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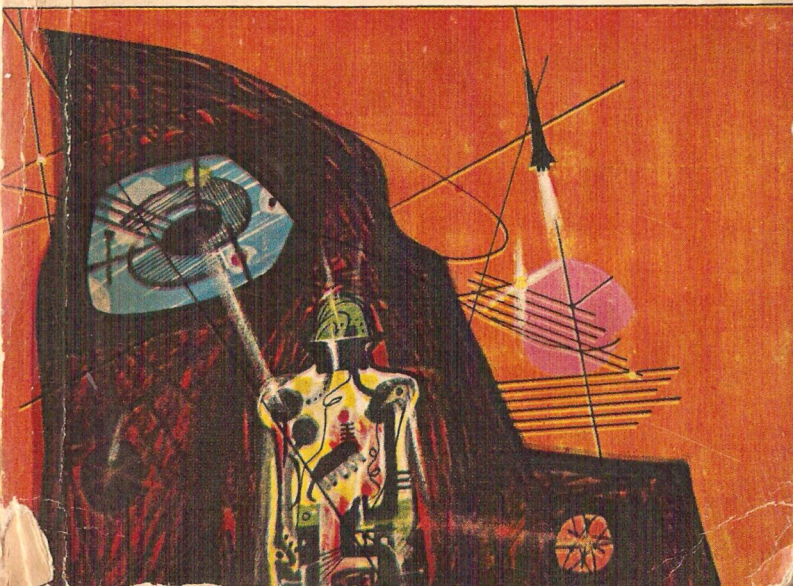
The best ALL NEW SF stories of the year

ORBIT 1

James Blish, Sonya Dorman, Kate Wilhelm, Thomas M. Disch, Richard McKenna, Poul Anderson, Allison Rice, Keith Roberts, Virginia Kidd

EDITED BY **DAMON KNIGHT**



ORBIT 1

In this first volume launching an exciting new annual series of SF anthologies, Damon Knight brings together nine brand new stories, never before published in paperback, by the finest of today's SF writers.

On a distant planet...

Earth colonists face a bitter choice: to leave their Eden, or spoil it forever, in...

The Disinherited by Poul Anderson

On a moon of Saturn...

A woman scientist struggles with the unholy hybrid formed when a native organism merges with her "living" spacesuit in...

How Beautiful with Banners by James Blish

In an alien spaceship...

A liaison officer must solve the cultural riddle of the gentle, kangaroo-like aliens, before a xenophobic military commander destroys them, in...

Kangaroo Court by Virginia Kidd

Also included are stories by Kate Wilhelm, Thomas M. Disch, Sonya Dorman, Richard McKenna, Allison Rice, and Keith Roberts

ORBIT I

is the first in a brand new annual series of science fiction anthologies under the editorship of Damon Knight, Hugo Award winner and founder and president of the Science Fiction Writers of America. Damon Knight, himself a veteran author (five SF novels, four books of short stories and some eighty or so magazine stories) has already put together some ten SF anthologies and is one of the most respected and popular anthologists in the field of science fiction.

In this volume he has chosen some of the year's best stories by nine leading SF writers, among whom are Poul Anderson, Thomas M. Disch, James Blish and Kate Wilhelm.

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Introduction

Here are the nine best new science fiction stories I could find in eight months of reading manuscripts. I did not know when I started what kind of stories I was looking for: all I had in mind was to try to put together a collection of unpublished stories good enough to stand beside an anthology of classic science fiction.

As this collection grew, I discovered what I was looking for by finding it. These are stories by master craftsmen. They are *about* something; they are not the sort of stories you forget as soon as you have read them. They are as entertaining as any story written "purely to entertain"—but they do more than that. Every one is a voyage of discovery into strange places of the universe and of the human psyche. Every one has that quality of unexpected rightness that marks a really good story. By my count, there are three brand-new ideas in this collection, and six brilliant variations on old themes, from the Earth colony on another planet ("The Disinherited") to the arrival of aliens on Earth ("Kangaroo Court").

In the normal course of things, if there had never been an Orbit 1, I believe you would have seen these stories in anthologies anyhow—after magazine publication, in three or four years. But why should you have to wait? Here they all are, now, fresh and new, in one book.

DAMON KNIGHT

KATE WILHELM'S first science fiction story, "The Mile-Long Spaceship," has been reprinted three times in the nine years since it was written. Here is one which I think will prove equally durable. It's a very human story, even though its hero is tentacled and shaped like a tulip.

STARAS FLONDERANS

By *Kate Wilhelm*

The great ship had picked up an uneven coating of space debris. Her once silver sides were scabrous with the detritus of ancient collisions and explosions: planetary, stellar, galactic rubble that had been hurled out from high-velocity impacts, or from the even more furious paroxysms of novas and supernovas to hurtle through space until the minute gravitational field of the ship netted speeding dust motes and drew them to her sides. A gaping rent on one side of her, and many dents and scars, told of blind passage through the littered reaches. The ship was spinning erratically, not on her own axis to give interior gravity, but with a lopsided, over-her-left-shoulder tumble. There was still enough silver left for her to reflect some of the starlight when the patrol boat first sighted her visually.

She had been a blip on the scanner a long time before she was close enough to view on the screen. The three men watching her were silent while she tumbled twice; they were satisfied that she was the dead ship they were after. A luxury liner had first spotted her. The captain had made no attempt to board, but had plotted her course and filed a report.

"She's right on schedule," Conly said. His voice was harsh and abrupt. He was big, more than six feet tall, two hundred pounds or more, with bold features—a too-large nose, square thrusting chin, ears that stood away from his shaved head, a high heavy forehead, and wide

gray eyes that gave him a false look of feline cruelty. He was in command of the Fleet scout craft.

As Conly turned from the screen, Malko, the second man watching, whistled softly between his teeth. Shorter than Conly, he was more massive, with a great heavily muscled chest, bulging biceps and leg muscles, spatulate fingers. His legs, arms and chest were covered with black curly hair. He had a curling beard and heavy, black eyebrows. His eyes were dark blue; there were many crinkle lines of laughter on his face, about his eyes.

The third man was not a human. He was Staeen, the Chlaesan observer. He, also, turned from the screen and watched Conly take his place before the controls. Staeen was much shorter than either of his companions, although, if he chose to, he could elongate himself to their height. Staeen drew his mantle closer about his body and flowed toward his own couch. He was shaped like an inverted tulip when he gathered his mantle about him. The mantle looked like dark gray leather. Under it his body parts were soft and pink; his brain was encased in more leathery covering, as were his tentacles. His eyes were close to his body now, but they could extend; the eyeballs had transparent protectors over them. His upper half served as a sense organ, like an ear, with the inner parts complex mazes of tubes, membranes, chambers. The organ allowed him to feel vibrations well above and below the human range of hearing. Staeen knew that his human companions were considered handsome among their own kind; he was beautiful in the eyes of his people. When he got to his couch he flowed up onto it, then let himself settle down to a slightly raised mound of leather. He sealed the mantle.

"Ready?" Conly asked. They would accelerate to approach the derelict, lock onto her and investigate from her stem to her stern.

Malko grunted, and Staeen said, "Let's go." Under his mantle there was a small two-way radio that had been modified so that it amplified his chest vibrations and translated them into sounds that were intelligible to the humans.

Conly brought the small scout closer to the great ship, matching her speed until they were side by side. The slow tumble of the crippled ship caused her to wobble as she turned over. She had passed through a region of heavy dust and rocks; the damage done to her was extensive, with several holes in the forward section where the engine room and controls were located. Conly cursed harshly. Malko grunted, glanced at Staeen and said, "Lifeboat pods are empty. She's abandoned, all right."

"They left her on manual," Conly said. "If she'd been on automatic, the computer would have dodged all that junk. She must be hotter than hell."

He began the approach maneuver, guiding the scout toward the rear of the big ship, away from the engine section and the radioactivity. Malko and Conly made a good team. Staeen felt wave after wave of worry come from Malko, while Conly sent nothing during the difficult approach. It took skillful handling to bring the small boat to the right place, but he edged in, first a foot at a time, then inch by inch until it seemed they could reach out and touch the other ship. Staeen watched with admiration as the ship started to come nearer them, her tumbling motion completing the maneuver. Conly adjusted the controls, lifting the scout slightly, and when the two met, the jar was so slight that it might have been imagined rather than felt.

"That's that," Conly said, locking the scout in place magnetically. "Let's eat first, then board her and see what's what."

While the two humans prepared and ate their rations, Staeen turned from them to gaze out the port. Unlike species most often preferred not to watch one another partake of food, or perform other bodily functions. He knew his mouth parts were disgusting to the humans. Under his mantle his tentacles fed capsules into the pink mouth parts that moved rhythmically, and he stared with delight at the unwinding scene passing before his eyes. The tumble of the ship that they now shared seemed gone; all motion had been imparted to the stars about them, but it was a curious motion. It was as if a black

velvet cloth were being carried past him, making a slow twist, then settling very slowly downward. It was all very unhurried and leisurely. It was a new way of looking at space.

His people had known space for thousands of years, so long that they no longer regarded it as a thing to be conquered. They were almost as much at home in space as they were on the surface of their worlds, or in the depths of their oceans. Evolution, in fashioning their mantles, had adapted them to any environment, even, for short lengths of time, to a vacuum. Because they always adapted themselves rather than their surroundings, and because of their generosity and open good will, they were much loved by the various races of the galaxy.

When the Flonderans had come to Chlaesan, they had been greeted with friendliness and amusement. So eager, so impulsive, so childlike. The name Earthmen was rarely used for them; they remained the Flonderans, the children. It amused Staeen to think that when they had still been huddling in caves, more animal than man, his people already had mapped the galaxy; when they had been floundering with sails on rough seas, engrossed in mapping their small world, his people already had populated hundreds of planets, light-years away from one another.

When the Flonderans had burst on the Galactic scene, enthusiastic, vocal, boisterous even, they had been welcomed as children. Suspicious, prepared for rejection, for animosity, warfare, they had been met with patience and love. The Chlaesans loved the little Flonderans. The Chlaesans pitied the intelligent, short-lived Flonderans who had neither the longevity to learn from and enjoy what they found, nor the collective cooperation of a colonial organism that could ultimately share fully every experience felt by any part of itself.

It was doubly amusing to consider that the mathematicians and philosophers had proved that a race so short lived, so individually contained as the race of Flonderans could not possibly have been viable, and being viable could not possibly have advanced to the degree of intelligence that permitted space travel.

Blithely the Flonderans pushed on and out, oblivious to the dangers of space, to the improbability of their being in space. They went wearing guns, but they seldom had occasion to use them. This sector of the galaxy was peaceful, had been peaceful for thousands of years.

"Staeen," Malko said suddenly, "haven't your people ever come across a derelict like this?"

"Not just like this," Staeen said. "Not just left empty. There have been ships with plague, accidents, other-life aboard, but not one where they simply left it."

"This is the second for us," Conly said. "This is how they found the first one—lifeboats gone, ship damaged by space after the crew left." His voice sounded brutal. "Staeen, why don't you stay here? This is our problem."

Staeen was not made for smiling, and they could not feel the sympathy he was sending. He said, "Your problems are our problems now, Conly." Affection-waves washed over him and his pink parts under the mantle glowed red with pleasure.

Malko made a deep throat noise that was untranslatable. "Stay with us, you hear? Between us. We don't know what we might find in there. You understand?"

Staeen understood. They wanted to protect him. He quivered with pride and happiness. He said, "I am under your orders. Whatever you say."

"Okay," Conly said. "We suit up and go in through the airlock. We'll have to put the rad-suits on. Some of the ship's hotter than hell." He looked doubtfully at Staeen. It made them uneasy that the Chlaesans needed no spacesuits. "Will you know when you should get the hell out?"

"I'll know," Staeen said, his voice gentle through the apparatus that sent the sound to the two men. While they suited up he thought of the comparative lifetimes of the two species. He had been fully adult when Rome was building an empire, and now thousands of years later, the Flonderans, who could expect to die in what was to him a flicker of a tentacle, were being solicitous of him. They were born, matured, died in less time than it took

for his world to make one swing around its sun. Malko called him; they were ready.

They left the scout and floated along the big ship's hull toward the airlock. Conly was familiar with her design and he led them through the outer door to the first of three chambers. The outermost one had been damaged, but the other two were functioning perfectly, and the radiation from space dropped to normal by the time they had gone through the last.

The ship was a standard transport-passenger model, discontinued seventy years ago. The emphasis had been on transport with this model; the corridor was narrow and closely lined with oval doors, some of them open to show cramped sleeping quarters, three hammocks to a cubicle. In some rooms television screens were uncovered, as if the watchers had only stepped out for a beer. Papers on a tabletop drew Conly: an unfinished letter to a girl-friend. In the mess hall the tables were set, waiting for the crew. The feeling of overcrowding persisted.

The tumble of the ship caused a slight pull of centrifugal force so that the men were constantly shifting their positions, now having one of the door-lined walls "down," now the floor, then the ceiling. They went in single file with Staeen between them. Conly led them through the ship, corridor after corridor of the oval doors, up stairs when they found that the elevators were not working, more corridors. Everything they saw appeared in perfect order, neat and clean, except for one or two places near portholes, where Malko picked up a chess piece and a plasti-book. Only where meteorites had struck and entered, some lodging, some passing through and out again, was there actual disorder.

Finally they approached the control room. Conly's radiation detection unit clicked angrily. "Malko, keep watch. I'll go in," he said.

"And I," Staeen said. He could not see either of their faces, but they were sending washes of courage and bewilderment. He wished he had hands with which to pat and soothe them. He caught a wave of regret from Malko

who pushed himself backward to hang, drifting gently, away from the hot area of the door.

Conly motioned to Staeen to follow and passed through the doorway into the control room. Staeen could feel the radiation like a warm yellow sun against his mantle; presently there was a change in the makeup of the covering and he could no longer feel anything through it.

"What the—?" Conly muttered. A fire had raged through the control room. Black dust dotted the space they moved through, the flakes stirring when they were touched. Conly studied the control panel that was left, cursing under his breath. "Like I thought," he said. "The sons of bitches didn't even set it on automatic, just walked away from it. None of the safeties operative . . . damn fools. Explains the radiation in here."

Staeen floated from him toward the next door that led into a safety corridor surrounding the engine room. He was stopped by another flow of radiation. The change in his mantle was longer in coming this time, the feeling of sun-warmth stronger. Conly followed him.

"No," Staeen said, "it is too hot even for the suit."

Conly worked a panel back from the wall and they both looked through the thick window that had been bared, through the corridor and into the engine room. A large meteorite lay in the corridor, lodged between the two walls; smaller ones had hit in the engine room. The ship turned, and one of the rocks slid from its resting place, moving very slowly to stop against the ruined machinery of the engines. Staeen felt a flare of warmth as it hit. He touched Conly gently with his rippling mantle, and they backed away from the window together.

Three days later, after their fifth trip inside the ship, as Staeen relaxed in his special cubicle where a five percent saline-ammonia mist played over his mantle, he listened to Conly and Malko talking.

"You can put it together," Conly said. "Something happened and they left, just ran out, leaving everything exactly as they were using it. No safeties on, no automatic controls, nothing. The ship was empty when the

meteorite hit the engine. The alarm system went off, but no one was there to do anything. It's still in alert condition. Another meteorite knocked out the controls for it, shorted the wiring and caused the fire in the control room."

Staeen sighed. A layer of his mantle sloughed off and was flushed away. He turned off the mist then and joined the Flonderans. He felt very well and healthy. His mantle was shiny-black now.

"You okay?" Conly asked. He was standing at the port; he turned when Staeen came in, and at Staeen's affirmative ripple of his mantle, he again directed bitter eyes toward space as if hoping to see the answer there. "Why? Why would the captain order the ship abandoned? Did he order it even? Not a sign of attack. No weapon out . . ."

"Capture of the entire crew?" Staeen said.

Conly shrugged again. "They would have put up resistance. You've read our psychology books, and our histories. You've been out on five recon missions with Malko and me. Do you think Earthmen are cowards?"

Staeen knew they were not. Fear, if present, would beat against him like a storm tide on an open shore. No such waves emanated from them.

"If they had been threatened, they would have fought," Malko said. "If they had to outrun something, why the lifeboats? Why not the ship itself? There was nothing wrong with it! Nothing! All that damage was done after they left, *because* they left."

Conly returned to his contour seat, kicked it and then let himself drop to it. He stared at the control panel and said heavily, "Let's give her one more going over, then we turn back."

Malko grunted; his fingers combed through his beard abstractedly. Staeen could feel their disappointment and restlessness. Like children, he thought again. If they could not have the answer, they did not want the question. Unlike his people who loved paradoxes and puzzles for their own sake, the Flonderans merely grew annoyed with unanswered questions. It was because of their

short lives, he decided. They knew they could not afford the thousands of years it sometimes took to find the answers.

"How many small craft were aboard the mother ship?" he asked.

Conly shifted to stare at him. His voice was a snarl when he said, "We should have thought of that! They took every lifeboat, scout, landing craft, everything! There were eighteen to twenty lifeboats and half a dozen other miscellaneous craft aboard. They knew they couldn't last more than four days in the landing craft. . . ."

"Even the repair boats," Malko said. "They're gone. Six hours, eight at the most in space in one of those . . ."

Staeen looked at the hairy man and felt waves of dread coming from him. Six to eight hours in space, then death from anoxia. He shuddered inside his mantle.

Brusquely Conly said, "Okay, let's get back. This time we split up and go through the private quarters. Try to find a note, a scrap of paper, a scrawl on the wall, anything that might give us a clue. Staeen——"

"I too can search," Staeen said.

Alone inside the great ship, Staeen let himself go, let it come to him. Hanging in a corridor lined with the oval doors, he thought of nothing, not even the sensations he received. He looked like a black shadow unanchored to reality as he hung there, shiny black slowly changing to a duller shade as his mantel adapted to the radiation. From a distance he felt echoes of doubts and apprehensions: Malko's waves.

From another direction came fainter wafts of determination mixed with the same doubts, and perhaps even a touch of fear, formless and unnamed as yet. For a brief time he was one with the ship: unguided, unmanned, alone in space on a course that would take it beyond the galaxy to the nothingness that lay between the oases of life. He shuddered with the ship, feeling the vibrations of the metal under impacts from meteorites, sharp-edged

bits of metallic ores set loose in space to roam forever until captured, or destroyed.

He felt the weight of the galaxy resting on himself as bits and pieces of space debris hit the ship and clung, giving it added mass. He knew that one day there would be enough mass so that planetoids could be captured, and under the pressure the ship at the core would be crushed and finally molten. It would sweep the path of its trajectory and its gravitational field would reach out farther and farther, insatiably then, and in a million years, or one thousand million, it would be caught by a hungry sun. Resisting for a while the end of its freedom in space, it would refuse a stable orbit, but in time it would become a captive like all planets. Staeen wondered if it would give birth to creatures who would pose questions of cosmology, wondering at the earth below them, at its origin, its eventual death.

Staeen continued to hang in the corridor, and now sensations too faint to be identified drifted into him. The temptation to strain to receive them better was great, but he resisted; it would be like straining too hard to hear a whisper only barely within hearing range. One either heard it, or did not. He let the feelings enter him without trying to sort them.

Emotions had been expressed with every footstep, with every grasp of a door handle, every yank on a drawer, with every shout and curse uttered by the men preparing to abandon the ship. The ship had vibrated with a different tempo of the emotions, and some of the vibrations still echoed along the molecules. Staeen intercepted them with his body and, after a long time without movement, he stirred, his mantle rippling slightly as he shifted his position. A great sadness filled him because he knew the answer he had found could not be accepted by the Flonderans. In the madness of fear the crew had left the ship.

What, or whom, had they feared to the point of insanity?

Staeen pondered that as he started to investigate the rooms assigned to him. He expected to find nothing,

but his search was methodical. He had offered to help to the best of his ability and would do so.

He found nothing in any of the rooms he searched. Now and again a stronger wave of the same crawling, irrational fear bathed him when he opened a door that had been closed since the ship was abandoned, but there was nothing to indicate its source.

Malko and Conly were depressed and irritable when they returned to the scout. Staeen soaked in his mist of salt, ammonia and water blissfully while the Flonderans unsuited and decontaminated their suits. The three gathered in the cabin afterward.

"I'm going to call it a bust," Conly said, running his hand over his shaved head. He looked tired and dejected.

Malko simply nodded. Scowl lines cut into his dark face and his deep eyes were shadowed. "Read about ocean ships being found like that," he said. "It looked like everyone just quit whatever he was doing and jumped over the side. No explanation ever given, far's I know."

"We'll make our independent reports as usual then," Conly said. He looked at Staeen. "Will you add whatever impressions you got from her?"

Staeen agreed. He gazed from the port at the ship, an unsteady pad beneath the small scout. She would sail on, not worth salvaging, keeping her wobbling course toward the rim of the galaxy, and her mystery would go with her beyond recall.

Two days later the scout was streaking back toward her port when a blip appeared on the scanner screen. Malko, at the controls, decelerated and he and Conly watched the blip.

"Shouldn't be one of ours," Conly said. "This is a hell of a long way off course for any place we'd want to go." He kept his eyes on the growing blob of light on the screen. The object was almost close enough now for a visual sighting. "How about your people, Staeen? Any reason for them to man a ship and come out here?"

Staeen wriggled his tentacles with excitement. "It must be the regular visit of the Thosars," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "I was a boy during their last

visit. They come bringing news of the galaxy, exchanging new ideas. They make a regular sweep of the galaxy every twelve thousands of your years . . ."

Malko and Conly stared at him. Neither had seen him so excited before. His mantle rippled uncontrollably and his tentacles were a blur of rosy motion.

"And are they friendly?" Conly asked. A grin broke out on his face even as he asked. Staeen's pleasure was so undisguised that to imagine the Thosars as other than friendly was ridiculous.

Throughout the next hours the ship drew nearer to them, changing on the screen from a blob of light to a pale blue, wheel-shaped ship that was bigger than anything yet made by the Flonderans. Staeen radiated such joy and happiness at the approaching visit that the Flonderans echoed it and the small scout fairly hummed with the vibrations. Conly and Malko gaped at the size of the wheel; it had a diameter of seven miles. They demanded Staeen tell them everything he could about the Thosars.

"Just like you, like Flonderans, only bigger, much bigger," Staeen said happily, staring at the wheel rolling through space toward them. "When they come, they visit everyone simultaneously, they have so many ambassadors. Every city, every hamlet, all receive them together. There is a festival, a party that lasts until they depart once more. Their scientists and ours share future dreams; they share discoveries concerning space, as we do with them. . . ." He couldn't continue. Silence fell within the small craft.

The blue wheel drew closer, occulting star after star with its approach. Conly returned to his contour seat and watched the radar. "They're going to smash us," he said nervously.

"It fills the sky," Staeen said joyously. "A blue ring in the sky, and then the force fields like silver balls . . ."

"It's stopped now," Conly said, cutting in. He adjusted a dial. "Two miles away."

An opening appeared in the nearest rim of the wheel and three silver globes glided away from it.

"When they get closer you can see inside them," Staeen

said. "They can't board us, you know. Too big. They'll pull abreast, invite us to enter their ship." He wished the two men could share his happiness, could partake of the ecstasy that was rippling his mantle. To be a passenger in the legendary blue wheel of the Thosars! The globes drew closer, dancing through space, circling one another, bounding apart, leap-frogging. Soon they would be close enough for the Thosars within them to be seen. Staeen did not breathe during the last seconds. Even his vibrations stopped. He saw them first; they were signaling.

Conly's voice jarred him. "They're only seventy-five feet away!"

"It is as I said," Staeen cried. "They wish to take us aboard, let us return to Chlaesan with them. Conly, blink our lights——"

One of the Thosars, clearly visible now behind the screen of energy, reached out and touched the scout. It turned. Another of them swam slowly past the port. He was as long as the three-man scout craft. His pale golden body glowed, the magnificent center eye studied them benignly, the great mouth curved in a welcoming smile. He arched away and back again, as a great fish turns in water, lazily, without effort. His face pressed against the port, filling it, too large for it.

Staeen turned triumphantly toward Malko at his side. "See, just like you, only bi——" He stopped, wracked with pain. There was insane horror on Malko's dark face; his eyes were bulging, his mouth partially open.

Staeen was hit by slamming, staggering waves of terror such as he never had felt before. He cried out under it, but his cry was not heard. Malko screamed hoarsely, and before he could get to his contour seat, before Staeen knew what was happening, the scout shot forward with a brutal acceleration.

Malko crashed to the floor. Staeen fell also, and writhed in pain, his own and Malko's. Malko had hit his head against the metal floor and was unconscious, but his brain was sending out urgent pain messages. The pain waves were on a level apart from the mounting, smothering, thundering waves of fear. The g's increased and

Conly lost consciousness. The paralyzing waves of fear diminished. Still the scout accelerated.

Staeen knew they would be killed by the continuing acceleration. Whimpering softly, he started to pull himself across the floor to the control panel. His body had flattened to a six-inch mound and moving was agony. As he passed Malko he saw blood trickling from his nose and mouth. Staeen was leaving a trail of blood behind him. There had been no time to prepare for the sudden acceleration; small ruptures had opened before he could adjust. He blanked out all of his thoughts then except the one guiding him to the control panel. He got to his own seat and was unable to crawl up into it. Conly was stretched out, his face smashed-looking, bleeding. Slowly Staeen dragged himself up Conly's legs until he could reach the controls. He decelerated. Moments later Conly awakened.

The fear came back, stronger than ever. Conly hissed something at him and tried to push him aside. Staeen flowed over the control panel, blocking Conly's attempt to accelerate again.

"I'll kill you!" Conly said hoarsely, sobbing the words. He was oblivious of the blood streaming freely from his nose, seemed unaware of the pain in his chest and stomach when he moved. Staeen felt it more strongly than he did. He lunged at Staeen, who flowed away from the clutching fingers. On the floor Malko stirred. Before he opened his eyes he started to scream.

Conly lurched across the scout and grabbed suits from the storage compartment. He let one of them drop on Malko and started to climb into the other one. Malko, sobbing violently, both with pain and fear, began pulling the suit over his legs. He was shaking so hard that his feet missed the openings several times.

Staeen did not know how either man could move after the ordeal their bodies had undergone. He dared not open the blanking inhibitions he had imposed on his own body. Conly was almost finished when his hand closed on the short-nosed laser gun all Flonderans wore when they went out in space. He stared at it wildly, saw Staeen

and fired, screaming obscenities at him. Staeen sealed off the injured part and dropped to the floor. He tried to speak to them, but could not. His voice box had been destroyed when he was flattened by the acceleration.

He was shuddering uncontrollably; he tried to blank out the fear waves, and failed. He gathered his mantle about him and sealed himself within it, then waited. The Flonderans had both gone mad, beyond reach. All he could do was wait. He thought of the thousands of eggs he still retained; carefully, not attracting the attention of the madmen, he deposited them on the underside of the contour seat.

Neither man spoke, but occasionally one or the other made an animal noise deep in his chest. The noises filled Staeen with dread.

Their actions were wholly automatic as they fumbled with the suits, driven by their glands and not their brains now. Before Conly pulled on his helmet and face mask, his eyes swept the cabin: they were animal eyes, maddened by fear, all traces of the rational submerged. The crazed eyes saw Staeen and Conly's hand groped for his gun. He had dropped it. He snarled and started to cross the cabin toward Staeen. The fear waves crashed against Staeen. Malko was reaching for his laser. They would kill him, maybe destroy the eggs on the bottom of the seat.

Staeen moved toward the airlock. Malko's hand dropped away from the gun. Both men yanked their helmets in place and stumbled to the airlock.

Malko opened the outer hatch; he held Staeen's mantle with his hand and jumped, pulling Staeen after him. Staeen caught a brief glimpse of the other human tumbling alone in space, then he was gone. The scout flashed away from them, like the great silver ship, streaking away toward the black that lay between the galaxies. Staeen felt the radiation from space like a warm sun on his mantle, then it was gone as he made the necessary adjustment. Malko held him several minutes before he released his hold, and, firing his belt rockets, left Staeen.

For a long time Staeen drifted without thought. He

caught no glimpse of the Thosars, or their pale blue ship, nor of the scout. He did not expect to catch a glimpse of either of the two men. Scattered, he thought, in three different directions, the little boat in the fourth. He rested and thought alternately until he knew what the missing bits and pieces were. He was not built for smiling, but if he had been his smile would have been sad and understanding.

He recalled the psychology books of the Flonderans, so full of categorical statements, so certain of the rightness of the theories that guided them in their daily lives. It was said in those books that Earthmen had no innate response mechanisms.

Staeen fluttered his tentacles under the mantle that was slowly turning dull. He felt very stupid; he should have guessed at the start. He recalled the text, and the experiments with chickens raised for many generations with no exposure to chicken hawks, only to have the tenth generation, or the fifteenth generation react with the same blind panic when exposed to the bird as its distant ancestors had. Had anyone ever tried them after four hundred eighty generations? That was how many had passed since the last visit of the Thosars to the poor Flonderans huddling in their caves, panicked to insanity by the giants descending from the sky. Panicking, scattering . . . The Thosars would not have pursued them, naturally. They were far too civilized to give chase, to intrude where they were not welcomed. They would have departed, hoping for a more advanced civilization on their next visit. Probably they were quite bewildered by the swift departure of the ships encountered in space during the past two years, but again, they would not have given chase. It was not their way. They would hope to contact the government . . .

Staeen closed off the outer parts of himself until there was only a spark of intelligence left, and eyes to see with, and he drifted in space, now and again shuddering from an impact with a grainlike bit of space debris. Eventually the eyes were covered with the detritus of space and there was only the spark of intelligence. It

amused him to think that one day, a million years, or a thousand million years in the future, he might lie in the heart of a planet. There were no regrets in the thought. He had lived many thousands of years. This was one more great adventure.

For long periods of time his mind dwelled on the fate of the eggs he had left in the scout. They would survive. Practically indestructible, they would lie dormant until conditions were right, then they would ripen and swell with life, and his seed would do what his people had not done: inhabit another galaxy.

He let his mind go out to the Flonderans and their crowded world where the Thosars probably already had landed. Eventually the Thosars would relate the incident to the Chlaesans, and eventually they would arrive at the answer to the question. Eventually they would decondition the Flonderans, if there were any remaining by then.

Staras eku Flonderans, he thought. Poor, short-lived Earthmen.

RICHARD McKENNA spent more than twenty years in a life he hated, that of an enlisted man in the U. S. Navy. He looked like the Hollywood stereotype of a tough Irish machinist's mate, but he was the most gentle man who ever walked the earth. Somehow he had escaped growing the callouses on his mind and heart that most people acquire in becoming adult. When he died in 1964, he left behind an unfinished novel that might have been better than *The Sand Pebbles,* and half a dozen unpublished short stories, including this one.

THE SECRET PLACE

By *Richard McKenna*

This morning my son asked me what I did in the war. He's fifteen and I don't know why he never asked me before. I don't know why I never anticipated the question.

He was just leaving for camp, and I was able to put him off by saying I did government work. He'll be two weeks at camp. As long as the counselors keep pressure on him, he'll do well enough at group activities. The moment they relax it, he'll be off studying an ant colony or reading one of his books. He's on astronomy now. The moment he comes home, he'll ask me again just what I did in the war, and I'll have to tell him.

But I don't understand just what I did in the war. Sometimes I think my group fought a death fight with a local myth and only Colonel Lewis realized it. I don't know who won. All I know is that war demands of some men risks more obscure and ignoble than death in battle. I know it did of me.

