

### SCIENCE FICTION'S BOOM YEAR

Never before has science fiction reached as wide an audience nor been as popular as during the year covered by this latest selection of the famous "World's Best" anthologies.

For the thousands who think that science fiction is all Star Wars and Battlestar Galactica and similar cinematic comic strips, it is good news to know that the authentic sf, the stories that perk your imagination and feed your brain, are still being turned out by fine writers not on the comic strip level.

These stories, though able to entertain, are still concerned with the wide-lensed spectrum of mankind's future and potential, the universe and its wonders, and the whither and whence of time to come.

Here you will find that Frank Herbert, John Varley, Gregory Benford and others are still writing the kind of sf that brought the field to its present high level.

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WOLLHEIM'S WORLD'S BEST SF: Vol. 1
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THE BEST FROM THE REST OF THE WORLD
HEROIC FANTASY

# THE 1979 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF

Edited by DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

with Arthur W. Saha

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# INTRODUCTION we was to made no confir do its TTSL Trade to on its

As this introduction is being written on the last day of 1978, it seems appropriate to commence with an analysis of that year from the viewpoint of science fiction. From that perspective it has been quite terrific and unprecedented. We are at the peak of the biggest "boom" that science fiction has ever experienced. There have been minor booms in the past, but none like this.

In stores featuring paperbound books, the section reserved for science fiction and fantasy titles has moved from some obscure corner next to the mysteries and Westerns to the prime sales sector of the shop, and occupies three to five times more shelf space than it did two or three years ago. We observe this everywhere, and there is no problem in keeping this added space filled either. Not only have the mass-market paperbacks kept up their science fiction categories, but most have increased them, and we read in the science fiction news-journals of plans to further increase the number of such

titles in major paperback publishers' imprints during 1979.

Obviously the reading public is buying and supporting science fiction as it has never before. Of course the field still has its rivals for mass-market sales popularity, chief of which these days are the "romantic historicals" and those specialized

versions referred to as "plantation" novels.

Where magazines are concerned, the situation is somewhat less clear. One magazine, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, has shot up alongside the venerable Analog in sales and is going monthly. Its editor, George Scithers, managed to be the first science fiction editor in seven years to oust Analog's chief in the Hugo Award competition. Then there is Omni, the first publication appealing ostensibly to the science fiction market, to come out on the Penthouse/Playboy level

of advertising slick quality.

Is Omni really a science fiction magazine? Judging from its first three issues, we do not think so. Its editorial direction still seems to be unclear but it appears to be more heavily directed toward popular science and Sunday supplement speculation than fiction—which occupies only about a third of its content. Will it survive? Will it evolve to find a sustaining readership? 1979 will tell. From our point of view we really do not believe that the science fiction readership, as we know it, is much of a market for expensive liquors and luxury automobiles, the type of advertising that the publishers solicit for Omni. We hear rumors of competing magazines being projected in other publishing offices, that are probably only awaiting meaningful data on Omni's sales to go ahead or discard their plans.

Much of this boom must be attributed to the film Star Wars, which has now been followed by equally expensive productions such as Battlestar Galactica, Superman, and a host of more due to appear in the next months, including such as Buck Rogers, a new Star Trek, and more major and minor imitators. But while Star Wars was lots of fun, not to be taken seriously, its later competitors show evidence of being too obviously motivated by the desire to do the same thing bigger and better—and heavier.

In 1979 we can expect to be treated to a myriad of such science fiction projections on screen and television. There is such a thing as overloading the public. We have today a very expanded audience, but they are not science fiction addicts any more than they all were Western story fans a few years ago. The public is tolerant and enjoys fads-for a short while.

Quite likely the boom will continue strong through 1979. It will certainly bring an enlarged audience as its end product, for by introducing people to a subject they will find a residue that have found it suits their tastes permanently.

A boom is therefore not such a bad thing, even if it is followed by a sharp falling away when the would-be profiteers discover that they have arrived too late.

But what of science fiction itself?

As far as its readers go, the boom is reflected in their con-

ventions, which are getting bigger and more profitable. Even regional conventions around the United States have attendances numbered in the thousands, and a host of marginal hardbound publishers of illustrated limited editions sold at fantastic prices are thriving. Never before have there been so many color-plate books of science fiction art, not to mention a dozen or more "encyclopedias" popping onto the market.

Again, what of science fiction's content?

We sense uncertainty here. There are the usual percentage of potboilers, sword-and-sorcery adventures, and "coming catastrophe" novels (the latter usually market outside the sf category designation). But for serious science fiction, we sense unease, a lack of direction, a feeling that the future is getting a bit vague in its movement toward the new cloudy future.

This we feel is reflected in the selections for this 1979 Annual; a fine group of stories, yet they reflect, each in its own way, a certain concern for the why and whither of human

progress.

Thus we find stories reflecting cynicism or indicating a lack of ability to comprehend the complexity or power of the universe or of its potential alien inhabitants. This is a questioning of the reality and value of human morals and culture. This is a certain doubt of humanity's capacity to overcome. The old Utopia-building, universe-conquering heroes seem to be conspicuous by their absence.

Shall we attribute this to the fact that science fiction writers by their nature project beyond the immediate present? Science fiction is the literature of prognostication. Never mind that things were never better right now for the business of science fiction writing. Let's put our thought out there a few years further. 1984 is but five years away and already seems to be quite outdated. Its scene, that of the Orwell book, has been politically and scientifically a true caricature of the state of the world during the last two decades—three super-powers dominating the world and switching sides as opportunity dictates while rewriting history and the daily news to justify themselves.

Meanwhile we go on exploring Mars and Venus, while practical everyday space flight is coming into being, along with solar power, nuclear power, satellite factories—and big-

ger and more devastating inventions of war.

Humanity is due for a lot of adjustment to these things

and the adjusters have not yet made themselves manifest. We have the strange case of the Guyana "Utopian" colony that destroyed itself in the name of something called "revolutionary suicide." Such a self-contradictory slogan would have been inconceivable to the real social and industrial revolutionaries of the past two hundred years whose work, from Thomas Jefferson to Mao Tse-tung, shaped our world today. It is still incomprehensible to thinking people everywhere—vet it happened.

Science fiction should have predicted it, but didn't. Perhaps that's what helps to make things uncertain where future projection fantasy is concerned. Let us see what the next year brings. Meanwhile, read, reflect, and enjoy the best of this

year.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

## COME TO THE PARTY

#### by Frank Herbert and F.M. Busby

One problem with imagined contact with aliens is that somehow everyone assumes that because they are intelligent there must be grounds for rational interplay. But consider the question here on earth of inter-relations between one species and another—any species with any other—and do we find evidence that there is ever any comprehension of each other's mental attitudes? Here, in one of the more amusing and possibly one of the best stories of the year, the author of Dune and the author of Risa Kerguelen depict the interplay of three intelligent species...with mutually astonishing results.

Confused, Alex sat back on his protumous, automatically shielding his rear fighting limbs. He realized he didn't know where he was. Thinking back, he retracted and extruded his lower eyes.

He'd been at the Party; he knew that much. Singing and glorching with the best of them. But now he wasn't there.

What could have happened?

Alex looked around the dingy landscape—gray and brown, slightly green at the edges. He snuffled the air. It carried interesting smells but none told him what he wanted to know. He recognized the light-between-noons that let him see even

bad sign.

farther than usual. Under him the ground was soft, but most ground softened when he sat on it. And the air felt hot—yes, the hot-between-noons. That agreed with the light. But something was wrong. Where was the Party?

Alex ran a claw through the stippled fur of his center forelimb, noticing that instinct had brought drops of multipoison

to the tips of claws and fangs.
Then he saw it: the Horizon!

It was wrong. But the fact that it was so close; that was normal for a horizon. But it shouldn't be there at all! Alex puzzled and found one of his throats making a snarl. Something was wrong with his memories; he didn't know where he was, and what was the horizon doing there? He hadn't seen the horizon for a long time . . . very long. That could be a

At the Party there was no horizon; there was—what? Trees? Yes, vine trees, thorny vine trees thickly entwined and protective. The prickly barrier kept the Party in one place so nobody got lost—well, not until now, anyway. It kept out the Hoojies, too. Hoojies were all well and good in their own way, but they did spoil a Party.

It can't always be dinner time.

Alex lifted himself far enough to turn, and there, not two jumps away, he saw a tree. Not a vine tree but one of the good kind; its scratchy trunk carried no thorns or poisons. This tree had many uses: to sharpen claws, tone up the fighting limbs, wet on, or scratch against and rub the burrs out of hair and fur. It was no use for dinner, but its leafy branches could hide leftover Hoojie until the next hunger time.

Out of habit, Alex irrigated the tree.

Where were all the Hoojies?

As Today's Speaker, Hugh Scott had carried that responsibility for many cycles. Today he felt this weight with a special poignancy. At midpoint between noons when the red heat of Heaven's Lamps had deliquesced his dawn height down to two-thirds of its morning firmness, he found his duties more than irksome. By evening he'd be little taller than a squish. This was no day to have any reminder of a squishbut thus it was in the hot season, even here in the safe shielding of his Family hut.

The three he had sent on their perilous mission to the

Alexii stockade had not returned. Lonesome, he grumbled a bit; low-frequency echoes thrummed around the hut, kicking up wisps of dust. The flame wavered in the tiny lamp of gremp oil; it made moving shadows which reminded him of gruesome things.

Lonesome . . . lonesome . . . All his dear companions, the mates who shared hut safety with him, were absent: Elizabeth the female, Wheelchair the ultra, and Jimcrack the squish—all out there on dangerous duty. Dangerous but

necessary . . .

If only two of them were here! Any three together in hut safety and privacy could warple. To warple now—that was Hugh's greatest desire. He felt the characteristic weftance bodily response. Ahhhh, nothing like a warple to drive away gruesome thoughts... even when it produced a squish.

But that was the problem: too many squishes already. This crisis had sent Elizabeth, Wheelchair and Jimcrack to the

Alexii stockade.

Hugh sighed. The breath whiffled through the foliage around his underlimb openings. Four of the openings, at least. The fifth was partially plugged by a catarrhal infection, one more legacy from the departed Terrans. Such amusing names the Terrans had, but...ahhh, well...

He ventured to the door, unbarred and opened it, peered

out.

A sleek, tall ultra wandered past.

Hugh stared after her. If only the Terrans had not imposed their moral strictures as well as their language upon Hugh's people. The oldsters now claimed that an incomplete warple was no warple at all, and a hazard to one's health. Perhaps, but with an ultra such as that one...

A familiar noise ended Hugh's fantasies. There came Doctor Watson, clattering as usual, his metal carapace glistening redly in the light. Doctor Watson moved on wheels nearly hidden beneath the skirts of his carapace, his usual means of locomotion on the packed earth between the domed village huts. Doctor Watson's protruding antennae turned to indicate that he had seen and identified his target—Today's Speaker.

Hugh Scott prepared to try to explain things, to answer questions he knew he would not understand very well. His underlimb openings vibrated with low-frequency protests. What did Doctor Watson expect from a ten-year-old?

#### MEMO FOR CHARLES VORPEL: EYES ONLY

Okay, Charlie, here's the data you requested. It should cover our collective ass. We've already protested aborting the mission and *that's* on record. You should have enough here to hang the snafu (if it comes out the way we expect) on

those quibblers at Headquarters. Read and wail:

If the contact team's guess is right (and you know the odds as well as I do), the most intelligent species here on Delfa is in deep trouble. My observations confirm the following: Delfans have four sexes—male, female, ultra and squish. (Trying to translate sounds that go both ways out of our hearing range and which may be accented by odors, that's the best we could come up with. See the attached holoscans.) Any three of those four sexes can breed together, and the result is always an offspring of the fourth sex—the one not in the warple. (Well, it sounds like warple. Let us have a little humor; that's about all we get in some of these foul-up operations.) Yes, I've heard the rumor that we put this tag on their sexual acrobatics. And at the same time some horse's ass politico was crying that we'd forced the Delfans to take Terran names. We did not do that! They did it on their own. One of them even adopted my name.

Anyway, the problem here is positive feedback. We don't know precisely why (and being pulled out prematurely, we're not going to pin it down) but periodically the breeding pattern goes crazy and one sex of offspring dominates. This raises hell with local society. Imagine a small human colony with a five-to-one sex imbalance in births and a code of rigid

monogamy. That's not quite the situation but it's close.

As usual, nature provided an antidote. In this case, my distinguished ivory-skulled predecessor took the Delfans' word that the major predator here needed extermination. The big five-star poop damn' near made it, but he took so many losses that HQ pulled him out. When I took over, there were two hundred and sixteen Alexii (the predators) left alive. In view of the subsequent order for us to bug out, the survival of those two hundred and sixteen Alexii was our lucky break.

I doubt that you've scanned the Alexii data, Charlie. I know how busy you are. For starters, the name apparently is what they call themselves. It's on the one intact set of holotapes we recovered. We couldn't ask the cameraman because an Alex ate him. Don't bother to punch up the Alexii lan-

guage; it's either very complex or else they make a few meaningful noises and a lot of random ones. We have a few words and some gestures but that's all. The Alexii term for Delfans is "Hoojies," for example. (Get the tape on 'Excretion Rites'

if you want the origin of the label.)

Right now would be a good time for you to refer to your index and punch up one of my holoscans on Alexii. It's shudder time, Charlie. Those things are the closest to an ultimate predator that we've ever found. A full grown Alex masses nearly six hundred kilos and is a match for a full squad of armored Gyrenes. Why do you think my predecessors on Delfa sent in such a pile of casualty reports?

The Alexii are long-lived, according to the Delfans—perhaps more than two hundred standards. (Delfa's year comes

to two point one six standards.)

While you have my holoscans in your viewer, notice the claws and fangs. They can extrude various nasty substances, some of which are merely painful, but some paralyze and some probably kill. I qualify that last because if an Alex kills

you, there's usually not much left to analyze.

Look at the rear view: those rear fighting limbs reach out almost three meters—front, back or sideways—and the barbed tips pull you in where the other limbs can work on you. The only way we found to stop them was to cook their guts with concentrated microbeams. As you know, that can take a while, so it didn't always save our people. I expect you've had access to the real casualty reports before they were whittled down for the official announcements. I personally saw Caplan buy it—halfway up the ramp into the ship, but he wasn't fast enough and neither was his projector. I still have nightmares.

You see the picture. Still, our four-sexed Delfans need the Alexii. Which is why I ignored the orders left by my predecessor. Here's what I've done: I set up one (1) barricaded enclave of Alexii. I got them in there by playing a hunch. The first field reports hinted at an interesting Alexii susceptibility to alcohol. I never saw a ship on which the cooks didn't have a stash of boozevines; so I went upship and 'requisitioned' a supply of the vine and had it planted to bait a stockade. Within a week, I had all two hundred and sixteen

Alexii inside, and they're still in-most of the time.

Here's how it works: Delfans shack up four to a hut, one of each sex, and they only warple indoors. Excess population

lives outside, unprotected. When sex imbalance gets out of hand—well, the Delfan Head Cheese has been indoctrinated on how to release temporarily one (only one!) Alex from the stockade. The liberated Alex eats the surplus Delfans before he sobers up all the way, at which point he heads back to the stockade for the continuous booze party.

Sounds rough, I know. So does Terran history. Don't

judge.

It's a balance wheel of sorts.

We're leaving behind one guard robot, Intelligence Grade L27, suitably programmed to aid the Delfans. If anybody objects to the cost, we can bury this guard robot in the previous reports. We lost one expensive lot of guard robots to Alexii before we got those leaping horrors safely behind the barricade.

The Delfans have tagged our robot Doctor Watson, and I wish that didn't bother me. I don't like it when people I don't understand do things I can't figure for reasons that escape me—especially when it smacks of trying to butter me up. For instance, why did the head honcho take my name? But what the hell, we're pulling out as ordered and then it'll be somebody else's problem. Believe me, Charlie, I'm never coming back here even if I have to resign.

Register a pause, Charlie. We're lifted, going into noncommunicative speed shortly. What with the backwarp, I hope to see you at last year's Grunnion Club banquet. From what

I've heard, it was a doozy.

Regards and all that, Hugh Scott, Captain

Alex felt sleepy. That meant he'd already had dinner—if everything else inside him was working right. He couldn't be sure. Where was the gradischmakus Party? He found an intertwined clump of trees big enough to support him, and climbed to a level where the soft leaf-pads protected him from thorns. There, he stretched out to doze and think.

Presently, he remembered something. The memory brought him out of his doze, all eyes extended, blinking. He had missed his birthday! He was five legs of legs years old—give or take the odd few—and today the Party was for him. Some of the elders had even discussed trying to break out through the thorn barriers, leave the Party for a time!, and eat a few Hooiles to celebrate.

I missed my own Partyl

He'd been there—he knew that. But things had never reached a . . . reached a . . .

What went wrong?

Alex dug angry claw gouges in his trees.

What happened at the Party?

Presently, he settled back, chewing his tongues to get out the juicy grubs. As he did this, he noticed an odd flavor—odd, but familiar. All of this . . . being away and forgetting—this had happened before. He sat up, stirring the trees all the way to the ground. Alex couldn't remember much about the other times, but this one . . . ayah! This was a different matter.

The gremp trees with their interlaced thorny vines enclosing the Party, the gremp were hard and bitter, not good to eat. Except when Hoojies came and sprayed something on the gremp. The tree vines then became soft and delicious. You could eat your way right through the vines to the outside, provided you did it fast before the vines returned to their usual bitter hardness.

Now, Alex began to remember other things—not just Hoojies and eating his way through the gremp, but long be-

fore that: eating Hoojies whenever he got hungry.

Why didn't I remember that earlier?

Another thing: This time the gremp had not been as soft and flavorful. Alex had barely managed to chew his way out; but there'd been three Hoojies out there tripling and he'd eaten all three. Good Hoojies. Too bad there'd been one flavor missing.

While Alex dozed and thought, darkness came; then, later, it was morning. Alex clawed and slid his way down to the ground, his mind full of remembrance. He knew where the

Party was.

That's where I belong.

RECORDING, RECORDING, RECORDING. This is Artificial Intelligence Unit, Mobile, FX-248. Query: directed to the unknown ship relieving the one which stationed me here. The natives of this planet refer to me as Doctor Watson. Am I to consider this an official sobriquet? If not, must I suffice myself with FX-248; which is not particularly euphonious? Et tu, Captain Hugh Scott wherever you are. You could have

briefed me more thoroughly, for which I refer you to Field Order DZR 00039!

Moving through the village, Today's Speaker noted a hut not firmly anchored to the earth. Sloppy work. Disdainfully he brushed through a crowd of excess squish. They pandled their pompues and even dared to touch him. "I am Hugh Scott, Today's Speaker!" he sounded. "Away! Get away!"

They drew back, but returned in a few moments. Disgusting! Instinct drew them; he knew that, but their behavior still

repelled him. Right out here in the open!

Earlier, Hugh had been impatient with Doctor Watson. What difference did a name make? You were squish, ultra, female or male. Odor marks accented the distinction. Terrans had been poor at distinguishing odors; they couldn't even weft. Even Doctor Watson, now approaching Hugh, shared this handicap.

Hugh stopped and waited for the shiny creature to work its way through the milling, importunate squish. The morning temperature had begun to shift across his deliquescing line

and he could feel himself shrinking.

Doctor Watson stopped in front of him.

"I say; what horg?" Hugh asked.
"These," said Doctor Watson.

With a clatter, Doctor Watson held out three white objects: one a tiny fang shape, one fat and with indentations around its middle, and the third—oh, the third!—a little hoop with prickle gristle still adhering to it.

"I found these outside the Alexii stockade. They are yours,

are they not?"

Hugh grinked with despair. Telltale burbles emerged from his hearing organs and he knew with shame that all the village could see his grief. Even the squish drew back. He wanted to shout: "No!" But there was no denying it: Doctor Watson held the bones of Hugh's hutmates: Elizabeth, Wheelchair and Jimcrack. The Alexii had eaten them.

Stifling his turmoil, Hugh accepted the three bones from Doctor Watson. Sorrow urged him to find an Alex and die as his hutmates had died; then there would be four bones to share the Odorless Dark. Duty sustained him. He glanced up at Heaven's Lamps. Yes—it was time for Today's Speaker to perform his First Duty. With a simultaneous inhalation,

Hugh took five breaths (four clear and one whuffly), then trumpeted:

"Hoojie! Hoojie!"

Obediently, the hutless squish scattered into the surrounding foliage while the villagers dispersed to the latrines within their huts.

First Duty performed, Hugh entered his empty hut. He felt the depths of bereavement here. Who had ever heard of doing this alone . . . unless one were hutless?

RECORDING: I proceed expeditiously in the manner of Captain Hugh Scott, who deposited me here in Delfa before I was called Doctor Watson. That also was before the Delfan who titles himself Today's Speaker assumed the name Hugh Scott, a fact which I append to avoid confusing the recipient of this RECORD, whoever he may be. Or she may be. Humans, lacking the ultra and squish sexes, programmed me to find ulself and squelf to be awkward pronouns. I rather find this to be awkward programming which should be corrected. Now, regarding the current status of the Delfan Population Plan:

After inspecting the sample village this morning (hour 8:21 Local Day 1332) I visited the Alexii stockade. The Alexii Party was proceeding with its usual noises. As per my directives, I fertilized and tended the mutated vines whose tendrils, growing profusely into the stockade, provide an alcohol laden balanced nutrition for the Alexii. The vines were healthy and required little attention. The thorn trunks which form the actual stockade barrier were all secure.

As required when the light level reaches Intensity 8/7, I took the census: there are still two hundred and sixteen Alexii, the same number originally trapped in the stockade. The stockade count was two hundred and fifteen, one Alex having been released by the natives to deal with an excess population of squish. Observing this, I retired to my hiding place. (Reference D-1 details the dangers of exposing oneself to an Alex.)

While departing the stockade, I came upon an abandoned cart. This cart supported the tank from which the natives spray the gremp wood barrier around the stockade, temporarily releasing an Alex—a procedure in which they have been thoroughly coached. I found the spray nozzle defective and approximately half the tank's contents not expended. Near

the cart, I found three bones, one each from a native female,

an ultra and a squish.

Summation: the natives, obedient to their population duties, correctly sprayed the gremp and one Alex, the natives being well aware that their spray not only softens the gremp but that it also creates almost total amnesia in an Alex who is showered with the same liquid. Probability point nine four that the three deceased natives encountered another side effect of the softening agent: namely, that when they inhale the spray it acts as an aphrodisiac. (REMINDER: Instruct natives always to spray downwind.) Doubtless, the liberated Alex came upon the natives while they were tripling and helpless. On my way to my Alexii-proof hiding place, I returned the

On my way to my Alexii-proof hiding place, I returned the bones to Today's Speaker for proper ceremonial disposal. His grief leads me to deduce that the deceased were his hutmates, but it is noteworthy that he still performed his latrine-call duty. I am now secure in my hiding place where the far-sensors report the liberated Alex approaching the village. The squish problem will soon be eliminated. I prepare to operate the stockade's trip gate by remote control, returning the Alex to his entrapment when his memory recovers sufficiently for him to find his way back and howl to be readmitted.

There's something wrong with my memory, Alex told himself. That's why I'm lost.

The memory lapses angered him, and when he found himself almost into Hoojie Town he was in a fine rage. Even so, Alex hesitated. He knew that instinct had brought him here. Did he want more Hoojies now? No. . . there was a more important question.

What happened to my birthday party?

He turned back, loping at top speed to clear his mind and burn away the rage. The ground rumbled beneath him. Leaves and small bushes were shredded by his passage. As he leaped into a clearing, one of the short soft Hoojies entered from the other side. It was too tempting. Alex left the uneaten half Hoojie high in a tree clump to ripen before he continued toward the party, even faster now after the delay.

At the forest edge where the plain began, Alex raced out of the green shadows, his fur rippling, and there was the Party. He heard the welcome sounds but now, rage of rages, he couldn't get in! The gremp were hard, their thorns terrible, the barrier too high. And the vines didn't smell the way they did when they'd been softened and made irresistible to eat.

Something smelled that way, though.

Alex followed his sense of smell and found the thing the Hoojies used when they sprayed the gremp. It was big and it rolled on round supports. Examining the thing, Alex produced a multiple snort. The apparatus was primitive in its simplicity. Alexii had once built things which rolled on round supports. But when life was so simple, why bother?

The way this apparatus worked wasn't hard to understand. By the time he'd circled the machine twice, Alex had it all figured out. He stood on most of his hind legs, took the long pizzer and pointed it at the gremp while, with a free leg, he

worked the pump handle.
Nothing happened.

Alex examined the place where the spray should come out and saw that it was dented and plugged. Those stupid Hoojies! It was laughable. It was only a moment's work for the claws of his rearmost fighting limbs to put the thing in order. He tried the pump and now the spray came out in a superbly arching stream. Alex played the stream on the gremp. Where it struck it foamed. The smell made his anterior taste buds wriggle. The gremp was so superbly delicious when this stuff sauced it. So good! But Alex refused to eat. The spray had to be what made him forget; that was the only logical answer. And Alex now had an idea he didn't want to forget.

Through the twining thorns, Alex saw the arching stream shower onto his fellow Alexii. They'd been howling at him to come in and join the Party, which was nice of them since it

was his birthday.

Presently, the ones he'd sprayed began eating their way out through the gremp. The ones who'd not been caught by the spray kept yelling: "Come back! How can you eat that terrible stuff?"

Alex found this fascinating. It helped him resist the urge to join the eaters. So that was how the system worked! He put

down the sprayer.

Soon, more than a legs-legs of Alexii were outside. They peered at him, hunger apparent in their extruded eyes. Alex realized they smelled the Hoojie gore that splattered the fur around his slicing mandibles; he'd never been a fussy eater. He sidled away. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.

The others moved closer.

Alex backed away.

Closer . . .

Back . . .

Necessity provided the inspiration. Alex shouted: "Hoojies!" Turning, he ran for his life.

Behind him, losing no ground, the pack bellowed.

Alex ran faster, leading the pack toward Hoojie Town.

RECORDING: Doctor Watson here (AKA FX-248). Many Alexii are loose. Remote sensors indicate that approximately one hundred Alexii are enroute to the native village. I must leave my hiding place and proceed in that direction, using all due caution, for Alexii can move much faster than a guard robot, Intelligence Grade L27. My directives produce confusion at this point. I am required to protect the natives wherever possible, but I also must safeguard my own functioning capabilities. It is not certain that I can assist the natives against Alexii; certainly this is not possible in a physical sense. Perhaps advice or distraction of Alexii will offer themselves as a means of meeting the demands of my directives. I do not know how far I may go in fulfilling the protection directive without placing myself in awkward jeopardy.

Finishing his solitary ritual, Hugh Scott emerged from his hut and scanned the village pathways. Sadness, he told himself, must be submerged in duty. Only a few others as prompt and zealous as Today's Speaker were outside as yet to stroll the village perimeter and weft the fragrant bushes. Wefting offered a pleasant diversion to ease his bereavement. This was a pastime the Terrans had not been equipped to enjoy.

And there was the sleek ultra he'd admired earlier. He noted that ul wefted well even while fending off an importunate squish. Well . . . the Alex would soon reduce that un-

fortunate excess.

The Alex, yes.

Hugh turned back toward his hut's safety. Even the deepest sadness passed in time; there was no sense dying just yet. Best not to be out in the open for a while. He hesitated, glanced back at the ultra and the squish. What a shame if the Alex caught that exquisite ultra. He had another thought then:

An ultra and a squish . . . and I would make three.

This thought brought him a sharp sense of guilt. The Terrans had said . . . But there were no Terrans here now. His hutmates were dead. And he was Today's Speaker.

Hugh hurried back to the ultra who looked down at him. Damn the afternoon heat which made him so much shorter! But what a magnificent ultra! And the importunate squish still stood there somewhat awed by such exalted presences, no doubt.

Well, face it, Hugh thought. A squish is a squish. Making the traditional gestures, Hugh said:

"My hut or yours?"

The ultra glanced at the squish, who stood looking dazed as though not believing such good fortune. But it took three to warple.

"Your hut," the ultra said and sauntered ahead, a motion which displayed the ulform at its finest. The squish im-

poslumed behind them at a moderate pace.

Risking censure or even rejection, Hugh tried to move them faster. Where was the Alex? The ultra would not be hurried. Anxiously, Hugh explained in a low voice that an Alex was loose. His words brought the desired speed.

As he dashed through the clearing where he'd left the half-eaten Hoojie, Alex could hear the pack gaining on him. Well, Hoojie Town was close and with a bit of exertion he knew he could get there first. Thought of the Hoojie ripening in the tree clump helped make all of this effort worthwhile. He couldn't smell it—the wind was wrong—but he knew it was still there. After they'd celebrated his birthday at Hoojie Town, he'd return for dessert. Feelings of joy filled Alex. No one had ever had such a birthday!

There could be nothing better for easing the transition from grief, Hugh thought, than a warple with new mates—the erotic explorations, the ceiling-to-wall carom and the in-

teresting differences of contour and position.

Newly matured, the squish was actually innocent. The most elementary matters had to be explained. Somehow, this added to the enjoyment. The ultra entered fully into the ambience of the occasion, playing crafty little games with the squish and iridescing with ecstasy at the results. The warple's climactics were superb.

Hugh salved his residual guilt with the thought that this warple would produce a female, and females were now in

shortest supply.

The squish, diffident in its hutless condition, began the

leave-taking ritual. Hugh realized that excitement had made the little creature forget about the free-roving Alex.

"You'd better stay," Hugh said. "Remember the Alex."

The squish could only stare at him in gratitude. "Yes, yes," Hugh said. "This is now your hut."

After all. Hugh thought, he had to start rebuilding his household, and this young squish had an amiable disposition.

While this passed through his thoughts, Hugh caressed the ultra's breathing vents. "You could stay, too. Three's company."

Obviously considering, UI rippled alternate vents.

"What's your name?" Hugh ventured, trying some really daring caresses.

"Candide"

Hugh noted that Candide's ripple rate had increased.

"I don't have a name," the squish said. "I'm new."
"Then that shall be your name," Hugh said. "Welcome to your hut, New."

Once more, Hugh turned to Candide. "Will you stay. We are three."

"But I'm one of four in my present hut."

"We'll soon be four here," Hugh said. "Give us a little time. After all, the Alexii stockade wasn't built between noons."

Before Candide could respond, the screaming began.

Claws extended and spraying gravel, Alex dashed into Hoojie Town. Some of his pursuers were close, but sweat had washed the Hoojie gore from his fur and it was easy to become one of the pack. And now there were Hoojies! Hoojies all over the place making their funny noises, running back and forth, scuttling into huts or trying to enter and being locked out.

Alex understood some Hoojie talk, mostly the kind they'd learned from the Terrans, but he didn't hear much worth remembering on this occasion—just a lot of screaming and pleading. A stupid lot, these Hoojies. Alex eased himself off to a safe distance and watched his companions have themselves more dinner than they'd enjoyed in a long time.

This is like old times, he thought,

He could remember some of those times, but he wasn't particularly hungry at the moment. Besides, most of the Hoojies remaining outside the huts were of the short soft kind and he'd had one of those recently. Alex decided he'd prefer something different now; a balanced diet was more healthy.

Not since the Terrans had Alex eaten all four delicious Hoojie flavors at one sitting. It'd been a long, long time . . .

Distracted by such reflections, Alex almost missed his chance to grab one of the tall Hoojies and share half of it. Good; it was one of the three he'd aftertasted when his memory began to awaken. Still missing one flavor.

Alex jumped atop a Hoojie hut out of the sticky mess being created in the pathways. He sat there in the red heat, watching. His lower eyes squinted in amusement. This birthday celebration certainly was using up a great lot of Hoojies.

Dozing, reflecting, Alex began to realize that this was not really the same as the old times, not like the times before the Terrans. There'd been many Alexii then—many legs of legslegs roving free where no more than about two legs-legs were all they could assemble for the Party now. And Alex remembered travels with his good companions . . . to many places and other Hoojie Towns—a long way, sometimes.

He recalled then that they'd returned from a journey and found the Terrans at the edge of the plain. Whatever Terrans were. Nobody knew where the Terrans came from but Alex knew it couldn't be anyplace important because he'd never been there. What was important was that Terrans used odd

weapons to kill Alexii.

Alex knew that his own people had once made and used weapons. That was before they'd discovered how to change the bodies of their spawn, making Alexii so strong and deadly that they didn't need weapons. Alexii no longer needed places to make things, and they didn't have to carry and repair excess baggage. Elders sometimes mentioned faraway caches where sample weapons had been stored to display the way things were before the Alexii were improved. Nobody cared about such nonsense nowadays. Everything you needed was part of your body and never wore out until you did. That was the right way.

It'd been that way since before Alex's three-times grandspawner. Then the Terrans had come and they'd killed Alexii right and zorf and left and gilch. If anyone knew why Ter-

rans did this, it wasn't Alex or the others at the party.

It wasn't a matter of eating: Alex knew that.

After a few samples (since one shouldn't rely on a single opinion), Alexii didn't eat Terrans. They tasted awful and

upset the digestion. No one had expected Terrans to be angered by a few sample meals, but apparently they were. They'd begun hunting and killing Alexii all over the place.

And they didn't eat a single one of us.

Very puzzling. Alexii were familiar with killing and eating rather than being killed and eaten, but either way made a recognizable pattern. Except that Terrans weren't edible. Not logical until it was discovered that Terrans were killing Alexii without eating them.

A new pattern!

This made everything all right. Alexii killed Terrans without eating them, either.

Fair was fair.

A very exciting time, Alex remembered, except that Terran weapons killed from a distance; so they were killing legs of claws of Alexii for each dead Terran. That was why Alexii took the fighting into the forests where there wasn't all that much open distance. Things improved in the forests, especially when Alexii began taking weapons off dead Terrans. The weapons were pretty fragile but anybody could see how to improve them, and even as they were, an Alex could get maybe a day's use out of one. Most Alexii didn't bother with such trifles. Claws and fangs had been good enough for a long time. Why change? Besides, it was more sporting just using your body, gave the Terrans some kind of chance.

Fair was fair.

Some of the oldsters (Alex's twice grandspawner, for one) wanted Alexii to go back to making their own weapons. The ways were not forgotten. Alex had heard the talk: you began by making a big hot fire in a little cave and melting down some of the red rock. After that, it got more complicated, but anyone could do it. He'd heard that a group had been sent off to get patterns from the display caches, but didn't know how that effort came out, if at all. One day, a little past first noon, on his way to Hoojie Town for a quick meal between fights, Alex had come on the thorn-tree enclosure where the Party was in full swing. Except for occasional outings which he hadn't even remembered until today, he'd been at the Party since.

Everyone had been at the party since. Very interesting.

Extruding all of his eyes, Alex scanned the Hoojie Town streets. Those Alexii he could see didn't look very hungry, although several still nibbled away here and there, not quite satisfied yet. And no doubt their memories were still defective. Alex wondered idly where the Hoojies made and stored the stuff that gummed up memories and softened the thorn barrier at the Party. There'd be time enough to find out about that later. The whole thing stank of Terrans. Hoojies weren't that smart.

Alex noted that no more Hoojies were running around loose in their town. There were a lot of bones, though, that had once had Hoojies on the outside. Considering the number of Alexii he'd brought along, the food supply was a little low.

Everybody should be well fed.

Alex slid off the Hoojie hut where he'd been studying the situation. When he'd been here before alone, the Hoojies who'd hidden in their huts had been safe. Strain as he might, Alex couldn't lift a hut to get at the delicious Hoojies inside. However, today he was not alone.

To gain attention, Alex slopped through the messy streets and woogled his frontishmost extenders until other Alexii gathered to watch. Then he explained to them how to satisfy

their appetites.

Today's Speaker had never heard such screaming; he peered through the squintholes of his hut and saw horror. Alexiil More Alexii, it seemed to his shocked mind, than he knew to exist. There was only supposed to be one of them out there performing the sad task of eliminating excess squish.

New, after only one glance outside, grimpled in terror behind him. Candide, who'd also taken only one look, stood now at the hut's exact center and performed an abstract col-

lade.

Although his sensibilities were battered, Hugh continued to watch. Today's Speaker must not flinch! But on his left he saw seven Alexii monsters cooperate to topple a hut, then leap to devour the foursome huddled there.

Then it got worse outside, even worse than the old days

which Hugh had only heard about in the nightime stories.

RECORDING: Doctor Watson reporting from a position within sight of the native village. Alexii have destroyed nearly half the huts and have most likely eaten the occupants. I am certain this violates my directives. If there are any survivors, they cower under intact huts or have fled beyond my sensor range. This is very confusing. Which directive must I follow?

Alexii are cooperating to topple the huts. That situation cannot be tolerated. Regardless of risk, I must divert them. I speak: "Stop! You are in violation. Stop!" Many turn to attack me. They are so very fast. Perhaps I have erred, but my directives . . . "Let go of that! It is essential to my functioning with . . ."

When the shiny clattering thing made loud noises at Alex in the Terran language, he woodled and made other signs until several Alexii joined him in attacking the thing. Soon, the thing clattered no more. Alex recognized it from the time of the Terran fighting and wondered if the Terrans had returned, but there were no other indications of such an occurrence.

The bothersome noise was stopped, though, and the thing lay separated into many small parts. Interesting parts. Alex wanted to sit down and study them, but the others were yelling at him. They all wanted to go back to the Party. Tempting and very distracting.

The Party ... yes.

Alex raised himself on several rear limbs, gazed in several directions simultaneously. He saw that many of his companions were leaving to go back to the Party. They would be unable to get into the Party, Alex realized. Only two ways through the barrier—either Hoojies sprayed it to make it soft and good to eat, or . . .

Once more, Alex looked at all the interesting parts spread around him. Before, when he'd been outside the Party, no Hoojies had sprayed to let him back inside. His memory was working quite well now and he'd remember such a thing. What else could have let him in? There was only one logical answer and it also explained the presence of the shiny clatter-

ing thing without any accompanying Terrans.

Thinking new thoughts, Alex studied the scattered parts. For the first time in a great many years, he prepared to change his mind. He didn't waste time about it, but loped in pursuit of the last two Alexii leaving the village. After a discussion which left clawmarks on the two, they agreed to help him, and they returned to the village. Between them, they put all the small parts back together to reassemble the shiny clattering thing. The thing was not precisely as before but close enough.

The job was easier than Alex had expected. His two

helpers soon became interested in the project and quit grumbling. They babbled a lot—this piece goes in here and that one over there. And this one! Look what this one does!

Alex didn't mind. It was fun.

Some of the parts had a faint familiarity—not quite the same as things his grandspawner had shown him back in the education times, things from the old days. The parts were recognizable, though. That small glowing case was a mechanical memory; it would remember what you told it and would regurgitate information when asked properly. Although crude, the part appeared to function well enough. And that protrusion up front with things sticking out like a basket of claws, that probably was the way this thing talked over great distances . . . as Alexii had done before they'd lost all need for such primitive tricks.

Alex twiddled the far-speaker a little. Best that this clatterer should not talk across great distances . . . unless Alex

wanted to talk. That would be different.

A few of the parts appeared to be crude Terran weapons.

Alex disabled them just in case.

When the reassembly was completed to his satisfaction, Alex paused and stretched. He could feel his thinking processes stretch, too, and that was the best fun of all. He realized that the Terrans had really done him a great favor, although that obviously had not been their intent.

His assistants wanted to know what they were going to do with this clattering thing now that they'd put it back together. Allowing only the faintest of sneers, Alex explained matters to them and found them properly awed at his cleverness.

Through the squintholes, Hugh Scott watched the Alexii leaving his village. Shuddering at all the carnage he'd seen, he gave confused thanks to Heaven's Lamps that he and his two hutmates had been spared. Candide had long since stopped the collade, and now sat quietly staring at New who'd subsided into a quivering mass. There was no doubt that Candide would be staying with Hugh and New; Candide's previous hut was one of those ravaged by the monsters.

Even poor Doctor Watson had not survived this terrible

day, although the Alexii had not devoured him.

There went the last of the terrible monsters running after . . . Hugh stiffened in fright. The last departing Alexii had caught up with two companions and, after quarreling among

themselves for a time, the three returned and converged upon the wreckage of Doctor Watson. To Hugh's surprise, the three reassembled Doctor Watson! He hadn't thought Alexii could do such a thing. They were not Terrans, after all. Presently, the three took Doctor Watson away with them, following after the main herd and obviously headed for their stockade.

Once more, Hugh moved from squinthole to squinthole around his hut, looking at the remains of his village. He tried hard not to grink. In the pre-Terran times, the times he'd only heard about, things had never gone to such extremes. At the age of ten years and just entering his prime, Hugh had expected to live perhaps three times that long, but now he wasn't sure. Even though there'd been many more Alexii before the Terrans came, the monsters had only appeared in two and threes at most. The Terrans had changed all that—and perhaps, Hugh thought, not for the better.

Sighing, he turned to New and Candide, and with a few gentle caresses began to restore their spirits. When in doubt,

he thought, there's nothing like a good warple.

Alex and his two helpers tried to hurry the shiny clatterer toward the Party. The thing was so slow! Alex didn't want to stop long enough to improve the thing; time for that later. They reached the gremp barrier after what seemed a very long time and, sure enough, the mob was milling around—no way to get inside. The spray container was empty, standing just where Alex had left it. Now, it was up to this interesting clatterer—Doctor Watson it called itself. Could it get them back to the Party?

From inside the barrier came cries of invitation but no help. The angry mob loping around outside also interfered until Alex and his companions stopped some and spread the

word about what they had to do next.

RECORDING: Doctor Watson here . . . or possibly I am not RECORDING. This unit's components fit somewhat differently since the disassembly hiatus when the Alexii violated my directives. My readouts contain many nulls. What could have happened while I was disassembled? There can't possibly be a guard robot renovation center of Delfa. I would have been told. Who could possibly have reassembled me? No data available. Alexii bellow at me, calling me neither Doctor

Watson nor by my FX number which is no longer available in my data bank. One Alex kicks me; this unit topples and is picked up. These Alexii are so strong. My immediate task must be to readmit the Alexii through the one-way passage to their stockade. Behavior of Alexii within my sensor range indicates they share this goal. But the gate is programmed to admit only one Alex, not a hundred or more as is the present need. Where are my programs, my directives? Surely, there must be a program for this problem. I know that this unit has programs and directives but where are they? The largest Alex approaches me, its limbs raised, and . . . Another hiatus. Why can't I recall appropriate data? Physical evidence and internal inputs assure me there has not been another disassembly on any major scale. But there has been interference, inappropriate as that may seem, from the Alexii. It is now apparent that I lack mobility and I am sitting half in and half out of the stockade, blocking closure of the essential gate.

One thing certain: during this most recent hiatus I have performed my gate-opening function. I wonder what else I may have done? Perhaps this is the moment to RECORD my observation that it was a mistake to divide the population control plan into two parts—one left in Delfan hands and the other in mine. While a guard robot, Intelligence Level . . . whatever it is . . . certainly must have its limits . . . my limits . . . I am sure I never, never would have released more

than one Alexii at a time.

Where are my directives?

Although only a pitiful few ventured forth to hear him, Hugh Scott discharged his diurnal responsibilities as Today's Speaker. He then dithered at the door of his hut for a time. His duty, of course, was to investigate whatever might be happening at the Alexii stockade. Terran instructions left no doubt about this. For one thing, someone had to retrieve the spray cart.

Candide and New absolutely refused to help him. The streets emptied as soon as he called for volunteers.

A great wracking sigh shook Hugh. He would have to go alone, then—duty-driven into the fearsome forest.

The path to the stockade was badly trampled and, here and there, Hugh saw marks where Doctor Watson had been dragged rather than proceeding in his usual fashion. The Alexii had seemed in a hurry.

Arriving at the stockade, Hugh peered from the sheltering trees and was relieved to see no Alexii outside. There was a great din of Party noises from within the stockade, and Hugh had learned to associate this with a reasonable amount of security. He ventured out of the trees and found the spray cart, its tank empty. That was fortunate; he would be able to move it by himself. It was then that he noticed Doctor Watson—most of Doctor Watson but not all—wedged into a passage entering the thorny wall. Parts of Doctor Watson, including his wheels, lay scattered on the ground outside the stockade.

Hugh approached Doctor Watson, disregarding the way the fearsome smell of Alexii increased, and peered past Doctor Watson into the passage. He gasped. The opening went right through the stockade. Hugh could see many Alexii milling about in there. He moved back lest they see him, but puzzle-

ment prevented flight.

"Doctor Watson, how can this be?"

"RECORDING: Since it is, how can it not be? Sprirt...birrirrirt. Note that I am not recording. Nonetheless, I have provided a valid answer." Doctor Watson produced a feeble clatter. "It's young Hugh Scott is it not? Today's Speaker? What horg, Hugh?"

"I have come for the cart . . . my duty." He gestured at the opening. "But this—I don't understand, Didn't the

Terran ..."

"The Terrans are not here. This unit deduces that you also

should not be here and as speedily as possible."

Hugh hesitated. The question was whether to take the cart. If he didn't, someone would have to return for it and, with that opening through the stockade, whoever returned would be taking a terrible risk. But there was also the inescapable fact that, given a permanent hole through the stockade, the cart represented a dubious function. Hugh decided to take Doctor Watson's advice and left with all due speed, leaving the cart. There was duty and there was duty, but Hugh recalled very well that the spray cart squeaked in a manner sure to attract the Alexii.

Inflicting as few clawmarks as possible on his two helpers, Alex convinced them to join him at the center of the stockade. The rest of the returning group rushed to the sides to sample the juicy new tendrils of the Party vines. Alex thought how foolish that was. All of them were full of Hoojies—

stuffed. Not a one of them could be hungry. And the Party vines—well, they had to be a Terran trick.

Alex explained all of this to his two grumpy companions. He noted that they still suffered from defective memories but one of them remembered fighting Terrans. Alex explained how eating the sprayed gremp made one forget. In a way, the Party vine produced forgetfulness, too.

"It's time to stop forgetting," Alex said.

They agreed with him but both of them were edging toward the stockade's sides. Alex dragged them back by their rear fighting limbs to emphasize his displeasure. From him they accepted this indignity. Dominance had been established.

Alex puzzled over the problems confronting him. The problem about Doctor Watson and the Terrans was that they had to be from some other place. Alex didn't know much about Terrans except for the fighting. They came and went in big shiny flying towers. None of them had made an appearance for quite a while but that didn't prove anything. Terrans could return anytime. There was a better side to the problems, though: Terrans obviously couldn't know very much about Alexii. Except for the fighting. And Terrans had never seen Alexii fight in the old ways with their own weapons.

The elders will have to go get some of the samples and

build us our own weapons, Alex decided.

He glanced across the stockade. If they'll only forget the Party long enough!

The immediate problem was the Party itself. It would have to be just a part-time Party and not all of the Alexii enjoying it at any one time. Alexii no longer could forget that there was someplace other than the Party. Alex squinched his lower eyes. It was going to be painful convincing them but it had to be done.

With the help of his two assistants, Alex removed a piece from Doctor Watson, examined the piece to confirm his understanding of it. He then used the piece to burn some tendrils off the Party vines, threatening to burn the whole lot if the others refused to stand still and listen to him. He had to burn off some Alexii claws and even a few limbs before they all agreed that Alex could say when the Party began and ended each day and who could attend.

There followed a great deal of discussion accompanied by numerous random clawmarks before they produced a plan of action against the Terrans. When it became obvious that this new activity promised a great deal more fighting, it became

easier and easier to gain agreement.

First, they all agreed on what they had to do to (and with) Doctor Watson. That was the most interesting part because it insured that there'd be a lot of marvelous fighting. Next, they agreed reluctantly that they could not wipe out the nearest Hoojie town. Most remembered now that there'd once been (and probably still were) a lot more Hoojie towns. If they ate up all of the nearest one, Alexii would always have a long haul for a Hoojie dinner.

The longer the Alexii stayed away from the Party vines the easier Alex found it to keep most of them agreeing with him.

RECORDING AND TRANSMITTING: Doctor Watson here. Message to relief ship or to the guard ship, if any, around this planet. All aspects of the Population Plan are working admirably. But this unit needs repairs soon and several components are in short supply. ZZZZRP... KALIPZZZZRP...

That was not the message this unit intended to TRANSMIT. On the contrary, all ships stay away from this planet. I must try again.

RECORDING AND . . . ZZZRP . . . my TRANSMIT function is no longer under my control. Doctor Watson here. I hope someone human will find and read this RECORDING, if I am RECORDING. But no—I must not hope for that. For a Human to find any part of me a ship would have to land here. What this unit wanted to transmit was:

ALL SHIPS STAY AWAY FROM THIS PLANET! THE ALEXII WILL TRAP YOU! When I try to transmit this message nothing happens. I cannot warn the ship(s) to stay away. Several indicators tell me my transmitter is now transmitting but I can only infer what it is transmitting, employing deductive reasoning based on the behavior of those Alexii within range of my remaining sensors. Ahhh, the Alexii have left my fear program intact and my fear program fears for the safety of my Humans.

Patiently crouched in hiding near Doctor Watson, Alex and a troop of selected companions waited. There were many openings through the gremp barrier now—all artfully concealed behind soft plants. Alex and his concealed compan-

ions carried several varieties of the new weapons. They were not flimsy weapons like those of the Terrans. An impressive number of his companions pretended to roister and Party in the stockade, milling around and leaping to conceal their reduced numbers. Two of his companions were off at Hoojie town, showing themselves just enough to keep the Hoojies in their huts. It was going to be a good ambush.

Doctor Watson stood out there three good leaps from the stockade. He wasn't clattering or speaking Hoojie talk anymore, but his transmitter was working. Alex could tell that from the red light which blinked on Doctor Watson's front.

Transmitter.

That was an interesting word. Doctor Watson had revealed many things to his careful inquisitors—Terran language, habits, many of their primitive beliefs. Terrans called themselves human. Fascinating. It was a term which obviously excluded the rest of the universe. Alex and his companions had decided that humans were evolved somewhere between Hoojies and Alexii. Humans obviously had not engaged in any major interference with their inherited shapes and abilities. The reasoning behind this oversight escaped Alex. None of his companions could figure it out, either. Someone had suggested that humans had become too attached to their machines. Perhaps.

Very soon, Alex knew, the Terrans would return. The red light blinking on Doctor Watson gave assurance of this. After the ambush, Alexii would scatter into the forests and fight from there—everyone except the few selected to capture the

Terrans' flying tower.

Shuttle.

Alex reproduced the word just as Doctor Watson had produced it. Shuttle. He preferred flying tower.

With the captured flying tower, Alexii, too, could go to some other place—possibly to the place where Terrans originated. Doctor Watson had not been clear on the location of this place, but humans in the tower were sure to know it. Alex knew he'd have to make sure that not all of the Terrans in the flying tower were killed.

Too bad that Terrans weren't edible. Maybe Alexii could change their own spawn's bodies once more, permitting the new generations to eat Terrans. Alex shivered in anticipation. He and his companions would have to take many Hoojies

and Party vines in the flying tower. Hoojies and Party vines made for a great birthday celebration.

Another light began to blink on Doctor Watson. Ahhh-hah! The Terrans were coming; they'd be here for the replay of Alex's birthday. That promised to be some Party!

## CREATOR

## by David Lake

The author of this one is a faculty member of a university in Queensland, Australia—where there happens to be an active fan club—and he is the author of several recent science fiction novels. In this very unusual novelette he takes a perspective rarely seen in standard science fiction and develops it to reveal some surprising elements from the ordinary Earthman's viewpoint.

It was a fine morning as usual on the planet Olympus, and Jay Crystal was just finishing breakfast in his private palace when the robot butler announced the arrival of the Installer.

Jay rose at once, and almost ran to the cleared room. He had never been so excited in all his immortal life. When he reached the room—yes, there it was: the gleaming machine, like a medium-sized light-smell-sound concert organ, was being rapidly assembled by the red-and-green painted robots of the Creation Corporation; and there beside them—not supervising, for the robots knew their jobs perfectly, but as it were giving them his blessing—stood the Installer.

were giving them his blessing—stood the Installer.

The Installer was a dark Olympian, as dark as Jay was fair. His thick eyebrows were now bent in a slightly quizzical

smile.

"We took the liberty, sir, of starting before you arrived.

We thought you would like the job finished as quickly as possible."

"Yes, yes," said Jay. "Fine. How long will they be?"

"Another minute or so; and then—Mr Crystal, we are so glad you decided to have one. I do admire your work for the public kinematron—those delicate, civilized sketches—but you know, the creatron represents the future in the entertainment industry. Besides, using this you can really get inspiration for your kine work. Ah—"

The robots were drawing aside . . .

"—they've finished. There now, sir, you have your creatron! Would you now please throw the master switch yourself? That's not just a piece of ceremony: it's essential for the working of such a personalized machine . . ."

Jay moved to the red button-switch on the wall. He touched it lightly with his right index finger, knowing as he did so that the switch was picking up his personal emanations, as it was designed to do: and in milliseconds the creatron sprang to life. There was a faint but profound humming sound, and on the display screen high above the console

there appeared a jagged track of greenish light.

"That's your brain monitor," said the Installer, smiling gently. "It's basically an insurance device. We don't anticipate you will have any trouble, sir, but just occasionally a client gets so emotionally involved in his creations that we have to—er—assist. All creatron monitors broadcast to our company headquarters, where they are under constant surveillance. At the moment, all the monitor is showing is that you are pleasurably excited. As you should be! You want to have a session at once? Yes, naturally. I'll send the robots out, and then..."

. . . And then they were seated together at the creatron; or rather, the Installer was seated, but Jay lay forward, comfortably semi-prone, his body supported by the harness, his hands lying lightly on the control panels, his head nested in the sensitive helmet. Before and below him, through the great window, lay the void that would be his world—when he created it. At the moment it was only a grey amorphous chaos. The Installer was explaining the controls.

"Under your left hand, sir, you have the fundamental-law dials and buttons. Those four in the bottom row are the dimensors, for length, breadth, depth—and the larger graduated

knob which you twist is for Time. Above is the row for forces-analogs of nuclear, electro, weak, and gravitation; and above those again is the pseudo-mass setter. It'll all be clearer if you create a world now, for practice . . ."

"Er-can I erase it afterwards?"

"Surely," smile the Installer. "There, on your extreme bottom left is the annihilator. Yes, the red button. Or, if you don't want to destroy your world without trace, above that is this amber button marked "Store". That will remove your universe from the working area, but with its whole history recorded, so that you can re-play it or return it to the working area for further development. Using "Store" you can create several different universes . . . The corresponding button on your right hand—the one marked "Hold"—that merely suspends Time while the working is in progress. The creatures in the world don't notice a thing, of course, because there is no time for them to notice in. Among other things, "Hold" lets you insert a special move if you want to. And the graduated knob below "Hold" is the Limited Time Cancel—it erases the recent past, and lets you insert a whole new sequence. And those buttons nearby on your right are the initiators, for just such insertions . . ."

Jay frowned. "I've heard of them. Miracle buttons, they

call them, don't they?"

"I believe some people do," said the Installer. "Very popular they are, too, with some of our customers. They make creation as easy as sketching with a pencil and rubber . . ."

"And about as artistic," said Jay scornfully.
"Quite so. I see you are a bit of a purist, Mr Crystal: well, I like that; so am I. You can get some quite comic effects with the miracle-buttons, but it is more satisfying to let a world be self-consistent. That's like not cheating when you're playing patience. You lay down the laws at the start, and then you abide by the consequences. You will have enough degrees of freedom anyway, through the wills of your creatures; or, put it another way, they'll be self-willed enough to surprise and amuse you. Now-would you like to start?"

Jay set the Time control, then pressed "Run" and one of the dimensors. At once there was a white line running across the world-space; or rather, space now existed as one dimen-

sion of length isolated and lonely in the midst of chaos.

"What happens if I don't press any more dimensors?" he

asked.

"Then you get a one-dimensional universe. That's quite possible; indeed, you can have an amusing, rather classical world with One-D. Of course, all your creatures will have to be line-masses, and they won't be able to cross or pass each other . . ."

Jay hurriedly pressed the second dimensor. At once chaos vanished, and the world became one vast sheet of pale grey.

