels. Her pale brows and lashes, lighter than even her hair and normally almost invisible, stood out against her flushed face.

Chris grinned. "It's okay. Looks good." He found that even he had to look slightly up to meet her eyes.

She darted her gaze away from his to Sandra and back, then away again. "Toasted almond," she affirmed, nodding. She held the bar up as though offering it to him—or perhaps to let him read the wrapper for himself.

"Uh, huh," he replied. "That's, uh—good," he finished lamely. Sometimes he found his gift for clever repartee definitely out to lunch. It should be fairly roly-poly by now.

Maryanne hesitated another moment, apparently decided that was that, bobbed her head again with a smile to the both of them, and walked away to the trash basket, where she stopped and began to carefully unwrap the bar. She had a sweet smile, Chris thought. But...

At Sandra's rather abrupt tug, they resumed their stroll toward the fountain, passing a tall pedestal where there had apparently once been a bust or statue of someone named Halley.

The huge, circular pool was waterless at the moment, the fountain dry. Kids and guitar players and a variety of other park denizens littered its rim and the steps and ledges of the concentric plaza that surrounded it, sitting or lying down or playing or soaking up the sun. A war-protest sign or two was in evidence, but not being brandished.

Chris caught a whiff of pot smoke. He didn't actually see anyone with a joint. New York State law, or at least its enforcement, had of late lost much of its old liberality about marijuana, despite—indeed, in the face of—last year's controversial passage in Congress of the Tackett ("...and welcome") bill.

The general noise and buzz of conversations drowned the guitars to but one more sound among others. To their left, through the famous arch, Fifth Avenue stretched glittering whitely toward workaday midtown Manhattan.

"Hi, Joyce," Chris heard Sandra say. "Linda," she added. He looked around.

Joyce tended toward the plump, of middle height, with short, straight dark hair cut in bangs and deep-set laughing eyes that pierced through rimless glasses. "Hi, Sandra, Christopher," she smiled. He grinned back at her, disarmed as usual. Slightly behind her, Linda, petite, sweetly sharp-faced and shy, smiled agreeably to them both.

"Some cover, Christopher," Joyce said. "*Demons of Deneb*?"

"Oh? You've seen it?"

"Bought it. Thought that was your style. I heard about it, and Mike showed me the poster in the book store a couple of days ago. Lindy picked up a copy yesterday. We started reading it last night."

"Thanks." Chris felt a gathering flush at the back of his neck. Ol' Repartee Function was still chomping lunch somewhere, and Chris had never really learned how to deal with admiration. But he knew Joyce well enough to respect her opinion. It didn't help, however, that she had one of the most engaging smiles he'd ever seen.

"You really made it feel alien, with those colors streaking through it like—I don't know. How'd you ever come up with that?"

He grinned, feeling the helplessness of trying to explain something he was less than sure of himself. "I really don't know. It just—it felt right, somehow."

"The book wasn't up to it," Sandra interjected.

Joyce nodded. "I know—just another space opera, like one of those old *Star Wars*-Conan ripoffs."

"Mike and I read the galleys before I did it, you know?" Chris said. "We got the idea from their encounter with the thing, the baaloth, when the girl, Rahnitra's trying to recover the power pod. That's the shiny thing she's holding..."

"Don't tell me any more, we've just started it! But good! I was afraid that was supposed to be some kind of gun, or maybe even a light-saber!"

"Well, I admit I did think about that. You might find more than one resemblance to that old first *Star Wars* poster, if you—"

"Before my time." Joyce grinned, shaking her head. "But I think you made it your own."

Chris shrugged. "More Mike's, really. But thanks. Anyway, Jupiter seemed happy with it."

"They'd better! We don't pick up every book that comes along, not at those prices. You know, five years ago you could have bought that book for maybe ten dollars in paperback. Now—" She shook her head again.

"Sorry 'bout that," Chris grinned.

She smiled back. "No hard feelings. Just let me have your aut—"

Someone lurched between them, almost knocking Chris off balance. He glimpsed a figure in jeans and what looked like some kind of bandanna-cloth caftan, and a grubby hand that clutched at Joyce's bosom.

Her eyes widened. He didn't quite see what she did, but she moved and he heard her curse, and the figure howled and tumbled sideways, sprawling on the rim of the fountain, where it lay twitching and waving its arms.

It was a kid, a teenager with a week's patchy shadow on his face, unfocused eyes betraying some absorption wholly apart from anything outside himself. Chris caught a look of unfathomed disgust shared between Joyce and Sandra, while Linda, clutching Joyce's arm, had turned a fiery red. She looked as agonized as though she herself had been violated.

"Huh?" cried the boy, as though belatedly surprised. "Hunh hunh, hunh, u-unnnhh!" he repeated, and now it was something else.

"Oh, shit!" he wailed. He was now writhing on the concrete, in the midst of a gathering crowd, and there was something in the way he was moving that made Chris's stomach feel squirmy.

"Comehard," he heard someone say, and Sandra echoed it. "What?" he said.

"Sounds like he's on orgomine," she said.