It began in 1931, when a local boy was found dead in the desert near Barker, Oregon. He had with him a sack of gold ore and one thumb-sized crystal of uranium oxide. The crystal ended as a curiosity in a Salt Lake City assay office until, in 1942, it became of strangely great importance. Army agents traced its probable origin to a hundred-square-mile area near Barker. Dr. Lewis was called to duty as a reserve colonel and ordered to find the vein. But the whole area was overlain by thousands of feet of Miocene lava flows and of course it was

geological insanity to look there for a pegmatite vein. The area had no drainage pattern and had never been glaciated. Dr. Lewis protested that the crystal could have gotten there only by prior human agency.

It did him no good. He was told his not to reason why. People very high up would not be placated until much money and scientific effort had been spent in a search. The army sent him young geology graduates, including me, and demanded progress reports. For the sake of morale, in a kind of frustrated desperation, Dr. Lewis decided to make the project a model textbook exercise in mapping the number and thickness of the basalt beds over the search area all the way down to the prevolcanic Miocene surface. That would at least be a useful addition to Columbia Plateau lithology. It would also be proof positive that no uranium ore existed there, so it was not really cheating.

That Oregon countryside was a dreary place. The search area was flat, featureless country with black lava outcropping everywhere through scanty gray soil in which sagebrush grew hardly knee high. It was hot and dry in summer and dismal with thin snow in winter. Winds howled across it at all seasons. Barker was about a hundred wooden houses on dusty streets, and some hay farms along a canal. All the young people were away at war or war jobs, and the old people seemed to resent us. There were twenty of us, apart from the contract drill crews who lived in their own trailer camps, and we were gown against town, in a way. We slept and ate at Colthorpe House, a block down the street from our headquarters. We had our own "gown" table there, and we might as well have been men from Mars.

I enjoyed it, just the same. Dr. Lewis treated us like students, with lectures and quizzes and assigned reading. He was a fine teacher and a brilliant scientist, and we loved him. He gave us all a turn at each phase of the work. I started on surface mapping and then worked with the drill crews, who were taking cores through the basalt and into the granite thousands of feet beneath. Then I worked on taking gravimetric and seismic readings. We

had fine team spirit and we all knew we were getting priceless training in field geophysics. I decided privately that after the war I would take my doctorate in geophysics. Under Dr. Lewis, of course.

In early summer of 1944 the field phase ended. The contract drillers left. We packed tons of well logs and many boxes of gravimetric data sheets and seismic tapes for a move to Dr. Lewis's Midwestern university. There we would get more months of valuable training while we worked our data into a set of structure contour maps. We were all excited and talked a lot about being with girls again and going to parties. Then the army said part of the staff had to continue the field search. For technical compliance, Dr. Lewis decided to leave one man, and he chose me.

It hit me hard. It was like being flunked out unfairly. I thought he was heartlessly brusque about it.

"Take a jeep run through the area with a Geiger once a day," he said. "Then sit in the office and answer the phone."

"What if the army calls when I'm away?" I asked sullenly.

"Hire a secretary," he said. "You've an allowance for that."

So off they went and left me, with the title of field chief and only myself to boss. I felt betrayed to the hostile town. I decided I hated Colonel Lewis and wished I could get revenge. A few days later old Dave Gentry told me how.

He was a lean, leathery old man with a white mustache and I sat next to him in my new place at the "town" table. Those were grim meals. I heard remarks about healthy young men skulking out of uniform and wasting tax money. One night I slammed my fork into my half-emptied plate and stood up.

"The army sent me here and the army keeps me here," I told the dozen old men and women at the table. "I'd like to go overseas and cut Japanese throats for you kind hearts and gentle people, I really would! Why don't you all write your Congressman?"

I stamped outside and stood at one end of the veranda, boiling. Old Dave followed me out.

"Hold your horses, son," he said. "They hate the government, not you. But government's like the weather, and you're a man they can get aholt of."

"With their teeth," I said bitterly.

"They got reasons," Dave said. "Lost mines ain't supposed to be found the way you people are going at it. Besides that, the Crazy Kid mine belongs to us here in Barker."

He was past seventy and he looked after horses in the local feedyard. He wore a shabby, open vest over faded suspenders and gray flannel shirts and nobody would ever have looked for wisdom in that old man. But it was there.

"This is big, new, lonesome country and it's hard on people," he said. "Every town's got a story about a lost mine or a lost gold cache. Only kids go looking for it. It's enough for most folks just to know it's there. It helps 'em to stand the country."

"I see," I said. Something stirred in the back of my mind.

"Barker never got its lost mine until thirteen years ago," Dave said. "Folks just naturally can't stand to see you people find it this way, by main force and so soon after."

"We know there isn't any mine," I said. "We're just proving it isn't there."

"If you could prove that, it'd be worse yet," he said. "Only you can't. We all saw and handled that ore. It was quartz, just rotten with gold in wires and flakes. The boy went on foot from his house to get it. The lode's got to be right close by out there."

He waved toward our search area. The air above it was luminous with twilight and I felt a curious surge of interest. Colonel Lewis had always discouraged us from speculating on that story. If one of us brought it up, I was usually the one who led the hooting and we all suggested he go over the search area with a dowsing rod. It was an article of faith with us that the vein did not exist. But now I was all alone and my own field boss.

We each put up one foot on the veranda rail and rested our arms on our knees. Dave bit off a chew of tobacco and told me about Owen Price.

"He was always a crazy kid and I guess he read every book in town," Dave said. "He had a curious heart, that boy."

I'm no folklorist, but even I could see how myth elements were already creeping into the story. For one thing, Dave insisted the boy's shirt was torn off and he had lacerations on his back.

"Like a cougar clawed him," Dave said. "Only they ain't never been cougars in that desert. We backtracked that boy till his trail crossed itself so many times it was no use, but we never found one cougar track."

I could discount that stuff, of course, but still the story gripped me. Maybe it was Dave's slow, sure voice; perhaps the queer twilight; possibly my own wounded pride. I thought of how great lava upwellings sometimes tear loose and carry along huge masses of the country rock. Maybe such an erratic mass lay out there, perhaps only a few humdred feet across and so missed by our drill cores, but rotten with uranium. If I could find it, I would make a fool of Colonel Lewis. I would discredit the whole science of geology. I, Duard Campbell, the despised and rejected one, could do that. The front of my mind shouted that it was nonsense, but something far back in my mind began composing a devastating letter to Colonel Lewis and comfort flowed into me.

"There's some say the boy's youngest sister could tell where he found it, if she wanted," Dave said. "She used to go into that desert with him a lot. She took on pretty wild when it happened and then was struck dumb, but I hear she talks again now." He shook his head. "Poor little Helen. She promised to be a pretty girl."

"Where does she live?" I asked.

"With her mother in Salem," Dave said. "She went to business school and I hear she works for a lawyer there."

Mrs. Price was a flinty old woman who seemed to control her daughter absolutely. She agreed Helen would

be my secretary as soon as I told her the salary. I got Helen's security clearance with one phone call; she had already been investigated as part of tracing that uranium crystal. Mrs. Price arranged for Helen to stay with a family she knew in Barker, to protect her reputation. It was in no danger. I meant to make love to her, if I had to, to charm her out of her secret, if she had one, but I would not harm her. I knew perfectly well that I was only playing a game called "The Revenge of Duard Campbell." I knew I would not find any uranium.

Helen was a plain little girl and she was made of frightened ice. She wore low-heeled shoes and cotton stockings and plain dresses with white cuffs and collars. Her one good feature was her flawless fair skin against which her peaked, black Welsh eyebrows and smoky blue eyes gave her an elfin look at times. She liked to sit neatly tucked into herself, feet together, elbows in, eyes cast down, voice hardly audible, as smoothly self-contained as an egg. The desk I gave her faced mine and she sat like that across from me and did the busy work I gave her and I could not get through to her at all.

I tried joking and I tried polite little gifts and attentions, and I tried being sad and needing sympathy. She listened and worked and stayed as far away as the moon. It was only after two weeks and by pure accident that I found the key to her.

I was trying the sympathy gambit. I said it was not so bad, being exiled from friends and family, but what I could not stand was the dreary sameness of that search area. Every spot was like every other spot and there was no single, recognizable *place* in the whole expanse. It sparked something in her and she roused up at me.

"It's full of just wonderful places," she said.

"Come out with me in the jeep and show me one," I challenged.

She was reluctant, but I hustled her along regardless. I guided the jeep between outcrops, jouncing and lurching. I had our map photographed on my mind and I knew where we were every minute, but only by map coordinates. The desert had our marks on it: well sites,

seismic blast holes, wooden stakes, cans, bottles and papers blowing in that everlasting wind, and it was all dismally the same anyway.

"Tell me when we pass a 'place' and I'll stop," I said.

"It's all places," she said. "Right here's a place."

I stopped the jeep and looked at her in surprise. Her voice was strong and throaty. She opened her eyes wide and smiled; I had never seen her look like that.

"What's special, that makes it a place?" I asked.

She did not answer. She got out and walked a few steps. Her whole posture was changed. She almost danced along. I followed and touched her shoulder.

"Tell me what's special," I said.

She faced around and stared right past me. She had a new grace and vitality and she was a very pretty girl.

"It's where all the dogs are," she said.

"Dogs?"

I looked around at the scrubby sagebrush and thin soil and ugly black rock and back at Helen. Something was wrong.

"Big, stupid dogs that go in herds and eat grass," she said. She kept turning and gazing. "Big cats chase the dogs and eat them. The dogs scream and scream. Can't you hear them?"

"That's crazy!" I said. "What's the matter with you?"

I might as well have slugged her. She crumpled instantly back into herself and I could hardly hear her answer.

"I'm sorry. My brother and I used to play out fairy tales here. All this was a kind of of fairyland to us." Tears formed in her eyes. "I haven't been here since . . . I forgot myself. I'm sorry."

I had to swear I needed to dictate "field notes" to force Helen into that desert again. She sat stiffly with pad and pencil in the jeep while I put on my act with the Geiger and rattled off jargon. Her lips were pale and compressed and I could see her fighting against the spell the desert had for her, and I could see her slowly losing.

She finally broke down into that strange mood and I took good care not to break it. It was weird but won-

derful, and I got a lot of data. I made her go out for "field notes" every morning and each time it was easier to break her down. Back in the office she always froze again and I marveled at how two such different persons could inhabit the same body. I called her two phases "Office Helen" and "Desert Helen."

I often talked with old Dave on the veranda after dinner. One night he cautioned me.

"Folks here think Helen ain't been right in the head since her brother died," he said. "They're worrying about you and her."

"I feel like a big brother to her," I said. "I'd never hurt her, Dave. If we find the lode, I'll stake the best claim for her."

He shook his head. I wished I could explain to him how it was only a harmless game I was playing and no one would ever find gold out there. Yet, as a game, it fascinated me.

Desert Helen charmed me when, helplessly, she had to uncover her secret life. She was a little girl in a woman's body. Her voice became strong and breathless with excitement and she touched me with the same wonder that turned her own face vivid and elfin. She ran laughing through the black rocks and scrubby sagebrush and momentarily she made them beautiful. She would pull me along by the hand and sometimes we ran as much as a mile away from the jeep. She treated me as if I were a blind or foolish child.

"No, no, Duard, that's a cliff!" she would say, pulling me back.

She would go first, so I could find the stepping stones across streams. I played up. She pointed out woods and streams and cliffs and castles. There were shaggy horses with claws, golden birds, camels, witches, elephants and many other creatures. I pretended to see them all, and it made her trust me. She talked and acted out the fairy tales she had once played with Owen. Sometimes he was enchanted and sometimes she, and the one had to dare the evil magic of a witch or giant to rescue the other.

Sometimes I was Duard and other times I almost thought I was Owen.

Helen and I crept into sleeping castles, and we hid with pounding hearts while the giant grumbled in search of us and we fled, hand in hand, before his wrath.

Well, I had her now. I played Helen's game, but I never lost sight of my own. Every night I sketched in on my map whatever I had learned that day of the fairyland topography. Its geomorphology was remarkably consistent.

When we played, I often hinted about the giant's treasure. Helen never denied it existed, but she seemed troubled and evasive about it. She would put her finger to her lips and look at me with solemn, round eyes.

"You only take the things nobody cares about," she would say. "If you take the gold or jewels, it brings you terrible bad luck."

"I got a charm against bad luck and I'll let you have it too," I said once. "It's the biggest, strongest charm in the whole world."

"No. It all turns into trash. It turns into goat beans and dead snakes and things," she said crossly. "Owen told me. It's a rule, in fairyland."

Another time we talked about it as we sat in a gloomy ravine near a waterfall. We had to keep our voices low or we would wake up the giant. The waterfall was really the giant snoring and it was also the wind that blew forever across that desert.

"Doesn't Owen ever take anything?" I asked.

I had learned by then that I must always speak of Owen in the present tense.

"Sometimes he has to," she said. "Once right here the witch had me enchanted into an ugly toad. Owen put a flower on my head and that made me be Helen again."

"A really truly flower? That you could take home with you?"

"A red and yellow flower bigger than my two hands," she said. "I tried to take it home, but all the petals came off."

"Does Owen ever take anything home?"

"Rocks, sometimes," she said. "We keep them in a secret nest in the shed. We think they might be magic eggs."

I stood up. "Come and show me."

She shook her head vigorously and drew back. "I don't want to go home," she said. "Not ever."

She squirmed and pouted, but I pulled her to her feet.

"Please, Helen, for me," I said. "Just for one little minute."

I pulled her back to the jeep and we drove to the old Price place. I had never seen her look at it when we passed it and she did not look now. She was freezing fast back into Office Helen. But she led me around the sagging old house with its broken windows and into a tumbledown shed. She scratched away some straw in one corner, and there were the rocks. I did not realize how excited I was until disappointment hit me like a blow in the stomach.

They were worthless waterworn pebbles of quartz and rosy granite. The only thing special about them was that they could never have originated on that basalt desert.

After a few weeks we dropped the pretense of field notes and simply went into the desert to play. I had Helen's fairyland almost completely mapped. It seemed to be a recent fault block mountain with a river parallel to its base and a gently sloping plain across the river. The scarp face was wooded and cut by deep ravines and it had castles perched on its truncated spurs. I kept checking Helen on it and never found her inconsistent. Several times when she was in doubt I was able to tell her where she was, and that let me even more deeply into her secret life. One morning I discovered just how deeply.

She was sitting on a log in the forest and plaiting a little basket out of fern fronds. I stood beside her. She looked up at me and smiled.

"What shall we play today, Owen?" she asked.

I had not expected that, and I was proud of how

quickly I rose to it. I capered and bounded away and then back to her and crouched at her feet.

"Little sister, little sister, I'm enchanted," I said. "Only you in all the world can uncharm me."

"I'll uncharm you," she said, in that little girl voice. "What are you, brother?"

"A big, black dog," I said. "A wicked giant named Lewis Rawbones keeps me chained up behind his castle while he takes all the other dogs out hunting."

She smoothed her gray skirt over her knees. Her mouth drooped.

"You're lonesome and you howl all day and you howl all night," she said. "Poor doggie."

I threw back my head and howled.

"He's a terrible, wicked giant and he's got all kinds of terrible magic," I said. "You mustn't be afraid, little sister. As soon as you uncharm me I'll be a handsome prince and I'll cut off his head."

"I'm not afraid." Her eyes sparkled. "I'm not afraid of fire or snakes or pins or needles or anything."

"I'll take you away to my kingdom and we'll live happily ever afterward. You'll be the most beautiful queen in the world and everybody will love you."

I wagged my tail and laid my head on her knees. She stroked my silky head and pulled my long black ears.

"Everybody will love me." She was very serious now. "Will magic water uncharm you, poor old doggie?"

"You have to touch my forehead with a piece of the giant's treasure," I said. "That's the only onliest way to uncharm me."

I felt her shrink away from me. She stood up, her face suddenly crumpled with grief and anger.

"You're not Owen, you're just a man! Owen's enchanted and I'm enchanted too and nobody will ever uncharm us!"

She ran away from me and she was already Office Helen by the time she reached the jeep.

After that day she refused flatly to go into the desert

with me. It looked as if my game was played out. But I gambled that Desert Helen could still hear me, underneath somewhere, and I tried a new strategy. The office was an upstairs room over the old dance hall and, I suppose, in frontier days skirmishing had gone on there between men and women. I doubt anything went on as strange as my new game with Helen.

I always had paced and talked while Helen worked. Now I began mixing common-sense talk with fairyland talk and I kept coming back to the wicked giant, Lewis Rawbones. Office Helen tried not to pay attention, but now and then I caught Desert Helen peeping at me out of her eyes. I spoke of my blighted career as a geologist and how it would be restored to me if I found the lode. I mused on how I would live and work in exotic places and how I would need a wife to keep house for me and help with my paper work. It disturbed Office Helen. She made typing mistakes and dropped things. I kept it up for days, trying for just the right mixture of fact and fantasy, and it was hard on Office Helen.

One night old Dave warned me again.

"Helen's looking peaked, and there's talk around. Miz Fowler says Helen don't sleep and she cries at night and she won't tell Miz Fowler what's wrong. You don't happen to know what's bothering her, do you?"

"I only talk business stuff to her," I said. "Maybe she's homesick. I'll ask her if she wants a vacation." I did not like the way Dave looked at me. "I haven't hurt her. I don't mean her any harm, Dave," I said.

"People get killed for what they do, not for what they mean," he said. "Son, there's men in this here town would kill you quick as a coyote, if you hurt Helen Price."

I worked on Helen all the next day and in the afternoon I hit just the right note and I broke her defenses. I was not prepared for the way it worked out. I had just said, "All life is a kind of playing. If you think about it right, everything we do is a game." She poised her pencil and looked straight at me, as she had never done in that office, and I felt my heart speed up.

"You taught me how to play, Helen. I was so serious that I didn't know how to play."

"Owen taught me to play. He had magic. My sisters couldn't play anything but dolls and rich husbands and I hated them."

Her eyes opened wide and her lips trembled and she was almost Desert Helen right there in the office.

"There's magic and enchantment in regular life, if you look at it right," I said. "Don't you think so, Helen?"

"I know it!" she said. She turned pale and dropped her pencil. "Owen was enchanted into having a wife and three daughters and he was just a boy. But he was the only man we had and all of them but me hated him because we were so poor." She began to tremble and her voice went flat. "He couldn't stand it. He took the treasure and it killed him." Tears ran down her cheeks. "I tried to think he was only enchanted into play-dead and if I didn't speak or laugh for seven years, I'd uncharm him."

She dropped her head on her hands. I was alarmed. I came over and put my hand on her shoulder.

"I did speak." Her shoulders heaved with sobs. "They made me speak, and now Owen won't ever come back."

I bent and put my arm across her shoulders.

"Don't cry, Helen. He'll come back," I said. "There are other magics to bring him back."

I hardly knew what I was saying. I was afraid of what I had done, and I wanted to comfort her. She jumped up and threw off my arm.

"I can't stand it! I'm going home!"

She ran out into the hall and down the stairs and from the window I saw her run down the street, still crying. All of a sudden my game seemed cruel and stupid to me and right that moment I stopped it. I tore up my map of fairyland and my letters to Colonel Lewis and I wondered how in the world I could ever have done all that.

After dinner that night old Dave motioned me out to one end of the veranda. His face looked carved out of wood.

"I don't know what happened in your office today, and for your sake I better not find out. But you send Helen back to her mother on the morning stage, you hear me?"

"All right, if she wants to go," I said. "I can't just fire her."

"I'm speaking for the boys. You better put her on that morning stage, or we'll be around to talk to you."

"All right, I will, Dave."

I wanted to tell him how the game was stopped now and how I wanted a chance to make things up with Helen, but I thought I had better not. Dave's voice was flat and savage with contempt and, old as he was, he frightened me.

Helen did not come to work in the morning. At nine o'clock I went out myself for the mail. I brought a large mailing tube and some letters back to the office. The first letter I opened was from Dr. Lewis, and almost like magic it solved all my problems.

On the basis of his preliminary structure contour maps Dr. Lewis had gotten permission to close out the field phase. Copies of the maps were in the mailing tube, for my information. I was to hold an inventory and be ready to turn everything over to an army quartermaster team coming in a few days. There was still a great mass of data to be worked up in refining the maps. I was to join the group again and I would have a chance at the lab work after all.

I felt pretty good. I paced and whistled and snapped my fingers. I wished Helen would come, to help on the inventory. Then I opened the tube and looked idly at the maps. There were a lot of them, featureless bed after bed of basalt, like layers of a cake ten miles across. But when I came to the bottom map, of the prevolcanic Miocene landscape, the hair on my neck stood up.

I had made that map myself. It was Helen's fairyland. The topography was point by point the same.

I clenched my fists and stopped breathing. Then it hit me a second time, and the skin crawled up my back.

The game was real. I couldn't end it. All the time the

game had been playing me. It was still playing me.

I ran out and down the street and overtook old Dave hurrying toward the feedyard. He had a holstered gun on each hip.

"Dave, I've got to find Helen," I said.

"Somebody seen her hiking into the desert just at daylight," he said. "I'm on my way for a horse." He did not slow his stride. "You better get out there in your stinkwagon. If you don't find her before we do, you better just keep on going, son."

I ran back and got the jeep and roared it out across the scrubby sagebrush. I hit rocks and I do not know why I did not break something. I knew where to go and feared what I would find there. I knew I loved Helen Price more than my own life and I knew I had driven her to her death.

I saw her far off, running and dodging. I headed the jeep to intercept her and I shouted, but she neither saw me nor heard me. I stopped and jumped out and ran after her and the world darkened. Helen was all I could see, and I could not catch up with her.

"Wait for me, little sister!" I screamed after her. "I love you, Helen! Wait for me!"

She stopped and crouched and I almost ran over her. I knelt and put my arms around her and then it was on us.

They say in an earthquake, when the direction of up and down tilts and wobbles, people feel a fear that drives them mad if they can not forget it afterward. This was worse. Up and down and here and there and now and then all rushed together. The wind roared through the rock beneath us and the air thickened crushingly above our heads. I know we clung to each other, and we were there for each other while nothing else was and that is all I know, until we were in the jeep and I was guiding it back toward town as headlong as I had come.

Then the world had shape again under a bright sun. I saw a knot of horsemen on the horizon. They were heading for where Owen had been found. That boy had run a long way, alone and hurt and burdened.

I got Helen up to the office. She sat at her desk with her head down on her hands and she quivered violently. I kept my arm around her.

"It was only a storm inside our two heads, Helen," I said, over and over. "Something black blew away out of us. The game is finished and we're free and I love you."

Over and over I said that, for my sake as well as hers. I meant and believed it. I said she was my wife and we would marry and go a thousand miles away from that desert to raise our children. She quieted to a trembling, but she would not speak. Then I heard hoofbeats and the creak of leather in the street below and then I heard slow footsteps on the stairs.

Old Dave stood in the doorway. His two guns looked as natural on him as hands and feet. He looked at Helen, bowed over the desk, and then at me, standing beside her.

"Come on down, son. The boys want to talk to you," he said.

I followed him into the hall and stopped.

"She isn't hurt," I said. "The lode is really out there, Dave, but nobody is ever going to find it."

"Tell that to the boys."

"We're closing out the project in a few more days," I said. "I'm going to marry Helen and take her away with me."

"Come down or we'll drag you down!" he said harshly. "We'll send Helen back to her mother."

I was afraid. I did not know what to do.

"No, you won't send me back to my mother!"

It was Helen beside me in the hall. She was Desert Helen, but grown up and wonderful. She was pale, pretty, aware and sure of herself.

"I'm going with Duard," she said. "Nobody in the world is ever going to send me around like a package again."

Dave rubbed his jaw and squinted his eyes at her.

"I love her, Dave," I said. "I'll take care of her all my life."

I put my left arm around her and she nestled against

me. The tautness went out of old Dave and he smiled. He kept his eyes on Helen.

"Little Helen Price," he said, wonderingly. "Who ever would've thought it?" He reached out and shook us both gently. "Bless you youngsters," he said, and blinked his eyes. "I'll tell the boys it's all right."

He turned and went slowly down the stairs. Helen and I looked at each other, and I think she saw a new face too.

That was sixteen years ago. I am a professor myself now, graying a bit at the temples. I am as positivistic a scientist as you will find anywhere in the Mississippi drainage basin. When I tell a seminar student "That assertion is operationally meaningless," I can make it sound downright obscene. The students blush and hate me, but it is for their own good. Science is the only safe game, and it's safe only if it is kept pure. I work hard at that, I have yet to meet the student I can not handle.

My son is another matter. We named him Owen Lewis, and he has Helen's eyes and hair and complexion. He learned to read on the modern sane and sterile children's books. We haven't a fairy tale in the house—but I have a science library. And Owen makes fairy tales out of science. He is taking the measure of space and time now, with Jeans and Eddington. He cannot possibly understand a tenth of what he reads, in the way I understand it. But he understands all of it in some other way privately his own.

Not long ago he said to me, "You know, Dad, it isn't only space that's expanding. Time's expanding too, and that's what makes us keep getting farther away from when we used to be."

And I have to tell him just what I did in the war. I know I found manhood and a wife. The how and why of it I think and hope I am incapable of fully understanding. But Owen has, through Helen, that strangely curious heart. I'm afraid. I'm afraid he will understand.

JAMES BLISH has more scars and dignity than he had twenty years ago, but inside he is still the same irreverent, alertly interested, hungry young man. This story is crammed with his voracious interests, from microbiology to poetry; the cramming makes it all hang together as one gorgeous, multicolored, fluttering rag.

HOW BEAUTIFUL WITH BANNERS

By *James Blish*

1

Feeling as naked as a peppermint soldier in her transparent film wrap, Dr. Ulla Hillstrøm watched a flying cloak swirl away toward the black horizon with a certain consequent irony. Although nearly transparent itself in the distant dim arc-light flame that was Titan's sun, the fluttering creature looked warmer than what she was wearing, for all that reason said it was at the same minus 316° F. as the thin methane it flew in. Despite the virus space-bubble's warranted and eerie efficiency, she found its vigilance—itself probably as nearly alive as the flying cloak was—rather difficult to believe in, let alone to trust.

The machine—as Ulla much preferred to think of it—was inarguably an improvement on the old-fashioned pressure suit. Made (or more accurately, cultured) of a single colossal protein molecule, the vanishingly thin sheet of life-stuff processed gases, maintained pressure, monitored radiation through almost the whole of the electromagnetic spectrum, and above all did not get in the way. Also, it could not be cut, punctured or indeed sustain any damage short of total destruction; macroscopically it was a single, primary unit, with all the physical integrity of a crystal of salt or steel.

If it did not actually think, Ulla was grateful; often it almost seemed to, which was sufficient. Its primary drawback for her was that much of the time it did not really seem to be there.

Still, it seemed to be functioning; otherwise Ulla would

in fact have been as solid as a stick of candy, toppled forever across the confectionery whiteness that frosted the knife-edged stones of this cruel moon, layer upon layer. Outside—only a perilous few inches from the lightly clothed warmth of her skin—the brief gust the cloak had been soaring on died, leaving behind a silence so cataleptic that she could hear the snow creaking in a mockery of motion. Impossible though it was to comprehend, it was getting still colder out there. Titan was swinging out across Saturn's orbit toward eclipse, and the apparently fixed sun was secretly going down, its descent sensed by the snows no matter what her Earthly sight, accustomed to the nervousness of living skies, tried to tell her. In another two Earth days it would be gone, for an eternal week.

At the thought, Ulla turned to look back the way she had come that morning. The virus bubble flowed smoothly with the motion and the stars became brighter as it compensated for the fact that the sun was now at her back. She still could not see the base camp, of course. She had strayed too far for that, and in any event, except for a few wiry palps, it was wholly underground.

Now there was no sound but the creaking of the methane snow, and nothing to see but a blunt, faint spearhead of hazy light, deceptively like an Earthly aurora or the corona of the sun, pushing its way from below the edge of the cold into the indifferent company of the stars. Saturn's rings were rising, very slightly awaver in the dark blue air, like the banners of a spectral army. The idiot face of the gas giant planet itself, faintly striped with meaningless storms, would be glaring down at her before she could get home if she did not get herself in motion soon. Obscurely disturbed, Dr. Hillstrøm faced front and began to unload her sled.

The touch and clink of the sampling gear cheered her, a little, even in this ultimate loneliness. She was efficient —many years, and a good many suppressed impulses, had seen to that; it was too late for temblors, especially so far out from the sun that had warmed her Stockholm streets and her silly friendships. All those null adventures

were gone now like a sickness. The phantom embrace of the virus suit was perhaps less satisfying—only perhaps —but it was much more reliable. Much more reliable; she could depend on that.

Then, as she bent to thrust the spike of a thermocouple into the wedding-cake soil, the second flying cloak (or was it the same one?) hit her in the small of the back and tumbled her into nightmare.

2

With the sudden darkness there came a profound, ambiguous emotional blow—ambiguous, yet with something shockingly familiar about it. Instantly exhausted, she felt herself go flaccid and unstrung, and her mind, adrift in nowhere, blurred and spun downward too into trance.

The long fall slowed just short of unconsciousness, lodged precariously upon a shelf of dream, a mental buttress founded four years in the past—a long distance, when one recalls that in a four-dimensional plenum every second of time is 186,000 miles of space. The memory was curiously inconsequential to have arrested her, let alone supported her: not of her home, of her few triumphs or even of her aborted marriage, but of a sordid little encounter with a reporter that she had talked herself into at the Madrid genetics conference, when she herself was already an associate professor, a Swedish government delegate, a 25-year-old divorcée, and altogether a woman who should have known better.

But better than what? The life of science even in those days had been almost by definition the life of the eternal campus exile. There was so much to learn—or, at least, to show competence in—that people who wanted to be involved in the ordinary, vivid concerns of human beings could not stay with it long, indeed often could not even be recruited. They turned aside from the prospect with a shudder or even a snort of scorn. To prepare for the sciences had become a career in indefinitely protracted adolescence, from which one awakened fitfully to find one's

adult self in the body of a stranger. It had given her no pride, no self-love, no defenses of any sort; only a queer kind of virgin numbness, highly dependent upon familiar surroundings and unvalued habits, and easily breached by any normally confident siege in print, in person, anywhere—and remaining just as numb as before when the spasm of fashion, politics or romanticism had swept by and left her stranded, too easy a recruit to have been allowed into the center of things or even considered for it.

Curious, most curious that in her present remote terror she should find even a moment's rest upon so wobbly a pivot. The Madrid incident had not been important; she had been through with it almost at once. Of course, as she had often told herself, she had never been promiscuous, and had often described the affair, defiantly, as that single (or at worst, second) test of the joys of impulse which any woman is entitled to have in her history. Nor had it really been that joyous. She could not now recall the boy's face, and remembered how he had felt primarily because he had been in so casual and contemptuous a hurry.

But now that she came to dream of it, she saw with a bloodless, lightless eye that all her life, in this way and in that, she had been repeatedly seduced by the inconsequential. She had nothing else to remember even in this hour of her presumptive death. Acts have consequences, a thought told her, but not ours; we have done, but never felt. We are no more alone on Titan, you and I, than we have ever been. *Basta, per carita!*—so much for Ulla.

Awakening in the same darkness as before, Ulla felt the virus bubble snuggling closer to her blind skin, and recognized the shock that had so regressed her—a shock of recognition, but recognition of something she had never felt herself. Alone in a Titanic snowfield, she had eavesdropped on an . . .

No. Not possible. Sniffling, and still blind, she pushed the cozy bubble away from her breasts and tried to stand up. Light flushed briefly around her, as though the bubble

had cleared just above her forehead and then clouded again. She was still alive, but everything else was utterly problematical. What had happened to her? She simply did not know.

