

THE BALLAD OF BETA-2

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I

“Quite simply, the answer is—because they are there!”

White light from the helical fixture struck the sharp bones of

the professor's face.

“But...” began Joneny.

“But, no,” the professor cut him off. They were alone in the office. “It isn't that simple, is it? The reason is that many of them were once there, and they did something that had never been done before—that will never be done again—and because remnants of them are there now. That is why you will study them.”

“But, sir,” Joneny persisted, “that's not what I asked. I'm requesting a personal dispensation that will exempt me from research work on this unit. I expect to be held accountable for all examination questions on the Star Folk but I'm already an honors student and, on the strength of that, I'm asking to skip the detail work on them. I'm perfectly willing to put in the time on my thesis topic, the Nukton Civilization of Creton III, or anything else that's reasonable, sir.” Then, as an afterthought, “I realize it would be a privileged exemption that only you can grant.”

“That is quite correct,” the professor said coolly; then he leaned forward. “On the strength of your ‘honors,’ Joneny—and you're more than a good student, you're an amazing one—I'll listen to your objections. But I have to admit that there's something about your request that annoys me.”

Joneny took a breath. “I just don't want to waste my time on them, sir. There's so much needed research in a field like Galactic Anthropology; and, as far as I can see, the Star Folk are just a dead end, with no significance at all. They were a very minor transition factor that was eliminated from the cosmic equation even before its purpose was achieved. Their contributions to the arts were entirely derivative—and they produced nothing else. All that remains of them is a barbaric little settlement, if you can call it that, which the Federation sentimentally allows to exist out near Leffer VI. There are too many cultures and civilizations just crying to be researched to waste time poking through dozens of chrome-plated eggshells, documenting the history of a—a bunch of chauvinistic,

degenerate morons. And I don't care what anyone says, sir. That's all they are!"

"Well," the professor murmured. "Well. You are vehement on the subject." He glanced at the screen on his desk, flicked a few notes across it, and then looked sternly at Joneny. "I am not going to grant your request, but I'll tell you why. In fact, I'll even argue with you—because of your 'honors' status. You say that the culture of the Star Folk was an insignificant transitional factor, superceded before its purpose was achieved. Why?"

"Because, sir," Joneny was prepared for that question, "they left Earth for the stars in their ships early in 2242, expecting to cruise through space for twelve generations before reaching an uncertain destination. They'd only been gone sixty years when the hyper-space drive became a large-scale reality. By the time the ten remaining-generation-ships arrived in the Leffer System, Earth had already established a going-business of trade and cultural exchange, which was already a hundred or so years old, with scores of planetary systems. And it was just as well, too, because the level of *civilization* on the star-ships was at a primitive-barbaric stage and the descendants of the proud Star Folk who had left Earth with such exalted goals would never have been able to survive on alien planets, much less make friendly contact with any of their cultures. So the ten ships were herded into orbit around Leffer, with the imbecilic remnants of their populations allowed to dodder toward extinction. From all reports, they are as contented as such creatures can be; so I say leave them there. But I, personally, am not interested in knowing much more about them."

Certain that he had made his point, he waited for the professor's—perhaps reluctant—acquiescence to his request, but the silence lengthened. When the professor spoke, it was in a tone more distant than before.

"You assert that they produced no significant contribution to the arts. Are you completely familiar with *all* the records?"

Joney's face reddened. "I'm hardly an expert, sir. But again, you'd think that in twelve generations there would be one poem, one painting, something—other than those insipid, maudlin, derivative exercises in nostalgia."

The professor's expression did not change, but he raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Joney stuck doggedly to his argument. "I've looked through the collection of their ballads that Xamol Nella made in '79, and there's not a single metaphor or simile that could possibly be called original or even indigenous to life on the Star Ships. There's nothing but semi-mythical folk tales couched in terms of sand and sea and cities and nations—some of them very interesting, no doubt, but complete fantasies with no relation to the people living and dying on the ships. I couldn't be less interested in such cotton-candy effusions."

The professor raised his other eyebrow. "Oh? Well, before I give you your assignment, I want to stress what I said in the beginning: the Star Folk did something never done before—or since. They traveled through space—a lot of it—for a very long time. No one else has ever really been there because the hyper-space drive actually takes you *around* interstellar space." He laughed softly. "So perhaps they did find all the sand and sea and cities and nations there." He raised a hand as Joney opened his mouth to object. "You haven't been there, so you can't disprove it. At any rate they made what is perhaps the most dangerous journey imaginable, and for that alone they deserve to be studied."

"What could be safer than interstellar space, sir?" Joney's tone was slightly contemptuous. "There's nothing in it."

Both the professor's eyebrows came crashing down. "Even if we knew that to be true—which we do not—what in blue blazes makes you think it would be safe for Earthmen in Earth star-ships? It's within the realm of possibility that there were others. I remind you that although twelve ships left Earth, only ten reached the

Leffer system; and two of those arrived empty. Perhaps there was something in the ‘safety’ of interstellar space—in the sand and the sea—which we do not yet know.” The hint of restrained but intense emotion suddenly went out of his voice, like a light in a shadowed room, leaving it dark and cold. “You say you are familiar with the Nella Ballad Collection. Then no doubt you know ‘The Ballad of Beta-2.’ I want a complete, historical analysis of that ballad—from primary sources. That will be your detail assignment for this unit.”

“But professor!”

“Dismissed.”



Joney scanned Samol Nella’s laconic footnote: “Beta-2 was one of the star-ships that arrived at its destination, the Leffer System, empty. The ballad is extremely popular among the remaining Star Folk. (See Appendix for music.) Note the irregular repetition of the refrain, an original feature of many of the Star Folk ballads, as well as the slightly elliptical syntax.”

“That’s really straining for originality,” Joney thought as he turned back to the ballad.

*Then came one to the City,
Over sand with her bright hair wild.
With her eyes coal black and her feet sole sore,
And under her arms a green-eyed child.*

Three men stood on the City wall,
One was short and two were tall,
One had a golden trumpet clear
That he shouted through so all would hear
*That one had come to the City,
Over sand... etc.*

A woman stood by a market stall,
The tears like diamonds on her cheek,
One eye was blind, she could not speak
But she heard the guards of the City call
Out: *“One has come to the City,
Over sand...”* etc.

One man stood by the court house door
To judge again as he'd judged before,
When he heard the guards of the City cry,
He said, *“She is come back to the City to die.”*
*Yes, she's come back to the City,
Over sand... etc.*

Another man stood on Death's Head hill

A complete historical analysis from primary sources meant he would have to visit the star-ships in person and find out what he could about the ballad from at least three different Star Folk. The “lab period” was twenty-four hours but he could get a time Adjustment through the Clearing Center of the University, which would mean that he could spend up to a week at the Ship Colony while only twenty-four hours passed on the campus. Joneny had no intention of spending more than the minimum requisite time on this research project. And, in order to make his task as easy as possible, he decided to preface his jaunt with a couple of hours more in the library.

As a start, he re-scanned the Introduction to the Nella Ballad Collection, and found something vaguely interesting: “Of course I did not actually go inside the star-ships, both because of time limitations and cultural incompatibility; but a robot recorder was allowed entry, and a fair amount of co-operation was shown. The recorder instantaneously transmitted a printed copy of the words, lead sheets of the music and, of course, made a permanent recording. The only changes I have made are where an obvious mis-positioning of words or phrases occurred. This project was carried out rather hurriedly and such mistakes could be, I must point out, either a fault in the recorder’s copying device, or simply a mistake on the part of the singer. Consult Variorum Edition for any discrepancies.”

Joneny sat back feeling a conscientious researcher’s anger. Robot recorder, no actual entrance, the entire collection probably made in less time than he was going to spend on a single ballad. He could reconstruct it easily: Nella, somewhere in the vicinity of Leffer, suddenly getting the idea of sending his recorder in to see what he could pick up from the star-ships (probably did it while making some repairs or stuck in quarantine); leaving the machine on for six or seven hours, and then turning up with what appeared to be a scholarly collection of inaccessible folk songs. Such

slipshod investigation infuriated Joneny, and he was sure that there was a lot of it in the inexhaustable archives of the Galactic Anthropology Library.

Just for the hell of it, he consulted the Variorum Edition anyway. The only lines of “The Ballad of Beta-2” that Nella had amended occurred in the seventh stanza. The recorder had given the lines as:

“She walked through the gates and the voices cried.

She walked through the Market and the children died.”

Well, that was an obvious correction—or was it? Joneny frowned. No, he decided, Nella was probably right; otherwise it was a little too surreal—and that was the antithesis of everything he believed about the Star Folk.

There was a pleasant sort of simplicity about the song, he realized as he reread it slowly and carefully; too bad it wasn’t about anything.

He went to the catalogue and selected a couple more crystal recordings on the Star Folk. There were only a half-dozen or so to choose from and he looked for a blue one (indicating a first-hand account). To his surprise there was only one. Suspecting an error in the catalogue, he checked with the librarian and found that it was indeed the only blue.

It was without title and when he slipped it into the player, he was surprised to find that it was a recording of the primary contact when the almost forgotten star-ships hove into the ken of the Federation, ninety years before.

The voice was that of an Earthman, speaking in the heavily consonanted and jarring-syllabled High Centaurian (an extremely

compressed language and therefore eminently suitable for official reports), on the initial contacts and the first belligerent repulsion by the Star Folk.

... finally hypnotic vibrations had to be used. Even so, entry has been extremely difficult. De-evolution is at an advanced stage. The sleeping creatures, slumped over their weapons on the floor of the inner locks, are hairless, naked, pale-skinned and fragile. Despite their frantic (one might say 'heroic') efforts, they caused us no casualties, and the probe shows that they are not basically hostile. However, they are so enslaved by an incredible mythology that has sprung up among them, based on indecipherable incidents of their crossing, that we feel it advisable to leave them alone. Their technical means would not suffice for an interplanetary jump of more than six or seven million miles. There appears to have been some intercourse between ships, by radio contact and, it is surmised, by occasional parties making the crossing from one to another.

There was an extended silence and then the voice continued: They still have writing and, despite the polyglot nature of the original population, it is English but an English difficult to follow because of orthographic changes and because the text seems to be composed entirely of euphemisms. A great many of the reports we have studied had to do with trouble in the 'Market,' which we

assumed to be the hydroponic gardens or one of the other food-supplying devices on the ship. It took semanticist Burber an hour to discover that this was a reference to the complex breeding and birth process that was devised for the star-ships. To keep the population stable, birth was to continue artificially in a mechanical 'Birth bank,' or rather 'birth market' where the prospective parents would receive their children. It was intended as a means of keeping the race fairly consistent and of safeguarding it against too many radiation deformities. From the appearance of these poor folk, it was not entirely successful.

Joney flipped the switch and reread the two corrected lines in the ballad. So that's what the "market" was. Then perhaps "market" did belong with "children." Undoubtedly the correction should have been:

"She walked through the gates and the voices died,
She walked through the Market and the children cried."

Or maybe the other way. But if so, why?