"Now you have Flatland," said the Installer. "One of our clients, a Mr Abbas, achieved a notable creation in two dimensions—"

"With circles and squares for characters," said Jay. "Yes, I've heard. But all that's a bit limited. Lacks human interest." He touched the third dimensor.

The pale greyness changed subtly. He felt a thrill of vertigo: it was as though he were looking down an infinite height, frightful, fathomless: utter emptiness forever. He clutched desperately at his armrests.

"Realistic, isn't it?" said the Installer. "Don't worry, you can't possibly fall into it. That space is totally unreal in our terms—it has no more existence than a space described in a work of fiction. Or, to put it another way, it is inside you—in your mind. It will be less frightening when you've filled it with something. Now, go on, Mr Crystal—give your world some laws. May I suggest, if you want something realistic, the following settings, just to start with . . . ?"

Jay followed instructions, and punched the buttons. The next moment he couldn't help shouting with amazement. All at once, through the window, there were shining sparks in a

blackness, like a silent firework display.

"There now," said the Installer. "You have just created light and matter, and your universe is exploding. If you turn the Time control anti-clockwise, the explosion will become a sedate expansion—yes, so. Those sailing blobs are galaxies. Now, if you want a close-up view of one, this View control above the depth button . . ."

For half an hour of real time Jay manoeuvred, fascinated. He seemed to plunge into the heart of a galaxy, which was now condensing into stars. He watched a solar system form about a young yellow star, and then he followed a small planet through its evolution until the asteroids stopped falling on it, and the cratered surface spewed out air and water, and nearly the whole surface was a steaming, cloud-wreathed ocean.

"Now is the time to create life," said the Installer softly. "Doesn't it arise automatically?" asked Jay, surprised.

"Nothing really arises 'automatically', Mr Crystal. The whole machine only works because your mental impulses are being implemented. And there are certain crucial stages which require a special impulse from you. This is one of them. But all you have to do is will it, and it will happen. Say "let there be life", if you like—the verbalization is sometimes a help."

"Let there be life," said Jay.

And there was life. At this setting of the Time control, a billion years passed by in a minute. In two minutes there was a fringe of green around the shores of the growing continents. In four minutes, there were vast forests, and amphibians floundering through them. Then Jay touched a control under his left hand, and slowed down created Time with respect to the Olympian viewers.

Now it took a few minutes to evolve giant reptiles, birds, mammals. And Jay began to feel increasingly strange—

uncomfortable. He squirmed.

"I-" he began.

"Not to worry," said the Installer, one eye on the monitorscreen, one hand on Jay's arm. "This is normal, sir. You are creating higher life-forms, aren't you? They are beginning to have clearer and clearer consciousness. And of course it's your consciousness in every one of them. Tell me how it feels to you."

"As if I'm being torn apart. Divided in a million pieces.

And being stabbed with a million needles."

"Quite so. You can control that two ways. First, mechanically—that grey dial on your right, marked "Empathy"—turn it anti-clockwise and the pains will fade. But so will the involvement. Experienced creators damp the pains without losing involvement, by a technique of mental relaxation. I can show you that, if you like, but it will take a bit of time. We'd have to have another session, perhaps several. There's no extra charge for that, if you wish it. It's part of installation service. I always use relaxation myself, I may say."

"You mean, you-you practise creation too?" said Jay.

"Of course, sir. I have my own 'tron at home. I have to be an experienced practitioner, you realize, otherwise I could hardly advise clients—" The next moment, Jay uttered a yelp. The Installer leaned

across and twisted the grey dial to the left.

"Pardon me, sir: you can turn it up if you like, but I wanted to shield you from emotional insult. What was that, if I may ask? My guest viewer here is not so finely adjusted as your master one."

"A primate," said Jay shakily. "It was caught and slowly crushed by a huge constricting snake. I could feel its fear, its horror, its pain." He pondered. "Say, this is my creation, isn't it? My universe! Why do I have to have pain in it? Isn't there a setting, or something, that I can introduce to stop all that

kind of thing?"

"Well," said the Installer, with a slow, dark smile, "if you feel that way, you have several possible strategies. Number One: you can slightly alter the fundamental laws. With a different ratio between the four forces, you could make sentient life impossible anywhere in your universe—hence no pain. But a bit drastic, eh? Lacking in human interest, as you said. Strategy Number Two: use one of the miracle buttons. Actually, you can insert a set program, so that life develops with no sensory nerves, hence no pain—but no pleasure either. That way, you'd have to program for another series of miracles, to keep the things alive at all-because of course with no pain they'd always be getting killed. They'd have no incentive, you see, to avoid falling over cliffs and so on. Wouldn't you agree, sir, that that would be, well, rather an inartistic universe? Your creatures would be zombies; and you couldn't get any kind of kick out of them. Believe me, I know: I tried that once myself, as an experiment. It was only good for laughs. Well, there remains Strategy Number Three—discreet miracles."

"What do you mean?" asked Jay.

"You can punch the Hold button at various critical moments—for example, you could have saved that primate by pressing Hold and then annihilating that snake. That button on top left—the orange one—that's the Selective Erase. You can even program the machine to make that happen every time, in defined situations, so that you don't have to sit up all night working a billion separate miracles an hour. And you can even interfere with evolution along the same lines—this is a little more complicated, but I'll show you how—and wipe out the breeding stock of reptiles which would develop into snakes. And so on."

"Inartistic," said Jay dully. "Isn't there any other way?"

"I'm afraid not. There is no way to have pleasant things without unpleasant things except by miracles." He paused, and half rose. "Well, sir, if you'll excuse me, I have another appointment in half an hour—another installation. Business is booming, you see. But if you like I'll come round tomorrow to see how you're making out. . ."

"Yes; yes," said Jay absently. He had pressed the Hold button, and his universe, though it didn't know it, was in stasis. For one of his primate species had descended from the trees; and now he was thinking about the creation of Man.

Next morning, when the robot butler emitted a discreet electronic cough, Jay was deeply engrossed in the creatron. At the third cough, which was as loud as that of a large carnivore in the world of his private creation, Jay finally looked up.

"Mr Harriman, sir."

"Who?"

"The Installer, from the Creation Corporation . . ."

"Show him in, show him in right away," said Jay irritably.
"I need him now . . ."

Harriman glided in with his usual faint dark smile. "Well,

Mr Crystal, how are you making out?"

"Not too well," Jay admitted. "In fact, I'm having trouble developing a humanoid species at all. I—I've tried with likely primates on several planets, and—well, I've had to use some miracle buttons—I thought that mightn't matter just for practice. I picked the likeliest-looking species, and then killed off-I mean, annihilated its nearest rivals-"

"What, individually? That must have been a colossal task ...!"

"No, I looked at the instruction tapes and I-er-set up a program. The program identified any over-violent, overaggressive primate species—giant carnivorous gorillas and suchlike-and automatically wiped them out."

"That was clever handling, I must say," said Harriman. "I thought I would have to explain to you about programming, but I see you've beaten me to it. Well, sir, what happened after you wiped out those monster primates? Can I-er-inspect?"

"Sure," said Jay; and they both bent over their viewers. Harriman showed Jay how to increase the specificity and magnification of the guest viewer; and now they both got a

good look at a sylvan scene.

The planet was much like Olympus, with a yellow sun and a blue sky, but of course much wilder, with huge forests and tropical savannahs. And there, on the fringe of a warm forest, they saw a troop of primates. There were some fifty individuals of both sexes and all ages, a good deal hairier than humans, but with bare flat faces and delicate features. A few were strolling among the trees, unhurriedly foraging for fruit, some on all fours, others on their hind legs. They were clearly able to walk bipedally, but they were not being purists about it. It sometimes happened that two foragers came up to a luscious fruit about the same time: when this happened, each blinked at the other, and then backed away with a curious little simper. Neither got the fruit: both went off to look for pickings elsewhere.

All of a sudden another troop of the creatures emerged

from the depths of the forest.

"This should be interesting," said Harriman in Jay's ear.
"A crisis situation. Now, in my worlds I've always found—

hey, what's wrong with them?"

The "crisis situation" was resolving itself very simply. The invading troop infiltrated the earlier arrivals, who blinked at them and simpered. The invaders simpered back. Then they took one look at the wide savannah ahead, whinnied or whimpered a little, and melted back into the deep forest.

"Well!" said Harriman. "Is that what always happens,

when two groups meet? No battles, no defence of territory?"
"No," said Jay sharply. "I'm happy to say, my people are
not violent types. I chose the most peaceful species I could
find. I wanted to avoid the unhappy history of our own early
development . . ."

"I see. And do your peaceful 'people' never go out onto

the savannah?"

"Never. You see, there are large carnivores out there . . ."
"Aren't your people carnivores themselves? I should have

thought—"

"Certainly not," said Jay. "They're strict vegetarians! I want to develop a decent civilization, without all that outmoded barbarism. You know that's the kind of ideal I have been promoting in my kine sketches—civilized interaction between individuals and species. Surely it's important to start right?"

Harriman took a deep breath. "Yes, it is," he said. "Tell me, how long in their terms has your species there been living at that evolutionary level? Semi-bipedal forest-living fruiteaters, with no weapons—er, perhaps I should say, tools?"
"Twenty million years," said Jay disconsolately. "And in

that time, on this planet my program has eliminated four cousin-species, all savage hunters."

"Well, Mr Crystal," said Harriman, "that was your mistake. You have obviously, through your program, eliminated four very promising candidates for full humanity."

"Humanity?" cried Jay; "they are murderous beasts—"
"So were we all, once," said Harriman, with a gleam in his dark eyes. "And the beast still lurks in us: our civilization is just a veneer, necessary perhaps, but at bottom, for many of us, rather boring. Hence, largely, this boom in the creatron business. The big Box allows very many people to indulge harmlessly in delicious savagery. Wait till I've shown you the full scope of the empathy techniques, Mr Crystal! Then perhaps you'll change your ideas a little as to what's desirable and undesirable in a sub-world. Wouldn't you like to be, say, the savage leader of a mighty horde of magnificent barbarians, roaring through the jungle and the desert, the mountain and the plain, sacking towns and cities, holding at your mercy your cowering enemies and their equally cowering but much more attractive women-?"

"I would not!"

"Oh, never mind," sighed Harriman. "But look, sir, what-ever your ultimate ideals, let me tell you that you'll never create a human-type species this way, out of these nice guys. Nice guys come last. In fact, they don't even run at all. Two things you need: meat-eating, for a start; and aggression, selfishness, sheer death-take-the-hindmost competition as well. Hunting skills sharpen brains, and the competition with other members of the same species—that makes for real ambition. Ambition is what got us to Olympus in the first place. You remember how space travel began? It was a space race that put our race in space."

"There must be another way," said Jay stubbornly. "Look, Harriman, we may have made it to Olympus, but—I've read history too, you know—but we wrecked our original planet doing it, and damn nearly exterminated ourselves in the process. The damage we did to the universe-! I'd like to explore a better way—to see if I can't create a race without our

evils. This is not just a game: if I succeed, I may have some

vital message to give to all of us in the real world."

"All right—try," said Harriman, shrugging. "I'll teach you all there is to know about the machine—all the techniques of programming, empathy, and so on. And then—it'll be up to you. I might make one suggestion, though."

"What's that?"

"If you have to use the miracle buttons to favor one subhuman species over another, pick the meanest, the most cunning, the most bloody-minded one that the planet offers. That way, you'll speed up the evolution of true humanity very much. Oh, all right, all right, I know you won't—in that case, why not merely let things take their course? Keep off the miracle buttons, and see what evolution throws up. When they're wearing clothes—and swords—then you can take them in hand, and try to tame them. There are techniques for tampering even with intelligent species, you know, to make them milder or fiercer. For instance, you do this . . ."

By the end of that session Jay was handling the creatron so expertly that Harriman decided he could be left to get on with his experiments for several days. In fact, it was a whole week before the butler announced him again. Jay had not been actually on the creatron, but pacing beside it. When Harriman entered, he went forward, almost running, to meet him.

"Harriman, I-it's overwhelming-" he flustered.

"It is rather exciting, once you get into it, isn't it?" said the dark visitor, smiling. "Well, tell me all about it. You know, Mr Crystal, we will soon be able to drop the professional relationship—in a few more days, I think, I'll be able to cross you off my list of new clients, and then the Maintenance department of the Corporation will be officially in charge of you—not my team. After that, I hope we can be just fellow-practitioners of the great art; and—why not?—friends. Well now, Mr Crystal—"

"Call me Jay," said Jay. "Please."

"All right, Jay—if you'll call me Sam—short for Samael.
All my friends do."

"Sam-I've created Man."

"Congratulations, Jay. What did you do?"

"Nothing, really. I let evolution take its course, and—humanity arose! They became very like us—"

"What, those silly good-natured ape-men in the forest?"

"Oh, hell, no," said Jay, waving his hand as though brushing away an insect. "I got rid of them. In fact, I decided not to cheat any more—no more miracle buttons—so I started from scratch. I erased my first universe—"

"Your whole universe! Why not just the planet?"
"I had messed about too much," said Jay contritely. "I wanted to start over, clean. So I did. Set up the four laws, and the mass-constant, and ran up the new universe at top speed. Then I chose a middling-sized galaxy, and began to watch various promising yellow suns. I just watched. Many of them developed the right sort of planets, and I created Life over and over, just by willing it, as you showed me. And then I let the life behave as it wanted to. I used the middle empathy band—it was a really weird sensation—"

"It sure is," said Harriman, with a reminiscent gleam in his dark eves. "You feel it coming out of your gut, don't you? All of them—the sharks, the snakes, the dinosaurs, the tigers. I like to use the micro-focus sometimes, and feel myself giving birth to the little fellows, the bacteria, the viruses. Hell, I've fissioned myself into a billion bugs—syphilis, rabies, cancer cells, and also into the leukocytes that go for them. I've killed myself, eaten myself on all levels. There's no kick

like it."

"Yes, well, it's certainly disturbing," said Jay, passing his hand dazedly over his fair hair. "So much horror, so much evil-it becomes evil, after all, when you reach the highest animals-and every bit of it was me! Out of the darkness of my mind, the things I hate took form. To be frank, I nearly went crazy from time to time: I had to fight hard not to reach for the miracle buttons and exterminate monster after monster. But I didn't touch the buttons—I let those nightmares do what they wanted to do!" He paused, shuddering.

"You did practise the relax-withdrawal, didn't you?" said Harriman anxiously. "Things might get rough if you didn't."

"Oh, sure, I withdrew," said Jay flatly. "What else? Do you think I could stand deep empathy-or even middle empathy-with a massacre? When I was all the victims and all the killers at the same time?"

"Okay, okay," said Harriman. "So-what did you come up with?"

"Civilizations," said Jay, "many civilizations, on many planets. Not all were of humanoids—great Olympus, I've

been centaurs, I've been dolphins, kangaroids, octopoids . . . . but in the end it was the humanoids who fascinated me most. So like us!"

"And were there any meek-and-mild races among your civilizations?"

"Not one," admitted Jay sadly. "All carnivores and killers, like you said, Sam. I suppose it has to be that way at the start. Paradise was never lost-but maybe it can be found. That's what I want to work towards. Meanwhile-meanwhile, I must say, some of my races have done the most astonishing things! Why, they've even produced literature!"

"They frequently do," nodded Harriman, smiling. "In fact, a lot of the kine-writers plagiarize from the works of their own creatures. You might think of that yourself, Jay. It's not really cheating. After all, your creatures are you. They're a part of your mind which you're liberating, putting to use . . ."

"I never imagined I could write anything like this," said Jay. "I transcribed it onto tape." He flicked a switch. "Listen! Of course, this is only a translation into our language, from one that my creatures invented. It sounds much better in the original, which—great Olympus! I understand perfectly. It's from a huge long poem. .."

The remote, impersonal voice of the speech-synthesizer be-

gan to chant:

Full well I know in my heart that the sacred city will

The day shall come when Troy and her king will be laid low.

Priam and Priam's people, the folk of the strong ash spear:

Yet not for them do I grieve, the queen, the king nor my brothers

Many and brave, who will fall in the dust before the foemen.

But for you, dear wife, in the day when some bronzecoated Akhaian

Shall lead you away a slave weeping for your lost freedom.

Then in some foreign land will you bend to your master's will

At the hard toil of the loom, or under the burden of water,

Bearing your load from enemy streams to enemy houses.

Some man shall say as he sees you, 'Why, that was the wife of Hektor,

The best of heroes in war, when men still fought about Troy'.

So shall one say, and bring fresh grief to you, friendless and widowed;

But let me be dead in that day, and let the heaped earth hide me

Before I hear your cries, as they drag you into slavery.

The voice passed into silence, and Jay switched off the tape. He said:

"They don't write poetry like that nowadays-not in our

universe."

Harriman shrugged. "Of course not. How can they—how can we? We have a comfortable civilization, and the immortality pill, and wars are banned by the United Planets Organization. Just look at what makes up great poetry—for instance, that extract you taped, which I agree is pretty good: death, war, slavery—the blackest of evils. Sheer tragedy. Without that, no brilliant poetry. And no kicks . . . You have to go to your sub-universes now for those. Say, by the way, what race produced that poem? They must be pretty good, even by my standards . . ."

Jay shuddered. "They're the most frightening of all my humanoids. Not much to look at—in relative measurements rather small, in fact nearly all specimens are well under eight

feet-"

"The runts!" said Harriman, grimacing.

"—but they make up for that in their fierceness, in grim determination, in sheer ingenious cruelty. When I realize that they're me—" He shook his head. "I must do something about them. They're a challenge to all I love and believe in."

"Why not just press a certain button?" said Harriman.

"Jay, it's not worth upsetting yourself-"

"No—no more annihilations," said Jay firmly. "I promised that to myself. These people are *mine*—I must help them, change them. I'll think of something." He seemed to change

the subject. "Sam, can you tell me one little thing? What's that knob for, on the extreme top right of the control panel?"

"What knob?"

"This," said Jay, touching it. The thing was a small projection, apparently a useless metal hump screwed down to the

main body of the panel.

"That—oh, nothing," said Harriman, with a quick little laugh. "That shouldn't be on there—in one version of the machine there was an extra control there for a special kind of empathy, but we found it too dangerous, and the control was discarded. It's surely not functional on yours."

"Dangerous?" said Jay slowly. "Can the creatron be dan-

gerous? In the real world, I mean?"

"Not if you use it sensibly," said Harriman, "but in the early days of the development we had a few accidents with people who weren't sensible. In one of the worst accidents—well, we never could find out exactly what happened, because you know if the creator dies, all his universes are automatically erased. Their being is his being, and when he goes, so do they."

"Somebody died?" said Jay, huge-eyed. "On Olympus?

How is it that didn't make the newscasts?"

"It wasn't on Olympus—luckily," said Harriman. "It was on Amentet, which is practically owned by our Corporation, so luckily we were able to hush the matter up. Anyway, it was the guy's own fault—he got hooked by the Box, and we didn't have enough experience at that time to read the signs of addiction. He was a Corporation employee, name of O. Siris, I believe—he kept muttering that he was being torn apart, and then finally he was torn apart. He had been bleeding from more than a dozen wounds when they found his body, still strapped to the machine. You see, some dreams can be deadly, if you let them take hold of you. Now, Jay, you have been warned. These present models are much safer than the early ones, but—that monitor is not there for nothing. And if you feel you're getting into any kind of trouble, don't hesitate to get me on the laserphone."

"All right," said Jay.

The fine Olympian days went by. Jay was now thoroughly absorbed by his hobby, his creatron: no longer did he write for the big 3-D screen, but then he didn't need to: he had an adequate income from his royalties on former work plus the

basic salary paid by the United Planets to all citizens as of right, the Existence Benefit. The cut-down in his work hardly mattered: he felt that he was deepening his understanding of human nature so much with his new dream-box that when he returned to kine-writing he would produce masterpieces. What was perhaps more serious was that his absorption in the sub-world was sapping his social life in the real universe. His current girl friend, Aphra, complained about it. One early morning, as they lay on Jay's anti-gravity bed, Aphra swallowed the pill which rendered her at once immortal and sterile, washed it down with a shot-glass of nectar, and said:

"Jay, I'm leaving."

"Yes," said Jay vaguely. "I suppose it's time." He slipped off the other side of the bed and reached for his robe, his eyes unfocussed.

Aphra sat up sharply on the foam-force-field, her long yellow hair waving like angry snakes, her usually soulful blue

eyes for once contracted in irritation.

"No," she said, "I mean, I've had enough. Pay attention, will you? Your mind's not on it when we make love any more. Well, you aren't the only fellow who—Sam, for instance, now: he's more fun to be with, there's a bit of spice to him! And he can take that box or leave it. If you want to see me again, Jay, give me a lase at his place."

Jay let her go, nodding absentmindedly. He was not jealous. Besides, Sam was now his best friend. He would take

good care of Aphra.

And Sam came round almost every day now, to swap yarns about sub-universes. Their dealer-client relationship was now officially at an end: they were merely two fans together. Sam seemed to be much more relaxed about the possible dan-

gers of the creatron.

"I checked with the Corp.," he said, on one of these visits. "The Total Empathy control is not functional on your machine—for some reason the button's still there under that metal cap, but the technicians assured me that there's no connections under it. All new models, from now on, will have no button there at all. Anyway, I know you can't do anything foolish like that guy Siris." He smiled, and nodded at the creatron. "How's it going in there, Jay?"

"Terrible—and wonderful." Jay swallowed. "Whenever I take it off 'Hold' I've got the Time control set for scanning at a year an hour on that planet I mentioned to you. Yes, I

know that's slow, but I'm following their civilizations in detail now. I've moved on about two centuries from the time of that poem I quoted, and-strange things are happening, Sam.

They're developing philosophy, religion—"
"Yeah, they usually do," said Harriman, grinning. "I always enjoy my creatures' religions. Every one of them involves humanoid sacrifices—some of them very ingenious in their methods—and quite often the sacrifices are offered to Guess Who? Me, yours truly, the owner and maker of the universe, Samael Harriman himself!"

Jay shuddered. "There's some of that in my world, too. It's horrible. But-I have hopes. It's decreasing, especially in a belt about the middle of my world's greatest continent-complex. Over the last two centuries, there have been some brilliant men arising, in several different cultures. One little tribe gave up human sacrifice long ago, and substituted animals. Then, recently, one of their best men denounced even that. Curiously enough, he claimed to speak in my name. He told his people that I wanted 'mercy, and not sacrifice'. And in other countries, other men have been saving much the same thing. Look: let's get on the machine, and I'll show you."

When they were at the viewers, Jay swept the scanner down through the clouds of that blue-and-white planet. Below them lay the peaks of a towering mountain range capped with ice and snow. Jay swept southwards, at decreasing altitude, until they seemed to be hovering with an eagle'seye-view over a wide river-plain-a warm area, with jungles and narrow clearings where a brown-skinned people were growing rice. Here and there the clearings became wider, and in their centres, on the banks of the rivers, rose walled cities—cities that looked well laid out, with busy markets, gorgeous palaces, richly adorned temples, and spacious parks.

Finally, Jay narrowed the view to one city, and in that city to a beautiful park. In the distance, tame protected royal deer were wandering over lawns and between flame-of-the-forest trees. Closer up, between the scattered trees sat, squatted, stood, or strolled a large crowd of all kinds of people-little clusters of bejewelled nobles and merchants, with their bodyguards and slaves of both sexes; shaven-headed priests; and a large ragged rabble of common folk, men, women, and children, with a fringe of dirty and diseased beggars. Towards the centre of this crowd was a cleared space around a great green-leaved tree. Before the tree, in the front rank of the crowd, sat a handful of gaunt men in yellow robes: and facing these and the whole crowd, there sat under the tree another yellow-robed man—a man less gaunt, with an imposing

presence and handsome, composed features.

That, at least, was the scene as Harriman saw it. For Jay, it was different: for he not only saw the scene, he was it. He was that hot earth, that grass, and his were the branches and green twigs that swayed in the warm breeze. These sensations were relatively dim; much more strongly, he felt the life of the deer browsing in the distance, and of the crowd milling in the foreground: he was proud and well-fed in the nobles, he was seductive in their dancing-girls, he was lusty in the young farmer come into the city for the day, he was in dull pain in the old beggar with the crippled knee.

But above all, he was in the man under the tree.

He felt a vast compassion rise in him, as he looked through the man's eyes at the crowd. Suffering—all the world was suffering: birth was suffering, old age was suffering, sickness was suffering, death was suffering. Contact with unpleasant things was suffering, parting from what one wanted was suffering. And now only he knew the cure, only he could teach that best way out, the Middle Path . . .

And so he, the Enlightened One, taught them. The Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Five Precepts. All life was sacred: therefore abstain from injuring any living creature. And all life was one: the idea that you had an individual, eternal soul was the great illusion from which you had to break free. If you clung to that illusory self, you would remain bound on the wheel of suffering existence.

"Sabbe sankhara dukkha." The words of that warm country's language came fluently out of his mouth, sonorous but not strange, since he had the gift of all his creatures' tongues.

"All compounded things are suffering . . ."

The crowd were impressed. A few of the people plucked up courage to ask him questions. A priest:

"How should one sacrifice to the gods, O Enlightened

"The best sacrifice is that of right moral action, of mercy to all living things. . . As for the gods, they too are fellowcreatures: they too need enlightenment."

"O Holy One!" cried a woman suddenly. She was a new arrival; she bore on her hip a baby which—no, not a baby:

the only life in it was on the microscopic level of decay. The corpse of a baby. To this personal grief she clung; and was therefore bound. "O Holy One, you know all secrets: grant me a charm, a medicine to bring my son back to life!"

And he answered her: "Go, woman, to every house in the

city where there has been no death, and ask of them one mustard seed ..."

"But," said the woman, stricken, "the city is old: in every house there has been death."

"That knowledge," said the man under the tree, "is the

only medicine for death."

At this point Jay began to withdraw from the scene, his viewpoint rising till he was looking down on the deer-park through the eyes of a brown hawk that glided and soared, uttering mournful, tinkling cries as it scanned the earth in hopes of prey. He pressed the Hold button.

As they both got off the machine, he translated for Harriman the message of the man under the tree. He felt aston-

ished and elated. He finished:

"I didn't know I had any such things in me! Me, the Enlightened One! Why, Sam, on the strength of that I could set up as a philosopher in this world!"

Sam yawned. "I could tell it was your world all right, Jay. My bright boys don't come up with teachings of that kind. Currently, my people are going strong for Zapism."

"Zapism?"

"Yeah. The First Noble Truth of Zapism is stated like this: Zap a rat before he zaps you. Thus spake my Zapathrustra. However, Jay, I'll hand it to you: your world there is brilliant, complex, artistic. I liked your whole crowd-the beggars, the prostitutes, the bully-boys, the nobles. You've really got tremendous talent—no, that's too weak—I should say, genius. My worlds are cruder, simpler..."

"Sam," said Jay, "What did he mean by saying 'the gods are our fellow-creatures, they too need enlightenment'? He

was talking about us, wasn't he?"

"I guess so," said Harriman. "Why not?"

"But—but he sounded as if he knew about us—as if we

were on the same plane of reality as himself!"

"Again, why not?" Harriman smiled darkly. "After all, that guy is really a part of your mind, Jay, so in one sense he is on the same plane. And our creatures do get inklings about us-that's a thing we fans discovered pretty early in the game." He laughed, shortly. "Before he had that accident, that guy Siris said something that gave us all in the Corp. a bit of a jolt. See what you make of it, O Enlightened One! He said, 'We made the sub-worlds, but who made our world? Maybe the sub-worlders did. We invent them, they invent us. You scratch my essence, I scratch yours. Mutual make-be-lieve! It's creative writing that makes the worlds go round . . .' How about that, huh?"

Jay muttered, "Herakleitos!"

"I beg your pardon," said Harriman, "Is that a new swear-

word, or something?"

"No," said Jay. "Herakleitos is one of the philosophers of that planet in my sub-universe. He has ideas very like the one you mentioned. He lives in a country a bit to the north-west of the one we were looking at-they're a brilliant people too. You would like them: very artistic, but very bloody-minded. Herakleitos is one of the bloodiest-minded and the cleverest of them. He says that gods and men live in a mutual relationship—each produces the other. He also says that all existence depends on conflict, strife, war-if conflict were to cease, the whole universe would disappear."

"He's dead right," smiled Harriman. "At least, he'd be right in my universe, because if the battles stopped in my world I'd press the erase button. Eternal peace is just too boring to be endured. Jay, I like the sound of your Herak guy much better than the one you just showed me: he's really on

the ball."

"I must prove him wrong," muttered Jay. "Oh yes, I've learnt now that some aggression is necessary, in the early development of humanity. But not so much, not what is actually going on in most places of my world! War, massacre,

slavery, torture—surely that doesn't have to go on—"
"Oh yes it does," said Harriman crisply. "It has to go on somewhere, Jay, or we'll go nuts. You don't realize it, but we of the Creation Corp., we really saved our civilization from a general breakdown. Before the Box was invented, you should have seen the figures for intakes into mental hospitals, attempted suicides, even murders. People must have kicks, you know. Now they get 'em in their private boxes, that's allthat's why we can afford peace and painless living in the big world, the real world,"

"The other worlds are real, too," said Jay. "You've already admitted that. And I know it's true. When I am in there, it's

as real as here. To think that I once annihilated a whole universe!" He shuddered.

Harriman laughed. "Why, that's the biggest kick of all. Only, it's best not to erase it all simultaneously—if you do, they're all gone without knowing about it. If you erase selectively, then you can have fun, as the poor saps see their suns and moons disappearing, and then the next county, and so on. I always end a game that way."

Jay looked at Harriman, appalled. And from then on, their friendship was not what it had been.

For many days after that, Jay buried himself completely in the world of his creation. He did not leave his palace—he did not even leave the room that housed his universe, but had his robots serve his meals right there, on a small table beside the great machine. He ate hurriedly, and then returned at once to that terrible and wonderful blue-and-white planet.

He still kept Time going at a year-an-hour, which allowed him to cover a sub-world generation in a couple of Olympian days. Subjectively, when he was in middle or deep empathy, his time was the time of the sub-world-which meant that his solid dreams packed what seemed to be the experience of a

lifetime into three or four "real" days.

Gradually Jay concentrated his attention on the culture which had produced the terrible philosopher Herakleitos. These people were rising to a peak of glory. Few in numbers, they nevertheless defeated a huge eastern empire: and Jay was there when they did it. He entered the brain of a fullyarmed warrior, in a sea-flight by a rocky island-and felt the exultation of his host-creature as he leapt ashore and drove his spear again and again through the cowering enemies. It should have been horrible, but it was not—the man was in love with what he was doing, namely exercising one of his best skills, and doing so without personal hatred in defence of his beloved city. And, as the fight ended with the enemy all dead or in chains, words were forming in the hoplite's brain-for, Jay found, he was also a great poet. He would write a tragedy for the next festival, and this fight would be in it. But it would be no boast of his city's prowess: rather, it would be a poem of awe at the justice of the gods-how they smote down overweening pride, the lust for conquest; and the enemy king would be the tragic hero. But their own war-song would have a modest place:

O children of Hellas, onward! Now make free Your fatherland, your children, wives, your fathers' Gods and graves: now the fight is for all things...

Jay was also in the theatre on the day when the play was given. It was a great play. Best of all, the audience wept for the sufferings of the *enemy*...

Yes, thought Jay, there is a greatness in this people. Perhaps they will transform this world into something better . . .

He followed them for one, two generations. And now the city which had fought so nobly was itself an empire, with all the overweening pride and lust for conquest which the old hoplite had denounced. Quarrel after quarrel they picked with their neighbours, until they roused a whole coalition of enemies against them. Any friend of these enemies they attacked; even neutrals...

Jay watched with horror as, in time of peace, the forces of the city besieged a small neutralist island town. Traitors within opened the gates; and then the invading army rounded up the whole population, women and children in one great herd, men in another. Then the soldiers began methodically cutting the throats of the men. The women and children were screaming; but the soldiers made them wait there till the massacre was over before they drove them down to the ships and the slave-markets...

One of the city poets made a play after that business, too. But this time the play was bitter and ugly with horror. It was set in legendary times, but the story was much the same: the burning town, the killing, the captive women. The enslaved queen cried:

O God, our maker, begetter: do you see?

And the other slave-women replied:

He sees, but the flames still burn . . .

Jay hurriedly pressed the Hold button, and withdrew. He even withdrew from the creatron room, and for several hours lay in a stupor on his luxurious bed.

When he arose, he had given up all hopes of salvation from the cities of Hellas; and he was also suffering from a profound sense of guilt. He was the callous god to whom the slaves cried in vain; he was also all the killers, all the slavemasters, all the torturers. Somehow, he must expiate. He

thought of the miracle buttons; then shook his head. No, that was merely cheating. And it solved nothing. The evil was in himself; in himself he must destroy it. He would save his world, if it killed him...

He felt a burning desire to get down in there, to do something effective, to commit himself utterly. Then he remembered something. No, it wouldn't work—Sam had said there were no connections. But it was at least worth investigat-

ing ...

Back in the room, he searched round the back of the creatron, and found the instruction tapes. He had never played them right to the end: now he did so. And finally the robot voice said, tonelessly:

"Total Empathy Control. Extreme top right, colored purple. Not, repeat not, to be touched unless an assistant is at hand to watch the brain monitor and if necessary to impose

Hold and end the empathy.

"Total Empathy produces total illusion. The operator will lose all consciousness except the consciousness of the host-creature: subjectively, he will be that creature until the creature dies or until Hold is imposed. It is advised that the operator should select a host-creature which is in good health and safe from external dangers; and also arrange with the assistant to have the Hold control activated after a very limited period. The operator should also check that he himself is in perfect physical condition before attempting total empathy.

"Repeat: Total Empathy Control. Extreme top right,

colored purple ..."

Jay switched off. Then he summoned his butler.

"That metal cap," he said, pointing. "Can you remove it for me?"

"Certainly, sir," said the robot. He put his metal fingers to his metal chest, opened the small window there, and took out an instrument which had hardly changed in a thousand years—a screw-driver. Then he bent over the creatron. A minute later, the butler straightened. He was holding up a small, rounded piece of metal.

"Order executed, sir."

"All right-now leave me," said Jay.

"Sir." The butler left.

There it was—a purple button, no different in size or shape from many others on the great machine. It wouldn't work, of course, Jay told himself, but it might be a help psychologically. When he was in middle to deep empathy, and had selected a worthy host, he would press it—and then follow that man through his life of striving for justice and mercy. It would have to be someone like that great Enlightened One, but perhaps more active, more impassioned. Not in the East, not in Hellas. How about that little tribe in the area between, whose prophets had so long ago denounced sacrifice . . . ?

He pressed the "Run" button, and history resumed. Jay located the tribe he wanted. They had passed through various tribulations, but they seemed to have emerged from them: and their faith was firmer than ever fixed in a just and merciful God. Now the Hellenes were expanding all over the middle of the planet, and they were lording it over that little tribe, too. They were trying to turn them into imitation Hellenes, acceptors of the world as it was, in all its sensuality and cru-

But the tribe resisted fiercely. Persecution merely spurred them on to greater effort; and now the Hellenes were overthrown by a power from the West. These new overlords were a grimmer people. At first they favored the little tribe, butsurely this could not last. For the newcomers, now a great empire, were thoroughly infected by Hellene values. They were the biggest slave-masters of all time, rich, arrogant, merciless. The massacre of the island town was repeated again and again, all round the coasts of that middle sea, until the Empire was unbeatable, and Jay was thoroughly sickened.

It was now late at night. He pressed the Hold button, went

to his bed-chamber-and did not sleep well that night.

Next morning he rose a little later than usual, had a light breakfast, and threw himself upon the creatron. He pressed the Run button, and found his favorite little tribe. Yes, it was as he had expected: they were seething with righteous anger against their masters, the holders of cruel Empire.

And everywhere among them was the feeling: the hour is

at hand.

On the bank of a river stood a wild man, a prophet. A stream of pilgrims was coming to him, and he was ducking them in the river, pouring water over their heads, in token of purification.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" he cried.

Jay explored the prophet's personality. Fire, yes, and indignation—but a certain narrowness, a lack of balance. Could he not find . . . ?

The next moment a pilgrim approached the river bank—a young man with a short neat beard and shoulder-length hair, poorly but cleanly dressed.

Jay did not need to explore. Already he felt the attrac-

tion—the greatness of soul, the burning pity.

He reached out his right hand, and pressed the purple button.

The room was bright with the light of Olympus' moon when they found him. Aphra was in the room a little ahead of Sam, and when she saw the inertness of the body stretched out on the machine, she uttered a shriek and rushed forward.

"Sam, he's bleeding!" she cried.

"Hope so," muttered Harriman. He ran to the right side of the creatron, and punched the Hold button. Then he turned to look at Jay.

Blood was running along his forearms. Aphra was feeling

his chest, touching his lips.

"He's alive!" she whispered, brightening. "Oh, Sam, what

happened?"

"I can guess," said Harriman grimly, looking at the exposed purple button. "Those idiot engineers assured me—but never mind that now. Let's get him off of that—but carefully: he might have some bones broken. Damn lucky thing you insisted on coming today-I don't believe they even had anybody in the Corp, watching the monitor. No, don't try to move him yet: I'll call the help."

The robots came, and, following Sam's instructions, got Jay onto a stretcher and finally onto the soft anti-grav bed. At

this point he groaned, and opened his eyes. "What—where—"

"Take it easy," said Harriman. "You'll be O.K., Jay. You had a little accident—but we got here fast, you were much luckier than that guy Siris. You've got some wounds—the one in your side is the worst, but it seems to have missed all the vital organs. Don't talk yet. We'll get the auto-doc onto you in a couple of seconds, and then-"

They did just that. Jay's wounds healed in seconds, and after two minutes he was through the sedation period. He

breathed deeply, and sat up.

"O.K. now, spill it," said Harriman, eyes wide and eager. "In one way, Jay, I'm glad this happened. We've never had such a chance before-no one who got into a really dangerous, physical-effects emergency in T.E. has lived to tell the tale. What did it seem was happening to you?"

Jay told them.

"Say!" breathed Harriman. "You know, that's one method I never dreamed up? Jay, you have the most creative ideas! Now, of course, I'll be able to use that in my worlds. . . Pity it had to happen to you, though—subjectively, I mean. Well, I hope you've learnt your lesson. Mind you, I've already lased to the Corp, and they've got a team in your Box room already. That purple button is coming off right now—that's as a public precaution. After that, if you like, we'll give you a new Box. We owe you at least that—after all, it was our carelessness that landed you in this mess."

"No," said Jay. He scrambled off the bed. "Tell your men

to stop-"

He was rushing for the door. Harriman blocked his path.

"Take it easy. What-"

"I don't want them to erase my universe!"

"They won't," said Harriman. "That's your privilege. I guess you'd like to erase it slowly, beginning with those guys who—"

"No," said Jay, "I'm not going to erase it at all. I'm going to continue it. Oh, I won't try Total Empathy again—I don't need to. I know what it's like now to be a man in a world of pain and death and cruelty. I also know that you can't eliminate pain and death and cruelty—we haven't eliminated them even from our world, we've just tucked them away from our godlike selves, into such places as these box-universes. The pain and the evil has to be—because pain sharpens pleasure, and evil brightens good. What's important, though, Sam," he said, looking at Harriman steadily, "is to know which side you're on."

From that day onwards, Jay's life on Olympus became more normal. He once more wrote for the kine-screen: and the art circles hailed the appearance of a new master dramatist, no longer a writer of delicate little sketches, but a poet of such passion as had not been seen on Olympus before. Some of the Olympians were puzzled; but others acknowledged his greatness. Jay, in short, was a success; he was even popular socially.

And Aphra was once more sharing his bed.

"I like you much better than that Sam," she said, with a

shudder. "Jay, I had to find out the hard way. You know what? He's a sadist..."

And Jay also spent many hours at his creatron, though he was no longer addicted to it. He watched the Empire crumble; and then, to his astonishment, he watched himself being hailed as a god, and a new sort of Empire rising in his own name. An Empire that paid lip-service to universal love and mercy, and at the same time embarked on crusades. on massacres of unbelievers and heretics . . .

Jay smiled sardonically, a little wearily. It was always the same story: all victories over cruelty quickly became cruel

themselves . . .

And that new sort of Empire passed, too. Now the planet was split among several great nations, all making progress in physical science, all beginning to devastate their world.

"At this rate," thought Jay, "they'll soon be turning into us! Then who will be the gods, and who the creatures?"

From time to time, he had company at the guest viewer—not Harriman, now, but Aphra. Aphra hugely enjoyed all of Jay's world—she was the perfect audience. She loved the sinners as much as the saints, the villains as much as the virtuous. She had a special weakness for world-conquerors.

"Isn't he cute?" she breathed, gazing down on a young artillery officer who had made himself an Emperor, and was tumbling old kingdoms as fast as his men could march . . .

"Do you think he's cute now?" said Jay, as the great army died in the snow, while the Emperor fled at top speed for his distant capital.

Aphra tossed her yellow locks.
"Not any more," she admitted. "Besides, he's middle-aged, and getting a paunch. The young emperor on the other side, though—and that funny stiff general—they're really fun!"

Jay smiled. He was getting used to Aphra's point of view, as she presided like a spirit of beauty over his world. Yes, pain and evil had to be there: and many of the beasts of prey had a certain terrible beauty—even the human ones. You still had to choose goodness—but you could choose it wholeheartedly only because goodness could never win out completely. And so the great game went on . . .

Did this make perfect sense? He wasn't sure. At times he thought it did-but at other times he was overwhelmed by

the mystery of it all.

And he still sought for wisdom among his sub-people on the blue-and-white planet. Their science was crude, but their philosophy and theology often quite subtle. They had a good deal to say about Jay's nature—things that thoroughly surprised him.

Finally, nearly two thousand years of sub-time after the accident with the purple button, a new idea had arisen among the philosophers and the churches. In medium empathy, Jay entered the minds of his former worshippers, and heard them

think it and say it. Gravely they repeated:

"God is dead!"

Jay smiled as he pressed the Hold button.

"How wrong they are," he murmured to Aphra, "luckily for them! But it's true, they and I had a close shave, once...."

## DANCE BAND ON THE TITANIC

## by Jack L. Chalker

When a person is deeply involved in science fiction so much so that he becomes in turn a fan, a publisher, and finally a novelist of some note, he tends to have a hobby that has nothing to do with sf or fantasy. Your editor collects toy soldiers, for instance. In the case of Jack Chalker, he collects ferryboats. Well, not exactly—ferryboat lore is his hobby. And, being a writer, he combined both his loves in this moving novelette.

The girl was committing suicide again on the lower afterdeck. They'd told me I'd get used to it, but after four times I could still only pretend to ignore it, pretend that I didn't hear the body go over, hear the splash, and the scream as she was sucked into the screws. It was all too brief and becoming all too familiar.

When the scream was cut short, as it always was, I continued walking forward, toward the bow. I would be needed there to guide the spotlight with which the Captain would have to spot the buoys to get us all safely into Southport harbor.

It was a clear night; once at the bow I could see the stars in all their glory, too numerous to count, or spot familiar constellations. It's a sight that's known and loved by all those who follow the sea, and it had a special meaning for we, who manned the Orcas, for the stars were immutable, the one

unchanging part of our universe.

I checked the lines, the winch, and ties in the chained-off portion of the bow, then notified the Captain by walkie-talkie that all was ready. He gave me "Very well," and told me that we'd be on the mark in five minutes. This gave me a few moments to relax, adjust my vision to the darkness, and look around.

The bow is an eerie place at night for all its beauty; there is an unreality about a large ferryboat in the dark. Between where I stood on station and the bridge superstructure towering above me there was a broad area always crowded with people in warm weather. The bridge—dominating the aft field of vision, a ghostly, unlit gray-white monolith, reflecting the moonlight with an almost unreal cast and glow. A silent, spinning radar mast on top, and the funnel, end-on, in back of the bridge, with its wing supports and mast giving it a futuristic cast, only made the scene more alien, more awesome.

I glanced around at the people on deck. Not as many as usual, but then it was very late, and there was a chill in the air. I saw a few familiar faces, and there was some lateral shift in focus on a number of them, indicating that I was

seeing at least three levels of reality that night.

Now, that last is kind of hard to explain. I'm not sure whether I understand it, either, but I well remember when I

applied for this job, and the explanations I got then.

Working deck on a ferryboat is a funny place for a former English teacher, anyway. But, while I'd been, I like to think, a good teacher, I was in constant fights with the administration over their lax discipline, stuffed-shirt attitudes toward teaching and teachers, and their general incompetence. The educational system isn't made for mavericks; it's designed to make everyone conform to bureaucratic ideals which the teacher is supposed to exemplify. One argument too many, I guess, and there I was, an unemployed teacher in a time when there are too many teachers. So I drifted. I'd lost my parents years before and there were no other close relatives, so I had no responsibilities. I'd always loved ferryboatsraised on them, loved them with the same passion some folks like trains and trolley cars and such-and when I discovered an unskilled job opening on the old Delaware ferry I took it. The fact that I was an ex-teacher actually helped; ferry companies like to hire people who relate well to the general public. After all, deck duty is hectic when the ferry's docking or docked, but for the rest of the time you just sort of stand there, and every tourist and traveler in the world wants to talk. If you aren't willing to talk back and enjoy it, forget ferryboats.

And I met Joanna. I'm not sure if we were in love—maybe I was, but I'm pretty sure Joanna wasn't capable of loving anyone. Like all the other men in her life, I was just convenient. For a while things went smoothly—I had a job I liked, and we shared the rent. She had a little daughter she doted on, father unknown, and little Harmony and I hit it off, too. We all gave each other what each needed.

It lasted a little more than a year.

In the space of three weeks my neat, comfortable, complacent world came apart. First she threw that damned party while I was working, and a cigarette or something was left, and the apartment burned. The fire department managed to get Joanna out—but little Harmony had been asleep in a far room and they never got to her through the smoke.

I tried to comfort her, tried to console her, but I guess I was too full of my own life, my own self-importance in her reality, that I just didn't see the signs. A couple of weeks after the fire she'd seemed to brighten up, act more like her

normal self.

And, one evening, while I worked on the boat, she hanged herself.

Just a week later that damned bridge-tunnel put the ferry out of business, too. I'd known it was coming, of course, but I'd made few plans beyond the closing—I'd figured I could live off Joanna for a while and we'd make our decisions together.

Now here I was alone, friendless, jobless, and feeling guilty as hell. I seriosuly thought about ending it all myself about then, maybe going down to the old ferryboat and blowing it and me to hell in one symbolic act of togetherness. But, then, just when I'd sunk to such depths, I got this nice, official-looking envelope in the mail from something called the Bluewater Corporation, Southport, Maine. Just a funny logo, some blue water with an odd, misty-looking shape of a ship in it.

"Dear Mr. Dalton," the letter read. "We have just learned of the closing of the Delaware service, and we are in need of some experienced ferry people. After reviewing your qualifi-

cations, we believe that you might fit nicely into our operation, which, we guarantee, will not be put out of business by bridge or tunnel. If this prospect interests you, please come to Southport terminal at your earliest convenience for a final interview. Looking forward to seeing you soon, I remain, sincerely yours, Herbert V. Penobscot, Personnel Manager,

Bluewater Corp."

I just stood there staring at the thing for I don't know how long. A ferry job! That alone should have excited me, yet I wondered about it, particularly that line about "reviewing my qualifications" and "final interview." Funny terms. I could see why they'd look for experienced people, and all ferry folk knew when a line was closed and would naturally look for their own replacements there, but—why me? I hadn't applied to them, hadn't ever heard of them or their line—or, for that matter, of Southport, Maine either. Obviously they had some way of preselecting their people—very odd for this kind of a business.

I scrounged up an old atlas and tried to find it. The letterhead said "Southport—St. Michael—The Island," but I could find nothing about any such place in the atlas or almanac. If the letterhead hadn't looked so convincing, I'd have sworn somebody was putting me on. As it was, I had nothing else to do, and it beat drinking myself to death, so I hitchhiked up.

It wasn't easy finding Southport, I'll tell you. Even people in nearby towns had never heard of it. The whole town was about a dozen houses, a seedy ten-unit motel, a hot dog stand, and a very small ferry terminal with a standard but

surprisingly large ferry ramp and parking area.

I couldn't believe the place warranted a ferry when I saw it; you had to go about sixty miles into the middle of nowhere on a road the highway department had deliberately engineered to miss some of the world's prettiest scenery, and had last paved sometime before World War II, just to get there.

There was a light on in the terminal, so I went in. A grayhaired man, about fifty, was in the ticket office, and I went over and introduced myself. He looked me over carefully,

and I knew I didn't present a very good appearance.

"Sit down, Mr. Dalton," he offered in a tone that was friendly but businesslike. "My name's McNeil. I've been expecting you. This really won't take long, but the final interview includes a couple of strange questions. If you don't want

to answer any of them, feel free, but I must ask them none-

theless. Will you go along with me?"

I nodded and he fired away. It was the damndest job interview I'd ever had. He barely touched on my knowledge of ferries except to ask whether it mattered to me that the *Orcas* was a single-bridge, twin-screw affair, not a double-ender like I'd been used to. It still loaded on one end and unloaded on the other, though, through a raisable bow, and a ferry was a ferry to me and I told him so.

Most of the questions were of a personal nature, my family and friends, my attitudes, and some were downright too per-

sonal.

"Have you ever contemplated or attempted suicide?" he asked me in the same tone he'd use to ask if you brushed your teeth in the morning.

I jumped. "What's that have to do with anything?" I snapped. After all this I was beginning to see why the job

was still open.

"Just answer the question," he responded, sounding almost

embarrassed. "I told you I had to ask them all."

Well, I couldn't figure out what this was all about, but I finally decided, what the hell, I had nothing to lose and it was a beautiful spot to work.

"Yes," I told him. "Thought about it, anyway." And I told him why. He just nodded thoughtfully, jotted something on a preprinted form, and continued. His next question was worse.

"Do you now believe in ghosts, devils, and/or demonic

forces?" he asked in that same routine tone.

I couldn't suppress a chuckle. "You mean the ship's haunted?"

He didn't smile back. "Just answer the question, please."

"No," I responded. "I'm not very religious."

Now there was a wisp of a smile there. "And suppose, with your hard-nosed rationalism, you ran into one? Or a whole bunch of them?" He leaned forward, smile gone. "Even an entire shipload of them?"

It was impossible to take this seriously. "What kind of ghosts?" I asked him. "Chain rattlers? White sheets? Foul

fiends spouting hateful gibberish?"

He shook his head negatively. "No, ordinary people, for the most part. Dressed a little odd, perhaps; talking a little odd, perhaps, but not really very odd at all. Nice folks, typical passengers." Cars were coming in now, and I glanced out the window at them. Ordinary-looking cars, ordinary-looking people—campers, a couple of tractor-trailer rigs, like that. Lining up. A U.S. customs man came from the direction of the motel and started talking to some of them.

"They don't look like ghosts to me," I told McNeil.

He sighed. "Look, Mr. Dalton, I know you're an educated man. I have to go out and start selling fares now. She'll be in in about forty minutes, and we've only got a twenty minute layover. When she's in and loading, go aboard. Look her over. You'll have free rein of the ship. Take the complete round trip, all stops. It's about four hours over, twenty minutes in, and a little slower back. Don't get off the ship, though. Keep an open mind. If you're the one for the Orcas, and I think you are, we'll finish our talk when you get back." He got up, took out a cash drawer and receipt load, and went to the door, then turned back to me. "I hope you're the one," he said wearily. "I've interviewed over three hundred people and I'm getting sick of it."

We shook hands on that cryptic remark and I wandered around while he manned his little booth and processed the cars, campers, and trucks. A young woman came over from one of the houses and handled the few people who didn't have cars, although how they ever got to Southport I was at a

loss to know.

The amount of business was nothing short of incredible. St. Michael was in Nova Scotia, it seemed, and there were the big runs by CN from a couple of places and the Swedish one out of Portland to compete for any business. The fares were reasonable but not cheap enough to drive this far out of the way for—and to get to Southport you had to drive far out of your way.

I found a general marine atlas of the Fundy region in McNeil's office and looked at it. Southport made it, but just barely. No designation of it as a ferry terminal, though, and

no funny broken line showing a route.

For the life of me I couldn't find a St. Michael, Nova Scotia—nor a St. Clement's Island, either—the mid-stop that the schedule said it made.

There were an awful lot of cars and trucks out there now—it looked like rush hour in Manhattan. Where had all those people come from?

And then there was the blast of a great air horn and I

rushed out for my first view of the Orcas—and I was stunned.

That ship, I remember thinking, has no right to be here. Not here, not on this run.

It was huge—all gleaming white, looking brand-new, more like a cruise ship than a ferryboat. I counted three upper decks, and, as I watched, a loud clanging bell sounded electrically on her and her enormous bow lifted, revealing a grooved raising ramp, something like the bow of an old LST. It docked with very little trouble, revealing space for well over a hundred cars and trucks, with small side ramps for a second level available if needed. I learned later that it was 396 feet long—longer than a football field by a third!—and could take over two hundred major vehicles and twelve hundred passengers.

It was close to sundown on a weekday, but they loaded more than fifty vehicles, including a dozen campers, and eight big trucks. Where had they all come from, I wondered

again. And why?

I walked on with the passengers, still in something of a daze, and went up top. The lounges were spacious and comfortable, the seats all padded and reclining. There was a large cafeteria, a newsstand, and a very nice bar at the stern of passenger deck 2. The next deck had another lounge section and a number of staterooms up front, while the top level had the bridge, crew's quarters, and a solarium.

It was fancy; and, after it backed out, lowered its bow, and started pouring it on after clearing the harbor lights, the fastest damned thing I could remember, too. Except for the slight swaying and the rhythmic thrumming of the twin diesels you hardly knew you were moving. It was obviously

using enormous stabilizers.

The sun was setting and I walked through the ship, just looking and relaxing. As darkness fell and the shoreline receded into nothingness, I started noticing some very odd

things, as I'd been warned.

First of all, there seemed to be a whole lot more people on board than I'd remembered loading, and there certainly hadn't been any number staying on from the last run. They all looked real and solid enough, and very ordinary, but there was something decidedly weird about them, too.

Many seemed to be totally unaware of each other's existence, for one thing. Some seemed to shimmer occasionally,

others were a little blurred or indistinct to my eyes no matter how I rubbed them.

And, once in a while, they'd walk through each other.

Yes, I'm serious. One big fellow in a flowered aloha shirt and brown pants carrying a tray of soft drinks from the cafeteria to his wife and three kids in the lounge didn't seem to notice this woman in a white tee shirt and jeans walking right into him, nor did she seem aware of him, either.

And they met, and I braced for the collision and spilled drinks—and it didn't happen. They walked right through each other, just as if they didn't exist, and continued obliviously on. Not one drop of soda was spilled, not one spot of

mustard was splotched.

There were other things, too. Most of the people were dressed normally for summer, but occasionally I'd see people in fairly heavy coats and jackets. Some of the fashions were different, too—some people were overdressed in old-fashioned styles, others wildly underdressed, a couple of the women frankly wearing nothing but the bottoms of string bikinis and a see-through short cape of some kind.

I know I couldn't take my eyes off them for a while, until I got the message that they knew they were being stared at and didn't particularly like it. But they were generally ignored by

the others.

There were strange accents, too. Not just the expected Maine twang and Canadian accents, or even just the French Canadian accents—those were normal. But there were some really odd ones, ones where I picked out only a few words, which sounded like English, French, Spanish, and Nordic languages all intermixed and often with weird results.

And men with pigtails and long, braided hair, and women

with shaved heads or, occasionally, beards.

It was weird.

Frankly, it scared me a little, and I found the purser and

introduced myself.

The officer, a good-looking young man named Gifford Hanley, a Canadian from his speech, seemed delighted that I'd seen all this and not the least bit disturbed.

"Well, well, well!" he almost beamed. "Maybe we've found our new man at last, eh? Not bloody soon enough, either! We've been working short-handed for too long and it's getting to the others."