Therefore, she thought, begin with ignorance. No one begins anywhere else . . . but I did not know even that, once upon a time.

Hence:

3

Though the virus bubble ordinarily regulated itself, there was a control box on her hip—actually an ultra-short-range microwave transmitter—by which it could be modulated against more special environments than the bubble itself could cope with alone. She had never had to use it before, but she tried it now.

The fogged bubble cleared patchily, but it would not stay cleared. Crazy moirés and herringbone patterns swept over it, changing direction repeatedly, and, outside, the snowy landscape kept changing color like a delirium. She found, however, that by continuously working the frequency knob on her box—at random, for the responses seemed to bear no relation to the Braille calibrations on the dial—she could maintain outside vision of a sort in pulses of two or three seconds each.

This was enough to show her, finally, what had happened. There was a flying cloak around her. This in itself was unprecedented; the cloaks had never attacked a man before, or indeed paid any of them the least attention during their brief previous forays. On the other hand, this was the first time anyone had ventured more than five or ten minutes outdoors in a virus suit.

It occurred to her suddenly that insofar as anything was known about the nature of the cloaks, they were in some respect much like the bubbles. It was almost as though the one were a wild species of the other.

It was an alarming notion and possibly only a metaphor, containing as little truth as most poetry. Annoyingly, she found herself wondering if, once she got out of

this mess, the men at the base camp would take to referring to it as "the cloak and suit business."

The snowfield began to turn brighter; Saturn was rising. For a moment the drifts were a pale straw color, the normal hue of Saturn light through an atmosphere; then it turned a raving Kelly green. Muttering, Ulla twisted the potentiometer dial, and was rewarded with a brief flash of normal illumination which was promptly overridden by a torrent of crimson lake, as though she were seeing everything through a series of photographic color separations.

Since she could not help this, she clenched her teeth and ignored it. It was much more important to find out what the flying cloak had done to her bubble, if she were to have any hope of shucking the thing.

There was no clear separation between the bubble and the Titanian creature. They seemed to have blended into a melange which was neither one nor the other, but a sort of coarse burlesque of both. Yet the total surface area of the integument about her did not seem to be any greater —only more ill-fitting, less responsive to her own needs. Not much less; after all, she was still alive, and any really gross insensitivity to the demands and cues of her body would have been instantly fatal. But there was no way to guess how long the bubble would stay even that obedient. At the moment the wild thing that had enslaved it was perhaps dangerous to the wearer only if she panicked, but the change might well be progressive, pointed ultimately toward some saturnine equivalent of the shirt of Nessus.

And that might be happening very rapidly. She might not be allowed the time to think her way out of this fix by herself. Little though she wanted any help from the men at the base camp, and useless though she was sure they would prove, she had damn well better ask for it now, just in case.

But the bubble was not allowing any radio transmission through its roiling unicell wall today. The earphone was dead; not even the hiss of the stars came through

it—only an occasional pop of noise that was born of entropy loss in the circuits themselves.

She was cut off. *Nun denn, allein!*

With the thought, the bubble cloak shifted again around her. A sudden pressure at her lower abdomen made her stumble forward over the crisp snow, four or five steps. Then it was motionless once more, except within itself.

That it should be able to do this was not surprising, for the cloaks had to be able to flex voluntarily at least a little to catch the thermals they rode, and the bubble had to be able to vary its dimensions and surface tension over a wide range to withstand pressure changes, outside and in, and do it automatically. No, of course the combination would be able to move by itself. What was disquieting was that it should want to.

Another stir of movement in the middle distance caught her eye: a free cloak, seemingly riding an updraft over a fixed point. For a moment she wondered what on that ground could be warm enough to produce so localized a thermal. Then, abruptly, she realized that she was shaking with hatred, and fought furiously to drive the spasm down, her fingernails slicing into her naked palms.

A raster of jagged black lines, like a television interference pattern, broke across her view and brought her attention fully back to the minutely solipsistic confines of her dilemma. The wave of emotion, nevertheless, would not quite go away, and she had a vague but persistent impression that it was being imposed from outside, at least in part—a cold passion she was interpreting as fury because its real nature, whatever it was, had no necessary relevance to her own imprisoned soul. For all that it was her own life and no other that was in peril, she felt guilty, as though she were eavesdropping, and as angry with herself as with what she was overhearing, yet burning as helplessly as the forbidden lamp in the bedchamber of Psyche and Eros.

Another metaphor—but was it after all so far-fetched? She was a mortal present at the mating of inhuman es-

sences; mountainously far from home; borne here like invisible lovers upon the arms of the wind; empalaced by a whole virgin-white world, over which flew the banners of a high god and a father of gods and, equally appropriately, Venus was very far away from whatever love was being celebrated here.

What ancient and coincidental nonsense! Next she would be thinking herself degraded at the foot of some cross.

Yet the impression, of an eerie tempest going on just slightly outside any possibility of understanding what it was, would not pass away. Still worse, it seemed to mean something, to be important, to mock her with subtle clues to matters of great moment, of which her own present trap was only the first and not necessarily the most significant.

And suppose that all these impressions were in fact not extraneous or irrelevant, but did have some import —not just as an abstract puzzle, but to that morsel of displaced life that was Ulla Hillstrøm? No matter how frozen her present world, she could not escape the fact that from the moment the cloak had captured her she had been simultaneously gripped by a Sabbat of specifically erotic memories, images, notions, analogies, myths, symbols and frank physical sensations, all the more obtrusive because they were both inappropriate and disconnected. It might well have to be faced that a season of love can fall due in the heaviest weather—and never mind what terrors flow in with it or what deep damnations. At the very least, it was possible that somewhere in all this was the clue that would help her to divorce herself at last even from this violent embrace.

But the concept was preposterous enough to defer consideration of it if there were any other avenues open, and at least one seemed to be: the source of the thermal. The virus bubble, like many of the Terrestrial microorganisms to which it was analogous, could survive temperatures well above boiling, but it seemed reasonable to assume that the flying cloaks, evolved on a world where

even words congealed, might be sensitive to a relatively slight amount of heat.

Now, could she move of her own volition inside this shroud? She tried a step. The sensation was tacky, as though she were plowing in thin honey, but it did not impede her except for a slight imposed clumsiness which experience ought to obviate. She was able to mount the sled with no trouble.

The cogs bit into the snow with a dry, almost inaudible squeaking and the sled inched forward. Ulla held it to as slow a crawl as possible, because of her interrupted vision.

The free cloak was still in sight, approximately where it had been before, insofar as she could judge against this featureless snowscape; which was fortunate, since it might well be her only flag for the source of the thermal, whatever it was.

A peculiar fluttering in her surroundings—a whisper of sound, of motion, of flickering in the light—distracted her. It was as though her compound sheath were trembling slightly. The impression grew slowly more pronounced as the sled continued to lurch forward. As usual there seemed to be nothing she could do about it, except, possibly, to retreat; but she could not do that either, now; she was committed. Outside, she began to hear the soft soughing of a steady wind.

The cause of the thermal, when she finally reached it, was almost bathetic—a pool of liquid. Placid and deep blue, it lay inside a fissure in a low, heart-shaped hummock, rimmed with feathery snow. It looked like nothing more or less than a spring, though she did not for a moment suppose that the liquid could be water. She could not see the bottom of it; evidently it was welling up from a fair depth. The spring analogy was probably completely false; the existence of anything in a liquid state on this world had to be thought of as a form of vulcanism. Certainly the column of heat rising from it was considerable; despite the thinness of the air, the wind here nearly howled. The free cloak floated up

and down, about a hundred feet above her, like the last leaf of a long, cruel autumn. Nearer home, the bubble cloak shook with something comically like subdued fury.

Now, what to do? Should she push boldly into that cleft, hoping that the alien part of the bubble cloak would be unable to bear the heat? Close up, that course now seemed foolish, as long as she was ignorant of the real nature of the magma down there. And besides, any effective immersion would probably have to surround at least half of the total surface area of the bubble, which was not practicable—the well was not big enough to accommodate it, even supposing that the compromised virus suit did not fight back, as in the pure state it had been obligated to do. On the whole she was reluctantly glad that the experiment was impossible, for the mere notion of risking a new immolation in that problematical well horrified her.

Yet the time left for decision was obviously now very short, even supposing—as she had no right to do—that the environment-maintaining functions of the suit were still in perfect order. The quivering of the bubble was close to being explosive, and even were it to remain intact, it might shut her off from the outside world at any second.

The free cloak dipped lower, as if in curiosity. That only made the trembling worse. She wondered why.

Was it possible—was it possible that the thing embracing her companion was jealous?

4

There was no time left to examine the notion, no time even to sneer at it. Act—act! Forcing her way off the sled, she stumbled to the well and looked frantically for some way of stopping it up. If she could shut off the thermal, bring the free cloak still closer—but how?

Throw rocks. But were there any? Yes, there, there were two, not very big, but at least she could move them. She bent stiffly and tumbled them into the crater.

The liquid froze around them with soundless speed. In seconds, the snow rimming the pool had drawn completely over it, like lips closing, leaving behind only a faint dimpled streak of shadow on a white ground.

The wind moaned and died, and the free cloak, its hems outspread to the uttermost, sank down as if to wrap her in still another deadly swath. Shadow spread around her; the falling cloak, its color deepening, blotted Saturn from the sky, and then was sprawling over the beautiful banners of the rings——

The virus bubble convulsed and turned black, throwing her to the frozen ground beside the hummock like a bead doll. A blast of wind squalled over her.

Terrified, she tried to curl into a ball. The suit puffed up around her.

Then at last, with a searing invisible wrench at its contained kernel of space-time which burned out the control box instantly, the single creature that was the bubble cloak tore itself free of Ulla and rose to join its incomplete fellow.

In the single second before she froze forever into the livid backdrop of Titan, she failed even to find time to regret what she had never felt, for she had never known it, and only died as she had lived, an artifact of successful calculation. She never saw the cloaks go flapping away downwind—nor could it ever have occurred to her that she had brought anything new to Titan, thus beginning that long evolution the end of which, sixty millions of years away, no human being would see.

No, her last thought was for the virus bubble, and it was only two words long:

You philanderer——

Almost on the horizon, the two cloaks, the two Titanians, flailed and tore at each other, becoming smaller and smaller with distance. Bits and pieces of them flaked off and fell down the sky like ragged tears. Ungainly though the cloaks normally were, they courted even more clumsily.

Beside Ulla, the well was gone; it might never have

existed. Overhead, the banners of the rings flew changelessly, as though they too had seen nothing—or perhaps, as though in the last six billion years they had seen everything, siftings upon siftings in oblivion, until nothing remained but the banners of their own mirrored beauty.

POUL ANDERSON, now forty, has been writing science fiction since his college days, and has probably published more of it than any other living writer. (The list of his stories since 1950 in the M.I.T. index fills over three solid pages.) As a thinker, Anderson belongs to the rationalists; as a writer, to the romantics. The paradoxical combination is a powerful one, as you will see here.

I asked the author about the reference to "Painted Jaguar," and he advised me to go and reread Kipling's "'Just So' Stories." I did, and advise you to do the same.

THE DISINHERITED

By *Poul Anderson*

Like a bullet, but one that hunted its own target, the ferry left the mother ship and curved down from orbit. Stars crowded darkness, unwinking and wintry. Jacob Kahn's gaze went out the viewport over the pilot board, across thirty-three light-years to the spark which was Sol. Almost convulsively, he looked away again, seeking the clotted silver of the Milky Way and the sprawl of Sagittarius. There, behind dust clouds where new suns were being born, lay the galaxy's heart.

Once he had dreamed of voyaging there himself. But he had been a boy then, who stood on a rooftop and peered through city sky glow and city haze. Afterward the dream struck facts of distance, energy and economics. The wreck had not gone under in an instant. His sons, his grandsons——

No. Probably no man ever would.

Beside him, Bill Redfeather's craggy features scowled at instruments. "All systems check," he said.

"I should hope so." Kahn's mouth twitched.

Redfeather looked irritated. It was the pilot's, not the co-pilot's, responsibility to be sure they would not burn like a meteorite in the atmosphere of the planet.

Its night side swelled before them, a monstrous dark-

ness when you remembered the lights of Earth, but rimmed to dayward with blue and rosy red. An ocean sheened, polished metal scutcheoned with a hurricane, and that was alien, too, no pelagicultural cover, no floating towns or crisscrossing transport webs. As he watched Kahn staring at it, Redfeather's mood turned gentle.

"You think too damn much, Jake."

"Well——" Kahn shrugged. "My last space trip."

"Nonsense. They'll need men yet on the Lunar run."

"A nice, safe shuttle." Kahn's Israeli accent turned harsher. "No, thank you. I will make a clean break and stay groundside. High time I began raising a family anyway."

The ferry was coming into daylight now. Groombridge 1830 rose blindingly over the curve of its innermost planet. Clouds drifted gold across plains and great wrinkled mountains.

"Think we can get in some hunting and such?" Redfeather asked eagerly. "I mean the real thing, not popping loose at a robot in an amusement park."

"No doubt," Kahn said. "We will have time. They can't pack up and leave on no more notice than our call after we entered orbit."

"Damned shame, to end the project," Redfeather said. "I hope they solved the rotation problem, anyhow."

"Which?"

"You know. With the tidal action this sun must exert, why does Mithras have only a sixty-hour day?"

"Oh, that. That was answered in the first decade the base was here. I have read old reports. A smaller liquid core makes for less isostatic friction. Other factors enter in, too, like the absence of a satellite. Trivial, compared to what they have been learning since. Imagine a biochemistry like Earth's, but with its own evolution, natives as intelligent as we are but not human, an entire *world*."

Kahn's fist smote the arm of his chair light-bodied under the low deceleration, bounced a little in his harness. "The Directorate is governed by idiots," he said roughly. "Terminating the whole interstellar program just

because some cost-accountant machine says population has grown so large and resources so low that we can't afford to keep on learning. My God, we can't afford not to! Without new knowledge, what hope have we for changing matters?"

"Could be the Directors had that in mind also," Redfeather grunted.

Kahn gave the co-pilot a sharp glance. Sometimes Redfeather surprised him.

The houseboat came down the Benison River, past Riptide Straits, and there lay the Bay of Desire. The sun was westering, a huge red-gold ball that struck fire off the waters. Kilometers distant, on the opposite shore, the Princess reared her blue peak high over the clustered, climbing roofs of Withylet village; closer at hand, the sails of boats shone white as the wings of the sea whistlers cruising above them. The air was still warm, but through an open window David Thrailkill sensed a coolness in the breeze, and a smell of salt, off the Weatherwomb Ocean beyond the Door.

"Want to take the helm, dear?" he asked Leonie.

"Sure, if you'll mind Vivian," said his wife.

Thrailkill went aft across the cabin to get a bottle of beer from the cooler. The engine throb, louder there, did not sound quite right. Well, an overhaul was due, after so long a time upriver. He walked forward again, with his seven-year-old daughter in tow. (That would have been three years on Earth, an enchanting age.) Leonie chuckled at them as they went by.

Strongtail was on the porch, to savor the view. They were following the eastern bayshore. It rose as steeply as the other side, in hills that were green from winter rains but had begun to show a tinge of summer's tawniness. Flameflowers shouted color among pseudograsses and scattered boskets. Thrailkill lowered his lanky form into a chair, cocked feet on rail, and tilted the bottle. Cold pungency gurgled past his lips, like water cloven by the twin bows. "Ahhh!" he said. "I'm almost sorry to come home."

Vivian flitted in Strongtail's direction, several balls clutched to her chest. "Juggle?" she said.

"Indeed," said the Mithran.

The girl laughed for joy, and bounced around as much as the balls. Strongtail had uncommon skill in keeping things aloft and awhirl. His build helped, of course. The first expedition had compared the autochthones to kangaroos with bird heads and with arms as long as a gibbon's. But a man who had spent his life among them needed no chimeras. To Thrailkill, his friend's nude, brown-furred small form was a unity, more graceful and in a way more beautiful than any human.

The slender beak remained open while Strongtail juggled, uttering those trills which men could not imitate without a vocalizer. "Yes, a pleasant adventure," he said. "Fortune is that we have ample excuse to repeat it."

"We sure do." Thrailkill's gaunt face cracked in a grin. "This is going to rock them back on their heels in Treequad. For nigh on two hundred and fifty years, we've been skiting across the world, and never dreamed about an altogether fantastic culture right up the Benison. *Won't* Painted Jaguar be surprised?"

He spoke English. After an Earth century of contact, the Mithrans around the Bay understood even if they were not able to voice the language. And naturally every human kid knew what the flutings of his playmates meant. You could not travel far, though, before you met strangeness—not surprising, on a planet whose most advanced civilization was pre-industrial and whose natives were nowhere given to exploration or empire building.

Sometimes Thrailkill got a bit exasperated with them. They were too damned gentle! Not that they were not vigorous, merry, and all that. You could not ask for a better companion than Strongtail. But he lacked ambition. He had helped build this boat, and gone xenologizing on it, for fun and to oblige his buddy. When the mores of the riparian tribes became evident in all their dazzling complexities, he had not seen why the humans got so excited; to him, it was merely an occasion for amusement.

"I do not grasp your last reference," said Strongtail.

"Hm? Painted Jaguar? An old story among my people." Thrailkill looked toward the sun, where it touched the haze around the Princess with amber. Earth's sun he had watched only on film, little and fierce and hasty in heaven. "I'm not sure I understand it myself, quite."

Point Desire hove in view, the closest thing to a city that the region possessed, several hundred houses with adobe walls and red tile roofs on a headland above the docks. A dozen or so boats were in, mainly trading ketches from the southern arm of the Bay.

"Anxious though I am to see my kindred," the Mithran said, "I think we would do wrong not to dine with Rich-In-Peace."

Thrailkill laughed. "Come off it, you hypocrite. You know damn well you want some of her cooking." He rubbed his chin. "As a matter of fact, so do I."

The houseboat rode on. When it passed another craft, Strongtail exchanged cheerful whistles. That the blocky structure moved without sails or oars was no longer a cause of wonder, and never had been very much. The people took for granted that humans made curious things.

"Indeed this has been a delightful journey," Strongtail said. "Morning mists rolling still and white, islands hidden among waterstalks, a fish line to trail aft, and at night our jesting in our own snug world . . . I would like a houseboat for myself."

"Why, you can use this one any time," Thrailkill said.

"I know. But so many kin and friends would wish to come with me, years must pass before they have each shared my pleasure. There should be at least one other houseboat."

"So make one. I'll help whenever I get a chance, and you can have a motor built in Treequad."

"For what fair value in exchange? I would have to work hard, to gather food or timber or whatever else the builder might wish." Strongtail relaxed. "No, too many other joys wait, ranging Hermit Woods, lazing on Broadstrands, making music under the stars. Or playing

with your cub." He sent the balls through a series of leaps that made Vivian squeal.

The boat eased into a berth. There followed the routine of making fast, getting shipshape, packing the stuff that must go ashore. That went quickly, because several Mithrans stopped their dockside fishing to help. They seemed agitated about something, but would not say what. Presently everyone walked to the landward end of the dock. Planks boomed underfoot.

Rich-In-Peace's inn was not large, even by local standards. The few customers sat on their tails at the counter, which had been split from a single scarletwood log, and talked with more excitement than usual. Leonie let the door-screen fold behind her. "Hello," she called. "We're back for some of your delicious chowder."

"And beer," Strongtail reminded. "Never forget beer."

Rich-In-Peace bustled around the counter. Her big amber eyes glistened. The house fell silent; this was her place, she was entitled to break the news.

"You have not heard?" she caroled.

"No, our radio went out on the way back," Thrailkill replied. "What's happened?"

She spread her hands. They had three fingers apiece, at right angles to each other. "But so wonderful!" she exclaimed. "A ship has come from your country. They say you can go home." As if the implications had suddenly broken on her, she stopped. After a moment: "I hope you will want to come back and visit us."

She doesn't realize, flashed through the stupefaction in Thrailkill. He was only dimly aware of Leonie's tight grasp on his arm. *That's a one-way trip.*

Sunset smoldered away in bronze and gold. From the heights above Treequad, Kahn and Thrailkill could look past the now-purple hills that flanked the Door, out to a glimpse of the Weatherwomb Ocean. The xenologist sighed. "I always wanted to build a real sea-going schooner and take her there," he said. "Coasting down to Gate-of-the-South—what a trip!"

"I am surprised that the natives have not done so,"

Kahn said. "They appear to have the capability, and it would be better for trade than those toilsome overland routes you mentioned."

"I suggested that, and my father before me," Thrailkill answered. "But none of them cared to make the initial effort. Once we thought about doing it ourselves, to set an example. But we had a lot of other work, and too few of us."

"Well, if the natives are so shiftless, why do you care about improving their lot?"

Thrailkill bristled at the insult to his Mithrans, until he remembered that Kahn could not be expected to understand. " 'Shiftless' is the wrong word," he said. "They work as hard as necessary. Their arts make everything of ours look sick. Let's just call them less adventurous than humans." His smile was wry. "Probably the real reason we've done so much here, and wanted to do so much more. Not for altruism, just for the hell of it."

The mirth departed from him. He looked from the Door, past the twinkling lanterns of Goodwort and Withylet which guarded it, back across the mercury sheet of the Bay, to Treequad at his feet.

"So I'm not going to build that schooner," he said, then added roughly, "Come on, we'd better return."

They started downhill, over a trail which wound among groves of tall sweet-scented sheathbud trees. Leaves rustled in the twilight, a flock of marsh birds winged homeward with remote trumpetings, insects chirred from the pseudograsses. Below, Treequad was a darkness filling the flatlands between hills and Bay. Lights could be seen from windows, and the Center tower was etched slim against the waters. But the impression was of openness and peace, with some underlying mystery to which men could not put a name.

"Why did you establish yourselves here, rather than at the town farther north?" Kahn asked. His voice seemed flat and loud, and the way he jumped from subject to subject was also an offense to serenity. Thrailkill did not mind, though. He had recognized his own sort of man in the dark, moody captain; that was why he had invited

Kahn to stay with him and had taken his guest on this ramble.

Good Lord, what can he do but grab blindly at whatever he notices? He left Earth a generation ago, and even if he read everything we sent up till then, why, we never could transmit more than a fraction of what we saw and heard and did. He's got two and a half—well, an Earth century's worth of questions to ask.

Thrailkill glanced around. The eastern sky had turned plum color, where the first few stars shown. *We ourselves,* he thought, *have a thousand years'—ten thousand years' worth. But of course now those questions never will be asked.*

"Why Treequad?" he said slowly. "Well, they already had a College of Poets and Ceremonialists here—call it the equivalent of an intellectual community, though in human terms it isn't very. They made useful go-betweens for us, in dealing with less educated natives. And then, uh, Point Desire is a trading center, therefore especially worth studying. We didn't want to disturb conditions by plumping our own breed down right there."

"I see. That is also why you haven't expanded your numbers?"

"Partly. We'd like to. This continent, this whole planet is so underpopulated that—— But a scientific base can't afford to grow. How would everyone be brought home again when it's terminated?"

Fiercely, he burst out, "Damn you on Earth! You're terminating us too soon!"

"I agree," Kahn said. "If it is any consolation, all the others are being ended too. They don't mind so greatly. This is the sole world we have found where men can live without carrying around an environmental shell."

"What? There must be more."

"Indeed. But how far have we ranged? Less than fifty light-years. And never visited half the star in that radius. You don't know what a gigantic project it is, to push a ship close to the speed of light. Too gigantic. The whole effort is coming to an end, as Earth grows poor and weary. I doubt if it will ever be revived."

Thrailkill felt a chill. The idea had not occurred to him before, in the excitement of meeting the ferriers, but—"What can we do when we get there?" he demanded. "We're not fitted for . . . for city life."

"Have no fears," Kahn said. "Universities, foundations, vision programs, any number of institutions will be delighted to have you. At least, that was so when I left, and society appears to have grown static. And you should have party conversation for the rest of your lives, about your adventures on Mithras."

"M-m-m, I s'pose." Thrailkill rehearsed some fragments of his personal years.

Adventure enough. When he and Tom Jackson and Gleam-Of-Wings climbed the Snowtoothe, white starkness overhead and the wind awhistle below them, the thunder and plumes of an avalanche across a valley, the huge furry beast that came from a cave and must be slain before it slew them. Or shooting the rapids on a river that tumbled down the Goldstream Hills, landing wet and cold at Volcano to boast over their liquor in the smoky-raftered taproom of Monstersbane Inn. Prowling the alleys and passing the lean temples of the Fivedom, and standing off a horde of the natives' half-intelligent, insensately ferocious cousins, in the stockade at Tearwort. Following the caravans through the Desolations, down to Gate-of-the-South, while drums beat unseen from dry hills, or simply this last trip, along the Benison through fogs and waterstalks, to those lands where the dwellers gave their lives to nothing but rites that made no sense and one dared not laugh. Indeed Earth offered nothing like that, and the vision-screen people would pay well for a taste of it to spice their fantasies.

Thrailkill remembered quieter times more clearly, and did not see how they could be told. The Inn of the Poetess, small and snug beneath the stormcloud mass of Demon Mountain. Firelight, songs, comradeship; shadows and sun-flecks and silence in Hermit Woods; sailing out to Fish Hound Island with Leonie on their wedding night, that the sunrise might find them alone on its crags (how very bright the stars had been, even little

Sol was a beacon for them); afterward, building sand castles with Vivian on Broadstrands, while the surf rolled in from ten thousand kilometers of ocean. They used to end such a day by finding some odd eating place in Kings Point Station or Goodwort, and Vivian would fall asleep to the creak of the sweeps as their ferry plowed home across the water.

Well, those were private memories anyway.

He realized they had been walking for some time in silence. Only their footfalls on the cobbles, now that they were back in town, or an occasional trill from the houses that bulked on either side, could be heard. Courtesy insisted he should make conversation with the vaguely visible shape on his right. "What will you do?" he asked. "After we return, I mean."

"I don't know," Kahn said. "Teach, perhaps."

"Something technical, no doubt."

"I could, if need be. Science and technology no longer change from generation to generation. But I would prefer history. I have had considerable time to read history, in space."

"Really? I mean, the temporal contraction effect——"

"You forget that at one gravity acceleration, a ship needs a year to reach near-light speed, and another year to brake at the end. You passengers will be in suspended animation, but we of the crew must stand watch."

Kahn lit a cigarette. Earlier, Thrailkill had experimented with one, but tobacco made him ill, he found. He wondered for a moment if Earth's food had the savor of Mithras'. *Funny. I never appreciated kernelkraut or sour nuts or filet of crackler till now, when I'm about to lose them.*

The cigarette end brightened and faded, brightened and faded, like a tiny red watchlight in the gloaming. "After all," Kahn said, "I have seen many human events. I was born before the Directorate came to power. My father was a radiation technician in the Solar War. And, too, mine are an old people, who spent most of their existence on the receiving end of history. It is natural that I should be interested. You have been more fortunate."

"And the Mithrans are luckier yet, eh?"

"I don't know. Thus far, they are essentially a historyless race. Or are they? How can you tell? We look through our own eyes. To us, accomplishment equals exploitation of the world. Our purest science and art remain a sort of conquest. What might the Mithrans do yet, in Mithran terms?"

"Let us keep up the base," Thrailkill said, "and we'll keep on reporting what they do."

"That would be splendid," Kahn told him, "except for the fact that there will be no ships to take your descendants home. You have maintained yourselves as an enclave of a few hundred people for a century. You cannot do so forever. If nothing else, genetic drift in that small a population would destroy you."

They walked on unspeaking, till they reached the Center. It was a village within the village, clustered around the tower. Thence had sprung the maser beams, up through the sky to the relay satellite, and so to those on Earth who wondered what the universe was like. *No more,* Thrailkill thought. *Dust will gather, nightcats will nest in corroding instruments, legends will be muttered about the tall strangers who built and departed, and one century an earthquake will bring down this tower which talked across space, and the very myths will die.*

On the far side of the Mall, close to the clear plash of Louis' Fountain, they stopped. There lay Thrailkill's house, long and solid, made to endure. His grandfather had begun it, his father had completed it, he himself had wanted to add rooms but had no reason, for he would be allowed only two children. The windows were aglow, and he heard a symphony of Mithran voices.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed. "We've got company." He opened the door.

The fireplace danced with flames, against the evening cold. Their light shimmered off the beautiful grain of wainscoting, glowed on patterned rugs and the copper statue which owned one corner, and sheened along the fur of his friends. The room was full of them: Strongtail, Gleam-Of-Wings, Nightstar, Gift-Of-God, Dream-

er, Elf-In-The-Forest, and more and more, all he had loved who could get here quickly enough. They sat grave on their tails, balancing cups of herb tea in their hands, while Leonie attended to the duties of a hostess.

She stopped when Thrailkill and Kahn entered. "How late you are!" she said. "I was growing worried."

"No need," Thrailkill replied, largely for Kahn's benefit. "The last prowltiger hereabouts was shot five years ago." *I did that. Another adventure—hai, what a stalk through the folded hills! (The Mithrans didn't like it. They attached some kind of significance to the ugly brutes. But prowltigers never took a Mithran. When the Harris boy was killed, we stopped listening to objections. Our friends forgave us eventually.)* He looked around. "You honor this roof," he said with due formality. "Be welcome in good cheer."

Strongtail's music was a dirge. "Is the story true that you can never return?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Thrailkill said. Aside to Kahn: "They want us to stay. I'm not sure why. We haven't done anything in particular for them."

"But you tried," said Nightstar. "That was a large plenty, that you should care."

"And you were something to wonder at," Elf-In-The-Forest added.

"We have enjoyed you," Strongtail said. "Why must you go?"

"We took council," sang Gift-Of-God, "and came hither to ask from house to house that you remain."

"But we can't!" Leonie's voice cracked.

"Why can you not?" responded Dreamer.

It burst upon Thrailkill like a nova. He stood in the home of his fathers and shouted aloud: "Why not? We can!"

The meeting hall in Treequad was so big that the entire human population could gather within. Mounting the stage, Kahn looked between gaily muraled walls to the faces. The very graybeards, he thought, had an air of youth which did not exist for any age on Earth. Sun

and wind had embraced them throughout their lives. They had had a planet to wander in, the like of which men had not owned since Columbus.

He turned to Thrailkill, who had accompanied him. "Is everybody here?"

Thrailkill's gaze swept the room. Sunlight streamed in the windows, to touch women's hair and men's eyes with ruddiness. A quiet had fallen, underscored by rustlings and shufflings. Somewhere a baby cried, but was quickly soothed.

"Yes," he said. "The last field expedition came in two hours ago, from the Icefloe Dwellers." He scowled at Kahn. "I don't know why you want this assembly. Our minds are made up."

The spaceman consulted his watch. He had to stall for a bit. His men would not get down from orbit for some minutes yet, and then they must walk here. "I told you," he said. "I want to make a final appeal."

"We've heard your arguments," Thrailkill said.

"Not formally."

"Oh, all right." Thrailkill advanced to the lectern. The amplifiers boomed his words forth under the rafters.

"The meeting will please come to order," he said. "As you know, we're met for the purpose of officially ratifying the decision that we have reached. I daresay Captain Kahn will need such a recorded vote. First he'd like to address you." He bowed slightly to his guest and took a chair. Leonie was in the front row with Vivian; he winked at them.

Kahn leaned on the stand. His body felt heavy and tired. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "you have spent many hours this past night talking things over in private groups. Quite an exciting night, no? I have asked you to come here after sleeping on the question, because your choice should be made in a calmer mood, it being irrevocable.