He went rapidly but thoroughly through the reports of the individual ships and concentrated especially on:

... Beta-2 we have found to be completely empty. The long corridors are deserted, the

blue lights still burning. Doors swing open, tapes are in machines only half played, utensils lie as if put down because of some interruption. At the Death's Head there is a sight that reminds this reporter of pictures and descriptions of the Auschwitz atrocities during the so-called Second World War. It is completely jammed with skeletons, as though the population had been seized with a sudden suicide craze or else some unbelievable mass murder had been committed. Again it was semanticist Burber who called attention to the fact that all the skeletons were those of adults. This led to an examination of the Market which proved to be hopelessly non-functional. Many of the tiny glass cells in which the foetuses developed had been ruthlessly smashed. Obviously there is a connection between the two horrors but time does not allow a thorough study. Hypnotic probing on the other ships revealed an awareness of serious trouble on Beta-2 some generations back but the exact nature or extent of it is hazy, inexact and well-clouded by legend...

Again he stopped, then ran rapidly through the brief remaining text for further mention of the Death's Head: "Death's Head unit," "put into the Death's Head," and even "Death's Head slope," but no clear explanation.

He chose another crystal, the transcription of an ancient microfilm—a report on the construction of the Star Ships in the days before interplanetary travel:

“... is provided with a Death’s Head unit that acts as a reconverter of waste material. It can also be used as an instrument for capital punishment in those extreme cases which cannot otherwise be dealt with in such a limited community.”

With something very like interest, Joneny turned again to the copy he had made of the ballad. There had been Market trouble on Beta-2. The Death’s Head could be used for capital punishment. Perhaps there was a meaning to the original version of stanza seven, the way the robot had first recorded it.

“She walked through the gates and the voices cried,
She walked through the Market and the children died,
She walked past the court house and the judge so still,
She walked to the bottom of Death’s Head Hill.”

At least he had something to start with.



He sat back in the drive-hammock, staring at the black view screens that were dead to hyperspace. He was, he realized,

bypassing in seconds the immense void through which the Star Ships had crept laboriously at a few thousand miles a second for a handful of centuries. Despite stirrings of an excitement that he refused to acknowledge, he still saw himself—a potential Galactic Anthropologist—on his way to track down a minute, trivial incident pertaining to a cultural dead end.

How he yearned for the city of Nukton on Creton III, for its silvered halls, its black-stone parks—the relics of that tragic race which produced amazing architecture and music, the more amazing since it had never developed any form of speech or other means of immediate communication. Its phenomenal degree of advancement was something *worth* studying exhaustively.

The slight blurring of sight as his cruiser left hyperspace snapped him back and he leaned forward in the hammock.

Up in a corner of the screen in front of him was the greenish glow of Leffer. Close to him, hanging like a cluster of crescent moons were the star-ships. He counted six of them, like fingernail parings on dusty velvet. Each sphere, he knew, was some twelve miles in diameter. The other three, he reasoned, must be in eclipse and, even as he watched, the pattern of their movement—like a stately, ritualistic dance—became evident. They had been driven into a very close, delicately-balanced orbit at a forty-mile distance from one another, and in a ten-year orbit some two hundred million miles from Leffer itself.

Slowly another crescent began to appear, while its opposite faded into obscurity. He switched the view screen to a higher wave-length and the field of black became Prussian blue, with the crescents appearing as faintly green rims of shadowy spheres.

Joney's cruiser was a compact fifty-foot, chrono-drive, with a six-week time margin—which wasn't much for star-hopping. However, *they* didn't allow students more, claiming that such

unreliable “youngsters” were always producing paradoxes that annoyed the hell out of Central Clearing. Some of the big ships were given a couple of years to play around with, which was a little more reasonable; for, in the shorter time, if you got yourself into some catastrophic situation with a critical moment more than six weeks in the past, you were simply out of luck. You had a choice of oscillating back and forth between critical moment and climax, while broadcasting wildly for help until someone came along and got you out (which wasn't very likely to happen), or you just went through with it—and *hoped*—and there wasn't much hope in a spatial catastrophe. As a result, the Powers-That-Be were always complaining about the number of student accidents. The whole set-up was unfair.

At a thousand miles' distance, he cut speed to two hundred miles an hour and crept along beside them, wondering how he was going to find out which was Beta-2. And what to do first: identify and explore the abandoned Beta-2, or talk (if they would talk) to the inhabitants of one of the other ships.

A further question nagged him, although it had nothing to do with his research—directly. The last thing he had learned from the library crystals concerned the other empty ship, the Sigma-9:

“... Completely gutted,” ran the voice on the crystal. “There is a great, irregular section of the hull ripped away and the skeletal interior glints under the light of Leffer with a strange iridescence. The remainder of the hull is cracked nearly in two. There is no chance that there are any survivors. It is amazing that the momentum and the automatic drive mechanism kept such a twisted wreck in flight to the ultimate goal.”

He increased the magnification on the view screen until the spheres filled the whole wall. As he watched, another ship emerged from the cluster and there was no difficulty in identifying it as the Sigma-9. It looked like a crushed eggshell, with a fine spider-webbing of girders feathering the edges of the cracks. The main damage was indeed an enormous area missing from the hull, from which fissures radiated in all directions, a dangling fragment here and there.

His first thought was that there must have been a tremendous explosion inside the ship but reflection on the way that it had been constructed convinced him that any explosion of a magnitude sufficient to tear out such a large section of the hull would have forced the remainder apart. Laws learned in his course in Collidal Physics ruled out any exterior impact. It was, in fact, a completely impossible kind of wreckage. But there it hung, directly in front of him.

He let the mechano take him into the cluster and switched the screen to normal magnification, watching the great spheres grow. When he was seventy miles from the nearest one, he stopped the cruiser again and studied it, without result. Finally, at a speed of only seventy miles an hour (giving himself time for further reflection), he moved in. At the forty-two second mark, he jammed on the Time Stop.

And time stopped.

For all practical purposes, he was in an envelope of chronological stasis, his cruiser perhaps ten feet above the surface of a starship. He switched the screen to mobile vision, and the image grew until it surrounded him. He lowered the view-pointer until he seemed to be standing on the hull. Then he looked around.

The horizon was frighteningly close and the plates which he

had expected to be smooth and even looked like gnawed cheese: they were rotten, crystallized into ruts and flaking mounds, green with a color of their own, deeper than the light lent by the far sun. He looked up.

And stopped breathing. Fourteen times the size of the appearance of the moon from Earth, hung the Sigma-9. He knew that nothing moved in this stasis. He knew he was safely in his ship, minutes away from a dozen stars and their safe planets. Yet the looming, gutted wreck seemed to be careening toward him through the blackness.

He screamed, threw one hand over his eyes and jammed the other against the mobile vision switch. Quivering, he was back in his ship; the view screen was only a six foot window in front of him once more.

No. The mind was still not ready for unlimited space. Even the edge of an air-helmet window was something corporeal to hang onto. But the wreck itself, shimmering with green fire: there was something terrible, so that he had been unable to watch it directly for more than a second before he felt it was falling to engulf him—shimmering?

Joney took his moist palm off the hammock arm. Shimmering? It must have been part of the optical illusion of the wreck's falling. He was in time stasis. Nothing could be shimmering. But he remembered the gaseous green glow that seemed to spark over the wreck. He swung the view screen up to take another look at Sigma-9, this time from the psychological safety of his seat. Green and broken, it shimmered against space.

Panic caught his stomach. Something must be wrong with the time margin. His eyes flashed over dead warning lights. Nothing was out of place. He was about to jettison himself into hyperspace before something went really haywire, but his hand stopped. There was Leffer. He switched on a filter and increased magnification.

A sun's surface under time stasis looks very different from the view under normal timeflow. Something known as Keefen's Effect makes it look like a rubber ball dipped in glue, then rolled in parti-colored glitter. Each color shines out in a separate dot, distinct and prismatic; under ordinary chronology, it has the texture of fluorescent orange peel. Keefen's Effect was in full display.

So he *was* in time stasis. But something was going on around Sigma-9 that didn't care.

At a crawl of fifteen miles an hour he switched back to normal flow and began looking for an entrance. It was a corroded blister on the hull, and he hovered above the lock, for the hell of it, broadcasting his identity beam to see what it netted. To his surprise a voice came through his speaker in accented English:

"Your ears are unplugged but your eyes are black. Your ears are unplugged but your eyes are black. No admittance while your eyes are black. Please identify yourself. Over."

The voice was static, from an automatic answering station, but its message left him bewildered. He sent out his identity beam again and this time spoke as well: "If this is a robot answering, please get a human agent to let me in. I'd like to talk to a human agent."

"Your ears are free of wax, free and unplugged," came the voice again. "But your eyes are blind. We can't see you at all."

Then Joneny got the idea. The robot could apparently discern articulation changes. He wants my visual as well, Joneny thought. He put an image of himself through on a simple ban and waited for a return picture on the screen.

"Your eyes see clearly. Just a moment and we will give you an entrance pattern."

In a corner of the viewing screen the flickering black and white pattern appeared, a series of white circles and black lines.

Across it was written in block letters:

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE CITY OF GAMMA-5

Below, one of the blisters began to turn. The shuttle ships it had been built to accommodate were almost three times the size of Joney's cruiser. Shalings from the crystallized hull broke off in chunks and sent a drift of fine powder. Rotating, it sunk and divided into thirds, slipping back into the ship's hull. A mechano maneuvered Joney's cruiser over the tunnel. As the ship turned, Joney glimpsed the Sigma-9 on the view screen and remembered what he had said to the professor: "What could be safer than interstellar space, sir?" The ships had supposedly indestructible drives, and hulls of infinite strength. What had chewed up the plating, or had smashed the Sigma-9 like a porcelain shell? He resolved his curiosity by determining to consult the ship's tiny iridium cell computer on the problem and see if it could suggest any answer from a measurement of the stresses and strains still held in the shattered metal. Before he was finished, he would go over and make an extensive investigation. Even the first reporters had done no valuable research. As the triple doors of the first lock closed, he made a disgusted sound and waited for the landing process to finish.

The ship jarred and the indicator light for the repeller field flashed. These locks were designed to hold much bigger ships: the grapplers were groping in thin vacuum. The field held the ship centered in the lock, but the grapplers were too short. He increased the consistency of the repeller field to that of titanium steel twenty feet out from his cruiser in all directions. Let them sink their claws into that. *Clunk*. They did. A voice came through the speaker:

"Prepare for debarkation."

Here goes nothing, Joney thought. The pressure in the lock was Earth-normal. What about the rest of the star-ship? The robots should have sense enough not to allow admittance if there was anything wrong. Just in case he slipped a pressure gell in with his

survival kit. He checked the powerpack on his belt, tied his left sandal thong which had come undone, and went to the door.

Selector fields had made double airlocks obsolete. The iris of metal rolled away and he was looking across the inside of the star-ship's lock to where the flexible entrance tube had stuck against the side of the repeller field.

Though Joney's ship had a comfortable semblance of gravity, the star-ship was in free fall. He launched himself across and felt weight leave him. Then the round end of the tube moved up to engulf him like the mouth of a lamprey eel. The light was soft blue-white. Inside the tube he brought himself to a halt by pressing a button on his power belt. He caught hold of the rail running down the side of the tube and hauled himself along.