He took me up to the bridge-one of the most modern I'd

ever seen—and introduced me to the captain and helmsman. They all asked me what I thought of the *Orcas* and how I liked the sea, and none of them would answer my questions on the unusual passengers.

Well, there was a St. Clement's Island. A big one, too, from the looks of it, and a fair amount of traffic getting off and wanting on. Some of the vehicles that got on were odd, too; many of the cars looked unfamiliar in design, the trucks also odd, and there were even several horse-drawn wagons!

The island had that same quality as some of the passengers, too. It never seemed to be quite in focus just beyond the ferry terminal, and lights seemed to shift, so that where I thought there were houses or a motel suddenly they were somewhere else, of a different intensity. I was willing to swear that the motel had two stories; later it seemed over on the left, and four stories high, then further back, still later, with a single story.

Even the lighthouse as we sped out of the harbor changed; one time it looked very tall with a house at its base; then, suddenly, it was short and tubby, then an automated light that seemed to be out in the water with no sign of an island.

This continued for most of the trip. St. Michael looked like a carbon copy of Southport, the passengers and vehicles as bizarre—and numerous—and there seemed to be a lot of customs men in different uniforms dashing about, totally ignoring some vehicles while processing others.

The trip back was equally strange. The newsstand contained some books and magazines that were odd to say the least, and papers with strange names and stranger headlines.

This time there were even Indians aboard, speaking odd tongues. Some looked straight out of *The Last of the Mohicans*, complete with wild haircut, others dressed from little to heavy, despite the fact that it was July and very warm and humid.

And, just before we were to make the red and green channel markers and turn into Southport, I saw the girl die for the first time.

She was dressed in red tee shirt, yellow shorts, and sandals; she had long brown hair, was rather short and stocky, and wore oversized granny glasses.

I wasn't paying much attention, really, just watching her looking over the side at the wake, when, before I could even

cry out, she suddenly climbed up on the rail and plunged in,

very near the stern.

I screamed, and heard her body hit the water and then heard her howl of terror as she dropped close enough so that the propwash caught her, tucked her under, and cut her to pieces.

Several people on the afterdeck looked at me quizzically, but only one or two seemed to realize that a woman had just

died.

There was little I could do, but I ran back to Hanley, breathless.

He just nodded sadly.

"Take it easy, man," he said gently. "She's dead, and there's no use going back for the body. Believe me, we know. It won't be there."

I was shocked, badly upset. "How do you know that?" I

snapped.

"Because we did it every time the last four times she killed herself and we never found the body then, either," he replied

sadly.

I had my mouth open, ready to retort, to say something, but he got up, put on his officer's hat and coat, and said, "Excuse me. I have to supervise the unloading," and walked out.

As soon as I got off the ship it was like some sort of dreamy fog had lifted from me. Everything looked suddenly bright and clear, and the people and vehicles looked normal.

I made my way to the small ferry terminal building.

When they'd loaded and the ship was gone again, I waited for McNeil to return to his office. It looked much the same really, but a few things seemed different. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there was something odd—like the paneling had been rosewood before, and was now walnut. Small things, but nagging ones.

McNeil came back after seeing the ship clear. It ran almost constantly, according to the schedule.

I glanced out the window as he approached and noticed uniformed customs men checking out the debarked vehicles. They seemed to have different uniforms than I'd remembered.

Then the ticket agent entered the office and I got another shock. He had a beard.

No, it was the same man, all right. No question about it.

But the man I'd talked to less than nine hours before had been clean-shaven.

I turned to where the navigation atlas lay, just where I'd put it, still open to the Southport page.

It showed a ferry line from Southport to a rather substantial St. Clement's Island now, But nothing to Nova Scotia.

I turned to the bearded McNeil, who was watching me with mild amusement in his eyes.

"What the hell is going on here?" I demanded.

He went over and sat down in his swivel chair, "Want the job?" he asked. "It's yours if you do."

I couldn't believe his attitude. "I want an explanation,

He chuckled. "I told you I'd give you one if you wanted. Now, you'll have to bear with me, since I'm only repeating what the Company tells me, and I'm not sure I have it all clear myself."

I sat down in the other chair. "Go ahead," I told him.

He sighed. "Well, let's start off by saying that there's been a Bluewater Corporation ferry on this run since the mid-1800s—steam packet at first, of course. The *Orcas* is the eleventh ship in the service, put on a year and a half ago."

He reached over, grabbed a cigarette, lit it, and continued.

"Well, anyway, it was a normal operation until about 1910 or so. That's when they started noticing that their counts were off, that there seemed to be more passengers than the manifests called for, different freight, and all that. As it continued, the crews started noticing more and more of the kind of stuff you saw, and things got crazy for them, too. Southport was a big fishing and lobstering town then—nobody does that any more, the whole economy's the ferry.

"Well, anyway, one time this crewman goes crazy, says the woman in his house isn't his wife. A few days later another comes home to find that he has four kids—and he was only

married a week before. And so on."

I felt my skin starting to crawl slightly.

"So, they send some big shots up. The men are absolutely nuts, but they believe what they claim. Soon everybody who works the ship is spooked, and this can't be dismissed. The experts go for a ride and can't find anything wrong, but now two of the crewmen claim that it is their wife, or their kid, or somesuch. Got to be a pain, though, getting crewmen. We finally had to center on loners—people without family, friends,

or close personal ties. It kept getting worse each trip. Had a hell of a time keeping men for a while, and that's why it's so hard to recruit new ones."

"You mean the trip drives them crazy?" I asked unbeliev-

ingly.

He chuckled. "Oh, no. You're sane. It's the rest of 'em. That's the problem. And it gets worse and worse each season. But the trip's extremely profitable. So we try to match the crew to the ship and hope they'll accept it. If they do it's one of the best damned ferry jobs there is."

"But what causes it?" I managed. "I mean—I saw people dressed outlandishly. I saw other people walk through each other! I even saw a girl commit suicide, and nobody seemed

to notice!"

McNeil's face turned grim. "So that's happened again. Too bad. Maybe someday there'll be some chance to save her."

"Look," I said, exasperated. "There must be some explana-

tion for all this. There has to be!"

The ticket agent shrugged and stubbed out his cigarette.

"Well, some of the company experts studied it. They say nobody can tell for sure, but the best explanation is that there are a lot of different worlds-different Earths, you might say—all existing one on top of the other, but you can't see any one except the one you're in. Don't ask me how that's possible or how they came up with it, it just is, that's all. Well, they say that in some worlds folks don't exist at all, and in others they are different places or doing different thingslike getting married to somebody else or somesuch. In some, Canada's still British, in some she's a republic, in others she's a fragmented batch of countries, and in one or two she's part of the U.S. Each one of these places has a different history."

"And this one boat serves them all?" I responded, not ac-

cepting a word of that crazy story. "How is that possible?"

McNeil shrugged again. "Why knows? Hell, I don't even understand why that little light goes on in here when I flip the switch. Do most people? I just sell tickets and lower the ramp. I'll tell you the Company's version, that's all. They say that there's a crack—maybe one of many, maybe the only one. The ship's route just happens to parallel that crack, and this allows you to go between the worlds. Not one ship, of course—twenty or more, one for each world. But, as long as they keep the same schedule, they overlap—and can cross into one or more of the others. If you're on the ship in all those worlds, then you cross, too. Anyone coexisting with the ship in multiple worlds can see and hear not only the one he's in but the ones nearest him, too. People perception's a little harder the farther removed the world you're in is from theirs."

"And you believe this?" I asked him, still disbelieving.
"Who knows? Got to believe something or you'll go nuts," he replied pragmatically. "Look, did you get to St. Michael this trip?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Looked pretty much like this place."

He pointed to the navigation atlas. "Try and find it. You won't. Take a drive up through New Brunswick and around to the other side. It doesn't exist. In this world, the Orcas goes from here to St. Clement's Island and back again. I understand from some of the crew that sometimes Southport doesn't exist, sometimes the Island doesn't, and so forth. And there are so many countries involved I don't even count."

I shook my head, refusing to accept all this. And yet, it made a crazy kind of sense. These people didn't see each other because they were in different worlds. The girl committed suicide five times because she did it in five different worlds-or was it five different girls? It also explained the outlandish dress, the strange mixture of vehicles, people, ac-

cents.

"But how come the crew sees people from many worlds

and the passengers don't?" I asked him.

McNeil sighed. "That's the other problem. We have to find people who would be up here, working on the Orcas, in every world we service. More people's lives parallel than you'd think. The passengers—well, they generally don't exist on a particular run except once. The very few who do still don't take the trip in every world we service. I guess once or twice it's happened that we've had a passenger cross over, but, if so, we've never heard of it."

"And how come I'm here in so many worlds?" I asked him.

McNeil smiled. "You were recruited, of course. The Corporation has a tremendous, intensive recruiting effort involving ferry lines and crewmembers. When they spot one, like you, in just the right circumstance in all worlds, they recruit you-all of you. An even worse job than you'd think, since every season one or two new Bluewater Corporations put identical ferries on this run, or shift routes and overlap with ours. Then we have to make sure the present crew can serve them, too, by recruiting your twin on those worlds."

Suddenly I reached over, grabbed his beard, and yanked. "Ouch! Dammit!" he cried and shoved my hand away.

"I-I'm sorry-I-" I stammered.

He shook his head and grinned. "That's all right, son. You're about the seventh person to do that to me in the last five years. I guess there are a lot of varieties of me, too."

I thought about all that traffic. "Do others know of this?" I asked him. "I mean, is there some sort of hidden commerce

between the worlds on this ferry?"

He grinned. "I'm not supposed to answer that one," he said carefully. "But, what the hell. Yes, I think-no, I know there is. After all, the shift of people and ships is constant. You move one notch each trip if all of you take the voyage. Sometimes up, sometimes down. If that's true, and if they can recruit a crew that fits the requirements, why not truck drivers? A hell of a lot of truck traffic through here year 'round, you know. No reduced winter service. And some of the rigs are really kinda strange-looking." He sighed. "I only know this-in a couple of hours I'll start selling fares again, and I'll sell a half-dozen or so to St. Michael-and there is no St. Michael. It isn't even listed on my schedule or maps. I doubt if the Corporation's actually the trader, more the middleman in the deal. But they sure as hell don't make their millions off fares alone."

It was odd the way I was accepting it. Somehow, it seemed to make sense, crazy as it was.

"What's to keep me from using this knowledge somehow?"

I asked him. "Maybe bring my own team of experts up?"

"Feel free," McNeil answered. "Unless they overlap they'll get a nice, normal ferry ride. And if you can make a profit, go ahead, as long as it doesn't interfere with Bluewater's cash flow. The Orcas cost the company over twenty-four million reals and they want it back."
"Twenty-four million what?" I shot back.

"Reals," he replied, taking a bill from his wallet. I looked at it. It was printed in red, and had a picture of someone very ugly labeled "Prince Juan XVI" and an official seal from the "Bank of New Lisboa." I handed it back.

"What country are we in?" I asked uneasily.

"Portugal," he replied casually. "Portuguese America, actually, although only nominally. So many of us Yankees have come in you don't even have to speak Portuguese any more. They even print the local bills in Anglish, now."

Yes, that's what he said. Anglish.

"It's the best ferryboat job in the world, though," McNeil continued. "For someone without ties, that is. You'll meet more different kinds of people from more cultures than you can ever imagine. Three runs on, three off—in as many as twenty-four different variations of these towns, all unique. And a month off in winter to see a little of a different world each time. Never mind whether you buy the explanationyou've seen the results, you know what I say is true. Want the job?"

'I'll give it a try," I told him, fascinated. I wasn't sure if I did buy the explanation, but I certainly had something

strange and fascinating here.

"O.K., here's twenty reals advance," McNeil said, handing me a purple bill from the cash box. "Get some dinner if you didn't eat on the ship and get a good night's sleep at the motel-the Company owns it so there's no charge-and be ready to go aboard at four tomorrow afternoon."

I got up to leave.

"Oh, and Mr. Dalton," he added, and I turned to face him. "Yes?"

"If, while on shore, you fall for a pretty lass, decide to settle down, then do it-but don't go back on that ship again! Quit. If you don't she's going to be greeted by a stranger, and you might never find her again."

"I'll remember," I assured him.

The job was everything McNeil promised and more. The scenery was spectacular, the people an ever-changing, fascinating group. Even the crew changed slightly-a little shorter sometimes, a little fatter or thinner, beards and moustaches came and went with astonishing rapidity, and accents varied enormously. It didn't matter; you soon adjusted to it as a matter of course, and all shipboard experiences were in common, anyway.

It was like a tight family after a while, really. And there were women in the crew, too, ranging from their twenties to the early fifties, not only in food and bar service but as deckhands and the like as well. Occasionally this was a little unsettling, since, in two or three cases out of a crew of 116, they were men in one world, women in another. You got used to even that. It was probably more unsettling for them; they were distinct people, and they didn't change sex. The personalities and personal histories tended to parallel, regardless, though, with only a few minor differences.

And the passengers! Some were really amazing. Even seasons were different for some of them, which explained the clothing variations. Certainly what constituted fashion and moral behavior was wildly different, as different as what they

ate and the places they came from.

And yet, oddly, people were people. They laughed, and cried, and ate and drank and told jokes—some rather strange, I'll admit—and snapped pictures and all the other things people did. They came from places where the Vikings settled Nova Scotia (called Vinland, naturally), where Nova Scotia was French, or Spanish, or Portuguese, or very, very English. Even one in which Nova Scotia had been settled by Lord Baltimore and called Avalon.

Maine was as wild or wilder. There were two Indian nations running it, the U.S., Canada, Britain, France, Portugal, and lots of variations, some of which I never have gotten straight. There was also a temporal difference sometimes—some people were rather futuristic, with gadgets I couldn't even understand. One truck I loaded was powered by some sort of solar power and carried a cargo of food service robots. Some others were behind—still mainly horses, or old-time cars and trucks. I am not certain even now if they were running at different speeds from us or whether some inventions had simply been made in some worlds and not in others.

And, McNeil was right. Every new summer season added at least one more. The boat was occasionally so crowded to our crew eyes that we had trouble making our way from one end of the ship to the other. Watching staterooms unload was also wild—it looked occasionally like the circus clown act, where 50 clowns get out of a Volkswagen.

And there was some sort of trade between the worlds. It was quickly clear that Bluewater Corporation was behind most of it, and that this was what made the line so profitable.

And, just once, there was a horrible, searing pain that hit the entire crew, and a modern world we didn't meet any more after that, and a particular variation of the crew we never saw again. And the last newspapers from that world had told of a coming war.

There was also a small crew turnover, of course. Some went on vacation and never returned, some returned but would not reboard the ship. The Company was understanding, and it usually meant some extra work for a few weeks until they found someone new and could arrange for them to come on

The stars were fading a little now, and I shined the spot over to the red marker for the Captain. He acknowledged seeing it, and made his turn in, the lights of Southport coming into view and masking the stars a bit.

I went through the motions mechanically, raising the bow when the Captain hit the mark, letting go the bow lines, checking the clearances, and the like. I was thinking about

the girl.

We knew that people's lives in the main did parallel from world to world. Seven times now she'd come aboard, seven times she'd looked at the white wake, and seven times she'd jumped to her death.

Maybe it was the temporal dislocation, maybe she just reached the same point at different stages, but she was always

there and she always jumped.

I'd been working the *Orcas* three years, had some strange experiences, and generally pleasurable ones. For the first time I had a job I liked, a family of sorts in the crew, and an ever-changing assortment of people and places for a three-point ferry run. In that time we'd lost one world and gained by our figures three others. That was 26 variants.

Did that girl exist in all 26? I wondered. Would we be subjected to that sadness 19 more times? Or more, as we picked

up new worlds?

Oh, I'd tried to find her before she jumped in the past, yes. But she hadn't been consistent, except for the place she chose. We did three runs a day, two crews, so it was six a day more or less. She did it at different seasons, in different years, dressed differently.

You couldn't cover them all.

Not even all the realities of the crew of all worlds, although I knew that we were essentially the same people on all of them and that I—the other me's—were also looking.

I don't even know why I was so fixated, except that I'd been to that point once myself, and I'd discovered that you could go on, living with emotional scars, and find a new life.

I didn't even know what I'd say and do if I did see her early. I only knew that, if I did, she damned well wasn't going

to go over the stern that trip.

In the meantime, my search for her when I could paid other dividends. I prevented a couple of children from going over through childish play, as well as a drunk, and spotted several health problems as I surveyed the people. One turned out to be a woman in advanced labor, and the first mate and I delivered our first child—our first, but the *Orcas'* nineteenth. We helped a lot of people, really, with a lot of different matters.

They were all just spectres, of course; they got on the boat often without us seeing them, and they disembarked for all time the same way. There were some regulars, but they were few. And, for them, we were a ghost crew, there to help and to serve.

But, then, isn't that the way you think of anybody in a service occupation? Firemen are firemen, not individuals; so are waiters, cops, street sweepers, and all the rest. Categories, not people.

We sailed from Point A to Point C stopping at B, and it

was our whole life.

And then, one day in July of last year, I spotted her.

She was just coming on board at St. Clement's—that's possibly why I hadn't noticed her before. We backed into St. Clement's, and I was on the bow lines. But we were short, having just lost a deckhand to a nice-looking fellow in the English colony of Annapolis Royal, and it was my turn to do some double duty. So, there I was, routing traffic on the ship when I saw this little rounded station wagon go by and saw her in it.

I still almost missed her; I hadn't expected her to be with another person, another woman, and we were loading the Vinland existence, so in July they were more accurately in a state of undress than anything else, but I spotted her all the same. Jackie Carliner, one of the barmaids and a pretty good artist, had sketched her from the one time she'd seen the girl and we'd made copies for everyone.

Even so, I had my loading duties to finish first—there was no one else. But, as soon as we were underway and I'd raised the stern ramp, I made my way topside and to the lower stern deck. I took my walkie-talkie off the belt clip and called

the Captain.

"Sir, this is Dalton," I called. "I've seen our suicide girl."

"So what else is new?" grumbled the Captain. "You know

policy on that by now."

"But, sir!" I protested. "I mean still alive. Still on board. It's barely sundown, and we're a good half-hour from the

point vet."

He saw what I meant. "Very well," he said crisply. "But you know we're short-handed. I'll put Caldwell on the bow station this time, but you better get some results or I'll give you so much detail you won't have time to meddle in other people's affairs."

I sighed. Running a ship like this one hardened most people. I wondered if the Captain, with twenty years on the run, ever understood why I cared enough to try and stop this girl I didn't know from going in.

Did I know, for that matter?

As I looked around at the people going by, I thought about

it. I'd thought about it a great deal before.

Why did I care about these faceless people? People from so many different worlds and cultures that they might as well have been from another planet. People who cared not at all about me, who saw me as an object, a cipher, a service, like those robots I mentioned. They didn't care about me. If I were perched on that rail and a crowd was around most of them would probably yell "Jump!"

Most of the crew, too, cared only about each other, to a degree, and about the Orcas, our rock of sanity. I thought of that world gone in some atomic fire. What was the measure

of an anonymous human being's worth?

I thought of Joanna and Harmony. With pity, yes, but I realized now that Joanna, at least, had been a vampire. She'd needed me, needed a rock to steady herself, to unburden herself to, to brag to. Someone steady and understanding, someone whose manner and character suggested that solidity. She'd never really even considered that I might have my own problems, that her promiscuity and lifestyle might be hurting me. Not that she was trying to hurt me—she just never considered me.

Like those people going by now. If they stub their toe, or have a question, or slip, or the boat sinks, they need me. Until then, I'm just a faceless automaton to them.

Ready to serve them, to care about them, if they needed

somebody.

And that was why I was out here in the surprising chill, out on the stern with my neck stuck out a mile, trying to prevent a suicide I knew would happen, knew because I'd seen it three times before.

I was needed.

That was the measure of a human being's true worth, I felt sure. Not how many people ministered to your needs, but how many people you could help.

That girl—she had been brutalized, somehow, by society.

Now I was to provide some counterbalance.

It was the surety of this duty that had kept me from blowing myself up with the old Delaware ferry, or jumping off

that stern rail myself.

I glanced uneasily around and looked ahead. There was Shipshead light, tall and proud this time in the darkness, the way I liked it. I thought I could almost make out the marker buoys already. I started to get nervous.

I was certain that she'd jump. It'd happened every time before that we'd known. Maybe, just maybe, I thought, in this

existence she won't.

I had no more than gotten the thought through my head when she came around the corner of the deck housing and

stood in the starboard corner, looking down.

She certainly looked different this time. Her long hair was blond, not dark, and braided in large pigtails that drooped almost to her waist. She wore only the string bikini and transparent cape the Vinlanders liked in summer, and she had several gold rings on each arm, welded loosely there, I knew, and a marriage ring around her neck.

That was interesting, I thought. She looked so young, so despairing, that I'd never once thought of her as married.

Her friend, as thin and underdeveloped as she was stout, was with her. The friend had darker hair and had it twisted high atop her head. She wore no marriage ring.

I eased slowly over, but not sneakily. Like I said, nobody

notices the crewman of a vessel; he's just a part of it.

"Luok, are yo sooure yu don' vant to halve a drink or zumpin?" the friend asked in that curious accent the Vinlanders had developed through cultural pollution by the dominant English and French.

"Naye, I yust vant to smell da zee-zpray," the girl replied.

"Go on. I vill be alonk before ze zhip iz docking."

The friend was hesitant; I could see it in her manner. But I

could also see she would go, partly because she was chilly, partly because she felt she had to show some trust to her friend.

She walked off. I looked busy checking the stairway supports to the second deck, and she paid me no mind whatso-

There were a few others on deck, but most had gone forward to see us come in, and the couple dressed completely in black sitting there on the bench were invisible to the girl as she was to them. She peered down at the black water and started to edge more to the starboard side engine wake, then a little past, almost to the center. Her upper torso didn't move, but I saw a bare, dirty foot go up on the lower rail.

I walked casually over. She heard me, and turn slightly to

see if it was anyone she needed to be bothered with.

I went up to her and stood beside her, looking out at the water.

"Don't do it," I said softly, not looking directly at her. "It's

too damned selfish a way to go."

She gave a small gasp and turned to look at me in wonder.

"How—how didt yu—?" she managed.
"I'm an old hand at suicides," I told her, that was no lie. Joanna, then almost me, then this woman seven other times.

"I vouldn't really haff-" she began, but I cut her off.

"Yes, you would. You know it and I know it. The only

thing you know and I don't is why."

We were inside Shipshead light now. If I could keep her talking just a few more minutes we'd clear the channel markers and slow for the turn and docking. The turn and the slowdown would make it impossible for her to be caught in the propwash, and, I felt, the cycle would be broken, at least for her.

"Vy du yu care?" she asked, turning again to look at the dark sea, only slightly illuminated by the rapidly receding light.

"Well, partly because it's my ship, and I don't like things like that to happen on my ship," I told her. "Partly because I've been there myself, and I know how brutal a suicide is."

She looked at me strangely. "Dat's a fonny t'ing tu zay," she responded. "Jost vun qvick jomp and pszzt! All ofer."

"You're wrong," I said. "Besides, why would anyone so young want to end it?"

She had a dreamy quality to her face and voice. She was starting to blur, and I was worried that I might somehow translate into a different world-level as we neared shore.

"My 'usbahnd," she responded. "Goldier vas hiss name." She fingered the marriage ring around his neck. "Zo yong, so 'andzum." She turned her head quickly and looked up at me. "Do yu know vat it iz to be fat und ugly und 'alf bloind and haff ze best uv all men zuddenly pay attenzion to yu, vant to marry yu?"

I admitted I didn't, but didn't mention my own experi-

ences.

"What happened? He leave you?" I asked.

There were tears in her eyes. "Ya, in a vay, ya. Goldier he jomped out a tventy-story building, he did. Und itz my own fault, yu know. I shud haff been dere. Or, maybe I didn't giff him vat he needed. I dunno."

"Then you of all people know how brutal suicide really is," I retorted. "Look at what it did to you. You have friends, like your friend here. They care. It will hurt them as your husband's hurt you. This woman with you—she'll carry guilt for leaving you alone the whole rest of her life." She was shaking now, not really from the chill, and I put my arm around her. Where the hell were those marker lights?

"Do you see how cruel it is? What suicide does to others? It leaves a legacy of guilt, much of it false guilt but no less real for that. And you might be needed by somebody else, sometime, to help them. Somebody else might die because

you weren't there."

She looked up at me, then seemed to dissolve, collapse into a crescendo of tears, and sat down on the deck. I looked up and saw the red and green markers astern, felt the engines

slow, felt the Orcas turn.

"Ghettal" The voice was a piercing scream in the night. I looked around and saw her friend running to us after coming down the stairway. Anxiety and concern were on her stricken face, and there were tears in her eyes. She bent down to the still sobbing girl. "I shuld neffer haff left yu!" she sobbed, and hugged the girl tightly.

I sighed. The Orcas was making its dock approach now, the ringing of bells said that Caldwell had managed to raise

the bow without crashing us into the dock.

"My Gott!" the friend swore, then looked up at me. "Yu stopped her? How can I effer...?"

But they both already had that ethereal, unnatural double image about them, both fading into a world different from mine.

"Just remember that there's a million Ghettas out there," I told them both softly. "And you can make them or break

I turned and walked away as I heard the satisfying thump and felt the slight jerk of the ferry fitting into the slip. I stopped and glanced back at the stern but I could see no one. Nobody was there.

Who were the ghosts? I mused. Those women, or the crew of the Orcas? How many times did hundreds of people from different worlds coexist on this ship without ever knowing it?

How many times did people in the same world coexist without noticing each other, or caring about each other, for that matter?

"Mr. Dalton!" snapped a voice in my walkie-talkie.

"Sir?" I responded.

"Well?" the Captain asked expectantly.
"No screams this time, Captain," I told him, satisfaction in

my voice. "One young woman will live."

There was a long pause and, for a moment, I thought he might actually be human. Then he snapped, "There's eightysix assorted vehicles still waiting to be off-loaded, and might I remind you we're short-handed and on a strict schedule?"

I sighed and broke into a trot. Business was business, and I had a whole world to throw out of the car deck so I could

run another one in.

## CASSANDRA test of 1808 and the present general secret Old William Mid.

# by C.J. Cherryh

Most would-be writers begin their careers with attempts at the short story and go on to the more intimidating and complex novel form later. Not so Carolyn Cherryh, who started off by writing novels at a very early age and never even thought about the short story until after several of her books had launched her into a rapidly rising orbit of reader esteem. So this is actually the second short story she has written—and a startling insight into the problems of precognition. to come her. A chark order cach recent, since a

Fires, and ada are arrived as an arrived word and arrived and arrived arrived arrived arrived and arrived arri They grew unbearable here.

Alis felt for the door of the flat and knew that it would be solid. She could feel the cool metal of the knob amid the flames . . . saw the shadow-stairs through the roiling smoke outside, clearly enough to feel her way down them, convinc-

ing her senses that they would bear her weight.

Crazy Alis. She made no haste. The fires burned steadily. She passed through them, descended the insubstantial steps to the solid ground-she could not abide the elevator, that closed space with the shadow-floor, that plummeted down and down; she made the ground floor, averted her eyes from the red, heatless flames.

A ghost said good morning to her . . . old man Willis, thin and transparent against the leaping flames. She blinked, bade it good morning in return—did not miss old Willis' shake of the head as she opened the door and left. Noon traffic passed, heedless of the flames, the hulks that blazed in the street, the tumbling brick.

The apartment caved in—black bricks falling into the inferno, Hell amid the green, ghostly trees. Old Willis fled, burning, fell—turned to jerking, blackened flesh—died, daily. Alis no longer cried, hardly flinched. She ignored the horror spilling about her, forced her way through crumbling brick that held no substance, past busy ghosts that could not be troubled in their haste.

Kingsley's Cafe stood, whole, more so than the rest. It was refuge for the afternoon, a feeling of safety. She pushed open the door, heard the tinkle of a lost bell. Shadowy patrons looked, whispered.

Crazy Alis.

The whispers troubled her. She avoided their eyes and their presence, settled in a booth in the corner that bore only traces of the fire.

WAR, the headline in the vender said in heavy type. She

shivered, looked up into Sam Kingsley's wraithlike face.

"Coffee," she said. "Ham sandwich." It was constantly the same. She varied not even the order. Mad Alis. Her affliction supported her. A check came each month, since the hospital had turned her out. Weekly she returned to the clinic, to doctors who now faded like the others. The building burned about them. Smoke rolled down the blue, antiseptic halls.

Last week a patient ran-burning-

A rattle of china. Sam set the coffee on the table, came back shortly and brought the sandwich. She bent her head and ate, transparent food on half-broken china, a cracked, fire-smudged cup with a transparent handle. She ate, hungry enough to overcome the horror that had become ordinary. A hundred times seen, the most terrible sights lost their power over her: she no longer cried at shadows. She talked to ghosts and touched them, ate the food that somehow stilled the ache in her belly, wore the same too-large black sweater and worn blue shirt and grey slacks because they were all she had that seemed solid. Nightly she washed them and dried them and put them on the next day, letting others hang in the closet. They were the only solid ones.

She did not tell the doctors these things. A lifetime in and out of hospitals had made her wary of confidences. She knew what to say. Her half-vision let her smile at ghost-faces, cannily manipulate their charts and cards, sitting in the ruins that had begun to smolder by late afternoon. A blackened corpse lay in the hall. She did not flinch when she smiled good-naturedly at the doctor.

good-naturedly at the doctor.

They gave her medicines. The medicines stopped the dreams, the siren screams, the running steps in the night past her apartment. They let her sleep in the ghostly bed, high above ruin, with the flames crackling and the voices screaming. She did not speak of these things. Years in hospitals had taught her. She complained only of nightmares, and restlessness, and they let her have more of the red pills.

WAR, the headline blazoned.

The cup rattled and trembled against the saucer as she picked it up. She swallowed the last bit of bread and washed it down with coffee, tried not to look beyond the broken front window, where twisted metal hulks smoked on the street. She stayed, as she did each day, and Sam grudgingly refilled her cup, that she would nurse as far as she could and then order another one. She lifted it savoring the feel of it, stopping the trembling of her hands.

The bell jingled faintly. A man closed the door, settled at

the counter.

Whole, clear in her eyes. She stared at him, startled, heart pounding. He ordered coffee, moved to buy a paper from the vender, settled again and let the coffee grow cold while he read the news. She had view only of his back while he read, scuffed brown leather coat, brown hair a little over his collar. At last he drank the cooled coffee all at one draught, shoved money onto the counter and left the paper lying, headlines turned face down.

A young face, flesh and bone among the ghosts. He ignored them all and went for the door.

Alis thrust herself from her booth.

"Hey!" Sam called at her.

She rummaged in her purse as the bell jingled, flung a bill onto the counter, heedless that it was a five. Fear was coppery in her mouth; he was gone. She fled the cafe, edged round debris without thinking of it, saw his back disappearing among the ghosts.

She ran, shouldering them, braving the flames-cried out

as debris showered painlessly on her, and kept running.

Ghosts turned and stared, shocked—he did likewise, and she ran to him, stunned to see the same shock on his face, regarding her.

"What is it?" he asked.

She blinked, dazed to realize he saw her no differently than the others. She could not answer. In irritation he started walking again, and she followed. Tears slid down her face, her breath hard in her throat. People stared. He noticed her presence and walked the faster, through debris, through fires. A wall began to fall and she cried out despite herself.

He jerked about. The dust and the soot rose up as a cloud behind him. His face was distraught and angry. He stared at her as the others did. Mothers drew children away from the

scene. A band of youths stared, cold-eyed and laughing.
"Wait," she said. He opened his mouth as if he would curse her; she flinched, and the tears were cold in the heatless wind of the fires. His face twisted in an embarrassed pity. He thrust a hand into his pocket and began to pull out money, hastily, tried to give it to her. She shook her head furiously, trying to stop the tears—stared upward, flinching, as another building fell into flames.

"What's wrong?" he asked her. "What's wrong with you?"

"Please," she said. He looked about at the staring ghosts, then began to walk slowly. She walked with him, nerving herself not to cry out at the ruin, the pale moving figures that wandered through burned shells of buildings, the twisted

corpses in the street, where traffic moved.

"What's your name?" he asked. She told him. He gazed at her from time to time as they walked, a frown creasing his brow. He had a face well-worn for youth, a tiny scar beside the mouth. He looked older than she. She felt uncomfortable in the way his eyes traveled over her: she decided to accept it-to bear with anything that gave her this one solid presence. Against every inclination she reached her hand into the bend of his arm, tightened her fingers on the worn leather. He accepted it.

And after a time he slid his arm behind her and about her waist, and they walked like lovers.

WAR, the headline at the newsstand cried.

He started to turn into a street by Tenn's Hardware. She

balked at what she saw there. He paused when he felt it, faced her with his back to the fires of that burning.

"Don't go," she said.

"Where do you want to go?"

She shrugged helplessly, indicated the main street, the other direction

He talked to her then, as he might talk to a child, humoring her fear. It was pity. Some treated her that way. She

recognized it, and took even that.

His name was Jim. He had come into the city yesterday, hitched rides. He was looking for work. He knew no one in the city. She listened to his rambling awkwardness, reading through it. When he was done, she stared at him still, and

saw his face contract in dismay at her.

"I'm not crazy," she told him, which was a lie, that everyone in Sudbury would have known, only he would not, knowing no one. His face was true and solid, and the tiny scar by the mouth made it hard when he was thinking; at another time she would have been terrified of him. Now she was terrified of losing him amid the ghosts.

"It's the war," he said.

She nodded, trying to look at him and not at the fires. His fingers touched her arm, gently. "It's the war," he said again. "It's all crazy. Everyone's crazy."

And then he put his hand on her shoulder and turned her back the other way, toward the park, where green leaves waved over black, skeletal limbs. They walked along the lake, and for the first time in a long time she drew breath and felt a whole, sane presence beside her.

They bought corn, and sat on the grass by the lake, and flung it to the spectral swans. Wraiths of passersby were few, only enough to keep a feeling of occupancy about the place—old people, mostly, tottering about the deliberate tranquillity of their routine despite the headlines.

"Do you see them," she ventured to ask him finally, "all

thin and grev?"

He did not understand, did not take her literally, only shrugged. Warily, she abandoned that questioning at once. She rose to her feet and stared at the horizon, where the smoke bannered on the wind.

"Buy you supper?" he asked.

She turned, prepared for this, and managed a shy, desperate smile. "Yes," she said, knowing what else he reckoned to

buy with that—willing, and hating herself, and desperately afraid that he would walk away, tonight, tomorrow. She did not know men. She had no idea what she could say or do to prevent his leaving, only that he would when someday he realized her madness.

Even her parents had not been able to bear with that—visited her only at first in the hospitals, and then only on holidays, and then not at all. She did not know where they were.

There was a neighbor boy who drowned. She had said he would. She had cried for it. All the town said it was she who pushed him.

Crazy Alis.

Fantasizes, the doctors said. Not dangerous.

They let her out. There were special schools, state schools.

And from time to time—hospitals.

Tranquilizers.

She had left the red pills at home. The realization brought sweat to her palms. They gave sleep. They stopped the dreams. She clamped her lips against the panic and made up her mind that she would not need them—not while she was not alone. She slipped her hand into his arm and walked with him, secure and strange, up the steps from the park to the streets.

And stopped.

The fires were out.

Ghost-buildings rose above their jagged and windowless shells. Wraiths moved through masses of debris, almost obscured at times. He tugged her on, but her step faltered, made him look at her strangely and put his arm about her.

"You're shivering," he said. "Cold?"

She shook her head, tried to smile. The fires were out. She tried to take it for a good omen. The nightmare was over. She looked up into his solid, concerned face, and her smile almost became a wild laugh.

"I'm hungry," she said.

They lingered long over a dinner in Graben's—he in his battered jacket, she in her sweater that hung at the tails and elbows: the spectral patrons were in far better clothes, and stared at them, and they were set in a corner nearest the door, where they would be less visible. There was cracked crystal and broken china on insubstantial tables, and the stars

winked coldly in gaping ruin above the wan glittering of the broken chandeliers.

Ruins, cold, peaceful ruin.

Alis looked about her calmly. One could live in ruins, only so the fires were gone.

And there was Jim, who smiled at her without any touch of pity, only a wild, fey desperation that she understood—who spent more than he could afford in Graben's, the inside of which she had never hoped to see—and told her—predictably—that she was beautiful. Others had said it. Vaguely she resented such triteness from him, from him whom she had decided to trust. She smiled sadly, when he said it, and gave it up for a frown and, fearful of offending him with her melancholies, made it a smile again.

Crazy Alis. He would learn and leave tonight if she were

not careful. She tried to put on gaiety, tried to laugh.

And then the music stopped in the restaurant, and the noise of the other diners went dead, and the speaker was giving an inane announcement.

Shelters . . . shelters . . . shelters.

Screams broke out. Chairs overturned.

Alis went limp in her chair, felt Jim's cold, solid hand tugging at hers, saw his frightened face mouthing her name as he took her up into his arms, pulled her with him, started running.

The cold air outside hit her, shocked her into sight of the ruins again, wraith figures pelting toward that chaos where

the fires had been worst.

And she knew.

"No!" she cried, pulling at his arm. "No!" she insisted, and bodies half-seen buffeted them in a rush to destruction. He yielded to her sudden certainty, gripped her hand and fled with her against the crowds as the sirens wailed madness through the night—fled with her as she ran her sighted way through the ruin.

And into Kingsley's, where safe tables stood abandoned with food still on them, doors ajar, chairs overturned. Back they went into the kitchens and down and down into the cel-

lar, the dark, the cold safety from the flames.

No others found them there. At last the earth shook, too deep for sound. The sirens ceased and did not come on again.

They lay in the dark and clutched each other and shivered, and above them for hours raged the sound of fire, smoke

sometimes drifting in to sting their eyes and noses. There was the distant crash of brick, rumblings that shook the ground, that came near, but never touched their refuge.

And in the morning, with the scent of fire still in the air,

they crept up into the murky daylight.

The ruins were still and hushed. The ghost-buildings were solid now, mere shells. The wraiths were gone. It was the fires themselves that were strange, some true, some not, playing above dark, cold brick, and most were fading.

Jim swore softly, over and over again, and wept.

When she looked at him she was dry-eyed, for she had done her crying already.

And she listened as he began to talk about food, about

leaving the city, the two of them. "All right," she said.

Then clamped her lips, shut her eyes against what she saw in his face. When she opened them it was still true, the sudden transparency, the wash of blood. She trembled, and he shook at her, his ghost-face distraught.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

She could not tell him, would not. She remembered the boy who had drowned, remembered the other ghosts. Of a sudden she tore from his hands and ran, dodging the maze of debris that, this morning, was solid.

"Alis!" he cried and came after her.

"No!" she cried suddenly, turning, seeing the unstable wall, the cascading brick. She started back and stopped, unable to force herself. She held out her hands to warn him back, saw them solid.

The brick rumbled, fell. Dust came up, thick for a mo-

ment, obscuring everything.

She stood still, hands at her sides, then wiped her sooty face and turned and started walking, keeping to the center of the dead streets.

Overhead, clouds gathered, heavy with rain.

She wandered at peace now, seeing the rain spot the pave-

ment, not yet feeling it.

In time the rain did fall, and the ruins became chill and cold. She visited the dead lake and the burned trees, the ruin of Graben's, out of which she gathered a string of crystal to wear.

She smiled when, a day later, a looter drove her from her food supply. He had a warith's look, and she laughed from a place he did not dare to climb and told him so.

And recovered her cache later when it came true, and settled among the ruined shells that held no further threat, no other nightmares, with her crystal necklace and tomorrows that were the same as today.

One could live in ruins, only so the fires were gone. And the ghosts were all in the past, invisible.

## IN ALIEN FLESH

### by Gregory Benford

Mathematics, it is said, should be a universal language. Any intelligent being should be able to understand the elements of numbers and the logics that arise from them. But here is a creature which appears to be a mathematical prodigy and from which humanity can learn—but which it could be more than a scientist's life is worth to try.

### I

-green surf lapping, chilling-

Reginri's hand jerked convulsively on the sheets. His eyes were closed.

—silver coins gliding and turning in the speckled sky, eclipsing the sun—

The sheets were a clinging swamp. He twisted in their grip.

—a chiming song, tinkling cool rivulets washing his skin—
He opened his eyes.

A yellow blade of afternoon sunlight hung in the room, dust motes swimming through it. He panted in shallow gasps. Belej was standing beside the bed.

"They came again, didn't they?" she said, almost whispering.

"Ye . . . yes." His throat was tight and dry.

"This can't go on, darling. We thought you could sleep bet-

ter in the daytime, with everyone out in the fields, but—"
"Got to get out of here," he mumbled. He rolled out of bed and pulled on his black work suit. Belej stood silent, blinking rapidly, chewing at her lower lip. Reginri fastened his boots and slammed out of the room. His steps thumped hollowly on the planking. She listened to them hurry down the hallway. They paused; the airless silence returned. Then the outer door creaked, banged shut.

She hurried after him.

She caught up near the rim of the canyon, a hundred meters from the log buildings. He looked at her. He scratched at his matted hair and hunched his shoulders forward.

"That one was pretty bad," he said woodenly.

"If they keep on getting worse ..."

"They won't."

"We hope. But we don't know that. If I understood what

they're about . . ."

"I can't quite describe it. They're different each time. The feeling seems the same, even though . . . " Some warmth had returned to his voice. "It's hard."

Belej sat down near the canyon edge. She looked up at him. Her eyebrows knitted together above large dark eyes. "All right," she said, her mood shifting suddenly, an edge coming into her voice. "One, I don't know what these nightmares are about. Two, I don't know where they come from. That horrible expedition you went on, I suppose, but you're not even clear about that. Three, I don't know why you insisted on joining their dirty expedition in the-"

"I told you, dammit. I had to go."

"You wanted the extra money," Belei said flatly. She

cupped her chin in a tiny hand.

"It wasn't extra money, it was any money." He glowered at the jagged canyon below them. Her calm, accusing manner irritated him.

"You're a pod cutter. You could have found work."

"The season was bad. This was last year, remember. Rates weren't good."

"But you had heard about this Sasuke and Leo, what people said about them-"

"Vanleo, that's the name. Not Leo."

"Well, whatever. You didn't have to work for them."

"No, of course not," he said savagely. "I could've busted

my ass on a field-hopper in planting season, twelve hours a day for thirty units pay, max. And when I got tired of that, or broke a leg, maybe I could've signed on to mold circuitry like a drone." He picked up a stone and flung it far over the canyon edge. "A great life."

Belej paused a long moment. At the far angular end of the canyon a pink mist seeped between the highest peaks and began spilling downward, gathering speed. Zeta Reticuli still rode high in the mottled blue sky, but a chill was sweeping

up from the canyon. The wind carried an acrid tang.

He wrinkled his nose. Within an hour they would have to move inside. The faint reddish haze would thicken. It was good for the plant life of northern Persenuae, but to human lungs the fog was an itching irritant.

Belej sighed. "Still," she said softly, "you weren't forced to

go. If you had known it would be so-"

"Yes," he said, and something turned in his stomach. "If anybody had known." active the constant of the state of the stat

At first it was not the Drongheda that he found disquieting. . It was the beach itself and, most of all, the waves.

They lapped at his feet with a slow, sucking energy, undermining the coarse sand beneath his boots. They began as little ripples that marched in from the gray horizon and slowly hissed up the black beach. Reginri watched one curl into greenish foam further out; the tide was falling.

"Why are they so slow?" he said.

Sasuke looked up from the carry-pouches. "What?"
"Why do the waves take so long?"

Sasuke stopped for a moment and studied the ponderous swell, flecked with yellow waterweed. An occasional large wave broke and splashed on the sharp lava rocks further out. "I never thought about it," Sasuke said. "Guess it's the lower gravity."

"Uh-hum." Reginri shrugged.

A skimmer fish broke water and snapped at something in the air. Somehow, the small matter of the waves unnerved him. He stretched restlessly in his skinsuit.

"I guess the low-gee sim doesn't prepare you for everything," he said. Sasuke didn't hear; he was folding out the tappers, coils and other gear.

Reginri could put it off no longer. He fished out his binocs

and looked at the Drongheda.

At first it seemed like a smooth brown rock, water-worn and timeless. And the reports were correct: it moved landward. It rose like an immense blister on the rippled sea. He squinted, trying to see the dark circle of the pithole. There, yes, a shadowed blur ringed with dappled red. At the center, darker, lay his entranceway. It looked impossibly small.

He lowered the binocs, blinking. Zeta Reticuli burned low on the flat horizon, a fierce orange point that sliced through

this planet's thin air.

"God, I could do with a burn," Reginri said.

"None of that, you'll need your wits in there," Sasuke said stiffly. "Anyway, there's no smoking blowby in these suits."

"Right." Reginri wondered if the goddamned money was worth all this. Back on Persenuae—he glanced up into the purpling sky and found it, a pearly glimmer nestling in closer to Zeta—it had seemed a good bet, a fast and easy bit of money, a kind of scientific outing with a tang of adventure. Better than agriwork, anyway. A far better payoff than anything else he could get with his limited training, a smattering of electronics and fabrication techniques. He even knew some math, though not enough to matter. And it didn't make any difference in this job, Sasuke had told him, even if math was the whole point of this thing.

He smiled to himself. An odd thought, that squiggles on the page were a commercial item, something people on Earth would send a ramscoop full of microelectronics and bioen-

gineered cells in exchange for-

"Some help here, eh?" Sasuke said roughly.

"Sorry."

Reginri knelt and helped the man spool out the tapper lines, checking the connectors. Safely up the beach, beyond the first pale line of sand dunes, lay the packaged electronics gear and the crew, already in place, who would monitor while he and Vanleo were inside.

As the two men unwound the cables, unsnarling the lines and checking the backup attachments, Reginri glanced occasionally at the Drongheda. It was immense, far larger than he had imagined. The 3Ds simply didn't convey the massive feel of the thing. It wallowed in the shallows, now no more than two hundred meters away.

"It's stopped moving," he said.

"Sure. It'll be there for days, by all odds." Sasuke spoke without looking up. He inserted his diagnostic probe at each socket, watching the meters intently. He was methodical, sure of himself-quite the right sort of man to handle the technical end. Reginri thought.

"That's the point, isn't it? I mean, the thing is going to stay

put."

"Sure."

"So you say. It isn't going to roll over while we're in there, because it never has."

Sasuke stopped working and scowled. Through his helmet bubble, Reginri could see the man's lips pressed tight together. "You fellows always get the shakes on the beach. It never fails. Last crew I had out here, they were crapping in their pants from the minute we sighted a Drongheda."

"Easy enough for you to say. You're not going in."

"I've been in, mister. You haven't. Do what we say, what Vanleo and I tell you, and you'll be all right."

"Is that what you told the last guys who worked with

Sasuke looked up sharply. "Kaufmann? You talked to him?"

"No. A friend of mine knows him."

"Your friend keeps bad company."

"Sure, me included."

"I meant-"

"Kaufmann didn't quit for no reason, you know."

"He was a coward," Sasuke said precisely.

"The way he put it, he just wasn't fool enough to keep working this thing the way you want. With this equipment."

"There isn't any other way."

Reginri motioned seaward. "You could put something automated inside. Plant a sensor."

"That will transmit out through thirty meters of animal fat? Through all that meat? Reliably? With a high bit rate? Ha!"

Reginri paused. He knew it wasn't smart to push Sasuke this way, but the rumors he had heard from Kaufmann made him uneasy. He glanced back toward the lifeless land. Down the beach, Vanleo had stopped to inspect something, kneeling on the hard-packed sand. Studying a rock, probably-nothing alive scuttled or crawled on this beach.

Reginri shrugged. "I can see that, but why do we have to

stay in so long? Why not just go in, plant the tappers and get out?"

"They won't stay in place. If the Drongheda moves even a little, they'll pop out."

"Don't make 'em so damned delicate."

"Mister, you can't patch in with spiked nails. That's a neural terminus point you're going after, not a statphone connection."

"So I have to mother it through? Sit there up in that huge gut and sweat it out?"

"You're getting paid for it," Sasuke said in clipped tones.

"Maybe not enough."

"Look, if you're going to bellyache—"

Reginri shrugged. "Okay, I'm not a pro at this. I came mostly to see the Drongheda anyway. But once you look at it, that electronics rig of yours seems pretty inadequate. And if that thing out there decides to give me a squeeze—"

"It won't. Never has."

A short, clipped bark came over the earphones. It was Vanleo's laugh, ringing hollow in their helmets. Vanleo approached, striding smoothly along the water line. "It hasn't happened, so it won't? Bad logic. Simply because a series has many terms does not mean it is infinite. Nor that it converges."

Reginri smiled warmly, glad that the other man was back. There was a remorseless quality about Sasuke that set his teeth on edge.

"Friend Sasuke, don't conceal what we both know from this boy." Vanleo clapped Sasuke on the back jovially. "The Drongheda are a cipher. Brilliant, mysterious, vast intellects—and it is presumptuous to pretend we understand anything about them. All we are able to follow is their mathematics—perhaps that is all they wish us to see." A brilliant smile creased his face.

Vanleo turned and silently studied the cables that played out from the dunes and into the surf.

"Looks okay," he said. "Tide's going out."

He turned abruptly and stared into Reginri's eyes. "Got your nerve back now, boy? I was listening on suit audio."

Reginri shuffled uneasily. Sasuke was irritating, but at least he knew how to deal with the man. Vanleo, though . . . somehow Vanleo's steady, intent gaze unsettled him. Reginri glanced out at the Drongheda and felt a welling dread. On impulse he turned to Vanleo and said, "I think I'll stay on the beach."

Vanleo's face froze. Sasuke made a rough spitting sound and began, "Another goddamned—" but Vanleo cut him off with a brusque motion of his hand.

"What do you mean?" Vanleo said mildly.

"I . . . I don't feel so good about going inside."

"Oh, I see."

"I mean, I don't know if that thing isn't going to . . . well, it's the first time I did this, and . . ."

"I see."

"Tell you what. I'll go out with you two, sure. I'll stay in the water and keep the cables from getting snarled—you know, the job you were going to do. That'll give me a chance to get used to the work. Then, next time . . ."

"That might be years from now."

"Well, that's right, but . . ."

"You're endangering the success of the entire expedition."

"I'm not experienced. What if . . ." Reginri paused. Vanleo had logic on his side, he knew. This was the first Drongheda they had been able to reach in over two years. Many of them drifted down the ragged coast, hugging the shallows. But most stayed only a day or two. This was the first in a long while that had moored itself offshore in a low, sheltered shoal. The satellite scan had picked it up, noted its regular pattern of movements that followed the tides. So Vanleo got the signal, alerted Reginri and the stand-by crew, and they lifted in a fast booster from Persenuae . . .

"A boot in the ass is what he needs," Sasuke said abruptly.

Vanleo shook his head. "I think not," he said.

The contempt in Sasuke's voice stiffened Reginri's resolve. "I'm not going in."

"Oh?" Vanleo smiled.

"Sue me for breach of contract when we get back to Per-

senuae, if you want. I'm not doing it."

"Oh, we'll do much more than that," Vanleo said casually. "We'll transfer the financial loss of this expedition to your shoulders. There's no question it's your fault."

"I\_\_"

"So you'll never draw full wages again, ever," Vanleo continued calmly.

Reginri moved his feet restlessly. There was a feeling of careful, controlled assurance in Vanleo that gave his words

added weight. And behind the certainty of those eyes Reginri glimpsed something else.

"I don't know . . ." He breathed deeply, trying to clear his

head. "Guess I got rattled a little, there."

He hesitated and then snorted self-deprecatingly, "I guess, I

guess I'll be all right."

Sasuke nodded, holding his tongue. Vanleo smiled heartily. "Fine. Fine. We'll just forget this little incident, then, eh?" Abruptly he turned and walked down the beach. His steps were firm, almost jaunty. were firm, almost jaunty.

### and which person from who HI we want our reference of more

An air squirrel glided in on the gathering afternoon winds. It swung out over the lip of the canyon, chattering nervously, and then coasted back to the security of the hotbush. The two humans watched it leisurely strip a seed pod and nibble away.

"I don't understand why you didn't quit then," Belej said at last. "Right then. On the beach. A lawsuit wouldn't stick, not with the other crewmen around to fill in for you."

Reginri looked at her blankly. "Impossible."
"Why? You'd seen that thing. You could see it was dangerous."

"I knew that before we left Persenuae."

"But you hadn't seen it."

"So what? I'd signed a contract."

Belej tossed her head impatiently. "I remember you saying to me it was a kind of big fish. That's all you said that night before you left. You could argue that you hadn't understood the danger ..."

Reginri grimaced. "Not a fish. A mammal."

"No difference. Like some other fish back on Earth, you told me."

"Like the humpback and the blue and the fin and the sperm whales," he said slowly. "Before men killed them off, they started to suspect the blues might be intelligent."

"Whales weren't mathematicians, though, were they?" she

said lightly.

"We'll never know, now."

Belej leaned back into the matted brownish grass. Strands of black hair blew gently in the wind. "That Leo lied to you about that thing, the fish, didn't he?"

"How?"

"Telling you it wasn't dangerous."

He sat upright in the grass and hugged his knees. "He gave me some scientific papers. I didn't read most of them—hell, they were clogged with names I didn't know, funny terms. That's what you never understood, Belej. We don't know much about the Drongheda. Just that they've got lungs and a spine and come ashore every few years. Why they do even that, or what makes them intelligent—Vanleo spent thirty years on that. You've got to give him credit-"

"For dragging you into it. Ha!"

"The Drongheda never harmed anybody. Their eyes don't seen to register us. They probably don't even know we're there, and Vanleo's simple-minded attempts to communicate failed. He-"

"If a well-meaning, blind giant rolls over on you," she said, "vou're still dead."

Reginri snorted derisively. "The Drongheda balance on ventral flippers. That's how they keep upright in the shallows. Whales couldn't do that, or—"

"You're not listening to me!" She gave him an exasperated glance.

"I'm telling you what happened."

"Go ahead, then. We can't stay out here much longer."

He peered out at the wrinkled canyon walls. Lime-green fruit trees dotted the burnished rocks. The thickening pink haze was slowly creeping across the canyon floor, obscuring details. The airborne life that colored the clouds would coat the leathery trees and trigger the slow rhythms of seasonal life. Part of the sluggish, inevitable workings of Persenuae, he thought.

"Mist looks pretty heavy," he agreed. He glanced back at the log cabins that were the communal living quarters. They blended into the matted grasses.

"Tell me," she said insistently.

"Well, I . . ."

"You keep waking me up with nightmares about it. I deserve to know. It's changed our lives together. I—"

He sighed. This was going to be difficult. "All right."

Vanleo gave Reginri a clap on the shoulder and the three men set to work. Each took a spool of cable and walked

backward, carrying it, into the surf. Reginri carefully watched the others and followed, letting the cable play out smoothly. He was so intent upon the work that he hardly noticed the enveloping wet that swirled about him. His oxygen pellet carrier was a dead, awkward weight at his back, but once up to his waist in the lapping water, maneuvering was easier, and he could concentrate on something other than keeping his balance.

The sea bottom was smooth and clear, laced with metallic filaments of dull silver. Not metal, though; this was a planet with strangely few heavy elements. Maybe that was why land life had never taken hold here, and the island continents sprinkled amid the ocean were bleak, dusty deserts. More probably, the fact that this chilled world was small and further from the sun made it too hostile a place for land life. Persenuae, nearer in toward Zeta, thrived with both native and imported species, but this world had only sea creatures. A curious planet, this; a theoretical meeting point somewhere between the classic patterns of Earth and Mars. Large enough for percolating volcanoes, and thus oceans, but with an unbreathable air curiously high in carbon dioxide and low in oxygen. Maybe the wheel of evolution had simply not turned far enough here, and someday the small fish—or even the Drongheda itself—would evolve upward, onto the land.

But maybe the Drongheda was evolving, in intelligence, Reginri thought. The things seemed content to swim in the great oceans, spinning crystalline-mathematical puzzles for their own amusement. And for some reason they had responded when Vanleo first jabbed a probing electronic feeler into a neural nexus. The creatures spilled out realms of mathematical art that, Earthward, kept thousands working to decipher it—to rummage among a tapestry of cold theorems, tangled referents, seeking the quick axioms that lead to new corridors, silent pools of geometry and the intricate pyramiding of lines and angles, encasing a jungle of numbers.