Joyce's face wrinkled. Chris looked back and forth between them. He'd heard that word, too, somewhere. It was supposed to be some new kind of drug, and it always seemed to elicit peculiar reactions when it was mentioned, like a dirty word. Sometimes disgust, sometimes snickers. The name was evocative enough—

And suddenly it dawned on him what the noises the kid was making reminded him of. By now they were a kind of strangled wheezing and gasping, joined by something that could have been exhausted, hysterical laughter—or sobs.

"Come on, Lindy," Joyce said, touching Linda's cheek comfortingly. "We've got to get along. It's all right, honey." She turned her divided attention back to them for a moment. "Sandra, Christopher. See you Saturday?"

"What?" Sandra asked.

"Mike's?"

"Oh," Sandra said. "I'd forgotten." She looked up at Chris as though for confirmation. Not especially characteristic of her, he thought. He'd forgotten about the party, himself, but he nodded.

"Right!" Joyce called back, and then she was hurrying off, Linda in tow. Chris dropped his hand from an aborted wave.

"Oh, God!" the boy cried out, almost hidden now by the crowd. "It's shit! It's no good!" And he seemed to be trying to swallow the grunts that were involuntarily shaking him from deep inside.

Chris stood helplessly by Sandra, jostled a little by gathering onlookers. The churning sensation continued in his gut, and he had an awful realization that there was something in him that was sharing in the poor kid's experience. He felt himself stepping back against onlookers behind him. Then there were bustling grey-jacketed men moving in authoritatively, and the crowd moved back. Seekers. They were kneeling by the boy, and Chris saw one deploying a hypodermic.

Sandra tugged him away, and he was ready to follow.

"Is that—orgomine—what it sounds like?" Chris inquired. She turned, vicious. "You heard it!" she snapped.

He stepped back, astonished. "Don't bite at me," he cried. "That wasn't me down there!"

"No, but I bet you'd—" She broke off, refocused on him. Her mouth fell open.

"I'm sorry, Chris. Oh, God!" She waved her hands, helplessly, looking away from him. "It's the first time I've seen it. But I know—knew—somebody who was—who used the stuff once. And she—she isn't the same any more." After a moment she clutched his arm with both hands and stared up at him as though seeking understanding, or asking forgiveness.

Chris nodded. The sounds were still coming from the boy, but weaker, now, muffled. An approaching ambulance whooped perkily from somewhere behind them.

He recalled stories he'd been told of things that had happened to users of various drugs back in the 60s and 70s. Before his time.

"Like acid," he said.

"Like what?"

"Like acid. LSD—some kind of—lysergic I think was the word—Lysergic Di-something acid. Hallucigenic, psychedelic—

One of the things not really included in the popular nostalgia for the Vietnam War protest era was LSD use.

Something called ecstasy had replaced it for a while when he was a kid, and crack was still a major problem in the inner cities.

"Oh." She nodded. "Something like that, I guess." She was looking down at her feet. "It—it's supposed to be some kind of substitute for— for sex. It gives you a continuous—"

"Unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged?" Chris chuckled, thinking of one of his father's old books he had read. Something about an immortal's search through history for such pleasure...

"It's not funny, Chris," she said earnestly, angrily. "Think about it. You're out of control, every muscle in your body contracting over and over, your mind—" She stopped, looked away again. "And they say it isn't the same, really. It only approximates the— the pleasure. But it isn't—it doesn't—"

Chris put his hand on her shoulder, squeezed. "I think I get the idea. It wouldn't be real, natural. I mean, there wouldn't be any love, any affection. It wouldn't even be as good as mas—uh, I mean— we— I wouldn't want—"

He broke off his floundering as she looked suddenly up at him, and he snatched his hand from her shoulder. She tossed her head, her hair swirling back, and he saw a peculiar quirk at the corners of her mouth.

"I mean I—" His neck and face were suddenly hot. "I'm going to be late to the talk!" he tried as a diversion. "How 'bout you?"

She slipped her arm around his waist again. "Poor darling," she said. "I don't have a thing 'til Rick Brown's class at three. I'll stop by the House and get my stuff together." There was a chuckle in her voice he wished he hadn't heard there.

"How about this evening?" he asked, reluctant to leave, reluctant to let her go.

He couldn't interpret the reaction he felt through his arm, but she shook her head as they started moving again toward the NYU campus, east of the park.

"No." She didn't look at him. "I'd like to see you, Chris, but I have to be— Some of us are getting together tonight for a kind of project. Or we were. Something went wrong, and— But that's— Never mind. See you in the Coop's class in the morning."

"Okay," he said, lugubriously. She pulled away from his arm, and darted one of her mischievous looks at him.

"I hear Scrubby's going to model again."

He winced. "Oh, God!"

"See you then!" she smirked, then suddenly stretched up on tiptoe to give him a quick peck— against the corner of his jaw, as it turned out; he hadn't been quick enough on the uptake to lean closer or turn his face to her. She grinned again at his renewed confusion, and then was trotting off, her long hair bounding behind her.