Rectangular windows looked out into the rest of the lock, ill lit with the same blue-white. Fifteen feet later the ribbed wall turned to smooth steel and the windows ceased. He'd come to the body of the ship. He turned as a faint sound behind him lisped through the tube. A triple jaw clamped over the mouth of the passage. It was comparatively cool in the tube and a breeze was coming from someplace. He reached the end.

Running off in both directions was a triangular corridor. A spiral bar wound through the middle. An arrow pointing one way said, "RECREATION HALL" and one pointing the other said, "NAVIGATION OFFICES." Joney's English was of the scholarly type: conversationally adept, but including few technical words since they had almost all been superceded. He was acquainted with a good number of latinate roots that were supposed to help one out of obscure translation situations.

After racking his mind he decided that the Navigation Offices would prove more interesting. He was a little curious to see what they *re-created* down the first corridor, as well as what sort of re-creation system they could have. But the idea of *sacrifices to the sea* left him completely bewildered, so he headed in that direction.

A moment later he came to a small room. A large post rose in the center. Around the wall were screens, dials, and seats before numerous desks. The bulkhead was metal, so Joneny put a light magnetic field on his sandal soles, drifted to the floor and went click. He glanced at the desks. Obviously this part of the ship had had gravity at one time.

“Just a moment,” a voice said through a speaker. “I will try to locate a human agent to deal with you as requested.”

“Thanks,” Joneny answered the robot. “Where is everybody around here anyway?”

“Too complicated a question. I will try to locate a human agent.” After five seconds of silence, the speaker said, “No human agent can be found who will respond. Apologies, sir.”

“Aren’t any people left alive on this ship?” asked Joneny.

“People are alive,” answered the robot. The flat, automaton voice sounded unintentionally menacing.

On the desk was a pile of books. *Books!* Real books were Joneny’s delight. Heavy, cumbersome, difficult to store, they were the bane of most scholars. Joneny found them entrancing. He didn’t care what was in them. Any book today was so old that each word glittered to him like the facet of a lost gem. The whole conception of a book was so at odds with this compressed, crowded, breakneck era that he was put into ecstasy by the simple heft of the paper. His own collection, some seventy volumes, was considered a pretentious luxury by everyone at the University. The glory of the collection, each page impregnated with plastic, was the Manhattan Telephone Directory for 1975.

He clicked toward the desk and lifted the top volume. It came away with a tug and a *tsk* as the magnets came loose. He opened it; the pages were thin sheets of metal, silver under the blue light. The writing was machine made. It was a log book or diary, each entry timed and dated. Turning to the middle of the book, Joneny read at

random:

Have been in the desert now for thirty-nine hours. Don't know whether the ship can take much more of this. Sand count varies between fifteen and twenty-two. The terrifying thing is that we have no way of knowing how long it will go on. The first desert we encountered twelve years ago took us fourteen hours to get through. Two years later we left the sea again to travel through light sand for nearly eleven months. The wear on the ship was incredible. Much more of this, it was decided back then, and the ships would not make it through the third generation. Then again there was sudden clear sailing with nothing but ocean for almost six years. Next there was a sandstorm of tremendous intensity for almost three hours where the count was over one hundred fifty—which did almost as much damage as the first fourteen hour one we passed. How long will this one last? Another hour? A year? A hundred years? Five hundred?

A later entry:

Sand count has remained fairly steadily at six for the past nine days. That is something to be thankful for, but even at one or two for an extended enough time it will prove

fatal to us. Married this evening: Afrid Jarin-6 and Peggy Ti-17. There was a celebration at the Market. I left early, slightly drunk. They have selected foetus BX-57911, containing some of my genes. Peggy said jokingly, “Since you’re going to be the godfather, you might as well have a hand in its genetics.” I guess because it’s still primarily Afrid’s and Peggy’s, Afrid took the joke very well. I left feeling depressed. Kids like them, who came out of the Market themselves, seem so flat and bland to us who remember Earth. Of course they have been told nothing about the real danger of the desert. They can milk so much pleasure out of so little; they believe so strongly in the successful outcome of our voyage it would be cruel to blight what little they can enjoy by the truth about the sand. I knew it would only make me feel worse, but I gave Leela a call over in Beta-2. “How you doing, Captain?” I asked.

“Fine thanks, Captain.”

“Want to come over here with me and raise a kid?”

“You’re drunk, Hank,” she said.

“Not very,” I told her. “I’m serious. Why don’t you chuck up Beta-2 City to your next in command, take a shuttle boat over here, and I’ll resign to an advisory position and you and me will live in idyllic free fall in the Center Section for the rest of our natural lives—which may not be very long, so think

it over, Lee.”

“This desert got you down, Hank?”

“Lee, it’s such a waste! How the hell did we know we were going to run into this sort of nonsense? If we had known, maybe we could have prepared for it. But at this rate we’ll be running through meson fields as thick as this or thicker all the way out, and they eat through the hull just like a file.”

“Or we could come out of this one in ten minutes and not hit another one the whole time left. We don’t know *what’s* out there, Hank.”

“Hell, a purple dragon with crepe-paper wings may be out there too, waiting for jelly beans like us to roll by. But it’s not likely. The only thing that is likely is that we’ll be gnawed up by these damn meson fields until there isn’t a scrap of anything resembling a star-ship left. The outside viewscope already shows that the hull looks like a road-map of the North Atlantic states. Three hundred years of this and we’ll be lucky if a lump of Swiss cheese gets to Leffer. Lee, come over and spend the time with me.”

“Hank,” she said. (I couldn’t see her. We always talked to each other with our eyes black. I hadn’t seen her in person since she was twenty-two. The idea of her pushing seventy now made me feel funny.) “Hank, suppose we do get out of the desert. I’ve got at least ten years of teaching to do if these kids are to get through the next three

hundred years alive, and look like something Earth would be proud of. By then we'll both probably be ready for the Death's Head."

"There're others to teach them, Lee."

"Not enough. You know that."

I was quiet for maybe six seconds. "Yeah, I know that."

Then she surprised me, and I realized in a moment how much all this sand count business was taking out of her. She said very quickly: "The next time the sand count reaches a hundred and twenty-five, I'll come to you, Hank." And she switched off. I feel like a little less than two cents.

The entry ended and Joney glanced at the next "Sand count up to eleven," and the next, "Sand count down to eight," and the next, "Sand count down to seven," then: "Sand count steady at seven." For almost a month it continued there. Then an alarmed: "Sand count up to nineteen." "Sand count up to thirty-two." An hour later: "Sand count up to thirty-nine." An hour on: "Sand count seventy-nine." And the next hour:

How it happened, or why, I don't know. I'd been watching the needle creep up for the past three hours. Sand count ninety-four; sand count one hundred seventeen. I felt like I was nothing but sweat sherbet, frozen and useless. Then the damn inter-vessel phone was shouting at my elbow. When I punched the switch, I heard Lee's voice:

“Oh for God’s sake, Hank, what are we going to do? What’s happening? Why?”

“Lee, I—I don’t know.”

“Jesus Christ, Hank, sand count one-hundred-thirty-eight, one-forty-nine. Oh Hank, we had a dream, a dream about the stars! And now we won’t get there. Oh God, we won’t get there—” She was crying. I was just numb. When I looked at the meter, the needle was moving with the speed of a second hand on a watch.

“It’s a hundred-and-ninety-six, Hank. I’m coming over. I’m coming over to you, Hank.” I could hardly hear her for the tears.

It was at two-hundred-and-nine. “You’re crazy,” I cried back at her. “Even the shuttle boat would be eaten up before you got two hundred miles. Oh God damn it, Lee, we won’t make it.”

She was still crying, “I’m coming to you, Hank,” and the needle soared somewhere up past three hundred. Then—it just reversed itself and whipped back down to zero, pausing for about three seconds at forty five before it slipped off the other end of the scale. My first thought was that the meter had broken.

I could just hear Lee trying to catch her breath on the other end of the phone. “Hank?”

“Lee?”

“We’re out of it, Hank.” Nothing was broken, except maybe something inside me. “We’re in the sea again. It’s clear sailing, Hank.” Then she said, “I am coming to see you. I won’t stay, but I want to see you.”

Joney turned the page and read on.

For half an hour the exhaust from her shuttle boat was like a wisp of wild hair blowing brightly on the viewscope. She came in with her eyes clear and her ears open and I went down to the tube to meet her. I saw her walk in. She must have seen me and paused for a moment. I think she raised her head, and I saw her brown eyes sparkling, and her black hair shaking to her shoulders. I saw the slightly pugged nose, and the clear alabaster skin and the smile on lips just a trifle full. Then she came toward me—and I realized what I *had* seen.

“Hank,” she said, when she had walked—very slowly—along three-quarters of the way. Now I went toward her. Her hair was short, white, her eyes were wide and there was no smile on her face. She breathed hard. “Hank?” It was as though she didn’t believe it was me. Then she said, “Hank, you’re going to have to get me out of this gravity before I have a stroke.”

“Huh?”

“I haven’t been well recently and I’ve been

keeping to the free fall section.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure,” I said.

“I’m afraid my feet are killing me.” She gave a little laugh.

The voice was hers. I had followed its aging over the forty years that separated us from Earth. But when I put my arm around her shoulder to help her, the skin was like loose cloth over her bones. We got to the edge of the tube and into the lift. When we reached the free fall section, she got a hell of a lot more relaxed. Once she stopped and looked at me. “I guess... you’ve come through in a little better shape than I have, Hank. Well, they say pretty women age quickly. And I used to be—be very pretty, wasn’t I, Hank?” She laughed again. “Oh, forget it, Hank. Boy, now I know what it means to have sore feet.”

“Sore feet?” I asked.

“Hasn’t that gotten around this City yet? That’s what the kids say now when somebody’s been in free fall too long and they come into a gravity section. Don’t worry. It’ll get here. It’s funny the way we pick up the kids’ expressions. They pick ‘em up from us, make up new meanings. Then we get ‘em back again. They affect us almost as much as we affect them.” She sighed. “We’ve put so much Earth into them, they want everything to be Earth again. So they keep giving Earth names and Earth phrases to things that belong out here. Do you think

we'll make it, Hank?"

I didn't say anything. I wanted to, but I couldn't. She waited with a smile sitting so strangely on the loose skin of her lips. Then the smile went and she looked down at her wrinkled hands. When she looked up, there was something like fear in her expression.

"Lee, we're old now, aren't we? It doesn't seem so long." I said it almost like a question, as though perhaps she could explain to me how it had happened.

When she did speak, she just said, "I think I better go back now."

We exchanged two more words, just at the shuttle boat door, and both of them were "Good-bye." I took her in my arms, and she held onto my shoulders as tight as she could. But it wasn't very tight, and I let her go quickly. Then she was just a wisp of silver light on the view screen.

I was in a bad mood for the rest of the day and the kids avoided me like plague. But that evening I put in a call to Beta-8 City.

"Hey there, Captain," I heard a familiar voice say.

"Hello, Captain," I answered, and we laughed. Then we did something we hadn't done for a long time. We talked for an hour and a half about the stars.