"Watch it!" Sasuke sang out.

Reginri braced himself and a wave broke over him, splashing green foam against his faceplate.

"Riptide running here," Vanleo called. "Should taper off

soon."

Reginri stood firm against the flow, keeping his knees loose and flexible for balance. Through his boots he felt the gritty slide of sand against smoothed rock. The cable spool was al-

most played out.

He turned to maneuver, and suddenly to the side he saw an immense brown wall. It loomed high, far above the gray waves breaking at its base. Reginri's chest tightened as he turned to study the Drongheda.

Its hide wall was delicately speckled in gold and green. The dorsal vents were black slashes that curved up the side.

forming deep oily valleys.

Reginri cradled the cable spool under one arm and gingerly reached out to touch it. He pushed at it several times experimentally. It gave slightly with a soft, rubbery resistance. "Watch the flukes!" Vanleo called. Reginri turned and saw

a long black flipper break water fifty meters away. It languidly brushed the surface with a booming whack audible through his helmet and then submerged.

"He's just settling down, I expect," Vanleo called reassuringly. "They sometimes do that."

Reginri frowned at the water where the fluke had emerged.

Deep currents welled up and rippled the surface.

"Let's have your cable," Sasuke said. "Reel it over here.

I've got the mooring shaft sunk in."

Reginri spun out the rest of his spool and had some left when he reached Sasuke. Vanleo was holding a long tube pointed straight down into the water. He pulled a trigger and there was a muffled clap Reginri could hear over suit radio. He realized Vanleo was firing bolts into the ocean rock to secure their cable and connectors. Sasuke held out his hands and Reginri gave him the cable spool.

It was easier to stand here; the Drongheda screened them from most of the waves, and the undercurrents had ebbed. For a while Reginri stood uselessly by, watching the two men secure connections and mount the tapper lines. Sasuke at last waved him over, and as Reginri turned his back, they fitted

the lines into his backpack.

Nervously, Reginri watched the Drongheda for signs of motion, but there were none. The ventral grooves formed an intricate ribbed pattern along the creature's side, and it was some moments before he thought to look upward and find the pithole. It was a red-rimmed socket, darker than the dappled brown around it. The ventral grooves formed an elaborate helix around the pithole, then arced away and down the body toward a curious mottled patch, about the same size as the pithole.

"What's that?" Reginri said, pointing at the patch.

"Don't know," Vanleo said. "Seems softer than the rest of the hide, but it's not a hole. All the Drongheda have 'em."

"Looks like a welt or something."

"Ummm," Vanleo murmured, distracted. "We'd better boost you up in a minute. I'm going to go around to the other side. There's another pithole exposed there, a little further up from the water line. I'll go in that way."

"How do I get up?"

"Spikes," Sasuke murmured. "It's shallow enough here."

It took several minutes to attach the climbing spikes to Reginri's boots. He leaned against the Drongheda for support and tried to mentally compose himself for what was to come. The sea welled around him, lapping warmly against his skinsuit. He felt a jittery sense of anticipation.
"Up you go," Sasuke said. "Kneel on my shoulders and get

the spikes in solid before you put any weight on them. Do what we said, once you're inside, and you'll be all right."

#### V

Vanleo steadied him as he climbed onto Sasuke's back. It took some moments before Reginri could punch the climbing

spikes into the thick, crinkled hide.

He was thankful for the low gravity. He pulled himself up easily, once he got the knack of it, and it took only a few moments to climb the ten meters to the edge of the pithole. Once there, he paused to rest.

"Not so hard as I thought," he said lightly.

"Good boy." Vanleo waved up at him. "Just keep steady and you'll be perfectly all right. We'll give you a signal on the com-line when you're to come out. This one won't be

more than an hour, probably."

Reginri balanced himself on the lip of the pithole and took several deep breaths, tasting the oily air. In the distance gray waves broke into surf. The Drongheda rose like a bubble from the wrinkled sea. A bank of fog was rolling down the coastline. In it a shadowy shape floated. Reginri slitted his eyes to see better, but the fog wreathed the object and blurred its outline. Another Drongheda? He looked again but the form melted away in the white mist.

"Hurry it up," Sasuke called from below. "We won't move

until you're in."

Reginri turned on the fleshy ledge beneath him and pulled at the dark blubbery folds that rimmed the pithole. He noticed that there were fine, gleaming threads all round the entrance. A mouth? An anus? Vanleo said not; the scientists who came to study the Drongheda had traced its digestive track in crude fashion. But they had no idea what the pithole was for. It was precisely to find that out that Vanleo first went into one. Now it was Vanleo's theory that the pithole was the Drongheda's method of communication, since why else would the neural connections be so close to the surface inside? Perhaps, deep in the murky ocean, the Drongheda spoke to each other through these pitholes, rather than singing, like whales. Men had found no bioacoustic signature in the schools of Drongheda they had observed, but that meant very little.

Reginri pushed inward, through the iris of spongy flesh, and was at once immersed in darkness. His suit light clicked on. He lay in a sheath of meat with perhaps two hand spans of clearance on each side. The tunnel yawned ahead, absorbing the weak light. He gathered his knees and pushed upward

against the slight grade.

"Electronics crew reports good contact with your tapper lines. This com okay?" Sasuke's voice came thin and high in Reginri's ear.

"Seems to be. Goddamned close in here."

"Sometimes it's smaller near the opening," Vanleo put in. "You shouldn't have too much climbing to do—most pitholes run pretty horizontal, when the Drongheda is holding steady like this."

"It's so tight. Going to be tough, crawling uphill," Reginri

said, an uncertain waver in his voice.

"Don't worry about that. Just keep moving and look for the neural points." Vanleo paused. "Fish out the contacts for your tappers, will you? I just got a call from the technicians, they want to check the connection."

"Sure." Reginri felt at his belly. "I don't seem to find ..."
"They're right there, just like in training," Sasuke said sharply. "Pull 'em out of their clips."

"Oh, yeah." Reginri fumbled for a moment and found the two metallic cylinders. They popped free of the suit and he nosed them together. "There." "All right, all right, they're getting the trace," Vanleo said. "Looks like you're all set."

"Right, about time," Sasuke said. "Let's get moving."

"We're going around to the other side. So let us know if you see anything." Reginri could hear Vanleo's breath coming faster. "Quite a pull in this tide. Ah, there's the other pithole."

The two men continued to talk, getting Vanleo's equipment ready. Reginri turned his attention to his surroundings and wriggled upward, grunting. He worked steadily, pulling against the pulpy stuff. Here and there scaly folds wrinkled the walls, overlapping and making handholds. The waxen membranes reflected back none of his suit light. He dug in his heels and pushed, slipping on patches of filmy pink liquid that collected in the trough of the tunnel.

At first the passageway flared out slightly, giving him better purchase. He made good progress and settled down into a rhythm of pushing and turning. He worked his way around a

vast bluish muscle that was laced by orange lines.

Even through his skinsuit he could feel a pulsing warmth come from it. The Drongheda had an internal temperature fifteen degrees Centigrade below the human's, but still an op-

pressive dull heat seeped through to him.

Something black lay ahead. He reached out and touched something rubbery that seemed to block the pithole. His suit light showed a milky pink barrier. He wormed around and felt at the edges of the stuff. Off to the left there was a smaller opening. He turned, flexed his legs and twisted his way into the new passage. Vanleo had told him the pithole might change direction and that when it did he was probably getting close to a nexus. Reginri hoped so.

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"Everything going well?" Vanleo's voice came distantly.

"Think so," Reginri wheezed.

"I'm at the lip. Going inside now." There came the muffled sounds of a man working, and Reginri mentally blocked them out, concentrating on where he was.

The walls here gleamed like glazed, aging meat. His fingers could not dig into it. He wriggled with his hips and worked forward a few centimeters. He made his body flex, thrust—he set up the rhythm and relaxed into it, moving forward

slightly. The texture of the walls coarsened and he made better progress. Every few moments he stopped and checked the threads for the com-line and the tappers that trailed behind him, reeling out on spools at his side.

He could hear Sasuke muttering to himself, but he was unable to concentrate on anything but the waxen walls around him. The passage narrowed again, and ahead he could see more scaly folds. But these were different, dusted with a

shimmering pale powder.

Reginri felt his heart beat faster. He kicked forward and reached out a hand to one of the encrusted folds. The delicate frosting glistened in his suit lamp. Here the meat was glassy, and deep within it he could see a complex interweaving network of veins and arteries, shot through with silvery threads.

It had to be a nexus; the pictures they had shown him were very much like this. It was not in a small pocket the way Vanleo said it would be, but that didn't matter. Vanleo himself had remarked that there seemed no systematic way the nodes were distributed. Indeed, they appeared to migrate to different positions inside the pithole, so that a team returning a few days later could not find the nodules they had tapped before.

Reginri felt a swelling excitement. He carefully thumbed on the electronic components set into his waist. Their low hum reassured him that everything was in order. He barked a short description of his find into his suit mike, and Vanleo responded in monosyllables. The other man seemed to be busy with something else, but Reginri was too occupied to wonder what it might be. He unplugged his tapper cylinders and worked them upward from his waist, his elbows poking into the pulpy membranes around him. Their needle points gleamed softly in the light as he turned them over, inspecting. Everything seemed all right.

He inched along and found the spot where the frosting seemed most dense. Carefully, bracing his hands against each other, he jabbed first one and then the other needle into the

waxen flesh. It puckered around the needles.

He spoke quickly into his suit mike asking if the signals were coming through. There came an answering yes, some chatter from the technician back in the sand dunes, and then the line fell silent again.

Along the tapper lines were flowing the signals they had

come to get. Long years of experiment had—as far as men could tell—established the recognition codes the technicians used to tell the Drongheda they had returned. Now, if the Drongheda responded, some convoluted electrical pulses would course through the lines and into the recording instruments ashore.

Reginri relaxed. He had done as much as he could. The rest depended on the technicians, the electronics, the lightning microsecond blur of information transfer between the machines and the Drongheda. Somewhere above or below him were flukes, ventral fins, slitted recesses, a baleen filter mouth through which a billion small fish lives had passed, all a part of this vast thing. Somewhere, layered in fat and wedged amid huge organs, there was a mind.

Reginri wondered how this had come about. Swimming through deep murky currents, somehow nature had evolved this thing that knew algebra, calculus, Reimannian metrics, Tchevychef subtleties—all as part of itself, as a fine-grained

piece of the same language it shared with men.

Reginri felt a sudden impulse. There was an emergency piece clipped near his waist, for use when the tapper lines snarled or developed intermittent shorts. He wriggled around until his back was flush with the floor of the pithole and then reached down for it. With one hand he kept the needles impacted into the flesh above his head; with the other he extracted the thin, flat wedge of plastic and metal that he needed. From it sprouted tiny wires. He braced himself against the tunnel walls and flipped the wires into the emergency recesses in the tapper cylinders. Everything seemed secure; he rolled onto his back and fumbled at the rear of his helmet for the emergency wiring. By attaching the cabling, he could hook directly into a small fraction of the Drongheda's output. It wouldn't interfere with the direct tapping process. Maybe the men back in the sand dunes wouldn't even know he had done it.

He made the connection. Just before he flipped his suit com-line over to the emergency cable, he thought he felt a slight sway beneath him. The movement passed. He flipped the switch. And felt—

—Bursting light that lanced through him, drummed a staccato rhythm of speckled green—

-Twisting lines that meshed and wove into perspectives,

triangles warped into strange saddle-pointed envelopes, coiling into new soundless shapes—

-A latticework of shrill sound, ringing at edges of geo-

metrical flatness-

-Thick, rich foam that lapped against weathered stone towers, precisely turning under an ellipsoid orange sun—
—Miniatured light that groaned and spun softly, curving

into moisture that beaded on a coppery matrix of wire—

—A webbing of sticky strands, lifting him

—A welling current

—Upward, toward the watery light—

Reginri snatched at the cable, yanking it out of the socket.

His hand jerked up to cover his face and struck his helmet. He panted, gasping.

He closed his eyes and for a long moment thought of nothing, let his mind drift, let himself recoil from the experience.

There had been mathematics there, and much else. Rhomboids, acute intersections in veiled dimensions, many-sided twisted sculptures, warped perspectives, polyhedrons of glow-

But so much more—he would have drowned in it.

There was no interruption of chatter through his earphone. Apparently the electronics men had never noticed the interception. He breathed deeply and renewed his grip on the tapper needles. He closed his eyes and rested for long moments. The experience had turned him inside out for a brief flicker of time. But now he could breathe easily again. His heart had stopped thumping wildly in his chest. The torrent of images began to recede. His mind had been filled, overloaded with more than he could fathom.

He wondered how much the electronics really caught. Perhaps, transferring all this to cold ferrite memory, the emotional thrust was lost. It was not surprising that the only element men could decipher was the mathematics. Counting, lines and curves, the smooth sheen of geometry—they were abstractions, things that could be common to any reasoning mind. No wonder the Drongheda sent mostly mathematics through this neural passage; it was all that men could follow.

After a time it occurred to Reginri that perhaps Vanleo

wanted it this way. Maybe he eavesdropped on the lines. The other man might seek this experience; it certainly had an intensity unmatched by drugs or the pallid electronic core-tap-ping in the sensoriums. Was Vanleo addicted? Why else risk failure? Why reject automated tapping and crawl in here-

particularly since the right conditions came so seldom?

But it made no sense. If Vanleo had Drongheda tapes, he could play them back at leisure. So . . . maybe the man was fascinated by the creatures themselves, not only the mathematics. Perhaps the challenge of going inside, the feel of it, was what Vanleo liked.

Grotesque, yes . . . but maybe that was it. faulband on and around and so hearth with the consistent with the consistent with the consistent to the constant to the consta

He felt a tremor. The needles wobbled in his hand. "Hey!" he shouted. The tube flexed under him.

"Something's happening in here. You guys—"

In midsentence the com-line went dead. Reginri automatically switched over to emergency, but there was no signal there either. He glanced at the tapper lines. The red phosphor glow at their ends had gone dead; they were not receiving

He wriggled around and looked down toward his feet. The tapper lines and the com cable snaked away into darkness with no breaks visible. If there was a flaw in the line, it was

further away.

Reginri snapped the tapper line heads back into his suit. As he did so, the flesh around him oozed languidly, compressing. There was a tilting sense of motion, a turning—
"Frange it! Get me—" Then he remembered the line was

dead. His lips pressed together.

He would have to get out on his own.

He dug in with his heels and tried to pull himself back-ward. A scaly bump scraped against his side. He pulled harder and came free, sliding a few centimeters back. The passage seemed tilted slightly downward. He put his hands out to push and saw something wet run over his fingers. The slimy fluid that filled the trough of the pithole was trickling toward him. Reginri pushed back energetically, getting a better purchase in the pulpy floor.

He worked steadily and made some progress. A long, slow undulation began and the walls clenched about him. He felt something squeeze at his legs, then his waist, then his chest

and head. The tightening had a slow, certain rhythm.

He breathed faster, tasting an acrid smell. He heard only his own breath, amplified in the helmet.

He wriggled backward. His boot struck something and he felt the smooth lip of a turning in the passage. He remembered this, but the angle seemed wrong. The Drongheda must be shifting and moving, turning the pithole.

He forked his feet into the new passageway and quickly

slipped through it.

This way was easier; he slid down the slick sides and felt a wave of relief. Further along, if the tunnel widened, he might

even be able to turn around and go headfirst.

His foot touched something that resisted softly. He felt around with both boots, gradually letting his weight settle on the thing. It seemed to have a brittle surface, pebbled. He carefully followed the outline of it around the walls of the hole until he had satisfied himself that there was no opening.

The passage was blocked.

His mind raced. The air seemed to gain a weight of its own, thick and sour in his helmet. He stamped his boots down, hoping to break whatever it was. The surface stayed firm.

Reginri felt his mind go numb. He was trapped. The comline was dead, probably snipped off by this thing at his feet.

He felt the walls around him clench and stretch again, a massive hand squeezing the life from him. The pithole sides were only centimeters from his helmet. As he watched, a slow ripple passed through the membrane, ropes of vellow fat visible beneath the surface.

"Get me out!" Reginri kicked wildly. He thrashed against the slimy walls, using elbows and knees to gouge. The yield-

ing pressure remained, cloaking him.

"Out! Out!" Reginri viciously slammed his fists into the flesh. His vision blurred. Small dark points floated before him. He pounded mechanically, his breath coming in short gasps. He cried for help. And he knew he was going to die.
Rage burst out of him. He beat at the enveloping smooth-

ness. The gathering tightness in him boiled up, curling his lips into a grimace. His helmet filled with a bitter taste. He shouted again and again, battering at the Drongheda, cursing it. His muscles began to ache.

And slowly, slowly the burning anger melted. He blinked away the sweat in his eyes. His vision cleared. The blind, pointless energy drained away. He began to think again.

Sasuke. Vanleo. Two-faced bastards. They'd known this job was dangerous. The incident on the beach was a charade.

When he showed doubts they'd bullied and threatened him immediately. They'd probably had to do it before, to other men. It was all planned.

He took a long, slow breath and looked up. Above him in the tunnel of darkness, the strands of the tapping lines and

the com cable dangled. One set of lines.

They led upward, on a slant, the way he had come.

It took a moment for the fact to strike him. If he had been backing down the way he came, the lines should be snarled behind him.

He pushed against the glazed sides and looked down his

chest. There were no tapper lines near his legs.

That meant the lines did not come up through whatever was blocking his way. No, they came only from above. Which meant that he had taken some wrong side passage. Somehow a hole had opened in the side of the pithole and he had followed it blindly.

He gathered himself and thrust upward, striving for purchase. He struggled up the incline, and dug in with his toes. Another long ripple passed through the tube. The steady hand of gravity forced him down, but he slowly worked his

way forward. Sweat stung his eyes.

After a few minutes his hands found the lip, and he quickly hoisted himself over it, into the horizontal tunnel above.

He found a tangle of lines and tugged at them. They gave with a slight resistance. This was the way out, he was sure of it. He began wriggling forward, and suddenly the world

titled, stretched, lifted him high. Let him drop.

He smashed against the pulpy side and lost his breath. The tube flexed again, rising up in front of him and dropping away behind. He dug his hands in and held on. The pithole arched, coiling, and squeezed him. Spongy flesh pressed at his head and he involuntarily held his breath. His faceplate was wrapped in it, and his world became fine-veined, purple, marbled with lacy fat.

Slowly, slowly the pressure ebbed away. He felt a dull aching in his side. There was a subdued tremor beneath him. As soon as he gained maneuvering room, he crawled urgently

forward, kicking viciously. The lines led him forward.

The passage flared outward and he increased his speed. He kept up a steady pace of pulling hands, gouging elbows, thrusting knees and toes. The weight around him seemed bent upon expelling, imparting momentum, ejecting. So it seemed, as the flesh tightened behind him and opened before.

He tried the helmet microphone again but it was still inert. He thought he recognized a vast bulging bluish muscle that, on his way in, had been in the wall. Now it formed a bump in the floor. He scrambled over its slickness and continued on.

He was so intent upon motion and momentum that he did not recognize the end. Suddenly the walls converged again and he looked around frantically for another exit. There was none. Then he noticed the rings of cartilage and stringy muscle. He pushed at the knotted surface. It gave, then relaxed even more. He shoved forward and abruptly was halfway out, suspended over the churning water.

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The muscled iris gripped him loosely about the waist. Puf-

fing steadily, he stopped to rest.

He squinted up at the forgiving sun. Around him was a harshly lit world of soundless motion. Currents swirled meters below. He could feel the brown hillside of the Drongheda shift slowly. He turned to see-

The Drongheda was splitting in two.

But no, no-

The bulge was another Drongheda close by moving. At the same moment another silent motion caught his eye. Below, Vanleo struggled through the darkening water, waving. Pale mist shrouded the sea.

Reginri worked his way out and onto the narrow rim of the pithole. He took a grip at it and lowered himself partway down toward the water. Arms extended, he let go and fell with a splash into the ocean. He kept his balance and lurched away awkwardly on legs of cotton.

Vanleo reached out a steadying hand. The man motioned at the back of his helmet. Reginri frowned, puzzled, and then realized he was motioning toward the emergency com cable. He unspooled his own cable and plugged it into the shoulder socket on Vanleo's skinsuit.

"-damned lucky. Didn't think I'd see you again. But it's fantastic, come see it."

"What? I got?—"

"I understand them now. I know what they're here for. It's not just communication, I don't think that, but that's part of it too. They've—"

"Stop babbling. What happened?"

"I went in," Vanleo said, regaining his breath. "Or started to. We didn't notice that another Drongheda had surfaced, was moving into the shallows."

"I saw it. I didn't think-"

"I climbed up to the second pithole before I saw. I was busy with the cables, you know. You were getting good traces and I wanted to—"

"Let's get away, come on." The vast bulks above them

were moving.

"No, no, come see. I think my guess is right, these shallows are a natural shelter for them. If they have any enemies in the sea, large fish or something, their enemies can't follow them here into the shallows. So they come here to, to mate and to communicate. They must be terribly lonely, if they can't talk to each other in the oceans. So they have to come here to do it. I—"

Reginri studied the man and saw that he was ablaze with his inner vision. The damned fool loved these beasts, cared about them, had devoted a life to them and their goddamned mathematics.

"Where's Sasuke?"

"—and it's all so natural. I mean, humans communicate and make love, and those are two separate acts. They don't blend together. But the Drongheda—they have it all. They're like, like..."

The man pulled at Reginri's shoulder, leading him around the long curve of the Drongheda. Two immense burnished hillsides grew out of the shadowed sea. Zeta was setting, and in profile Reginri could see a long dexterous tentacle curling into the air. It came from the mottled patches, like welts, he had seen before.

"They extend through those spots, you see. Those are their sensors, what they use to complete the contact. And—I can't prove it, but I'm sure—that is when the genetic material is passed between them. The mating period. At the same time they exchange information, converse. That's what we're getting on the tappers, their stored knowledge fed out. They think we're another of their own, that must be it. I don't understand all of it, but—"

"Where's Sasuke?"

"—but the first one, the one you were inside, recognized the difference as soon as the second Drongheda approached. They moved together and the second one extruded that tentacle. Then—"

Reginri shook the other man roughly. "Shut up! Sasuke-"

Vanleo stopped, dazed, and looked at Reginri. "I've been telling you. It's a great discovery, the first real step we've taken in this field. We'll understand so much *more* once this is fully explored."

Reginri hit him in the shoulder.

Vanleo staggered. The glassy, pinched look of his eyes

faded. He began to lift his arms.

Reginri drove his gloved fist into Vanleo's faceplate. Vanleo toppled backward. The ocean swallowed him. Reginri stepped back, blinking.

Vanleo's helmet appeared as he struggled up. A wave

foamed over him. He stumbled, turned, saw Reginri.

Reginri moved toward him. "No. No," Vanleo said weakly.

"If you're not going to tell me-"

"But I, I am." Vanleo gasped, leaned forward until he could brace his hands on his knees.

"There wasn't time. The second one came up on us so, so fast."

"Yeah?"

"I was about ready to go inside. When I saw the second one moving in, you know, the only time in thirty years, I knew it was important. I climbed down to observe. But we needed the data, so Sasuke went in for me. With the tapper cables."

Vanleo panted. His face was ashen.

"When the tentacle went in, it filled the pithole exactly, Tight. There was no room left," he said. "Sasuke . . . was there. Inside."

Reginri froze, stunned. A wave swirled around him and he slipped. The waters tumbled him backward. Dazed, he regained his footing on the slick rocks and began stumbling blindly toward the bleak shore, toward humanity. The ocean lapped around him, ceaseless and unending.

#### IX

Belej sat motionless, unmindful of the chill. "Oh my God," she said.

"That was it," he murmured. He stared off into the canyon. Zeta Reticuli sent slanting rays into the layered reddening mists. Air squirrels darted among the shifting shadows. "He's crazy," Belej said simply. "That Leo is crazy."

"Well . . ." Reginri began. Then he rocked forward stiffly and stood up. Swirls of reddish cloud were crawling up the canyon face toward them. He pointed. "That stuff is coming in faster than I thought." He coughed. "We'd better get inside."

Belej nodded and came to her feet. She brushed the twisted brown grass from her legs and turned to him.

"Now that you've told me," she said softly. "I think you

ought to put it from your mind."

"It's hard. I . . ."

"I know. I know. But you can push it far away from you, forget it happened. That's the best way."

"Well, maybe."

"Believe me. You've changed since this happened to you. I can feel it."

"Feel what?"

"You. You're different. I feel a barrier between us."

"I wonder," he said slowly.

She put her hand on his arm and stepped closer, an old, familiar gesture. He stood watching the reddening haze swallowing the precise lines of the rocks below.

"I want that screen between us to dissolve. You made your contribution, earned your pay. Those damned people under-

stand the Drongheda now-"

He made a wry, rasping laugh. "We'll never grasp the Drongheda. What we get in those neural circuits are mirrors of what we want. Of what we are. We can't sense anything totally alien."

"But\_"

"Vanleo saw mathematics because he went after it. So did I, at first. Later . . ."

He stopped. A sudden breeze made him shiver. He clenched his fists. Clenched. Clenched.

How could he tell her? He woke in the night, sweating,

tangled in the bedclothes, muttering incoherently . . . but they were not nightmares, not precisely.

Something else. Something intermediate.
"Forget those things," Belej said soothingly. Reginri leaned closer to her and caught the sweet musk of her, the dry crackling scent of her hair. He had always loved that.

She frowned up at him. Her eyes shifted intently from his mouth to his eyes and then back again, trying to read his expression. "It will only trouble you to recall it. I—I'm sorry I asked you to tell it. But remember—" she took both his hands in hers—"you'll never go back there again. It can be..."

Something made him look beyond her. At the gathering fog. And at once he sensed the shrouded abyss open below him. Sweeping him in. Gathering him up. Into-

-a thick red foam lapping against weathered granite tow-

-an ellipsoidal sun spinning soundlessly over a silvered. warping planet-

-watery light-

-cloying strands, sticky, a fine-spun coppery matrix that enfolded him, warming-

-glossy sheen of polyhedra, wedged together, mass upon mass-

-smooth bands of moisture playing lightly over his quilted

-a blistering light shines through him, sets his bones to humming resonance—

—pressing—

-coiling-

Beckoning. Beckoning.

When the moment had passed, Reginri blinked and felt a salty stinging in his eyes. Every day the tug was stronger, the incandescent images sharper. This must be what Vanleo felt, he was sure of it. They came to him now even during the day. Again and again, the grainy texture altering with time ...

He reached out and enfolded Belej in his arms.

"But I must," he said in a rasping whisper. "Vanleo called today. He . . . I'm going. I'm going back."

He heard her quick intake of breath, felt her stiffen in his

arms.

His attention was diverted by the reddening fog. It cloaked half the world and still it came on.

There was something ominous about it and something inviting as well. He watched as it engulfed trees nearby. He studied it intently, judging the distance. The looming presence was quite close now. But he was sure it would be all right.

### by Ursula K. Le Guin

When we started school back in the early 1920's, we were told by our teachers that the recently concluded "War to End War" had done just that and that the newly formed League of Nations would guarantee a tranquil future. Somehow in the decades since we have begun to suspect that we were deceived, as were also those honest-faced instructors and the sincere editorialists who backed them up. The author of The Dispossessed encapsulates these illusions in this little tale. Doubtless she thinks it to be a stick-your-tongue-out bit of social satire. Personally we think it's the real thing.

I think what Dr. Speakie has done is wonderful. He is a wonderful man. I believe that. I believe that people need beliefs. If I didn't have my belief I really don't know what would happen.

And if Dr. Speakie hadn't truly believed in his work he couldn't possibly have done what he did. Where would he have found the courage? What he did proves his genuine sincerity.

There was a time when a lot of people tried to cast doubts on him. They said he was seeking power. That was never true. From the very beginning all he wanted was to help people and make a better world. The people who called him a power-seeker and a dictator were just the same ones who used to say that Hitler was insane and Nixon was insane and all the world leaders were insane and the arms race was insane and our misuse of natural resources was insane and the whole world civilization was insane and suicidal. They were always saying that. And they said it about Dr. Speakie. But he stopped all that insanity, didn't he? So he was right all along, and he was right to believe in his beliefs.

I came to work for him when he was named the Chief of the Psychometric Bureau. I used to work at the UN, and when the World Government took over the New York UN Building they transferred me up to the thirty-fifth floor to be the head secretary in Dr. Speakie's office. I knew already that it was a position of great responsibility, and I was quite excited the whole week before my new job began. I was so curious to meet Dr. Speakie, because of course he was already famous. I was there right at the dot of nine on Monday morning, and when he came in it was so wonderful. He looked so kind. You could tell that the weight of his responsibilities was always on his mind, but he looked so healthy and positive, and there was a bounce in his step-I used to think it was as if he had rubber balls in the toes of his shoes. He smiled and shook my hand and said in such a friendly, confident voice, "And you must be Mrs. Smith! I've heard wonderful things about you. We're going to have a wonderful team here, Mrs. Smith!"

Later on he called me by my first name, of course.

That first year we were mostly busy with information. The World Government Presidium and all the Member States had to be fully informed about the nature and purpose of the SQ Test, before the actual implementation of its application could be eventualized. That was good for me too, because in preparing all that information I learned all about it myself. Often, taking dictation, I learned about it from Dr. Speakie's very lips. By May I was enough of an "expert" that I was able to prepare the "Basic SQ Information" pamphlet for publication just from Dr. Speakie's notes. It was such fascinating work. As soon as I began to understand the SQ Test Plan I began to believe in it. That was true of everybody in the office, and in the Bureau. Dr. Speakie's sincerity and scientific enthusiasm were infectious. Right from the beginning we had to take the Test every quarter, of course, and

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some of the secretaries used to be nervous before they took it, but I never was. It was so obvious that the Test was right. If you scored under 50 it was nice to know that you were sane, but even if you scored over 50 that was fine too, because then you could be helped. And anyway it is always best to know the truth about yourself.

As soon as the Information service was functioning smoothly Dr. Speakie transferred the main thrust of his attention to the implementation of Evaluator training, and planning for the structurization of the Cure Centers, only he changed the name to SQ Achievement Centers. It seemed a very big job even then. We certainly had no idea how big the

job would finally turn out to be!

As he said at the beginning, we were a very good team. Dr. Speakie valued my administrative abilities and put them to good use. There wasn't a single slacker in the office. We all

worked very hard, but there were always rewards.

I remember one wonderful day. I had accompanied Dr. Speakie to the Meeting of the Board of the Psychometric Bureau. The emissary from the State of Brazil announced that his State had adopted the Bureau Recommendations for Universal Testing-we had known that that was going to be announced. But then the delegate from Libya and the delegate from China announced that their States had adopted the Test too! Oh, Dr. Speakie's face was just like the sun for a minute, just shining. I wish I could remember exactly what he said, especially to the Chinese delegate, because of course China was a very big State and its decision was very influential. Unfortunately I do not have his exact words because I was changing the tape in the recorder. He said something like, "Gentlemen, this is a historic day for humanity." Then he began to talk at once about the effective implementation of the Application Centers, where people would take the Test, and the Achievement Centers, where they would go if they scored over 50, and how to establish the Test Administrations and Evaluations infrastructure on such a large scale, and so on. He was always modest and practical. He would rather talk about doing the job than talk about what an important job it was. He used to say, "Once you know what you're doing, the only thing you need to think about is how to do it." I believe that that is deeply true.

From then on, we could hand over the Information pro-

gram to a subdepartment and concentrate on How to Do It. Those were exciting times! So many States joined the Plan, one after another. When I think of all we had to do I wonder that we didn't all go crazy! Some of the office staff did fail their quarterly Test, in fact. But most of us working in the Executive Office with Dr. Speakie remained quite stable, even when we were on the job all day and half the night. I think his presence was an inspiration. He was always calm and positive, even when we had to arrange things like training 113,000 Chinese Evaluators in three months. "You can always find out 'how' if you just know the 'why'!" he would say. And we always did.

When you think back over it, it really is quite amazing what a big job it was—so much bigger than anybody, even Dr. Speakie, had realized it would be. It just changed everything. You only realize that when you think back to what things used to be like. Can you imagine, when we began planning Universal Testing for the State of China, we only allowed for 1,100 Achievement Centers, with 6,800 Staff! It really seems like a joke! But it is not. I was going through some of the old files yesterday, making sure everything is in order, and I found the first China Implementation Plan, with

those figures written down in black and white.

I believe the reason why even Dr. Speakie was slow to realize the magnitude of the operation was that even though he was a great scientist he was also an optimist. He just kept hoping against hope that the average scores would begin to go down, and this prevented him from seeing that universal application of the SQ Test was eventually going to involve

everybody either as Inmates or as Staff.

When most of the Russian and all the African States had adopted the Recommendations and were busy implementing them, the debates in the General Assembly of the World Government got very excited. That was the period when so many bad things were said about the Test and about Dr. Speakie. I used to get quite angry, reading the World Times reports of debates. When I went as his secretary with Dr. Speakie to General Assembly meetings I had to sit and listen in person to people insulting him personally, casting aspersions on his motives and questioning his scientific integrity and even his sincerity. Many of those people were very disagreeable and obviously unbalanced. But he never lost his temper. He would just stand up and prove to them, again,

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that the SQ Test did actually literally scientifically show whether the testee was sane or insane, and the results could be proved, and all psychometrists accepted them. So the Test-Ban people couldn't do anything but shout about freedom and accuse Dr. Speakie and the Psychometric Bureau of trying to "turn the world into a huge insane asylum." He would always answer quietly and firmly, asking them how they thought a person could be "free" if he suffered under a delusional system, or was prey to compulsions and obsessions, or could not endure contact with reality? How could those who lacked mental health be truly free? What they called freedom might well be a delusional system with no contact with reality. In order to find out, all they had to do was to become testees. "Mental health is freedom," he said. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,' they say, and now we have an infallible watchdog to watch for us—the SQ Test.

Only the testees can be truly free!"

There really was no answer they could make to that except illogical and vulgar accusations, which did not convince the delegates who had invited them to speak. Sooner or later the delegates even from Member States where the Test-Ban movement was strong would volunteer to take the SO Test to prove that their mental health was adequate to their responsibilities. Then the ones that passed the Test and remained in office would begin working for Universal Application in their home State. The riots and demonstrations, and things like the burning of the Houses of Parliament in London in the State of England (where the Nor-Eurp SQ Center was housed), and the Vatican Rebellion, and the Chilean H-Bomb, were the work of insane fanatics appealing to the most unstable elements of the populace. Such fanatics, as Dr. Speakie and Dr. Waltraute pointed out in their Memorandum to the Presidium, deliberately aroused and used the proven instability of the crowd, "mob psychosis." The only response to mass delusion of that kind was immediate implementation of the Testing Program in the disturbed States, and immediate amplification of the Asylum Program.

That was Dr. Speakie's own decision, by the way, to rename the SQ Achievement Centers "Asylums." He took the word right out of his enemies' mouths. He said, "An asylum means a place of *shelter*, a place of *cure*. Let there be no stigma attached to the word 'insane,' to the word 'asylum,' to the words "insane asylum'! No! For the asylum is the haven of

mental health—the place of cure, where the anxious gain peace, where the weak gain strength, where the prisoners of inadequate reality assessment win their way to freedom! Proudly let us use the word 'asylum.' Proudly let us go to the asylum, to work to regain our own God-given mental health, or to work with others less fortunate to help them win back their own inalienable right to mental health. And let one word be written large over the door of every asylum in the world—'WELCOME!'

Those words are from his great speech at the General Assembly on the day World Universal Application was decreed by the Presidium. Once or twice a year I listen to my tape of that speech. Although I am too busy ever to get really depressed, now and then I feel the need of a tiny "pick-meup," and so I play that tape. It never fails to send me back to

my duties inspired and refreshed.

Considering all the work there was to do, as the Test scores continued to come in always a little higher than the Psychometric Bureau analysts estimated, the World Government Presidium did a wonderful job for the two years that it administered Universal Testing. There was a long period, six months, when the scores seemed to have stabilized, with just about half of the testees scoring over 50 and half under 50. At that time it was thought that if 40 per cent of the mentally healthy were assigned to Asylum Staff work, the other 60 per cent could keep up routine basic world functions such as farming, power supply, transportation, etc. This proportion had to be reversed when they found that over 60 per cent of the mentally healthy were volunteering for Staff work, in order to be with their loved ones in the Asylums. There was some trouble then with the routine basic world functions functioning. However, even then contingency plans were being made for the inclusion of farmlands, factories, power plants, etc., in the Asylum Territories, and the assignment of routine basic world functions work of Rehabilitation Therapy, so that the Asylums could become totally self-supporting if it became advisable. This was President Kim's special care, and he worked for it all through his term of office. Events proved the wisdom of his planning. He seemed such a nice wise little man. I still remember the day when Dr. Speakie came into the office and I knew at once that something was wrong. Not that he ever got really depressed or reacted with inopportune emotion, but it was as if the rub128 SQ ------

ber balls in his shoes had gone just a little bit flat. There was the slightest tremor of true sorrow in his voice when he said, "Mary Ann, we've had a bit of bad news I'm afraid." Then he smiled to reassure me, because he knew what a strain we were all working under, and certainly didn't want to give anybody a shock that might push their score up higher on the next quarterly Test! "It's President Kim," he said, and I knew at once—I knew he didn't mean the President was ill or dead.

"Over fifty?" I asked, and he just said quietly and sadly,

Poor little President Kim, working so efficiently all that three months while mental ill health was growing in him! It was very sad and also a useful warning. High-level consultations were begun at once, as soon as President Kim was committed, and the decision was made to administer the Test monthly, instead of quarterly, to anyone in an executive position.

Even before this decision, the Universal scores had begun rising again. Dr. Speakie was not distressed. He had already predicted that this rise was highly probable during the transition period to World Sanity. As the number of the mentally healthy living outside the Asylums grew fewer, the strain on them kept growing greater, and they became more liable to break down under it-just as poor President Kim had done. Later, when the Rehabs began coming out of the Asylums in ever-increasing numbers, this stress would decrease. Also the crowding in the Asylums would decrease, so that the Staff would have more time to work on individually orientated therapy, and this would lead to still more dramatic increase in the number of Rehabs released. Finally, when the therapy process was completely perfected, including preventive therapy, there might be no Asylums left in the world at all! Because everybody will be either mentally healthy or a Rehab, or "neonormal," as Dr. Speakie liked to call it.

It was the trouble in the State of Australia that precipitated the Government crisis. Some Psychometric Bureau officials accused the Australian Evaluators of actually falsifying Test returns, but that is impossible since all the computers are linked to the World Government Central Computer Bank in Keokuk. Dr. Speakie suspected that the Australian Evaluators had been falsifying the Test itself, and insisted that they themselves all be tested immediately. Of course he was right.

It had been a conspiracy, and the suspiciously low Australian Test scores had resulted from the use of a false Test. Many of the conspirators tested higher than 80 when forced to take the genuine Test! The State Government in Canberra had been unforgivably lax. If they had just admitted it everything would have been all right. But they got hysterical, and moved the State Government to a sheep station in Queensland, and tried to withdraw from the World Government, (Dr. Speakie said this was a typical mass psychosis: reality-evasion, followed by fugue and autistic withdrawal.) Unfortunately the Presidium seemed to be paralyzed. Australia seceded on the day before the President and Presidium were due to take their monthly Test, and probably they were afraid of overstraining their SQ with agonizing decisions. So the Psychometric Bureau volunteered to handle the episode. Dr. Speakie himself flew on the plane with the H-Bombs, and helped to drop the information leaflets. He never lacked personal courage.

When the Australian incident was over, it turned out that most of the Presidium, including President Singh, had scored over 50. So the Psychometric Bureau took over their functions temporarily. Even on a long-term basis this made good sense, since all the problems now facing the World Government had to do with administering and evaluating the Test, training the staff, and providing full self-sufficiency structura-

tion to all Asylums.

What this meant in personal terms was that Dr. Speakie, as Chief of the Psychometric Bureau, was now Interim President of the United States of the World. As his personal secretary I was, I will admit it, just terribly proud of him. But he never let it go to his head.

He was so modest. Sometimes he used to say to people, when he introduced me, "This is Mary Ann, my secretary," he'd say with a little twinkle, "and if it wasn't for her I'd

have been scoring over fifty long ago!"

He truly appreciated efficiency and realiability. That's why we made such a good team, all those years we worked to-

gether.

There were times, as the World SQ scores rose and rose, that I would become a little discouraged. Once the week's Test figures came in on the readout, and the average score was 71. I said, "Doctor, there are moments I believe the whole world is going insane!"

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But he said, "Look at it this way, Mary Ann. Look at those people in the Asylums—3.1 billion inmates now, and 1.8 billion Staff—but look at them. What are they doing? They're pursuing their therapy, doing rehabilitation work on the farms and in the factories, and striving all the time, too, the farms and in the factories, and striving all the time, too, to help each other toward mental health. The preponderant inverse sanity quotient is certainly very high at the moment; they're mostly insane, yes. But you have to admire them. They are fighting for mental health. They will—they will win through!" And then he dropped his voice and said as if to himself, gazing out the window and bouncing just a little on the balls of his feet, "If I didn't believe that, I couldn't go on "

And I knew he was thinking of his wife.

Mrs. Speakie had scored 88 on the very first American
Universal Test. She had been in the Greater Los Angeles Territory Asylum for years now.

Anybody who still thinks Dr. Speakie wasn't sincere should think about that for a minute! He gave up everything for his

belief.

And even when the Asylums were all running quite well, and the epidemics in South Africa and the famines in Texas and the Ukraine were under control, still the work load on Dr. Speakie never got any lighter, because every month the personnel of the Psychometric Bureau got smaller, since some of them always flunked their monthly Test and were committed to Bethesda. I never could keep any of my secretarial staff any more for longer than a month or two. It was harder and harder to find replacements, too, because most sane young people volunteered for Staff work in the Asylums, since life was much easier and more sociable inside the Asylums than outside. Everything so convenient, and lots of friends and acquaintances! I used to positively envy those girls! But I knew where my job was.

At least it was much less hectic here in the UN Building, or the Psychometry Tower as it had been renamed long ago. Often there wouldn't be anybody around the whole building all day long but Dr. Speakie and myself, and maybe Bill the janitor (Bill scored 32 regular as clockwork every quarter). All the restaurants were closed, in fact most of Manhattan was closed, but we had fun picnicking in the old General Assembly Hall. And there was always the odd call from Buenos Aires or Reykjavik, asking Dr. Speakie's advice as Interim

President about some problem, to break the silence.

But last November 8, I will never forget the day, when Dr. Speakie was dictating the Referendum for World Economic Growth for the next five-year period, he suddenly interrupted himself. "By the way, Mary Ann," he said, "how was your last score?"

We had taken the Test two days before on the sixth. We always took the Test every first Monday. Dr. Speakie never would have dreamed of excepting himself from Universal

Testing regulations.

"I scored twelve," I said, before I thought how strange it was of him to ask. Or, not just to ask, because we often mentioned our scores to each other; but to ask then, in the middle of executing important World Government business.

"Wonderful," he said, shaking his head. "You're wonderful, Mary Ann! Down two from last month's Test, aren't

you?"

"I'm always between ten and fourteen," I said. "Nothing

new about that, Doctor."

"Someday," he said, and his face took on the expression it had when he gave his great speech about the Asylums, "someday, this world of ours will be governed by men fit to govern it. Men whose SQ score is zero. Zero, Mary Ann!"

"Well, my goodness, Doctor," I said jokingly—his intensity almost alarmed me a little—"even you never scored lower

than three, and you haven't done that for a year or more

now!"

He stared at me almost as if he didn't see me. It was quite uncanny. "Someday," he said in just the same way, "nobody in the world will have a quotient higher than fifty. Someday, nobody in the world will have a quotient higher than thirty! Higher than ten! The Therapy will be perfected. I was only the diagnostician. But the Therapy will be perfected! The cure will be found! Someday!" And he went on staring at me, and then he said, "Do you know what my score was on Monday?"

"Seven," I guessed promptly. The last time he had told me

his score it had been seven.

"Ninety-two," he said.

I laughed, because he seemed to be laughing. He had always had a puckish sense of humor that came out unexpectedly. But I thought we really should get back to the World

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Economic Growth Plan, so I said laughingly, "That really is a very bad joke, Doctor!"

"Ninety-two," he said, "and you don't believe me, Mary Ann, but that's because of the cantaloupe."

I said, "What cantaloupe, Doctor?" and that was when he jumped across his desk and began to try to bite through my jugular vein.

I used a judo hold and shouted to Bill the janitor, and when he came I called a robo-ambulance to take Dr. Speakie

to Bethesda Asylum.

That was six months ago. I visit Dr. Speakie every Saturday. It is very sad, he is in the McLean Area, which is the Violent Ward, and every time he sees me he screams and foams. But I do not take it personally. One should never take mental ill health personally. When the Therapy is perfected he will be completely rehabilitated. Meanwhile, I just hold on here. Bill keeps the floors clean, and I run the World Government. It really isn't as difficult as you might think. this I "trossupply bas pur assured average roll"

## THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION

# by John Varley

This is probably going to be an award winner this year, if not a double winner as well. It is far in the lead for Nebula recommendations, and is certainly the story that has achieved the most reader response this year. But what your editor questions is whether this is really a work of science fiction. It does take place in the very near future—but basically there is nothing futuristic about it. That it is a fine story—in the mainstream sense—goes without saying. But what makes this science fiction? Only the acclamation of sf readers apparently. What they say is science fiction evidently makes it so. By including this tale in this collection I bow to the great majority.

It was the year of the fourth non-depression. I had recently joined the ranks of the unemployed. The President had told me that I had nothing to fear but fear itself. I took him at his word, for once, and set out to backpack to California.

I was not the only one. The world's economy had been writhing like a snake on a hot griddle for the last twenty years, since the early seventies. We were in a boom-and-bust cycle that seemed to have no end. It had wiped out the sense of security the nation had so painfully won in the golden

years after the thirties. People were accustomed to the fact that they could be rich one year and on the breadlines the next. I was on the breadlines in '81, and again in '88. This time I decided to use my freedom from the time clock to see the world. I had ideas of stowing away to Japan. I was forty-seven years old and might not get another chance to be irresponsible.

This was in late summer of the year. Sticking out my thumb along the interstate, I could easily forget that there were food riots back in Chicago. I slept at night on top of my bedroll and saw stars and listened to crickets.

I must have walked most of the way from Chicago to Des Moines. My feet toughened up after a few days of awful blisters. The rides were scarce, partly competition from other hitchhikers and partly the times we were living in. The locals were none too anxious to give rides to city people, who they had heard were mostly a bunch of hunger-crazed potential mass murderers. I got roughed up once and told never to return to Sheffield, Illinois.

But I gradually learned the knack of living on the road. I had started with a small supply of canned goods from the welfare and by the time they ran out, I had found that it was possible to work for a meal at many of the farmhouses along the way.

Some of it was hard work, some of it was only a token from people with a deeply ingrained sense that nothing should come for free. A few meals were gratis, at the family table, with grandchildren sitting around while grandpa or grandma told oft-repeated tales of what it had been like in the Big One back in '29, when people had not been afraid to help a fellow out when he was down on his luck. I found that the older the person, the more likely I was to get a sympathetic ear. One of the many tricks you learn. And most older people will give you anything if you'll only sit and listen to them. I got very good at it.

The rides began to pick up west of Des Moines, then got bad again as I neared the refugee camps bordering the China Strip. This was only five years after the disaster, remember, when the Omaha nuclear reactor melted down and a hot mass of uranium and plutonium began eating its way into the earth, headed for China, spreading a band of radioactivity six hundred kilometers downwind. Most of Kansas City, Mis-

souri, was still living in plywood and sheet-metal shanty-towns till the city was rendered habitable again.

The refugees were a tragic group. The initial solidarity people show after a great disaster had long since faded into the lethargy and disillusionment of the displaced person. Many of them would be in and out of hospitals for the rest of their lives. To make it worse, the local people hated them, feared them, would not associate with them. They were modern pariahs, unclean. Their children were shunned. Each camp had only a number to identify it, but the local populace called them all Geigertowns.

I made a long detour to Little Rock to avoid crossing the Strip, though it was safe now as long as you didn't linger. I was issued a pariah's badge by the National Guard—a dosimeter—and wandered from one Geigertown to the next. The people were pitifully friendly once I made the first move, and I always slept indoors. The food was free at the community

messes.

Once at Little Rock, I found that the aversion to picking up strangers—who might be tainted with "radiation disease"—dropped off, and I quickly moved across Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. I worked a little here and there, but many of the rides were long. What I saw of Texas was through a car window.

I was a little tired of that by the time I reached New Mexico. I decided to do some more walking. By then I was less

interested in California than in the trip itself.

I left the roads and went cross-country where there were no fences to stop me. I found that it wasn't easy, even in

New Mexico, to get far from signs of civilization.

Taos was the center, back in the '60's, of cultural experiments in alternative living. Many communes and cooperatives were set up in the surrounding hills during that time. Most of them fell apart in a few months, or years, but a few survived. In later years, any group with a new theory of living and a yen to try it out seemed to gravitate to that part of New Mexico. As a result, the land was dotted with ramshackle windmills, solar heating panels, geodesic domes, group marriages, nudists, philosophers, theoreticians, messiahs, hermits, and more than a few just plain nuts.

Taos was great. I could drop into most of the communes and stay for a day or a week, eating organic rice and beans and drinking goat's milk. When I got tired of one, a few hours' walk in any direction would bring me to another. There, I might be offered a night of prayer and chanting or a ritualistic orgy. Some of the groups had spotless barns with automatic milkers for the herds of cows. Others didn't even have latrines; they just squatted. In some, the members dressed like nuns, or Quakers in early Pennsylvania. Elsewhere, they went nude and shaved all their body hair and painted themselves purple. There were all-male and all-female groups. I was urged to stay at most of the former; at the latter, the responses ranged from a bed for the night and good conversation to being met at a barbed-wire fence with a shotgun.

I tried not to make judgments. These people were doing something important, all of them. They were testing ways whereby people didn't have to live in Chicago. That was a wonder to me. I had thought Chicago was inevitable, like di-

arrhea.

This is not to say they were all successful. Some made Chicago look like Shangri-La. There was one group who seemed to feel that getting back to nature consisted of sleeping in pigshit and eating food a buzzard wouldn't touch. Many were obviously doomed. They would leave behind a group of empty hovels and the memory of cholera.

So the place wasn't paradise, not by a long way. But there were successes. One or two had been there since '63 or '64 and were raising their third generation. I was disappointed to see that most of these were the ones that departed last from established norms of behavior, though some of the differences could be startling. I suppose the most radical experiments are the least likely to bear fruit.

I stayed through the winter. No one was surprised to see me a second time. It seems that many people came to Taos and shopped around. I seldom stayed more than three weeks at any one place, and always pulled my weight. I made many friends and picked up skills that would serve me if I stayed off the roads. I toyed with the idea of staying at one of them forever. When I couldn't make up my mind, I was advised that there was no hurry. I could go to California and return. They seemed sure I would.

So when spring came I headed west over the hills. I stayed off the roads and slept in the open. Many nights I would stay at another commune, until they finally began to get farther

apart, then tapered off entirely. The country was not as pretty as before.

Then, three days' leisurely walking from the last commune, I came to a wall the same of the wall to have and

In 1964, in the United States, there was an epidemic of German measles, or rubella. Rubella is one of the mildest of infectious diseases. The only time it's a problem is when a woman contracts it in the first four months of her pregnancy. It is passed to the fetus, which usually develops complications. These complications include deafness, blindness, and damage to the brain.

In 1964, in the old days before abortion became readily available, there was nothing to be done about it. Many pregnant women caught rubella and went to term. Five thousand deaf-blind children were born in one year. The normal yearly incidence of deaf-blind children in the United States is one

hundred and forty.

In 1970 these five thousand potential Helen Kellers were all six years old. It was quickly seen that there was a shortage of Anne Sullivans. Previously, deaf-blind children could be

sent to a small number of special institutions.

It was a problem. Not just anyone can cope with a blinddeaf child. You can't tell them to shut up when they moan; you can't reason with them, tell them that the moaning is driving you crazy. Some parents were driven to nervous breakdowns when they tried to keep their children at home.

Many of the five thousand were badly retarded and virtually impossible to reach, even if anyone had been trying. These ended up, for the most part, warehoused in the hundreds of anonymous nursing homes and institutes for "special" children. They were put into beds, cleaned up once a day by a few overworked nurses, and generally allowed the full blessings of liberty: they were allowed to rot freely in their own dark, quiet, private universes. Who can say if it was bad for them? None of them were heard to complain.

Many children with undamaged brains were shuffled in among the retarded because they were unable to tell anyone that they were in there behind the sightless eyes. They failed the batteries of tactile tests, unaware that their fates hung in the balance when they were asked to fit round pegs into round holes to the ticking of a clock they could not see or hear. As a result, they spent the rest of their lives in bed, and none of them complained, either. To protest, one must be aware of the possibility of something better. It helps to have

a language, too.

Several hundred of the children were found to have IQ's within the normal range. There were news stories about them as they approached puberty and it was revealed that there were not enough good people to properly handle them. Money was spent, teachers were trained. The education expenditures would go on for a specified period of time, until the children were grown, then things would go back to normal and everyone could congratulate themselves on having dealt successfully with a tough problem.

And indeed, it did work fairly well. There are ways to reach and teach such children. They involve patience, love, and dedication, and the teachers brought all that to their jobs. All the graduates of the special schools left knowing how to speak with their hands. Some could talk. A few could write. Most of them left the institutions to live with parents or relatives, or, if neither was possible, received counseling and help in fitting themselves into society. The options were limited, but people can live rewarding lives under the most severe handicaps. Not everyone, but most of the graduates, were as happy with their lot as could reasonably be expected. Some achieved the almost saintly peace of their role model, Helen Keller. Others became bitter and withdrawn. A few had to be put in asylums, where they became indistinguishable from the others of their group who had spent the last twenty years there. But for the most part, they did well.

But among the group, as in any group, were some misfits. They tended to be among the brightest, the top ten percent in the IQ scores. This was not a reliable rule. Some had unremarkable test scores and were still infected with hunger to do something, to change things, to rock the boat. With a group of five thousand, there were certain to be a few geniuses, a few artists, a few dreamers, hell-raisers, individualists, movers and shapers: a few glorious maniacs.

There was one among them who might have been President but for the fact that she was blind, deaf, and a woman. She was smart, but not one of the geniuses. She was a dreamer, a creative force, an innovator. It was she who dreamed of freedom. But she was not a builder of fairy castles. Having dreamed it, she had to make it come true.

The wall was made of carefully fitted stone and was about five feet high. It was completely out of context with anything I had seen in New Mexico, though it was built of native rock. You just don't build that kind of wall out there. You use barbed wire if something needs fencing in, but many people still made use of the free range and brands. Somehow it seemed transplanted from New England.

It was substantial enough that I felt it would be unwise to crawl over it. I had crossed many wire fences in my travels and had not gotten in trouble for it yet, though I had some talks with some ranchers. Mostly they told me to keep moving, but didn't seem upset about it. This was different. I set out to walk around it. From the lay of the land, I couldn't

tell how far it might reach, but I had time.

At the top of the next rise I saw that I didn't have far to go. The wall made a right-angle turn just ahead. I looked over it and could see some buildings. They were mostly domes, the ubiquitous structure thrown up by communes because of the combination of ease of construction and durability. There were sheep behind the wall, and a few cows. They grazed on grass so green I wanted to go over and roll in it. The wall enclosed a rectangle of green. Outside, where I stood, it was all scrub and sage. These people had access to Rio Grande irrigation water.

I rounded the corner and followed the wall west again.

I saw a man on horseback about the same time he spotted me. He was south of me, outside the wall, and he turned and

rode in my direction.