"Hardly any of you have agreed to leave with us. I wonder if the majority have considered what their own desires mean. As was said long ago, *'Il faut vouloir les conséquences de ce que l'on veut.'* " Blankness met him,

driving home how far these people had drifted from Earth. "I mean you must want the results of what you want. You are too few to maintain a culture at the modern level. True, your ancestors brought along the means to produce certain amenities, and you have a lot of information on microtape. But there are only so many heads among you, and each head can hold only so much. You are simply not going to have enough engineers, medical specialists, psychopediatricians, geneticists . . . every trained type necessary to operate a civilization, as opposed to a mere scientific base. Some of your children will die from causes that could have been prevented. Those who survive will mature ignorant of Earth's high heritage.

"A similar thing happened before, on the American frontier. But America was close to Europe. The new barbarism ended in a few generations, as contact strengthened. You will be alone, with no more than one thin thread of radio, a lifetime passing between message and answer. Do you want to sink back into a dark age?"

Someone called, "We've done okay so far." Others added remarks. Kahn was content to let them wrangle; thus he gained time, without drawing on his own thin resources. But Thrailkill hushed them and said:

"I believe we're aware of that problem, Captain. In fact, we've lived with it during the whole existence of this . . . colony." *There,* Kahn thought, *he had spoken the word.* "We haven't really been bothered. From what we hear about Earth, we've gained more than we've lost." Applause. "And now that you've made us realize this is our home, this is where we belong, why, we won't stay small. For purely genetic reasons we'll have to expand our population as fast as possible. My wife and I always did want a houseful of kids. Now we can have them." Cheering began. His reserve broke apart. "We'll build our own civilization! And someday we'll come back to you, as visitors. You're giving up the stars. We're not!"

They rose from their chairs and shouted.

Kahn let the noise surf around him. *Soon,* he begged. *Let it be soon.* Seeing that he remained where he was, the crowd grew gradually still. He waited till the last one

had finished talking to his neighbor. Then the silence was so deep that he could hear the songbirds outside.

"Very well," he said in a dull tone. "But what is to become of the Mithrans?"

Thrailkill, who had also stayed on his feet, said rapidly, "You mentioned that to me before, Captain. I told you then and I tell you now, the planet has room for both races. We aren't going to turn on our friends."

"My mate Bill Redfeather is an Amerind," Kahn said. "Quite a few of his ancestors were friends to the white man. It didn't help them in the long run. I am a Jew myself, if you know what that means. My people spent the better part of two thousand years being alien. We remember in our bones how that was. Finally some started a country of their own. The Arabs who were there objected, and lived out the rest of their lives in refugee camps. Ask Muthaswamy, my chief engineer, to explain the history of Moslem and Hindu in India. Ask his assistant Ngola to tell you what happened when Europe entered Africa. And, as far as that goes, what happened when Europe left again. You cannot intermingle two cultures. One of them will devour the other. And already, this minute, yours is the more powerful."

They mumbled, down in the hall, and stared at him and did not understand. He sucked air into his lungs and tried anew:

"Yes, you don't intend to harm the Mithrans. Thus far there has been little conflict. But when your numbers grow, when you begin to rape the land for all the resources this hungry civilization needs, when mutual exasperation escalates into battle—can you speak for your children? Your grandchildren? Their grandchildren, to the end of time? The people of Bach and Goethe brought forth Hitler. No, you don't know what I am talking about, do you?

"Well, let us suppose that man on this planet reverses his entire previous record and gives the natives some fairly decent reservations and does not take them away again. Still, how much hope have they of becoming anything but miserable parasites? They cannot become

one with you. The surviving Amerinds could be assimilated, but they were human. Mithrans are not. They do not and cannot think like humans. But don't they have the right to live in their world as they wish, make their own works, hope their own hopes?

"You call this planet underpopulated. By your standards, that is correct. But not by the natives'. How many individuals per hectare do you expect an economy like theirs to support? Take away part of a continent, and you murder that many unborn sentient beings. But you won't stop there. You will take the world, and so murder an entire way of existence. How do you know that way isn't better than ours? Certainly you have no right to deny the universe the chance that it is better."

They seethed and buzzed at his feet. Thrailkill advanced, fists clenched, and said flatly, "Have you so little pride in being a man?"

"On the contrary," Kahn answered. "I have so much pride that I will not see my race guilty of the ultimate crime. We are not going to make anyone else pay for our mistakes. We are going home and see if we cannot amend them ourselves."

"So you say!" spat Thrailkill.

O God of mercy, send my men. Kahn looked into the eyes of the one whose salt he had eaten, and knew they would watch him for what remained of his life. And behind would gleam the Bay of Desire, and the Princess' peak holy against a smokeless heaven, and the Weatherwomb waiting for ships to sail west. "You will be heroes on Earth," he said. "And you will at least have memories. I——"

The communicator in his pocket buzzed *Ready.* He slapped it once: *Go ahead.*

Thunder crashed on the roof, shaking walls. A deep-toned whistle followed. Kahn sagged back against the lectern. That would be the warboat, with guns and nuclear bombs.

The door flew open. Redfeather entered, and a squad of armed men. The rest had surrounded the hall.

Kahn straightened. His voice was a stranger's, lost in

the yells and oaths: "You are still citizens of the Directorate. As master of an official ship, I have discretionary police authority. Will or no, you shall come back with me."

He saw Leonie clutch her child to her. He ducked Thrailkill's roundhouse swing and stumbled off the stage, along the aisle toward his men. Hands grabbed at him. Redfeather fired a warning burst, and thereafter he walked alone. He breathed hard, but kept his face motionless. It would not do for him to weep. Not yet.

"ALLISON RICE" is the collaborative pseudonym of Jane Rice and Ruth Allison, who report separately (via their agent):

Jane Rice: "Does he want magazines I've written for? *Ladies Home Journal, Cosmopolitan, Charm, F&SF, Astounding* are the only ones still alive and kicking. My only real claim to fame is my recipe for pickled shrimp and, although I dislike braggarts, I make a *superb* dry Martini."

Ruth Allison: "Really have no time to write (I wish I could—write, not have the time). We have torn out the kitchen, completely. There is just a huge hole in the house, starting at the foundation and going all the way up through the attic . . . said hole being full of rusty pipes, insulation and old plaster. It is a horrible mess. Am trying to cook on a lukewarm plate, fix the baby's bottles, keep the boys out of the excavation, the flies out of the house, the water out of the registers. . . . As you can see, am not in a very funny mood. Well, am in a damn funny mood, but I don't feel too humorous."

Men who read this story invariably laugh; women, however, especially those with small children, weep. One footnote: Mrs. Allison, who had four boys a year ago, now has *five.*

THE LOOLIES ARE HERE

By *Allison Rice*

They are. I've seen one. He (it?) was standing in the washbasin in our bathroom, during an electrical storm, in the middle of the night. He was about a foot high in his bare feet and he had a whiskery face and he smiled at me . . . slowly. I don't care to dwell on it. They have more teeth than we do—or *something,* and this one was wearing a little pockety-looking garment somewhat on the order of a shoemaker's apron. He must have been able to see in the dark because he was reading a threatening note I had written milord and scotch-taped *firmly* to the mirror.

In case you're thinking what I think you're thinking, the answer is—No, I don't. Nor am I subconsciously fulfilling a psychological need. I am the mother of four small boys and I need a loolie like milord needs a coat hanger caught in the lawnmower.

Anyhow, to the inevitable queries—Why are they called loolies? Where do they come from, et cetera?—I can only reply through a mouthful of clothespins, I haven't time to bat this over the head with a rolled-up research paper. I guess they're called loolies for the same reason that brownies are called brownies. It is their name. Maybe they come from the same place. Et cetera. Wherever that is. However and where*as* a brownie is a good-natured goblin who performs helpful services at night (that's what I need, begod, a reliable brownie, with an eyeshade and some counterfeiting equipment) a

loolie will leave you lop-legged. And probably already he has. I'm not sure a loolie is a goblin either.

No matter. Think back. Do you own a listless, slump-shouldered voltage-starved appliance that brightens, clicks its dials, and does a sexy Flamenco the minute the repair truck turns into the driveway? Does your gravel sprout grass, your lawn nourish moles, and your iced tea get cloudy? Do your paper bags jump out of the cupboard at you when you've got your eggbeater full of runny so that you get splaat all over? Are your children behaving like subversives in the employ of a foreign power? Are your groceries being delivered with the cans on top of the grapes on top of the potato chips? Does someone whom you haven't seen since your pink tulle and corsage days—such as an old Sigma Chi beau—drop in from Paris en route to the Orient when you've just returned from a catfish fry at Thick Lake and are going with your tongue hanging out looking like doodledy squat? Do drawers stick? Gutters runneth over? Sheets split down the middle? What always makes three too many of those floorboard screeks you hear in the dark? Where are your car keys? (Wanna bet?)

That's enough for a sample. Try them for size. If they fit, Welcome to the Club. The password is May Day and don't say you weren't warned. Another thing, pay attention to what your wee ones jabber at you when you find the sink stopped up, the ceiling leaking milk, and the baby licking the flyswatter. Let me be a lesson to you. I didn't listen and now I wear a size Gulp dress and my house is shrinking. Your motto should be WATCH OUT, lest thy hoe handle uprise and whack thee in thy teeth.

If you're the It Can't Happen Here type, get down on the kitchen floor where everything else usually is and hunt for eeny-weeny footprints. Act at once. The neck you save may be your own, honey. I learned the hard way, with a stray roller skate as my Cinderella slipper (a typical loolie ploy) and an ironing board for a partner. Recognizing this prone situation as a seldom-

come-by poopртunity*, I rested a spell. Which is how I saw the footprints.

When I was a new bride I would've thought MICE but I have realized that mice ain't much, comparatively speaking, and that eeeeek don't solve nuthin'. Therefore I merely shifted onto one elbow and ruminated hmmmmm. If I dipped snuff I'd've dipped some.

The prints were too large for mice. And they all had fairly human-looking toes, which is how human toes generally look. Was a lost doll walking around the neighborhood trying to beam in on Ma-Ma? Considering what-all dolls do nowadays this idea wasn't far-fetched. Could it be a baby robot, for that matter? Or, a ditto Martian, a very likely possibility. Perhaps it was loolies. Maybe it was—

. . . loolies . . .

! and ? Suppose loolies weren't scapegoats invented by our imaginative progeny? Suppose loolies were the truth? It was idiotic to suppose that loolies had painted our car wheels, when I had collared the syndicate white-handed, but suppose loolies were the *Master*-minds. Lor' luv a duck . . .

A succession of past events blipped across my inner eye, like the fruit on a slot machine. The Great Sugar Fight and Toothpaste Squirt. The company's-coming, big, old-fashioned Thanksgiving dinner which *dis*interested the company mightily when milord, probing the golden-brown-turkey-dripping-with-delicious-goodness, came up with a soggy wool-mitten. The day our offspring sneaked their scraggly, half-grown, spook-footed, purple Easter chickens into the car trunk and we didn't discover the witless, scrawky, whap-flap THINGS until we arrived at our destination, a downtown hotel in Louisville. The day they built the snowman, indoors. The day I was sure I had erected an impregnable barricade to defend a freshly varnished floor when here they came, huffing and puffing, to show me how thistledown worked.

And what about like weevils in the flour. Cobwebs

* This is *not* a typographical error.

overnight. Holes in socks. All those long lost, tenor, *s'wahoo ol' buddy* buddies milord finds at Homecomings, and places. And all those ol' midnight invitations for beckon and eggsh at our housh while I weigh my chances of beating the rap on a murder charge.

Y'know something? An all-woman jury would be a cinch. They wouldn't bother to leave the box. They would simply continue to knit one, purl two as they murmured in unison, "Justifiable homicide," Their modish foreman (not a grease spot on her, not one bead of sweat) would stand and say, "Your Honor . . . we find the defendant . . . NOT THE LEAST BITTY BIT GUILTY." Pandemonium. Judge pounds gavel, to no avail. Jury pounds prosecuting attorney. Snake dance forms . . . flambeaux . . . floats . . . bunting . . . banners . . . loudspeakers . . . *Allison Rice for President!* A prominent (size 42, D cup) society matron climbs up on the Helen Hayes Theatre marquee and does the split. Huzzah! Huzzah! Wall Street and ticker tape . . . Pennsylvania Avenue . . . the Inaugural Ball . . . and there, beside me, in the spotlight, my fambly. Milord has just met a long-lost, *tattooed* buddy. Our children have been eating dirt. The smallest is holding a one-eyed alley cat with a bad case of mange. They are showing a prominent society matron a bottle of spit they've saved up. They espy Lady Bird (a Mrs. Lady Bird Jackson who is famous for her salt-rising bread) and wave and yell for her to come watch how they can piddle-puddle through a knothole. I confront them with the footprints. Loolies? My voice booms over the microphones. There is a skitter of amusement. A widening sputter of mirth. A surge, a roar of jelly-belly laughter. I am horrified to discover I am the sole lady present who is not wearing a topless evening gown. The scene mercifully fades. . . .

Let's see. Where—

Ah, *there* you are. What are you doing way over there? Never mind, let us hurry on, past milord's theory that the loolie prints could've been made by any of the following: turtles, hamsters, cats, kittens, dogs, frogs,

hoptoads, rabbits, a salamander with a short tail, or large mice. I make no comment except to remark that at least he doesn't think they're mine.

As traps are taboo (too many fingers and toes—260½ to be exact, counting everyone) I left nightly saucers of milk for the loolies. Cookies. The latest issue of *House Beautiful.* I tried appealing to their sense of fun with a rubber lizard and a Hallowe'en nose. Please be informed that hope will get you nowhere. Our cat produced a litter of seven female kittens, and litter is the one right word, believe me. Our dog had an encounter with a skunk and, subsequently, terrorized the whole neighborhood by acting like an animal out of Mythical Beasts. We went through measles, mumps, green apples, a rash of dents and blown fuses and more baby rabbits and vacuum cleaner trouble. And have you ever, when getting the wash ready, emptied a child's *sock* and found yourself holding something terrible with a bite out of it?

Next, I "hexed." If you must know, I wrote "loolies" in pig Latin on the inside of a peanut-butter sandwich and ate it for lunch. It tasted clean, and good, and true. Yet, within twenty-four hours I was back on the *s'wahoo ol' buddy* circuit, and there was a whole quartet of the aforementioned s.o.b.s. and one of them had a guitar. If you think I put up with this hootenanny nonsense you win first prize, two pounds of beckon and a dozen eggsh.

And then, out of the Slough of Despond, came the midnight storm. It was a doozy. One of those torrential, lightning-ripped, rumble, BLAM things, black as cats one second and livid fluroescent green the next. Did the children rouse, frightened and seeking comfort? No. Did milord awaken to batten down the hatches and protect his nearest and dearest from loose electricity? No. 'Twas I, Minnie the Mermaid (no Ho-Daddy, she!) who crossed the Rubicon without so much as a flashlight (the battery was dead).

Oh, pioneers! I used to think I'd have made a splendid settler woman. Brave. Intrepid. Dauntless. The Indians

would have named me Little Bright Rattlesnake. I know, now, I'd have been a dud. For, when I pussyfooted into the bathroom for a towel to mop wet windowsills with and, BLAM, saw the loolie . . . had an Indian been handy he could have lifted my scalp right off my head, slick as a whistle, without benefit of tomahawk—that's how high my hair rose and how loose I was all the way up from my knees . . . as I vainly flicked the light switch.

From my knees down I was pure steel piston and I was out in the kitchen in nothing flat, desperately trying light switches en route and making thin keening noises as I snatched up suitable weapons.

Armed, I took a deep breath and started back, an inch at a time, keeping close to the walls like they do in the movies. Quietly. Quietly. The storm slammed and glittered about the house but Little Bright Rattlesnake slipped silently—the lights came on suddenly and I screamed.

Milord appeared in the hallway, sleepy and disheveled. "What——" he began, and stopped. I think at that moment he'd have traded me in for a used Edsel.

Behind him the bathroom was brilliantly lit, and empty. The note on the mirror was gone. He'd never believe me. Never in the wide world.

"I . . . uh . . . thought I heard something," I explained, lamely.

"You did," he said, eyeing my broom, and long-handled barbecue fork, and me. "Thunder."

Let us, for politeness' sake, lower the curtain here and raise it again the following morning. *This* morning, to be exact. Visualize, if you will, the sunny kitchen with its limp rained-on curtains, and me staring bug-eyed and whopper-jawed at the name *Chauncey* written in strawberry jam on the refrigerator door.

I realize *why* the loolie's strange attire. I wonder numbly what *else* he may have pocketed. The note on the mirror arises Phoenix-like in my mind.

Dearest *Chauncey*:
Someone who uses barbershop hair tonic used

my hairbrush. Pray tell, could it be you? How would you like to be snatched baldheaded?

Love and kisses,
Guess Who

As you have no doubt surmised, Chauncey is milord's middle name which he keeps under such careful guard that even Agent 007 couldn't spring it. Well, I thought, it was out now. I could almost see the graffiti on the sidewalk, the locker room floor at the club, the office bulletin board . . .

Hastily, I soaped a sponge and wiped the refrigerator door, and none too soon, for milord burst into the kitchen as if shot from guns. His expression was deathly, his voice a knell.

"Honey," he intoned in accents of DOOM, "I'm . . . I'm getting bald!"

VIRGINIA KIDD was born in Baltimore, where she early inhaled the atmosphere—books and brew—of H. L. Mencken's town. She has published poetry and criticism in the little magazines. Formerly married to James Blish, she collaborated with him on many stories and novels published under his byline. She appears here, under her own name, with her first major work of fiction. I think it will be long remembered.

KANGAROO COURT

By *Virginia Kidd*

The aliens arrived on Earth the same day that Wystan Godwin reported diffidently to work at Communications Complex, Middle Seaboard. By that time, everyone had grown accustomed to the message from outside—daily, brief, prompt and still just as mysterious in June as it had been six months before. Everyone except Wystan Godwin, that is; he had never heard it. He had never even heard *of* it.

Tulliver Harms, First Exec of Middle Seaboard Armies, had never lost track of the message. He had, indeed, taken sensible alarm the day the story broke. Regardless of what it meant, the message was *alien.* It was therefore to be feared, and to be silenced. Since it homed on Communications Satellite by tight-beam transmission, obviously Communications Tower would be the point of vantage when the originators of this babble would follow it down to Earth.

The realization that no other claimants were jousting with him for the privilege of dealing with the imminent invasion both pleased and disgusted Harms. Did nobody else listen to the news, put two and two together and scheme to meet Destiny halfway?

Expertly, he taloned his Liaison Agent out of the complex, recommending him for a job halfway across the world, leaving himself a clear field within which to operate.

He spent several joyously untrammeled days reorganizing the Armies' establishment into an offensive–

defensive unit, instead of the demolitions-and-constructions force that Pax Magna required it to be. He arbitrarily silenced newsmen who had never before experienced censorship, and set up road blocks around the entire area. He did all this without the stultifying aid of the Armies' only check of balance: Liaison. And then the man the computers selected for him struck him as almost as good as no Agent at all.

Wystan Godwin was on sabbatical leave when his recall-to-duty notice came through. It was somewhat delayed, the last leg of its trip having been through Hindustan by yak-back. Godwin has spent six months at the Restoration Lamasery in Tibet—"everything traditional: no PIX, no FAX, positively no planned recreation of any kind"—and he was still trying to rouse himself out of his Tibetan-achieved calm when he announced himself to the First Exec.

He apologized for the several days lost in transit and found that he could not tear his eyes away from Harms' bald head.

Glacially the Exec assured him that the lost time did not matter. "We've managed," he said.

Chilled but still amiable (fearing that he had been rude, and looking carefully away from Harms' head), Godwin explained that he was completely out of touch. "I'll just order up my predecessor's papers and a few FAX transcripts to bring myself up to date," he said, expecting an immediate briefing.

"Do that," snapped the Exec, and turned away, giving his entire attention to a sheaf of papers on his desk.

Startled at having been so curtly dismissed, but blissfully unaware that Harms planned to shield him from all job information, Godwin ambled off. He strongly suspected that this Exec might prefer him still in Tibet—which made the preference unanimous—as he entered his work cubicle next door.

He spent a profitless morning flicking dust off his desk. For a while he meditated on the way the world's tempo seemed to have slowed down to that of the lamasery.

It helped (looked at the right way) that girls were scarce in the complex. One such, a madonna-faced technician, came near enough for him to consider the possible consequences of a smile. She gave him one glance, lingering at the forehead, registered cool contempt and averted her face. He could feel his smile turning into a painful grimace.

When he had come down to Lhasa, he had not yet refocused on people as people, but by the time he left for the airport he had intuited an as yet indefinable difference in the aspect of the world. It was not the clothes, although women's cloaks were long again, but then they went up and down like pump handles. His own garments could not be out of style: Liaison harness never changed. . . . All the men were balding, that was it!

Over Paris, he decided he did not like the fad. The men on the plane looked strange. He resented the way everybody kept sneaking overt glances at him. Perhaps he would serve as the bellwether, guiding his fellow passengers in the return to sanity and a more natural hairline. As they went over London, he wavered a little; one or two well-shaped heads caught his eye.

Now, after one long, slow morning, he began to detect in the wealth of hair on his forehead a resemblance to the yaks he had left behind him. Harms' total baldness must be an accident of nature rather than a fashionable extreme; nothing that ugly could have been intentional. But the fashion had changed while he had been away, and now that he was getting used to it, he might as well conform.

He decided to skip lunch, pick up a depilatory kit from General Stores and retire to his quarters. All alone, a man could work out a compromise with fashion.

Just a little off at the temples, and a ruthless swipe out of his widow's peak, perhaps? He hummed quietly to himself, studying the effect in the mirror. He took off a little more, and a little more.

Then he drew a line across his skull from ear tip to ear tip and laid a really heavy coat of cream to the fore.

Waiting for the depilatory to penetrate the hair follicles, he was gazing abstractedly out the window, when there came a sound that put an abrupt stop to his humming.

It moved rapidly on up beyond the audible range. He could still feel it, though, and he flinched, instinctively. All his senses clamored that something huge was hurtling through the air at him. A shock wave did indeed rock him slightly, and rattled everything movable, but not as much as he had braced for.

And then—there was a spaceship, still shimmering from that violent descent, but now at rest. A shining ovoid hovered in the emptiness of the middle air, cancelling out the innocuous view of trees marking the far side of the mile-wide park. His line of sight was as abruptly foreshortened as if by the heavens falling.

Startlement gave place to a kind of indignation that this monstrous thing had happened with no warning such as a reasonable man might expect to precede either revelation or disaster. His scalp began to tingle, warning him that it was about to burn. Belatedly, he began to rinse the cream away, peering perplexedly out the window between splashes. That he had no immediate assessment of the event did not worry him; he had nothing to compute from.

For aught he knew, that great silver egg might have been laying itself in invisible cotton wool out there every day at high noon for months. Experimentation, even, had been in the discard for half a century, since the wars and Pax Magna, when space travel had been outlawed—but a man must accept what he sees. This gleaming ball, at rest on absolutely nothing, was too big to be anything other than a spaceship.

So Wystan Godwin marveled, and proceeded methodically with the necessary rinsing of his scalp. It would not stop tingling. That impossible, downright illegal interruption had made him flub the timing, but otherwise he had done a fine job.

Eventually he tore himself away from the fascinating twin spectacle: himself in the mirror with very pink skin

up to *here,* and the ship in the park, where no ship should be.

As he was leaving, the speaker in the hall rattled portentously and said: "ALL PERSONNEL REPORT IMMEDIATELY COMMUNICATIONS COMPLEX." He winced; it was the frantic and impersonal shout of public address that had determined his choice of Tibet for refuge. His living quarters were on the forty-third floor, so he took the express cage to the tenth. He regretted it. No matter how many spaceships might drop in his lap, he decided he would never be in that much of a hurry again.

Still vibrating, he set out to find Harms. The man was standing spread-legged at a window, surrounded by his staff. Godwin tapped politely on shoulders, begged pardon right and left, pushed when necessary, and prepared his mind for immediate top-level conference; in public or private. It was a relief to note that everyone was as excited as he was. He and Harms, physically closest to the event and the two top-ranking men in Communications Complex, must therefore reach policy decisions without delay. He cleared his throat.

Harms did not wait for the first word. He whirled, showing all his teeth, and bellowed, "Later!"

Godwin swallowed his little speech and elbowed his way out again.

Days went by and yet he could form no clear idea of how much later "later" would be. It troubled him that he seemed to be accomplishing very little, and yet he was kept busy. He was, in fact, run ragged, playing the role of referee in the ancient game of peck order.

Impatiently he awaited the arrival of working papers. It was reassuring to see a hut city sprout like brilliant fungi at the base of the spaceship. Any moment now the Liaison encampment over there would reach out and gather him back into its workings, he told himself, trying to fathom why all that information and activity had not yet filtered up to him. In the meantime he resigned himself to the practice of *yama* and *dhyāna*—self-control and meditation.

Exec Harms played hell with the *dhyāna* part. Maintenance of the peace was any Liaison Agent's first responsibility, but Godwin had never encountered anything like this atmosphere of simmering violence. In the ordinary course of things a dispute—name calling, raising of the voice, threats of violence—might erupt once a year or so. Harms' method of running his complex by taunt and tantrum kept his Liaison man popping in and out of his cubicle like a cuckoo in disrepair. It was humiliating, it was distracting, it was dull. Only the computer that had selected him for this job could have explained why it was necessary—Harms' temperament of chronic rage and Godwin's talent for conciliation had brought them uneasily together. The Exec was a far-gone adrenalin addict.

Arrival of the alien ship exactly when and where Harms had predicted it deliciously upped his blood pressure, but the irruption of the hut city at its base was unlooked-for torture. He had intended to be fêted as savior of the world, in spite of what he called "the decadent way the decimated world was degenerately run." Pax Magna had driven Harms into the perpetual frenzy he had come to enjoy.

He had not foreseen that Liaison would poke its idiot nose where it was least wanted, by the hundreds, right in the line of fire. That prevented his taking his plan to its logical conclusion: sudden and total annihilation of the invaders. Whatever the nature of the monstrosities in that ship, they could not, must not, be allowed to get back to the base that had sent them to Earth—because their report would have to read: *lightly populated, riddled and ravaged by fifty years of peace, ripe for conquest.* And yet——

For the moment, he must wait, wait until the split second when the invaders revealed their weapons, if necessary. Then, if his hand were forced, what weight would the lives of a few hundred short-sighted humans have against the safety of Earth? Until then, or until he accumulated enough proof to justify his act should he regrettably be brought to trial for the deaths (however

fortuitous) of the special Liaison group, he could only mark time.

He spent some of that time combing through the Liaison reports, skimming off the cream of the damning facts and foolish speculations; for diversion he bickered with his staff. The delay allowed him to requisition additional bombs and lorries. He had not really expected the alien ship to be so damned *big*.

Still serenely certain that somehow, somewhere, the traditional Liaison packet was on its traditional way to him, Wystan Godwin—lacking even the one or two bits of information that might have triggered an assessment of the true situation—sat and waited for a sheaf of papers to bring him up to date. As Harms had foreseen, he never even thought of demeaning his position by actively seeking data from anyone in the complex. The only man of status equal to his, Harms himself, never spoke directly to him. Their sole contact was via dispute protocol, a procedure as ritualized as the mating dance of the bower bird. Harms' dictum of *later* swallowed up fourteen days.

Godwin was simultaneously trying to concentrate on the tip of his nose with both eyes and to visualize the lotus position in his mind's eye—an attempt to synthesize *yama* and *dhyāna* that he was sure his *guru* would have disapproved—when a small figure in green just outside his doorway caught his attention. He uncrossed his eyes.

It was a civilian, as remarkable in a complex full of military scarlet as was Wystan Godwin in his Liaison blue. And the civ had been remarking him, all right; it was his fascinated step forward to get a clearer view that had interrupted ascetic practice. Godwin flushed.

Tulliver Harms suddenly strode out of his office, and past the door of the Liaison cubicle, a fragile affair of unceiled partitions that rattled at his passage. The First Exec of Middle Seaboard Armies held a large package in front of him, well away from his blouse.

"Where's the errand boy that brought this—these—this

balderdash back up here—against my express orders?" Harms shouted.

"Me, sir?" said the little man in green.

"You, sir!" Harms sneered. "What's your name? Mager?"

Alerted by the first ill-tempered syllable, Godwin was on his feet, ready to perform again the most humiliating of all Liaison duties. He groaned inwardly, and then froze.

The bundle held so gingerly by the Exec was the diplomatic pouch, traditionally untouchable by anyone other than accredited Liaison Agents. Top secret, inviolable, the papers he had awaited for two long weeks —and Harms actually appeared to be about to hurl the entire packet at the green-clad civilian!

The Exec's grip was too disdainful for a clean pitch, and he fumbled it. The unwieldy packet began to fall. With more spite than grace, Harms crooked his scarlet knee and drop-kicked the packet at an angle that took it underneath a portable drafting table.

The draftsman promptly kicked it out again. Godwin stared in horror as his holy of holies slithered back and forth across the floor. The draftsman's suddenly pink face appeared alongside the angled desk and he said, "Jostling makes the little lines crooked. If I am not jostled, I never draw the little lines crooked, and that is why I occupy this desk. If I am jostled again, I will resign this desk . . . sir."

The Exec glared. "What the hell do you want, Tawmison—a cubicle out of my personal stores, hey?"

Wystan Godwin threw off his paralysis and moved to intercept the slightly battered package before one of Harms' aides might think to hand it back to the Exec. Jack-knifed, one hand firmly on the Liaison packet, he intervened in the dispute. In a tone of voice trained to cut through hysterical screeching, he said, "Is this necessary?"

The question was intentionally so phrased as to allow everyone to choose his own referent.

"Necessary?" The draftsman talked more to his board

and to his colleagues than to the Liaison man, but he was talking loud enough to make sure he drowned out the Exec. Therefore, rapport was re-established. "Necessary? Man, it's crucial. A desk conscript has got the right to work unharassed in any way, or he has got the right to resign, and choose another complex."

Good—the windier the verbalization of the root grievance, the faster the grief leached out. Tawmison was already smiling.

Godwin smiled back and nodded equably. However, he stayed on one knee; and when he turned the top of his head to the Exec's wrath, he carefully kept his face averted.

Harms seemed to be unable to take pride in the rigid dispute protocol that put him always last because his was the more powerful side of any argument. He had fallen into the habit of saying everything at least twice in crises. Tawmison's brevity left him sputtering. "Necessary?" he mumbled for the fourth time, and then cranked up the gain to the full Harms bellow. "Necessary nonsense!"

Godwin nodded, cutting him short. He stood up and spoke into a point in the middle air between the two disputants. "The Exec apologizes, being clearly in the wrong. You will not be jostled again, Tawmison. By the Exec's order, witnessed by all here present, as he himself in the heat of argument so suitably proposed, if any person should jostle you, a cubicle shall be supplied from the Exec's personal supplies for your working protection."

His inner composure restored by having caught the Exec in his own net, Godwin ran through the opposite formula—ritual words pretending abject sorrow on Tawmison's part for having let his temper flare under work stress—for the Exec's public satisfaction and, Godwin hoped, further disgruntlement.

He tightened his already firm grip on the Liaison packet: amazingly thick, disgracefully shabby, two weeks overdue, and welcome. Incredible that a mere civilian had delivered these papers. Incredible?—it was a thun-

dering breach of protocol that Harms had tried to prevent delivery and (if Godwin had heard correctly) this was not the first time.