Joney closed the book. Sand and desert: meson fields! And

City was part of the star-ship's title. Bright hair: the exhaust from a shuttle boat. Sore feet, eyes black; of course the Ballad of Beta-2 was from a much later time than Hank and Leela, the first captains of the star-ships. But almost everything, at least in the chorus, made some sort of sense now. He let the words run through his mind once more, his concentration drifting inward, losing focus upon the dials and screens, even the log book in his hand:

*Then came one to the City,
Over Sand with her bright hair wild,
With her eyes coal black and her feet sole sore,
And under her arms a green-eyed child.*

IV

Someone said, "Hello."

Joney whirled and nearly tore himself loose from his magnetic couplings with the floor. The book flew from his hand and bounced away, moving further from him.

The boy was holding the edge of a circular doorway with one hand. Now he reached out with his skinny foot and caught the book in his toes. "Here," he said, giving the book a shove so that it went floating end over end toward Joney.

Joney caught it and said, "Thank you."

"Any time," the boy said. He was thin, naked, with luminously white skin. Joney would have put his age at fourteen

or fifteen except that his hair, fine and pale and long, had receded at the temples like an old man's, throwing off the whole character of his face. The nose was flat, the lips thin, and the features all dominated by immense shell-green eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Just—eh—looking around," answered Joneny.

"For what?"

"Eh... whatever I can... well, find." Joneny was surprised and a little put off.

"You found that?" The boy gestured with his foot toward the book.

Joneny nodded cautiously.

"Can you read it?"

Joneny nodded again.

"You must be pretty smart," the boy grinned. "I can read it too, I bet. Give it here."

Joneny couldn't think of anything else to do, so he tossed the diary back. The boy grabbed it with his toes again, opened the cover with his other foot, and reached down and turned the first page with his free hand. "This is the Log Book of Gamma-5 City, sole property of Captain Hank Brandt, begun in the year—"

"All right, all right," Joneny said. "I believe you." A thought struck him. "Where did you learn to talk?"

"What do you mean, where?" the boy asked. His green eyes widened in surprise.

"Your accent," Joneny said. "You're speaking pretty modern English." It was a lot more modern than the clipped distortions of the robot speaker that had guided him in.

"I just—" He paused. "I don't know where I learned. Just"—he looked around—"here."

“Where are all the others?” Joneny asked.

The boy let go of the door and began to turn over slowly in the air, the book still in his toes. “Other what?”

“The other people.”

“On the ships,” the boy said. Then he added, “There’re no people on Sigma-9 City or Beta-2 City though.”

“I know that,” Joneny said, mustering an imitation of patience. “Where are the people on this ship?”

“Mostly in the center section, at the Market, in the Fishstore, in the Mountains, or down in the Poolroom.”

“Will you take me to them?” Joneny asked.

The boy was almost right side up again. “Are you sure you want to go?”

“Well, why not?”

“They won’t like you very much,” the boy said to him. Now he reached with his hand and grabbed back onto the rim of the entrance. “They almost killed the last visitors they had. Those stun guns are still pretty powerful.”

“What visitors were those?”

“About ninety years ago some people tried to get in.”

To be sure, thought Joneny, the primary contact from the Federation explorers. Suddenly the boy launched from the ceiling. Joneny ducked back and nearly lost his couplings again. But the boy had aimed to miss him and simply placed the book on the table once more. *Tsk* went the magnets. The boy grabbed the edge of the desk with one hand and one foot. Those agile, prehensile toes, Joneny saw at close range, were over half the length of his fingers. “Then what are you doing here,” Joneny asked.

“The robot mechano told me you were here, so I came up.”

“Isn’t there anybody older than you around, somebody in charge who can perhaps give me some more information?”

“I don’t think the people in charge are going to help you very much.”

“Well, where are they?”

“I told you, down at the Market and in the Pool-room.” He turned to the wall and switched on a dial. “Here, I’ll show you.”

A gray screen erupted into colors that formed at last into the view of a large chamber. The particular room, Joneny noted, had gravity, though not much. The floor was covered with water that bubbled and lapped in slow motion waves. Transparent plastic tubes crossed and recrossed the room. Immense bus bars of varying sizes plunged into the water, and there was a bank of good-sized waldoes along one wall. Through the tubes loped men—or men and women, he couldn’t tell: their eyes were small and pink, probably half blind. They were bald. Their ear trumpets had grown to their skulls. Round-shouldered, with nubby, nailless fingers, they paused and groped mechanically at instrument dials and nobs, raising and lowering the rods in and out of the pool below them. Suddenly Joneny remembered the description that the Primary Contact had given of the Star Folk. These people were a lot closer to what had been reported than this green-eyed boy with him. Joneny glanced at the boy’s hands and feet. The nails, though somewhat bitten, were perfectly in evidence. The boy also had hair, while these—people were completely naked.

“That one’s in charge,” the boy indicated. As he said so, the figure on the screen gave one of his companions a blow on the back of the head. The other one staggered away, regained his balance, and went off toward an instrument board. “I don’t think he’d be too interested in helping you. That, incidentally, is the poolroom. I don’t like to go in there.”

Joneny looked at the figures all firmly anchored to the floor,

then regarded the boy so adept at free fall. “You get sore feet?”

“You said it.”

“What are they doing?” Joney asked, turning back to the screen.

“Taking care of one of the temporary reactors. It’s got to be kept under water. It maintains the spin of that whole section of the ship.”

Like a gyroscope spinning inside a beachball, reflected Joney. And an underwater reactor! Just how primitive were these ships anyway? With that many moving parts it was a wonder they were around at all.

“Why don’t you look like them?” Joney asked as the boy switched off the screen. He might as well come right out and ask.

“I come from another City,” the boy said.

“Oh,” said Joney. Apparently then, this degeneration hadn’t taken place on all the other ships. “Isn’t there any one around who can help me?”

“Help you do what?”

“Help me get some information.”

“Information about what. You’re not very clear.”

“About a song,” Joney said. “A song about Beta-2.”

“Which song?” the boy asked. “There’re more songs about that City than all the rest put together.”

“Do you know them?”

“A lot of them,” said the boy.

“This is the Ballad of Beta-2. It starts off, ‘Then came one to the City...’”

“Oh sure. I know that one.”

“Well what the hell is it about?”

“Leela RT-857.”

Could it be one of the descendants of the woman Hank Brandt had been in love with? “Who was she?”

“She was Captain of Beta-2 City when”—he stopped—“when everything—when... I don’t know how to say it.”

“Say what?”

“When everything changed.”

“Changed? What things changed?”

“Everything,” the boy repeated. “That’s when Epsilon-7 City and the Delta-6 were attacked, and the Sigma-9 was crushed, and we were struck in the desert and the Market crashed, and—everything changed.”

“Attacked? What do you mean, changed?”

The boy shook his head and shrugged. “That’s all I know. I can’t explain it any more.”

“What were they attacked by?”

There was only silence. The green eyes were wide and bewildered.

“Can you tell me when this happened?”

“About two hundred and fifty years back,” the boy said at last. “The Cities were still a hundred and fifty years out. And Leela RT-857 was Captain of Beta-2 City.”

“Then what happened?”

The boy shrugged. “Just like it says in the song, I guess.”

“And that’s just what I’m trying to find out.” Joneny thought for a moment, again remembering the verses. “For instance, can you tell me who the one-eyed woman was?”

“Her name was Merril. One-Eyed Merril. And she was... well, one of the One-Eyes.”

“Well who are the One-Eyes?”

“They’re dead now,” the boy said after a minute. “They could have helped you. But they’re all dead.”

“But what did they do?”

“They kept us from the others. They tried to teach us. They tried to make it so we would know what to do. But they got killed finally, by the others, the ones you saw.”

Joney frowned. Something was beginning to clear, but he wasn’t sure what it was. “Maybe there’s somebody back at your City who can tell me just exactly what this is about. Why don’t we go back there.”

The boy shook his head. “Nobody there can help you.”

“How can you be sure. Do you know everybody on the ship?”

Joney didn’t expect an answer, but the boy nodded.

“How many of you are there?”

“Many.”

“Let’s give it a try,” Joney insisted.

The boy shrugged.

“They won’t be hostile to me, will they?”

“No, they won’t be hostile.”

“Fine,” Joney said. He was excited by the idea of something to be uncovered on one of the other ships. His magnetic soles, however, were weaker than he thought, for when he turned, he came loose and drifted away from the floor, helpless.

The boy, still holding the desk, swung his leg out and offered,

“Here, grab my arm.”

Joney flailed at the boy’s ankle, caught, and was pulled back down to where his sandals clicked onto the bulk-head.

“You’re not very used to free fall, are you,” the boy said.

“I’m a little out of practice,” Joney said, releasing the kid’s foot and righting himself. “That’s your idea of an arm?”

“What do you call it?” asked the boy, a little indignantly.

“I call it a leg,” laughed Joney.

“Sure,” said the boy. “But a leg is an arm, isn’t it?”

“I suppose technically speaking you could call anything that sticks out— Oh, never mind.” It really wasn’t worth going into. As they started for the door, Joney reflected: Now here’s a piece of information that could have nothing to do with the ballad. Legs and arms were both arms: that was quite logical when under free fall, hands and feet had developed almost equal dexterity. *Under her legs was a green-eyed child?* That was safely in the realm of nonsense.

Only something from way back in a semantics course he had taken was jabbing at his mind. What did they call it? The spiral of decreasing semantic functionality... something like that. Then it hit him. In an environment where there is no gravity—or little enough gravity to develop this much dexterity in hands and feet, words of vertical placement—up, down, under, over, above, below—would rapidly lose their precise meanings. According to the spiral, before the words disappeared from the language altogether, they would stay on a while as subtle variants of words with more immediate meanings—inside, through, between—(two fine examples of the spiral of decreasing semantic functionality that Joney was completely unaware of were *recreation hall* and *navigation offices*). *Between*, thought Joney. *Between her legs was a green-eyed child*. He stopped as they were about to enter the tube to the cruiser. The boy stopped too, looked puzzled, and blinked at him with his wide,

green eyes.

It was impossible; they were all born from the Birth Market. But there had been a Market crash, and everything changed. “Which City did you come from?” Joneny asked suddenly.

“Sigma-9.”

Joneny stopped. Before them, the triple door to the flexible portion of the tube sank back into the wall.

“Which lock is your shuttle boat in?” Joneny asked.

The boy shook his head.

“Which lock?” Joneny demanded.

“No shuttle boat—” the boy began.

“Then how the hell did you get over here?”

“Like this,” the boy said.

Then there wasn't any boy there any more. Joneny was floating alone in the tube. He blinked. He decided he was crazy. Then he decided he was sane and that something strange was happening. But if it were a fantasy of his own imagining, why was he aware of the contradictions in it? The boy had said there were “many” on Sigma-9, and he had also said there were no people on it. Suddenly Joneny turned and pulled himself back to the navigation offices. Launching himself into the room he shouted at the robot mechanism; “Contact me with somebody who can give me some cogent information about what's going on here!”

“I am sorry,” came the clipped, archaic voice. “I have called all over the City, sir, and no human agent has responded to my announcement of your presence.” It was repeated: “No human agent has responded to your presence.”