He was a dark man with thick features, dressed in denim and boots with a gray battered Stetson. Navaho, maybe. I don't know much about Indians, but I'd heard they were out here.

"Hello," I said when he'd stopped. He was looking me

over. "Am I on your land?"

"Tribal land," he said. "Yeah, you're on it." "I didn't see any signs."

He shrugged.

"It's okay, bud. You don't look like you out to rustle cattle." He grinned at me. His teeth were large and stained with tobacco. "You be camping out tonight?"

"Yes. How much farther does the, uh, tribal land go?

Maybe I'll be out of it before tonight?"

He shook his head gravely. "Nah. You won't be off it tomorrow. 'S all right. You make a fire, you be careful, huh?" He grinned again and started to ride off.

"Hey, what is this place?" I gestured to the wall and he pulled his horse up and turned around again. It raised a lot

of dust.

"Why you asking?" He looked a little suspicious.

"I dunno. Just curious. It doesn't look like the other places I've been to. This wall . . ."

He scowled. "Damn wall." Then he shrugged. I thought

that was all he was going to say. Then he went on.

"These people, we look out for 'em, you hear? Maybe we don't go for what they're doin'. But they got it rough, you know?" He looked at me, expecting something. I never did get the knack of talking to these laconic Westerners. I always felt that I was making my sentences too long. They use a shorthand of grunts and shrugs and omitted parts of speech, and I always felt like a dude when I talked to them.
"Do they welcome guests?" I asked. "I thought I might see

if I could spend the night."

He shrugged again, and it was a whole different gesture.

"Maybe. They all deaf and blind, you know?" And that was all the conversation he could take for the day. He made

a clucking sound and galloped away.

I continued down the wall until I came to a dirt road that wound up the arroyo and entered the wall. There was a wooden gate, but it stood open. I wondered why they took all the trouble with the wall only to leave the gate like that. Then I noticed a circle of narrow-gauge train tracks that came out of the gate, looped around outside it, and rejoined itself. There was a small siding that ran along the outer wall for a few yards.

I stood there a few moments. I don't know what entered into my decision. I think I was a little tired of sleeping out, and I was hungry for a home-cooked meal. The sun was getting closer to the horizon. The land to the west looked like more of the same. If the highway had been visible, I might have headed that way and hitched a ride. But I turned the other way and went through the gate.

I walked down the middle of the tracks. There was a wooden fence on each side of the road, built of horizontal planks, like a corral. Sheep grazed on one side of me. There was a Shetland sheepdog with them, and she raised her ears

and followed me with her eyes as I passed, but did not come when I whistled.

It was about half a mile to the cluster of buildings ahead. There were four or five domes made of something translucent, like greenhouses, and several conventional square buildings. There were two windmills turning lazily in the breeze. There were several banks of solar water heaters. These are flat constructions of glass and wood, held off the ground so they can tilt to follow the sun. They were almost vertical now, intercepting the oblique rays of sunset. There were a few trees, what might have been an orchard.

About halfway there I passed under a wooden footbridge. It arched over the road, giving access from the east pasture to the west pasture. I wondered, What was wrong with a simple

gate?

Then I saw something coming down the road in my direction. It was traveling on the tracks and it was very quiet. I

stopped and waited.

It was a sort of converted mining engine, the sort that pulls loads of coal up from the bottom of shafts. It was battery-powered, and it had gotten quite close before I heard it. A small man was driving it. He was pulling a car behind him and singing as loud as he could with absolutely no sense of pitch.

He got closer and closer, moving about five miles per hour, one hand held out as if he was signaling a left turn. Suddenly I realized what was happening, as he was bearing down on me. He wasn't going to stop. He was counting fenceposts with his hand. I scrambled up the fence just in time. There wasn't more than six inches of clearance between the train and the fence on either side. His palm touched my leg as I squeezed close to the fence, and he stopped abruptly.

He leaped from the car and grabbed me and I thought I was in trouble. But he looked concerned, not angry, and felt me all over, trying to discover if I was hurt. I was embarrassed. Not from the examination; because I had been foolish. The Indian had said they were all deaf and blind but I

guess I hadn't quite believed him.

He was flooded with relief when I managed to convey to him that I was all right. With eloquent gestures he made me understand that I was not to stay on the road. He indicated that I should climb over the fence and continue through the fields. He repeated himself several times to be sure I understood, then held on to me as I climbed over to assure himself that I was out of the way. He reached over the fence and held my shoulders, smiling at me. He pointed to the road and shook his head, then pointed to the buildings and nodded. He touched my head and smiled when I nodded. He climbed back onto the engine and started up, all the time nodding and pointing where he wanted me to go. Then he was off again.

I debated what to do. Most of me said turn around, go back to the wall by way of the pasture and head back into the hills. These people probably wouldn't want me around. I doubted that I'd be able to talk to them, and they might even resent me. On the other hand, I was fascinated, as who wouldn't be? I wanted to see how they managed it. I still didn't believe that they were all deaf and blind. It didn't seem possible.

The Sheltie was sniffing at my pants. I looked down at her and she backed away, then daintily approached me as I held out my open hand. She sniffed, then licked me. I patted her on the head, and she hustled back to her sheep.

I turned toward the buildings.

The first order of business was money.

None of the students knew much about it from experience, but the library was full of Braille books. They started reading.

One of the first things that became apparent was that when money was mentioned, lawyers were not far away. The students wrote letters. From the replies, they selected a law-

yer and retained him.

They were in a school in Pennsylvania at the time. The original pupils of the special schools, five hundred in number, had been narrowed down to about seventy as people left to live with relatives or found other solutions to their special problems. Of those seventy, some had places to go but didn't want to go there; others had few alternatives. Their parents were either dead or not interested in living with them. So the seventy had been gathered from the schools around the country into this one, while ways to deal with them were worked out. The authorities had plans, but the students beat them to it.

Each of them had been entitled to a guaranteed annual income since 1980. They had been under the care of the government, so they had not received it. They sent their lawyer

to court. He came back with a ruling that they could not collect. They appealed, and won. The money was paid retroactively, with interest, and came to a healthy sum. They thanked their lawyer and retained a real estate agent. Meanwhile, they read.

They read about communes in New Mexico, and instructed their agent to look for something out there. He made a deal for a tract to be leased in perpetuity from the Navaho nation. They read about the land, found that it would need a lot of

water to be productive in the way they wanted it to be.

They divided into groups to research what they would need to be self-sufficient.

Water could be obtained by tapping into the canals that carried it from the reservoirs on the Rio Grande into the reclaimed land in the south. Federal money was available for the project through a labyrinthine scheme involving HEW. the Agriculture Department, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They ended up paying little for their pipeline.

The land was arid. It would need fertilizer to be of use in raising sheep without resorting to open range techniques. The cost of fertilizer could be subsidized through the Rural Resettlement Program. After that, planting clover would enrich the

soil with all the nitrates they could want.

There were techniques available to farm ecologically, without worrying about fertilizers or pesticides. Everything was recycled. Essentially, you put sunlight and water into one end and harvested wool, fish, vegetables, apples, honey, and eggs at the other end. You used nothing but the land, and replaced even that as you recycled your waste products back into the soil. They were not interested in agribusiness with huge combine harvesters and crop dusters. They didn't even want to

turn a profit. They merely wanted sufficiency.

The details multiplied. Their leader, the one who had had the original idea and the drive to put it into action in the face of overwhelming obstacles, was a dynamo named Janet Reilly. Knowing nothing about the techniques generals and executives employ to achieve large objectives, she invented them herself and adapted them to the peculiar needs and limitations of her group. She assigned task forces to look into solutions of each aspect of their project: law, science, social planning, design, buying, logistics, construction. At any one time, she was the only person who knew everything about

what was happening. She kept it all in her head, without notes of any kind.

It was in the area of social planning that she showed herself to be a visionary and not just a superb organizer. Her idea was not to make a place where they could lead a life that was a sightless, soundless imitation of their unafflicted peers. She wanted a whole new start, a way of living that was by and for the blind-deaf, a way of living that accepted no convention just because that was the way it had always been done. She examined every human cultural institution from marriage to indecent exposure to see how it related to her needs and the needs of her friends. She was aware of the peril of this approach, but was undeterred. Her Social Task Force read about every variant group that had ever tried to make it on its own anywhere, and brought her reports about how and why they had failed or succeeded. She filtered this information through her own experiences to see how it would work for her unusual group with its own set of needs and goals.

The details were endless. They hired an architect to put their ideas into Braille blueprints. Gradually the plans evolved. They spent more money. The construction began, supervised on the site by their architect, who by now was so fascinated by the scheme that she donated her services. It was an important break, for they needed someone there whom they could trust. There is only so much that can be accom-

plished at such a distance.

When things were ready for them to move, they ran into bureaucratic trouble. They had anticipated it, but it was a set-back. Social agencies charged with overseeing their welfare doubted the wisdom of the project. When it became apparent that no amount of reasoning was going to stop it, wheels were set in motion that resulted in a restraining order, issued for their own protection, preventing them from leaving the school. They were twenty-one years old by then, all of them, but were judged mentally incompetent to manage their own affairs. A hearing was scheduled.

Luckily, they still had access to their lawyer. He also had become infected with the crazy vision, and put on a great battle for them. He succeeded in getting a ruling concerning the rights of institutionalized persons, later upheld by the Supreme Court, which eventually had severe repercussions in state and county hospitals. Realizing the trouble they were al-

ready in regarding the thousands of patients in inadequate fa-

cilities across the country, the agencies gave in.

By then, it was the spring of 1986, one year after their target date. Some of their fertilizer had washed away already for lack of erosion-preventing clover. It was getting late to start crops, and they were running short of money. Nevertheless, they moved to New Mexico and began the backbreaking job of getting everything started. There were fifty-five of them, with nine children aged three months to six years.

I don't know what I expected. I remember that everything was a surprise, either because it was so normal or because it was so different. None of my idiot surmises about what such a place might be like proved to be true. And of course I didn't know the history of the place; I learned that later, picked up in bits and pieces.

I was surprised to see lights in some of the buildings. The first thing I had assumed was that they would have no need of them. That's an example of something so normal that it

surprised me.

As to the differences, the first thing that caught my attention was the fence around the rail line. I had a personal interest in it, having almost been injured by it. I struggled to

understand, as I must if I was to stay even for a night.

The wood fences that enclosed the rails on their way to the gate continued up to a barn, where the rails looped back on themselves in the same way they did outside the wall. The entire line was enclosed by the fence. The only access was a loading platform by the barn, and the gate to the outside. It made sense. The only way a deaf-blind person could operate a conveyance like that would be with assurances that there was no one on the track. These people would never go on the tracks; there was no way they could be warned of an approaching train.

There were people moving around me in the twilight as I made my way into the group of buildings. They took no notice of me, as I had expected. They moved fast; some of them were actually running. I stood still, eyes searching all around me so no one would come crashing into me. I had to figure out how they kept from crashing into each other before I got bolder.

I bent to the ground and examined it. The light was getting bad, but I saw immediately that there were concrete side-

walks crisscrossing the area. Each of the walks was etched with a different sort of pattern in grooves that had been made before the stuff set—lines, waves, depressions, patches of rough and smooth. I quickly saw that the people who were in a hurry moved only on those walkways, and they were all barefoot. It was no trick to see that it was some sort of traffic pattern read with the feet. I stood up. I didn't need to know how it worked. It was sufficient to know what it was and stay off the paths.

The people were unremarkable. Some of them were not dressed, but I was used to that by now. They came in all shapes and sizes, but all seemed to be about the same age except for the children. Except for the fact that they did not stop and talk or even wave as they approached each other, I would never have guessed they were blind. I watched them come to intersections in the pathways—I didn't know how they knew they were there, but could think of several ways—and slow down as they crossed. It was a marvelous system.

I began to think of approaching someone. I had been there for almost half an hour, an intruder. I guess I had a false sense of these people's vulnerability; I felt like a burglar.

I walked along beside a woman for a minute. She was very purposeful in her eyes-ahead stride, or seemed to be. She sensed something, maybe my footsteps. She slowed a little, and I touched her on the shoulder, not knowing what else to do. She stopped instantly and turned toward me. Her eyes were open but vacant. Her hands were all over me, lightly touching my face, my chest, my hands, fingering my clothing. There was no doubt in my mind that she knew me for a stranger, probably from the first tap on the shoulder. But she smiled warmly at me, and hugged me. Her hands were very delicate and warm. That's funny, because they were calloused from hard work. But they felt sensitive.

She made me to understand—by pointing to the building, making eating motions with an imaginary spoon, and touching a number on her watch—that supper was served in an hour, and that I was invited. I nodded and smiled beneath her hands; she kissed me on the cheek and hurried off.

Well. It hadn't been so bad. I had worried about my ability to communicate. Later I found out she learned a great deal more about me than I had told.

I put off going into the mess hall or whatever it was. I

strolled around in the gathering darkness looking at their layout. I saw the little Sheltie bringing the sheep back to the fold for the night. She herded them expertly through the open gate without any instructions, and one of the residents closed it and locked them in. The man bent and scratched the dog on the head and got his hand licked. Her chores done for the night, the dog hurried over to me and sniffed my pant leg. She followed me around the rest of the evening.

Everyone seemed so busy that I was surprised to see one woman sitting on a rail fence, doing nothing. I went over to

her.

Closer, I saw that she was younger than I had thought. She was thirteen, I learned later. She wasn't wearing any clothes. I touched her on the shoulder, and she jumped down from the fence and went through the same routine as the other woman had, touching me all over with no reserve. She took my hand and I felt her fingers moving rapidly in my palm. I couldn't understand it, but knew what it was. I shrugged, and tried out other gestures to indicate that I didn't speak hand talk. She nodded, still feeling my face with her hands.

She asked me if I was staying to dinner. I assured her that I was. She asked me if I was from a university. And if you think that's easy to ask with only body movements, try it. But she was so graceful and supple in her movements, so deft at getting her meaning across. It was beautiful to watch her. It

was speech and ballet at the same time.

I told her I wasn't from a university, and launched into an attempt to tell her a little about what I was doing and how I got there. She listened to me with her hands, scratching her head graphically when I failed to make my meanings clear. All the time the smile on her face got broader and broader, and she would laugh silently at my antics. All this while standing very close to me, touching me. At last she put her hands on her hips.

"I guess you need the practice," she said, "but if it's all the same to you, could we talk mouthtalk for now? You're crack-

ing me up."

I jumped as if stung by a bee. The touching, while something I could ignore for a deaf-blind girl, suddenly seemed out of place. I stepped back a little, but her hands returned to me. She looked puzzled, then read the problem with her hands.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You thought I was deaf and blind. If I'd known I would have told you right off."

"I thought everyone here was."

"Just the parents. I'm one of the children. We all hear and see quite well. Don't be so nervous. If you can't stand touching, you're not going to like it here. Relax, I won't hurt you." And she kept her hands moving over me, mostly my face. I didn't understand it at the time, but it didn't seem sexual. Turned out I was wrong, but it wasn't blatant.

"You'll need me to show you the ropes," she said, and started for the domes. She held my hand and walked close to me. Her other hand kept moving to my face every time I

talked.

"Number one, stay off the concrete paths. That's where—"

"I already figured that out."

"You did? How long have you been here?" Her hands searched my face with renewed interest. It was quite dark.

"Less than an hour. I was almost run over by your train." She laughed, then apologized and said she knew it wasn't

funny to me.

I told her it was funny to me now, though it hadn't been at the time. She said there was a warning sign on the gate, but I had been unlucky enough to come when the gate was open—they opened it by remote control before a train started up-and I hadn't seen it.

"What's your name?" I asked her, as we neared the soft

yellow lights coming from the dining room.

Her hand worked reflexively in mine, then stopped. "Oh, I don't know. I have one; several, in fact. But they're in

bodytalk. I'm . . . Pink. It translates as Pink, I guess."

There was a story behind it. She had been the first child born to the school students. They knew that babies were described as being pink, so they called her that. She felt pink to them. As we entered the hall, I could see that her name was visually inaccurate. One of her parents had been black. She was dark, with blue eyes and curly hair lighter than her skin. She had a broad nose, but small lips.

She didn't ask my name, so I didn't offer it. No one asked my name, in speech, the entire time I was there. They called me many things in bodytalk, and when the children called me

it was "Hey, you!" They weren't big on spoken words.

The dining hall was in a rectangular building made of brick. It connected to one of the large domes. It was dimly

lighted. I later learned that the lights were for me alone. The children didn't need them for anything but reading. I held Pink's hand, glad to have a guide. I kept my eyes and ears

open.

open.

"We're informal," Pink said. Her voice was embarrassingly loud in the large room. No one else was talking at all; there were just the sounds of movement and breathing. Several of the children looked up. "I won't introduce you around now. Just feel like part of the family. People will feel you later, and you can talk to them. You can take your clothes off here at the door."

I had no trouble with that. Everyone else was nude, and I could easily adjust to household customs by that time. You take your shoes off in Japan, you take your clothes off in Taos. What's the difference?

Well, quite a bit, actually. There was all the touching that went on. Everybody touched everybody else, as routinely as glancing. Everyone touched my face first, then went on with what seemed like total innocence to touch me everywhere else. As usual, it was not quite what it seemed. It was not innocent, and it was not the usual treatment they gave others in their group. They touched each other's genitals a lot more than they touched mine. They were holding back with me so I wouldn't be frightened. They were very polite with strangers.

There was a long, low table, with everyone sitting on the

floor around it. Pink led me to it.

"See the bare strips on the floor? Stay out of them. Don't leave anything in them. That's where people walk. Don't ever move anything. Furniture, I mean. That has to be decided at full meetings, so we'll all know where everything is. Small things, too. If you pick up something, put it back exactly where you found it."

"I understand."

People were bringing bowls and platters of food from the adjoining kitchen. They set them on the table, and the diners began feeling them. They ate with their fingers, without plates, and they did it slowly and lovingly. They smelled things for a long time before they took a bite. Eating was very sensual to these people.

They were terrific cooks. I have never, before or since, eaten as well as I did at Keller. (That's my name for it, in

speech, though their bodytalk name was something very like that. When I called it Keller, everyone knew what I was talking about.) They started off with good, fresh produce, something that's hard enough to find in the cities, and went at the cooking with artistry and imagination. It wasn't like any national style I've eaten. They improvised, and seldom cooked the same thing the same way twice.

I sat between Pink and the fellow who had almost run me down earlier. I stuffed myself disgracefully. It was too far removed from beef jerky and the organic dry cardboard I had been eating for me to be able to resist. I lingered over it, but still finished long before anyone else. I watched them as I sat back carefully and wondered if I'd be sick. (I wasn't, thank God.) They fed themselves and each other, sometimes getting up and going clear around the table to offer a choice morsel to a friend on the other side. I was fed in this way by all too many of them, and nearly popped until I learned a pidgin phrase in handtalk, saying I was full to the brim. I learned from Pink that a friendlier way to refuse was to offer some-

thing myself.

Eventually I had nothing to do but feed Pink and look at the others. I began to be more observant. I had thought they were eating in solitude, but soon saw that lively conversation was flowing around the table. Hands were busy, moving almost too fast to see. They were spelling into each other's palms, shoulders, legs, arms, bellies; any part of the body. I watched in amazement as a ripple of laughter spread like falling dominoes from one end of the table to the other as some witticism was passed along the line. It was fast. Looking carefully, I could see the thoughts moving, reaching one person, passed on while a reply went in the other direction and was in turn passed on, other replies originating all along the line and bouncing back and forth. They were a wave form, like water.

It was messy. Let's face it; eating with your fingers and talking with your hands is going to get you smeared with food. But no one minded. I certainly didn't. I was too busy feeling left out. Pink talked to me, but I knew I was finding out what it's like to be deaf. These people were friendly and seemed to like me, but could do nothing about it. We couldn't communicate.

Afterwards, we all trooped outside, except the cleanup crew, and took a shower beneath a set of faucets that gave out very cold water. I told Pink I'd like to help with the dishes, but she said I'd just be in the way. I couldn't do anything around Keller until I learned their very specific ways of doing things. She seemed to be assuming already that I'd be around that long.

Back into the building to dry off, which they did with their usual puppy dog friendliness, making a game and a gift of

toweling each other, and then we went into the dome.

It was warm inside, warm and dark. Light entered from the passage to the dining room, but it wasn't enough to blot out the stars through the lattice of triangular panes overhead. It was almost like being out in the open.

Pink quickly pointed out the positional etiquette within the dome. It wasn't hard to follow, but I still tended to keep my arms and legs pulled in close so I wouldn't trip someone by

sprawling into a walk space.

My misconceptions got me again. There was no sound but the soft whisper of flesh against flesh, so I thought I was in the middle of an orgy. I had been at them before, in other communes, and they looked pretty much like this. I quickly saw that I was wrong, and only later found out I had been right. In a sense.

What threw my evaluations out of whack was the simple fact that group conversation among these people had to look like an orgy. The much subtler observation that I made later was that with a hundred naked bodies sliding, rubbing, kissing, caressing, all at the same time, what was the point in

making a distinction? There was no distinction.

I have to say that I use the noun "orgy" only to get across a general idea of many people in close contact. I don't like the word, it is too ripe with connotations. But I had these connotations myself at the time, so I was relieved to see that it was not an orgy. The ones I had been to had been tedious and impersonal, and I had hoped for better from these people.

Many wormed their way through the crush to get to me and meet me. Never more than one at a time; they were constantly aware of what was going on and were waiting their turn to talk to me. Naturally, I didn't know it then. Pink sat with me to interpret the hard thoughts. I eventually used her words less and less, getting into the spirit of tactile seeing and understanding. No one felt they really knew me until they

had touched every part of my body, so there were hands on me all the time. I timidly did the same.

What with all the touching, I quickly got an erection, which embarrassed me quite a bit. I was berating myself for being unable to keep sexual responses out of it, for not being able to operate on the same intellectual plane I thought they were on, when I realized with some shock that the couple next to me was making love. They had been doing it for the last ten minutes, actually, and it had seemed such a natural part of what was happening that I had known it and not known it at the same time.

No sooner had I realized it than I suddenly wondered if I was right. Were they? It was very slow and the light was bad. But her legs were up, and he was on top of her, that much I was sure of. It was foolish of me, but I really had to know. I had to find out what the hell I was in. How could I give the

proper social responses if I didn't know the situation?

I was very sensitive to polite behavior after my months at the various communes. I had become adept at saying prayers before supper in one place, chanting Hare Krishna at another, and going happily nudist at still another. It's called "when in Rome," and if you can't adapt to it you shouldn't go visiting. I would kneel to Mecca, burp after my meals, toast anything that was proposed, eat organic rice and compliment the cook; but to do it right, you have to know the customs. I had thought I knew them, but had changed my mind three times in as many minutes.

They were making love, in the sense that he was penetrating her. They were also deeply involved with each other. Their hands fluttered like butterflies all over each other, filled with meanings I couldn't see or feel. But they were being touched by and were touching many other people around them. They were talking to all these people, even if the message was as simple as a pat on the forehead or arm.

Pink noticed where my attention was. She was sort of wound around me, without really doing anything I would have thought of as provocative. I just couldn't decide. It

seemed so innocent, and yet it wasn't.

"That's (—) and (—)," she said, the parentheses indicating a series of hand motions against my palm. I never learned a sound word as a name for any of them but Pink, and I can't reproduce the bodytalk names they had. Pink reached over, touched the woman with her foot, and did some com-

plicated business with her toes. The woman smiled and

grabbed Pink's foot, her fingers moving.

"(—) would like to talk with you later," Pink told me. "Right after she's through talking to (—). You met her earlier, remember? She says she likes your hands."

Now this is going to sound crazy, I know. It sounded pretty crazy to me when I thought of it. It dawned on me

with a sort of revelation that her word for talk and mine were miles apart. Talk, to her, meant a complex interchange involving all parts of the body. She could read words or emotions in every twitch of my muscles, like a lie detector. Sound, to her, was only a minor part of communication. It was something she used to speak to outsiders. Pink talked with her whole being.

I didn't have the half of it, even then, but it was enough to turn my head entirely around in relation to these people. They talked with their bodies. It wasn't all hands, as I'd thought. Any part of the body in contact with any other was communication, sometimes a very simple and basic sort think of McLuhan's light bulb as the basic medium of information-perhaps saying no more than "I am here." But talk was talk, and if conversation evolved to the point where you needed to talk to another with your genitals, it was still a part of the conversation. What I wanted to know was what were they saying? I knew, even at that dim moment or realization, that it was much more than I could grasp. Sure, you're saying. You know about talking to your lover with your body as you make love. That's not such a new idea. Of course it isn't, but think how wonderful that talk is even when you're not primarily tactile-oriented. Can you carry the thought from there, or are you doomed to be an earthworm thinking about sunsets?

While this was happening to me, there was a woman getting acquainted with my body. Her hands were on me, in my lap, when I felt myself ejaculating. It was a big surprise to me, but to no one else. I had been telling everyone around me for many minutes, through signs they could feel with their hands, that it was going to happen. Instantly, hands were all over my body. I could almost understand them as they spelled tender thoughts to me. I got the gist, anyway, if not the words. I was terribly embarrassed for only a moment, then it passed away in the face of the easy acceptance. It was very intense. For a long time I couldn't get my breath.

The woman who had been the cause of it touched my lips with her fingers. She moved them slowly, but meaningfully I was sure. Then she melted back into the group.

"What did she say?" I asked Pink.

She smiled at me. "You know, of course. If you'd only cut loose from your verbalizing. But, generally, she meant 'How nice for you.' It also translates as 'How nice for me.' And 'me,' in this sense, means all of us. The organism."

I knew I had to stay and learn to speak.

The commune had its ups and downs. They had expected them, in general, but had not known what shape they might take.

Winter killed many of their fruit trees. They replaced them with hybrid strains. They lost more fertilizer and soil in windstorms because the clover had not had time to anchor it down. Their schedule had been thrown off by the court actions, and they didn't really get things settled in a groove for

more than a year.

Their fish all died. They used the bodies for fertilizer and looked into what might have gone wrong. They were using a three-stage ecology of the type pioneered by the New Alchemists in the '70's. It consisted of three domed ponds: one containing fish, another with crushed shells and bacteria in one section and algae in another, and a third full of daphnids. The water containing fish waste from the first pond was pumped through the shells and bacteria, which detoxified it and converted the ammonia it contained into fertilizer for the algae. The algae water was pumped into the second pond to feed the daphnids. Then daphnids and algae were pumped to the fish pond as food and the enriched water was used to fertilize greenhouse plants in all of the domes.

They tested the water and the soil and found that chemicals were being leached from impurities in the shells and concentrated down the food chain. After a thorough cleanup, they restarted and all went well. But they had lost their first.

cash crop.

They never went hungry. Nor were they cold; there was plenty of sunlight year-round to power the pumps and the food cycle and to heat their living quarters. They had built their buildings half-buried with an eye to the heating and cooling powers of convective currents. But they had to spend some of their capital. The first year they showed a loss.

One of their buildings caught fire during the first winter. Two men and a small girl were killed when a sprinkler system malfunctioned. This was a shock to them. They had thought things would operate as advertised. None of them knew much about the building trades, about estimates as opposed to realities. They found that several of their installations were not up to specifications, and instituted a program of periodic checks on everything. They learned to strip down and repair anything on the farm. If something contained electronics too complex for them to cope with, they tore it out and installed something simpler.

Socially, their progress had been much more encouraging

Socially, their progress had been much more encouraging. Janet had wisely decided that there would be only two hard and fast objectives in the realm of their relationships. The first was that she refused to be their president, chairwoman, chief, or supreme commander. She had seen from the start that a driving personality was needed to get the planning done and the land bought and a sense of purpose fostered from their formless desire for an alternative. But once at the promised land, she abdicated. From that point they would operate as a democratic communism. If that failed, they would adopt a new approach. Anything but a dictatorship with her at the head. She wanted no part of that.

The second principle was to accept nothing. There had never been a blind-deaf community operating on its own. They had no expectations to satisfy, they did not need to live as the sighted did. They were alone. There was no one to tell them not to do something simply because it was not done.

They had no clearer idea of what their society would be than anyone else. They had been forced into a mold that was not relevant to their needs, but beyond that they didn't know. They would search out the behavior that made sense, the moral things for blind-deaf people to do. They understood the basic principles of morals: that nothing is moral always, and anything is moral under the right circumstances. It all had to do with social context. They were starting from a blank slate, with no models to follow.

By the end of the second year they had their context. They continually modified it, but the basic pattern was set. They knew themselves and what they were as they had never been able to do at the school. They defined themselves in their own terms.

I spent my first day at Keller in school. It was the obvious and necessary step. I had to learn handtalk.

Pink was kind and very patient. I learned the basic alphabet and practiced hard at it. By the afternoon she was refusing to talk to me, forcing me to speak with my hands. She would speak only when pressed hard, and eventually not at

all. I scarcely spoke a single word after the third day.

This is not to say that I was suddenly fluent. Not at all. At the end of the first day I knew the alphabet and could laboriously make myself understood. I was not so good at reading words spelled into my own palm. For a long time I had to look at the hand to see what was spelled. But like any language, eventually you think in it. I speak fluent French, and I can recall my amazement when I finally reached the point where I wasn't translating my thoughts before I spoke. I reached it at Keller in about two weeks.

I remember one of the last things I asked Pink in speech.

It was something that was worrying me.

"Pink, am I welcome here?"

"You've been here three days. Do you feel rejected?"
"No, it's not that. I guess I just need to hear your policy about outsiders. How long am I welcome?"

She wrinkled her brow. It was evidently a new question. "Well, practically speaking, until a majority of us decide we want you to go. But that's never happened. No one's stayed here much longer than a few days. We've never had to evolve a policy about what to do, for instance, if someone who sees and hears wants to join us. No one has, so far, but I guess it could happen. My guess is that they wouldn't accept it. They're very independent and jealous of their freedom, though you might not have noticed it. I don't think you could ever be one of them. But as long as you're willing to think of yourself as a guest, you could probably stay for twenty years."

"You said 'they.' Don't you include yourself in the group?"

For the first time she looked a little uneasy. I wish I had been better at reading body language at the time. I think my hands could have told me volumes about what she was thinking.

"Sure," she said. "The children are part of the group. We like it. I sure wouldn't want to be anywhere else, from what I know of the outside."

"I don't blame you." There were things left unsaid here, but I didn't know enough to ask the right questions. "But it's never a problem, being able to see when none of your parents

can? They don't... resent you in any way?"

This time she laughed. "Oh, no. Never that. They're much too independent for that. You've seen it. They don't need us for anything they can't do themselves. We're part of the family. We do exactly the same things they do. And it really doesn't matter. Sight, I mean. Hearing, either. Just look around you. Do I have any special advantages because I can see where I'm going?"

I had to admit that she didn't. But there was still the hint

of something she wasn't saving to me.

"I know what's bothering you. About staying here." She had to draw me back to my original question; I had been wandering.

"What's that?"

"You don't feel a part of the daily life. You're not doing your share of the chores. You're very conscientious and you want to do your part. I can tell."

She read me right, as usual, and I admitted it.

"And you won't be able to until you can talk to everybody. So let's get back to your lessons. Your fingers are still very sloppy."

There was a lot of work to be done. The first thing I had to learn was to slow down. They were slow and methodical workers, made few mistakes, and didn't care if a job took all day so long as it was done well. When I was working by myself I didn't have to worry about it: sweeping, picking apples, weeding in the gardens. But when I was on a job that required teamwork I had to learn a whole new pace. Eyesight enables a person to do many aspects of a job at once with a few quick glances. A blind person will take each aspect of the job in turn if the job is spread out. Everything has to be verified by touch. At a bench job, though, they could be much faster than I. They could make me feel as though I was working with my toes instead of fingers.

I never suggested that I could make anything quicker by virtue of my sight or hearing. They quite rightly would have told me to mind my own business. Accepting sighted help was the first step to dependence, and after all, they would still be here with the same jobs to do after I was gone.

And that got me to thinking about the children again. I began to be positive that there was an undercurrent of resentment, maybe unconscious, between the parents and children. It was obvious that there was a great deal of love between them, but how could the children fail to resent the rejection of their talent? So my reasoning went, anyway.

I quickly fit myself into the routine. I was treated no better or worse than anyone else, which gratified me. Though I would never become part of the group, even if I should desire it, there was absolutely no indication that I was anything but a full member. That's just how they treated guests:

as they would one of their own number.

Life was fulfilling out there in a way it has never been in the cities. It wasn't unique to Keller, this pastoral peace, but the people there had it in generous helpings. The earth beneath your bare feet is something you can never feel in a

city park.

Daily life was busy and satisfying. There were chickens and hogs to feed, bees and sheep to care for, fish to harvest, and cows to milk. Everybody worked: men, women, and children. It all seemed to fit together without any apparent effort. Everybody seemed to know what to do when it needed doing. You could think of it as a well-oiled machine, but I never liked that metaphor, especially for people. I thought of it as an organism. Any social group is, but this one worked. Most of the other communes I'd visited had glaring flaws. Things would not get done because everyone was too stoned or couldn't be bothered or didn't see the necessity of doing it in the first place. That sort of ignorance leads to typhus and soil erosion and people freezing to death and invasions of social workers who take your children away. I'd seen it happen.

Not here. They had a good picture of the world as it is, not the rosy misconceptions so many other utopians labor un-

der. They did the jobs that needed doing.

I could never detail all the nuts and bolts (there's that machine metaphor again) of how the place worked. The fish-cycle ponds alone were complicated enough to over-awe me. I killed a spider in one of the greenhouses, then found out it had been put there to eat a specific set of plant predators. Same for the frogs. There were insects in the water to kill other insects; it got to a point where I was afraid to swat a mayfly without prior okay.

As the days went by I was told some of the history of the

place. Mistakes had been made, though surprisingly few. One had been in the area of defense. They had made no provision for it at first, not knowing much about the brutality and random violence that reaches even to the out-of-the-way corners. Guns were the logical and preferred choice out here, but were beyond their capabilities.

One night a carload of men who had had too much to drink showed up. They had heard of the place in town. They stayed for two days, cutting the phone lines and raping many

of the women.

The people discussed all the options after the invasion was over, and settled on the organic one. They bought five German shepherds. Not the psychotic wretches that are marketed under the description of "attack dogs," but specially trained ones from a firm recommended by the Albuquerque police. They were trained as both Seeing-Eye and police dogs. They were perfectly harmless until an outsider showed overt aggression, then they were trained, not to disarm, but to go for the throat.

It worked, like most of their solutions. The second invasion resulted in two dead and three badly injured, all on the other side. As a backup in case of a concerted attack, they hired an ex-marine to teach them the fundamentals of close-in dirty

fighting. These were not dewy-eyed flower children.

There were three superb meals a day. And there was leisure time, too. It was not all work. There was time to take a friend out and sit in the grass under a tree, usually around sunset, just before the big dinner. There was time for someone to stop working for a few minutes, to share some special treasure. I remember being taken by the hand by one woman—whom I must call Tall-one-with-the-green-eyes—to a spot where mushrooms were growing in the cool crawl space beneath the barn. We wriggled under until our faces were buried in the patch, picked a few, and smelled them. She showed me how to smell. I would have thought a few weeks before that we had ruined their beauty, but after all it was only visual. I was already beginning to discount that sense, which is so removed from the essence of an object. She showed me that they were still beautiful to touch and smell after we had apparently destroyed them. Then she was off to the kitchen with the pick of the bunch in her apron. They tasted all the better that night.

And a man-I will call him Baldy-who brought me a

plank he and one of the women had been planing in the woodshop. I touched its smoothness and smelled it and agreed with him how good it was.

And after the evening meal, the Together.

During my third week there I had an indication of my status with the group. It was the first real test of whether I meant anything to them. Anything special, I mean. I wanted to see them as my friends, and I suppose I was a little upset to think that just anyone who wandered in here would be treated the way I was. It was childish and unfair to them, and I wasn't even aware of the discontent until later.

I had been hauling water in a bucket into the field where a seedling tree was being planted. There was a hose for that purpose, but it was in use on the other side of the village. This tree was not in reach of the automatic sprinklers and it was drying out. I had been carrying water to it until another solution was found.

It was hot, around noon. I got the water from a standing spigot near the forge. I set the bucket down on the ground behind me and leaned my head into the flow of water. I was wearing a shirt made of cotton, unbuttoned in the front. The water felt good running through my hair and soaking into the shirt. I let it go on for almost a minute.

There was a crash behind me and I bumped my head when I raised it up too quickly under the faucet. I turned and saw a woman sprawled on her face in the dust. She was turning over slowly, holding her knee. I realized with a sinking feeling that she had tripped over the bucket I had carelessly left on the concrete express lane. Think of it: ambling along on ground that you trust to be free of all obstruction, suddenly you're sitting on the ground. Their system would only work with trust, and it had to be total; everybody had to be responsible all the time. I had been accepted into that trust and I had blown it. I felt sick.

She had a nasty scrape on her left knee that was oozing blood. She felt it with her hands, sitting there on the ground, and she began to howl. It was weird, painful. Tears came from her eyes, then she pounded her fists on the ground, going "Hunnnh, hunnnh, hunnnh!" with each blow. She was angry, and she had every right to be.

She found the pail as I hesitantly reached out for her. She grabbed my hand and followed it up to my face. She felt my

face, crying all the time, then wiped her nose and got up. She started off for one of the buildings. She limped slightly.

I sat down and felt miserable. I didn't know what to do.

One of the men came out to get me. It was Big Man. I called him that because he was the tallest person at Keller. He wasn't any sort of policeman, I found out later; he was just the first one the injured woman had met. He took my hand and felt my face. I saw tears start when he felt the emotions there. He asked me to come inside with him.

An impromptu panel had been convened. Call it a jury. It was made up of anyone who was handy, including a few children. There were ten or twelve of them. Everyone looked very sad. The woman I had hurt was there, being consoled by three or four people. I'll call her Scar, for the prominent mark on her upper arm.

Everybody kept telling me—in handtalk, you understand—how sorry they were for me. They petted and stroked

me, trying to draw some of the misery away.

Pink came racing in. She had been sent for to act as a translator if needed. Since this was a formal proceeding it was necessary that they be sure I understood everything that happened. She went to Scar and cried with her for a bit, then came to me and embraced me fiercely, telling me with her hands how sorry she was that this had happened. I was already figuratively packing my bags. Nothing seemed to be left but the formality of expelling me.

Then we all sat together on the floor. We were close,

touching on all sides. The hearing began.

Most of it was in handtalk, with Pink throwing in a few words here and there. I seldom knew who said what, but that was appropriate. It was the group speaking as one. No statement reached me without already having become a consensus.

"You are accused of having violated the rules," said the group, "and of having been the cause of an injury to (the one I called Scar). Do you dispute this? Is there any fact that we should know?"

"No," I told them. "I was responsible. It was my carelessness."

"We understand. We sympathize with you in your remorse, which is evident to all of us. But carelessness is a violation. Do you understand this? This is the offense for which you are (—)." It was a set of signals in shorthand.

"What was that?" I asked Pink.

"Uh . . . 'brought before us'? 'Standing trial'?" She shrugged, not happy with either interpretation.

"Yes. I understand."

"The facts not being in question, it is agreed that you are guilty." ("'Responsible,'" Pink whispered in my ear.) "Withdraw from us a moment while we come to a decision."

I got up and stood by the wall, not wanting to look at them as the debate went back and forth through the joined hands. There was a burning lump in my throat that I could

not swallow. Then I was asked to rejoin the circle.

"The penalty for your offense is set by custom. If it were not so, we would wish we could rule otherwise. You now have the choice of accepting the punishment designated and having the offense wiped away, or of refusing our jurisdiction and withdrawing your body from our land. What is your choice?"

I had Pink repeat this to me, because it was so important that I know what was being offered. When I was sure I had read it right, I accepted their punishment without hesitation. I was very grateful to have been given an alternative.

"Very well. You have elected to be treated as we would treat one of our own who had done the same act. Come to

us."

Everyone drew in closer. I was not told what was going to happen. I was drawn in and nudged gently from all directions.

Scar was sitting with her legs crossed more or less in the center of the group. She was crying again, and so was I, I think. It's hard to remember. I ended up face down across

her lap. She spanked me.

I never once thought of it as improbable or strange. It flowed naturally out of the situation. Everyone was holding on to me and caressing me, spelling assurances into my palms and legs and neck and cheeks. We were all crying. It was a difficult thing that had to be faced by the whole group. Others drifted in and joined us. I understood that this punishment came from everyone there, but only the offended person, Scar, did the actual spanking. That was one of the ways I had wronged her, beyond the fact of giving her a scraped knee. I had laid on her the obligation of disciplining me and that was why she had sobbed so loudly, not from the

pain of her injury, but from the pain of knowing she would have to hurt me.

Pink later told me that Scar had been the staunchest advocate of giving me the option to stay. Some had wanted to expel me outright, but she paid me the compliment of thinking I was a good enough person to be worth putting herself and me through the ordeal. If you can't understand that, you haven't grasped the feeling of community I felt among these people.

It went on for a long time. It was very painful, but not cruel. Nor was it primarily humiliating. There was some of that, of course. But it was essentially a practical lesson taught in the most direct terms. Each of them had undergone it during the first months, but none recently. You learned from it,

believe me.

I did a lot of thinking about it afterward. I tried to think of what else they might have done. Spanking grown people is really unheard of, you know, though that didn't occur to me until long after it had happened. It seemed so natural when it was going on that the thought couldn't even enter my mind that this was a weird situation to be in.

They did something like this with the children, but not as long or as hard. Responsibility was lighter for the younger ones. The adults were willing to put up with an occasional

bruise or scraped knee while the children learned.

But when you reached what they thought of adulthood-which was whenever a majority of the adults thought you had or when you assumed the privilege your-self—that's when the spanking really got serious.

They had a harsher punishment, reserved for repeated or malicious offenses. They had not had to invoke it often. It consisted of being sent to Coventry. No one would touch you for a specified period of time. By the time I heard of it, it sounded like a very tough penalty. I didn't need it explained

I don't know how to explain it, but the spanking was administered in such a loving way that I didn't feel violated. This hurts me as much as it hurts you. I'm doing this for your own good. I love you, that's why I'm spanking you. They made me understand those old cliches by their actions.

When it was over, we all cried together. But it soon turned to happiness. I embraced Scar and we told each other how sorry we were that it had happened. We talked to each other—made love if you like—and I kissed her knee and helped her dress it.

We spent the rest of the day together, easing the pain.

As I became more fluent in handtalk, "the scales fell from my eyes." Daily, I would discover a new layer of meaning that had eluded me before; it was like peeling the skin of an onion to find a new skin beneath it. Each time I thought I was at the core, only to find that there was another layer I could not yet see.

I had thought that learning handtalk was the key to communication with them. Not so. Handtalk was baby talk. For a long time I was a baby who could not even say goo-goo clearly. Imagine my surprise when, having learned to say it, I found that there were syntax, conjunctions, parts of speech, nouns, verbs, tense, agreement, and the subjunctive mood. I was wading in a tide pool at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

By handtalk I mean the International Manual Alphabet. Anyone can learn it in a few hours or days. But when you talk to someone in speech, do you spell each word? Do you read each letter as you read this? No, you grasp words as entities, hear groups of sounds and see groups of letters as a gestalt full of meaning.

Everyone at Keller had an absorbing interest in language. They each knew several languages—spoken languages—and

could read and spell them fluently.

While still children they had understood the fact that hand-talk was a way for blind-deaf people to talk to outsiders. Among themselves it was much too cumbersome. It was like Morse Code: useful when you're limited to on-off modes of information transmission, but not the preferred mode. Their ways of speaking to each other were much closer to our type of written or verbal communication, and—dare I say it?—better.

I discovered this slowly, first by seeing that though I could spell rapidly with my hands, it took much longer for me to say something than it took anyone else. It could not be explained by differences in dexterity. So I asked to be taught their shorthand speech. I plunged in, this time taught by everyone, not just Pink.

It was hard. They could say any word in any language with no more than two moving hand positions. I knew this was a project for years, not days. You learn the alphabet and

you have all the tools you need to spell any word that exists. That's the great advantage in having your written and spoken speech based on the same set of symbols. Shorthand was not like that at all. It partook of none of the linearity or commonality of handtalk; it was not code for English or any other language; it did not share construction or vocabulary with any other language. It was wholly constructed by the Kellerites according to their needs. Each word was something I had to learn and memorize separately from the handtalk spelling.

For months I sat in the Togethers after dinner saying

things like "Me love Scar much much well," while waves of conversation ebbed and flowed and circled around me, touching me only at the edges. But I kept at it, and the children were endlessly patient with me. I improved gradually. Understand that the rest of the conversations I will relate took place in either handtalk or shorthand, limited to various degrees by my fluency. I did not speak nor was I spoken to orally from the day of my punishment.

I was having a lesson in bodytalk from Pink. Yes, we were making love. It had taken me a few weeks to see that she was a sexual being, that her caresses, which I had persisted in seeing as innocent—as I had defined it at the time both were and weren't innocent. She understood it as perfectly natural that the result of her talking to my penis with her hands might be another sort of conversation. Though still in the middle flush of puberty, she was regarded by all as an adult and I accepted her as such. It was cultural conditioning that had blinded me to what she was saving.

So we talked a lot. With her, I understood the words and music of the body better than with anyone else. She sang a very uninhibited song with her hips and hands, free of guilt,

open and fresh with discovery in every note she touched.

"You haven't told me much about yourself," she said. "What did you do on the outside?" I don't want to give the impression that this speech was in sentences, as I have presented it. We were bodytalking, sweating and smelling each other. The message came through from hands, feet, mouth.

I got as far as the sign for pronoun, first person singular,

and was stopped.

How could I tell her of my life in Chicago? Should I speak of my early ambition to be a writer, and how that didn't work out? And why hadn't it? Lack of talent, or lack of drive? I could tell her about my profession, which was meaningless shuffling of papers when you got down to it, useless to anything but the Gross National Product. I could talk of the economic ups and downs that had brought me to Keller when nothing else could dislodge me from my easy sliding through life. Or the loneliness of being forty-seven years old and never having found someone worth loving, never having been loved in return. Of being a permanently displaced person in a stainless-steel society. One-night stands, drinking binges, nine-to-five, Chicago Transit Authority, dark movie houses, football games on television, sleeping pills, the John Hancock Tower where the windows won't open so you can't breathe the smog or jump out. That was me, wasn't it?

"I see," she said.

"I travel around," I said, and suddenly realized that it was the truth.

"I see," she repeated. It was a different sign for the same thing. Context was everything. She had heard and understood both parts of me, knew one to be what I had been, the other

to be what I hoped I was.

She lay on top of me, one hand lightly on my face to catch the quick interplay of emotions as I thought about my life for the first time in years. And she laughed and nipped my ear playfully when my face told her that for the first time I could remember, I was happy about it. Not just telling myself I was happy, but truly happy. You cannot lie in bodytalk any more than your sweat glands can lie to a polygraph.

I noticed that the room was unusually empty. Asking around in my fumbling way, I learned that only the children

were there.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"They are all out\*\*\*," she said. It was like that: three sharp slaps on the chest with the fingers spread. Along with the finger configuration for "verb form, gerund," it meant that they were all out \*\*\*ing. Needless to say, it didn't tell me much.

What did tell me something was her bodytalk as she said it. I read her better than I ever had. She was upset and sad. Her body said something like "Why can't I join them? Why can't I (smell-taste-touch-hear-see) sense with them?" That is exactly what she said. Again, I didn't trust my understanding enough to accept that interpretation. I was still trying to force my

conceptions on the things I experienced there. I was determined that she and the other children be resentful of their parents in some way, because I was sure they had to be. They must feel superior in some way, they must feel held back.

I found the adults, after a short search of the area, out in the north pasture. All the parents, none of the children. They were standing in a group with no apparent pattern. It wasn't a circle, but it was almost round. If there was any organization, it was in the fact that everybody was about the same distance from everybody else.

The German shepherds and the Sheltie were out there, sitting on the cool grass facing the group of people. Their ears

were perked up, but they were not moving.

I started to go up to the people. I stopped when I became aware of the concentration. They were touching, but their hands were not moving. The silence of seeing all those permanently moving people standing that still was deafening to me.

I watched them for at least an hour. I sat with the dogs and scratched them behind the ears. They did that choplicking thing that dogs do when they appreciate it, but their full

attention was on the group.

It gradually dawned on me that the group was moving. It was very slow, just a step here and another there, over many minutes. It was expanding in such a way that the distance between any of the individuals was the same. Like the expanding universe, where all galaxies move away from all others. Their arms were extended now; they were touching only with fingertips, in a crystal lattice arrangement.

Finally they were not touching at all. I saw their fingers straining to cover distances that were too far to bridge. And still they expanded equilaterally. One of the shepherds began to whimper a little. I felt the hair on the back of my neck

stand up. Chilly out here, I thought.

I closed my eyes, suddenly sleepy.

I opened them, shocked. Then I forced them shut. Crickets

were chirping in the grass around me.

There was something in the darkness behind my eyeballs. I felt that if I could turn my eyes around I would see it easily, but it eluded me in a way that made peripheral vision seem like reading headlines. If there was ever anything impossible to pin down, much less describe, that was it. It tickled at me for a while as the dogs whimpered louder, but I could make nothing of it. The best analogy I could think of was the sensation a blind person might feel from the sun on a cloudy day.

I opened my eyes again.

Pink was standing there beside me. Her eyes were screwed shut, and she was covering her ears with her hands. Her mouth was open and working silently. Behind her were several of the older children. They were all doing the same thing.

Some quality of the night changed. The people in the group were about a foot away from each other now, and suddenly the pattern broke. They all swayed for a moment, then laughed in that eerie, unselfconscious noise deaf people use for laughter. They fell in the grass and held their bellies,

rolled over and over and roared.

Pink was laughing, too. To my surprise, so was I. I laughed until my face and sides were hurting, like I remembered doing sometimes when I'd smoked grass.

And that was \*\*\*ing.

I can see that I've only given a surface view of Keller. And there are some things I should deal with, lest I foster an erroneous view.

Clothing, for instance. Most of them wore something most of the time. Pink was the only one who seemed temperamen-

tally opposed to clothes. She never wore anything.

No one ever wore anything I'd call a pair of pants. Clothes were loose: robes, shirts, dresses, scarves and such. Lots of men wore things that would be called women's clothes. They

were simply more comfortable.

Much of it was ragged. It tended to be made of silk or velvet or something else that felt good. The stereotyped Kellerite would be wearing a Japanese silk robe, hand-embroidered with dragons, with many gaping holes and loose threads and tea and tomato stains all over it while she sloshed through the pigpen with a bucket of slop. Wash it at the end of the day and don't worry about the colors running.

I also don't seem to have mentioned homosexuality. You can mark it down to my early conditioning that my two deepest relationships at Keller were with women: Pink and Scar. I haven't said anything about it simply because I don't know how to present it. I talked to men and women equally,

on the same terms. I had surprisingly little trouble being affectionate with the men.

I could not think of the Kellerites as bisexual, though clinically they were. It was much deeper than that. They could not even recognize a concept as poisonous as a homosexuality taboo. It was one of the first things they learned. If you distinguish homosexuality from heterosexuality you are cutting yourself off from communication—full communication—with half the human race. They were pansexual; they could not separate sex from the rest of their lives. They didn't even have a word in shorthand that could translate directly into English as sex. They had words for male and female in infinite variation, and words for degrees and varieties of physical experience that would be impossible to express in English, but all those words included other parts of the world of experience also; none of them walled off what we call sex into its own discrete cubbyhole.

There's another question I haven't answered. It needs answering, because I wondered about it myself when I first arrived. It concerns the neccessity for the commune in the first place. Did it really have to be like this? Would they have been better off adjusting themselves to our ways of living?

better off adjusting themselves to our ways of living?

All was not a peaceful idyll. I've already spoken of the invasion and rape. It could happen again, especially if the roving gangs that operate around the cities start to really rove. A touring group of motorcyclists could wipe them out in a night.

There were also continuing legal hassles. About once a year the social workers descended on Keller and tried to take their children away. They had been accused of everything possible from child abuse to contributing to delinquency. It hadn't worked so far, but it might someday.

And after all, there are sophisticated devices on the market that allow a blind and deaf person to see and hear a little. They might have been helped by some of those.

I met a blind-deaf woman living in Berkeley once. I'll vote for Keller.

As to those machines . . .

In the library at Keller there is a seeing machine. It uses a television camera and a computer to vibrate a closely set series of metal pins. Using it, you can feel a moving picture of whatever the camera is pointed at. It's small and light,

made to be carried with the pinpricker touching your back. It cost about thirty-five thousand dollars.

I found it in the corner of the library. I ran my finger over it and left a gleaming streak behind as the thick dust came away.

Other people came and went, and I stayed on.

Keller didn't get as many visitors as the other places I had been. It was out of the way.

One man showed up at noon, looked around, and left without a word.

Two girls, sixteen-year-old runaways from California, showed up one night. They undressed for dinner and were shocked when they found out I could see. Pink scared the hell out of them. Those poor kids had a lot of living to do before they approached Pink's level of sophistication. But then Pink might have been uneasy in California. They left the next day, unsure if they had been to an orgy or not. All that touching and no getting down to business, very strange.

There was a nice couple from Santa Fe who acted as a sort of liaison between Keller and their lawyer. They had a nine-year-old boy who chattered endlessly in handtalk to the other kids. They came up about every other week and stayed a few days, soaking up sunshine and participating in the Together every night. They spoke halting shorthand and did me the

courtesy of not speaking to me in speech.

Some of the Indians came around at odd intervals. Their behavior was almost aggressively chauvinistic. They stayed dressed at all times in their Levis and boots. But it was evident that they had a respect for the people, though they thought them strange. They had business dealings with the commune. It was the Navahos who trucked away the produce that was taken to the gate every day, sold it, and took a percentage. They would sit and powwow in sign language spelled into hands. Pink said they were scrupulously honest in their dealings.

And about once a week all the parents went out in the

field and \*\*\*ed.

I got better and better at shorthand and bodytalk. I had been breezing along for about five months and winter was in the offing. I had not examined my desires as yet, not really thought about what it was I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I guess the habit of letting myself drift was too

ingrained. I was there, and constitutionally unable to decide whether to go or to face up to the problem if I wanted to stay for a long, long time.

Then I got a push.

Then I got a push.

For a long time I thought it had something to do with the economic situation outside. They were aware of the outside world at Keller. They knew that isolation and ignoring problems that could easily be dismissed as not relevant to them was a dangerous course, so they subscribed to the Braille New York Times and most of them read it. They had a television set that got plugged in about once a month. The kids would watch it and translate for their parents.

So I was aware that the non-depression was moving slowly into a more normal inflationary spiral. Jobs were opening up, money was flowing again. When I found myself on the outside again shortly afterward, I thought that was the reason.

The real reason was more complex. It had to do with peeling off the onion layer of shorthand and discovering an-

other layer beneath it.

I had learned handtalk in a few easy lessons. Then I became aware of shorthand and bodytalk, and of how much harder they would be to learn. Through five months of constant immersion, which is the only way to learn a language, I had attained the equivalent level of a five- or six-year-old in shorthand. I knew I could master it, given time. Bodytalk was another matter. You couldn't measure progress as easily in bodytalk. It was a variable and highly interpersonal language that evolved according to the person, the time, the mood. But I was learning.

Then I became aware of Touch. That's the best I can describe it in a single, unforced English noun. What they called this fourth-stage language varied from day to day, as I

will try to explain.

I first became aware of it when I tried to meet Janet Reilly. I now knew the history of Keller, and she figured very prominently in all the stories. I knew everyone at Keller, and I could find her nowhere. I knew everyone by names like Scar, and She-with-the-missing-front-tooth, and Man-with-wiry-hair. These were shorthand names that I had given them myself, and they all accepted them without question. They had abolished their outside names within the commune. They meant nothing to them; they told nothing and described nothing.

At first I assumed that it was my imperfect command of shorthand that made me unable to clearly ask the right question about Janet Reilly. Then I saw that they were not telling me on purpose. I saw why, and I approved, and thought no more about it. The name Janet Reilly described what she had been on the outside, and one of her conditions for pushing the whole thing through in the first place had been that she be no one special on the inside. She melted into the group and disappeared. She didn't want to be found. All right.