Godwin formally concluded his intervention in the dispute by stepping back into his cubicle. He could not get that packet open fast enough, but the topmost page, a white one, stopped him cold. In big block letters, it said:

Leaping largely, we return. Hearing droops
at [?] so great and grasper [?]
from emptiness.

The Liaison Agent massaged his eyebrows. Sometimes it did not pay to get right at the heart of a problem. He ran gingerly through the blue sheets accompanying the document.

Just the same, he thought, sometimes one *could* skip the blue sheets entirely. Routine, routine, everything was routine question and answer or refusal to answer on grounds of protocol. What a mess!

The beginnings of nausea swirled a warning and subsided as he quickly, conscientiously, changed his formulation: what a mass of information! (He was so used to his pollyanna-prod that he gave himself a hearty little Liaison speech automatically: *Yes, sir, he was really going to have to work from the white sheets on this one.*)

. . . If he could find them. There did not seem to be any flagged white sections, after that peculiar first one, in the entire accumulation of blue worksheets, although there should have been a dozen. He thumbed more slowly through the file again, until renewed altercation forced his attention outside the cubicle. The rasping shout was familiar and unmistakable. A crash, the sound of something brittle smashing.

Godwin gathered up his precious papers and stepped out of his cubicle again, restraining a wild impulse to say, "Sixteen twenty. Cuckoo, cuckoo."

In Harms' hand was the jagged-edged base of a bottle,

a real glass bottle, and in the civilian's eyes there were tears.

"Hobby horses!" The Exec was, of course, repeating himself. "Intuition where a little force is all that's needed! Nonsense, everywhere I turn!"

"Please, sir," said the little civ to Godwin. "I was sent here to talk to you. I've got to talk to you. I can't deal with him. And he broke my very best specimen, for no reason at all!"

"Yes," said Godwin. He quite understood. But—while it was not necessary for people to drop to one knee in their presence or to walk away backward when they left—both he and Harms had the status of kings in the old days. Protocol's requirements were strict. "The Exec apologizes for having caused you stress, and he regrets having broken your specimen."

Harms spun away from the openly weeping civ and strode toward Godwin. "Regrets! Apologizes!" He made an inarticulate sound and pulled himself together. "On the contrary, the Exec requires that this errand boy should get his stinking person off the premises of Communications Complex immediately. And he can take this message back to the Liaison Agent out there: the unauthorized Liaison encampment must be broken up and removed to a distance of . . . uhm . . . at least two miles within twenty-four hours." He looked at his wrist, sought among the dial faces there, and continued. "At 1700 hours precisely, I will—I am—it will not be safe for any human beings to be in the vicinity of that ship."

Godwin felt for the first time that Harms was speaking directly to him instead of to the invisible web of restraints and evasions in which the Exec had netted him since his arrival. "Such a threat," he said smoothly, "cannot be transmitted without the nature of the danger being made more clear."

"Sir," said Harms, "the grave menace imperiling the peace of this planet warrants the use of force. Extreme force!"

The Liaison man felt the blood mounting in his forehead. In a curious detached fashion, he felt it mounting

higher than he thought his forehead could possibly go, remembered that he was back in "civilization" again and hairless almost to the crown. He longed momentarily for the lamasery in the Himalayas, and spoke very softly to the sneering officer. "Statutory warning and advice noted. But——"

As one begins to notice the ticking of a clock that has never ceased ticking but that customarily ticks unheard, Wystan Godwin noted the small physical signs that preceded an assessment. While he waited for insight, one hand raised in the universally recognized King's X signal—honored even by a berserker like Harms—one corner of his mind that was uninvolved with the problem at hand marveled at his own ability. That endless stream of information cross-connecting itself, subconnecting, crossing over, canceling itself out or throwing out transforms did arrive ever so often at a conclusion that was more than the mere sum of its points. The conclusion, the supralogical assessment, was not under his control, and so could never be dismissed as a mere talent. The only test of the ability was that it was *always* right. The ability to produce such conclusions was the only prerequisite to training for Liaison.

The moment of assessment was a physical fact, a proprioceptive fact that pre-empted attention from all other activity and made him as vulnerable as a long-necked animal at a waterhole: for a split physical second he "felt" the assessment eject itself from his mind in the same way that he could feel himself swallow and begin to breathe again. *Total lack of data is a datum. Harms withheld data . . . Harms assumes menace . . . Harms (HARMS!) is the menace.*

Contrary to custom, he did not voice the assessment. The room full of people waited, immobile, for the man of the law to pronounce the law. He wondered, as an agent always must when his insight contradicts the apparent facts, if he had this time slipped a cog and come up with a wrong one. He had never before faced a potential criminal. He had never contemplated treason himself—for the law said that until he was recalled and reassigned, Harms' purposes were his purposes.

Smoothly, allowing his audience to believe that his next words were the actual assessment, Godwin intoned, "An announcement so arbitrary can be delivered only *by* Liaison *to* Liaison. I will accompany this man."

Harms made no response other than to wheel around and march out of the room.

Godwin offered the civ his arm as they left the room, saying equably, "What has the specimen to do with all this?"

"Wh—, well,—nothing, sir," the civ whispered. The change of ground had evidently frightened him. "I collect them. I was looking at one of them—at that one—when my Agent sent me over here, and I brought it along without thinking. So it really hasn't anything to do with the ship or the problem or anything; it was just mine."

He paused, but once started, he seemed voluble enough. "How it got broken was the Exec got mad at what I told him—my Agent wants to talk to you—and he said, 'Give me that piece of junk'—because I guess I was rubbing it for luck. And of course I did. Give it to him, that is. But I said it wasn't junk. I said just like I told you, 'It's my hobby, sir. I collect specimens.'" The civ laughed, and several stray tears still coasting down his cheeks made his lack of integration obvious. Godwin had to look away as the civ said plaintively, "And what he did, he broke it."

"What were you telling him before he asked for the specimen?"

"My Agent says she most particularly needs your presence. Because I'm understanding the aliens real good now and they object to dealing with a female. Got that clear about the same time I got the last blanks filled. 'Hearing droops at *lapse* so great and grasper *aches* from emptiness,' you know."

"What?" Godwin realized he was shouting, blamed the Exec, realized he was blaming another than himself and winced as his pollyanna-prod gave him a good one in the upper gut. They were strolling across the park, and at his shout the startled civ leaped a good two feet off the path

into a bed of flowers. He picked his way out again, whimpering a little, making useless gestures of straightening the bent stalks.

"Look here," Godwin said in his normal voice, "tell me, please, how you happen to have heard that sentence in the first place, and where you obtained the words you supply for the blanks, in the second." He added quickly, "And what's your name?"

As he should have expected, and would have expected if he had been calmer, the civ replied in reverse order.

"Mager, sir. Andrew Mager. I got the words kind of out of my own head, sir. Those two words just fell into place like a knight's move. Two forward and one sideways, *you* know. Or——"

"One forward and two sideways," said Godwin, who did not know. He answered only out of a vague need for self-chastisement—and his Agent's instinct that if he spoke gibberish, too, he might get some sense out of the little man yet.

"Right!" cried Mager. Godwin suffered a moment's revulsion from such easy pleasure, so openly expressed. He wanted to look away again in self-protection. Remembering his shout of a moment ago, he disciplined himself by keeping his gaze on Mager's face. He was therefore looking deeply into the guileless brown eyes, and could not doubt what he heard next.

"Oh, I didn't just *happen* to hear the sentence, sir. I was talking back and forth with the Leloc, like I do, on this job, and the head one was acting it out, like he does, two kinds of stretch and the first one is something missing but the second is more something hurting—*lapse* and *aches*. It wasn't hard, right there in the ship like that, to see what he meant."

Now Godwin was reduced to a whisper. Their stroll had taken them through the encampment and completely across the park. He gestured helplessly upwards. "You were in this ship?"

And the little man was nodding.

The gathering seemed to have been in session for a long time when Wystan Godwin at long last entered the ship in the park. The entrance was open and unguarded, although there was one last lock to go through before he reached the great hall at the center of the ship.

His first coherent thought, as he and Mager passed through the ranks of humans massed on the nearer side of the hall, was a sharp distress that the human beings were seated on chairs, all of one distinct kind, while the aliens perched on low backless blocks. Each kept an enormous broad tail in balance in thin air, like a well-rehearsed string section with all the violins in first position. Godwin winced at the thought of supporting such a burden unassisted, even as he noted that "thin air" was a misnomer. The atmosphere inside the ship was certainly Earthlike, but more wet, more warm, like the moist air of a greenhouse. He had halted outside that last lock, wondering if he ought to inquire about protection—suit or mask or something to mark that the "air" inside came from another world—but the lock had swung open for them, and they had simply walked in.

Nonetheless, it had been a discriminatory breach of protocol if they had imported chairs from Liaison stores. Better to have sat on the floor, he thought, if there just had not been enough blocks to go around. He must insist that he personally *must* sit on the same kind of seat as his hosts.

The foremost of the aliens rose and paced forward to cross wrists with him. The creature's forelimbs were absurdly small, in comparison with the rest of his bulk. Two more aliens approached Godwin and Mager, holding out their tiny wrists in the same fashion. Waves of a faintly spicy scent like old nutmeg reached Godwin's nostrils, and he noticed that "his" alien was holding his tail straight up in the air behind him.

Mager said, "They'll have one of our chairs up here in a moment for you. Don't sit on one of those blocks, whatever you do!"

Godwin smiled an annoyed acknowledgment of the advice, and turned to his other side, where he had

caught a flash of Liaison blue. As the Agent approached in dreamlike slow motion, yet another alien came forward. Godwin fought down the impulse to run and whispered stiffly, "On the contrary, protocol absolutely requires that we sit as they sit—— Agnes!"

She had him firmly by one sleeve; a desire to squirm out of her grasp had to be mastered. He stood stock still and said through clenched teeth, "You always were too impatient with ritual. Why hurt their feelings?"

"Why soak yours?" That coolly unconcerned voice was as irritating as ever, but she was considerably prettier than she had been so many years ago, in Liaison training. "Those blocks are hollow and full of some kind of liquid that bathes them while they sit in it." She grinned. "In their living quarters they have very different chairs —with tail supports, for one thing. Besides—don't be so upset, Wys—*they* issued *us* the chairs we're using; we didn't bring them ourselves."

One of her aides leaned over to whisper loudly, "We think they use these blocks only for formal gatherings —diplomatic parleys. Perhaps they depend strongly on odor as testimony of fear or dishonesty, and use this means to negate their own odors?"

"Exactly," said Agnes. "Every stool a bidet."

Godwin felt absurdly flustered as his first decision revealed itself unworkable. He had expected his ignorance to play him false, but not right off the bat, and not in a matter for which his training had prepared him.

He saw the immense tail projecting up behind the alien's head begin to waver. "And what does that mean?" he asked Agnes, indicating "his" alien with the slightest forward motion of his head. "Why is he trembling? Is he angry at being kept waiting like this?"

He was beginning to feel angry himself—or at least trapped in this tableau with four human beings faced by four aliens, and no progress being made.

"Oh, the poor thing!" she said, her voice contrite and sweet. She laid her wrists briefly on both of theirs, Godwin's and the monster's, and smiled. "Now that you've finally arrived, he's willing to deal with me again."

The alien's tail dropped immediately to the more normal position, straight out behind him. He paced with Agnes back to his sitz-bath and sat down on it. She held up three fingers to him and then drew the flat of her hand through the air as if she were cancelling a message written there.

She moved slowly through the enormous room, waking the two sleepers and tapping on the shoulder a third who looked to be in pretty bad shape. These three gathered up their trays and cups and papers, made a kind of obeisance—as if they would have crossed their own wrists but for all the junk they were carrying—and left the room.

Abruptly, everyone was seated again. One of the empty chairs had been passed awkwardly forward until it was directly opposite the largest alien, and Agnes, from her circle of aides, waved Godwin into it. "Take over, boss man," she said.

"Oh, no, you don't," said Godwin. He jumped up and started to move his chair to her side. "Everybody in this room knows more about what's going on here than I do. Let's keep you front and center, too!"

"Don't move so suddenly, you moron!" she shouted at him. "Put it back—where it was! I'll come!"

He saw that every alien in the room was also on his feet, and there was abruptly a new scent making the air heavy, dizzying. Overripe melon, perhaps, or the sickly sweet smell of certain things newly dead. Godwin stood all the way up—slowly—and placed one wrist over the other. He bowed from the waist toward the largest alien. He had not seen anybody bow yet at this tea party, but it seemed like a peculiarly propitiatory gesture, recognizable in any culture.

The creature made a sound rather as if he had cleared his throat and sat slowly down again. All his fellows did likewise, while, without anyone but Agnes actually standing all the way up, half a dozen of the human delegation slid onto the vacated chair's nearest them, playing a kind of musical chairs to leave the seat nearest Godwin's empty. Agnes joined him, still pale with alarm.

"Didn't you *read* what it says about moving slowly?" she demanded.

"The papers were kept from me," he said, "deliberately. So happens, I just got back from six months' off-time in Tibet, and I don't even know what's been on PIX or FAX, if anything."

"You don't?" said Agnes, with such honest disbelief that he felt greatly impelled to explain to her what frustrations had dogged him from the moment of his arrival at Communications Complex. Somehow he knew that she would not sympathize. *She* would have gotten hold of the transcripts the same day she arrived. He swallowed a mouthful of excuses, as she added, "Well, you've got the work papers now. There's a viewer. Catch up."

As he bored his way into the Liaison packet, the despairing sense grew that he could not master such disparate and difficult material in anything under the length of time that Harms had stolen from him by diverting the daily flow of reports. He was not trained in any science, after all—liaison comprised the arts of protocol and parataxis carried to their logical extremes, and had nothing to do with the laboratory. Yet, if Agnes had found it necessary to attach so many specialists to her group, the information they supplied must be essential. Painfully, he sorted through the worksheets for headings that looked promising, and started again.

LIAISON
Leloc—XII—35:006: Physiology

We have been unable to test, examine or dissect these animals and hence have nothing to report.

From a distance they appear to be intelligent(?) kangaroos. We presume that they share some of the characteristics of these marsupials; and we suggest that the marsupial pattern of child-bearing—that is, adults protecting their young by various means *outside* their bodies—is not unlikely for an extraterrestrial being. Some Earthly fish raise their offspring in such pouches, and so does the Surinam toad. The method having been

independently arrived at by differing species on Earth, it is conceivable that a marsupial form may have become the dominant life form on some other planet.

It is, however, worth noting that the Earthly animal which these aliens most closely resemble—that is, the kangaroo—does not always protect its young with the fanatical concern exhibited by a human mother for her offspring. Kangaroos have been observed, when pursued, to lift their unwieldy young out of their pouches and cast them aside. In the example given earlier (35:002:) ("in the evolutionary sequence concluding with man, offspring are progressively more helpless . . . smaller . . . immature, etc., with the natural increase of dependency, length of suckling period, greater delay in learning to move about independently, and postponing of social and sexual maturation") insufficient emphasis, perhaps, was placed on the emotional investment of the mother in the infant's well-being. In the case of the Earthly kangaroo, the young are dropped from the womb as such undeveloped foetuses that they can properly be called larvae. There is disagreement as to whether they are taken by the lips of the mother and placed within the ventral pouch or whether they crawl blindly and unassisted through the belly hair to the safety of the pouch. Each larva clings by means of a temporary sucking mouth to a teat from which milk oozes or is pressed down its throat. After some four months they have grown sufficiently to emerge, but may still return to the pouch for food, rest or protection.

No comparison with the aliens can justifiably be made, inasmuch as there are as yet no young to be observed in this group, nor is it likely that any will appear. It is, perhaps, however, indicative, that, while the males wear a species of body harness which covers and perhaps exaggerates the reproductive area, the females do not, and are most easily identified by the lack of protective covering; the pouch, being unoccupied, is virtually invisible. The civ, Mager, who claims to be in actual communication with the Leloc, submits that the word for the female's pouch is one and the same as the word for the

male body harness—but inclusion here of this alleged information does not constitute endorsement.

In Earthly marsupials, the offspring do tend to be more and more immature at birth, and to become ectoparasites thereafter, allowing a certain comparison with the human case. Marsupials as we know them however, all expel their cubs early—sometimes without seeming to realize that they have abandoned them. Only the young which survive such cavalier treatment remain with the herd.

If it is true, as it is claimed, that the aliens have previously visited Earth, and established a colony at that time, it is possible that the present visit of the aliens is meant to reclaim the colonists; such an interpretation is put, by one of us, upon Mager's claim that the Leloc "say" they desire only to "gather up those dropped."

We would like, however, to direct Liaison's attention to the fact that marsupials have lived upon the Earth for at least 125 million years, and that the Leloc cannot therefore be related to any local fauna in any conceivable way. Any other suggestion is irresponsible, in the opinion of the majority, and totally without foundation in the facts.

LIAISON
Leloc—II—45:057: Propulsion

The conclusions of the group leader on propulsion are as follows: (1) the Leloc drive is inoperable, and probably wholly imaginary; and, (2) if it functions as deduced, the Leloc are hopelessly lost.

Conclusion One is obviously untrue, since the Leloc are here and their drive therefore functions. Nevertheless we begin with it to emphasize that our analysis of how it operates is derived from indirect evidence and hence cannot be trusted; thus, the second conclusion is also untrustworthy.

Relatively firm evidence supplied by the Group on Symbols and Signs places the point of origin of the Leloc somewhere within a powerful radio-emitting blue cluster estimated to be at the edge of the galactic halo, in Ursa

Minor. Since the physical nature of this object is in doubt, there is some dispute as to how to interpret its red-shift measurements. The distances involved are immense and could not have been traversed by any vessel imaginable to us in anything under 125 million years. These mortal animals, however, have made this journey in a single generation, apparently in less than six months.

The S & S Group has also noted that all code and other marks of the Leloc are rigidly bound to an underlying metrical frame, sometimes drawn in, but most often only implicit, which most closely resembles our own tic-tac-toe sign subjected to certain highly rhythmic distortions. The projective geometry of this frame is quite obviously non-Euclidean, though since our only samples of it are brief curves in only two dimensions, we have found it impossible to determine the four-or-more-dimensional curvature which is implied.

Third, what little we have been able to see of Leloc instruments suggests that these animals are acutely sensitive to parts of the electromagnetic spectrum which can be only pointer readings to human eyes. Their grand navigation grid, for example—to choose only the largest and most obvious of the tools aboard their ship—involves *at least* four coordinates and may be found to be unreadable except in Hilbert space; yet no overt grid network is visible in it, and it seems to be read by very small differences in the colors and absolute magnitudes of the token stars it shows. These, incidentally, became visible to us only through Dr. Minowski's diffraction filters after long examination.

The engines of the Leloc ship are small, simple and beyond any present analysis. They appear to consume very little power. However, everything aboard the ship appears to be economical of power. S & S reports that the Leloc appear to be naturally conservative, and there is as yet no suggestion that these animals would undertake an expedition of this duration distance with less than a reasonable safety factor. It is reluctantly concluded that the power available is greater, by an unknown order of magnitude, than any need foreseen by

the Leloc; hence these engines must indeed operate upon this very small power flow. (The emergency which the Leloc confront at present may or may not be beyond their resources. On this point our evidence is virtually zero; our guess is that they do not recognize the emergency for what it is.)

These bits and pieces of fact and assumption are most unsatisfactory, but we have been forced to use them because there are no others; experiment is impossible in a unique situation. From them we draw the following description of the Leloc drive:

The (unknown) principle acts directly upon the metrical frame of spacetime—the multidimensional web-work which Newton once called "absolute space," and which has since been redefined in many other ways. Assuming that this is possible, one can see that such a drive would have many advantages which, in fact, the Leloc drive actually possesses. It would require almost no expenditure of energy, because it would work as simply as a lever: the direction in which such a machine would travel would be a vector or resultant pried out of the fundamental tension exerted by the metrical frame in keeping itself in existence, and from which cauldron of energy the ship need take only a glancing blow to gain all the power it could possibly need. Second, since matter warps the metrical frame in its immediate vicinity, large bodies such as suns and planets need not be watched for at high velocities; the drive could be set to avoid them automatically. Third, such a drive would so recreate the metrical frame as to maintain it in near-normal condition in the vicinity of the ship, so that in that vicinity the ship need never approach the speed of light though the surrounding spacetime may be traversing the frame at many multiples of light speed. (See Appendix IV, "Pseudo-Lorentz Invariance as a Turbine Function.")

This brings us to Conclusion II, which assumes that our analysis of the Leloc drive is correct—a very dubious precondition.

Since Leloc "writing" and symbology are derived from and refer to a non-Euclidean geometry, and since the

Leloc can see and act upon events in Hilbert space which they seem to receive directly as sense data rather than indirectly as meter readings, we have no present choice but to assume that their drive is not a late product of their technology, but is actually exceedingly primitive—perhaps the first of all Leloc space drives. If this is true, then the first arrival here of the Leloc would have given them no reason to suspect the divagations from experience implicit in the theory until such errors became patent to their senses; they must have been as confident of their "common-sense" non-Euclideanism as we once were of Euclid. Local trial flights, furthermore, would not reveal the rather small errors involved. In particular, only a long flight would disclose that cruising world lines from one star to another accumulates substantial errors in *time*—in this instance, well more than 100 million years.

Our second conclusion, therefore, is that cruising world lines must be perilously close to being a random procedure. Every atom has a world line of its own, and, though the world line of a large body like a sun should not be difficult to distinguish from the background "noise" of smaller event threads over very short distances, interstellar travel involves so large a volume of spacetime that precise arrivals and departures are out of the question. The Leloc expedition apparently decided to return to Earth for reasons unknown in a mere six months (subjective time) after their original landing, but arrived here at least 100 million years later. Similarly, the expedition may home on its own sun in Ursa Minor and voyage a seeming two or three years but arrive there as much as 80 to 100 million years *before*—or after!—*their initial departure.*

[Godwin was reminded of the old saw about Columbus: he did not know where he was going and he did not know where he was when he got there. But at least Ferdinand and Isabella were still doing business at the same old stand when he finally made it home.]

Possibly this form of space drive can be refined and collimated. Such a task, however, would in itself take several centuries of real time for human beings. These

animals, if it is true that Euclidean space is abstract and insensible to them, may never be able to make it manageable; hence we conclude that they may be hopelessly lost. We do not believe that we have conveyed these conclusions to the Leloc. If Mager is to be credited, they are triumphantly aware that they have returned "unerringly" to the planet they colonized, and their principal concern appears to be to determine what we have done with—or to—the colony. The notion that eons of time may have elapsed since then has not been grasped by them as of this writing.

LIAISON
Leloc—VI—84:049: Signs and Symbols

. . . and requires the closest measurement of the underlying (and usually only assumed) network, which for the most part we have been unable to make. In addition, Biology reports that . . .

[Godwin nervously touched the dial.]

. . . geometry. Their behavior in conference is that of a people with a sense of property so fundamental that it can hardly be distinguished from religion. Even the space occupied by a Leloc is his until he vacates it, and if a new person enters a spacio-social situation, etiquette requires that that situation be relieved of one prior occupant of approximately the same physical bulk and social authority. In ordinary social situations among the Leloc, this yielding of space is symbolized by stylized gestures with the animals' tails, but in diplomacy it must be acted out by real exits and entrances . . .

. . . unable to say whether these are functional diagrams or works of art. Several members of our group believe that the Leloc use color as a code for motion; the Art subsection denies that this is possible, but Physics (see II=44) considers it extremely important. The supposition that a species so acutely sensitive to color as to be able to detect differences in terms of Angstrom units would be seeing "in depth," so that for them the sky is truly filled with stars, and color is equivalent to motion,

implies a kind of relativistic physics very early in their development—and may also mean that they never have developed Newtonian physics at all. It is therefore quite possible that these are both functional diagrams *and* works of art at one and the same time. Any assumptions as to the existence or nature of an esthetic sense must wait upon semantic progress, which may be long delayed. The gesture language is overtly easier to read, but its conventions . . .

. . . They would particularly like to know how we have altered the gridwork and landscaping of their colony in so short a time. Mager says they are not so much accusatory as admiring, and they seem to think that such an act must have symbolic function. There is not a shred of evidence for this.

. . . interesting to note one of the earliest references in the literature, from the annals of Captain Cook's first voyage of discovery, at Endeavour River, dated July 14, 1770: "Mr Gore, who went out this day with his gun, had the good fortune to kill one of the animals which had been so much the subject of our speculation, . . . and which is called by the natives Kanguroo."

Godwin's hand hovered over the *next* and *repeat* keys indecisively as the words lingered on the screen. An image formed in his mind of Mr. Gore stalking his "kanguroo," and it looked remarkably like Tulliver Harms about to pull the trigger. He switched off the machine. "All right," said Godwin briskly. "How soon can they lift ship?"

"Lift?" Agnes raised her eyebrows. "They won't lift ship. Not for me, anyhow. What about this removal threat, Wys? Mager didn't tell me much, and I put him right back to work, directly with the Leloc, since they are still receptive to him."

"The threat is serious, Agnes. What do you mean, they 'won't' lift ship? You have been warned-and-advised to move your camp out of range of the 'extreme force' Harms plans to use against the aliens at seventeen hundred hours tomorrow."

"Impossible," she said flatly. "Wasn't he in your con-

fidence when you okayed our whites for the last two weeks—the planned expedition to Australia, the—"

"I okayed your whites?" he repeated, astounded. "I haven't seen any of this material before. There is only one white in the packet. I have just plowed my way through nothing but blues!"

A little quiver ran through both of them. They knew simultaneously who had forged Wystan Godwin's signature on the Liaison whites, and they made an accurate assessment of why he had been playing for time.

"Caught in the act—tampering with a Liaison packet," said Godwin. "It will destroy him."

"Not unless we can bring him to trial, it won't. In the meantime, the important thing is that he apparently plans to use explosives on the Leloc ship—and us. What were you doing all this time while he was presumably ordering up every bomb on the entire Seaboard?"

"I had no estimate of this situation at all—I was simply waiting for orders, information—"

He took a firm grip on himself. If Harms had not prevented his coming out to the camp, the Exec's intention must be to kill off the one witness whose word counted for as much as his own, in the event the Liaison people failed to remove themselves in time. Now that Harms had screwed himself up to making the threat, he was probably hoping they would not move. In that case,——

"Agnes, I think he isn't sane. He had admitted planning violence against living creatures. Obviously, he expects to be brought to trial for it, or he wouldn't have stolen what he considers damning information out of the packet." Godwin shook his head. It was still the breach of protocol that disturbed his sense of the way things should be, more than the imminent violence. "Therefore, he's still operating within a distorted view of the Pax Magna even while he plans to commit—murder. Now that I am here, we outnumber him. Two Agents outrank one Exec." He winced. "I never expected to use numbers to settle a dispute."

"It's been done," said Agnes thoughtfully. "Twice, in extreme situations, since the Pax. But, Wys, how?"

"Send a runner. No, first we contact the Nine Old Men and put the order on the record, and then we order Harms to come out here for a parley with the Leloc. Furthermore, we order him to come with an evidence of good faith."

"They have had us completely cut off from the outside world from the third day after we set up our camp. We haven't been able to get a message out, much less a messenger. They don't interfere with us otherwise. But we *can't* contact the judiciary branch."

"We will lie," he said calmly, enjoying her gasp of surprise. "We will say that you established contact with the Nine Old Men on day one, feeling that alien diplomacy might go beyond the requirements of Pax Magna. Now, in spite of his rages and his xenophobia, he seems to respect the law sufficiently to take account of it in his planning. I think he may accede." At Agnes' troubled look, he added, "And in the event that he doesn't, is there any way we can convey all the facts to the . . . the Leloc here?"

"No, yes . . . I don't know," she replied distractedly. "Mager!" She beckoned to the civ, adding, "Actually, he is the only one of us who can talk to them at all, on anyone's behalf. I believe he is the greatest puzzler who ever lived, but it's all intuitive rightness. My crew of certified experts has been fighting him all the way."

"I noticed a certain nonreceptiveness to Mager's opinions in the papers." Wystan grinned.

She did not smile back.

The large alien had made no sound during the exchange. He pricked up his ears and swiveled his large muzzle (that in an Earth creature would unmistakably indicate a vegetarian habit), as if he were chairing a committee meeting; patiently allowing them to run on as long as they refrained from any sudden movements.

Agnes shrugged. Godwin marveled at how this table-pounder had tightened up all her characteristic gestures —possibly only since first encountering the aliens. She

finally smiled a little bit, and he hoped he was being over sensitive in reading contempt into the twist of her lips. "Take over, anyhow, and I'll get the message off to Harms," she said. "If they've got to lift ship, you've got to put it over to them exactly why. Myself, I wouldn't know how to tell a truly peaceable creature that he's in danger of being blown to atoms by those who might better be helping him."

Wystan had not the faintest idea what he was going to say or do. He addressed himself to Mager. "Do they understand any of this?" he asked, nodding at the great benign-looking creature sitting so stiffly upright before him—only a few feet away, but the distance was enormous.

Apparently not subject to the same restrictions on his movements as the rest of that roomful of humans and aliens, Mager had been engaged in pantomime and one-sided conversation with a small group clustered behind the leader; they had welcomed him back as if he were the original lost colonist. "Why, certainly," he said. "Well, not *understand*. I mean, lots of things we take for granted before we ever open our mouths, they either don't have them or they have them all different. But they know what I mean, a good part of the time."

Massaging that part of his head which felt so unaccustomedly bald, Godwin essayed to take over. "The Last President of the Federated World said, 'Our swords are now at long last beaten into ploughshares,' " he intoned, in the ringing accents that every schoolchild could imitate. " 'Meaning: One does not wage war on oneself.' Can you convey that concept to the aliens?"

Buzzing like a small angry bee, Agnes let Mager carry the message, but (for Godwin's own personal benefit and at length) she insisted immediately that the concept was fallacious. "We do indeed wage war on ourselves, all the time. You, Wystan Godwin, are the most outstanding example of that fact I have ever encountered, and I have had a rather busy life."

Mager reported back: the aliens agreed one does not wage war on oneself, but the Last President's oratory

was lost on them. They had never waged war on anyone. The Leloc had been one nation since before the beginning of their recorded time. "Their notion of individual conflict, however, utterly rules out compromise or surrender. A Leloc challenged stands and fights to the death, or is killed by his, ah, friends."

"Well, can you convey to them that we, here, are friendly, but that outside there is one whom we must consider—unwillingly—as one of us, who fears them without reason? Who will destroy them—bomb them out of existence—*tomorrow evening,* if they stay here, but who cannot touch them if they will simply change their locus? In other words, will they please lift ship and land somewhere—anywhere—else, to prevent their total destruction? Otherwise, tomorrow evening—BOOM."

Mager wagged his head commiseratingly. "That's a stiff order, sir. I can tell you in advance that the chances are small. They have already acknowledged that they are challenged, and they stand. On their big fat dignity, see."

Mager returned to the group of aliens with whom he had been working. Sporting an invisible tail and with his hands curled close to his chest so that even Godwin could see that he was "being" a Leloc, he began by making a small leap from one point to another. Then he turned to the portable Liaison-stores blackboard and sketched rapidly.

Up to now, Mager's conferences with the Leloc had been lively, with activity and chattering and busy-ness on both sides. This time, all the aliens sat silent and impassive. Mager turned and inclined his head in Godwin's direction, at the same time making a stylized gesture which surely suggested . . . protection? Blessing? Every muzzle swung to follow his gesture and Godwin stood up, feeling a complete idiot. He gravely imitated the protection sign, bowed deeply, and resumed his seat. Except that the Leloc leader had stood when he did, there was no acknowledgment; unless you counted the leader's averted muzzle and half-closed eyes as a kind of negative remark.