Joneny felt chills unraveling up his spine.

V

Once more in his chrono-drive, sitting back in his hammock, Joneny watched the twisted shell of Sigma-9 grow in his viewscope. The crushed surface plates had been chewed up and spit out by a mad rush through how many millions of miles of meson showers—those tiny particles bigger than electrons, smaller than nucleons, that came in a staggering quantity of masses, spins, and charges—yet what had caused the catastrophe had been something else.

Automatically he slowed as the webbing of bare girders flashed brightly in the direct light from the sun. He passed over the wreck and a gaping darkness veered beneath. From the distance, the shimmer that played over the ruins was invisible. He switched on the iridium cell computer and let it record the twists and wrenches in the metal. It might be able to reconstruct the catastrophe. He drifted out over the edge of the gaping hull, a blister of blackness beneath. Slowly the mechano took him down into the pit. The view screen went black as they cut into the shadow. He swept the selector up and down the spectrum. At the violet end of the band there was enough haze to determine the details of the wreck. Girders, melted to blobs on the ends, spiderwebbed in a blue, underwater fog. Hunks of refuse moved about lazily, caught by the faint gravity of the ship's mass.

A section of corridor was split below him like a length of rubber tubing. As he swung his view-scope around the depths of the Sigma-9 he stopped. Deep in the marine blueness was a faint red glow. He flicked his eyes over the dials. No particular radiation to worry about. Double checking, he found it higher to the left. He wondered again what the shimmering had been. The ship sank

further. Once he switched to natural light, but immediately the screen went black.

The computer was chuckling away but so far had arrived at no conclusion. He got out a pressure gel as the ship finally anchored itself to a strut. The gell was a mobile force-bubble composed of a complex arrangement of geodesically crystallized plasmas. It held about six hours worth of air, could be moved from his power-belt, as well as be adjusted to become opaque to almost any frequency of radiation. Delicate work could be done at the edges of the gell by forming the skin into gloves.

The bubble wavered on the floor, growing. He stepped forward and it surrounded him with just a tingle on his skin before the plasmas sealed.

He walked toward the door, the bubble rolling with him. It was like walking inside a balloon. The sphincter of metal wings that was the airlock pulled away in a circular opening on total black. He touched his belt and the light frequency differential plunged into far violet: the ship behind him darkened and at the same time the scene outside the lock began to glow like pale blue milky mist.

The ship had anchored on a wall of girders that jutted out three hundred yards into the body of the wreck in a huge, octagonal web. A bank of corridors twisted out into the cavity like arteries severed in meat. Raising his eyes, Joneny saw a sectioning of the ripped outer hull. Lowering them, he could see where the red glow leaked from behind twisted girders and burst chambers.

Launching from the lock and hovering in the blue, he looked at his own cruiser, a thin, seamless, silver-blue oblong. But when he glanced over the octagonal web floating beside him, he grabbed his belt and brought himself to a quick stop, banging into the transparent wall. Something was climbing over the girders.

It stood up and waved at him.

The boy, still naked, seemed to have no protection from the

hard vacuum of the gutted star-ship. The shifting of his fine hair increased the submarine illusion. The boy was about thirty feet away, and from this distance (and under this particular frequency of light that the pressure gell was translating) his eyes were black. He waved again.

Joney's mind juttet toward half a dozen different conclusions, several of which involved doubts of his own sanity. He rejected all of them, and at last merely waved back because there was nothing else to do. Just then the boy left the girder and sailed through the space between them. With hands and feet he caught the surface of the gell and perched there like a frog. Then he was—half inside, and then all the way in. "Hello," the boy said.

Joney's back was pressed against the curved inside of the gell and his hands spredeagled over the transparent plasma. And he was sweating. "What—" he began. Impossibilities fluttered in his mind like moths. He tried to shake them clear. People leaping across hard vacuum, climbing through pressure gells, disappearing, appearing; impossible—

"Hello," the boy repeated, green eyes blinking.

Now Joney repeated: "Wha—"

"You O.K.?"

"What are you!" Joney finally got out, and peeled himself away from the wall.

The boy blinked again and shrugged.

Joney wanted to scream, "Get out of here"; cover his eyes until the apparition went away; go home. He didn't. The same thing which made him collect impossibly cumbersome books in a world of recording crystals made him look closely at all the impossibilities around him now.

He saw fifteen of them right off. They were standing on the web of girders, some upside down, some sideways, all naked, all

watching him and from what he could make out, all duplicates of the boy who shared the gell with him.

“I figured you were going to come out here,” the boy said. Then he asked, “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“My adrenalin count I’m sure is way above normal,” Joneny said as calmly as he could. “But that is because I am in a situation in which lots of things are happening I don’t understand.”

“Like what?”

“Like *you!*” Some of Joneny’s calmness went.

“I told you, I don’t know what I am. I don’t know.” It took Joneny a moment to see through his own upset and realize there was genuine perturbation in the boy’s face. “What are you?” the boy asked.

“I’m a student of galactic anthropology. I’m a human being. I’m flesh and blood and bone and hormones and antibodies that can’t jump a hundred miles of cold space without protection, that can’t disappear and reappear, that can’t walk through a crystallized pressure gell. I answer to the name of Joneny Horatio T’waboga, and I may be stark, raving mad.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want to give it a try now?”

The boy looked blank.

“Well what’s your name?”

The boy shrugged.

“What do people call you?”

“The people call me The Destroyer’s Children.”

Joneny, as has been pointed out, was not semantically alert enough to catch all he had been told by that statement; it floated on the surface of his mind, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the

red glow in the labyrinthine ruin. “What’s that?” he asked, again because he could think of nothing else to do.

“A Death’s Head,” the boy told him.

Now his eye caught again the boy’s duplicates on the webbing. One leapt off and sailed by some ten feet away, peering back over his shoulder until he grew too small to make out. “What about them?”

“Huh?”

“Are they Destroyer’s Children too?”

The boy nodded. “Yeah. They’re the rest of me.”

Again Joneny turned his mind away from the syntactical discrepancies which would have given him many of the answers he sought. Now he looked back at the Death’s Head.

He touched his belt and the gell began to drift toward the glow, gaining speed. He wouldn’t have been shocked if the boy had simply slipped out of the gell once it started moving, but he came along predictably inside the bubble.

“Incidentally,” Joneny said, “how much air do you breathe? This has only got six hours for one person, and I didn’t bring a renewer.”

“It depends,” the boy said. “I don’t have to breathe any.”

“Then don’t.”

“All right. But then I won’t be able to talk.”

“Well breathe when you want to say something, O.K.?”

“O.K.”

They neared a wall of refuse. The junk floated closely, but there were paths through. “Which way?” Joneny asked.

“You can go through a corridor,” the boy said. Then he added

in a strangled voice, “I... just... used... up... two... seconds... of... air.”

“Huh?” asked Joney. “Which corridor?”

“You can go through that one,” the boy said. “One... and... a... quarter... seconds... more...”

Joney moved the gell into the end of a tubular corridor that had been crushed and broken open. The walls were bare and set with free-fall handholds. They passed a place where another corridor had joined this one. The intersection was ripped raggedly away at the seam.

“Where are we heading for now?” he asked again over his shoulder.

“We’ll be coming to the Mountains soon.” The strangled voice once more: “... one... and... a...”

“Oh cut it out,” Joney said. “I don’t care what you use up. I don’t intend to stay that long anyway.”

“I was just trying to be helpful.”

They turned another corner, passed the next section where the wall had been ripped back, and sailed down the straight away. At the end of the corridor, Joney brought them to a halt and gasped.

Before them in blue mist a vast auditorium rolled away. In the center, above a raised dais was a huge sphere. Even at this distance and in this light, Joney could see etched on the surface was a representation of the lands and oceans of Earth. The scooped immensity of the hall, the rings of seats, the isolated globe, gave the place a comprehensible air of hugeness, completely different from his glimpse of empty space in which the wreck hung. This feeling of contained size was calming, nearly religious. “What’s this? Is it the Death’s Head?”

“It’s the Court House,” said the boy.

“The Court House?” Joneny looked from the smooth, vaulted ceiling down to the tiered seats, at last back to the globe. “What happened here?”

“Trials.” He added, “Of criminals.”

“Were there many criminals on board the star-ships?”

“Not many, at least at the beginning. Toward the end there were a lot more.”

“What did the criminals do?”

“Mostly went against the Norm.”

“The Norm?”

“That’s right. You can hear the records if you want. They were all recorded.”

“Does the mechanism still work?”

The boy nodded.

“Where is it?”

“Down there.” The boy pointed toward the dais.

Joneny touched his belt and the gell floated down over the seats toward the globe. He paused just above the stage, adjusted the gell for hyper-malleability and magno-permeability. His sandal soles clicked as he hit the floor, a drop of an inch, and stuck there through the pliable surface of the gell.

When he glanced for the boy, he saw that he was hovering on the other side of the dais now, outside the bubble. The boy motioned to him, and Joneny carefully walked the bubble around the edge of the dais. When he reached the other side, there was a small pop as the boy stuck his head inside. (Joneny jumped a little) and said, “The index is right there.” He popped out again.

Joneny reached for the slanted desk through the molding skin. It molded to his hands. He ran his fingers around the edge of the

desk, till he found a catch. He pushed it, pulled at the desk top again, and this time it came up. Revealed was a complicated mosaic. Bending closer, Joney saw that it was actually a matrix of pentagonal labels each holding two names. The top of the desk snapped up and then slid back down into an envelope. Joney squinted in the blue:

45-A7 Milar vs. Khocran, 759-V8 Travis vs. The Norm, 654-M87 DeRogue vs. Blodel, 89-T68L One-Eyed Davis vs. The Norm.

The tray of labels was on a very long conveyor that moved upwards. It was arranged in some sort of five coordinate index system that was roughly chronological. As he perused the labels, one thing became quite clear. There was a marked increase of trials between One-Eyed Someone-or-other and The Norm. Joney came to the place where the crystal labels stopped. The last trial was 2338-T87 One-Eyed Jack vs. The Norm.

Joney looked up as the boy popped inside the gell again. “What do you do with these?” Joney asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Just press one and it’ll play back.”

“Press?”

“With your finger, or your toe, or your elbow,” the boy said, a bit indignantly. “Just press it.”

Joney reached out and pressed the last labeled pentagon. Then he jumped back as a roar swelled around him. The sound was being transmitted through the soles of his feet. The whole floor of the dais was acting as the vibration plate for some sort of loudspeaker. The roaring was the sound of many people talking at once.

A staccato tattoo rang out above it, and an elderly baritone, oddly accented cried out, “Order in the court! Silence! Please!

Order in the court.” The roaring stilled, became the rustling of someone twisting here in a chair, there coughing behind a fist.

Joney looked across the empty chairs in the blue auditorium.

“Order in the court,” the voice repeated unnecessarily. The baritone voice paused, then went on, “There has been a slight deviation from normal proceedings. Captain Alva, before we make the official opening, you may make your statement.”