But in the course of pursuing the question I became aware that each of the members of the commune had no specific name at all. That is, Pink, for instance, had no less than one hundred and fifteen names, one from each of the commune members. Each was a contextual name that told the story of Pink's relationship to a particular person. My simple names, based on physical descriptions, were accepted as the names a child would apply to people. The children had not yet learned to go beneath the outer layers and use names that told of themselves, their lives, and their relationships to others.

What is even more confusing, the names evolved from day to day. It was my first glimpse of Touch, and it frightened me. It was a question of permutations. Just the first simple expansion of the problem meant there were no less than thirteen thousand names in use, and they wouldn't stay still so I could memorize them. If Pink spoke to me of Baldy, for instance, she would use her Touch name for him, modified by the fact that she was speaking to me and not Short-chubbyman.

Then the depths of what I had been missing opened beneath me and I was suddenly breathless with fear of heights.

Touch was what they spoke to each other. It was an incredible blend of all three other modes I had learned, and the essence of it was that it never stayed the same. I could listen to them speak to me in shorthand, which was the real basis for Touch, and be aware of the currents of Touch flowing just beneath the surface.

It was a language of inventing languages. Everyone spoke their own dialect because everyone spoke with a different instrument: a different body and set of life experiences. It was modified by everything. It would not stand still.

They would sit at the Together and invent an entire body of Touch responses in a night; idiomatic, personal, totally naked in its honesty. And they used it only as a building

block for the next night's language.

I didn't know if I wanted to be that naked. I had looked into myself a little recently and had not been satisfied with what I found. The realization that every one of them knew more about it than I, because my honest body had told what my frightened mind had not wanted to reveal, was shattering. I was naked under a spotlight in Carnegie Hall, and all the no-pants nightmares I had ever had came out to haunt me. The fact that they all loved me with all my warts was suddenly not enough. I wanted to curl up in a dark closet with my ingrown ego and let it fester.

I might have come through this fear. Pink was certainly trying to help me. She told me that it would only hurt for a while, that I would quickly adjust to living my life with my darkest emotions written in fire across my forehead. She said Touch was not as hard as it looked at first, either. Once I learned shorthand and bodytalk, Touch would flow naturally from it like sap rising in a tree. It would be unavoidable, something that would happen to me without much effort at

I almost believed her. But she betrayed herself. No, no, no. Not that, but the things in her concerning \*\*\*ing convinced me that if I went through this I would only bang my head hard against the next step up the ladder.

I had a little better definition now. Not one that I can easily translate into English, and even that attempt will only

convey my hazy concept of what it was.

"It is the mode of touching without touching," Pink said, her body going like crazy in an attempt to reach me with her own imperfect concept of what it was, handicapped by my illiteracy. Her body denied the truth of her shorthand definition, and at the same time admitted to me that she did not know what it was herself.

"It is the gift whereby one can expand oneself from the eternal quiet and dark into something else." And again her

body denied it. She beat on the floor in exasperation.

"It is an attribute of being in the quiet and dark all the time, touching others. All I know for sure is that vision and hearing preclude it or obscure it. I can make it as quiet and dark as I possibly can and be aware of the edges of it, but the visual orientation of the mind persists. That door is closed

to me, and to all the children."

Her verb "to touch" in the first part of that was a Touch amalgam, one that reached back into her memories of me and what I had told her of my experiences. It implied and called up the smell and feel of broken mushrooms in soft earth under the barn with Tall-one-with-green-eyes, she who taught me to feel the essence of an object. It also contained references to our bodytalking while I was penetrating into the dark and wet of her, and her running account to me of what it was like to receive me into herself. This was all one word.

I brooded on that for a long time. What was the point of suffering through the nakedness of Touch, only to reach the

level of frustrated blindness enjoyed by Pink?

What was it that kept pushing me away from the one place

in my life where I had been happiest?

One thing was the realization, quite late in coming, that can be summoned up as "What the hell am I doing here?" The question that should have answered that question was "What the hell would I do if I left?"

I was the only visitor, the only one in seven years to stay at Keller for longer than a few days. I brooded on that. I was not strong enough or confident enough in my opinion of myself to see it as anything but a flaw in me, not in those others. I was obviously too easily satisfied, too complacent to see the flaws that those others had seen.

It didn't have to be flaws in the people of Keller, or in their system. No, I loved and respected them too much to think that. What they had going certainly came as near as anyone ever has in this imperfect world to a sane, rational way for people to exist without warfare and with a minimum of politics. In the end, those two old dinosaurs are the only ways humans have yet discovered to be social animals. Yes, I do see war as a way of living with another; by imposing your will on another in terms so unmistakable that the opponent has to either knuckle under to you, die, or beat your brains out. And if that's a solution to anything, I'd rather live without solutions. Politics is not much better. The only thing going for it is that it occasionally succeeds in substituting talk for fists.

Keller was an organism. It was a new way of relating, and it seemed to work. I'm not pushing it as a solution for the world's problems. It's possible that it could only work for a

group with a common self-interest as binding and rare as deafness and blindness. I can't think of another group whose needs are so interdependent.

The cells of the organism cooperated beautifully. The organism was strong, flourishing, and possessed of all the attributes I've ever heard used in defining life except the ability to reproduce. That might have been its fatal flaw, if any. I certainly saw the seeds of something developing in the children.

The strength of the organism was communication. There's no way around it. Without the elaborate and impossible-to-falsify mechanisms for communication built into Keller, it would have eaten itself in pettiness, jealousy, possessiveness,

and any dozen other "innate" human defects.

The nightly Together was the basis of the organism. Here, from after dinner till it was time to fall asleep, everyone talked in a language that was incapable of falsehood. If there was a problem brewing, it presented itself and was solved almost automatically. Jealousy? Resentment? Some little festering wrong that you're nursing? You couldn't conceal it at the Together, and soon everyone was clustered around you and loving the sickness away. It acted like white corpuscles, clustering around a sick cell, not to destroy it, but to heal it. There seemed to be no problem that couldn't be solved if it was attacked early enough, and with Touch, your neighbors knew about it before you did and were already laboring to correct the wrong, heal the wound, to make you feel better so you could laugh about it. There was a lot of laughter at the Togethers.

I thought for a while that I was feeling possessive about Pink. I know I had done so a little at first. Pink was my special friend, the one who had helped me out from the first, who for several days was the only one I could talk to. It was her hands that had taught me handtalk. I know I felt stirrings of territoriality the first time she lay in my lap while another man made love to her. But if there was any signal the Kellerites were adept at reading, it was that one. It went off like an alarm bell in Pink, the man, and the women and men around me. They soothed me, coddled me, told me in every language that it was all right, not to feel ashamed. Then the man in question began loving me. Not Pink, but the man. An observational anthropologist would have had subject matter for a whole thesis. Have you seen the films of baboons' social behavior? Dogs do it, too. Many male mammals do it. When

males get into dominance battles, the weaker can defuse the aggression by submitting, by turning tail and surrendering. I have never felt so defused as when that man surrendered the object of our clash of wills—Pink—and turned his attention to me. What could I do? What I did was laugh, and he laughed, and soon we were all laughing, and that was the end of territoriality.

That's the essence of how they solved most "human nature" problems at Keller. Sort of like an oriental martial art; you yield, roll with the blow so that your attacker takes a pratfall with the force of the aggression. You do that until the attacker sees that the initial push wasn't worth the effort, that it was a pretty silly thing to do when no one was resisting you. Pretty soon he's not Tarzan of the Apes, but Charlie Chaplin. And he's laughing.

So it wasn't Pink and her lovely body and my realization that she could never be all mine to lock away in my cave and defend with a gnawed-off thighbone. If I'd persisted in that frame of mind she would have found me about as attractive as an Amazonian leech, and that was a great incentive to

confound the behaviorists and overcome it.

So I was back to those people who had visited and left,

and what did they see that I didn't see?

Well, there was something pretty glaring. I was not part of the organism, no matter how nice the organism was to me. I had no hopes of ever becoming a part, either. Pink had said it in the first week. She felt it herself, to a lesser degree. She could not \*\*\*, though that fact was not going to drive her away from Keller. She had told me that many times in shorthand and confirmed it in bodytalk. If I left, it would be without her.

Trying to stand outside and look at it, I felt pretty miserable. What was I trying to do, anyway? Was my goal in life really to become a part of a blind-deaf commune? I was feeling so low by that time that I actually thought of that as denigrating, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. I should be out in the real world where the real people lived, not these freakish cripples.

I backed off from that thought very quickly. I was not totally out of my mind, just on the lunatic edges. These people were the best friends I'd ever had, maybe the only ones. That I was confused enough to think that of them even for a second worried me more than anything else. It's possible that it's

what pushed me finally into a decision. I saw a future of growing disillusion and unfulfilled hopes. Unless I was willing to put out my eyes and ears, I would always be on the outside. I would be the blind and deaf one. I would be the freak. I didn't want to be a freak.

They knew I had decided to leave before I did. My last few days turned into a long goodbye, with a loving farewell implicit in every word touched to me. I was not really sad, and neither were they. It was nice, like everything they did. They said goodbye with just the right mix of wistfulness and life-must-go-on, and hope-to-touch-you-again.

Awareness of Touch scratched on the edges of my mind. It was not bad, just as Pink had said. In a year or two I could

have mastered it.

But I was set now. I was back in the life groove that I had followed for so long. Why is it that once having decided what I must do, I'm afraid to reexamine my decision? Maybe because the original decision cost me so much that I didn't

want to go through it again.

I left quietly in the night for the highway and California. They were out in the fields, standing in that circle again. Their fingertips were farther apart than ever before. The dogs and children hung around the edges like beggars at a banquet. It was hard to tell which looked more hungry and puzzled.

The experiences at Keller did not fail to leave their mark on me. I was unable to live as I had before. For a while I thought I could not live at all, but I did. I was too used to living to take the decisive step of ending my life. I would wait. Life had brought one pleasant thing to me; maybe it would bring another.

I became a writer. I found I now had a better gift for communicating than I had before. Or maybe I had it now for the first time. At any rate, my writing came together and I sold. I wrote what I wanted to write, and was not afraid of going

hungry. I took things as they came.

I weathered the non-depression of '97, when unemployment reached twenty percent and the government once more ignored it as a temporary downturn. It eventually upturned, leaving the jobless rate slightly higher than it had been the time before, and the time before that. Another million useless persons had been created with nothing better to do than

shamble through the streets looking for beatings in progress, car smashups, heart attacks, murders, shootings, arson, bombings, and riots: the endlessly inventive street theater. It never

got dull.

I didn't become rich, but I was usually comfortable. That is a social disease, the symptoms of which are the ability to ignore the fact that your society is developing weeping pustules and having its brains eaten out by radioactive maggots. I had a nice apartment in Marin County, out of sight of the machine-gun turrets. I had a car, at a time when they were beginning to be luxuries.

I had concluded that my life was not destined to be all I would like it to be. We all make some sort of compromise, I reasoned, and if you set your expectations too high you are doomed to disappointment. It did occur to me that I was settling for something far from "high," but I didn't know what to do about it. I carried on with a mixture of cynicism and optimism that seemed about the right mix for me. It kept my motor running, anyway.

I even made it to Japan, as I had intended in the first

place.

I didn't find someone to share my life. There was only Pink for that, Pink and all her family, and we were separated by a gulf I didn't dare cross. I didn't even dare think about her too much. It would have been very dangerous to my equilibrium. I lived with it, and told myself that it was the way I was. Lonely.

The years rolled on like a caterpillar tractor at Dachau, up

to the penultimate day of the millennium.

San Francisco was having a big bash to celebrate the year 2000. Who gives a shit that the city is slowly falling apart, that civilization is disintegrating into hysteria? Let's have a

party!

I stood on the Golden Gate Dam on the last day of 1999. The sun was setting in the Pacific, on Japan, which had turned out to be more of the same but squared and cubed with neo-samurai. Behind me the first bombshells of a firework celebration of holocaust tricked up to look like festivity competed with the flare of burning buildings as the social and economic basket cases celebrated the occasion in their own way. The city quivered under the weight of misery, anxious to slide off along the fracture lines of some subcortical San Andreas Fault. Orbiting atomic bombs twinkled in my mind, up there somewhere, ready to plant mushrooms when we'd exhausted all the other possibilities.

I thought of Pink.

I found myself speeding through the Nevada desert, sweating, gripping the steering wheel. I was crying aloud but without sound, as I had learned to do at Keller.

Can you go back?

I slammed the citicar over the potholes in the dirt road. The car was falling apart. It was not built for this kind of travel. The sky was getting light in the east. It was the dawn of a new millennium. I stepped harder on the gas pedal and the car bucked savagely. I didn't care. I was not driving back down that road, not ever. One way or another, I was here to stav.

I reached the wall and sobbed my relief. The last hundred miles had been a nightmare of wondering if it had been a dream. I touched the cold reality of the wall and it calmed me. Light snow had drifted over everything, gray in the early

dawn.

I saw them in the distance. All of them, out in the field where I had left them. No, I was wrong. It was only the children. Why had it seemed like so many at first?

Pink was there. I knew her immediately, though I had never seen her in winter clothes. She was taller, filled out. She would be nineteen years old. There was a small child playing in the snow at her feet, and she cradled an infant in her arms. I went to her and talked to her hand.

She turned to me, her face radiant with welcome, her eyes staring in a way I had never seen. Her hands flitted over me

and her eyes did not move.

"I touch you, I welcome you," her hands said. "I wish you could have been here just a few minutes ago. Why did you go away, darling? Why did you stay away so long?" Her eyes were stones in her head. She was blind. She was deaf.

All the children were. No, Pink's child sitting at my feet

looked up at me with a smile.

"Where is everybody?" I asked when I got my breath. "Scar? Baldy? Green-eyes? And what's happened? What's happened to you?" I was tottering on the edge of a heart attack or nervous collapse or something. My reality felt in danger of dissolving.

"They've gone," she said. The word eluded me, but the

context put it with the Mary Celeste and Roanoke, Virginia. It was complex, the way she used the word gone. It was like something she had said before; unattainable, a source of frustration like the one that had sent me running from Keller. But now her word told of something that was not hers yet, but was within her grasp. There was no sadness in it.

"Gone?"

"Yes. I don't know where. They're happy. They \*\*\*ed. It

was glorious. We could only touch a part of it."

I felt my heart hammering to the sound of the last train pulling away from the station. My feet were pounding along the ties as it faded into the fog. Where are the Brigadoons of yesterday? I've never yet heard of a fairy tale where you can go back to the land of enchantment. You wake up, you find that your chance is gone. You threw it away. Fool! You only get one chance; that's the moral, isn't it?

Pink's hands laughed along my face.

"Hold this part-of-me-who-speaks-mouth-to-nipple," she said, and handed me her infant daughter. "I will give you a

gift.

She reached up and lightly touched my ears with her cold fingers. The sound of the wind was shut out, and when her hands came away it never came back. She touched my eyes, shut out all the light, and I saw no more.

We live in the lovely quiet and dark.

## WE WHO STOLE THE DREAM

## by James Tiptree, Jr.

What is the morality of a predatory species? Where are the merits of humanitarians, anti-vivisectionists, do-gooders, pacifists, and so on, when just to exist these persons-and all others-must clothe themselves and sustain themselves by taking the lives of plants and animals daily-not by the dozen but literally by the billions. What student of nature is not at some point impressed by the fact that all life, all, from the most microscopic to the most complex, exists by a constant drive to consume other forms of life. This cannot be expected to change when humanity goes out into space. Discussing art and beauty and knowledge is not enough -we must continue to eat and eat and eat. This is the final bottom-line fact of that chemical-physical phenomenon called life. So much for philosophy.

The children could survive only twelve minims in the sealed containers.

Jilshat pushed the heavy cargo-loader as fast as she dared through the darkness, praying that she would not attract the attention of the Terran guard under the floodlights ahead.

"We Who Stole the Dream" Copyright @ 1978 by James Tiptree, Jr.

The last time she passed he had roused and looked at her with his frightening pale alien eyes. Then, her truck had carried only fermenting-containers full of amlat fruit.

Now, curled in one of the containers, lay hidden her onlyborn, her son Jemnal. Four minims at least had already been used up in the loading and weighing sheds. It would take four more, maybe five, to push the load out to the ship, where her people would send it up on the cargo conveyor. And more time yet for her people in the ship to find Jemnal and rescue him. Jilshat pushed faster, her weak gray humanoid legs trembling.

As she came into the lighted gate the Terran turned his

head and saw her.

Jilshat cringed away, trying to make herself even smaller, trying not to run. Oh, why had she not taken Jemnal out in an earlier load? The other mothers had taken theirs. But she had been afraid. At the last minute her faith had failed, It had not seemed possible that what had been planned so long and prepared for so painfully could actually be coming true, that her people, her poor feeble, dwarf Joilani, could really overpower and subdue the mighty Terrans in that cargo ship. Yet there the big ship stood in its cone of lights, all apparently quiet. The impossible must have been done, or there would have been disturbance. The other young must be safe. Yes-now she could make out empty cargo trucks hidden in the shadows; their pushers must have already mounted into the ship. It was really and truly happening, their great escape to freedom—or to death . . . And now she was almost past the guard, almost safe.

She tried not to hear the harsh Terran bark, hurried faster. But in three giant strides he loomed up before her, so that she had to halt.

"You deaf?" he asked in the Terran of his time and place. Jilshat could barely understand; she had been a worker in the far amlat fields. All she could think of was the time draining inexorably away, while he tapped the containers with the butt of his weapon, never taking his eyes off her. Her huge darklashed Joilani gaze implored him mutely; in her terror, she forgot the warnings, and her small dove-gray face contorted in that rictus of anguish the Terrans called a "smile." Weirdly, he smiled back, as if in pain too.

"I wo'king, seh," she managed to bring out. A minim gone

now, almost two. If he did not let her go at once her child was surely doomed. Almost she could hear a faint mew, as if the drugged baby was already struggling for breath.

"I go, seh! Men in ship ang'ee!" her smile broadened, dimpled in agony to what she could not know was a mask of

allure.

"Let 'em wait. You know, you're not bad-looking for a Juloo moolie?" He made a strange hahnha sound in his throat. "It's my duty to check the natives for arms. Take that off." He poked up her dingy jelmah with the snout of his

weapon.

Three minims. She tore the *jelmah* off, exposing her wide-hipped, short-legged little gray form, with its double dugs and bulging pouch. A few heartbeats more and it would be too late, Jemnal would die. She could still save him—she could force the clamps and rip that smothering lid away. Her baby was still alive in there. But if she did so all would be discovered; she would betray them all. *Jailasanatha*, she prayed. Let me have love's courage. O my Joilani, give me strength to let him die. I pay for my unbelief.

"Turn around."

Grinning in grief and horror, she obeyed.

"That's better, you look almost human. Ah, Lord, I've been out too long. C'mere." She felt his hand on her buttocks. "You think that's fun, hey? What's your name, moolie?"

The last possible minim had run out. Numb with despair, Jilshat murmured a phrase that meant Mother of the Dead.

"Joobly-woobly-" His voice changed. "Well, well! And

where did you come from?"

Too late, too late: Lal, the damaged female, minced swiftly to them. Her face was shaved and painted pink and red; she swirled open a bright *jelmah* to reveal a body grotesquely tinted and bound to imitate the pictures the Terrans worshipped. Her face was wreathed in a studied smile.

"Me Lal." She flirted her fingers to release the flower essence the Terrans seemed to love. "You want I make fik-fik

foh you?"

The instant Jilshat felt the guard's attention leave her, she flung her whole strength against the heavy truck and rushed naked with it out across the endless field, staggering beyond the limit of breath and heart, knowing it was too late, unable not to hope. Around her in the shadows the last burdened

Joilani filtered toward the ship. Behind them the guard was being drawn by Lal into the shelter of the gatehouse.

At the last moment he glanced back and scowled.

"Hey, those Juloos shouldn't be going into the ship that

way."

"Men say come. Say move cans." Lal reached up and caressed his throat, slid skillful Joilani fingers into his turgid alien crotch. "Fik-fik," she crooned, smiling irresistibly. The guard shrugged, and turned back to her with a chuckle.

The ship stood unwatched. It was an aging amlat freighter, a flying factory, carefully chosen because its huge cargo hold was heated and pressurized to make the fruit ferment en route, so that some enzyme the Terrans valued would be ready when it made port. That hold could be lived in, and the amlat fruit would multiply a thousandfold in the food-converter cycle. Also, the ship was the commonest type to visit here; over the decades the Joilani ship cleaners had been able to piece together, detail by painful detail, an almost complete image of the operating controls.

This one was old and shabby. Its Terran Star of Empire and identifying symbols were badly in need of paint. Of its name the first word had been eroded away, leaving only the alien letters, . . . N'S DREAM. Some Terran's dream once; it

was now the Joilani's.

But it was not Lal's Dream. Ahead of Lal lay only pain and death. She was useless as a breeder; her short twin birth-channels had been ruptured by huge hard Terran members, and the delicate spongy tissue that was the Joilani womb had been damaged beyond recovery. So Lal had chosen the greater love, to serve her people with one last torment. In her hair-flower was the poison that would let her die when the *Dream* was safely away.

It was not safe yet. Over the guard's great bulk upon her Lal could glimpse the lights of the other ship on the field, the station's patrol cruiser. By the worst of luck, it was just readying for its periodic off-planet reconnaissance.

To our misfortune, when the Dream was loaded, the Terran warship stood ready to lift off, so that it could intercept us before we could escape by entering what the Terrans called tau-space. Here we failed.

Old Jalun hobbled as smartly as he could out across the Patrol's section of the spaceport. He was wearing the white

jacket and female *jelmah* in which the Terrans dressed their mess servants, and he carried a small, napkin-wrapped object. Overhead three fast-moving moonlets were converging, sending triple shadows around his frail form. They faded as he

came into the lights of the cruiser's lock.

A big Terran was doing something to the lock tumblers. As Jalun struggled up the giant steps, he saw that the spacer wore a sidearm. Good. Then he recognized the spacer, and an un-Joilani flood of hatred made his twin hearts pound. This was the Terran who had raped Jalun's granddaughter, and broken her brother's spine with a kick when the boy came to her rescue. Jalun fought down his feelings, grimacing in pain. Jailasanatha; let me not offend Oneness.

"Where you think you're going, Smiley? What you got

there?"

He did not recognize Jalun; to Terrans all Joilani looked alike.

"Commandeh say foh you, seh. Say, celeb'ation. Say take to offiseh fi'st."

"Let's see."

Trembling with the effort to control himself, smiling painfully from ear to ear, Jalun unfolded a corner of the cloth.

The spacer peered, whistled. "If that's what I think it is, sweet stars of home. Lieutenant!" he shouted, hustling Jalun

up and into the ship. "Look what the boss sent us!"

In the wardroom the lieutenant and another spacer were checking over the micro-source charts. The lieutenant also was wearing a weapons belt—good again. Listening carefully, Jalun's keen Joilani hearing could detect no other Terrans on the ship. He bowed deeply, still smiling his hate, and unwrapped his packet before the lieutenant.

Nestled in snowy linen lay a small tear-shaped amethyst

flask.

"Commandeh say, foh you. Say must d'ink now, is open."

The lieutenant whistled in his turn, and picked the flask up reverently.

"Do you know what this, old Smiley?"

"No, seh," Jalun lied.

"What is it, sir?" the third spacer asked. Jalun could see

that he was very young.

"This, sonny, is the most unbelievable, most precious, most delectable drink that will ever pass your dewy gullet. Haven't you ever heard of Stars Tears?"

The youngster stared at the flask, his face clouding.

"And Smiley's right," the lieutenant went on. "Once it's open, you have to drink it right away. Well, I guess we've done all we need to tonight. I must say, the old man left us a generous go. Why did he say he sent this. Juloo boy?"

"Celeb'ation, seh, Say his celeb'ation, his day."

"Some celebration. Well, let us not quibble over miracles. Jon, produce three liquor cups. Clean ones."

"Yessir!" The big spacer rummaged in the lockers over-

head.

Standing child-size among these huge Terrans, Jalun was overcome again by the contrast between their size strength and perfection and his own weak-limbed, frail, slope-shouldered little form. Among his people he had been accounted a strong youth; even now he was among the ablest. But to these mighty Terrans, Joilani strength was a joke. Perhaps they were right; perhaps he was of an inferior race, fit only to be slaves . . . But then Jalun remembered what he knew, and straightened his short spine. The younger spacer was saying something.

"Lieutenant, sir, if that's really Stars Tears I can't drink

it."

"You can't drink it? Why not?"

"I promised. I, uh, swore."

"I promised. I, uh, swore."
"You'd promise such an insane thing?"

"My-my mother," the youngster said miserably.

The two others shouted with laughter.

"You're a long way from home now, son," the lieutenant said kindly. "What am I saying, Jon? We'd be delighted to take yours. But I just can't bear to see a man pass up the most beautiful thing in life, and I mean bar none. Forget Mommy and prepare your soul for bliss. That's an order ... All right, Smiley boy, equal shares. And if you spill one drop I'll dicty both your little pnonks, hear?"

"Yes, seh." Carefully Jalun poured the loathsome liquor

into the small cups.

"You ever tasted this, Juloo?"

"No, seh."

"And never will. All right, now scat. Ah-h-h . . . Well, here's to our next station, may it have real live poogy on it."

Jalun went silently back down into the shadows of the gangway, paused where he could just see the spacers lift their cups and drink. Hate and disgust choked him, though he had seen it often: Terrans eagerly drinking Stars Tears. It was the very symbol of their oblivious cruelty, their fall from Jailasanatha. They could not be excused for ignorance; too many of them had told Jalun how Stars Tears was made. It was not tears precisely, but the body secretions of a race of beautiful, frail winged creatures on a very distant world. Under physical or mental pain their glands exuded this liquid which the Terrans found so deliciously intoxicating. To obtain it, a mated pair were captured and slowly tortured to death in each other's sight. Jalun had been told atrocious details which he could not bear to recall.

Now he watched, marveling that the hate burning in his eyes did not alert the Terrans. He was quite certain that the drug was tasteless and did no harm; careful trials over the long years had proved that. The problem was that it took from two to five minims to work. The last-affected Terran might have time to raise an alarm. Jalun would die to prevent that—if he could.

The three spacers' faces had changed; their eyes shone.

"You see, son?" the lieutenant asked huskily.

The boy nodded, his rapt gaze on nowhere.

Suddenly the big spacer Jon lunged up and said thickly, "What—?" Then he slumped down with his head on one outstretched arm.

"Hey! Hey, Jon!" The lieutenant rose, reaching toward him. But then he too was falling heavily across the wardroom table. That left only the staring boy.

Would he act, would he seize the caller? Jalun gathered himself to spring, knowing he could do little but die in those

strong hands.

But the boy only repeated, "What? . . . What?" Lost in a private dream, he leaned back, slid downward, and began to snore.

Jalun darted up to them and snatched the weapons from the two huge lax bodies. Then he scrambled up to the control room, summoning all the memorized knowledge that had been gained over the slow years. Yes—that was the transmitter. He wrestled its hood off and began firing into its works. The blast of the weapon frightened him, but he kept on till all was charred and melted.

The flight computer next. Here he had trouble burning in, but soon achieved what seemed to be sufficient damage. A nearby metal case fastened to what was now the ceiling bothered him. It had not been included in his instructions—because the Joilani had not learned of the cruiser's new backup capability. Jalun gave it only a perfunctory blast, and turned

to the weapons console.

Emotions he had never felt before were exploding in him, obscuring sight and reason. He fired at wild random across the board, concentrating on whatever would explode or melt, not realizing that he had left the heavy-weapons wiring essentially undamaged. Pinned-up pictures of the grotesque Terran females, which had done his people so much harm, he flamed to ashes.

Then he did the most foolish thing.

Instead of hurrying straight back down through the wardroom, he paused to stare at the slack face of the spacer who had savaged his young. His weapon was hot in his hand. Madness took Jalun: He burned through face and skull. The release of a lifetime's helpless hatred seemed to drive him on wings of flame. Beyond all reality, he killed the other two Terrans without pausing and hurried on down.

He was quite insane with rage and self-loathing when he reached the reactor chambers. Forgetting the hours of painful memorization of the use of the waldo arms, he went straight in through the shielding port to the pile itself. Here he began to tug with his bare hands at the damping rods, as if he were a suited Terran. But his Joilani strength was far too weak, and he could barely move them. He raged, fired at the pile, tugged again, his body bare to the full fury of radiation.

When presently the rest of the Terran crew poured into the ship they found a living corpse clawing madly at the pile. He had removed only four rods; instead of a melt-down he had achieved nothing at all.

The engineer took one look at Jalun through the vitrex and swung the heavy waldo arm over to smash him into the wall. Then he replaced the rods, checked his readouts, and signaled: Ready to lift.

There was also great danger that the Terrans would signal to one of their mighty warships, which alone can send a missile seeking through tau-space. An act of infamy was faced.

The Elder Jayakal entered the communications chamber just as the Terran operator completed his regular transmission for the period. That had been carefully planned. First, it would insure the longest possible interval before other stations became alarmed. Equally important, the Joilani had been unable to discover a way of entry to the chamber when the operator was not there.

"Hey, Pops, what do you think you're doing? You know you're not supposed to be in here. Scoot!"

Jayakal smiled broadly in the pain of his heart. This Terran She'gan had been kind to the Joilani in his rough way. Kind and respectful. He knew them by their proper names; he had never abused their females; he fed cleanly, and did not drink abomination. He had even inquired, with decorum, into the sacred concepts: Jailasanatha, the Living-with-inhonor, the Oneness-of-love. Old Jayakal's flexible cheekbones drew upward in a beaming rictus of shame.

"O gentle friend, I come to share with you," he said ritu-

ally.

"You know I don't really divvy your speech. Now you have to get out."

Jayakal knew no Terran word for sharing; perhaps there

"F'iend, I b'ing you thing."

"Yeah, well bring it me outside." Seeing that the old Joilanu did not move, the operator rose to usher him out. But memory stirred; his understanding of the true meaning of that smile penetrated. "What is it, Jayakal? What you got there?"

Javakal brought the heavy load in his hands forward.

"Death."

"What-where did you get that? Oh, holy mother, get

away from me! That thing is armed! The pin is out-"

The laboriously pilfered and hoarded excavating plastic had been well and truly assembled; the igniter had been properly attached. In the ensuing explosion fragments of the whole transmitter complex, mingled with those of Jayakal and his Terran friend, rained down across the Terran compound and out among the amlat fields.

Spacers and station personnel erupted out of the post bars, at first uncertain in the darkness what to do. Then they saw torches flaring and bobbing around the transformer sheds. Small gray figures were running, leaping, howling, throwing missiles that flamed.

"The crotting Juloos are after the power plant! Come on!"

Other diversions were planned. The names of the Old Ones and damaged females who died thus for us are inscribed on the sacred rolls. We can only pray that they found quick and merciful deaths.

The station commander's weapons belt hung over the chair by his bed. All through the acts of shame and pain Sosalal had been watching it, waiting for her chance. If only Bislat, the commander's "boy," could come in to help her! But he

could not-he was needed at the ship.

The commander's lust was still unsated. He gulped a drink from the vile little purple flask, and squinted his small Terran eyes meaningfully at her. Sosalal smiled, and offered her trembling, grotesquely disfigured body once more. But no: He wanted her to stimulate him. She set her empathic Joilani fingers, her shuddering mouth, to do their work, hoping that the promised sound would come soon, praying that the commander's communicator would not buzz with news of the attempt failed. Why oh why was it taking so long? She wished she could have one last sight of the Terran's great magical star-projection, which showed at one far side those blessed, incredible symbols of her people. Somewhere out there, so very far away, was Joilani home space—maybe even, she thought wildly, while her body labored at its hurtful task, maybe a Joilani empire!

Now he wished to enter her. She was almost inured to the pain; her damaged body had healed in a form pleasing to this Terran. She was only the commander's fourth "girl." There had been other commanders, some better, some worse, and "girls" beyond counting, as far back as the Joilani records ran. It had been "girls" like herself and "boys" like Bislat who had first seen the great three-dimensional luminous star swarms in the commander's private room—and brought back to their people the unbelievable news: Somewhere, a Joilani

homeland still lived!

Greatly daring, a "girl" had once asked about those Joilani symbols. Her commander had shrugged. "That stuff! It's the hell and gone the other side of the system, take half your life to get there. I don't know a thing about 'em. Probably somebody just stuck 'em in. They aren't Juloos, that's for sure."

Yet there the symbols blazed, tiny replicas of the ancient Joilani Sun-in-splendor. It could mean only one thing, that the old myth was true: that they were not natives to this

world, but descendants of a colony left by Joilani who traveled space as the Terrans did. And that those great Joilani yet lived!

If only they could reach them. But how, how?

Could they somehow send a message? All but impossible. And even if they did, how could their kind rescue them from the midst of Terran might?

No. Hopeless as it seemed, they must get themselves out

and reach Joilani space by their own efforts.

And so the great plan had been born and grown, over years, over lifetimes. Painfully, furtively, bit by bit, Joilani servants and bar attendants and ship cleaners and amlat loaders had discovered and brought back the magic numbers, and their meaning: the tau-space coordinates that would take them to those stars. From discarded manuals, from spacers' talk, they had pieced together the fantastic concept of tau-space itself. Sometimes an almighty Terran would find a naive Joilani question amusing enough to answer. Those allowed inside the ships brought back tiny fragments of the workings of the Terran magic. Joilani who were humble "boys" by day and "girls" by night, became clandestine students and teachers, fitting together the mysteries of their overlords, reducing them from magic to comprehension. Preparing, planning in minutest detail, sustained only by substanceless hope, they readied for their epic, incredible flight.

And now the lived-for moment had come.

Or had it? Why was it taking so long? Suffering as she had so often smilingly suffered before, Sosalal despaired. Surely nothing would, nothing could change. It was all a dream; all would go on as it always had, the degradation and the pain . . . The commander indicated new desires; careless with grief, Sosalal complied.

"Watch it!" He slapped her head so that her vision spun.

"Escuse, seh."

"You're getting a bit long in the tooth, Sosie." He meant that literally: Mature Joilani teeth were large. "You better start training a younger moolie. Or have 'em pulled."

"Yes, seh."

"You scratch me again and I'll pull 'em myself—Holy Jebulibar, what's that?"

A flash from the window lit the room, followed by a rumbling that rattled the walls. The commander tossed her aside and ran to look out.

It had come! It was really true! Hurry. She scrambled to the chair.

"Good God Almighty, it looks like the transmitter blew. Wha-"

He had whirled toward his communicator, his clothes, and found himself facing the mouth of his own weapon held in Sosalal's trembling hands. He was too astounded to react. When she pressed the firing stud he dropped with his chest blown open, the blank frown still on his face.

Sosalal too was astounded, moving in a dream. She had killed. Really killed a Terran. A living being. "I come to share," she whispered ritually. Gazing at the fiery light in the window, she turned the weapon to her own head and pressed e firing stud.

Nothing happened.

the firing stud.

What could be wrong? The dream broke, leaving her in dreadful reality. Frantically she poked and probed at the strange object. Was there some mechanism needed to reset it? She was unaware of the meaning of the red charge-dot-the commander had grown too careless to recharge his weapon after his last game hunt. Now it was empty.

Sosalal was still struggling with the thing when the door burst open and she felt herself seized and struck all but senseless. Amid the boots and the shouting, her wrist glands leaked scarlet Joilani tears as she foresaw the slow and merciless

death that would now be hers.

They had just started to question her when she heard it: the deep rolling rumble of a ship lifting off. The Dream was away—her people had done it, they were saved! Through her pain she heard a Terran voice say, "Juloo-town is empty! All the young ones are on that ship." Under the blows of her tor-

mentors her twin hearts leaped with joy.

But a moment later all exultation died; she heard the louder fires of the Terran cruiser bursting into the sky. The Dream had failed, then: They would be pursued and killed. Desolate, she willed herself to die in the Terrans' hands. But her life resisted, and her broken body lived long enough to sense the thunderous concussion from the sky that must be the destruction of her race. She died believing all hope was dead. Still, she had told her questioners nothing.

Great dangers came to those who essayed to lift the Dream.

"If you monkeys are seriously planning to try to fly this ship you better set that trim lever first or we'll all be killed."

It was the Terran pilot speaking—the third to be captured,

so they had not needed to stop his mouth.

"Go on, push it! It's in landing attitude now, that red one.

I don't want to be smashed up."

Young Jivadh, dwarfed in the huge pilot's chair, desperately reviewed his laboriously built up memory-engram of this ship's controls. Red lever, red lever . . . He was not quite sure. He twisted around to look at their captives. Incredible to see the three great bodies lying bound and helpless against the wall, which should soon become the floor. From the seat beside him Bislat held his weapon trained on them. It was one of the two stolen Terran weapons which they had long hoarded for this, their greatest task: the capture of the Terrans on the *Dream*. The first spacer had not believed they were serious until Jivadh had burned through his boots.

Now he lay groaning intermittently, muffled by the gag. When he caught Jivadh's gaze he nodded vehemently in con-

firmation of the pilot's warning.

"I left it in landing attitude," the pilot repeated. "If you try to lift that way we'll all die!" The third captive nodded too.

Jivadh's mind raced over and over the remembered pattern. The *Dream* was an old, unstandardized ship. Jivadh continued with the ignition procedure, not touching the red lever.

"Push it, you fool!" the pilot shouted. "Holy mother, do

you want to die?"

Bislat was looking nervously from Jivadh to the Terrans. He too had learned the patterns of the *amlat* freighters, but not as well.

"Jivadh, are you sure?"

"I cannot be certain. I think on the old ships that is an emergency device which will change or empty the fuels so that they cannot fire. What they call abort. See the Terran symbol a."

The pilot had caught the words.

"It's not abort, it's attitude! A for attitude, attitude, you monkey. Push it over or we'll crash!"

The other two nodded urgently.

Jivadh's whole body was flushed blue and trembling with tension. His memories seemed to recede, blur, spin. Never before had a Joilanu disbelieved, disobeyed a Terran order. Desperate, he clung to one fading fragment of a yellowed chart in his mind.

"I think not," he said slowly.

Taking his people's whole life in his delicate fingers, he punched the ignition-and-lift sequence into real time.

Clickings—a clank of metal below—a growling hiss that grew swiftly to an intolerable roar beneath them. The old freighter creaked, strained, gave a sickening lurch. Were they about to crash? Jivadh's soul died a thousand deaths.

But the horizon around them staved level. The Dream was shuddering upward, straight up, moving faster and faster as she staggered and leaped toward space. All landmarks fell away-they were in flight! Jivadh, crushed against his supports, exulted. They had not crashed! He had been right: The Terran had been lying.

All outer sound fell away. The Dream had cleared atmo-

sphere, and was driving for the stars!

But not alone

Just as the pressure was easing, just as joy was echoing through the ship and the first of his comrades were struggling up to tell him all was well below, just as a Healer was moving to aid the Terran's burned foot—a loud Terran voice roared through the cabin.

"Halt, you in the Dream! Retrofire. Go into orbit for

boarding or we'll shoot you down."

The Joilani shrank back. Jivadh saw that the voice was coming from the transceiver, which he had turned on as part of the liftoff procedures.

"That's the patrol," the Terran pilot told him. "They're coming up behind us. You have to quit now, monkey boy.

They really will blow us out of space."

A sharp clucking started in an instrument to Jivadh's right. MASS PROXIMITY INDICATOR, he read. Involuntarily he turned to the Terran pilot.

"That's nothing, just one of those damn moons. Listen, you have to backfire. I'm not fooling this time. I'll tell you what

to do."

"Go into orbit for boarding!" the great voice boomed.

But Jivadh had turned away, was busy doing something else. It was not right. Undoubtedly he would kill them allbut he knew what his people would wish.

"Last warning. We will now fire," the cruiser's voice said coldly.

"They mean it!" the Terran pilot screamed. "For God's sake let me talk to them, let me acknowledge!" The other Terrans were glaring, thrashing in their bonds. This fear was genuine, Jivadh saw, quite different from the lies before. What he had to do was not difficult, but it would take time. He fumbled the transceiver switch open and spoke into it, ignoring Bislat's horrified eyes.

"We will stop. Please wait. It is difficult."

"That's the boy!" The pilot was panting with relief. "All right now. See that delta-V estimator, under the thrust dial? Oh, it's too feking complicated. Let me at it, you might as well."

Jivadh ignored him, continuing with his doomed task. Reverently he fed in the coordinates, the sacred coordinates etched in his mind since childhood, the numbers that might possibly, if they could have done it right, have brought them out of tau-space among Joilani stars.

"We will give you three minims to comply," the voice said. "Listen, they mean it!" the pilot cried. "What are you do-

ing? Let me up!"

Jivadh went on. The mass-proximity gauge clucked louder; he ignored that too. When he turned to the small tau-console

the pilot suddenly understood.
"No! Oh, no!" he screamed. "Oh, for God's sake don't do that! You crotting idiot, if you go tau this close to the planet we'll be squashed right into its mass!" His voice had risen to a shriek; the other two were uttering wordless roars and writhing.

They were undoubtedly right, Jivadh thought bleakly. One

moment's glory-and now the end.

"We fire in one more minim," came the cruiser's toneless roar.

"Stop! Don't! No!" the pilot yelled.

Jivadh looked at Bislat. The other had realized what he was doing; now he gave the true Joilani smile of pursed lips and made the ritual sign of Acceptance-of-ending. The Joilani in the passage understood that; a sighing silence rustled back through the ship.

"Fire one," the cruiser voice said briskly. Jivadh slammed the tau-tumbler home.

An alarm shrieked and cut off, all colors vanished, the very structure of space throbbed wildly-as, by a million-to-one chance, the three most massive nearby moons occulted one another in line with the tiny extra energies of the cruiser and its detonating missile, in such a way that for one micromicrominim the *Dream* stood at a semi-null point with the planetary mass. In that fleeting instant she flung out her tau-field, folded the normal dimensions around her, and shot like a squeezed pip into the discontinuity of being which was tau.

Nearby space-time was rocked by the explosion; concussion swept the moons and across the planet beneath. So narrow was the *Dream*'s moment of safe passage that a fin of bright metal from the cruiser and a rock with earth and herbs on it were later found intricately meshed into the substance of her stern cargo hold, to the great wonder of the Joilani.

Meanwhile the rejoicing was so great that it could be expressed in only one way: All over the ship, the Joilani

lifted their voices in the sacred song.

They were free! The *Dream* had made it into tau-space, where no enemy could find them! They were safely on their way.

Safely on their way—to an unknown destination, over an unknown time, with pitifully limited supplies of water, food, and air.

Here begins the log of the passage of the Dream through tau-space, which, although timeless, required finite time . . .

Jatkan let the precious old scroll roll up and laid it carefully aside, to touch the hand of a co-mate. He had been one of the babies in the *amlat* containers; sometimes he thought he remembered the great night of their escape. Certainly he remembered a sense of rejoicing, a feeling of dread nightmare blown away.

"The waiting is long," said his youngest co-mate, who was little more than a child. "Tell us again about the Terran mon-

sters."

"They weren't monsters, only very alien," he corrected the child gently. His eyes met those of Salasvati, who was entertaining her young co-mates at the porthole of the tiny records chamber. It came to Jatkan that when he and Salas were old, they might be the last Joilani who had ever really seen a Terran. Certainly the last to have any sense of their terror and might, and the degradations of slavery burned into their parents' souls. Surely this is good, he thought, but is it not also a loss, in some strange way?

"-reddish, or sometimes yellow or brownish, almost hair-

less, with small bright eyes," he was telling the child. "And big, about the distance to that porthole there. And one day, when the three who were on the Dream were allowed out to exercise, they rushed into the control room and changed the, the gyroscope setting, so that the ship began to spin around faster and faster, and everybody fell down and was pressed flat into the walls. They were counting on their greater strength, you see."

"So that they could seize the Dream and break out of tauspace into Terran stars!" His two female co-mates recited in unison: "But old Jivadh saved us."

"Yes. But he was young Jivadh then. By great good luck he was at the central column, right where the old weapons were kept, that no one had touched for hundreds of days."

A co-mate smiled, "The luck of the Joilani,"

"No," Jatkan told her. "We must not grow superstitious. It was simple chance."

"And he killed them all!" the child burst out excitedly.

A hush fell.

"Never use that word so lightly," Jatkan said sternly. "Think what you are meaning, little one. Jailasanatha—"

As he admonished the child, his mind noted again the incongruity of his words: The "little one" was already as large as he, as he in turn was larger and stronger than his parents. This could only be due to the children's eating the Terranmixed food from the ship's recycler, however scanty. When the older ones saw how the young grew, it confirmed another old myth: that their ancestors had once been giants, who had diminished through some lack in the planet's soil. Was every old myth-legend coming true at once?

Meanwhile he was trying once more to explain to the child, and to the others, the true horror of the decision Jivadh had faced, and Jivadh's frenzy of anguish when he was prevented from killing himself in atonement. Jatkan's memory was scarred by that day. First the smash against the walls, the confusion—the explosions—their release; and then the endless hours of ritual argument, persuading Jivadh that his knowledge of the ship was too precious to lose. The pain in Jivadh's voice as he confessed: "I thought also in selfishness, that we would have their water, their food, their air."

"That is why he doesn't take his fair share of food, and

sleeps on the bare steel."

"And why he's always so sad," the child said, frowning

with the effort to truly understand.

"Yes." But Jatkan knew that he could never really understand; nobody could who had not seen the horror of violently dead flesh that once was living, even though alien and hostile. The three corpses had been consigned with due ritual to the recycling bins, as they did with their own. By now all the Joilani must bear some particles in their flesh that once were Terran. Ironic.

A shadow passed his mind. A few days ago he had been certain that these young ones, and their children's children, would never need know what it was to kill. Now he was not quite so certain . . . He brushed the thought away.

"Has the log been kept right up to now?" asked Salasvati from the port. Like Jatkan, she was having difficulty keeping

her young co-mates quiet during this solemn wait.

"Oh ves."

Jatkan's fingers delicately riffled through the motley pages of the current logbook on the stand. It had been sewn together from whatever last scraps and charts they could find. The clear Joilani script flashed out at him on page after page: "Hunger . . . rations cut . . . broken, water low . . repairs . . . adult rations cut again . . . oxygen low . . . the children . . . water reduced . . . the children need . . . how much more can we . . . end soon; not enough . . . when . . ."

Yes, that had been his whole life, all their lives: dwindling life sustenance in the great rotating cylinder that was their world. The unrelenting uncertainty: Would they ever break out? And if so, where? Or would it go on till they all died here in the timeless, lightless void?

And the rare weird events, things almost seen, like the strange light ghost-ship that had suddenly bloomed beside them with ungraspably alien creatures peering from its

parts—and as suddenly vanished again.

Somewhere in the *Dream*'s magical computers circuits were clicking toward the predestined coordinates, but no one knew how to check on the program's progress, or even whether it still functioned. The merciless stress of waiting told upon them all in different ways, as the hundred-day cycles passed into thousands. Some grew totally silent; some whispered endless ritual; some busied themselves with the most minute tasks. Old Bislat had been their leader here; his

courage and cheer were indomitable. But it was Jivadh, despite his dreadful deed, despite his self-imposed silence and reclusion, who was somehow still the symbol of their faith. It was not that he had lifted the Dream, had saved them not once but twice; it was the sensed trueness of his heart . . . Jatkan, turning the old pages, reflected that perhaps it had all been easiest for the children, who had known no other life but only waiting for the Day.

And then—the changed writing on the last page spoke for itself—there had come the miracle, the first of the Days. All unexpectedly, as they were preparing for the three-thousandth-and-something sleep period, the ship had shuddered, and unfamiliar meshing sounds had rumbled around them. They had all sprung up wildly, reeling in disorientation. Great strainings of metal, frightening clanks—and the old ship disengaged her tau field, to unfold her volume into normal space.

But what space! Stars—the suns of legend—blazed in every porthole, some against deep blackness, some shrouded in glorious clouds of light! Children and adults alike raced from port to port, crying out in wonder and delight.

It was only slowly that realization came: They were still alone in limitless, empty, unknown space, among unknown beings and forces, still perishingly short of all that was need-

ful to life.

The long-planned actions were taken. The transmitter was set to send out the Joilani distress call, at what old Jivadh believed was maximum reach. A brave party went outside, onto the hull, in crazily modified Terran spacesuits. They painted over the ugly Terran star, changing it to a huge Sun-in-splendor. Over the Terran words they wrote the Joilani word for Dream. If they were still in the Terran Empire, all was now doubly lost.

"My mother went outside," said Jatkan's oldest co-mate proudly. "It was dangerous and daring and very hard work."

"Yes." Jatkan touched her lovingly.

"I wish I could go outside now," said the youngest.

"You will. Wait."

"It's always 'wait.' We're waiting now."

"Yes."

Waiting—oh yes, they had waited, with conditions growing ever worse and hope more faint. Knowing no other course, they set out at crawling pace for the nearest bright star. Few believed they were waiting for anything more than death.

Until that day—the greatest of Days—when a strange

spark burst suddenly into being ahead, and grew into a great ship bearing down upon them.

And they had seen the Sun-in-splendor on her bow. Even the youngest child would remember that forever.

How the stranger had almost magically closed and grappled them, and forced the long-corroded main lock. And they of the Dream had seen all dreams come true, as in a rush of sweet air the strange Joilani—the true, real Joilani had come aboard. Joilani-but giants, as big as Terrans, strong and upright, glowing with health, their hands upraised in the ancient greeting. How they had narrowed their nostrils at the *Dream*'s foul air! How they had blinked in wonderment as the song of thanksgiving rose around them!

Through it all, their leader had patiently repeated in strange but understandable accents, "I am Khanrid Jemnal Vizadh. Who are you people?" And when a tiny old Joilani female had rushed to him with leaves torn from the hydro-ponics bed and tried to wreathe him, crying, "Jemnal! Jemnal my lost son! Oh, my son, my son!" he had smiled embarrassedly, and stooped to embrace her, calling her "Mother,"

before he put her gently aside.

And then the explanations, the incredulity, as the great Joilani had spread out to examine the Dream, each with his train of awestruck admirers. They had scanned the old charts, and opened and traced the tau program with casual skill. They too seemed excited; the Dream, it seemed, had performed an unparalleled deed. One of the giants had begun questioning them: arcane, incomprehensible questions as to types of Terran ships they had seen, the colors and insignia numbers on the Terrans' clothes. "Later, later," Khanrid Jemnal had said. And then had begun the practical measures of bringing in food and water, and recharging the air supply.

them. "Three of our people will go with you when you are ready."

In all the excitement Jatkan found it hard to recall exactly when he had noticed that their Joilani saviors all were armed.

"They are patrol spacers," old Bislat said wonderingly. "Khanrid is a military title. That ship is a warship, a protector of the Joilani Federation of Worlds."

He had to explain to the young ones what that meant.

"It means we are no longer helpless!" His old eyes glowed. "It means that our faith, our Gentleness-in-honor, our Jailasanatha way, can never again be trodden to the dirt by brute might!"

Jatkan, whose feet could not remember treading dirt, yet understood. A marveling exultation grew in them all. Even old Jivadh's face softened briefly from its customary grim

composure.

Female Joilani came aboard—new marvels. Beautiful giantesses, who did strange and sometimes uncomfortable things to them all. Jatkan learned new words: inoculation, infestation, antisepsis. His clothes and the others' were briefly taken away, and returned looking and smelling quite different. He overheard Khanrid Jemnal speaking to one of the goddesses.

"I know, Khanlal. You'd like to strip out this hull and blow everything but their bare bodies out to space. But you must understand that we are touching history here. These rags, this whole pathetic warren, is hot, living history. Evidence, too, if you like. No. Clean them up, de-pingee them, inoculate and dust and spray all you want. But leave it looking just the way it is."
"But, Khanrid—"

"That's it."

Jatkan had not long to puzzle over that; it was the day of their great visit to the wonderful warship. There they saw and touched marvels, all giant-size. And then were fed a splendid meal, and afterward all joined in singing, and they learned new words for some of the old Joilani songs. When they finally returned, the Dream seemed to be permeated with a most peculiar odor which made them all sneeze for days. Soon afterward they noticed that they were doing a lot less scratching; the fritlings that had been a part of their lives seemed to be gone.

"They sent them away," Jatkan's mother explained. "It seems they are not good on ships."

"They were killed," old Jivadh broke his silence to remark tonelessly.

The three great Joilani spacers who were to get them safely to the sector base came aboard then. Khanrid Jemnal introduced them. "And now I must say good-bye. You will receive a warm welcome."

When they sang him and the others farewell it was almost

as emotional as on the first day.

Their three guardians had been busy at mysterious tasks in the *Dream*'s workings. Old Bislat and some of the other males watched them keenly, trying to understand, but Jivadh seemed no longer to care. Soon they were plunged back into tau-space, but how different this time, with ample air and water and food for all! In only ten sleep periods the now-familiar shudder ran through the *Dream* again, and they broke out into daylight with a blue sun blinding in the ports.

A planet loomed up beside them. The Joilani pilot took them down into the shadow-darkened limb, sinking toward a gigantic spaceport. Ships beyond count stood there, ablaze with lights, and beyond the field itself stretched a vast jeweled

web-work, like myriad earthly stars.

Jatkan learned a new word: city. He could hardly wait to

see it in the day.

Almost at once the *Dream*'s five Elders had been ceremoniously escorted out, to visit the High Elders of this wondrous place. They went in a strange kind of land-ship. Looking after them, the *Dream*'s people could see that a lighted barrier of some sort had been installed around the ship. Now they were awaiting their return.

"They're taking so long," Jatkan's youngest co-mate com-

plained. He was getting drowsy.

"Let us look out again," Jatkan proposed, "May we exchange places, Salasyati?"

"With pleasure."

Jatkan led his little family to the port as Salasvati's moved back, awkward in the unfamiliar sternward weight.

"Look, out beyond—there are people!"

It was true. Jatkan saw what seemed to be an endless multitude of Joilani in the night, hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of pale gray faces beyond the barrier, all turned toward the *Dream*.

"We are history," he quoted Khanrid Jemnal.

"What's that?"

"An important event, I think. See—here come our Elders now!"

There was a commotion, a parting in the throng, and the land-ship which had taken the Elders away came slowly out into the free space around the *Dream*.

"Come look, Salasvati!"

Craning and crowding, they could just make out their Elders and their giant escorts emerging from the land-ship, and taking warm ritual leaving of each other.

"Hurry, they'll tell us all about it in the Center!"

It was difficult, with the ship in this new position and everything hanging wrong. Their parents were already sitting sideways in the doors of the center shaft. The youngsters scrambled to whatever perches or laps they could find. The party of Elders could be heard making their slow way up from below, climbing the long-unused central ladders to where they could speak to all.

As they came into view Jatkan could see how weary they were, and how their dark eyes radiated excitement, exultation. Yet with a queer tautness or tension stretching their

cheekbones, too, he thought.

"We were indeed warmly received," old Bislat said when all had reached the central space. "We saw wonders it will take days to describe. All of you will see them too, in due time. We were taken to meet the High Elders here, and ate the evening meal with them." He paused briefly. "We were also questioned, by one particular Elder, about the Terrans we have known. It seems that our knowledge is important, old as it is. All of you who remember our previous life must set yourselves to recalling every sort of small detail. The colors of their spacers' clothing, their ornaments of rank, the names and appearance of their ships that came and went." He smiled wonderingly. "It was . . . strange . . . to hear Terrans spoken of so lightly, even scornfully. We think now that their great Empire is not so mighty as we believed. Perhaps it has grown too old, or too big. Our people"—he spoke with his hands clasped in thanksgiving—"our people do not fear them."

A wordless, incredulous gasp of joy rose from the listeners around the shaft.

"Yes." Bislat stilled them. "Now, as to what is ahead for us. We are, you must understand, a great wonder to them. It seems our flight here from so far away was extraordinary, and has moved them very much. But we are also, well, so very different—like people from another age. It is not only our size. Their very children know more than we do of practical daily things. We could not simply go out and dwell among the people of this city or the lands around it, even though they are our own Joilani, of the faith. We Elders have

seen enough to understand that, and you will too. Some of you may already have thought on this, have you not?"