The long night consisted of long waits, piled one on

another, overlapping and intertwined. It was not war, not even (intentionally anyhow) a war of nerves, but it was certainly stalemate.

Godwin began to have a dreamlike illusion of being back in school again as he and Agnes entered upon quiet, friendly discussions of the situation that flared into bickering on the turn of a phrase.

"I wonder why they came back," he said, "after so long. *I* wouldn't have."

"They didn't think they were gone longer than six months," she snapped irritably. "Can't you get that through your head?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. He just was not used to people snarling at him any more. No, not "people;" no one but Agnes ever had.

"This whole thing makes me so sick," she burst out. "It should have been our ship that went out to the stars, not theirs that came to us. Where did Earth take the wrong path, into cautious conservatism and the perfectly stable society?"

"The wrong path!" said Wystan. "Earth has been free of war for how long now?"

"Oh—pacifism," she sneered.

"Not a bit of it. We have an enormous and well-trained standing army, in the event that we should ever need it. Its being a peacetime army means only that we are not geared to shoot first and inquire later—and that's just as well, isn't it? Since the plague, since national barriers disappeared—and that was long before the population dropped so low—we operate like one enormous sparsely populated village. We have plenty of warriors but no wars."

"No excitement, either," she countered.

"What kind of excitement are you looking for? Plague again? Famine? All the traditional horsemen? We've had all four, and conquered them. You don't sufficiently value the goods of the world we've made."

"Well, you do; enough for both of us. I stand with the few human beings who still like to ask questions that have difficult answers. And I'm working—through

Liaison, understand—for people like Mager, whose whole lives are a sterile waste."

"Now . . . with the whole world a garden?"

"Amusement park, you mean! And that's the worst of it! After Earth made so many brave efforts to clean the whole universe, to settle for one parochial corner, and cower in it! All Mager's talents were being channeled away in sheer time-wasting, until the Leloc came to us."

"But these Leloc are plain and simply lost, unable to get home, not even knowing where they are."

"Just the same, they have crossed space. They've seen the stars, while mankind is well on the way back into the cliffs and caves again."

She said, "Wystan, have you ever read Thoreau? I have. I've memorized great swatches of *Walden.* Listen to this—this is the way Mager's talents were being channeled away." She closed her eyes and began to recite: ". . . like the humbler esculents, which though they may be biennials, are cultivated only till they have perfected their root, and often cut down at top for this purpose, so that most would not know them in their flowering season." Her eyes flashed again.

She leaned forward in her intensity. "Do you know what that means? Potato-people! And not only Mager, the retired puzzler. You, me—most of the working citizenry of Earth, and *all* of the people who simply aren't lucky enough to be permitted to work. We've all been cut down to live potato-lives in a safe little vegetable garden." She made a kind of grumbling noise in her throat, closed her eyes again in sheer weariness, and incontinently fell asleep while he watched.

Why, she was a worse malcontent now than she had been at school. She had always been willing to replace the known with the unknown, and unwilling, or unable, to cooperate for peace and immediate quiet.

Wystan gratefully accepted a picnic supper that was passed up to him about seven o'clock. The mere word *picnic* passing through his mind made him feel combative again, it was so peaceful—and somehow also he

felt equally protective and guilty. He itched to open the argument again. He really wanted to argue the question of worldwide peace versus human striving, with its inevitable concomitants of chicanery and violence, he discovered. But perhaps with somebody more rewarding to talk to than Agnes?

He sensed and then saw a sudden turmoil at the back of the hall. The runner had returned and the word was that Harms would arrive for parley at 1300 hours the next day.

Wystan felt relief flood through him, as if he had solved the whole problem. He nodded cordially to the Leloc leader whose muzzle had lifted with a softly inquiring tilt toward the new arrival. Simultaneously, Wystan realized that the last thing in the world he wanted to see was those two uncomprehending stubborn beings confronting each other. Luckily, there was some time left before that would be necessary.

Wystan looked around for Mager, and discovered him curled up on the floor confidingly close to the Leloc leader's enormous feet. Agnes was still napping, too. Wystan examined his conscience, which assured him that it was always the wisest course to let sleeping agents lie. He smiled again; the situation was under control, and nothing whatsoever needed facing right at that moment.

Murkily, it seemed to him that he was bypassing more and more decisions. He wondered if the quite pleasant smell that now permeated the air, a veritable sleepy-smell, were the result of a room full of fatigued people. Fatigued aliens, he corrected himself. Tired people do not smell particularly good, do they, he asked himself? But this was definitely a lethe smell, a sleeping spell . . .

His euphoria was subsiding while his relief that Harms was willing to parley was great. His inability to cope with either the military mind or the blank wall of alien attitudes was more than he could face. Intuition would have told him, if he had been aware enough to intuit, that there was indeed a new scent in the air, because the Leloc leader wanted the little interpreter to have his rest uninterrupted.

Wystan Godwin's next masterly step in the taking-over process was to drift quietly off to sleep.

He woke hours later with a great sense of urgency and the desolate knowledge that there was nothing he, personally, could do—except his belated homework.

How much time was there left before Harms' arrival? About eight hours, he determined—time enough to get in a good two days' work, if he could resist the Leloc lullaby technique that long. His nap made him feel sheepish, and yet everybody around him had been working on those terms and for a much longer time, studying until they passed out and sleeping *in situ*.

Mager was back at his task of trying to come to an understanding with the Leloc leader. And, by now, their flat refusal to lift ship was being acted out dramatically by the entire alien population. It made Wystan twitch, surveying that hall full of seeming statues.

Leloc discipline had not relaxed even a trifle. When anyone stood, the leader of the Leloc stood. It was understandable why the Leloc virtually never had to leave the conference room, but it was dull watching them bob up and down every time a human being retired, however briefly.

Wystan's growing discomfort brought him back again to the Liaison packet. He found he was very curious about the colonists, although he could neither organize nor apply much of the information for lack of the other side of the picture: How long was a Leloc year? Did they ever move faster than a dignified walk? What did they really eat—grass, grains?

For that matter, all of the information about the Earthly kangaroo was news to him, still, and he decided to review it.

. . . According to Huxley, tree kangaroos were so imperfectly adapted to arboreal life that it was impossible to imagine them able to survive in the tropical forests of Malaya or the Amazon. . . .

In the later Mesozoic Age the marsupialia were ap-

parently scattered all over the land area of that time, their remains having been discovered in many parts of both hemispheres, but even previous to the Eocene they were no longer to be found north of the equator.

Huxley further states that in general the Australian marsupials seem unable to compete successfully with introduced species from other regions of the world. At that time kangaroos roamed Australia in great numbers, but (again according to Huxley) "in an evolutionary sense had not adapted to their environment with greatest possible efficiency had natural selection been more vigorously at work . . ."

. . . Island populations tend to have aberrant characteristics. Genetic drift . . .

A hunter of the kangaroo for profit said, "Inch for inch, and ounce for ounce, they provided perhaps the toughest of all animal skins . . . [and yet] soft, light, pliable, and, with no sweat glands, it had a quality few other skins reached. . . . Funny how there are more moffs [hermaphroditic specimens] among kangaroos than any other animal. . . ."

. . . inability to reason. A tendency to accept something strange within minutes of noticing it—leading to insufficient fear of man, for instance. A tendency, on the other hand, to panic and (on the part of does) to make insufficient allowance for a full pouch in attempting to run or leap an obstacle. . . . Subject to instestinal worms, lice, much damage from all kinds of parasites and pests.

Buck teeth enable the kangaroos to eat new shoots of grass before they have more than broken the earth —so that they can strip an area and leave themselves with no forage, an area that can serve as pasture for an equal number of sheep with no need for the latter to range farther.

. . . Family Macropodidae . . . great development of hinder parts and leaping powers. . . . peculiar method of reproduction. . . .

[Godwin's flagging attention revived.]

The internal organs of reproduction are double, the

two oviducts not uniting into a single uterus or vagina, although the separation of the two parts is often imperfect. The testes of the male are suspended in a scrotum in front of the penis, the glans of which is often double.

["By *George*!" said Godwin.]

Marsupialia have developed into a great variety of forms and present a most curious parallel to the diversities observable among the higher and more widely diffused mammalia. Some have large size, go in herds and occupy grassy plains; others are smaller, more agile, and confined to mountainous districts. Others are still smaller, burrow and feed upon roots or resemble little terrestrial rodents in appearance and habits; while many forms dwell altogether in trees and often simulate squirrels of various kinds. In another direction . . . a variety of predatory marsupialia, whose needs have developed bodies, teeth and powers resembling those of wolves and bears, and which are wholly flesh-eaters. There is, in fact, hardly a group of mammals which does not find a counterpart among the marsupialia—even the moles and shrews.

Godwin became aware of warm breathing on his neck and turned to find somebody named Abendstern as rapt by the text as he himself. "Parallel evolution, yes, but it seems to have been more of a two-way street, really. The Leloc themselves *de*volved, rapidly, while the lower animals they brought with them evolved *up*, trying all kinds of adaptations with fantastic imitativeness. It's hard to believe that the Leloc could have been so . . . naive . . . as to be unaware of the hard radiation that their method of travel subjected them to, but it does appear to have been a pioneer trip. Every living creature in the colony must have suffered radically altered chromosomes. The most highly specialized group, the Leloc themselves, had nowhere to go but down. The colonials must have gone back to savagery within a very few generations."

"The environment was probably too tough for them," said Godwin.

Abendstern was very positive. "Just the opposite. It was too easy; no competition at all. They probably had a much rougher time in transit—all the colonists, their livestock, the eucalypti and so on were crammed into this very hall."

"Eucalypti?"

"Yes—wouldn't you know they'd be a Leloc import? So smell-prominent." Abendstern indicated that he would like to hit the button and Godwin waved permission. A picture appeared on the screen. "There are fragrant oils in the little leaf glands—there—and with seasonal changes the chemical composition of the oils alters overnight. What had been food becomes poison. Been considered very mysterious, but if we think of the tree as originating in another system, under not one but many suns, it becomes much more logical. The eucalypti have always been classified as members of the myrtle family, but it's probably another case of parallel evolution. In Europe there is one solitary kind of myrtle; Sanderson says there are over eight hundred kinds of eucalyptus in Australia. And yet—with the animals anyhow—all that productivity is petering out, coming to substantially nothing in the end: out of their Noah's ark came wolves and bears and dogs—and moles and shrews, and rats and raccoons and skunk and deer, all pouched, and all outdone by their mammalian counterparts."

Mager, dismissed by the Leloc, headed straight for the little group made up of Godwin and his one friend among the experts. The three coffees that arrived shortly after showed Godwin that Agnes was awake again and—probably—listening. He inquired, "They still feel themselves threatened?"

"Challenged, yes, sir. But we've left that to one side. We're back to working out a basic vocabulary, beyond the original Message from Outside." Mager gestured at the work papers in the Liaison Agent's lap.

The phrases leaped out at Godwin. They had puzzled

him in his cubicle at Communications Complex; they still puzzled him.

Leaping largely we return. Hearing droops at lapse so great and grasper aches from emptiness.

"What were they trying to tell us for half a year?" asked Godwin. "What does 'grasper aches from emptiness' *mean*?"

"Hands—and something missing. But they don't exactly have hands, see," said Mager. "And I couldn't be sure from the acting out of the term whether it was tools they wanted to be using, and lacked, or friends whose hands they wanted to grip. They don't seem to have the handshake, but after all we've seen them only in a highly formal situation. Who knows how they show affection?"

"I see," said Wystan, and for the first time, he did, a bit.

"I keep feeling, probing-like, for some spirit of vengeance. If *I* was them, I'd assume we had destroyed their colony. Especially since bombing has been mentioned. But they just act interested . . . and waiting . . ."

"For what, I wonder?" Godwin mused. "I might come up with something, if I just understood how their minds work."

"Oh, I understand a little how their minds work, sir," said Mager diffidently. "It's like this thing they have about balance. If something threatens them, it is just impossible to run away. As long as they know Exec Harms has made the threat, it would be running away if they raised ship. But, well, for instance, if we had been able to tell them where their colony is, and they had already been planning to go there, then it wouldn't be running away. It doesn't matter now, of course."

"Oh, great," said Godwin. "I don't suppose we could get them to take off and come down again slightly backward in time, could we?"

"Sir?"

"Nothing intended. It was just a bad joke."

"They might, you know," said Bonwit, from his other side. Or Minowski. Wystan was not sure which of the experts knew about the Leloc method of travel, but whichever one it was had craned precariously over to join the conversation. "If they could just get far enough away first. It looks as if they have no control whatever over the temporal aspects of their flight, and—we are convinced—did not know it until they made this long jump. Maybe they still don't."

"Oh, they don't," said Mager.

Bonwit—or Minowski—gave him a cool stare and continued: "If they ever get back to their home planet, they may use up the whole of their subjective lifetimes getting far enough away to make stab after stab at landing within their own epoch, and hitting every thinkable era in random order. It looks as if this colonial expedition was the first flight made out of their own system with this method of travel, and I suspect will have been the last."

Godwin asked, "Why did they decide to return?"

"I can't prove this, sir," said Mager, "but *something* happened along the way. We can't yet talk in that kind of detail so I don't know what it was. But, whatever it was, it aroused their suspicions. I think they returned to an intermediate planet where they had made landfall, found it much changed, and beat it back here to check on their colony. That six months in transit from their home system is just a bad guess. They weren't coming back to the Earth we know, and sending us a message. They had no idea we existed, you know. They expected a Communications Satellite, but they thought it would have been put up by their own people. Six months is only how long we detected them sending the relief message to their colonists."

"Mager," exclaimed the participating expert, "you're right."

The civ looked as if he had just had a medal pinned on, with kisses on both cheeks. Abendstern said, "You not only talk with the Leloc, you finally got through to a physicist! Congratulations."

"I'd better be getting back to work," said Mager, and moved away.

From a far corner of the human side of the hall a shout went up, stopping Mager in his tracks. The large alien, pricking up one ear, swiveled his muzzle toward the improvised chart table and the excited group of humans.

"I think we've got it—a real match on a power installation. The land bridge threw me off. It isn't where I was always taught, but everything meshes otherwise. We've been assuming it would be New Zealand or Australia, but it is actually this little place here called Kukukukuland."

"Why not?" said Mager. "They had three power installations, or more, and their settlements were spread out all over the world as it then was. Their maps prove the continental drift theory. I mean, it isn't theory any more——"

One of the recalcitrant experts farther down the line snorted loudly but said nothing.

Mager swallowed, his shyness suddenly enveloping him again. He continued "—and Australia isn't necessarily where they started out either; it's just where all that's left of them ended up."

Godwin was halfway out of his chair, wanting to see that map, wanting even more to see what the aliens had offered as their map, and needing to exchange conjectures that might really be going somewhere . . . anywhere . . . with somebody. Anybody.

Agnes opened one eye. "Sit, stupid," she hissed. "You must not make a sudden move, not right here at the parley center. A little hubble-bubble at the back of the hall on either side is allowed, but you *saw* what happened before when you jumped up."

Godwin sat down, deflated. And yet, suddenly, all of the Leloc were on their feet, and pure delight was in the air. The smell this time was like new-mown grass. The leader was making rapid gestures with his tiny hands. He uttered a sound, and all his fellows sat down again, but the leader remained standing.

Tawmison and two Earthly kangaroos, together with a stranger dressed in entertainer's purple, strode forward triumphantly from the lock.

"I would have been quicker," Tawmison murmured, when he was close to Godwin. "But we thought we'd best set the copter down far enough from the ship so that these creatures wouldn't shoot at Harms' peace offering." Seeing that further explanation was necessary, he added, "These two boxer kangaroos are Harms' evidence of good faith, for the parley. I upped his timetable a little, but he's on the way. Whatever your message was, it scared him witless. Justifying himself; these are Exhibit A."

Boxer? What was that? And—peace offering? How——?

Godwin waited nervously for the invisible abacus board in the Leloc's head to click off its tally, so that negotiations could begin. But nothing happened. Then he realized that it was neither two nor four that had entered the hall, but a balanced two and two, from the Leloc standpoint. He paced to the Leloc leader, and initiated proceedings with the careful caution and courtesy that characterized the Leloc as they did himself. He crossed wrists and gestured like a master of ceremonies toward the new arrivals.

Immediately the Leloc leader began to deliver a speech. It was patently a welcome speech, as much sung as spoken, and wound up with what could only have been a question. The smell of delight became so overwhelming throughout the hall that Godwin wondered for one moment if he was about to weep from sheer pleasure.

The two animals on the leather thong had been shuffling their enormous hind feet a little bit, and staring vacantly at the speaker. Nervously, at the conclusion of the Leloc oration, the larger newcomer bent its head and began to dab at its wrists. A murmur swept the alien side of the room.

The scent of new-mown grass abruptly soured into spoiled, fermenting hay. The murmur became louder, and it reminded him of something. He had it: the sounds

of disapproval and dismay older sisters make when the baby does something improper in public.

Then there was an ominous stretch of time that was absolutely empty. The new arrivals were offering nothing —the licking of the wrists had stopped—and the distressed sound from the alien side had died away. As for the smell, either it was diminishing or his nose was temporarily paralyzed. The leader spoke no further; he was simply waiting, with an intensity that Godwin could feel all through his body. Waiting for what? An answer, he supposed—but what could the new arrivals say? The tension continued to build, and Godwin felt the cold sweat standing on his forehead.

Suddenly the trainer broke the silence. "All *right*-y," he cried, and slipped the thong free. "I guess you're waiting for the show to begin. *Give* 'em room now. They're just a little clumsy, in close quarters." He was putting bulky gloves such as Godwin had never seen on the inadequate-seeming little hands.

In the absolute silence, the two liberated animals went into their act. They slapped their tails on the floor; each went into a crouch, and they began to shuffle about in a close circle, each one now and then taking a punch at the other, pummeling with the forepaws and feinting at slashing with their claws.

"Oh," moaned Agnes, "no! No, no no! If we were in their position . . . and the aliens brought in two drooling morons—human but morons—and had them put on a degenerate Punch and Judy show for us—wouldn't we be . . . ?"

Wystan looked at the Leloc side of the hall. Every alien tail was straight up in the air and quivering wildly. Their little hands were laid alongside their muzzles, covering their eyes, and they were making a keening sound, still very soft, but getting louder and more menacing every second.

The Leloc leader crouched, almost imperceptibly. His tail hit the floor once, like a thunderclap, and he sprang forward. In one leap he was on top of the boxing kangaroos. With a single murderous flailing motion of his

tail he laid the mountebank animals flat on the resilient floor. At this a cry went up from the assembled Leloc that made Godwin's hair stand on end. Even his bare forehead prickled reminiscently.

Sour hay metamorphosed into hydrogen sulfide.

"Tawmison!" he shouted. "Get those creatures out of here again before they're murdered."

The draftsman leaped to obey, but even at this moment, he was Tawmison the irrepressible, avid reader of tapes on the Golden Past. "Hey," he said delightedly, "they 'bombed out'!" He reached for the thong, adding, "That's rotten eggs the Leloc are throwing!"

The animal trainer left incontinently with his gloved clowns, after one horrified glance at the aroused and enraged alien audience.

The Leloc leader, tail dragging so it almost touched the floor, had returned to his accustomed place, and was again essaying speech. In English. Godwin, Agnes, and Mager listened intently to the explosive sounds that were slowly adding up to "Buh . . . bub . . bomb. Bomb better."

"He did it, he did it—his first words!" shouted the little civ. He was capering, but immediately turned serious. "He means it would have been better to bomb them than to have shown them these creatures."

The large muzzle swung to follow Mager's movements and, in a tone of infinite sadness, the Leloc said, "Esssss. Using tails."

"Yes," breathed Mager. Questioningly, almost to himself, he added, "But you used yours, too." And more loudly, "Hey—look at those brutes!"

Wystan looked past the leader. He saw nothing but tails, a battery of great fleshy paddles, and they were slowly advancing. He began to tick, inside, and went rigid. *Mob reaction. Panic multiplies itself. To lessen the alien numbers, lighten your load. . . . Balance.*

"Every Liaison man and woman out of the hall, orderly but fast," he shouted. "Except Agnes, Mager, you and you and you." He swept the immediate circle of top

experts with his stabbing forefinger. "Everybody else *out!*"

Most of them had never known real fear before in their whole lives, but the Liaison people streamed in unquestioning obedience to the lock.

Like magic, the Leloc advance stopped. Within seconds, as the aliens perceived what was happening, the threatening tails dropped out of sight. Within minutes more, all but twelve of the space travelers had picked up their sitz-baths, drained them into that marvelously resilient (and apparently also thirsty) floor, and departed.

Twelve? There were only ten humans, huddled in the center of the hall. At the end of his resources, he looked to Agnes.

"Perfect," she said. "Oh, Wystan, I'm proud of you. What? Those two are only gathering up the chairs they issued us. See?"

"Uh-huh," he said. "But while they're still with us—haul two of our people back here fast."

"What a chess player," Mager said, as the order was shouted out of the lock. "Forced exchange and check."

Wystan glared—impassively, he hoped—at the little civ, because he did not know what he was going to do with the two when he got them back. Instinct in the form of the assessment that was—thank God!—always right directing him at the moment. His rational mind had very little to do with the orders he was issuing. Both groups were perfectly calm as two of the Liaison people returned.

The Leloc leader spoke to Mager and then gestured to his crew. Two more aliens departed precipitately.

"He says you are a Great Leader, sir," Mager reported with obvious delight.

Agnes inquired, "Should we return the compliment—to show that we think he is a Great Leader, too? But we can't spare anybody! At least, *I* couldn't finger anybody."

"Right, girl. We can't, but we'd better. That's what he's waiting for."

"You," said Wystan, "and you. I do not know your

relative merits. Random selection, I assure you. We will miss you, gentlemen, but—oh, hell, get some asleep!"

After the little diplomatic flurry, there was another wait. They all sat warily down again while Mager and the Leloc leader conferred further.

Tawmison yelled from the lock. "Boss, I want to come back in. Can I?"

Godwin risked his dignity to yell back. "This is not just fun and games, you know. It could cost you your life."

"Sir," screamed the draftsman, "I am a conscript no longer, but I do not think this is a good time to inform the warhawk of my decision. May I——"

"Protocol be damned," called Godwin cheerfully. "You may. Hold on——" He turned to Agnes. "How do I get that monkey back in here without destroying their illusion that I am a Great Leader?"

She stood up, slowly evolving out of the ritual chair, and the Leloc leader immediately turned his attention from Mager and rose at the same tempo. She raised one finger and beckoned to the lock. The alien imitated her gesture, but to his rear, and Godwin watched while one alien and one human approached the center of the hall. The alien fell into converse with another alien opposite him—who had sat down the instant Agnes indicated she wanted to sit down again—but it seemed to Godwin that in spite of the violent episode that had just blown itself out, the two aliens were merely discussing the weather back in Ursa Minor, or old times, or alien baseball. There was no urgency in their exchange. They were talking because and only because he and Tawmison were talking. Balance, again and always.

He was beginning to get a fine feeling about dealing with these creatures: no rages and no disputes, given half a chance, but all the ritual in the world. He *knew* he could get along with them, now that there was communication.

The alien leader turned to him, and spoke.

"All Leloc-here?" said the Leloc leader hesitantly. "All? So?"

"He means are all Earthly Leloc like those two, sir," said Mager, after a moment's intense thought.

"Yesssss," said the Leloc positively.

Agnes and Mager between them explained to the noble alien that the two boxing kangaroos were unusually talented specimens, but in all the Earth now there was very few left of the species, and they not much (short-memoried and short-lived, physically degenerate, speechless, dying out—not from illness, competition or mistreatment, but from sheer inability to survive) although under human protection.

"Protection?"

Wystan was not the genius at interpeting alien nuances that Mager was. In fact, he had fallen into the oldest of traps in dealing with aborigines or, he guessed, extraterrestrials. They all looked alike to him. The only way he could tell the leader from the others was by his position and by the black leatherlike apron he wore like a sporran, unique in both size and color.

But even his untrained ears could hear the irony in the alien question. He edged out of the group. He was still aching to see the map on the improvised chart table, before the aliens cleaned everything up. He found the Liaison map without any difficulty, and right beside it a gossamer scroll that looked so delicate he was afraid to touch it. It was in the event so heavy that his first reach of hesitant hands braced for a spiderweb merely abraded his fingertips. As he almost lifted it, on the second try, he saw that it was tridimensional in a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't fashion. He gasped.

"Beautiful, isn't it," said Tawmison. He was not asking a question; he was stating a fact. "The boys were telling me about it. Those places that waver in and out are there, but in colors mostly not visible to our eyes. And then, the human eye being what it is, the mind keeps supplying the missing details in near-color, but with each ripple, the mind seems to think it made a mistake and moves the near-color up or down a shade. It'll give you a bellyache if you stare at it long enough."

Wystan tried again, and found that the evanescently

exquisite map was only as heavy as an unabridged dictionary. He could lift it easily with both hands. They took the pair of maps, human and alien, back to the center of the hall.

An expectant silence greeted him. He pointed to the corresponding places on both maps and essayed a speech in pidgin.

"All are there. All Earth-Leloc are there. Go? Star-Leloc go there and see?"

"No," said the Leloc leader unexpectedly. "War. War must here."

"Godwin, sir," cried Mager. "He'll move if the bomber moves first. Threatener has to move, you see——"

"Two sideways and one forward, and then once around the maypole," muttered Godwin. "Well, Harms is supposed to be here any minute."

"And then the Leloc can move to capture him," said Mager eagerly.

"What?" Godwin was remembering those two boxing kangaroos flat on the spaceship floor. "He is a human being, Mager."

"A lunatic," said Agnes crisply.

"It was planned for parley," Wystan said, but he saw that Agnes had gone rigid. He adjusted his mind to going along with whatever her next dictum might be.

"*Bomb-man here. Bomb-man Leloc capture.*" Agnes pronounced the words with great deliberation and care, and Wystan stared at her. It was the first time he had ever heard of an assessment arriving in pidgin Leloc, but he would not put it past her.

Scarlet-faced and scarlet-uniformed, Exec Harms came through the lock. His military might was emphasized by his immediate staff, all wearing every manner of ancient sidearm. Wystan blinked. Five new Leloc, lugging their own sitz baths, filed in from the other side.

Mager had followed Agnes' portentous pronouncement with several gestures so rapid that Wystan could not fathom them. All the aliens nodded their heavy heads and folded their little hands on their chests. Feeling a

little hysterical, Wystan noticed for the first time that they could all move their ears independently.

"Are they convinced of their own degeneracy? Do they surrender?" said Harms in a voice made shrill by fear.

The Leloc cocked his head at Mager. "This is . . . threatener?" He had the usual outlanders' trouble with his *"this"* but everyone present understood him. Mager nodded. The Leloc launched himself at his challenger.

Exec Harms opened his mouth in an inarticulate bull roar, whether of frustration or of fear at being so close to the aliens, they never discovered.

Simultaneously a cloud of scent permeated the room, so acrid that Wystan gagged and a wave of coughing spread through the human contingent. "Hey," said Mager. "They got the idea, all right. They got—look out, Harms!"

His aides were all fumbling with their swords and popguns. Godwin said, "Keep your hands off your weapons!" The Exec had just barely had time to draw himself up to his full height, coughing and sputtering, before an opaque covering shrouded him. It had to have been thrown by the Leloc, but no human eye saw the gesture. It did not so much enfold or expand as flow and mold itself, encompassing every inch of the crimson features and gaudy uniform, the hands and head, turning what had been mottled and crimson, but a man, into a Harms-shaped monotony of immobilized no-color.

Before it engulfed his head, he screamed, "Don't, don't—I'll cancel—"

An alien lifted the inert object and as the body left the floor, that substance encased his feet as well, met from all sides and sealed itself off.

The silent bundle was already being carried away, when Godwin managed to shut his mouth, simply to open it again, wordless either way. Then he remembered the efficacy of dignified retreat in bringing hostilities to an end. He ordered Harms' staff to leave.

The largest alien, while making an emphatic, incomprehensible speech, gestured an equal number of Leloc

off the scene. His fragmentary English did not serve him in this moment of stress.

Mager listened closely, whistled, and said, "Well, I'll be—— They just pouched him, that's all. That's the ultimate version of what they do to disobedient children; pop them back into the pouch and tuck in the flap, so to speak."

"I take it we all agree that Harms is in their custody now?" said Agnes, with her accustomed briskness. "All right. But we don't know what the Leloc are going to do next."

"Since they have captured the bomber," offered Mager from his meditations over an invisible chess board, "they *could* stay right here peacefully until we are in full and clear communication."

The Leloc leader issued another series of sounds. Mager moved in his direction, gesturing busily, and they harangued each other with great earnestness for a while. Godwin examined the situation, feeling that it had got entirely out of hand, and that it might be weeks before he had another idea all his own.

Mager turned back, his cheerful little face somber. "They're ready to lift, all right. They want to know if we will now, finally, reveal to them where their colony is."

Wystan gave Agnes the look of a man who was not about to tell anybody anything, because he just barely knew his own name.

"Let me handle it then," she said hastily. Sticking as much as possible to concepts she knew to be familiar to the Leloc leader, with frequent pauses for Mager to pour oil on her troubled sentence structure, she said, "Leloc big in knowing. Untailed people still in pouch. We star not; we make no-color maps."

The Leloc leader offered a remark. "*Some* color, he says," said Mager.

Agnes flourished the Leloc map—one-handed, Godwin noted bitterly. She certainly did keep fit. "All here go there," she proposed, "to do honor where they lost their lives."

Mager whispered to her.

"Where they lowered their tails, long ago," she said dutifully, and the Leloc keened in chorus.

"*Bomb-man Leloc capture,*" snarled Godwin to Agnes, in private. "Now are you satisfied?"

"Well, yes," she said. "It was the only thing to do."

"If they're not going to pouch us," he said, "we had best evacuate the Liaison camp—in a hurry."

"Now we lift ship," said the Leloc precisely. Wystan's messenger managed to get through the lock before it closed. The long conference was indubitably over. The spaceship rose, then hovered. The Liaison people left behind struck camp and were clear of the area when the bombs fell, right on schedule. Harms had encircled the site with remote-controlled wheeled platforms, ordinarily used to trundle heavy equipment from one spot to another. The occupants of the spaceship watched from portholes as the dollied bombs converged. Their simultaneous explosions made a charred and smoking ruin of the stretch of ground in the middle of the park that the spaceship had not altered by a grass blade's bending.

They went to Australia. It was a ritual tour, as Agnes admitted to Godwin her assessment had assured her it would be. "They have known for quite a while now that we can't show them their colony," said Mager. "But their customs prescribe that they must ask to see what they know they left. Then we must show them the next best thing, if we can't produce the original. No difficulty."

Well, there was no quarreling with an assessment, thought Godwin, and his own brain had been off gibbering somewhere else when Harms had thrown down the gauntlet. But he was having difficulty, whether the Leloc were or not. He was still shaken in his inmost soul by the sudden outbreaks of violence that had marred the peak of his diplomatic career.

He never succeeded in believing one hundred percent in the authenticity of Agnes' pidgin-Leloc assessment, but—when it came to that—he never expressed his doubts to the Nine Old Men, either. (The computers eventually

bore out the decision with a unanimous *sane and adequate* from all nine. It was their highest possible praise.)

The ritual tour included Kukukukuland, where there were no traces of Leloc settlers. The ship then headed for the little town of Mt. Magnet in the western part of Australia, where they found the site of the original and largest power installation with no difficulty. It was a deeply buried and melted-down hardened puddle of slag, still faintly radioactive.