“Thank you, judge.” It was the voice of a younger man. Also a very tired man, Joney thought. His phrases were measured, with long pauses between. “Thank you. Only it isn’t exactly a statement I want to make. It’s a request—of the Court, and appeal to the leniency of the citizens of the City of Sigma-9. I would like to request that this trial not take place...” (in the pause a murmur began among the people) “... and that One-Eyed Jack, in fact all the One-Eyes remaining in Sigma-A-9, be placed in the custody of the City’s navigation staff, with myself fully and finally responsible for their conduct—” The murmur broke out into expletives of indignation. Above them the judge’s gavel crashed and the judge’s voice cut sharply over the noise:

“Captain Alva, this is most—”

And above even this the captain’s voice came sharply: “—I make this request, not only in my own name, but with the full consent and encouragement of the Captains of every other City in the Nation. We have been in radio contact with each other constantly since the tragedy of Epsilon-7. Captain Vlyon of Alpha-8, Captain Leela of Beta-2, Captain Riche of Epsilon-6—every single Captain of every City in the Nation has begged me to make this request, Your Honor, and they are all making similar request of the courts of their respective Cities.”

The crowd sounded chaotic. The gavel pounded again. When something like order was regained, the judge’s leveling voice led

over the noise: “Captain Alva, may I remind you that as Captain of this City, you are in charge of its physical welfare. But there are other issues involved here, and as the Spiritual Head of the City, as the repository for moral cleanliness, and as representative of the Norm, I must certainly, in the name of the City, refuse your request. I most certainly must refuse!”

The murmur rose again, this time an inrush of relief. Not so heavily the gavel sounded, and more responsively silence came.

“To continue with the formal opening of the trial: Case 2338-587 Jackson O-E-5611, physical and mental deviate of the first magnitude, alias One-Eyed Jack, versus the Norm. Are you in Court, Jackson?” Momentary silence. “Are you present at court, Jackson?”

A voice came back, curtly, shrill, yet with the same tiredness Joney had heard in the Captain’s words. “You have eyes. Can’t you see I’m here?”

“I must ask you to follow the prescribed forms set down by the Norm, and not to ask impertinent, irrelevant questions. Are you present at court?”

“Yes. I am present at court.”

“Now will you describe, please, your deviation from the Norm as you understand it.”

A hiss of air drawn quickly between teeth. “This is not an irrelevant question. It is a declarative statement—you have eyes and you can see.”

“Jackson E-E-5611,” a defensive listlessness oozed into the judge’s voice “the code of the Norm requires that a deviate, to be held responsible, have understanding of his deviation. Now, will you please describe your deviation as you see it to the court.”

“I had the misfortune to emerge from the Market with a full set of brains in my head. That’s not normal around this place. Or

perhaps I'm a deviate because there was a certain amount of information about Earth and our goals that I felt was important to study without the permission of the Norm. Or because I decided it was worth joining others like me to pursue these studies. But to you that makes me a One-Eyed monster who's got to be exterminated before he thinks in the wrong direction and corrupts somebody."

"Obviously Jackson is not aware of his deviation. That relieves him of having to sign his own reconversion certificate. There will be no difficulty now in returning you to the Death's Head."

"For God's sake, I've got arms, legs, hands, feet. My eyes see, my ears hear. All right. You tell me what's wrong with me."

"Will the medical examiner please make her comparative Norm report?"

There was a rustling of papers, someone rose to standing. A contralto voice said, "Medical report, taken two days ago, of Jackson O-E-5611 correlated with the Norm of the City of Sigma-9."

"Go on, Dr. Lang."

"Thank you. Jackson O-E-5611, height six feet, one and a half inches: the Norm for the City of Sigma-9 is five-feet-nine and three quarter inches. Of course this discrepancy does not indicate anything definite, but it is a deviation nevertheless. Jackson O-E-5611 is a chronic nail-biter, and has been so since early childhood. This is quite far away from the Norm, a condition that exists in less than .08 percent of the population, definitely marking him for consideration."

"I notice you are skipping the more standard criteria, Dr. Lang," the voice of the judge interrupted.

"Yes, your Honor. But, as you advised me earlier, in view of

the destruction of Epsilon-7 so short a time ago, I thought I might skip to the more drastic deviations.”

“Very well. I just wanted it on record that I did so advise you. I saw Captain Alva about to raise an objection.”

The Captain’s voice: “Not an objection, Your Honor. I only wanted to say that the destruction of the City of Epsilon-7 is exactly the reason why I—and the other Captains—believe that—”

“Very well,” interrupted the judge’s voice, “then Dr. Lang will give a thorough report on the deviation.”

“Your Honor, that wasn’t my object—”

“I have requested a thorough report from Dr. Lang. I can see no other reason for you to object. Proceed, Dr. Lang.”

“But, your Honor—”

“Dr. Lang, if you will.”

A murmur in the audience again, then the contralto voice went on. “Weight, 169 pounds as compared to the Norm of 162. I might well mention that this difference is only significant when looked at along with the height, where it becomes apparent that the subject, though above the Norm, is still underweight for his own physical development.”

Jackson’s taut voice jutted in, “Isn’t that a hell of a complicated way of saying I haven’t had a decent meal in three months, thanks to the hounding of your goon squad?”

“Jackson!”

Dr. Lang went on, “He conforms quite well to the Norm in dexterity. He’s righthanded, and the Norm is 89 per cent of the City’s population also righthanded.”

Again Jackson’s voice, sharp and darting: “I notice you hold your stylus in your left hand, Dr. Lang. Would you say that marks a

significant deviation?”

“Jackson, need I remind you that in several Cities One-Eyes are not allowed to speak at their own trials, and occasionally not even allowed to attend them. I would dislike to find such an arrangement a temporary necessity.”

“Captain Alva...” The tautness had gone from Jackson’s voice and a pleading replaced it.

“Jackson, I’m doing everything I possibly—”

“Will you continue, Dr. Lang. Order. Order, please.”

“There is a slight difference in length of limbs, right arm nearly a centimeter and a half longer than the left. The Norm is a discrepancy of only a centimeter. Legs are identical length. Norm of Sigma-9 is a two millimeter extension of left leg over right. Note the gauntness of his face, for which I have no figures, but it is definitely away from the Norm. His nose has been broken twice. The percentage of the population to break bones is 1.6 per cent. This puts him quite definitely out of the Norm. A small birth mark on his right shoulder is completely away from the Norm. In situations of great strain, artificially induced, his perspiration index is 9.75 as opposed to 8.91 for the Norm. There is also a marked...” and the contralto voice continued to outline a list of glandular secretions, sub-metabolic functions, and tropal differentiations that sounded like the cataloguing process a modern biologist might go through in defining a newly discovered life form; nothing less, mused Joney, could merit such detail. After fifteen minutes, she paused; then, in a staccato epilogue, in which Joney could hear the lack of conviction, Dr. Lang declared: “And due to the extremity of our situation, I believe all this taken together is deviation enough to recommend reconversion in the Death’s Head.”

Approving whispers rose and fell.

“You may, if you really want to, question Dr. Lang on her findings,” said the judge. “If you want to take the time.”

“Yes, I want to.” The answer was quick and desperate.

“Go on. But the questioning is only a formality.”

“You’ve reminded me of a lot of things today, your Honor.” There was an expectant pause, but the judge was silent. “Dr. Lang, you’re a woman of science. You deal closely with the biology staff, and the Market Research staff; you’re friendly with many of the Navigation Officers.”

“That’s right.”

Dr. Lang’s voice was covered immediately by the judge’s: “I don’t see what this has to do with—”

“Please let him go on,” from Captain Alva.

Silence. Then Dr. Lang repeated, “That’s right. I am.”

“Do you remember, Dr. Lang, two years ago when a thirteen-year-old girl named Tomasa was discovered to have the first case of carcinoma of the pancreas on record in the ten generations of the City’s history?”

“I remember.”

“And how was Tomasa’s life saved?”

“By an ancient technique of radio-micro surgery.”

“Where did you find out the existence of this technique and its application?”

“From an old woman named—”

“—named Mavle TU-5 who, six months later, was condemned as a One-Eyed deviate and executed in the Death’s Head!”

“I fail to see what this has to do with—” began the judge. Disorder had begun again and the gavel now covered the voice, rapping loudly. But the moment half silence was restored, Jackson’s voice came again: “Captain Alva, when the gyroscopic centering for

the multiple gravity distributor failed, didn't you come to Ben Holden I-6 for a two-week cram course in general relativistic physics before you even dared to open the housing?"

From the judge: "This has nothing to do with your case! You were asked only to question Dr. Lang's report on your deviation!"

"For the love of knowledge, I am questioning. I'm telling you we're not a bunch of mutant monsters. I'm telling you we're only people who are trying to guard what's left of wisdom in this barbaric cave you call a City. Your beloved Norm! To close off twenty people in a section and gas them for their love of history; to chase a man out of hiding with a herd of specially bred twenty pound rats because he knows multiple calculus; to inject a woman with half-a-dozen pathological viruses until she confesses Goedle's Law and then sentence her to the Death's Head as an unredeemable mutant; what Norm does this conform to? Does this meet any standard of human—"

"Silence!" The gavel thundered. Then, slowly but mounting, "Our ancestors charged us with bringing *human beings* to the stars. And no deviation will be tolerated. How long ago was it that One-Eyed conspirators took over Epsilon-7 and destroyed it?"

Three voices attempted to interrupt, the Captain's, Jackson's, and Dr. Lang's: "But your Honor, we don't—"

"That the last communication came from One-Eyes is proof enough that they were the last ones in charge, and therefore that they must have overthrown the leadership of the Norm. Fifteen thousand people on Epsilon-7 all dead: the Sigma-9 will not be next. In view of the threat such deviation poses, I cannot but give my assent to Dr. Long's recommendation of death by—"

"Excuse me, your Honor!" It was Captain Alva's voice, desperate. "I've just received a message from the communications gate. Static has blanketed our connection with Delta-6. Faint messages are coming through asking for assistance. They seem to

have—”

A sound like an explosion, only it didn't stop.

Joney jumped. At first he thought the people in the court had rioted. Then he realized it was raging static. He punched the label again; the static stopped. Confused, with long rollings of terror in him, he stepped back from the trial index, pulling his thoughts to the present. The auditorium before him was no longer empty.

He started. Nearly a quarter of the seats were filled with azure-skinned youngsters, boys, all of whom had been paying silent attention to the record of the trial. As Joney watched, open-mouthed, several of the audience, now that the record was over, floated from the seats and listed to one side or the other. Joney looked around for his guide and saw him at last stretched out across the upper surface of the gell.

“What—what are they?” Joney motioned again, to the figures in the auditorium.

The boy stuck his head in and said, “I told you. They're the rest of me... the Destroyer's Children.”

“Then what are you?”

The boy slipped the rest of the way into the gell, shrugged, and when Joney glanced at the auditorium again, it was empty.

“Didn't you say you wanted to go to the Death's Head?”

Joney shook his head, not in negation but to clear it. He was still trying to figure out why the ending of the last trial record was so sudden, as well as make some judgment on the situation between the One-Eyes and the Norm. And there was no explanation for these green-eyed youngsters who seemed so capable of navigating in a vacuum.

“You said you wanted to see it.”