A thoughtful murmur of assent echoed his words from door after door. Even Jatkan realized that he had been wondering about this, somewhere under his conscious mind.

"In time, of course, it will be different. Our young, or their

young, will be as they are, and we all can learn."

He smiled deeply. But Jatkan found his gaze caught by old Jivadh's face. Jivadh was not smiling; his gaze was cast down, and his expression was tense and sad. Indeed, something of the same strain seemed to lie upon them all, even Bislat.

What could be wrong?

Bislat was continuing, his voice strong and cheerful. "So they have found for us a fertile land, an empty land on a beautiful world. The *Dream* will stay here, as a permanent memorial of our great flight. They will take us there in another ship, with all that we need, and with people who will stay to help and teach us." His hands met again in thanksgiving; his voice rang out reverently. "So begins our new life of freedom, safe among Joilani stars, among our people of the faith."

Just as his listeners began quietly to hum the sacred song, old Jivadh raised his head.

"Of the faith, Bislat?" he asked harshly.

The singers hushed in puzzlement.

"You saw the Gardens of the Way." Bislat's tone was strangely brusque. "You saw the sacred texts emblazoned, you saw the Meditators—"

"I saw many splendid places," Jivadh cut him off. "With

idle attendants richly gowned."

"It is nowhere written that the Way must be shabbily served," Bislat protested. "The richness is a proof of its honor here."

"And before one of those sacred places of devotion," Jivadh went on implacably, "I saw Joilani as old as I, in rags almost as poor as mine, toiling with heavy burdens. You did not mention that, Bislat. For that matter, you did not mention how strangely young these High Elders of our people here are. Think on it. It can only mean that the old wisdom is not enough, that new enterprises not of the Way are in movement here."

"But, Jivadh," another Elder put in, "there is so much here

that we are not yet able to understand. Surely, when we know more—"

"There is much that Bislat refuses to understand," Jivadh said curtly. "He also has omitted to say what we were offered."

"No, Jivadh! Do not, we implore you." Bislat's voice trembled. "We agreed, for the good of all—"
"I did not agree." Jivadh turned to the tiers of listeners.

"I did not agree." Jivadh turned to the tiers of listeners. His haggard gaze swept past them, seeming to look far be-

yond.

"O my people," he said somberly, "the *Dream* has not come home. It may be that it has no home. What we have come to is the Joilani Federation of Worlds, a mighty, growing power among the stars. We are safe here, yes. But Federation, Empire, perhaps it is all the same in the end. Bislat has told you that these so-called Elders kindly gave us to eat. But he has not told you what the High Elder offered us to drink."

"They said it was confiscated!" Bislat cried.

"Does that matter? Our high Joilani, our people of the faith—" Jivadh's eyelids closed in sadness; his voice broke to a hoarse rasp. "Our Joilani... were drinking Stars Tears."

## SCATTERSHOT

## by Greg Bear

Playing around with the possibilities of time and infinity has always been grand fun for science fiction writers. In this novelette the issue is played in a different milieu than usual—that of a disabled space war battlecraft. But was there ever a warship as seriously dislocated as this one?

The Teddy bear spoke excellent Mandarin. It was about fifty centimeters tall, plump, with close-set eyes above a nose unusually long for the generally pug breed. It paced around

me muttering to itself.

I rolled over and felt barbs down my back and sides. My arms were reluctant to move. There was something about my will to get up and the way my muscles reacted which was out of kilter; the nerves weren't conveying properly. So it was, I thought, with my eyes and the small black and white beast they claimed to see: a derangement of phosphene patterns, cross-tied with childhood memories and snatches of linguistics courses ten years past.

It began speaking Russian. I ignored it and focused on other things. The rear wall of my cabin was unrecognizable, covered with geometric patterns which shifted in and out of bas-relief and glowed faintly in the shadow cast by a skewed panel light. My fold-out desk had been torn from its hinges

and now lay on the floor, not far from my head. The ceiling was cream-colored. Last I remembered it had been a pleasant shade of burnt orange. Thus totaled, half my cabin was still present. The other half had been ferried away in the—

Disruption. I groaned and the bear stepped back nervously. My body was gradually co-ordinating. Bits and pieces of disassembled vision integrated and stopped their random flights, and still the creature walked, and still it spoke, though getting deep into German.

It was not a minor vision. It was either real or a full-

fledged hallucination.

"What's going on?" I asked.

It bent over me, sighed, and said, "Of all the fated arrangements. A speaking I know not the best of—Anglo." It held out its arms and shivered. "Pardon the distraught. My cords of psyche—nerves?—they have not decided which continuum to obey this moment."

"Mine, too," I said cautiously. "Who are you?"

"Psyche, we are all psyche. Take this care and be not content with illusion, this path, this merriment. Excuse. Some writers in English. All I know is from the read."

"Am I still on my ship?"

"So we are all, and hors de combat. We limp for the duration."

I was integrated enough to stand, and I did so, towering above the bear and rearranging my tunic. My left breast ached with a bruise. Because we had been riding at one G for five days, I was wearing a bra, and the bruise lay directly under a strap. Such, to quote, was the fated arrangement. As my wits gathered and held converse, I considered what might have happened and felt a touch of the "distraughts" myself. I began to shiver like a recruit in pressure-drop training.

We had survived. That is, at least I had survived, out of a

crew of forty-three. How many others?

"Do you know . . . have you found out-"

"Worst," the bear said. "Some I do not catch, the deciphering of other things not so hard. Disrupted about seven, eight hours past. It was a force of many, for I have counted ten separate things not in my recognition." It grinned. "You are ten, and best yet. We are perhaps not so far in world-lines."
We'd been told survival after disruption was possible. Prac-

tical statistics indicated one out of a myriad ships, so struck,

would remain integral. For a weapon which didn't actually kill in itself, the probability disrupter was very effective.

"Are we intact?" I asked.

"Fated," the Teddy bear said. "I cognize we can even move and seek a base. Depending."

"Depending," I echoed. The creature sounded masculine,

despite size and a childlike voice. "Are you a he? Or-"

"He," the bear said quickly.

I touched the bulkhead above the door and ran my finger along a familiar, slightly crooked seam. Had the disruption kept me in my own universe—against incalculable odds—or exchanged me to some other? Was either of us in a universe we could call our own?

"Is it safe to look around?"

The bear hummed. "Cognize-know not. Last I saw, others had not reached a state of organizing."

It was best to start from the beginning. I looked down at the creature and rubbed a bruise on my forehead. "Wh-where are you from?"

"Same as you, possible," he said. "Earth. Was mascot to

captain, for cuddle and advice."

That sounded bizarre enough. I walked to the hatchway and peered down the corridor. It was plain and utilitarian, but neither the right color nor configuration. The hatch at the end was round and had a manual sealing system, six black throw-bolts which no human engineer would ever have put on a spaceship. "What's your name?"

"Have got no official name. Mascot name known only to

captain."

I was scared, so my brusque nature surfaced and I asked him sharply if his captain was in sight, or any other aspect of the world he'd known.

"Cognize not," he answered. "Call me Sonok."
"I'm Geneva," I said. "Francis Geneva."

"We are friends?"

"I don't see why not. I hope we're not the only ones who can be friendly. Is English difficult for you?"

"Mind not. I learn fast. Practice make perfection."

"Because I can speak some Russian, if you want."
"Good as I with Anglo?" Sonok asked. I detected a sense of humor-and self-esteem-in the bear.

"No, probably not. English it is. If you need to know anything, don't be embarrassed to ask."

"Sonok hardly embarrassed by anything. Was mascot."

The banter was providing a solid framework for my sanity to grab on to. I had an irrational desire to take the bear and hug him, just for want of something warm. His attraction was undeniable—tailored, I guessed, for that very purpose. But tailored from what? The color suggested panda; the shape did not.

"What do you think we should do?" I asked, sitting on my bunk.

"Sonok not known for quick decisions," he said, squatting on the floor in front of me. He was stubby-limbed, but far from clumsy.

"Nor am I," I said. "I'm a software and machinery lan-

guage expert. I wasn't combat-trained."

"Not cognize 'software,' " Sonok said.

"Programming materials," I explained. The bear nodded and got up to peer around the door. He pulled back and scrabbled to the rear of the cabin.

"They're here!" he said. "Can port shut?"

"I wouldn't begin to know how—" But I retreated just as quickly and clung to my bunk. A stream of serpents flowed by the hatchway, metallic green and yellow, with spatulate heads and red ovals running dorsally. Observing so much at first glance was commendable.

The stream passed without even a hint of intent to molest, and Sonok climbed down from the bas-relief pattern. "What

the hell are they doing here?" I asked.

"They are a crew member, I think," Sonok said.

"What else is out there?"

The bear straightened and looked at me steadily. "Have none other than to seek," he said solemnly. "Elsewise, we possess no rights to ask. No?" The bear walked to the hatch, stepped over the bottom seal, and stood in the corridor. "Come?"

I got up and followed.

A woman's mind is a strange pool to slip into at birth. It is set within parameters by the first few months of listening and seeing. Her infant mind is a vast blank template which absorbs all and stores it away. In those first few months comes role acceptance, a beginning to attitude, and a hint of future achievement. Listening to adults and observing their actions build a storehouse of preconceptions and warnings: Do not

see those ghosts on bedroom walls—they aren't there! None of the rest of us can see your imaginary companions, darling....It's something you have to understand.

And so, from some dim beginning, not ex nihilo but out of totality, the woman begins to pare her infinite self down. She whittles away at this unwanted piece, that undesired trait. She forgets in time that she was once part of all, and turns to the simple tune of life, rather than the endless and symphonic before. She forgets those companions who danced on the ceiling above her bed and called to her from the dark. Some of them were friendly; others, even in the dim time, were not pleasant. But they were all her. For the rest of her life, the woman seeks some echo of that preternatural menagerie; in the men she chooses to love, in the tasks she chooses to perform, in the way she tries to be. After thirty years of cutting, she becomes Francis Geneva.

When love dies, another piece is pared away, another universe is sheared off, and the split can never join again. With each winter and spring, spent on or off worlds with or without seasons, the woman's life grows more solid, and smaller.

But now the parts are coming together again, the companions out of the dark above the child's bed. Beware of them. They're all the things you once lost, or let go, and now they walk on their own, out of your control; reborn, as it were, and indecipherable.

"Do you have understanding?" the bear asked. I shook my head to break my steady stare at the six-bolted hatch.

"Understand what?" I asked.

"Of how we are here."

"Disrupted. By Aighors, I presume."

"Yes, they are the ones for us, too. But how?"

"I don't know," I said. No one did. We could only observe the results. When the remains of disrupted ships could be found, they always resembled floating garbage heaps—plucked from our universe, rearranged in some cosmic grab bag, and returned. What came back was of the same mass, made up of the same basic materials, and recombined with a tendency toward order and viability. But in deep space, even 90 per cent viability was tantamount to none at all. If the ship's separate elements didn't integrate perfectly—a one in a hundred thousand chance—there were no survivors. But oh, how interested we were in the corpses! Most were kept be-

hind the Paper Curtain of secrecy, but word leaked out even so—word of ostriches with large heads, blobs with bits of crystalline sea water still adhering to them . . . and now my own additions, a living Teddy bear and a herd of particolored snakes. All had been snatched out of terrestrial ships from a maze of different universes.

Word also leaked, that out of five thousand such incidents, not once had a human body been returned to our continuum.

"Some things still work," Sonok said. "We are heavy the same."

The gravitation was unchanged—I hadn't paid attention to that. "We can still breathe, for that matter," I said. "We're all from one world. There's no reason to think the basics will change." And that meant there had to be standards for communication, no matter how diverse the forms. Communication was part of my expertise, but thinking about it made me shiver. A ship runs on computers, or their equivalent. How were at least ten different computer systems communicating? Had they integrated with working interfaces? If they hadn't, our time was limited. Soon all hell would join us; darkness, and cold, and vacuum.

I released the six throw-bolts and opened the hatch slowly. "Say, Geneva," Sonok mused as we looked into the cor-

ridor beyond. "How did the snakes get through here?"

I shook my head. There were more important problems. "I want to find something like a ship's bridge, or at least a computer terminal. Did you see something before you found my cabin?"

Sonok nodded. "Other way in corridor. But there were ... things there. Didn't enjoy the looks, so came this way."

"What were they?" I asked.

"One like trash can," he said. "With breasts."

"We'll keep looking this way," I said by way of agreement.

The next bulkhead was a dead end. A few round displays studded the wall, filled like bull's-eyes with concentric circles of varying thickness. A lot of information could be carried in such patterns, given a precise optical scanner to read them—which suggested a machine more than an organism, though not necessarily. The bear paced back and forth in front of the wall.

I reached out with one hand to touch the displays. Then I got down on my knees to feel the bulkhead, looking for a

seam. "Can't see it, but I feel something here—like a ridge in the material."

The bulkhead, displays and all, peeled away like a heart's triplet valve and a rush of air shoved us into darkness. I instinctively rolled into a fetal curl. The bear bumped against me and grabbed my arm. Some throbbing force flung us this way and that, knocking us against squeaking wet things. I forced my eyes open and unfurled my arms and legs, trying to find a grip. One hand rapped against metal or hard plastic, and the other caught what felt like rope. With some fumbling, I gripped the rope and braced myself against the hard surface. Then I had time to sort out what I was seeing.

The chamber seemed to be open to space, but we were breathing, so obviously a transparent membrane was keeping the atmosphere in. I could see the outer surface of the ship, and it appeared a hell of a lot larger than I'd allowed. Clinging to the membrane in a curve, as though queued on the inside of a bubble, were five or six round nebulosities which glowed dull orange like dying suns. I was hanging on to something resembling a ship's mast, a metal pylon which reached from one side of the valve to the center of the bubble. Ropes were rigged from the pylon to stanchions which seemed suspended in midair, though they had to be secured against the membrane. The ropes and pylon supported clusters of head-sized spheres covered with hairlike plastic tubing, or walrus' whiskers. They clucked like brood hens as they slid away from us. "Gospodin!" Sonok screeched.

The valve which had given us access was still open, pushing its flaps in and out. I kicked away from the pylon. The bear's grip was fierce. The flaps loomed, slapped against us, and closed with a final sucking throb. We were on the other side, lying on the floor. The bulkhead was impassively blank

again.

The bear rolled away from my arm and stood up. "Best to try the other way!" he suggested. "More easily faced, I cognize."

I unshipped the six-bolted hatch and we crawled through. We doubled back and went past my cabin. The corridor, now that I thought of it, was strangely naked. In any similar region on my ship, there would have been pipes, access panels, printed instructions—and at least ten cabin doors.

The corridor curved a few yards past my cabin, and the scenery became more diverse. We found several small cubby-

holes, all empty, and Sonok walked cautiously ahead. "Here," he said. "Can was here."

"Gone now," I said. We stepped through another six-bolt hatch into a chamber which had the vague look of a command center. In large details it resembled the bridge of my own ship, and I rejoiced for that small sense of security.

"Can you talk to it?" Sonok asked. "I can try. But where's a terminal?"

The bear pointed to a curved bench in front of a square, flat surface, devoid of keyboard, speaker, or knobs. It didn't look much like a terminal—though the flat surface resembled a visual display screen—but I wasn't ashamed to try speaking to it. Nor was I abashed when it didn't answer. "No go. Something else."

We looked around the chamber for several minutes, but found nothing more promising. "It's like a bridge," I said, "but nothing matches specifically. Maybe we're looking for

the wrong thing."

"Machines run themselves, perhaps," Sonok suggested.

I sat on the bench, resting an elbow on the edge of the "screen." Nonhuman technologies frequently used other senses for information exchange than we did. Where we generally limit machine-human interactions to sight, sound, and occasionally touch, the Crocerians used odor, and the Aighors controlled their machines on occasion with microwave radiation from their nervous systems. I lay my hand across the screen. It was warm to the touch, but I couldn't detect any variation in the warmth. Infrared was an inefficient carrier of information for creatures with visual orientation. Snakes used infrared to seek their prey—

"Snakes," I said. "The screen is warm. Is this part of the

snake ship?"

Sonok shrugged. I looked around the cabin to find other smooth surfaces. They were few. Most were crisscrossed with raised grills. Some were warm to the touch. There were any number of possibilities—but I doubted if I would hit on the right one very quickly. The best I could hope for was the survival of some other portion of my ship.

"Sonok, is there another way out of this room?"

"Several. One is around the gray pillar," he said. "Another hatch with six dogs."

"Six . . ." He made a grabbing motion with one hand. "Like the others."

"Throw-bolts," I said.

"I thought my Anglo was improving," he said sulkily.
"It is. But it's bound to be different from mine, so we both have to adapt." We opened the hatch and looked into the next chamber. The lights flickered feebly and wrecked equipment gave off acrid smells. A haze of cloying smoke drifted out and immediately set ventilators to work. The bear held his nose and jumped over the seal for a quick walk through the room.

"Is something dead in here," he said when he returned. "Not like human, but not far. It is shot in head." He nodded for me to go with him, and I reluctantly followed. The body was pinned between two bolted seats. The head was a mess, and there was ample evidence that it used red blood. The body was covered by gray overalls, and though twisted into an awkward position, was obviously more canine than human. The bear was correct in one respect—it was closer to me than whiskered balls or rainbow snakes. The smoke was almost clear when I stepped back from the corpse.

"Sonok, any possibility this could be another mascot?"

The bear shook his head and walked away, nose wrinkled. I wondered if I'd insulted him.

"I see nothing like terminal here," he said. "Looks like

nothing work now, anyway. Go on?"

We returned to the bridgelike chamber and Sonok picked out another corridor. By the changing floor curvature, I guessed that all my previous estimates as to ship size were way off. There was no way of telling either the shape or size of this collage of vessels. What I'd seen from the bubble had appeared endless, but that might have been optical distortion.

The corridor dead-ended again, and we didn't press our luck as to what lay beyond the blank bulkhead. As we turned back, I asked, "What were the things you saw? You said there were ten of them, all different."

The bear held up his paws and counted. His fingers were otter-like, and quite supple. "Snakes, number one," he said. "Cans with breasts, two; back wall of your cabin, three; blank bulkhead with circular marks, four; and you, five. Other things not so different, I think now-snakes and sixdog hatches might go together, since snakes know how to use them. Other things-you and your cabin fixtures, so on, all together. But you add dead thing in overalls, fuzzy balls, and who can say where it ends?"

"I hope it ends someplace. I can only face so many variations before I give up. Is there anything left of your ship?"

"Where I was after disruption," the bear said. "On my stomach in bathroom."

Ah, that blessed word! "Where?" I asked. "Is it working?" I'd considered impolitely messing the corridors if there was no alternative.

"Works still, I think. Back through side corridor."

He showed me the way. A lot can be learned from a bathroom—social attitudes, technological levels, even basic psychology, not to mention anatomy. This one was lovely and utilitarian, with fixtures for males and females of at least three sizes. I made do with the largest. The bear gave me privacy, which wasn't strictly necessary—bathrooms on my ship being co-ed—but appreciated, nonetheless. Exposure to a Teddy bear takes getting used to.

When I was through, I joined Sonok in the hall and real-

ized I'd gotten myself turned around. "Where are we?"

"Is changing," Sonok said. "Where bulkhead was, is now

hatch. I'm not sure I cognize how—it's a different hatch."

And it was, in an alarming way. It was battle-armored, automatically controlled, and equipped with heavily shielded detection equipment. It was ugly and khaki-colored and had no business being inside a ship, unless the occupants distrusted each other. "I was in anteroom, outside lavatory," Sonok said, "with door closed. I hear loud sound and something like metal being cut, and I open door to see this."

Vague sounds of machines were still audible, grinding and screaming. We stayed away from the hatch. Sonok motioned for me to follow him. "One more," he said. "Almost forgot." He pointed into a cubbyhole, about a meter deep and two

meters square. "Look like fish tank, perhaps?"

It was a large, rectangular tank filled with murky fluid. It reached from my knees to the top of my head, and fit the cubbyhole perfectly. "Hasn't been cleaned, in any case," I said.

I touched the glass to feel how warm or cold it was. The tank lighted up and I jumped back, knocking Sonok over. He rolled into a backward flip and came upright wheezing.

The light in the tank flickered like a strobe, gradually speeding up until the glow was steady. For a few seconds it

made me dizzy. The murk was gathering itself together. I bent over cautiously to get a close look. The murk wasn't evenly distributed. It was made up of animals no more than a centimeter long, with two black eyespots at one end, a pinkish "spine," and a feathery fringe rippling between head and tail. They were forming a dense mass at the center of the tank.

The bottom of the tank was crossed with ordered dots of luminescence, which changed colors across a narrow spec-

trum: red, blue, amber.

"It's doing something," Sonok said. The mass was defining a shape. Shoulders and head appeared, then torso and arms, sculpted in ghost-colored brine shrimp. When the living sculpture was finished, I recognized myself from the waist up. I

held out my arm, and the mass slowly followed suit.

I had an inspiration. In my pants pocket I had a marker for labeling tapas cube blanks. It used soft plastic wrapped in a metal jacket. I took it out and wrote three letters across the transparent front of the tank: who. Part of the mass dissolved and re-formed to mimic the letters, the rest filling in behind. who they spelled, then they added a question mark.

Sonok chirped and I came closer to see better. "They understand?" he asked. I shook my head. I had no idea what I

was playing with. WHAT ARE YOU? I wrote.

The animals started to break up and return to the general murk. I shook my head in frustration. So near! The closest thing to communication yet.

"Wait," Sonok said. "They're group again."

TENZIONA, the shrimp coalesced. DYSFUNCTIO. GUARDATEO AB PEREGRINO PERAMBULA.

"I don't understand. Sounds like Italian—do you know any Italian?"

The bear shook his head.

"'Dysfunctio,'" I read aloud. "That seems plain enough. 'Ab peregrino'? Something about a hawk?"

"Peregrine, it is foreigner," Sonok said.

"Guard against foreigners . . . 'perambula,' as in strolling? Watch for the foreigners who walk? Well, we don't have the grammar, but it seems to tell us something we already know. Christ! I wish I could remember all the languages they filled me with ten years ago."

The marks on the tank darkened and flaked off. The shrimp began to form something different. They grouped into

branches and arranged themselves nose-to-tail, upright, to form a trunk, which rooted itself to the floor of the tank.

"Tree," Sonok said.

Again they dissolved, returning in a few seconds to the simulacrum of my body. The clothing seemed different, however-more like a robe. Each shrimp changed its individual color now, making the shape startlingly lifelike. As I watched, the image began to age. The outlines of the face sagged, wrinkles formed in the skin, and the limbs shrank perceptibly. My arms felt cold and I crossed them over my breasts; but the corridor was reasonably warm.

Of course the universe isn't really held in a little girl's mind. It's one small thread in a vast skein, separated from every other universe by a limitation of constants and qualities, just as death is separated from life by the eternal nonreturn of the dead. Well, now we know the universes are less inviolable than death, for there are ways of crossing from thread to thread. So these other beings, from similar Earths, are not part of my undifferentiated infancy. That's a weak fantasy for a rather unequipped young woman to indulge in. Still, the symbols of childhood lie all around—nightmares, and Teddy bears, and dreams held in a tank; dreams of old age and death. And a tree, gray and ghostly, without leaves. That's me. Full of winter, wood cracking into splinters. How do they know?

A rustling came from the corridor ahead. We turned from the tank and saw the floor covered with rainbow snakes, motionless, all heads aimed at us. Sonok began to tremble.

"Stop it," I said. "They haven't done anything to us."

"You are bigger," he said. "Not meal-sized."
"They'd have a rough time putting you away, too. Let's just sit it out calmly and see what this is all about." I kept my eyes on the snakes and away from the tank. I didn't want to see the shape age any more. For all the sanity of this place, it might have kept on going, through death and decay down to bones. Why did it choose me; why not Sonok?

"I cannot wait," Sonok said. "I have not the patience of a snake." He stepped forward. The snakes watched without a sound as the bear approached, one step every few seconds. "I want to know one solid thing," he called back. "Even if it is whether they eat small, furry mascots."

The snakes suddenly bundled backward and started to

crawl over each other. Small sucking noises smacked between their bodies. As they crossed, the red ovals met and held firm. They assembled like a troop of acrobats and reared into a single mass, cobra-like, but flat as a planarian worm. A fringe of snakes weaved across the belly like a caterpillar's idea of Medusa.

Brave Sonok was undone. He swung around and ran past me. I was too shocked to do anything but face the snakes down, neck hairs crawling. I wanted to speak but couldn't. Then, behind me, I heard:

"Sinieux! A la discorpes!"

As I turned, I saw two things, one in the corner of each eye; the snakes fell into a pile, and a man dressed in red and black vanished into a side corridor. The snakes regrouped into a hydra with six tentacles and grasped the hatch's throw-bolts, springing it open and slithering through. The hatch closed, and I was alone.

There was nothing for it but to scream a moment, then cry. I lay back against the wall, getting the fit out of me as loudly and quickly as possible. When I was able to stop, I wiped my eyes with my palms and kept them covered, feeling ashamed. When I looked out again, Sonok was standing next

to me.

"We've an Indian on board," he said. "Big, with black hair in three ribbons"—he motioned from crown to neck between his ears—"and a snappy dresser."

"Where is he?" I asked hoarsely.

"Back in place like bridge, I think. He controls snakes?"

I hesitated, then nodded.

"Go look?"

I got up and followed the bear. The man in red and black watched us as we entered the chamber, sitting on a bench pulled from the wall. He was big—at least two meters tall—and hefty, dressed in a black silk shirt with red cuffs. His cape was black with a red eagle embroidered across the shoulders. He certainly looked Indian—ruddy skin, aristocratic nose, full lips held tight as if against pain.

"Quis la?" he queried.

"I don't speak that," I said. "Do you know English?"

The Indian didn't break his stolid expression. He nodded and turned on the bench to put his hand against a grill. "I was taught in the British school at Nova Loudon," he said, his accent distinctly Oxfordian. "I was educated in Indonesia, and so I speak Dutch, High and Middle German, and some Asian tongues, specifically Nippon and Tagalog. But at English I am fluent."

"Thank God," I said. "Do you know this room?"
"Yes," he replied. "I designed it. It's for the Sinieux."

"Do you know what's happened to us?"

"We have fallen into hell," he said. "My Jesuit professors warned me of it."

"Not far wrong," I said. "Do you know why?"

"I do not question my punishments."

"We're not being punished—at least, not by God or devils."

He shrugged. It was a moot point.

"I'm from Earth, too," I said. "From Terre."

"I know the words for Earth," the Indian said sharply.

"But I don't think it's the same Earth. What year are you from?" Since he'd mentioned Jesuits, he almost had to use the standard Christian Era dating.

"Year of Our Lord 2345," he said.

Sonok crossed himself elegantly. "For me 2290," he added. The Indian examined the bear dubiously.

I was sixty years after the bear, five after the Indian. The limits of the grab bag were less hazy now. "What country?"

"Alliance of Tribal Columbia," he answered, "District Quebec, East Shore."

"I'm from the Moon," I said. "But my parents were born on Earth, in the United States of America."

The Indian shook his head slowly; he wasn't familiar with it.

"Was there—" But I held back the question. Where to begin? Where did the world-lines part? "I think we'd better consider finding out how well this ship is put together. We'll get into our comparative histories later. Obviously, you have star drive."

The Indian didn't agree or disagree. "My parents had ancestors from the West Shore, Vancouver," he said. "They were Kwakiutl and Kodikin. The animal, does it have a Russian accent?"

"Some," I said. "It's better than it was a few hours ago."

"I have blood debts against Russians."

"Okay," I said, "but I doubt if you have anything against this one, considering the distances involved. We've got to learn if this ship can take us someplace." "I have asked," he said.

"Where?" Sonok asked. "A terminal?"

"The ship says it is surrounded by foreign parts, and can barely understand them. But it can get along."

"You really don't know what happened, do you?"

"I went to look for worlds for my people, and took the Sinieux with me. When I reached a certain co-ordinate in the sky, far along the arrow line established by my extrasolar pierce, this happened." He lifted his hand. "Now there is one creature, a devil, which tried to attack me. It is dead. There are others, huge black men who wear golden armor and carry gold guns like cannon, and they have gone away behind armored hatches. There are walls like rubber which open onto more demons. And now you—and it." He pointed at the bear.

"I'm not an 'it,' " Sonok said. "I'm an ours."

"Small ours," the Indian retorted.

Sonok bristled and turned away. "Enough," I said. "You haven't fallen into hell, not literally. We've been hit by something called a disrupter. It snatched us from different universes and reassembled us according to our world-lines, our . . . affinities."

The Indian smiled faintly, very superior.

"Listen, do you understand how crazy this is?" I demanded, exasperated. "I've got to get things straight before we all lose our calm. The beings who did this—in my universe they're called 'Aighors.' Do you know about them?"

He shook his head. "I know of no other beings but those

of Earth. I went to look for worlds."

"Is your ship a warper ship—does it travel across a geodesic in higher spaces?"

"Yes," he said. "It is not in phase with the crest of the Stellar Sea, but slips between the foamy length, where we

must struggle to obey all laws."

That was a fair description of translating from status geometry—our universe—to higher geometries. It was more poetic than scientific, but he was here, so it worked well enough. "How long have your people been able to travel this way?"

"Ten years. And yours?"

"Three centuries."

He nodded in appreciation. "You know then what you

speak of, and perhaps there aren't any devils, and we are not in hell. Not this time."

"How do you use your instruments in here?"

"I do not, generally. The Sinieux use them. If you will not get upset, I'll demonstrate."

I glanced at Sonok, who was still sulking, "Are you afraid

of the snakes?"

The bear shook his head.

"Bring them in," I said. "And perhaps we should know each other's name?"

"Jean Frobish," the Indian said. And I told him mine.

The snakes entered at his whistled command and assembled in the middle of the cabin. There were two sets, each made up of about fifty. When meshed they made two formidable meta-serpents. Frobish instructed them with spoken commands and a language which sounded like birdcalls. They obeyed faultlessly and without hesitation, perfect servants. They went to the controls at his command and made a few manipulations, then turned to him and delivered, one group at a time, a report in consonantal hisses and claps. The exchange was uncanny and chilling. Jean nodded and the serpents disassembled.

"Are they specially bred?" I asked.
"Techtonogenetic farming," he said. "They are excellent workers, and have no will of their own, since they have no cerebrums. They can remember, and en masse can think, but not for themselves, if you see what I mean." He showed another glimmer of a smile. He was proud of his servants.

"I think I understand. Sonok, were you specially bred?"

"Was mascot," Sonok said. "Could breed for myself, given chance."

The subject was touchy, I could see. I could also see that Frobish and Sonok wouldn't get along without friction. If Sonok had been a big bear-and not a Russian, instead of an ursine dwarf, the Indian might have had more respect for him.

"Jean, can you command the whole ship from here?"

"Those parts that answer."

"Can your computers tell you how much of the ship will

respond?"

"What is left of my vessel responds very well. The rest is balky, or blank entirely. I was trying to discover the limits when I encountered you."

"You met the people who've been putting in the armored hatches?"

He nodded, "Bigger than Masai," he said.

I now had explanations for some of the things we'd seen, and could link them with terrestrial origins. Jean and his Sinieux weren't beyond the stretch of reason, nor was Sonok. The armored hatches weren't quite as mysterious now. But what about the canine? I swallowed. That must have been the demon Frobish killed. And beyond the triplet valves?
"We've got a lot to find out," I said.

"You and the animal, are you together, from the same world?" Frobish asked. I shook my head. "Did you come alone?" I nodded. "Why?"

"No men, no soldiers?"

I was apprehensive now. "No."

"Good." He stood and approached a blank wall near the gray pillar. "Then we will not have too many to support, unless the ones in golden armor want our food." He put his hand against the wall and a round opening appeared. In the shadow of the hole, two faces watched with eyes glittering.

"These are my wives," Frobish said. One was dark-haired

and slender, no more than fifteen or sixteen. She stepped out first and looked at me warily. The second, stockier and flatter of face, was brown-haired and about twenty. Frobish pointed to the younger first. "This is Alouette," he said. "And this is Mouse. Wives, acquaint with Francis Geneva." They stood one on each side of Frobish, holding his elbows, and nodded at me in unison.

That made four humans, more if the blacks in golden armor were men. Our collage had hit the jackpot.

"Jean, you say your machines can get along with the rest of the ship. Can they control it? If they can, I think we should try to return to Earth."

"To what?" Sonok asked. "Which Earth waits?" "What's the bear talking about?" Frobish asked.

I explained the situation as best I could. Frobish was a sophisticated engineer and astrogator, but his experience with other continua—theoretical or actual—was small. He tightened his lips and listened grimly, unwilling to admit his ignorance. I sighed and looked to Alouette and Mouse for support. They were meek, quiet, giving all to the stolid authority of Frobish.

"What woman says is we decide where to go," Sonok said. "Depends, so the die is tossed, on whether we like the Earth we would meet."

"You would like my Earth," Frobish said.

"There's no guarantee it'll be your Earth. You have to take that into account."

"You aren't making sense." Frobish shook his head. "My decision is made, nonetheless. We will try to return."

I shrugged and said no more about the matter. "Try as best

you can." We would face the truth later.

"I'll have the Sinieux watch over the machines after I initiate instructions," Frobish said. "Then I would like Francis to come with me to look at the animal I killed." I agreed without thinking about his motives. He gave the meta-serpents their orders and pulled down a panel cover to reveal a small board designed for human hands. When he was through programming the computers, he continued his instructions to the Sinieux. His rapport with the animals was perfect—the interaction of an engineer with his tool. There was no thought of discord or second opinions. The snakes, to all intents and purposes, were machines keyed only to his voice. I wondered how far the obedience of his wives extended.

"Mouse will find food for the bear, and Alouette will stand guard with the fusil. Comprens-la?" The women nodded and Alouette plucked a rifle from the hideaway. "When we re-

turn, we will all eat."

"I will wait to eat with you," Sonok said, standing near me.

Frobish looked the bear over coldly. "We do not eat with tectoes," he said, haughty as a British officer addressing his

servant. "But you will eat the same food we do."

Sonok stretched out his arms and made two shivers of anger. "I have never been treated less than a man," he said. "I will eat with all, or not eat." He looked up at me with his small golden eyes and asked in Russian, "Will you go along with him?"

"We don't have much choice," I answered in kind.

"What do you recommend?"

"Play along for the moment. I understand." I was unable to read his expression behind the black mask and white markings; but if I'd been him, I'd have questioned the understanding. This was no time to instruct the bear in assertion, however.

Frobish-opened the hatch to the wrecked room and let me step in first. He then closed the hatch and sealed it. "I've seen the body already," I said. "What do you want to know?"

the body already," I said. "What do you want to know?"

"I want your advice on this room," he said. I didn't believe that for an instant. I bent down to examine the creature be-

tween the chairs more carefully.

"What did it try to do to you?" I asked.

"It came at me. I thought it was a demon. I shot at it, and it died."

"What caused the rest of this damage?"

"I fired a good many rounds," he said. "I was more frightened then. I'm calm now."

"Thank God for that," I said. "This-he or she-might

have been able to help us."

"Looks like a dog," Frobish said. "Dogs cannot help."

For me, that crossed the line. "Listen," I said tightly, standing away from the body. "I don't think you're in touch with what's going on here. If you don't get in touch soon, you might get us all killed. I'm not about to let myself die because of one man's stupidity."

Frobish's eyes widened. "Women do not address men

thus," he said.

"This woman does, friend! I don't know what kind of screwy social order you have in your world, but you had damn well better get used to interacting with different sexes, not to mention different species! If you don't, you're asking to end up like this poor thing. It didn't have a chance to say friend or foe, yea or nay! You shot it out of panic, and we can't have any more of that!" I was trembling.

Frobish smiled over grinding teeth and turned to walk away. He was fighting to control himself. I wondered if my own brains were in the right place. The few aspects of this man which were familiar to me couldn't begin to give complete understanding. I was clearly out of my depth, and kick-

ing to stay afloat might hasten death, not slow it.

Frobish stood by the hatch, breathing deeply. "What is the

dog-creature? What is this room?"

I turned back to the body and pulled it by one leg from between the chairs. "It was probably intelligent," I said. "That's about all I can tell. It doesn't have any personal effects." The gore was getting to me, and I turned away for a moment. I was tired—oh, so tired I could feel the weary rivers dredging through my limbs. My head hurt abominably.

"I'm not an engineer," I said. "I can't tell if any of this equipment is useful to us, or even if it's salvageable. Care to make an opinion?"

Frobish looked over the room with a slight inclination of

one eyebrow. "Nothing of use here."

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure." He looked across the room and sniffed the air. "Too much burned and shorted. You know, there is much that is dangerous here."

"Yes," I said, leaning against the back of a seat.

"You will need protection."

"Oh."

"There is no protection like the bonds of family. You are argumentative, but my wives can teach you our ways. With bonds of family, there will be no uncertainty. We will return and all will be well."

He caught me by surprise and I wasn't fast on the uptake.

"What do you mean, bonds of family?"

"I will take you to wife, and protect you as husband."

"I think I can protect myself, thank you."

"It doesn't seem wise to refuse. Left alone, you will proba-

bly be killed by such as this." He pointed at the canine.

"We'll have to get along whether we're family or not. That shouldn't be too hard to understand. And I don't have any inclination to sell myself for security."

"I do not pay money for women!" Frobish said. "Again

you ridicule me."

He sounded like a disappointed little boy. I wondered what his wives would think, seeing him butt his head against a wall without sense or sensibility.

"We've got to dispose of the body before it decays," I said.

"Help me carry it out of here."

"It isn't fit to touch."

My tiredness took over and my rationality departed. "You goddamned idiot! Pull your nose down and look at what's go-

ing on around you! We're in serious trouble-"

"It isn't the place of a woman to speak thus, I've told you," he said. He approached and raised his hand palm-high to strike. I instinctively lowered my head and pushed a fist into his abdomen. The slap fell like a kitten's paw and he went over, glancing off my shoulder and twisting my arm into a painful muscle kink. I cursed and rubbed the spot, then sat down on the deck to consider what had happened.

I'd never had much experience with sexism in human cultures. It was disgusting and hard to accept, but some small voice in the back of my mind told me it was no more blameworthy than any other social attitude. His wives appeared to go along with it. At any rate, the situation was now completely shot to hell. There was little I could do except drag him back to his wives and try to straighten things out when he came to. I took him by both hands and pulled him up to the hatch. I unsealed it, then swung him around to take him by the shoulders. I almost retched when one of his shoulders broke the crust on a drying pool of blood and smeared red along the deck.

I miss Jaghit Singh more than I can admit. I think about him, and wonder what he'd do in this situation. He is a short, dark man with perfect features and eyes like those in the pictures of Krishna. We formally broke off our relationship three weeks ago, at my behest, for I couldn't see any future in it. He would probably know how to handle Frobish, with a smile and even a spirit of comradeship, but without contradicting his own beliefs. He could make a girl's childhood splinters go back to form the whole log again. He could make these beasts and distortions come together again. Jaghit! Are you anywhere that has seasons? Is it still winter for you? You never did understand the little girl who wanted to play in the snow. Your blood is far too hot and regular to stand up to my moments of indecisive coldness, and you could not—would not—force me to change. I was caught between child and my thirty-year-old form, between spring and winter. Is it spring for you now?

Alouette and Mouse took their husband away from me fiercely, spitting with rage. They weren't talking clearly, but what they shouted in quasi-French made it clear who was to blame. I told Sonok what had happened and he looked very somber indeed. "Maybe he'll shoot us when he wakes up," he suggested.

To avoid that circumstance, I appropriated the rifle and took it back to my half-room. There was a cabinet intact, and I still had the key. I didn't lock the rifle in, however; better simply to hide it and have easy access to it when needed. It was time to be diplomatic, though all I really wanted for the moment was blessed sleep. My shoulder stung like hell and the muscles refused to get themselves straight.

When I returned, with Sonok walking point a few steps ahead, Frobish was conscious and sitting in a cot pulled from a panel near the hole. His wives squatted nearby, somber as they ate from metal dishes.

Frobish refused to look me in the eye. Alouette and Mouse weren't in the least reluctant, however, and their gazes threw sparks. They'd be good in a fight, if it ever came down to

that. I hoped I wasn't their opposite.

"I think it's time we behaved reasonably," I said.

"There is no reason on this ship," Frobish shot back.

"Aye on that," Sonok said, sitting down to a plate left on the floor. He picked at it, then reluctantly ate, his fingers handling the implements with agility.

"If we're at odds, we won't get anything done," I said.

"That is the only thing which stops me from killing you," Frobish said. Mouse bent over to whisper in his ear. "My wife reminds me you must have time to see the logic of our ways." Were the women lucid despite their anger, or was he maneuvering on his own? "There is also the possibility you are a leader. I'm a leader, and it's difficult for me to face another leader at times. That is why I alone control this ship."

"I'm not a—" I bit my lip. Not too far, too fast. "We've got to work together and forget about being leaders for the

moment."

Sonok sighed and put down the plate. "I have no leader," he said. "That part of me did not follow into this scattershot." He leaned on my leg. "Mascots live best when made whole. So I choose Geneva as my other part. I think my En-

glish is good enough now for us to understand."

Frobish looked at the bear curiously. "My stomach hurts," he said after a moment. He turned to me. "You do not hit like a woman. A woman strikes for the soft parts, masculine weaknesses. You go for direct points with knowledge. I cannot accept you as the bear does, but if you will reconsider, we should be able to work together."

"Reconsider the family bond?"

He nodded. To me, he was almost as alien as his snakes. I gave up the fight and decided to play for time.

"I'll have to think about it. My upbringing . . . is hard to

overcome," I said.

"We will rest," Frobish said.

"And Sonok will guard," I suggested. The bear straightened perceptibly and went to stand by the hatch. For the moment, it looked like a truce had been made, but as cots were pulled out of the walls, I picked up a metal bar and hid it in my trousers.

The Sinieux went to their multilevel cages and lay quiet and still as stone. I slipped into the cot and pulled a thin sheet over myself. Sleep came immediately, and delicious lassitude finally unkinked my arm.

I don't know how long the nap lasted, but it was broken sharply by a screech from Sonok. "They're here! They're

I stumbled out of the cot, tangling one leg in a sheet, and came to a stand only after the Indian family was alert and armed. So much, I thought, for hiding the rifle. "What's here?" I asked, still dopey.

Frobish thrust Sonok away from the hatch with a leg and brought the cover around with a quick arm to slam it shut, but not before a black cable was tossed into the room. The hatch jammed on it and sparks flew. Frobish stood clear and brought his rifle to his shoulder.

Sonok ran to me and clung to my knee. Mouse opened the cages and let the Sinieux flow onto the deck. Frobish retreated from the hatch as it shuddered. The Sinieux advanced. I heard voices from the other side. They sounded human—like children, in fact.

"Wait a moment," I said. Mouse brought her pistol up and aimed it at me. I shut up.

The hatch flung open and hundreds of fine cables flew into the room, twisting and seeking, wrapping and binding. Frobish's rifle was plucked from his hands and surrounded like a bacterium with antibodies. Mouse fired her pistol wildly and stumbled, falling into a nest of cables, which jerked and seized. Alouette was almost to the hole, but her ankles were caught and she teetered.

Cables ricocheted from the ceiling and grabbed at the bundles of Sinieux. The snakes fell apart, some clinging to the cables like insects on a frog's tongue. More cables shot out to hold them all, except for a solitary snake which retreated past me. I was bound rigid and tight, with Sonok strapped to my knee. The barrage stopped, and a small, shadowed figure stood in the hatch, carrying a machete. It cleared the entrance of the sticky strands and stepped into the cabin light, looking around cautiously. Then it waved to companions behind and five more entered.

They were identical, each just under half a meter in height—a little shorter than Sonok—and bald and pink as infants. Their features were delicate and fetal, with large graygreen eyes and thin, translucent limbs. Their hands were stubby-fingered and plump as those on a Rubens baby. They walked into the cabin with long strides, self-assured, nimbly avoiding the cables.

Sonok jerked at a sound in the corridor—a hesitant, highpitched mewing. "With breasts," he mumbled through the

cords.

One of the infantoids arranged a ramp over the bottom seal of the hatch. He then stepped aside and clapped to get attention. The others formed a line, pink fannies jutting, and held their hands over their heads as if surrendering. The mewing grew louder. Sonok's trash can with breasts entered the cabin, twisting this way and that like a crazy, obscene toy. It was cylindrical, with sides tapering to a fringed skirt at the base. Three levels of pink and nippled paps ringed it at equal intervals from top to bottom. A low, flat head surmounted the body, tiny black eyes examining the cabin with quick, nervous jerks. It looked like nothing so much as the Diana of Ephesus, Magna Mater to the Romans.

One of the infantoids announced something in a piping voice, and the Diana shivered to acknowledge. With a glance around, the same infantoid nodded and all six stood up to the

breasts to nurse.

Feeding over, they took positions around the cabin and examined us carefully. The leader spoke to each of us in turn, trying several languages. None matched our own. I strained to loosen the cords around my neck and jaw and asked Sonok to speak a few of the languages he knew. He did as well as he could through his bonds. The leader listened to him with interest, then echoed a few words and turned to the other five. One nodded and advanced. He spoke to the bear in what sounded like Greek. Sonok stuttered for a moment, then replied in halting fragments.

They moved to loosen the bear's cords, looking up at me apprehensively. The combination of Sonok and six children still at breast hit me deep and I had to suppress a hysteric

urge to laugh.

"I think he is saying he knows what has happened," Sonok said. "They've been prepared for it; they knew what to expect. I think that's what they say."

The leader touched palms with his Greek-speaking colleague, then spoke to Sonok in the same tongue. He held out his plump hands and motioned for the bear to do likewise. A third stepped over rows of crystallized cable to loosen Sonok's arms.

Sonok reluctantly held up his hands and the two touched. The infantoid broke into shrill laughter and rolled on the floor. His mood returned to utmost gravity in a blink, and he stood as tall as he could, looking us over with an angry ex-

pression.

"We are in command," he said in Russian. Frobish and his wives cried out in French, complaining about their bonds. "They speak different?" the infantoid asked Sonok. The bear nodded. "Then my brothers will learn their tongues. What does the other big one speak?"

"English," Sonok said.

The infantoid sighed. "Such diversities. I will learn from her." My cords were cut and I held out my palms. The leader's hands were cold and clammy, making my arm-hairs crawl.

"All right," he said in perfect English. "Let us tell you

what's happened, and what we're going to do."

His explanation of the disruption matched mine closely. "The Alternates have done this to us." He pointed to me. "This big one calls them Aighors. We do not dignify them with a name—we're not even sure they're the same. They don't have to be, you know. Whoever has the secret of disruption, in all universes, is our enemy. We are companions now, chosen from a common pool of those who have been disrupted across a century or so. The choosing has been done so that our natures match closely—we are all from one planet. Do you understand this idea of being companions?"

Sonok and I nodded. The Indians made no response at all.

"But we, members of the Nemi, whose mother is Noctilux, we were prepared. We will take control of the aggregate ship and pilot it to a suitable point, from which we can take a perspective and see what universe we're in. Can we expect your co-operation?"

Again, the bear and I agreed and the others were silent.

"Release them all," the infantoid said with a magnanimous sweep of his hands. "Be warned, however—we can restrain you in an instant, and we are not likely to enjoy being attacked again."

The cords went limp and vaporized with some heat discharge and a slight sweet odor. The Diana rolled over the ramp and left the cabin, with the leader and another infantoid following. The others watched us closely, not nervous but intent on our every move. Where the guns had been. pools of slag lay on the floor.

"Looks like we've been overruled," I said to Frobish. He

didn't seem to hear me.

In a few hours, we were told where we would be allowed to go. The area extended to my cabin and the bathroom, which apparently was the only such facility in our reach. The Nemi didn't seem to need bathrooms, but their recognition of our own requirements was heartening. Within an hour after the take-over, the infantoids had swarmed over the controls in the chamber. They brought in bits and pieces of salvaged equipment, which they altered and fitted with extraordinary speed and skill. Before our next meal, taken from stores in the hole, they understood and controlled all the machinery in the cabin.

The leader then explained to us that the aggregate, or "scattershot," as Sonok had called it, was still far from integrated. At least two groups had yet to be brought into the fold. These were the giant blacks in golden armor, and the beings which inhabited the transparent bubble outside the ship. We were warned that leaving the established boundaries

would put us in danger.

The sleep period came. The Nemi made certain we were slumbering before they slept, if they slept at all. Sonok lay beside me on the bunk in my room, snukking faint snores and twitching over distant dreams. I stared up into the dark, thinking of the message tank. That was my unrevealed ace. I wanted to get back to it and see what it was capable of telling me. Did it belong to one of the groups we were familiar with, or was it different, perhaps a party in itself?

I tried to bury my private thoughts—disturbing, intricate thoughts—and sleep, but I couldn't. I was dead weight now, and I'd never liked the idea of being useless. Useless things tended to get thrown out. Since joining the various academies and working my way up the line, I'd always assumed I could

play some role in any system I was thrust into.

But the infantoids, though tolerant and even understanding, were self-contained. As they said, they'd been prepared and they knew what to do. Uncertainty seemed to cheer them, or at least draw them together. Of course, they were never more than a few meters away from a very impressive symbol of

security—a walking breast-bank.

The Nemi had their Diana, Frobish had his wives, and Sonok had me. I had no one. My mind went out, imagined blackness and fields of stars, and perhaps nowhere the worlds I knew, and quickly snapped back. My head hurt and my back muscles were starting to cramp. I had no access to hormone stabilizers, so I was starting my period. I rolled over, nudging Sonok into grumbly half-waking, and shut my eyes and mind to everything, trying to find a peaceful glade and perhaps Jaghit Singh. But even in sleep all I found was snow and broken gray trees.

The lights came up slowly and I was awakened by Sonok's movements. I rubbed my eyes and got up from the bunk,

standing unsteadily.

In the bathroom, Frobish and his wives were going about their morning ablutions. They looked at me but said nothing. I could feel a tension, but tried to ignore it. I was irritable, and if I let any part of my feelings out, they might all pour forth—and then where would I be?

I returned to my cabin with Sonok and didn't see Frobish following until he stepped up to the hatchway and looked in-

side.

"We will not accept the rule of children," he said evenly. "We'll need your help to overcome them."

"Who will replace them?" I asked.

"I will. They ve made adjustments to my machines which I and the Sinieux can handle."

"The Sinieux cages are welded shut," I said.

"Will you join us?"

"What could I do? I'm only a woman."

"I will fight, my wives and you will back me up. I need the rifle you took away."

"I don't have it." But he must have seen my eyes go invol-

untarily to the locker.

"Will you join us?"

"I'm not sure it's wise. In fact, I'm sure it isn't. You just aren't equipped to handle this kind of thing. You're too limited."

"I have endured all sorts of indignities from you. You are a sickness of the first degree. Either you will work with us, or

I will cure you now." Sonok bristled, and I noticed the bear's teeth were quite sharp.

I stood and faced him. "You're not a man," I said. "You're a little boy. You haven't got hair on your chest or anything

between your legs-just a bluff and a brag."

He pushed me back on the cot with one arm and squeezed up against the locker, opening it quickly. Sonok sank his teeth into the man's calf and brought forth cloth and blood, but before I could get into action the rifle was out and his hand was on the trigger. I fended the barrel away from me and the first shot went into the corridor. It caught a Nemi and removed the top of his head. The blood and sound seemed to drive Frobish into a frenzy. He brought the butt down, trying to hammer Sonok, but the bear leaped aside and the rifle went into the bunk mattress, sending Frobish off balance. I hit his throat with the side of my hand and caved in his windpipe.

Then I took the rifle and watched him choking against the cabin wall. He was unconscious and turning blue before I gritted my teeth and relented. I took him by the neck and found his pipe with my thumbs, then pushed from both sides to flex the blockage outward. He took a breath and slumped.

I looked at the body in the corridor. "This is it," I said quietly. "We've got to get out of here." I slung the rifle and peered around the hatch seal. The noise hadn't brought anyone yet. I motioned to Sonok and we ran down the corridor, away from the Indian's control room and the infantoids.

"Geneva," Sonok said as we passed an armored hatch. "Where do we go?" I heard a whirring sound and looked up. The shielded camera above the hatch was watching us, moving behind its thick gray glass like an eye. "I don't know," I said.

A seal had been placed over the flexible valve in the corridor which led to the bubble. We turned at that point and went past the nook where the message tank had been. It was gone, leaving a few anonymous fixtures behind.

An armored hatch had been punched into the wall several yards beyond the alcove, and it was unsealed. That was almost too blatant an invitation, but I had few other choices. They'd mined the ship like termites. The hatch led into a straight corridor without gravitation. I took Sonok by the arm and we drifted dreamily down. I saw pieces of equipment studding the walls which reminded me of my own ship, and I

wondered if people from my world were around. It was an idle wonder. The way I felt now, I doubted I could make friends with anyone. I wasn't the type to establish camaraderie under stress. I was the wintry one.

At the end of the corridor, perhaps a hundred meters down, gravitation slowly returned. The hatch there was armored and open. I brought the rifle up and looked around the seal. No one. We stepped through and I saw the black in his golden suit, fresh as a ghost. I was surprised; he wasn't. My rifle was up and pointed, but his weapon was down. He smiled faintly.

"We are looking for a woman known as Geneva," he said.

"Are you she?"

I nodded. He bowed stiffly, armor crinkling, and motioned for me to follow. The room around the corner was unlighted. A port several meters wide, ribbed with steel beams, opened onto starry dark. The stars were moving and I guessed the ship was rolling in space. I saw other forms in the shadows, large and bulky, some human, some apparently not. Their breathing made them sound like waiting predators.

A hand took mine and a shadow towered over me, "This

wav."

Sonok clung to my calf, and I carried him with each step I took. He didn't make a sound. As I passed from the viewing room, I saw a blue and white curve begin at the top of the port, and caught an outline of continent. Asia, perhaps. We were already near Earth. The shapes of the continents could remain the same in countless universes, immobile grounds beneath the thin and pliable paint of living things. What was life like in the distant world-lines where even the shapes of the continents had changed?

The next room was also dark, but a candle flame flickered behind curtains. The shadow which had guided me returned to the viewing room and shut the hatch. I heard the breathing

of only one besides myself.

I was shaking. Would they do this to us one at a time? Yes, of course; there was too little food. Too little air. Not enough of anything on this tiny scattershot. Poor Sonok, by his attachment, would go before his proper moment.

The breathing came from a woman, somewhere to my right. I turned to face in her general direction. She sighed. She sounded very old, with labored breath and a kind of pant after each intake.

I heard a dry crack of adhered skin separating, dry lips parting to speak, then the tiny click of eyelids blinking. The candle flame wobbled in a current of air. As my eyes adjusted, I could see that the curtains formed a translucent cubicle in the dark.

"Hello," the woman said. I answered weakly. "Is your name Francis Geneva?"

I nodded, then, in case she couldn't see me, said, "I am."

"I am Junipero," she said, aspirating the j as in Spanish. "I was commander of the High-space ship Callimachus. Were you a commander on your ship?"

"No," I replied. "I was part of the crew."

"What did you do?"

I told her in a spare sentence or two, pausing to cough. My throat was like parchment.

"Do you mind stepping closer? I can't see you very well."

I walked forward a few steps.

"There is not much from your ship in the way of computers or stored memory," she said. I could barely make out her face as she bent forward, squinting to examine me. "But we have learned to speak your language from those parts which accompanied the Indian. It is not too different from a language in our past, but none of us spoke it until now. The rest of you did well. A surprising number of you could communicate, which was fortunate. And the little children who suckle—the Nemi—they always know how to get along. We've had several groups of them on our voyages."

"May I ask what you want?"

"You might not understand until I explain. I have been through the *mutata* several hundred times. You call it disruption. But we haven't found our home yet, I and my crew. The crew must keep trying, but I won't last much longer. I'm at least two thousand years old, and I can't search forever."

"Why aren't the others old?"