Thereafter the Leloc made the briefest possible visits to the reservations where the few remaining degenerate kangaroos were kept in protective custody.

And in the afternoon of the eighth day Mager and a dozen aliens came to Godwin, saying that the Leloc were completely satisfied with their investigations—to the point that they were now ready to take over. All the way over. Every human must return on board immediately, because the ship was about to lift for its far home in Ursa Minor.

"Must?"

Mager nodded.

Godwin could not claim surprise—only inattention. He should have foreseen this turn of events from any one of a dozen items of information in the Liaison packet. As, for instance:

". . . little or no competition makes for a naturally conservative life form, too. A glandular setup of reticence and balance is a physiological precondition for the pouch —or perhaps it goes in the other direction."

It hardly mattered which came first, he thought wryly: the egg laid in Communications Park or Henny Penny Godwin that set out to mother it and promptly laid a few more. The warning had clearly been there in the report:

". . . in any event, the sense of personal property can hardly be distinguished from religion, and there does not so far appear to be any evidence for theism."

All the experts, including the now omnipresent PIX man (with his wrist camera and the throat mike into

which he whispered his incessant and now suddenly tense commentary) were out at the dig, along with Agnes, Tawmison and Godwin. As had become his custom, the Leloc leader propped interestedly between the two Liaison agents. When Mager and the unusually large party of alien crew members approached, Godwin amusedly watched the Leloc straighten into a formal stance with his tail at dignified half-mast.

Once he heard Mager's announcement, all Godwin's amusement evaporated. He was very aware of the Leloc presence, and summoned every ounce of dignity he could himself command.

"Do they now consider us hostages?"

"Not hostages, no," said Mager. They don't think that way. We are . . . reparations. Or an unexpected harvest. They put certain seed into the ground, so to speak, when they planted a colony. They must take something back."

"But that's as if I tended an apple orchard," cried Wystan with unusual force. "An orchard that a hurricane destroyed. Would I—because of that—feel justified in snatching grapefruit off another's table, because fruit is fruit, and therefore I'm entitled? That doesn't make sense."

"Not to us, perhaps. But with that sense of balance they've got, and the sense of numbers having to even out, they really think we're theirs now. Not hostages, but property. Remember: only a get balances a give."

"No," said Godwin, even though the entire group, flanked by the irresistible push of twelve aliens pacing them, was walking toward the ship.

"Yessss," said the Leloc leader. Godwin thought he looked regretful.

"Regardless—I have no intention of getting back into a ship that doesn't know when or where it's going, once it leaves this system," cried Godwin. "And by force! That's kidnapping!"

"We leave two and two and one here," said the Leloc leader persuasively.

They had reached the ship's entrance, but the way was barred.

One of the aliens was standing in the exact center of the open lock, and he was wearing a black leatherlike pouch, such as Godwin had seen only on the Leloc leader up until this moment. He heard an indrawn breath beside him and saw the leader's face stiffen. He had time for the fleeting thought that panic is panic anywhere in the universe, even as he felt the Leloc's fear—and smelled it—diminishing again. The scent was replaced by another, less repugnant, but he could not put a name to it.

The creature in the doorway spoke rapidly for a few moments in the Leloc tongue, at a rate that none of them but Mager could hope to follow.

Mager listened with his head cocked on one side, and in a low voice gave them a running translation. "They're ready to lift for home. Bomb threat is long canceled, but they plan to take Harms with them. They admit their colony is long gone, and they do not claim any responsibility for degenerate descendants. They will give us passage to their world of origin. They say they're only jumpers, now free to jump again, and we—we humans —must explain to their thinkers what has happened here. *They* are not experts in anything but crossing space."

"Experts!" murmured Tawmison. He snorted. "With a hundred-million-year miscalculation, exp—"

"Listen," said Mager, urgently. "This is turning into an indictment." He nodded at the Leloc leader, whose tail was again out stiff behind him, but whose head was lowered. "*He* led them wrong in coming back. *He* used his tail on the two boxers. *He* was actually seen to leap into an enclosure with degenerate non-Leloc, *again* using his tail. And he spends all his time with . . . with . . . what? The *zekr?* What's that?"

The Leloc leader swung his muzzle in the direction of the little party of humans. It was so dark now, they could barely see him.

"They mean us? A nasty word, I guess?" The alien nodded. "Leloc, why don't you stay with us?" Mager cried. "We're not willingly going to get back on that ship, not now. I'll tell them—okay, Godwin?— check: they

leave one, they've got one. They can keep the general, right? And they don't need us to tell their experts anything, because their experts all died out millennia ago at home as well as here."

"Don't tell them that," interposed Godwin quickly. "Just say we're not going, but we will allow them to keep the general. In exchange for the grand leader of the Leloc. And that's all. Since," he added softly, turning to his friend, "they've just kicked you off the ship in disgrace."

Above them, in the lock, the new leader listened gravely to Mager. He lifted one forepaw, and the humans braced, remembering that impenetrable net flung over Harms. But the gesture was merely a sign to the party of aliens, the twelve—mutineers?—who had brought the human beings back to the ship for parley.

Carefully not using their tails to make the leap to the lock, which any one of them could have managed without any difficulty, they paced up the landing ramp into the ship.

The deposed Leloc leader looked toward the dig and the enclosure. "I will work with the lost ones. I will stay with you."

The Leloc crew faced the Liaison people, and each knew the other to be alien to the core.

The usurping leader barked a contemptuous phrase which Godwin knew without translation was, "Goodby, *Zekr*!"

The assessment came, just in time. Godwin said, "Walk away fast. We allow them to leave; *we will not be left.* Their civilization is dead. We are the inheritors of the Earth."

His people about-faced smartly. An equal number of humans marched on either side of the Leloc leader, and they accomplished the trip back to the dig without a sound or a motion from the group at the lock. They climbed aboard the PIX-FAX plane to thaw out, and from its windows they could at last look back without losing face.

"Inheritors of the Earth, Wystan? Inheritors of the universe, too—after this visit. The legislatures that voted

to abandon space so long ago don't even exist any longer. And this visit proves that their sacred judgment was in error!"

"Agnes," he cried in exasperation, "those poor creatures are castaways in time and space! They'll never get home again. Spaceflight is madness."

"Other methods . . . are," said the Leloc leader unexpectedly. "Many other methods. This . . . pro-pulsive drive a new thing, experimental. Of the others I know little and cannot teach you." He executed the Leloc equivalent of a shrug. Wrists crossed, the thrilling odor of confidence strong in the air all about them, the leader added, "You will find, yourselves."

He shuddered once, and then, as if he had made another difficult decision, dropped his tail to the floor and propped on it, hard.

Outside the window, abruptly, as always, with no fiery wastes and no sound, the great sphere lifted. Not so much as a hiccup roiled the air, and it was gone.

Agnes said nothing, but she gripped Godwin's arm fiercely, as they watched the departure of the lost survivors. Her proud chin lifted—and Wystan followed her gaze unwillingly, ineluctably, up to the beckoning stars.

SONYA DORMAN is in her late thirties but has never grown up. When I first met her, a couple of years ago, she wore pigtails and looked about fifteen. She lives with her husband and small daughter in Stony Point, N. Y., where they raise Akita dogs and dig wells. (The latest one is still dry.) Her fiction has been published in *The Saturday Evening Post, Redbook* and elsewhere under the concealing byline "S. Dorman."

A real experience of the author's formed the basis of this bitter, frightening and beautiful story.

SPLICE OF LIFE

By *Sonya Dorman*

"This won't hurt," the doctor said, leaning over her in the white hospital bed from which she could see only a great black vault of ceiling in the center of which burned a furious light. A narrow strip of some tape was attached to the nape of her neck; had she been wounded there, also?

The doctor's white sleeve crossed her face toward her right eye, and then he plunged the hypodermic through the lower lid and the eyeball and she let out a scream that bounced off the distant walls and flew back like an arrow into her right eye, and all the way out through the back of her head.

"Tch, tch," the attending nurse said, holding her down.

"Look up, look up," the doctor commanded. "You must look up."

I will look up unto the hills, she thought fiercely, rolling up her eyeballs, promising herself not to scream again. "Why didn't you warn me, you sadist?"

"Tch!" the nurse said in a rage.

The doctor began delicately probing through her eye with various instruments, none of which she could feel because she was concentrating so hard on the immediately past pain of the hypodermic and writhing with outrage at being treated like a piece of meat on a butcher block. "What am I, a piece of butcher's meat?" she asked.

"Be quiet," said another nurse, more gently, leaning into the view of her left eye which began to swim with sympathy for the right eye, which she knew without being

told was past all hope. "Will I have to keep it in a glass of water at night?" she asked.

The doctor made a sound like a laugh. "You haven't lost the eye," he said.

"What have I lost?" she asked. She could not feel anything except some pressure from his wrist on her cheekbone, so they must have numbed the nerves well with that needle. It was a wonder she had not gone into shock, she thought, and reverted to grieving for whatever it was she had lost. Doctors did not always tell you what.

"You may not have any vision in this eye," he said in a tough voice. He was not going to make any compromises with a patient like this. Remain polite, she warned herself, or they'll treat you to something even better than a jab in the eyeball and not a word of warning. It was worse having screamed than being hurt. Or wasn't it?

The pressure was gone from her face. Both eyelids were gently compressed behind wads of cotton, taped on, her skin stretched under the tape. She could hear a small humming, soft as summer afternoons.

"You must lie still," the doctor said. "The nurse will give you a pill if you can't stand the pain, but try to hold out." He had no more than said it, and gone away on crepe-soled shoes, than a drill began to eat its way through her right eye in the wake of the hypo needle, and she clenched her jaws, wondering if it was possible to hold out against this. In no more than twenty seconds, after her resolve to be polite and a model patient, she yelled, "Gimme that pill!"

The nurse popped a pill into her mouth and gave her a bent glass straw to drink through. "Don't move," the nurse warned. "It's essential for you to lie still." Her bed began to glide on soundless casters, accompanied by the soft humming sound, and another sound, as though a gallery of people were shifting, shoes scuffling, throats being cleared. She faded out.

A dull whiteness shone through everything, bathing her face in faint warmth, and she smelled chicken soup. Her nostrils grew eight inches wide, her mouth opened. "Soup," she said.

"Ah. You're awake," and the nurse spooned a mouthful in. "You look like a hungry bird," the nurse said. More soup was spooned in, but too soon, it stopped.

"Still hungry?" the nurse asked.

"I'm starving. I didn't eat any breakfast this morning."

"Well, that's a mercy. You should see what happens to some accident cases with their stomachs full."

"More soup?" she begged.

"Not now, you'd better sleep. And try not to move your head."

At intervals they gave her chicken soup and told her to lie still, until it must have been morning, and they spooned in coffee, told her not to move, and gave her something for the red-hot needle in her eye. After a while, she was tired of sleeping, and lay with the bandages on her eyes watching the pictures. They flipped over from right to left: flags, geraniums, cakes, colors with no names and the number between eight and nine all appeared, flipped and vanished. When someone spoke to her, the pictures stopped.

A little boy's voice said, "I've got an amputated arm. Have you got broken eyes?"

"Just one eye," she said, reassuringly.

"I'd rather have a broken arm," he said.

"So would I," she said.

"I'm wearing a green bathrobe. Can you see it?"

"No, silly. Both my eyes are covered. Has it got a green belt?"

"Yeah, but I lost it at Ronny's house when I slept over. But I don't think I've been to Ronny's house for a long time."

"How old is Ronny?"

The nurse came in and said, "Tch! I'm sorry, Miss D. I didn't know he was bothering you."

"He isn't," she protested.

"Come on," the nurse said to the little boy.

"It's all right, he wasn't bothering me," she said.

"Lie still," the nurse commanded.

The pictures started again, some of them highly colored, some of them bleak landscapes of granite and bone.

She went to the moon and jumped nineteen feet into the air. She fell into a lake where the cold water trickled down her cheek to her chin into the pillow. A pig snuffled at her under the leaf mold and began rooting in her eye until the nurse came in and gave her another pill.

After they had spooned cereal into her mouth, she began to think of her mother. She could imagine her mother's great brown eyes streaming tears, buckets of tears, weeping for her poor lost daughter. "For God's sake, stop snuffling," she thought her father said, long-legged, in red striped shorts shaving on a sunny morning with the bathroom steamed up and smelling of cigarette smoke.

"How are the children?" she asked.

"What children?" the nurse demanded.

"The ones in the other car."

"They're just fine," the nurse said.

One of the children picked up a baseball and threw it at her, and she knew it was going to hit her in the eye so she ducked, but the pillow held her firmly and sure enough, it whacked into her eye and she let out a yell.

"Shush, dear," the nurse said, slapping her on the back of the neck.

"I'm ten," the little boy said when she was awake again. "My name is Bob and I only have one arm."

"I know. You told me. Is it nice to be ten?"

"No," Bob said. "How old are you?"

"Twenty," she said. "I didn't like being ten either."

"Is twenty better?"

"Sometimes."

"Oh, tch," the nurse said, coming in.

"Do they teach you that in nursing school?" she asked.

"Teach us what?"

"Tch. All of you say it, all the time."

"Come along, Bob, you aren't supposed to be in here, you know."

The nurse came back with the doctor, who said, "You may sit up now."

"No, thanks. I'm quite comfy this way."

"I mean, you may sit up in bed now," the doctor said.

"I don't want to." She giggled.

"Nurse," the doctor asked in an undertone, "how much Nembutol has she been getting? We don't want her to be too difficult." Rustle of charts. "Oh," the doctor said. "Well, well, Miss D., we'll try again later, won't we?"

"There's a dog under the bed. Nobody's fed him."

"Yes," the doctor said, and sighed.

"A terrier. He ought to be fed."

The nurse sighed. "Tch, we'll feed him, dear. Don't worry."

There really seemed to be a dog under the bed, her comfortable companion, kenneled between the downfalls of the aseptic bedspread. She threw her pillow down so he would have something to lie on. After a while, the dog crept out, tweaking the wire that hung down from the back of her neck, and he went away. She wanted him back for company; she wanted more Nembutol for comfort; all of a sudden she wanted to be loved. When she tilted the glass, champagne swirled and a few bubbles plopped against her cheek sweetly, love, love, dancing and music. What was the eye going to look like?

"Will it look horrible?" she asked the doctor, who was snipping around the bandages with cold metal.

"Certainly not. A film will have formed over the scar tissue. We'll remove the film at a later time."

"Using another of those darling needles in the eye?"

"Keep your eyes closed," he ordered, and she obeyed. "You don't want it done without anesthesia," he commented. He removed the cotton pads and her lids felt chilled. "You may try to open them," he said.

Try? Try, indeed, to breathe. She lifted her lids and the daylight seared her eyes blind in less than a second. Tears spurted out and poured down her face. "It will take some time," the doctor said. The nurse mopped her face. "A little bit at a time," the doctor said.

"It's Sunday. I want to read the funnies."

"Well, you go right ahead and read them," he said, and she felt something, the papers?, thrust at her clenched right hand. She grabbed it. She opened the lid of the

good eye and peeked. The Pirates of Doran ran all colors of the rainbow; the balloons were full of black ants. She closed her eyes, tried again in a few minutes. Betsy swam in green soup, leaks sprouted at the edge of the page.

"Oh, to hell with it," she said, lying down. From time to time she lifted her lids cautiously, and each time opened them further, kept them open longer. For hours she practiced, right on through the spinach and lime sherbet. When the nurse came in, she asked, "May I have a mirror?"

"We don't keep them in the rooms, dear. When you're able to walk, you can find one in the bathroom."

"But how do I look?" she asked.

The nurse stood staring seriously at her. "Not badly," the nurse assured her. "Your eye is clouded with scar tissue, but that will be removed later."

She groaned. "It looks lousy, I knew it. Thanks anyway."

The nurse continued to view her sternly, until she said, "It's all right, nurse."

"There's a good girl," the nurse said. "Lie down for a bit and rest."

The nurse went out to the doctor, who was across the corridor standing in the doorway of a huge classroom, talking with two visitors. The nurse said to him, "Shall we discontinue Miss D.'s cycle?"

"Yes, but only for two days. We have a new class of opthalmologists already waiting." Then he turned courteously to the visitors.

"Her circuit has now been fully rerun," the doctor explained to them. "After two days, it will be run again."

One of the visitors asked, "But how do you start it at the beginning?"

The doctor looked surprised. "Oh, but we reproduce the original wound, or damage, of course."

The other visitor asked, "Are they never conscious? I mean are they never aware, at some point, of rerunning?"

"Certainly not," the doctor said in a shocked voice.

"How do you replace them?"

The doctor put his hands in his pockets, and began to lead the visitors down the corridor toward another room. "This floor is always full," he explained. "Accident cases who remain unidentified, or who have no relatives, or, for the most part, who have no money and can't pay hospital bills."

The nurse passed them and went into the patient's room with a tray on which stood a little paper cup with pills in it.

"More pills?" she asked.

"Now, Miss D., we're doing so well. Don't you want to go home? To be all finished up here?"

She began to murmur, "All finished, all washed up, all done for," while the nurse put the pill into her mouth, and gave her a glass of water.

"Yes, yes, home to Mom, all finished up, home to the dial-a-slice, mmmm," as the drowsy waves came washing over her.

"Take another sip," the nurse said, pressing the glass against her lower lip.

She gulped twice, once for the pill, then for the water. "Mmmm. Take me home, carry me back, my eye's all filled in, not a penny in the socket, I'll be asleep soon."

"This won't hurt," the doctor said, leaning over her. She saw his white sleeve cross her face toward her right eye, and then he plunged the hypodermic through the lower lid and the eyeball and she let out a scream. The attending class of young students in the auditorium shuddered, and leaned forward for a better view.

"Look up," the doctor commanded. "You must look up."

I will look up unto the hills, she said fiercely, promising not to scream again. She looked up, out, over the plastic cage of the hypodermic, to the range of hills covered with crackling snow. They were all there, all the people, they must be out for a winter picnic. I will go, she promised.

"I'll get up and go," she yelled.

The doctor murmured, "All right, all right. Track's wearing out, I knew it would," and then raising his

voice slightly, as he continued to probe in the depths of her eye, he said to her, "Yes, you'll go, you'll get a splendid vacation."

"But I want to take my eye with me," she insisted. "I must, I need it."

"Hush, now, tch," the nurse said soothingly.

"You'll take your eye," the doctor promised her. "Hold still, now. We'll finish soon," but there was despair in his voice, and she did not believe him. Obviously she had lost the eye, and what else had she lost? She did not dare to move her head, but under the cold, sterile sheet that covered her, she clasped her wrinkled hands.

THOMAS M. DISCH is an ebullient young man who has done time on Madison Avenue, in ballet, little theater and grand opera. His first novel, *The Genocides,* was published by Berkley this year. When last heard from, he was in Europe writing two more.

5 EGGS

By *Thomas M. Disch*

Alas, he thought (and that was exactly how he did think, with words like that), *alas, Nyctimene has flown from me.* From their very first evening on the hill, beneath the great oak, he had known this could happen, but he had denied it with all the steely force of his will —and now that steel was molten with grief. Nyctimene had gone, she would never come back.

She had been more beautiful than he had believed possible: not the exotic beauty of a gull or a flamingo, which must, in its nature, fly away; not tentative like the rustle of branches and the brief sighting through the summer foliage of a white breast or wingtip, which vanishes. It had been an amazement of beauty. Her face poised over his, her cruel loving lips parted in a smile that mocked their own mortality, her eyes. His rapture—*their* rapture—had been compounded by the knowledge they shared of its brevity.

Before Nyctimene he would not have thought it possible for himself to be so carried away. Love, she had taught him, was Jove—a giant swan, showers of gold, a stampede.

Remorse? No, that was an amenity—for afterward, when the stampede was over. Remorse was for now.

Now (or in half an hour, at seven o'clock) he might be exquisitely remorseful. At seven, such friends as still remained to him would arrive to offer their congratulations on his announced engagement to Nyctimene. How would he tell them that she had gone? Should he pre-

tend simply to be embarrassed, as though he had invited them to a garden party that had been rained out? Was it even possible to conceal his grief? Probably he would get drunk. Of the courses open to him that seemed the least distasteful.

In the morning he had gone into town for groceries for the party, run the provincial gauntlet of snubs and whispers (most of the townspeople had pretensions to honoring the institution of marriage and felt compelled therefore to show their disapproval of so open a liaison as his and Nyctimene's), and returned to find her note:

> Dearest,
>
> We knew didn't we? But when I tried to mention it, when we would lie in the meadow looking at the stars, the wonderful stars, or once when we kissed and you mentioned the hardness in the middle of my upper lip and touched your finger to the small "bone" there, I would begin to tell you. But you knew already and prevented me.
>
> I will always remember that your eyes were blue, your strangeness, your words (many that I never understood), your caresses. I have loved you, but now I must go.
>
> It has only been two months! So quickly.
>
> I never believed in that word of yours—*inevitable*. I understand, at last, what you meant by it. You meant that for yourself it was inevitable that I would leave. It is a funny idea and it makes me smile. Perhaps you would think I'm crying. Did you know that it is not possible, physically, for me to cry?
>
> The eggs that I am leaving in the basket will hatch in thirty of your days. Keep them at room temperature—70°.
>
> I laughed so hard at that funny play you read to me—not *Titus Andronicus* (though that was funny too) but the *other* one—that you will

be surprised that I have remembered a line from it:

Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.

Love,
Nyctimene

Ursa, the housekeeper he had inherited from his parents with the house itself and the surrounding acreage, knew already without having read the letter that Nyctimene had left him. Ursa had never approved of Nyctimene as his mistress; she approved of her still less as his fiancée. Ursa said nothing about it. Remorselessly she prepared the buffet for that evening's guests and brooded over his salads, canapés and sliced meats like the presiding harpy of the feast.

Standing in the dining room where the appetizers, salads and sauces were spread on the great mahogany table amid the plunder of his mother's cupboard—the gilt-edged china, the heavy silver, the crystal—he stared out the French windows at the bleak, moonlit autumn hills that lay beyond his watered lawn. The neighboring farmers had complained when he had let his fields go fallow and used them as a bird refuge. It was as though they had sensed that it would bring them together.

November. The remorseless mechanism of the sun ticked off its seasons. Life fled to the south, or slept, or buried its seeds and died. Generation succeeded generation, but he had always stood outside the cycles of recurrence and renewal. But now . . . ?

He could not bear, a second time, to see that basket and its five, small, precious eggs. Would the hatched fledglings be in *her* image? Or would they be like the pupae of a butterfly? Could he love the caterpillar if it would become in time another Nyctimene?

Nyctimene had known, or trusted, that he could. She had come to him from the privacy of her observations (knowing already the language he spoke, the customs

of his people, even the books he had read), trusting herself to him alone of all the people in the world, just as birds would confide their presence to the eaves of his house. It was because these alien byways of evolution were his habitat, because he was not the usual dry-as-dust birdwatcher, not an ornithologist.

If science were a coral reef of small minds snuggled into cells of specialization, then he was a diver exploring the reef, who had stayed, bemused, in a single cavern. In these depths, in the grotto of ornithology, he had lost all sense of self, even of humanness. So that really it was not she who had come to him—but *he* who had come to her—there, in the grotto.

The first guest to arrive was the Rev. Mr. Compson, who, despite the stern judgment of the town, had agreed to give his belated sanction to his union with Nyctimene, not for *his* sake of course, but because Compson had been a friend of his parents.

"And the lucky little lady?" Compson asked, entering the parlor. "Where is she?"

"Vanished," he explained, dawdling over his second Scotch. "To the south perhaps, since it is November."

"Pity," the minister replied, which was the nearest he would come to finding suitably consoling words.

Outside the moon had sunk from the sky, and clouds were gathering to obscure the stars, as their riddle would forever be obscure to him. She had never said whether one of them had been her home, or which, or why she had left, or how. And he had never asked such questions.

It had been just such an evening as this, moonless, that he had met her in September. For two nights he had gone about in search of the great horned owl, *Bubo virginianus,* but he had found only its spoor of prey, shreds of rabbit fur, a chicken's stalkless head. He went to the hill-topping giant oak a mile away, because of trees it alone had commensurate stature to the owl. She had been there, Nyctimene, waiting for him. She greeted him familiarly, with even a hint of impatience—as though

he had been late. There was no pretense of coincidence. They did not sight *Bubo virginianus* that night, and Nyctimene went home with him.

Mrs. Shreve with her husband was the next to arrive. Shreve was his publisher. Mrs. Shreve received the news of Nyctimene's desertion politely, as she might have received news of a friend's bankruptcy, with an invitation to dinner, with the understanding that as long as the friend's evening clothes and composure were intact the invitation stood. Mrs. Shreve had brought along galleys of his latest book, and they talked business and drank, and more guests arrived and somehow he welcomed them all and told them his news. Everyone drank too many cocktails, except the Rev. Mr. Compson, who left before dinner.

The buffet was a dreary affair. The guests ate without enthusiasm, because courtesy required it. Their host ate because he was their host. He nibbled at a Caesar salad, crunching the burnt, garlic-flavored croutons in his teeth . . . and remembered . . .

Nyctimene, tearing at her food unrestrainedly, laughing. He suspected that the few minutes that she allowed her steaks to warm under the broiler were only a concession to his sensibilities. Or perhaps it was more like living flesh when it was warmed.

What had she said to him a few nights ago? It was in Latin: *Modicum et non videbitis me; et iterum modicum, et vos videbitis me.* A little while and you shall not see me; and again a little while and you shall see me. She had pronounced the Latin words with the same easy grace with which she spoke his English. Had she made other visits, centuries before? To Ovid perhaps, whom she so loved to quote, from whom she had borrowed her name. He became dizzy, drunk not so much with alcohol as with remembering and grief.

He set down his plate of salad and excused himself to his guests. He went up the stairs to her room. The blinds were drawn and the curtains pinned shut, as she had left them. Like her Ovidean namesake, the woman meta-

morphosed to owl, she detested the daylight. The musk of her body still perfumed the close air. He could imagine her hand reaching out in the dark to surprise him. He sat down and let the feather bed billow over him, let the reins of memory drop. He remembered . . .

Her hands first: their soft white down barely perceptible to his lips; the nervous clench of the fingers about his arms; the narrow tapered nails that had more than once cut through his skin. Then, her subtly alien mouth, the large brown discs of her whiteless eyes, her hair that hung in Botticellian ropes midway down her chest.

He had never thought to ask her whether they were breasts in the mammalian sense. For in other, crucial ways she was not mammalian.

The eggs. What would he feed the fledglings when they hatched? Worms in milk, and to wean them, baby mice? Fortunately for the children, he was not rigidly anthropocentric. Not that he preferred Alienness for its own sake. There was a good deal to be said for Earth, as even Nyctimene had been ready to admit:

"Your science and its little stories are very good, and you did it all so fast—in one century, two centuries, no time at all. With all your machines and with numbers for the days, for the people, and for all the buying and buying you must do, you have all become scientists. *I* can't count to one hundred."

He had protested. Science was not just machines and numbers. But she would not be convinced.

"I read in a newspaper the most complicated description of the atom bomb. You bring one piece of it together with another piece" (she kissed him in demonstration of this principle), "and matter becomes energy. It was very closely reasoned and, as you say, *causal.*" She laughed. "Marvelous. Someday I shall study science."

"Don't you have science where . . . where you come from?"

"I have a scientist. That is quite enough." When he questioned she would not say any more, but at other times

she would volunteer the most extraordinary facts, pretending afterward that it had been a joke.

"In your book, the one I tried to read, you said that people and animals can't be bred together if they've evolved a long way apart."

"It's true."

"What is truth? Something always the same, everywhere, all the time?"

"Truth is something like that."

"Then it isn't true. What if things evolve together, *toward* each other?"

He had laughed then and told her she would never be a scientist. Things cannot evolve *toward* each other. They cannot.

But now that his only tangible link to Nyctimene was the basket of unhatched eggs, he hoped she had spoken truly. The month of their incubation would be a torture of suspense. Thirty days—it was half as long as the eternity they had been together.

Mrs. Shreve found him in Nyctimene's room and led him downstairs. Some guests had departed; the others had only been waiting his return to say their goodbys. Mrs. Shreve was very brusque and full of business, insisting that he finish the galleys a week before it was possible. She meant it as a kindness.

Nyctimene had never been *kind* to him. Often, like a goddess, like an animal, she had been deliberately cruel, mocking him at the most indelicate moments or pinching him with her taloned fingers when she thought him inattentive. However, he was rarely inattentive. Cruelty? At times he had thought of the shrike, impaling her mate on her voluptuous beak, but predator though Nyctimene might be, murderess she was not.

Alone, again, he began to clear the living room of the dirty dishes, the smeared glasses, the ashtrays. Alone again, he thought . . .

Of Nyctimene. She had filled his larger loneliness. She had taught him satiety. As a young man he had indeed sparred with women, but he had never loved nor as far as he knew been loved. Now, thrust back again into that

loneliness, he wondered if he could return to his old shifts. To his studies. The grotto might have lost its magic.

Yet it was not so bleak a prospect nor so final a rupture. Her image would not blur with years or distance, of that he could be sure. And there was still . . . their children. Fondly now, anxiety quite drained away (and a little drunk), he took up the little basket she had left.

It was empty.

He behaved quite rationally. He looked in all the likely places before he searched the unlikely places. There were no eggs in the refrigerator, in the cupboards, in the grocery bags.

He found the shells in the garbage.

Ursa had gone to see her mother as she always did Thursday evenings. But in any case he did not need to question her. For the recipe was in plain sight on the kitchen table. It was hand-lettered on a 3 x 5 card:

CAESAR SALAD

Romaine lettuce	Vinegar
5 cloves garlic	5 eggs
10 anchovies	Salt, pepper
12 tbsp. Parmesan cheese	Croutons, fried in butter
Olive oil	till brown

Rub wooden salad bowl with garlic. Mash anchovies into paste, add cheese. Add eggs, well beaten. Add oil, continue beating. Add salt, pepper, vinegar. Toss romaine leaves until well coated with dressing. Add croutons. Serve. Eat.

He should have been quite upset. Instead, despair sifted down on him like snow covering the leaves that would be humus in the spring. He wondered: *Had she known?*

He wondered not of Ursa. Ursa's malice was more direct and pettier. In any case, Ursa did not know what the eggs *were.*

He wondered if this had not been the last and subtlest

of Nyctimene's cruelties. He doubted (because he wanted *not* to believe) that they had been his children, that they had been any other than the most ordinary eggs. But he remembered Nyctimene's savage hilarity when he had read the disgusting scene in *Titus Andronicus,* when Titus serves the Queen her own sons in a stew. And he recognized the handwriting on the 3 x 5 card: it was hers.

KEITH ROBERTS is a young English commercial artist who turned to writing science fiction two years ago, with spectacular results. His first novel, *The Furies,* was published by Berkley in 1966.

"The Deeps" is remarkable for its grasp of the subject, its plausible treatment of women—rare in men's writing —and for the sea music that mumbles and moans its way through the story.

THE DEEPS

By *Keith Roberts*

It was bound to happen. For generations, the chain reaction of population explosion had been going on and on. While medical skill grew, while longevity increased nearly beyond belief, humankind everywhere bred and bred and bred. Houses, estates, factories to serve the vast new economies spread and sprawled, twitching out across good land and bad, climbing mountains, suffocating rivers. Town touched town, touched town; the pink octopus tentacles of houses grew and thickened as the machines graded and scraped and hammered. Green belts and parks vanished, fields were swallowed overnight. Here and there voices were raised; the voices of economists, scientists, philosophers, even at last theologians. But they were swamped in the great universal cry.