“Huh?” Nothing would resolve. “Oh, yeah. I guess so.”

“You just follow me,” the boy said; then he added in what seemed a consoling tone, “You’ll see.”

The boy popped out of the bubble, and nervously Joney propelled the gell after him.

VI

So that was what the ballad meant by “Death’s Head hill.”

The gell, with Joney inside, had just entered a room larger than the auditorium. The walls curved toward a vaulted peak. The blue glow was replaced by crimson. The floor sloped upward, the ceiling came down, and joined in an immense funnel that was stopped by a skull-shaped grate. The wide door at the bottom where the mouth would be increased the resemblance. Joney stood at the bottom of the curved metal slope and stared for a full minute.

At last his eyes fell away from the heights and he caught sight of an alcove at the bottom. At the back of the alcove was a door. His sandals clicking on the plates, he started toward it. A moment later he pushed open the door and blinked as the light went again to blue. It was a living apartment; it had not been set up for free fall which held this part of the ship now. Books had drifted from shelves and settled like barnacles on the walls. A lamp had done the same. As Joney stepped in, the bulb, disturbed after aeons, blinked on and went out again. Who had lived here, Joney wondered.

His eyes roamed the books: *Moby Dick*, *Les Illuminations de Rimbaud*, *Voyage Orestes*, *The Worm Ouroboros*. He had read none of

them and only heard of one.

Across the room was another door. He gloved the gell again and pulled it open. One instant he was terrified that the black thing billowing out was alive. But it was only cloth. Surprise still held, but he reached out and took the suit of clothing from the closet and spread it out. There was something on the shoulder, and when he pushed back the black folds, he saw it was a rope; a rope had been coiled about one shoulder like an emblem.

Without bellying, the cloth waved and floated, and a part of the suit he hadn't seen rose into sight from behind the collar. It was a black hood that would mask the entire face save two ominous eye-holes.

Joney frowned. He put the suit back in the closet and shut the door. One sleeve caught outside and flapped slowly in the windless space like a truncated arm. Again he looked at the books quivering among the shelves.

One was large, black, and familiar. It was the same sort of book that Captain Hank Brandt had kept his log in. Joney pulled it to him and opened the silvered pages. It was no diary. The entries were statistically terse. On the opening page the epigraph:

Lord, what do I here...

Then:

Executed today at 2:00 P.M.... name and date. Executed this morning at 6:30... name and date. Executed this afternoon...

The book was only half filled. Joney turned to the final entry:
...this evening at 11:45, One-Eyed Jackson-O-E-5611.

The words that started in his mind were also sounding inside the gell. He turned to listen to the boy singing to an odd, bare

melody:

“Another man stood on Death’s Head hill,
His eyes were masked, his hands were still.
Over his shoulder he carried a rope,
And he stood quiet on Death’s Head slope.”

Joney let the book float away, went to the door of the executioner’s apartment, and looked toward the Death’s Head.

The Destroyer’s Children, several hundred of them now, all standing over the floor that sloped toward the skull, turned and looked at him. Their lean bodies cast thin shadows on the crimson vault.

Joney turned back again. The boy was outside the bubble now. The words, *What are you?* came into his mind again, but before he said them, the boy shrugged again. Joney thought about this for three whole seconds before he asked, “You can read my mind, can’t you?”

The boy nodded.

“Is that why you speak so well?”

The boy nodded again.

“And you say you don’t know what you are,” said Joney trying to control both voice and thoughts.

A third time the boy nodded.

“Why don’t we try to find out?” He motioned for the boy who came forward and stepped (pop) into the bubble. “Let’s go back to my ship, all right?”

“All right,” the boy said.

They made their way from the Death’s Head, along the blue corridor, through the courthouse, and out into the hollow wound of the star-ship in which Joneny’s cruiser hung against the girders.

The gell plunged through the open space toward the silver oblong. A few yards from the door, Joneny slowed down. “I want you to stay outside the ship until I call you in,” he said.

“O.K.”

Joneny moved the gell forward and the boy *popped* out the back wall. The selector field passed the gell and Johnny felt gravity strike him again. He collapsed the bubble around him and kicked it into the corner like a pile of cellophane. Then he looked out the door again. In the light from his cruiser, some twenty feet away, the boy waved at him. Joneny waved back and went to the controls.

Once more he glanced at the boy before he jammed the ship into time stasis. Again he went to the door and looked out. Nothing in that blackness should be able to move now, reflected Joneny, for, relatively speaking, everything outside the ship was caught in time, though one could say that it was Joneny’s cruiser that was caught.

“You can come in now,” he said. Joneny was expecting one of two things to happen. Either the boy would stay put, suspended and immobile. Or he would come drifting in through the door: Joneny rather hoped for the latter. It would corrolate with the strange flickering he had seen before on the Sigma-9 that also ignored time stasis. It would be at least a stab in the definition of just what the boy’s lack of humanity was, and his ignorance (in the sense of ignoring) of time would make his disregard of space less strange.

Joneny expected one of these two things to happen. Neither of them did. Instead, everything exploded.

Outside the door a wave of purple light rolled across the girders. The gravity of the cruiser went crazy; he got heavier and lighter in sickening waves. The figure of the boy erupted into a geyser of green sparks which swept for the door of the cruiser and missed.

Every loudspeaker in the ship began to moan in different keys. As Joneny stumbled for the controls, something happened to his eyes. The room went double, quadruple, octuple, and his hand, searching for the switch to throw the ship back into normal time, was lost among infinite decisions and choices. Then his head twisted.

He was falling, orbiting great pulsing luminosities of thought. A white light glowed before him so beautifully he wanted to cry. He turned from it and was confronted by blindingly cool green, that was hysterically funny. He slid toward it and was enveloped in sad heat. There was a face rolling toward him down a long hall, the face of a man, with green eyes, dark hair, high cheekbones. The face rolled over him and he reached out to push it away, but his hand kept going, for miles and miles, until it fell on the time margin switch.

And he was standing before the control board, slightly nauseated, but all right. He sank in the hammock and turned to face the door, just in time to see the boy step through.

“What happened?” Joneny asked.

“You—you called me in. But I couldn’t...”

“Couldn’t what?”

“I couldn’t hear you. So my... father... father?... you don’t have the words. My father told me you called.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Joneny.

“My... father... but not father. The Destroyer.”

“What’s the Destroyer?”

“He’s where—where I came from.”

“When I asked you where you came from before, you said from this star-ship, Sigma-9.”

“That’s right. That’s where my father is.”

“Whereabouts in the ship is he?”

The boy frowned. “All over it.”

Joney closed the portal. “I’m going over to Beta-2,” he said. “Maybe I can find something there.” He tried to put off the paralysis that the last strange incident had pushed him toward, detached the cruiser, and aimed for the rent in the hull of the Sigma-9.

The iridium cell computer, which had been humming all this time, suddenly flashed its completion light. Joney opened the tape case and ran the answer through his fingers. All that the computer had been able to come up with was that the Sigma-9 had been torn open—torn open from the outside, the way one might tear off the skin of an orange!

“Hey, stop,” the boy said. They were halfway between the two ships.

“Stop what?”

“Stop your ship.”

“For what?”

“You’ll see. Just stop it.”

Joney turned the ship into a slowing spiral.

“Now put it in time stasis.”

Warily Joney put the ship in stasis. Nothing happened.

“Now look back at Sigma-9 and you’ll see my father.”

Puzzled, Joney turned the view screen back toward the wreck

they had just left. As before, it glowed and shimmered in complete disregard for their chronological position.

“The flickering,” the boy said, pointing. “That’s it.”

“That’s what?”

“That’s the Destroyer.”

VII

Beta-2 was silent. The locks opened without any address from the robot mechanism. Here the corridors, though filled with air, were without gravity. “I’m looking for records,” Joneny told his companion as they threaded the triangular halls.

“Here,” the boy said.

They turned into a room that must have been the ship’s library. “These are the rest of the records,” said the boy, going to one wall of books behind glass. Joneny opened the case door. Black tomes ranged along the shelves, log books for the duration of the crossing. Joneny took first one out, then another. There were records of the Market, food production; he had absolutely no idea where to begin when the boy picked one and handed it to him.

“This one was my mother’s.”

Before the thought sank and bloomed to meaning, the cover fell open and he read: “This is the Log Book of Beta-2 City, the sole property of Captain Leela RT-857.”

“Mother?” Joneny remembered his interpretation of the lines:

Under her arms a green-eyed child.

The boy nodded. “Turn to when the first ship was attacked.” He reached over Joneny’s shoulder and flipped the pages. It was near the end:

The report came in this afternoon that we had left the sea and entered light sand. The count from the first half an hour was in the high thirties which caused me an odd paralytic alarm I have been so subject to lately with all the nonsense over the One-Eyes. But it dropped to three and has been there for the last couple of hours. Any sand is dangerous, but as long as it stays down there, we can sustain it for a few years. The uncertainty of when it will increase or end is unsettling.

Earlier this evening I left the staff meeting and decided to visit the One-Eye quarter. Passing through the City Concourse, I met Judge Cartrite.

“What brings you to this part of the ship?” he asked.

“Just walking,” I said.

“Taking stock of all your charges, Lee?” He gestured to the people around us.

“Just walking, Judge,” I repeated.

“Well you seem to be going in my direction. We’ll go together a ways and give a picture of official solidarity.”

“I’m turning off shortly,” I told him, but he accompanied me across the walkway.

“Have you heard anything about the new ritual group they’ve started over in Quadrant Two? They’re evolving some elegant complexities on some of the rituals I initiated back ten years ago. It makes a man feel he’s accomplished something. You know,” and the tone of his voice dropped slightly, “I hardly ever hear of any of the City’s officers attending the ritual groups. You ought to encourage them to go, Lee. Solidarity again.”

I smiled at him. “We’re a busy bunch, Judge. And let’s face it, the rituals are mostly time-consumers.” I smiled to avoid spitting, I think.

“They mean a great deal to a lot of people.”

“I’ll put up a notice,” I said. I’d like to paste it over his face.

Judge Cartrite grinned. “Can’t ask more than that.” As we reached the other side of the concourse, he stopped. “Do you turn off here?”

“I’m afraid I do.” I left him at the lift to the administrative sphere.

The tall corridor was empty. My feet echoed. Then the hall ended at the web, spreading out in front of me, dim and huge, run through with catwalks and free corridors. It’s such a tangle that you can’t really see more than a hundred yards into it. I remembered as I stood on the edge of that spreading gulf how as children we had played near the exit. We were always terrified of getting lost inside. But now I took a short breath and pushed over the edge. Gravity left me and I was floating toward the tangle of beams that was the web. It takes skill to leap from normal gravity into free fall. A lot of people never learn to. More than one body has gone into the Death’s Head with its neck broken from a headon crash with anything from a bus bar to a plate wall. I caught myself against a ground sheet and pulled around on the handholds. It’s pointedly obvious that this section of the ship was not intended to be lived in; certain repairs for the rest of the ship must be made here, but the hidden ways and mechanical caverns, niches and paths of the center, are never used by people of the City. Nevertheless it holds some six or seven hundred inhabitants. From the other side of the plate I could see the housing for the little detractor gyro, a riveted sphere of metal seventy-five feet in diameter. I launched for one of the guy cables. It sailed up to me, I caught it, and pulled myself down to the surface. Just from playing at the very edges of the web with other children of the City I had learned that one magnetic

boot was useful. Two were a nuisance. So now I stood, anchored by one foot to the housing.