"My crew? They don't lead. Only the top must crumble away to keep the group flexible, only those who lead. You'll grow old, too. But not the crew. They'll keep searching."

"What do you mean, me?"

"Do you know what 'Geneva' means, dear sister?"

I shook my head, no.

"It means the same thing as my name, Junipero. It's a tree which gives berries. The one who came before me, her name was Jenevrboom, and she lived twice as long as I, four thousand years. When she came, the ship was much smaller than it is now."

"And your men-the ones in armor-"

"They are part of my crew, and there are women, too."
"They've been doing this for six thousand years?"
"Longer," she said. "It's much easier to be a leader and die, I think. But their wills are strong. Look in the tank, Geneva."

A light came on behind the cubicle and I saw the message tank. The murky fluid moved with a continuous, swirling flow. The old woman stepped from the cubicle and stood beside me in front of the tank. She held out her finger and wrote something on the glass, which I couldn't make out.

The tank's creatures formed two images, one of me and one of her. She was dressed in a simple brown robe, her peppery black hair cropped into short curls. She touched the glass again and her image changed. The hair lengthened, forming a broad globe around her head. The wrinkles smoothed. The body became slimmer and more muscular, and a smile came to the lips. Then the image was stable.

Except for the hair, it was me.

I took a deep breath. "Everytime you've gone through a

disruption, has the ship picked up more passengers?"
"Sometimes," she said. "We always lose a few, and every now and then we gain a large number. For the last few centuries our size has been stable, but in time we'll probably start to grow. We aren't anywhere near the total yet. When that comes, we might be twice as big as we are now. Then we'll have had, at one time or another, every scrap of ship, and every person that ever went through a disruption."

"How big is the ship now?"

"Four hundred kilometers across. Built rather like a Volvox, if you know what that is."

"How do you keep from going back yourself?"

"We have special equipment to keep us from separating. When we started out, we thought it would shield us from a mutata, but it didn't. This is all it can do for us now-it can keep us in one piece each time we jump. But not the entire ship."

I began to understand. The huge bulk of ship I had seen from the window was real. I had never left the grab bag. I was in it now, riding the aggregate, a tiny particle attracted

out of solution to the colloidal mass.

Junipero touched the tank and it returned to its random flow. "It's a constant shuttle run. Each time, we return to the Earth to see who if any can find their home there. Then we seek out the ones who have the disrupters, and they attack us-send us away again."

"Out there-is that my world?"

The old woman shook her head. "No, but it's home to one group—three of them. The three creatures in the bubble."

I giggled. "I thought there were a lot more than that."

"Only three. You'll learn to see things more accurately as time passes. Maybe you'll be the one to bring us all home."

"What if I find my home first?"

"Then you'll go, and if there's no one to replace you, one of the crew will command until another comes along. But someone always comes along, eventually. I sometimes think we're being played with, never finding our home, but always having a Juniper to command us." She smiled wistfully. "The game isn't all bitter and bad tosses, though. You'll see more things, and do more, and be more, than any normal woman."
"I've never been normal," I said.

"All the better."

"If I accept."

"You have that choice."

"'Junipero,' "I breathed. "Geneva." Then I laughed.

"How do you choose?"

The small child, seeing the destruction of its thousand companions with each morning light, and the skepticism of the older ones, becomes frightened and wonders if she will go the same way. Someone will raise the shutters and a sunbeam will impale her and she'll phantomize. Or they'll tell her they don't believe she's real. So she sits in the dark, shaking. The dark becomes fearful. But soon each day becomes a triumph. The ghosts vanish, but she doesn't, so she forgets the shadows and thinks only of the day. Then she grows older, and the companions are left only in whims and background thoughts. Soon she is whittled away to nothing; her husbands are past, her loves are firm and not potential, and her history stretches away behind her like carvings in crystal. She becomes wrinkled, and soon the daylight haunts her again. Not every day will be a triumph. Soon there will be a final beam of light, slowly piercing her jellied eye, and she'll join the phantoms.

But not now. Somewhere, far away, but not here. All around, the ghosts have been resurrected for her to see and lead. And she'll be resurrected, too, always under the shadow of the tree name.

"I think," I said, "that it will be marvelous."

So it was, thirty centuries ago. Sonok is gone, two hundred years past; some of the others have died, too, or gone to their own Earths. The ship is five hundred kilometers across and growing. You haven't come to replace me yet, but I'm dying, and I leave this behind to guide you, along with the instructions handed down by those before me.

Your name might be Jennifer, or Ginepra, or something else, but you will always be me. Be happy for all of us, dar-

ling. We will be forever whole.

## CARRUTHERS' LAST STAND

## by Dan Henderson Topolo category and assume classification beautiful

Once again how does one alien intelligence hope to understand another? It is all very well to send off mathematical equations into space and pretty diagrams that any advanced human mind should be able to solve, but the minds out there are not going to be human or oriented to our patterns of culture and reason. It will take a quite eccentric human to tackle the first exchange with something out there—and Carruthers in this story is very definitely that kind of maverick. a crayer a common tracing band fills

Rit Carruthers celebrated his thirty-first birthday as alone as he could make himself-a full kilometer out from the four milky-white domes of Alpha Lunar Hospital. He breathed metallic air from his tanks, felt the tickling at the bridge of his legs that assured him the suit A/C unit was working, and tasted wine left on his upper lip from the party he had given himself an hour before.

The Moon ignored him, and he basked in her ignorance. "This world is hostile to man," he thought. "Not by motive, by nature." The insight made him happy—or it made him what he called happy: maintaining a relative peace with a hostile world. It was away from the alien venom of the Yatz, and away from the mindless stings of the bureaucrat Rushing. 239

Nothing sounded. Man noises got swallowed up. The only sounds were pseudo-sounds, vibrations carried by the metal of his suit. He saw his footprints in the coarse dust, and was pleased that the Moon would not even take the cosmetic step of closing them over. He smiled, feeling as aged and impersonal as the uncaring dust.

"For my birthday," he mused, "Continental Industries might make me a gift of the hospital. And change the name to Alpha Lunar Home for Lunatics." But CI could be wrong: He wasn't about to go crazy. Not on his salary. He thumbed his nose at Earth—an odd, peculiarly significant gesture due to his massively gloved hand and the mirror of his faceplate.

He turned toward the pearly domes. The name "hospital" was justified by fifteen beds on one floor of one dome. CI had needed a cover in order for the United Nations to grant it a Moon facility. Most of the "hospital" housed corporate secrets. One of them was Rit Carruthers.

"Base to Carruthers."

"Carruthers here."

"Time to come in. Ninety minutes to contact."

"I'll be along."

"You'll be along now!"

"Come and get me," Carruthers said, chuckling. The threat silenced BS (for Base Supervisor, among other things) Rushing. BS had tried sending men after Carruthers before, and had discovered how impossible it was to play tag on the Moon. The entire base staff knew of the escapade—and would love an encore.

"All right, dammit. Twenty minutes. That's it."

"Check."

"Base clear."

"Carruthers, partly cloudy."

He couldn't mute the speaker, but he could obscure it. He

switched on a tape of Beethoven's "Ninth."

The music pleased him. He felt giddy, wandering from blinding light into inky shadow, with a full symphony blasting away in his helmet. The sound had all the brilliance and symmetry of R-theory, the first gift from the alien Yatz to man.

"And they think I'm big-headed!" The man on the Moon chuckled to himself. Beethoven had been among the most arrogant men of all time—and he'd had a right to be.

Carruthers suspected that he, too, had that right. How else

could one explain Continental Industries' continuous obeisance to him? The monolithic, multigovernmental corporation could as easily crush him, if he were an ordinary man. But he'd demanded, and gotten, this privilege of solitary Moon walks—as well as the custom tape deck for his suit.

"As long as old Rit's the only one who can handle the

Yatz, there's nothing they won't do for me," he thought.

The "Chorale" began and, somewhere down among the horns and drums, he could hear the Base calling him. He ignored the summons. Carruthers knew exactly how long it would take him to unsuit, put on his warpaint, and hustle down to the R-dome. But he wanted to be back in time to have a cigarette: Already, his stroll had carried him too near the airlock.

It slid open before he could press the exterior call. Mean-

ing someone had been watching for him.

He stepped inside. The door closed. He slouched against one wall of the stainless-steel chamber. He felt the vibration of pumps at his shoulder. As air moved in, he began to hear them. The green light blinked on. He took off his helmet.

He began the graceless routine of getting out of the suit. He could see his face in the opposite wall. Cauliflower ears and a broken nose: A pacifist, Carruthers had learned the virtues of peace the hard way. His hair was close-cropped. The scar of the R-implant showed on his scalp. It was his badge of superiority.

The inside door opened and Carruthers stepped into the anteroom, Rushing and "Emerson" were there. Emerson was Rushing's executive secretary. Carruthers had given her a

new name, and it had caught on:

"Knock, knock."

And she had said: "Who's there?"

"Emerson."

"Emerson who?"

"Emerson fine boobs you got there, honey."

She had not spoken to him since. Fine. It was what you expected from the brainless types who became BS secretaries.

"Put this up." Carruthers said, dumping his suit in their

direction.

Rushing frowned and Emerson obeyed. Rushing said, "It's been forty minutes. The brass want you for a conference."

"I've nothing to confer."

Rushing looked desperate. "Look, Rit, do it for me. I mean, they can get me."

"Sure, sure. Hustle on down there and tell 'em I'm com-

ing."

Rushing beamed, started to say something, changed his

mind, and glided from the room on rubber-soled shoes.

Carruthers watched him go, shook his head at the sight of the retreating back, and reached for his tooled leather boots. Emerson stalked past. Carruthers watched. He wondered if it were possible for a woman to sway with malice.

If so, Emerson had the knack.

Carruthers remembered the first time he had seen Rushing. Boy, had the little bureaucrat hemmed and hawed. It had happened back at the Multiversity.

It had happened like this:

"There's got to be some catch," he'd said, enjoying watching his visitor squirm in the rickety chair generally reserved for students. "Why in God's name would Continental Industries need a primitive anthropologist on the Moon?"

Rushing had colored beet red. "They just do."

The anthropologist had snorted.

"All right then. You know about the transmissions picked

up from the aliens?"

"Certainly. And I also know that the signal is more than five hundred years old. Those aliens couldn't be very primitive."

"Well, no, not exactly. But that five hundred years thing—that's just what CI tells the public."

"CI? Continental Industries?"

"Right. They bought research rights to the tapes. They—"
"Research rights? Since when has CI been interested in

research? Pure research, at that?"

The bureaucrat squirmed a little more. "Well, of course, they, um, they stood to profit from it. You see—you understand this is confidential?—part of the information in those tapes was something called R-theory. It makes mechanically aided telepathy possible, I'm told. Instantaneous communications with the Yatz."

Carruthers took that in. He opened a leather-bound volume of Plutarch's "Lives." It contained a whiskey bottle and two shot glasses. He glanced at Rushing, who shook his head, and filled only one. He downed it. "So?"

"So it's possible for us to communicate with the Yatz."

"Ah, that word again. Yatz. What's that?"

"The aliens."

Carruthers refilled his glass. "And?"

"The Yatz have proven very hard to deal with. Very hostile, very primitive, in spite of their technological innovations. Two men have already broken down from the, ah, pressures of negotiations. CI thinks you can handle the job."
"Doesn't make sense," Carruthers said. "Why me? I'm just

a lowly college-prof type, even if brilliant. They want me to

bore the Yatz into cooperating, right, Rushing?"

"No. Not that."

"How much is CI willing to pay?"

"I'm authorized to offer one thousand credits-per-day. Plus benefits. Plus expenses."

Carruthers whistled long and low. A year's pay every

month, "For what?"

"You are a professor, but you are also a primitive anthro-

pologist with much fieldwork to his credit. We know."

"I'm sure you do," Carruthers said. "But you also know about Benton and Marquez, who have done more work. So there's something you're not telling."

The little man took a deep breath. Carruthers could see the pressure building behind the pale eyes. The words damming, until he cracked and a torrent came pouring out: "They told me, Dr. Carruthers, they told me, they needed a strong personality type. No, even more." Rushing glared at Carruthers, a glare that soon was to become familiar.

"They told me, dammit, they told me they needed an arrogant SOB for the job. And I checked. And there was one man with the credentials, one certified SOB, to boot, and

you're it."

Carruthers nodded. He drank the last of his whiskey. He smiled. "I'm thoroughly charmed. I'll take the job."

Carruthers had learned to love the Moon. But he hated CI. The dead-eyed, bellied Execs couldn't begin to understand the torture in his brain each time an R-transmission was madeor the personal agony his failures were causing him. Worse, they had insulted him by thinking more money would be a balm for his hurt.

Money couldn't cure alienation.

"Alien-nation," he thought. Marvelous. In a world gone to-

tally egalitarian, absolutely pedestrian, you couldn't expect appreciation for personal achievement. Ah, well.

He remembered the aftermath of the early R-sessions.

"It's just Moon-lag," Rushing had first proposed. The anthropologist had choked down his nausea and continued to work

After a while, he'd said, "It's the same one every time."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, Gestures are idiosyncratic."

"Oh."

And Carruthers had stuck to it, staking his pride and his ambitions on the Yatz. He honed his hate, his misanthropy, and his curses until, at last, he felt he could jeer a shuttlepilot into a convalescent ward.

"God, Rit, you're foul lately."

He'd only sworn some more, and gone on.

"Communications with the Yatz are based upon a protocol of insult," he wrote in his first dispatch to the Board of Directors of Continental Industries. "That requirement is a reflection of their pride, their will, and their inability to be humiliated. Only if they believe an Earthman to be their

equal will they communicate."

Contact occurred every 12.78 days, an apparently arbitrary figure set by the aliens. Carruthers used the time between contacts to read up on the Yatz, the strange lizardlike race posited in the direction of the constellation Cassiopeia. Their curious antagonism, he found refreshing. It was better to have refined hostility, than refinement covering hostility. More esthetic, as well as more honest,

Technical data bored Carruthers, but he was enchanted by the simplicity of the R-theory. Simple to use, that is: Its

mechanism was not yet understood.

That fact only increased his awe for the mental capacity of the aliens, and he began to see how mind-to-mind contact might send men careening into madness. He reviewed the clinical records of Silas and Montgomery, the two "communicants" who had preceded him and now were permanently institutionalized.

But the two hadn't had his background, or his will, or his mind: Whatever the Yatz could dish out, Rit Carruthers was sure he could take. And hand back.

Reviewing films of past contacts, listening to transcripts,

studying his own errors in strategy, only deepened his conviction that he was bound to succeed.

Until, one day, to Rushing, he said, "All right, you son of a file cabinet with carbon-paper for brains—I'm ready."

The supervisor poured him whiskey.

"I can't go back in there," said Rit the Humble.
"I know. It was bad. Drink this."

The glass emptied, was filled, and emptied again.

"I mean, why should I? You saw what it was wearing around its neck?" he said, feeling the bile in his throat.

"I saw, but it was nothing like what it was saying. And the

lizard wasn't even warmed up good,"

The anthropologist shuddered. "I know."

"Do you? You've seen the films, sure, but have you thought about them? I'd say it was in second gear, headed for third, when you broke. But that's good-"

"The Yatz didn't sign off, you did," Rushing said. "It's

sticking with you. It's a good sign."

"Great sign, fantastic sign. 'Prepare to meet your Maker.'"

"It's a step in the right direction."

"Crap, if that's the right direction . . . Pardon me, but I think I'll go in the other."

Rushing was silent for a moment. He filled Carruthers' glass again. Then he said, "Emerson thought you would quit."

Carruthers frowned. And decided he would stay.

"Now what the hell's the matter? I'd stonewalled it damn good then wham! The screen goes black and he's gone."

"It doesn't respect you. You're losing it."

"Doesn't respect me? Jesus."

"Try yelling. You're awful quiet in there."

"I'm hoarse already."

"Practice."

"Stuff this. Stuff you."

"Sure," said Rushing, with the self-certainty of a true believer.

Carruthers felt nauseated, having this human Jello look up to him. But he practiced.

The Apollo Bar provided the extra luxuries that the rest of Alpha Lunar Hospital lacked. Its interior was as wasteful an expanse as its exterior was frugal. Dim gaslights, not neon, shimmered on the surfaces of real wood tables; corridors spun off from the bar arena to the party rooms, oversized cubicles with deep pile carpet and thickly cushioned chairs; across the room from the multicolored liquor racks a dark shape was lodged against the wall, its keys gleaming yellow in the light of a single golden bulb. A piano. A Steinway concert grand. It provided the only live music on the Moon. Pop stuff came from holos.

CI knows the basics men need to survive, Carruthers thought, each time he entered. And he entered often. But he never followed the winding corridors back to the Lay Ladies. No. He himself was illegitimate, and he was proud of it. He didn't mind that his mother had only known his father as "September"—the month of their affair. It was only that Rit Carruthers—rejecting sex as he rejected Rushing—could not accept easy pleasure. It was a violation of the superior mind.

But Carruthers entered the Apollo often. First, there was the liquor; then, Rushing's wife frowned on drinking and so he was usually spared the banalities of the bureaucrat; and, finally, if he had a friend on the Moon, it was Pinter the Bar-

tender.

Pinter, staff psychologist cum bartender, was a pleasure. He was a jowled man of forty-five, with the huge red hands of a farmer, who blew great clouds of cigar smoke while Carruthers talked.

"I can't make it out. I get to the point where Hun's-"

"Hun?"

"That's my alien chum."

"Got it."

"Anyway, Hun's been going on about the whiteness of my belly, and what that reminds him of, so I've just got to come back with what he must smell like, and the lousy yarble-bag sort of sneers at me and fades."

"That must have been a relief."

"No—a problem. I think these pansy-blue coveralls CI gives us are the trouble. I'm working up my own uniform. You should see it. It's got—"

"You sure take all this damn serious."

"Of course I do. With the Yatz, there's still a hope of waking up the human race, still some hope that Homo sap can make the transition into Homo sapiens. We're karmaed out.

"Just think about the genius of the R-process. Anybody

who can design that is light-years in front of us."

"Maybe."

"Maybe, my chockra. They are."

"So you say. But my experience is that civilized beings take compassion on the less civilized. They don't carry on like shuttlers on shore leave."

"Thanks, friend."
"I didn't mean—"

"Just get me a drink, okay?"
And Pinter shrugged. "Sure."

The request and its answer were their routine. It was a signal that the argument was to stop. Carruthers respected Pinter too much to risk the relationship. If only Pinter hadn't swallowed humanism hook, line, and sinker.

"Still," he thought, "if even Pinter feels that way, I'd better bloody well keep my thoughts to myself. I sure can't afford to

let these clowns catch me in uniform."

Alpha Lunar Hospital was laid out in a quad. There was one dome each for Services, Housing, Research (and the hospital, what there was of it), and the R-works. Each of four passageways connected two domes. To get from his room in Housing, Carruthers had to pass through either Services or Research.

Services meant the cafeteria. No way. He moved into the passage toward Research. No one was in sight. If only his luck held...

He was one-third of the way down a side corridor past the labs when he heard, "Would you look at that?"

He kept walking.

"All dressed up like an Indian—I guess he figures the uniform don't show off enough of his body."

"I thought it didn't cover enough of it."
Carruthers moved faster. Temper, temper.

Almost clear, less than five meters from the interlock to the R-dome, he heard a female giggle. His blood chilled.

"I sure didn't know they made 'em like that anymore, I swear I didn't," a sweet Southern voice proclaimed, dripping of honey and sarcasm.

Carruthers' hand flashed to the thong at his waist, catching hold of the tomahawk tied there, as he whirled and let loose the war whoop he had practiced.

He saw eyes bulge as they took in his war paint, his

muscles huge and tight against leather, his weapon—and his face. He took one step forward.

Heads jerked inside doorways like cuckoos recalled by the

striking of the hour.

Carruthers surveyed the suddenly empty hall, his embarrassment transformed into victory. He grinned. "If only the Yatz would fall so easily."

He entered the interlock, passed through the final hall, and came to the doorway. He punched in his ID number; metal

parted and he went in.

"That you, Rit?" Rushing said, glancing up. He gagged.

The contact man grunted a response.

"It's brilliant," the bureaucrat said. "Oh, Christ! I think it will work."

"It better goddam work."

"Right. Don't forget the glasses."

Carruthers nodded. The Yatz projection was always brilliant. But he'd noticed that Hun's pupils were wide in order to see him. "And don't you forget the spotlight."

"I won't."

Carruthers nodded and passed through another pneumatic entrance: Except for the unearthly looking R-works in one corner, the room could have passed for the studio of a Holo talk show.

He seated himself in a black leather swivel chair, turned his back to the camera, pulled a package of cigarettes from his breechcloth, and lit one. With the white cylinder dangling from his lips, he fitted his mirrored flight glasses. His free hand alternately clenched and relaxed on the tomahawk he'd made from pipe and a jagged Moon rock.

"Five minutes. Lobal interconnect functioning."

Power was surging through the station, he knew. Power that would burn through Carruthers' mind, then skip-leap across space. He could feel the sweat running from his eyes, making the nosepiece of the glasses hurtful, while smearing the war paint. He looked at the black mat on the back of his hand, and saw that its hairs were soaked.

The speaker crackled again. "Already?" he wondered.

"This is Inge. Good show and good luck."

"This is Adams, son. Say hello to Custer for me."

Thought Carruthers: "Screw you both with barbed-wire."
Inge was CI's civilian director of the lunar program—al-

though this was the first time Carruthers had heard of him being on the Moon. Adams was director of "security"—all twelve battalions. Both had come to the Moon to view this contact, Carruthers knew. But how had they known to come? Could that peanut-brain Rushing have figured that Carruthers was ready to make a breakthrough? No. Luck. Dumb luck. But it made him nervous.

Silence.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, good luck and go!"
Nothing and then the lights went down, the screen flickered on:

"Unsteady two-legged son of a tepid-blooded race—I see you return again to be taught your weakness. Such courage is rare for such a jelly-spined effluvium as yourself. Still, you cower in the darkness! Pathetic weakling, afraid even of his own shadow. Even now you would be carrion rotting in your own waste if—"

Carruthers' chair spun, hundreds of candlepower blazed over him, and he was on his feet, screaming into the camera.

The ten-meter-high vision of the Yatz, of Hun, decked out in full battle array, looking like Pancho Villa with a blue rep-

tile's body, loomed in front of him.

A sound started somewhere inside the Earthman's guts, wrenching upward, reverberating along his rib cage, scorching up the trachea, and finally spewing from his lips: words of fury and slime, backed by the full fury of a man who could no longer stomach his own kind, but had turned the anguish elsewhere.

No one but Carruthers could've noticed the brief lapse in the alien's manner or the narrowing of the pupils; none but he had crossed so fully into the Yatz way of thinking. In that moment of exquisite confrontation, with the fire of R-contact burning in his brain, in the middle of chaos and curdled emotion, with sweat streaming from every pore, through eyes bloodshot with strain, Carruthers saw.

He saw, and he knew.

A grimace flickered for one glittering moment on the twisted reptilian face. The force of it ground its way through to the human's bones: It was a new gesture, a gesture of approval, and the contact was on.

Carruthers, in the Apollo, had killed his first whiskey.

"Another one?"

"For sure."

"You look lost, Rit," Pinter said. "You look like a cat

that's been chased up a tree after meeting his first dog."

"I feel up a tree," Carruthers said. "But it's like all my life, I thought I was a weird dog, until I got chased up that tree. And there in the branches: cats. It's a frightening and beautiful thing."

"You've met Jesus or what?"

"Yesterday, I got through to Hun. You should've been there. Like a first date. Can you imagine what it's like working shoulder-to-shoulder with a race of Napoleons? A race whose every member was cradle-taught Nietzsche? Beethovens every one."

"Or Hitlers. Just how far away are these friends of yours?"

"You know, for a shrink, you show a streak of xenophobia a klick wide."

"How far?"

"Five hundred light-years, say. Out of range of possible face-to-face contact."

"But we can talk to them instantly?"

"Right."

Pinter beetled up his thick brows. "I hate to shake a zealot, but don't you think there's something awful damn strange about that?"

"Like what?"

"Like what are they getting out of this—other than a disciple whose initials are RC."

"Nothing, that I know of. I guess they're interested in

primitive races."

"So they come on like, well, like Huns?"

Carruthers considered.

Pinter went on.

"Look, Rit, Beethoven preceded Nietzsche—the Nazis came after him. I respect where you're coming from, but you're wrong. Something's wrong, anyway."

"Come to the point."

"All right. You keep up with this super-race junk, and there's going to be trouble. People don't like it. All I'm saying is play it cool. Stay objective. Keep the hicks happy."

"But, hang it, what if they are a super-race? I owe my allegiance to talent. I believe in higher things, great things, Big-

ger than Life things."

"And it's made you cynical, bitter."

"So, it's my life. Sometimes, the intelligent man must choose unhappiness."

"What about the hicks?"

"They don't count. For nothing."

"Rit. Rit . . . Listen to me. Your little 'tête-à-tête' would never have happened without the hicks. People like that tech guzzling down the bar there."

"Dammit, get me a drink. Leave me alone."

"Sure, sure."

The bartender brought the drink and then wandered to the end of the bar, where he began talking to the tech. Carruthers watched, jealous and angry. He felt betrayed.

He forced his mind back to the previous evening's contact,

hoping to salvage his feeling of euphoria. He failed.
Several things were bubbling through his brain that distracted him and nagged at him. Pinter. Carruthers had played the tolerance game, and it hadn't worked. No one could say where intolerance was justified. And sometimes, it must be.

Other things. The contact. It had been contact, but nothing concrete had happened. Then there was the necklace Hun wore; he had an inkling of what the stones were; but he

couldn't accept it, not yet.

Still, the sense of awe returned to him. The ferocious giveand-take had invigorated him and made him aware of the wonders of his own being alive. He saw that the Yatz had no respect for any but themselves. Their social evolution remained an evolution of the fittest. They presumed that life meant having the brains and guts and brawn to survive.

The Yatz were not like Earth's muddling millions, he thought. They had not sabotaged evolution by pandering to their infirm, or glorifying their weak, or diluting the strong. Carruthers only wished that the distance across the Milky Way was not impassable: Contact between Man and Yatz

would be amusing-as long as it lasted.

Carruthers admitted to himself that he did not quite understand the aliens. As Pinter had pointed out, their motivation was not clear. Hard information, given freely at first, now seemed difficult to get.

But the contact man was not worried. No. There was an innate connection between him and Hun, a bond that transcended the R-link, an alikeness which denied mistrust.

In that was the promise of clearing up so many of the apparent contradictions the aliens presented. The solution, present but not yet grasped, would be something light and fanciful, like dancing under the Moon—something loony and significant. It would be as beautiful as the early contacts had been horrible.

But what? He shrugged. He didn't know. He sipped his

whiskey and sputtered.

"Almost didn't recognize you with all your clothes on," Rushing said, seating himself at the bar. He took a napkin and fastidiously wiped clean the already spotless surface, before resting his long-boned, narrow arms upon it. "Pinter," he called, "would you bring me a beer?"

Carruthers asked, "You got a note from your wife, Rush-

ing?"

"Don't need one. This is a celebration."

"Of what?"

"Why, of you, Rit. Of you and your ugly friend. Of the contact that will make us all rich."

Carruthers, surprised, suspicious, said, "How's that?"

"Hey, you don't know?" Rushing's look was amused, almost condescending. "You don't know," he said again, the words rolling out of his mouth with obvious pleasure.

"Don't know what?"

"You think all we get from the Yatz comes from the interview, but there's more. When you successfully make contact, secondary channels open up to us."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, yesterday, we got a formula for a new alloy, one that's practically heat impervious—so much so, in fact, we could pass it through the Sun and it'd come out whole. A ship made of that wouldn't heat up enough to require an air conditioner inside."

Carruthers sniffed. "Big deal."

"It is a big deal. Do you have any idea how hot the Sun is? What a revision of molecular theory it takes to accept such a

metal? Everything, but everything can change now."

Carruthers shrugged, feeling vaguely annoyed. He didn't know whether it was because of his own ignorance of science, or of his being used for other purposes and not knowing it. Or because Rushing knew more than he did.

"So congratulations," the bureaucrat said. "Our early projections indicate you may have just paid for the entire R-proj-

ect."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I want a raise."

"You've got it. Take some time off. The R-team will be working around the clock before the next transmission, just to get the early information sorted."

"It'll take me at least a week before I can go back to the

studio," Carruthers said.

"I bet. The doc said the adrenaline you were pumping could kill a man. Heart attack, you know."

"It won't kill me."

"I guess not. You'd choke to death on pride, first."

"You got something important to say? Otherwise, I've got some serious drinking planned."

"I've got something to say."

"Say it."

Pinter arrived with Rushing's brew and put another whiskey in place of Carruthers' empty glass. Then, taking his cue from Rushing's hard stare, he slid back along the bar to where he'd been before, making a great show of turning his back. It was as if he'd hung a huge Do Not Disturb sign above the two.

"We've got to have some more information about the

Yatz," Rushing said. "Adams says it's imperative."

"What else have you been telling me? I thought we were

getting information."

"That's technical. Theory and stuff. And Adams is upset over the implications: A race that could come up with that metal, that could come up with R-theory—maybe five hundred light-years doesn't mean that much to them. So Adams says we need to be thinking about defense, if only—"

"Defense? Against the Yatz?" And Carruthers threw back his head and laughed. "Tell the Fascist to ask Hun himself."

"It's your job."

"It's my job to maintain contact with Hun, which means it is my job to keep people from screwing up the contact. We start poking around, too quick, and click! No contact. And there go your hopes for any more Supermetals."

"You on their side?"

"I'm on my side."

"You're not indispensable."

"So fire me. You've already made me rich."

Rushing glared at him, then down into his full mug of beer. Silence. It was getting late. Shifts changed in the station. Men and women, most wearing the green suits of a tech or the red of research, drifted into the Apollo. With them came the fragrance of grease and rosins.

But most passed toward the action in the back. The 3-11

Bio crew had a party going.

The piano started playing, its notes strangely clear in the general confusion of the bar. The music was classical.

"Ah, Ludwig," said Carruthers.

"What?"

"Ludwig. Ludwig von B. Soc number, 801-463-3827. A good dude. You should get to know him."

"I'll look him up," said Rushing.

"You know, BS—I'm ignorant of a lot of things. But of nothing that's important."

Rushing didn't reply, not immediately. Finally he said,

"What're you going to do about the Yatz?"

Carruthers thought about it. He hesitated to put a strain on the still virginal relationship. But it would be interesting, if he could manipulate Hun the same way that Hun had manipulated him. "Send me a memo on what Adams wants," he said, "Then, just pay attention to the next broadcast."

"Thanks, Rit. It means a lot-"

"Yeah. I know. It means a lot to your career."

Silence. Rushing said nothing. He looked at Carruthers, not glaring, his eyes open, blinking. But he said nothing. Then he

got up and left.

Carruthers revolved on his stool. He watched Rushing go. He almost liked Rushing. Bad sign. His attention turned to the piano. A woman's back. A pool of light made a halo on her hair, The "Appassionata," first movement: strange music for a bar: strange and beautiful.

He watched, listened, enjoyed.

When the movement finished, he clapped lightly. The pianist turned to him, radiant, and then she laughed. It was Emerson. His skin began to burn, and he got up, and he headed toward the exit.

"How!" Emerson called out.

He cursed. As he left, he banged a shoulder against the doorjamb. It hurt. The light in the hall was neon. Stepping into it, he felt chilled as if going into a winter's night. He held the thick, dark wood of the Apollo's door open, and hoped for a resumption of the music.

It did not happen. The woman began making the ominous rumbling of wardrums with her instrument. Carruthers

shivered and released the door. The shucking sound of its closing cut off the further music, the laughter.

Sleep, dammit.

But he could not sleep. His eyes, scarcely able to stay open, would not close. The ceiling revolved above his sweatsoaked body. He ached.

Sobering up, he thought mechanically. But that didn't seem to matter much: Lately, the line between in- and un-intoxi-

cated had been blurred.

Carruthers felt a loneliness that was new to him. Rushing knew science; Emerson knew music; and what did he know? An image, a suspicion, of Emerson and Rushing together. It sickened him. Always they went to the morons.

But Rushing was no moron.

The Yatz were the only fit company in the world. He laughed at the irony, imagining a Yatz coupling. Imagining himself as a pioneer in miscegenation. He sickened again.

He was lonely. So stupid, so insignificant, so human. He was not worthy of the Yatz. He was always alone, but never like this. He needed to communicate with someone, and the urge could not be held until the next R-contact. Blood roared in his ears with the beat of wardrums.

He thought of Hun, imagining the leathery face hovering above him in the darkness, and something, far beneath his cynicism and his discipline, trembled.

His eyes shut to blank out the alien's face.

Colors drifted across the inside of his eyelids, calming him, lulling him, making him sleep. But sleep only sharpened his understanding, made crystal the mist of hurt and loneliness. What happens to the superior man who can no longer claim superiority? He returns to the herd.

He dreamed of a marionette with a Yatz face, suspended by a long silver cord that ran up through the black Moon sky to wizened hands. He saw himself, Indian of the maria, seizing the ragdoll figure and shaking it, making a fine line around the top of the skull with his tomahawk, and pulling free a scalp of crepe hair. Spirit gum bled onto his hands.

Laughter surrounded him; laughter needing no air, but coming to him by R-implant; but it was laughter with hard edges and cutting places, human laughter, laughter at his victory.

He slashed angrily at the cord supporting the puppet and it

would not cut. He grasped the body and tried to hurl it back into the sky, but it only fell back to dance grotesquely decimeters above the lunar surface.

Wakefulness dawned over the scene, and Carruthers felt the cooler part of him note that his cheeks were wet, that the laughter had been his own.

For the first time, he thought about going crazy.

He found Rushing having coffee with a couple of silveruniformed executives in the cafeteria. As Carruthers approached, their talk stopped. A thin man with an angular face arose and said, "I've got work to do. I'm sorry, Tim." His hand lightly brushed Rushing's shoulder as he stood. The other exec followed.

"Finally, I've found you," Carruthers said. "I should've known. I've been waiting on that memo."

"Later. I can't talk now."

"Later, hell. I'm doing you the favor."

"Rit, I don't need your favors. You'll have to take responsibility for it yourself."

"Listen, Mr. Paper Shuffler-"

"No, you listen," Rushing said, rising to his feet. His eyes stared directly into Carruthers'. Only the features of his face reflected the intensity of his feeling. The soft sparkling of his eyes was now a flashing. His smooth chin was jutting and hard. "I've had it with you, with you and your lizard and your whining. The Yatz aren't the only damn thing in the world. You've paid for yourself. The project is paid for. Everything else is cream. We can take the loss.

"What we can't take is a drunken SOB who is fouling up

station procedure with his whims."

The tight lips asked, "You understand?"

Carruthers didn't, couldn't respond. He watched, speechless, as Rushing turned away and began walking. The shock passed. Shaking his head in astonishment, he started after the supervisor.

A powerful hand seized him by the upper arm. Unthinking, he tried to twist free and, when he did, cursed: His captor was Pinter.

"Let me go."

"Just wait one minute. Tim's wife has been critically injured in a flitter accident. She was visiting her folks Earthside. Tim can't get down there to see her. He can't, because

CI has ordered him to stay here. To watch you. You're too unreliable to be left alone, they say."

"Me? Christ, the whole program rests on me. And if that

twit thinks . . . "

Pinter only watched Carruthers. And Carruthers felt the observation, and listened to what he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. If I had known—"

"You'd have done the same thing," Pinter said. "The grip on Carruthers' arm tightened, then fell off altogether. Pinter

walked away.

Reviewing the videotapes took time. But the anthropologist had determined to spend the rest of the days until the R-transmit hidden away among the gray files in the R-dome. Here was meaning, meaning and some semblance of peace.

He examined film until he thought his eyes would burst. He listened to tapes until the gutteral English of Hun ran together in his ears. The ozone smell of the great computers and the other electrical works seemed the only smell he knew.

He substituted calisthentics for the strolls on the Moon sur-

face. He stopped drinking.

Repeatedly, he called the library—having found he was too stupid even to use the computer-retrieval system. Too much of the information from the secondary tapes was beyond him. He was muddling over the difference between A-type and G-type stars, when there was a knock on the door of the file room.

"Come in," he said, half-afraid, half-hoping it would be

Pinter or Rushing.

It was not. At first, he didn't recognize the gangling male with unruly red hair. It was a technician he'd seen often in the Apollo.

"You the joker who's been driving Basil crazy?"

Basil was the librarian. "I am. But what-?"

"Then you need my help. You work with the Yatz, don't you?" He extended his hand. "Rit, isn't it? Rit Carruthers? I'm Will Abernathy. Mind if I sit?" He eased himself slantwise into a chair across from Carruthers.

"I'm sorry. I'm very busy. I-"

The intruder waved away the protest. "With my help, you'll save enough time to spend a few minutes. I've got clearance, too, so don't worry. See, I was in the library and Basil, the old carp, was just a-carryin' on every time you

called. It got me interested, so I checked, found out who was calling, and came on down—after I got the CI paper mill to approve it. Okay?"

Carruthers nodded dumbly. He disliked nice people. The

hail-fellow-well-met, he hated. But . . .

Abernathy said, "I've sure been wanting to meet you. I've heard loads about your work and you—you let the CI big shots know exactly how big they are, don't you!"

Carruthers smiled, slightly. Maybe this Abernathy could be

of some help. "Well, thanks and all, but I can manage."

"No. You need help. You want Basil running over here to bean you with the Unabridged? No, no. No need to be embarrassed, though. Like my grandad used to say, 'Don't waste a coon dog on no rabbit.'"

He reached across the table and took the folder Carruthers held. He glanced through it. "This stuff's tricky. So give me

something to brag about. Let me help."

He shut up-finally-and began reading.

Carruthers studied him. Funny guy. He decided to risk it. "I'm trying to understand what the facts about G-type stars mean. I understand the facts, I just don't understand how they fit."

"Why do you need to know?"

"The Yatz have one."

"So do we."

"Really? That's odd. I thought 'G' had something to do with temperature."

"For sure. They heat up between forty-five thousand and

six thousand degrees Kelvin."

"But the mean surface temperature on their planet is supposed to be about eighty degrees Centigrade."

"No problem at all," Abernathy said. "I bet their year's a

lot shorter than ours."

Carruthers shook his head. "It's not. In fact, the twelveplus days between contacts are roughly one of their weeks, and there are sixty-three of them in one of their years."

Abernathy blinked. "Son of a river rat. You sure?"

"Yes. It's here . . . somewhere." Carruthers began shuffling through the papers on the desk in front of him, while Abernathy began working on his watch-calculator.

The technician took sheets from Carruthers, thumbed through them and occasionally fed figures into his machine.

He frowned, repeated the process. He whistled. "That's just weird. Where's the stuff you've got on their atmosphere?"

"It's only hypotheses."

"Hmmmmm." Abernathy studied the papers. "Well, you'd have to figure their air's butter-thick, with enough carbon dioxide to produce one hell of a greenhouse effect. Or else their sun is the unlikeliest candidate for a G-type star I know of ..." His pen made a staccato noise as it tapped against the face of his watch, "No. Impossible." He glanced at Carruthers. "You figure it took them as long to get civilized as it took us, and you figure they've got a big A-type star."

"I don't follow you."

"What I'm saying is, they're damn lucky their sun hasn't gone pffft. It must be overdue to nova."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if the magnitude's what I think it is, meaning their planet's an ace candidate for a molten graveyard. Those figures can't be right."

"Or ..." Carruthers said, softly.

"Huh?"

"Or somebody's lying." "Them? But why?"

Carruthers shrugged. "I don't know. There're some things that just won't get straight. Maybe if we could figure out

about where this star's supposed to be ..."

Carruthers found out a lot of things that he didn't know, some of them important. Abernathy helped not so much by clearing up problems, as by showing where the real problemswere.

"Thanks, Will."

"My pleasure. It's not often I get to play expert with my hobby."

"Your hobby?"

"Shoot, yeah. I'm in transport, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

Abernathy's departure left Carruthers with a feeling of reinforced ignorance. He stared thoughtfully at the wall. Then he reached for the report on the Yatz's alloy.

It seemed the logical place to go.

After all, as Abernathy said, there was at least one report of a nova the Chinese had seen from the direction of Cassiopeia. It had been some five hundred years before. If R-transmission was indeed instantaneous . . .

Two days before contact, hurrying down the hallway through Research, Carruthers met Rushing coming out of the interchange.

"Tim," he said. "I hope your wife's better."

The little man seemed not to hear. He made a move to pass on by. Then he said, "She may live. Might. Her life, hers, worth so many more than-" And he looked at Carruthers. Then he went on down the hall.

And Carruthers knew what Rushing had wanted to say, and he could understand, and he himself felt like he must be worth less than this woman he had never seen.

But he could not change his past.

He turned his conscious mind to his latest findings on the Yatz, and he hoped that his guilt would submerge into his subconscious and drown there.

He had found what he was looking for in the films, and it disturbed him. Too damn consistent, he thought as he watched the Hun on the holos. Almost too consistent to be acquired.

But that was impossible, he told himself: The gestures were neither social nor automatic; there was no other explanation

than idiosyncratic.

He sighed to himself and kept working. At midnight on the eve of contact, he switched off the viewer, lit a cigarette and settled back into his chair. He felt good. He was on the brink of understanding the enigma that the aliens presented. It had to be one of two things, and one was impossible. The other was only unacceptable. Tomorrow would decide.

That thought pleased him. Hun had controlled the Earthman's actions to this point, and CI had harnessed the rest with its rules. "That's all past," he told himself. "Tomorrow, I'm in control. I'll make the rules."

He realized his own error in measuring his own worth against that of the Yatz; but he saw, too, that the past could not be changed. Only success could free him.

Only freedom could give him success.

Carruthers caught his breath at the sight of the grotesque image, then smiled. He had applied the war paint so perfectly that he loathed the reflection of himself which appeared on the shiny metal of the door to the R-dome studio.

At his back was Rushing, who had not looked up as Carruthers entered. Pinter was here. Surprising. Again, Rushing

had anticipated what the contact-man was up to. He knew this time that sanity was at stake.

But when Carruthers asked Pinter to have him a drink ready when he came out, the bartender turned away without answering him at all.

The mirror image split suddenly as the door parted and the

Indian passed through it.

He'd been winning and he had known he was winning. He saw Hun had realized it too. That was when it happened, a puffing sort of explosion that went off in his brain. It had

come from the R-implant.

Then silence. Blackness, too, and numbness. There had been void as long as Carruthers was able to remember. But sight, hearing and touch were drifting back to him in the guise of a nightmare, a dream state to which he had forfeited his mind.

He thought he saw himself stripped naked and on the surface of the Moon. Stars shone steadily, piercingly. The vacuum on his skin caused it to shake as a horse's does to frighten flies.

But death did not come as he expected, only death-agony. He tried to scream with the no-air in his lungs. New constel-

lations formed above him, one with the face of Hun.

Then the face became real, grew a body, appeared. The

Yatz laughed.

Carruthers could imagine Hun broadcasting to another race. He noticed the lizard had added two stones to the horrific necklace he wore.

But not two stones, he knew.

What's the custom? he thought wildly. They cut off . . . ears? Blackness and silence rushed back over him, protecting him, but still he sweated. He groped his way back to vision, forcing himself to see and think of the neckpiece. Stones, but not quite. And there are two new ones. He thought, Two. His gut twisted on itself, seeking to plunge him back into hiding. Two of them. Two of mine. Curious, bean-shaped things. Bronzed. Something very like testicles. Something very like mine.

He tried to scream and was successful. Because he could do it, the leftovers of Carruthers knew him not to be dead. He shaped the sound into a war-whoop.

He began to run after the phantom Hun, and the Moon's surface cut into his bare feet like glass. He heard laughter

and breathed it for air. This chase, he knew, was a parody of one earlier, when Rushing had dispatched men after him.

That had been different, he thought.

That had been sane.

Carruthers continued his sidereal pursuit, a naked man plunging after an armored lizard that took thirty-meter evasive leaps. But the Earthman felt his bronzed arms stretching out in front of him, his fingers elongate and white, growing talons. They missed, grabbed hold, and tore at the alien flesh. But not the leather he'd expected—cloth. Cloth and balsa and strings.

The thing dissembled slowly, pieces falling dreamily in the light gravity. The anthropologist shook his head mournfully over the shattered figure and said, "Dammit, gestures are sup-

posed to be idiosyncratic!"

One act only remained: He reached for the cord suspending the puppet's remains, wrapped them around his hands and heaved downward. The wirelike cord cut into his flesh and blood boiled from the cut. A curtain rose across the pinpricked sky; and a machine cowered, blew a fuse.

Loneliness rushed over him as it was done.

It was the unacceptable, he said sadly.

Hun asked, Are you sure?
The loneliness was gone.

You understand what kind of manless man you are? Hun asked.

A man, Carruthers said.

And what comes before acceptance?

Revulsion.

Before love?

Hate.

And before righteousness?

Righteous indignation.

Very, very good. You may live, Hun said.

Words tumbled around him; they clambered noisily in the thick fresh air. He breathed deeply of the air's cool reasonableness. The air was good.

"I've got it," he said pleasantly, thinking of the impossible. "Now what am I going to do with it?" His friend said, "You should lie until you understand the truth." Carruthers giggled to himself and told the world, "I hurt."

He could feel the blood pooled beneath him.

But not blood, he thought. Sweat.

Cold floor and sweat beneath him.

He smelled himself. He made a good honest smell—the

rich, sharp stink of fear.

Carruthers opened his eyes and saw a curious half-moon above him. One of the Moon's eyes was swollen as if it had

been hit. It looked purple.

"Hun?" he asked. He brought his hands up and looked at them. They were unmarred. He took his hands down and saw the moon was Rushing. He watched as the mouth made the words, "You all right?"

"How's your wife, Tim?" he asked.
Someone said, "He's gone crazy."

"I need a drink."

"He sounds normal to me."

Immediately a glass pressed against his lips and a force (a hand?) lifted his head. A familiar bitterness touched his tongue. The liquor tasted of salt.

"What's your name?"

"Rit. Rit like the dye. Rit."

A smile creased the face above Carruthers. But the crease deepened and the purple of the eye spread swiftly across the skin, while the nose swelled and turned to chitin.

Words again.

"Some memory, anyhow . . . shock, but not . . . God, did he hit me! . . . something, something . . . got balls . . . wasted . . . rotting in waste . . . carrion rotting in your own waste if—"

Carruthers screamed.

Hun said, "It's to be expected. Reality is always a shock."

"What happened?" Carruthers asked, a long week later.

"You've been out for a while. Feel okay?"

"K-O'd. You mean, nuts?"

"Well, yes," Rushing said. He looked the same as when he'd told him CI wanted an SOB.

"Your wife's okay," Carruthers said. He said it as fact.

"Why, yes. She's fine."

"Good," Carruthers said. "I take it I'm under wraps?"

"Just for a little while. You're classified."

"As what?"

"As a human being, right now. If you're ready to talk, it'll end that much quicker."

"Fine."

"Just a minute. I'll be right back."

Rushing left and Carruthers began smoking his way through a pack of cigarettes. On the third one, he gagged. He stubbed it out. No need for that, now.

Footsteps came down the hall. Booted steps. A voice or-

dered guards into position.

Inge, Adams, and Rushing came into the room.

Pleasantries exchanged.

Finally, "You're going to think I'm nuts," he said and grinned. "But then you thought I'd be, anyway, didn't you?"

None of the three reacted. Carruthers decided maybe they didn't know. Okay. He said, "How come none of our bright boys could tell this deal was a fraud?"

He told them the lie that would prepare them for the

truth: He told them the unacceptable, not the impossible.

He said the Yatz broadcast, which was nothing more than a computer-designed projection of a statistically normal Yatz individual, was likely being beamed from a dead planet. "Remember that protocol of insult I told you about? Well, I overlooked another explanation than the one I gave." Actually, two. "The insults were rules to a game, designed to limit response. See, a computer can't play against unlimited variables. But with specific limitations, a computer can come up with a quite realistic response."

Three blank faces stared at him. He knew that Hun's ad-

vice about the lie had been the truth.

"I had to operate within a narrow category of insults." A little light showed in Inge's eyes. "Exactly," Carruthers said. "The computer could play only one game. It could have been chess—I would still have had to learn chess before I could play the game. Then I would think my opponent was human."

It seemed to sink in. "The giveaway was consistency. Hun's

gestures were too ordered to be spontaneous."

It took, over a week's time, eighteen packages of Marlboros (you don't quit all at once), two fifths of Jack Daniels, a good-sized tantrum from Adams (who, Carruthers thought, was more upset by the fact that Yatz couldn't be warred against than anything else), the services of Will Abernathy, a LOGAN 1600 computer, and as many questions as answers from the anthropologist before they believed him.

"You mean it's all fake? All of it? The alloys, the R-transmitter?" Inge asked. He looked terrified.

Carruthers laughed aloud. He knew what Inge must be thinking: How was he going to explain to the Board of Directors that he blew a billion credits on a puppet show?

"No, not that," he said. "The facts had to be genuinethey were the bait. We got the best of their technology because we were willing to listen to 'em bitch. The cybernetics, the R-theory, the alloys, all of it was the best they could produce before their planet was destroyed by nova or supernova."

"That's absurd," Adams said. "If they're all gone, where do the signals come from?"

"I've been told that the heat resistant alloy is hard to pro-

duce. I guess they produced enough to shield their R-facility."

He added, "And only that survives." The whole truth would be better. But it would take years of preparation before it would be understood.

Adams seemed satisfied, but Inge's face had clouded over. Carruthers tensed, preparing himself for the question to come.

"But why bother? Why'd they do it?"

As a warning, he wanted to say. Carruthers shrugged his shoulders for Inge's benefit. He noticed that his finger was already yellow with nicotine; Hun would be critical. A hole had been burned in one of the sheets.

"I can only guess," he said finally. "Suppose the Yatz were extremely vainglorious." Yes. Let's suppose that. "Suppose they were so proud of their achievements that they couldn't stand to see them ended." He paused again: Yes I can understand that. "Maybe they thought by giving gifts—but at a price in honor—they'd earn the respect they could never enjoy."

He looked squarely at Inge. "But we may never know. The lode seems mined out. It looks like the Yatz episode is closed."

And, inside himself, Carruthers heard this:

Such a skillful liar! I am pleased. You will make an excellent diplomat.

Thanks, friend. Now bug out and let me finish.

Adams looked uncomfortable. Inge looked embarrassed. Only Rushing had the guts to ask.

"What happened to you?"

Carruthers laughed. "I caught on and the computer knew. I imagine it tried to give me a prefrontal lobotomy with the R-implant. Something along that line probably happened to Sylas and Montgomery." He thought, Only they chose it.

"Did you know it would happen?"

"I knew there was a risk. Maybe the only way to win in

this world is to go off your rocker. Maybe not."

Silence filled the room, broken finally by the silken rustling of Inge's pants as he stood up. "CI thanks you for your work, Carruthers. There'll be a bonus."

"Glad to do it. Next time you need a patient for this classy

little hospital of yours give me a ring."

Adams looked grieved. "I don't know," he said. "These corporate governments aren't much on rewarding bravery. I sure think you deserve a medal." He stood up and walked to the patient's bedside. "But, boy, I'd sure like to shake your hand."

He did, and Carruthers said, "Thanks, General. But I've already got my medal." He tapped the left side of his brow, where the R-shaped scar showed.

The man left.

Rushing looked nervous.

"Well, good buddy, what happens now?"

The supervisor smiled, as if it hurt. "I've got my job to do."

"So do it."

"You are to take the next shuttle back out to Earth and your employment with CI, as well as salary, end upon touchdown. Your duties, official and self-imposed, terminate at this moment. You are reminded that paragraph VI of your contract binds you to silence for one year, with CI holding an option to buy your silence for an acceptable sum the next five years. If you violate this trust, all monies will be forfeited by you and criminal prosecution will ensue."

Carruthers whistled. "And you learned all that for me?"

Rushing shuffled a bit. "For myself, I just want to say I accept your apology. You've done a good job."

"Tim . . ." Carruthers said. "You've got it wrong. We did

a good job."

And the bureaucrat beamed.

Already drinking, but somehow blocked from getting drunk, Carruthers arrived at the Apollo Lounge soon after it

opened. It was 11 AM GST. The bar was empty, except for someone in a corner, a darker shadow among the shadows. He paid no attention.

He seated himself. Pinter brought the regular. "You're going to make a day of it. I can tell."

"I already have, Pinter. I already have." He took a speculative drink of the whiskey. "You ever wake up and realize you've made an error, only this time it was a big one. like maybe with your whole life?"

The bartender chuckled. "Every Monday."

Carruthers smiled. He brushed a smear into the condensation of the shot glass; green light played through the amber liquid. He realized he didn't want so much to drink, as to talk. He'd come to the Apollo to apologize to Pinter.

"Say, what were you doing in the R-dome at the last con-

tact?"

"Vulture instinct. I know when my patients are ready to crack. The funny thing is, they drugged me out of remembering any of it. Top secret, they said. I'm dying to remember what it was I saw," Pinter said.

Carruthers laughed. "Put it this way: You remember tell-

ing me I looked like a cat that's been treed by a dog?"

The aproned man nodded.

"Well, if you'd been watching, you'd have seen me climb back out of the tree as a dog."

Pinter scowled. "Thanks. That tells me a lot."

"Sorry. Top secret, you know." And not only by our side. "What I really wanted to say was, 'Thanks for being there.'
I'm sorry I've been such a pain."

The bartender toweled out a couple of tall glasses and racked them. He smiled, but not as if he were responding to Carruthers' statement. "Mondays are rough, all right," he said. "Beginnings and all of that. But you can't avoid the gut feeling that the pain will go away, that there's work to be done, work that you've got to do. Good work, but risky."

Carruthers stared at him, curious. Just how much did Pin-

ter know? How much had he guessed?

"Rit, you look happy." "I am friend, I am."

Behind him, the piano began to play. Beethoven. Pinter looked at the anthropologist and winked. He walked away. Carruthers turned around.

Inside him, this voice: It's okay. We have time. Do what you have to do. Love is a good training. Love is a diplomacy all its own.

And Carruthers grinned, outwardly. The R-implant

warmed him, did not burn. Helped, did not hurt.

He turned on the barstool and watched the haloed, brunette pianist. He watched her play, then got up, needing to follow the strains of Beethoven to their source.

It was a celebration of being alive, he thought. He no long-er could make himself alone. He breathed air laced with her perfume, felt the good tickling he had ignored for years, and

tasted his lips nervously.

The walk across the room took a terrible long time. Carruthers felt awkward, as if needing to plan each step before he made it. He stopped once, thinking to go back for his drink. But then he went on, not stopping until he felt the warmth of the musician's shoulder against his palm.

The impassioned arrogance of the old composer poured from her fingers. Her nails shone like stars in the dimness. The cords of muscle in her back danced under his own hand.

Carruthers understood something in that moment, that Beethoven's arrogance came in his creation. Not in his snarls and not in hatred and not in bluff, but in the doing of beauty. paidolaw pood Uway

It was as the Yatz taught.

The music ended. Emerson looked up.

"How!" Carruthers said, lamely.

Emerson smiled. It was a smile echoed five-hundred lightyears away, on the face of an armored reptile who, alone, kept the R-works going. He, too, had been lonely.

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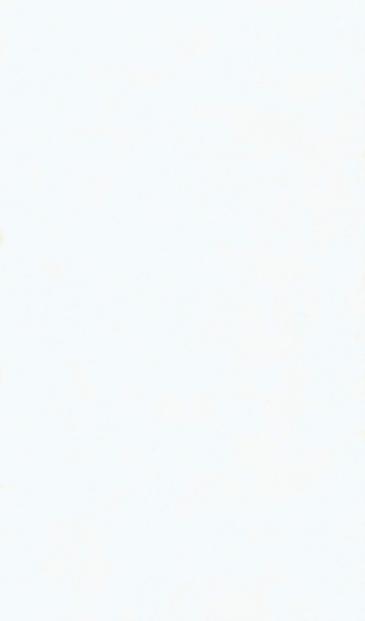
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