Give us room . . . The shout went up night and day from a hundred million throats, the slogan blared from loudspeakers, blazed from hoardings as political parties jockeyed for power. Increasingly, room was what they promised. Room for more houses, more estates, room to rear new families that cried in their turn for room and still more room . . .

All over the world countrysides vanished, eaten. Wars flared as nations bit at each other's borders, but still the Cities grew. The huge estates were searched, forced to yield their last acres, their secret gardens. And all for nothing, it seemed, because still the cry was heard for room. Skyscrapers soared, fifty stories, seventy, a hundred, and it was not enough. The Cities bulged outward,

noisy with music and the sound of human life. A hundred yards thick they were and blaring with light, complex with stack on twinkling stack of avenues. Raucous, Technicolored, sleepless. Everywhere, they reached the sea.

And they could not stop. The pressure, the need for room, pushed them out again. The houses sank like silver bells into blueness and quiet, and at last there was room enough.

* * *

Mary Franklin sat in the living area of her bungalow, knitting quiet for once in her lap, and tried to watch the telscreen at the other side of the room. Across her line of sight Jen passed scuttling, bare feet scuffing the carpet, the straps of her lung flapping round her shoulders. Across and back, then across again, frantic now, going to a party at the Belmonts on the other side of town, and late. Mary raised her eyes to Heaven, represented temporarily by a curved steel shell. She concentrated on the screen where a demonstrator, in a vivid color, divulged to her audience the inner secrets of a varient of crawfish mayonnaise. Jen yelped something inaudible from the bedroom, thumped the wall. (Why . . . ?) She padded across again and back. Mary raised her voice suddenly.

"Jen . . . ?"

Thump. Mumble.

"Jen!"

"Mummy, I can't find my . . ." Indistinguishable.

"Jen, you're not to be late. No more than nine, understand?"

"Yes . . ."

"And for *land's* sake child, *put something on* . . ."

"Yes, Mummy . . ." That in a high voice, wearily. And almost instantly the roar of the sealock. Mary got up in quick rage, walked halfway to the radio gear, changed her mind, went back to her chair. Jen, she knew well enough, would conveniently have forgotten her phone-leads.

She kicked the channel switch irritably in passing; the picture on the wallscreen jumped and altered. The set began to disgorge a Western; Mary lay back, eyes nearly shut, half her mind on the ancient film and half on the blueness overhead. The endless blue.

Jen, defiantly bare, hung twenty feet above the hemispherical roof of her home. Bubbles from her breathing rose in a series of shimmering, dimly seen sickles to the Surface overhead. As always, the sea had made her forget her compulsion to hurry; she began to paddle slowly, feet in their long fins catching and driving back wedges of water. As she moved she looked below her, at the lines of domes with their neat, almost suburban gardens of waving weed. She saw the misty squares of their windows, the brighter greeny-blue globes of the streetlighting swung from thin wires above the ocean bed. Warnings were hung on long streamers of wires for swimmers; there were well-marked lanes, corresponding to the streets of the city complexes Jen barely remembered, but many people ignored them. And most of the children. Technically she was out of bounds now, gliding along like this only a few feet from Surface.

Visibility was good tonight; onshore winds could kick up a smother that lasted for days, but there had been nearly a week of calm. Jen could make out through the almost haze-free water the faint shimmer where the engineers, her father among them, were working on the new extension to the theater and civic center. When it was finished, the installation would be the pride of Settlement Eighty, the town its inhabitants called Oceanville. There were a dozen other Oceanvilles scattered up and down this one stretch of coast, hundreds possibly in all the seas of the world. She shivered slightly although the water was not cold.

Beyond the lights, beyond where the divers floated round the tall steel skeletons, were long sloping stretches where the town buildings petered out and the coral and sand of the inshore waters gave place to the silt of real ocean. There was a graveyard, tiny as yet, where a few bodies lay in their metal cans; beyond again, past gray

dunes where the light faded imperceptibly to navy blue and black, were the Deeps. Above anything else Jen liked to go to the new buildings, sit on one of the girders, look down into the vagueness that was the proper sea, bottomless and immense. Just stare, and listen, and wait. She would go there tonight maybe, after the party.

She let herself relax, holding air in her lungs to increase buoyancy. Her body floated upward, legs and arms slack; Surface appeared above her, a faintly luminous upside-down plain. Points of light sparkled where the moontrack refracted into the depths. Jen wagged lazily with her flippers, once, twice; her body broke the Surface and she felt herself lifted by the slight action of the waves.

She looked round. The sea was flatly calm, dark at the horizon, glinting with bluish swirls of phosphorescence round her shoulders and neck. When she looked closely, she could see the organisms that made the light floating in it like grains of brightness. Way off was the orange cloud reflection over the land, where the universal Cities bawled and yammered. Jen lay still, supported by the water. Once she would have pulled her mask aside, breathed in the wet salt of ordinary air. Now she felt no desire to do so. She turned slowly, treading water, took a last look at the moon, and dived. Her heels stirred up a momentary flash of light. Once below, she moved powerfully, stroking with her arms. She arrowed down to West Terrace where the Belmonts had their dome. The party would be in full swing already; she was missing good dancing time.

Hours later, Mary prodded one of her rare cigarettes from the wall dispenser. She frowned a little, drawing in smoke and letting it dribble from her nostrils. She lay back and watched the fumes being sucked toward the ceiling vent. The telscreen was off; the last badman had bitten the dust and she had grown tired of watching. The bungalow seemed very quiet; the buzz of the air conditioning plant sounded unusually loud, as did the recurring clink-thump of the refrigerator solenoids from the kitchen.

She stood uncertainly, fingered her throat, took a step, paused. She went to the alcove by the kitchen that housed the radio link and telephone. Beside the handset the dome metering equipment chuckled faintly. Inside the gray housings, striped discs spun, needles wavered against their dials. Force of habit made her check the readings. All normal, of course. . . She touched the phone, pulled at her lip with her teeth, made herself take her hand away. A quarter of an hour, that was nothing. When she was dancing Jen forgot the time. They all did. She would be home in a few minutes, by nine-thirty at the latest. She knew exactly how long to outstay an order. . . Mary went back to the living area, turned the telscreen on, clicked the channel switch to five. While the set was warming she walked through to David's cubicle, peered in. He was asleep, hair tousled on the pillow.

Nine-fifty.

Mary got up again, walked to the window in the curved wall. She drew the curtains back, looked across the street at the neighboring houses visible through the faint residual haze. A little fear stirred somewhere at the back of her mind, throbbed, stilled itself again. She wondered, fear of what? Accidents maybe; they happened, even in the best-run towns. Jack—but it wasn't that. She laughed at herself quietly, trying to shrug away her fit of nerves.

These late shifts of her husband's were a curse but there was no help for them; the new building was going ahead fast and as engineering controller for the sector Jack had to be almost constantly on site. She told herself, physically her husband was not far away. She could ring him if she had to. How far off was the new complex, a hundred and fifty yards, two hundred? No distance, by terrestrial standards. . . But here under the sea, just how far was a hundred yards? Could be a lifetime, or an epoch. She grimaced. That was what the fear was about, what the . . . throb . . . tried to tell her maybe. That under the sea, patterns and values could change ineradicably.

She sat down, crossed her knees, laid her head against

the back of the chair. After a few moments she picked up the abandoned knitting and stared at it. She was making a sweater, though there was no point in the exercise. The domes were air-conditioned and sea temperature only varied a few degrees through the year; nobody needed sweaters down here and the yarn was expensive, it came from Surface and all Surface things were dear. But it was something to do, it kept her hands busy. Above all, it was a link with the past. . .

A quarter after ten.

The face of the clock was round and sea-blue, the hands plain white needles. They moved in one-minute jerks; Mary imagined that she could see the tiny quiver that preceded each jump. She stubbed out the cigarette. The party would be long finished now, the dancers dispersed. . .

Dancers? She shook her head. She could remember the dancing in the Cities, the pulsing rhythms, frenetic jerking. That pattern, like everything else, had changed. She remembered the first time she had heard what they called sea-jazz, the shock it had given her. Jen had a player in her bedroom, it wailed and bumped half the night, but the rhythms, the melodies, were like nothing she had ever heard landside. The music howled and dragged, the beats developed timings that defied notation, had in them something of the slow surge of the tides. It was music for swimming to.

The Belmonts had a dance floor but it was outside, in the sea. Airposts surrounded it, and speaker casings; round them the kids would swirl like pale flakes among the hordes of fish that always seemed to be attracted. "But Mummy," Jen would say if she protested. "You just don't *gel,* you're not *wavy*. . ." It was all part of the new phraseology; the boy down the block, Kev Hartford was not it, he *gelled* for Jen, he was a *wave*; but the lad from the airplant, Cy Scheinger who had visited once or twice, was out of favor. He was *neapy,* a *scorp.* (Scorpion fish?) The sea, and thoughts of the sea, pervaded their whole lives now even to the language they spoke. Which was natural, and as it should be. . .

Why did we call her Jennifer? Why, of all the names we could have used? The Jennifer was a sea-thing, and cursed. . .

It was no use. Mary killed the sound from the screen, walked back to the phone, lifted the handset and dialed. She listened to the clicking of the exchange relays, the faint purr-purr at the other end of the line. An age, and the receiver was lifted.

"Ye-es?" The slight coo in the voice, unmistakable even through the surging distortion of the sea. The Belmonts were just a little conscious of their status; Alan Belmont was fisheries manager for the area. Mary licked her lips. "Hello? Hello, Anne, this is Mary. Mary Franklin. . . What? Yes, fine thank you . . . Anne . . . is Jen still at your place by any chance? I told her nine, she's late, I wondered if. . ."

Anne Belmont sounded vaguely surprised. "My dear, I shooed them off positively hours ago. Well, an hour . . . Hold the line. . ."

Unidentifiable human sounds. Someone calling faintly. The wash . . . crash . . . of the sea.

"Hello?"

"Yes. . ."

"Just before nine," said the phone. "We sent them all off, there's no one here now . . . You say she's not back?"

"No," said Mary. "No, she's not." Her knuckles had whitened on the handset.

The phone clucked. "My dear, they're all the same; ours are hopeless, time means *nothing*, absolutely *nothing* . . . But I'm quite *sure* you needn't worry, she'll be along any moment. Perhaps she's with that *Cy* boy, whatever his name is . . . yes. . ."

Ice, along the spine, moving out like fingers that gripped and clutched. "Thank you," said Mary. "No, no, of course not. Yes, I'll let you know . . . Yes, goodbye, Anne. . ." She laid the handset on its cradle, stood looking at it, not knowing what to do. The sea pushed at the dome gently, slurringly.

A quarter after ten.

Mary stood very still in the middle of the living area,

lips pursed. She had called the airworks, Cy was off duty, could not be traced. And two or three neighbors and friends. No Jen. She could not ring Jack at the construction office, not again. Down here you helped your husband, pulled your weight. You didn't run panicking at every little thing. . . The trembling had started, in her legs; she rubbed her thighs unconsciously through her dress. She touched the hair pinned into a chignon at the nape of her neck. In front of her, on the sill of the window, a plaster foal pranced, hooves outlined against greenness. The greenness was the sea.

Decision. She pulled at her hair, shook it free round her shoulders. She unsnapped the clasp at her neck, wriggled her dress up over her head. Beneath it she wore the conventional blue leotard of a married woman. She plucked automatically at the high line of the legs, kicked her sandals off, crossed to the equipment locker. She came back with her sea gear, lung, mask and flippers. She dressed quickly, fastening the broad straps round her waist and between her legs, the lighter shoulder harness that held the meter panel across her chest. Habit again made her check the dials, valve air, slap the red cancellator-tab on her shoulder. That was another safety factor; if for any reason air stopped flowing from the pack and that tab was not touched, a built-in radio beacon would arrow town guards down to the wearer.

She looked in at David again, satisfied herself he was still sleeping. She walked to the sealock, stopped on the way to see herself in the half-length mirror. She was heavier now, her hips had broadened and there were maybe faint worry lines round her mouth. But her hair was brown and soft; landside she would still be a desirable woman.

She looked round the dome slowly, seeming to see familiar things in a new light that was bright and strange. The bungalow was double-skinned, the inner ceiling finished in octagonal plates of white and pale blue plastic. The half-round shape, dictated by considerations of pressure, had the secondary advantage of enclosing the greatest possible volume of space; deep-pile carpets cov-

ered the floors, the furniture was low and streamlined, easy to live with. The telscreen was tucked neatly into an alcove; to each side of it were wall tanks with fish and anemones. Through a half-open door she could see the kitchen. It was miniaturized but well equipped, with plenty of stainless steel like the galley of a ship.

The whole bungalow was as safe as it was functional. In the unlikely event of a fracture in the pressure shell, the second skin would hold the sea while instantaneous warnings were flashed to a central exchange, insuring help within minutes. Not that anything could or would go wrong, of course, the whole system was too carefully worked out for that. People had been living undersea for years now, and fatalities were far fewer than on the overcrowded land.

Mary grimaced, stepped through into the lock and closed the inner hatch. The ceiling lamp came on; she pressed the filler control, heard the hiss as air was expelled through the outlet valves.

She squatted in rising water to work the straps of the flippers over her heels, then straightened up. The coolness touched her hips; she brushed her hair back, spat in the mask and rinsed it, pressed the transparent visor onto her face. The plastic was self-adhesive, molded to her skull contour; it fitted from forehead to chin. She palmed the earphones into place, reached under her arm for her mike leads, flicked the tags onto the magnetic contacts in her throat. The compartment filled, water rising greenly over her head. As the pressure equalized, the outer segment of wall slid aside automatically, letting in the hazy glow of the street lighting. Mary kicked away and floated up from the dome, sensing the old lift as the sea shucked off her weight. Her hair swirled across her eyes gracefully, like fronds of black fern.

She swam slowly across the town. To each side, lines of round-topped buildings marched out of the haze. Some of the houses were still new and bright with their coated steel skins, others had grown a rich waving cover of algae. In the main street the shop windows were brightly lit; the plate-glass ports displayed seafoods set on

white dishes garnished with fronds of weed; there were Aqualungs and radiophones, Surface ware of all sorts, clothes and books, records, dolls, toys. Here the ocean floor had been cleared to the rock that underlay the sand; overhead were slim arches to which were moored the sledges of out-of-towners, the fish herders and oceanographers whose work took them to lonely domes scattered over the bed of the sea. There were lights on the gantries; each globe hung glaring in greenness, surrounded by a flickering cloud of tiny fish like moths round a terrestrial lamp. Over everything was an air of peace; the dreamy peace of dusk on an ancient, unspoiled Earth.

There were few human swimmers about, but here and there, careening over the roofs of buildings, Mary caught sight of glistening shapes. Dolphins—they had been quick to discover the sea-floor communities and take advantage of them. Many families, in fact, kept one or more of them as semi-permanent pets, became very attached to them. Other creatures occasionally troubled the townships—sharks, rays, the odd squid. But the repellants carried by the swimmers in their harness had been developed to a stage where there was little to fear. The town guards could be relied on to harpoon or shoo off any of the big fellows who hung around too close or too long, though in the main there was little to attract predators.

Disposal of garbage was rigidly controlled; locking offal into the sea was about the worst crime in the book; it could result in being sent landside. The "monsters of the deep," in so far as they existed, tended to avoid the colonies. They disliked the brightness and noise, the bustle, the thud of many vibrations criss-crossing in the water. As Jack never tired of pointing out, life down here was as safe or safer than on land.

Mary doubled back, passing the king-size domes that held the town distillation plant. The per capita consumption of fresh water was fifty percent higher for Sea People than for Terrestrials. Frequent bathing was necessary to remove ingrained salt from the skin; supplying salt-free water was one of the biggest problems of the ocean-floor settlements. Beyond the distillery was the

airworks. The electrolyzers reached halfway to Surface, each mass of tubes contained in an insulating shell of helium. The current for the oxygen separation came from strategically sited tidal generating stations up and down the coast. Many domes were already on tap from the plant; eventually they would all avail themselves of the new municipal service, though they would retain their own gear as a fail-safe in case of emergency.

Mary swam round the huge stacks, peering into locked shadows, calling softly through her mask. "Jen . . . Jen. . ." The harness pack radiated the word into the water, farther than a human voice could reach in air, but there was no answer. She clung to a steel stay twenty feet above the seabed. Bubbles curled up from her in a shimmering stream as she tried to quiet her breathing. A group of children went by, out late and swimming fast; she heard their chattering, realized with a cold shock how similar it was to the noises of a fish herd in the hydrophones. She shivered. Thoughts like that had been plaguing her for months now, maybe years. She called urgently, but the child-shoal swerved aside, accelerating and vanishing in the gloom. There was quiet; beside her the great cans vibrated, the sensation more felt than heard. The stay seemed to buzz in her fingers.

She let go quickly, because electrolyzer stacks cannot make any sound. She concentrated. That deep, thudding boom . . . Was it her heart, or just fear, or was there something . . . something else. . . No, it was gone. Slipped over the edge of perception, into silence. She started to swim again, thoughts churning confusedly. She remembered a conversation she had had with her husband weeks back. They had been lying abed after his shift had done; the house had been silent, or as silent as it could get. Just the airplant, buzzing in the dark. . .

She had spoken to blackness. "Jack," she had said, wondering at herself, "the Deeps. Have you heard what they've been saying about them—that they talk?"

"I've heard a lot of rubbish."

She said, "They talk. That's what the kids say. Jen

. . . she says she's heard it a . . . thing, I don't what. A calling. Jack, be serious, listen to me. . ."

"I am serious," he said. "Completely. Mary, there's nothing in the Deeps except one hell of a lot of water, at one hell of a pressure. Oh, there could be a slip somewhere, volcanic activity maybe, a long way down, that would send up pressure waves, you might be able to feel them, but that's all. I'm an engineer, I've been working with the sea more years than I want to think about, now take my word, I *know*. This . . . thing, it's a fad with the kids. You get little gangs of them floating out there waiting for revelations, I've seen 'em. I don't know where it started but it's just a craze, it'll die off when something new comes along. . ."

She was quiet, thinking of all the towns stretching through the warm seas of the world, all along the Continental Shelves. The domes were snug and secure, automated; nothing could go wrong. But what if . . . what if there was an enemy, something more insidious than pressure? Something in people, in me she told herself, or in Jen. Something working outward from the roots of the brain. . . She said abruptly, "Jack, how can you be so damn sure you're always right?"

The bed creaked as he moved. "You going Continental on me, Mary?"

She did not answer. His hand reached the contacts on her throat, stroked. "You know what I told you. What we agreed when they put these in. Once down, always down." He paused. Then, softly, "What's for us on land?"

She lay remembering the lowness of the roofed City streets, the flaring miles of fluorescent strip, the crushing sense of overcontact. Hive phobia of a crowded planet.

He could play her mind, he always could. "Listen," he said. "You can still hear it deep down. The roaring. Escalators, pedivators. Traffic. Dancehalls. Wallscreens all yelling, fighting one against another. Buy this. Buy that. Vote for freedom. Use our toothpaste. Don't copulate. . . Just remember it, Mary. Markets. Moviehouses. The whole heaped-up, tipped-up jumble we made for our-

selves. Is that a thing to go back to? Take the kids to? Well, is it?"

No answer. He carried on, talking. The old vision. "Down here we've got peace. We've got security. Well, as much security as people can find anywhere. And more important, we've got a democracy. A real practical working democracy, maybe for the first time ever. Down here your neighbor's house is always open because that's the way it has to be. We can't afford to fight each other, the sea takes care of that. And the sea's forever."

"So we've got unity, and drive. Right now maybe you reckon there's a lot of us but I say we're still villages, settlements. We're dependent on Surface, we still buy down supplies. But it won't always be like that. I can see whole nations and tribes of us scattered over the oceans, everywhere in the world. Right down into the Deeps. We'll be independent. We'll draw everything we need straight out of the sea. Gold, tin, lead, copper, uranium, you name it you'll find it's right here in the sea. Billions of tons of it, waiting to be used. In a small way we've started already. The land's old, burned out. Let the Continentals keep it. . ." He chuckled. "Tell you what, we'll pop up one day, in a thousand years maybe, for a little trade. Find they've gone. All of them. Blown each other apart, starved, lit out for the planets, anywhere. We wouldn't know. If the whole world burned up, how should we tell? We shouldn't care. . ."

She was making patterns in blackness, drawing on the pillow with one finger. Biting her lip. He touched her hair; his hand found the pendant warmth of a breast and she moved irritably, twisting away from him. "I was thinking," she said, "about the kids. All the kids we've got down here—"

"All the kids," he said tiredly. "Mary, all the kids have *changed*. Adapted to their surroundings, now that's the most natural thing. We'd be having to worry if it wasn't happening. This environment, after all it's alien. Outside racial experience. In a sense this life of ours is being lived on a new planet. We must expect new skills, new adaptations, and they'll show in the children quicker be-

cause the children have known nothing else. That's the way it has to be, that way's right. This has taken a long time coming out in you, Mary, can't you see what's happening?"

"I can," she said bitterly. "Can you?"

"Mary, listen here a minute. . ."

She felt that obscurely he was still hedging. His mind maybe would automatically reject anything that could not be measured and calibrated. She wanted to scream; the confidence, the know-how, suddenly it all seemed so much smugness. The sea was infinite, from it could come an infinity of fears. She said, "We all . . they say we all came from the sea. Well, couldn't we . . . regress, you know, sort of slip back. . ."

He clicked on the bedside light. "Mary, do you have any clear idea what you're saying?"

She nodded vigorously, trying to make him understand. "I thought it all through, Jack. I mean about birds losing their wings and seals—didn't seals go back into the sea, degenerate somehow? And now us, the children, they . . . swim like fish, more and more like fish. . ."

"But hell," he said, "Mary, do you know how *long* a thing like that takes? A biological degeneration? How many millions of. . . Oh look, Mary, look here. A million years. That's how long we've been around, give or take a few thousand. And that's nothing, nothing at all. It isn't . . . that." He snapped his fingers. "You're thinking on the fine scale, the historical scale. All that time, that million years, wasn't enough for us to lose our little toes. Look, the Earth's a day old. Took twenty-four hours to evolve, go through all the cycles of life and get to us. You know what we are, what all our history is? The last tick of the clock. . . That's how long evolution takes, it's a very big thing. . ."

But it was no use, she had heard it all before. "Maybe it won't be like that this time," she said. "We . . . evolved that quick, at the end. Maybe we'll go back now just as fast. . ."

"It isn't anything to do with it," he said. "Nothing at all."

She said desperately, "We were so smart, Jack, getting out like this, living in the sea. Making a new world. But maybe . . . couldn't that somehow be what the sea really wanted, all along? What we were *meant* to do? Oh, I know this sounds crazy but believe me when I see the kids. . . Jen slipped the other day, in the kitchen. When she tried to get up, I think she tried to turn like she was swimming—she forgot she was in air. . . And David, he swims just like a little shrimp. . . When I see things like that I think. . . Oh, I don't know what I think sometimes—maybe we're not . . . pioneers at all. This thing about the Deeps, they say they call, pull . . . Maybe we're just sort of being sucked back, that's where we belong. . ."

He was angry, finally. "All right. So this craziness is all true. We've got a racial memory in our brains, in our nervous systems. We remember the beginnings of life all those years back, so many years we can't even count the thousands. Well, then, we're home already, Mary. Right where we are, this is where life started. In the shallows, swilling in the sunlight. Not in the Deeps. It moved down there, same time some of it spread onto land. There's nothing can call us from there. We don't belong there, never did."

She was quivering a little, looking at the pillow, seeing the texture of it. Every strand in the weave of the cloth. "I wanted to stay human," she said. "That was all. Just to stay human, and the kids. . ."

He touched her. "You're human. You're all right."

She wouldn't look at him. "I think," she said, "I think now . . . I'd take the Cities. Jack. . ."

He did not answer, and she knew the expression on his face without looking. Something inside her seemed to twist and become cold. He would do anything for her maybe, except that. He would not go landside, not now. The empires, the herds and tribes of the sea, they were in his brain, they called too. The dream was too strong, he could not let it go.

He pushed the clothes back and swung his legs off the bed. She heard the little swish as he picked up a

robe. "Mary," he said, "why don't you get a little checkup. You're rundown, it's my fault, I should have realized . . . Too much time on your own, you don't get about. Not any more. Maybe you should have a trip landside. Go and see your folks. Tell you what—I'll get a couple of days leave, we'll have a run up to Seventy-five, take the kids, how's that? They've got the new theater up there, whole pile of junk. Sound okay?"

She did not answer. "I'll have a talk with Jen," she said. "I'll do it tomorrow. This is silliness, it can be stopped. . ." He walked out, turned on a light. Started tinkering in the kitchen. He brought her back coffee laced with rum. She pulled a bedjacket over her shoulders, sat drinking, hands gripped round the warmth of the cup. Feeling the trembling still deep in her body, hearing the buzz of the airplant, imagining the silly, silly meters checking and recording. Pressure, humidity, oxy-level, all the things that did not matter. While Jack sat and watched her, smoked and smiled and did not understand. . .

Mary swam the length of the town again, moving slowly, watching to right and left at the domes nestling in shadow, their windows like square bright eyes. The sea was darker now; in the real world above, the moon was setting. Surface was just visible as a grayish sheen; tall weed fronds were silhouetted against it, leaning majestically to the current like trees bowed by an endless wind. The tide was setting out, toward the Deeps.

After that talk with her husband, her restlessness had become worse. Quite suddenly it seemed the whole furnishing of the dome was oppressive, stultifying. The curtains had come down, the glinting blue fabric with its faint interlapping tidal patterns had been put away. Mary had hung new yellow cloth, sun-yellow, printed with designs of buds and flowering trees. She had banished the spiny amber-spotted shells and the urchin lamps, Jen's untidy collection of sea bed fossils, even the cushion covers on which she herself had once worked swirling Minoan patterns of weed and octopi. In their places

were landside things, figurines of horses and kittens, panting china dogs. Creatures long vanished now but that reminded her of Earth and the way humans lived once on a time.

Every ornament, every yard of cloth, had had to be bought from Surface; the cost had been enormous but once started Mary had seemed unable to stop. Jack had raised his eyebrows but said nothing; Jen had protested more noisily.

Things had reached crisis pitch the day Mary found, in the wall tank in Jen's room, a piece of old human skull, coral-crusted, put there as a home for crabs. She had slapped her daughter for that, a thing she had never done before, and emptied tank and contents through the lock. Jen had fled squalling, into the sea, and not to come home for hours. After that Mary spent a week scraping the whole top of the dome, polishing away the velvet coat of sea-growth till the plastic-covered panels gleamed like new; but it seemed the more she did, the more she tried to banish the presence of the sea from her home, the more the sea invaded. At night, lying quiet, she imagined she could feel the slow push of the wave force against the bungalow, tilting it this way and that, slow, slow, this way . . . then that. . .

She drove herself across to West Terrace, built slightly higher than the rest of town on a curving ridge of rock. Nearly to the Belmonts' dome and back, calling all the way. Jen was not in town; or if she was, she refused to answer. Mary's face was wet now inside the mask and her lungs were laboring. Thoughts tumbled in her mind. Nitrogen narcosis, the thing they used to call rapture of the depths . . . no longer possible, the lungs delivered an oxy-helium mix. Oxygen intoxication, then; that could make you throw your mask off, breathe water and die. But it was nearly unheard-of. Low down on Mary's back, and on Jen's, were other contacts. They led to cells deep in the body that metered the blood itself, tasting it for oxy-content. The lungs were self-compensating. Pack failure? Crazy, the gulp-bottle on Jen's belt would give her twenty minutes' breathing. And the

beacon, there was the beacon. But beacons could go out. . .

Mary doubled, swerving under the rigging of the street lamps. Across to where she could see the divers working on the new building complex. The bodies hung round the curving ribs, tiny with distance, silver as fish under the glare of the lamps; below, the windows of the construction office just showed in the gloom. Soon she would call Jack, she would have to. . . She felt the fear again, like a coldness round her heart. There was only one place she had not been. She began to swim purposefully away from the town and its lights, toward the Deeps.

Just beyond the domes the sea bed fell away in a series of troughs, miles long and wide. Unseen, their contours could still appal the mind. This was the frontier, the last frontier maybe on the planet. She passed over the graveyard, trying not to see the frail crosses sticking up from the silt, name tags fluttering in the current like gray leaves. Out to where the last light faded, and beyond. . .

She was in a void, bottomless, pit-black. Above her a vagueness that was just one shade less dark than darkness itself. Not light; some trailing ghost maybe, that light had left behind it. Mary drove deeper, hopelessly, feeling pressure begin to squeeze her body like cold hands. She was panting, though there was no sound of it in her ears; her breathing alone could not activate the throat mike. She called again; her voice was a vibrating thread, nearly lost in immensity.

And there was something, a blemish in the gulf. Tiny, nearly invisible, its shape so vague it mocked the retinas. Mary swam, hair flowing, there was a longness, a paleness, like a body caught and floating on some denser stratum of the sea. Deep down, far below. . .

"Jen!"

Mary kicked out, desperate now, her movements losing smoothness and coordination. Fighting the pressure was like butting at a wall; she imagined her whole body shrinking, condensing, becoming tiny as a fish.

"JEN!"

She'd reached the thing, she was stretching for it with her hands, when it moved. Eeled away, rolled. . . She saw the bright cloud of breathing suddenly released, the fins threshing. Heard her daughter chuckling in her earphones.

Fear turned to anger. Mary arced in the water. "Jen, get back this *instant*. . ." She grabbed again and the girl eluded her, quick as a fish. "Mummy, *listen*. . ." The voice bubbled through the sea. "It's loud tonight, *listen*. . ."

Mary opened her mouth to yell again, and stopped. The noise . . . *was there a noise?*

She listened, straining. Found herself not breathing. It was impossible; no outside sound could come through her blocked ears. Nonetheless, it came. There, and again. . . A thudding, but not a thudding. Some pressure, like a concussion against the brain. Immeasurably slow and powerful and somehow *ancient*. . . Pulsing with her heart, fading, swelling back to touch her body. Earthquake or volcano, she had no idea. Nor did she care. Somehow it was sufficient that the sensation, the not-sound, was there. This was something immemorial, eternal. The true, dark, jet-blue voice of the sea. . .

Woman and girl hung a little apart, bodies vaguely glowing motes against a hugeness of water. Mary felt she could lie all night, not speaking, just soaking in the strangeness that seemed to fill her by rich stages from feet to head. Hearing rhythms that were not rhythms, that blended and crossed, melding each into each like the sounds of the sea-jazz. Soothing, calming, somehow *warm*. . .

She could hear Jen calling but the voice was unimportant, remote. It was only when the girl swam to her, grabbed her shoulders and pointed at the gauges between her breasts that she withdrew from the half-trance. The thing below still called and thudded; Mary turned reluctantly, found Jen's hand in her own. She let herself float, Jen kicking slowly and laughing again delightedly, chuckling into her earphones. Their hair, swirling, touched and mingled; Mary looked back and

down and knew suddenly her inner battle was over.

The sound, the thing she had heard or felt, there was no fear in it. Just a promise, weird and huge. The Sea People would go on now, pushing their domes lower and lower into night, fighting pressure and cold until all the seas of all the world were truly full; and the future, whatever it might be, would care for itself. Maybe one day the technicians would make a miracle and then they would flood the domes and the sea would be theirs to breathe. She tried to imagine Jen with the bright feathers of gills floating from her neck. She tightened her grip on her daughter's hand and allowed herself to be towed, softly, through the darkness.