I beeped a few times on my belt communicator just to let them know I was there when a soft, familiar voice behind me said, “What are you doing that for?”

I avoided the impulse to whirl and perhaps tear loose from my position. The voice chuckled, and I tried to look over my shoulder. “Every time I come here, Ralf tells me you know I’m here as soon as I leave gravity, but just in case, I like to let somebody know. I haven’t got time to stand around on one leg all day.”

The voice chuckled again.

“Is that you, Timme?” I asked. I was turning slowly, and he, who could maneuver five times as fast as I could, was keeping out of my field of vision.

“Here I am,” he said.

I turned quickly the other way and he was floating in front of me still chuckling softly.

Timme is maybe seventeen or eighteen. He’s a dark boy, his hair uncut, black, his clothes, nondescript rags. Timme is missing an arm and his left sleeve is just knotted at his shoulder. “You want to go to Ralf’s?” he asked.

“That’s what I came here for,” I said.

“Aye, aye, Captain Lee,” he said, nodding his head slightly with his vaguely mocking smile.

With his one hand he untied a coil of rope from his waist and threw me an end. I made a loop in it and slipped it around my back, under my arms, and held on in front.

Timme looped the rope a couple of times around his wrist—which always struck me as a trifle insecure, and said, “Kick

free!” I let go my hold with my boot. “We go that way,” he said, pointing off between two large columns with a ten foot space between them; then, crouching like a frog, he leapt off from the housing—in the entirely wrong direction! This is the thing that always confuses me about free-fall travel: how can they calculate the whole business? The rope went taut, I was pulled along (nearly three times as fast as I’d ever dare go myself), but when Timme reached the end, the rope made him swing around, and our whole trajectory changed. The two of us on the ends of the rope were a complex rather than a simple weight, and together we were spiraling directly toward the space between the bars.

The trip into the web probably beats what our ancestors called a roller coaster ride hands down. Every five or six seconds we went jutting off in another direction.

Then we were in the clear again, and rotating before us was the Ring. Amidst the confusion of the web, a circular path three hundred feet in diameter had been discovered that would admit of objects throughout its circumference of thirty or forty feet. In it the One-Eyes had constructed a metal ring, rotated by the City’s excess power on which were attached small dwellings where four-fifths normal gravity was maintained. The houses themselves, terribly flimsy contraptions that occasionally broke loose and caused a bit of damage, flung out like seats in the old pictures of a ferris wheel. I’m sure boarding a moving train was no more difficult than getting into the Ring. I always did it with my eyes closed and simply let myself be pulled.

Timme launched himself toward the whirling sheet-metal shacks, and I held on and closed my eyes. A moment later I was hauled, pulled, pushed into gravity again. In general the One-Eyes, even those who are physically deformed like Timme, have developed a physical dexterity that leaves the less adventurous majority of the City’s population aghast. I’m sure that’s a good reason for so much of the fear.

When I opened my eyes, Timme was closing the trap door. I was sitting on the floor, and Merrill was standing over me saying, “Well, Captain Lee, what brings you here this evening?”

“I wanted to talk to you and Ralf about a number of things. Do you know about the desert we’ve entered?”

She gave me her hand as I stood up. “Yes. But there’s nothing that can be done. Would you have come all the way out here just to tell us something our instruments show as well as yours?” There was the same slightly mocking tone that Timme used.

“There’s more than that,” I said. “Is Ralf here?”

Merril nodded. The two of them, Ralf and Merrill, were more or less the leaders of the One-Eyes, though the fabric of their society was so amorphous, vertically and horizontally, that perhaps the term was too precise.

“Come with me,” she said. “He got your beeps; we were expecting you.”

We went down a low-ceilinged corridor. Through a window, light from the outside shifted across the far wall to remind us of the whirling frame we were on. As we stepped into the next room, Ralf looked up from his desk, smiled, and rose.

“Captain Leela, what can I do for you?”

We were in an informal office with a few filing cabinets along the walls. There were two paintings hanging. One was the Assumption by the old earth painter Titian. The other was done by a second generation artist of the City, abstract, troubling darkness lapping one another, full of blacks and greens.

“What can you do for me?” I asked. “Talk to me like intelligent people in sentences I can put in logical order. Maybe even say a few funny things about the more ludicrous stupidities of the City; maybe drop some advice my way.”

“Is it that bad?”

I sat down in the suspended hammock across the office. Merrill took a seat near the filing cabinet. Timme, I saw, had sat quietly in a corner on the floor though nobody had invited him to stay. But then neither Ralf nor Merrill seemed to want him to go, either.

“While I was coming here I ran into Judge Cartrite. He suggested that the official staff start attending the rituals. Hell, it’s all I can do to keep them away now.”

“What do the rituals do?” Timme asked from the corner.

“Fortunately you’ll never have to be bothered with them,” Ralf told him. “That’s one of the advantages of living out here with us. You came here when you were only three. But some of us who took a little longer to get here know a little too much about what they do.”

Timme—Ralf told me this last time I visited him—had fallen into the web as a child and floated around for more than thirty hours before he was discovered. He had eventually been sucked to one of the great ventilator ducts that drew in air at seventy miles an hour. His arm had been squeezed between two grill blades and chewed off by the fan above his elbow. Instead of sending him back to be persecuted by the Norm that was going through a particularly rigid enforcement on children that year, they kept him among the One-Eyes and nursed him back to health.

“A lot of people get together and do perfectly meaningless things for hours at a time, for which impossible reasons have been calculated; like standing on their heads for five minutes in the corner and then drinking a glass of pink-colored water, seventeen times in succession, in honor of the seventeen times an hour the poolroom revolves to maintain gravity, and the pink liquid in honor of the red shift of Sol—”

Timme laughed. “No, I know what they do, or some of the things. But I mean what do they do it for?”

“Damned if I know,” I said.

“Is that true?” asked Merrill.

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you think they have the rituals?”

“Because they have nothing better to do. They need something to occupy their minds, and they haven’t got the guts to come out here in the web and struggle for themselves.”

Ralf laughed now. “If they all migrated out here, Leela, there would be no struggle. We’d all die. In our own way we live off you people in the official quarter of the City. We struggle, perhaps a little officious stealing from the surplus farm stores, bargaining with your people when there’s some specialized knowledge we have that you don’t. All we are, Lee, is the people rituals couldn’t work for, the ones who’d go a little crazy if we didn’t reconstruct the City’s radar sector; in miniature—for a hobby; make improvements on a model hydroponics garden—not for food but for fun; or put colors and shapes on canvas simply as an organization of forms: maybe just different rituals.”

Just then Timme stood up. “Isn’t it about time for Hodge to come over?”

“That’s right,” Merrill said. “He’ll make it to the edge of the track. Just go out to bring him over to the Ring.”

Timme bounced out the door.

“Hodge?” I asked.

“Um-hm,” nodded Merrill.

“Does he come to visit you too?”

“He gets lonely,” she said. “Probably lonelier than you do.”

“That’s funny,” I said. “Sometimes I’ve seen him walk in the concourse. Nobody talks to him, everyone backs away. But he

walks around, looking at things, at people. I don't think anyone talks to him. If that's true in the official quarter, I'm surprised anyone even allows him in here."

"Why?" Merrill asked, with the slight smile again.

I shrugged. "Well... because he's been responsible for so many of your people's... I mean whenever the legal department takes it into its head to start enforcing the Norm—" I stopped.

"Responsible?" questioned Merrill.

I shrugged. "I see what you mean. He's only carrying out orders."

"Hodge is a very lonely man," Ralf said. "Most of us are lonely out here in the web. Yes, maybe there should be that sort of fear, but we're also a pretty suicidal bunch as well."

"Hodge comes out here twice a week," Merrill said. "He spends the evening with us, eats here, plays chess with Ralf."

"Twice a week?" I said. "I'm surprised when he comes to the official sector twice a year."

"You know, sometimes I've thought that you and Hodge have a lot in common."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you are the only two people who aren't allowed to choose mates and go to the Market and raise children."

"With the exception," I reminded him, "that I can resign and play mother any time I want, where Hodge is stuck with his job for life."

Ralf nodded. "Then, also, you both are, in your ways, responsible for the entire ship, not just your sector. Even Judge Cartrite doesn't have any real control over the One-Eyes, except when he catches us. But we're bound to obey you as much as anyone else in the City."

“I know,” I said. Then I said, “The responsibility: Ralf, Merrill, that’s what I really wanted to talk to you about. Somehow I feel that even by letting the rituals go on, I’m betraying that responsibility. Oh, a couple of times when we’ve argued you’ve told me that we all have our rituals, from my duties as Captain to some poor creature who pushes a small steel ball up a metal ramp with his nose in honor of the Journey to the Stars, to your studies in Ancient Earth Political Sciences. But there has to be some way to distinguish between them. I look at the kids walking around the official sectors, and then I look at Timme. One-Arm and all, Timme is alive, alert, you can see it in his face. There’s a kid Parks is training in Market Research, a bright boy; but every response comes out in slow motion. Parks tells me the boy’s appalled at the lack of interest we show in the rituals—thinks we’re all oafish brutes with no interest in the higher things.”

Ralf waited for me to go on as I turned in my seat.

“What it all comes down to, is that someday—and this seems to be the thing they’ve all forgotten—someday there won’t be any more Cities. There will be a bright new world hanging in the night before us, with natural forces to fight and food to be searched for, tracked, and hunted; not handed to us on a conveyor belt from the hydroponics garden. All right, you and I will never see it, but it’s not five or six hundred years from now any more; it’s only a hundred and fifty, two hundred years away. And one and the other considered, I’d rather turn Timme out on a new world to struggle for his own than Parks’ little bright-eyed boy. If I let the City become a bunch of blank-faced ritual followers, then I’m not fulfilling my responsibility.”

There was silence for seconds as Ralf thought. I wondered what answer he might make. Merrill did not seem to have one.

Just then Timme called in, “Here’s Hodge.”

And the answer, whatever it was, was delayed.

I turned as Hodge reached the door. He was tall, with high cheek bones and deep eyes. The black hood was pushed back from his face and as he stopped on the threshold, the emblem of rope he carried over his shoulder swung around against his chest. His black uniform made me conscious of all the other colors in the room; the paintings which I had thought somber now seemed very bright.

We talked a little more, and when dinner time came, I excused myself and Timme took me through the hectic journey back to the mouth of the web. This time I kept my eyes open. I saw many of the One-Eyes making the fantastic leap onto the Ring, as though they were stepping off a curb.

Timme, as he towed me along, guessed my thought. “You know Hodge can get around the web almost as well as a One-Eye,” he said. “But he still needs help over the jump. Just takes practice though.”

He cut me loose and gave me a shove into the corridor. Gravity returned and I staggered forward. Then I turned, waved good-bye to Timme, and started back to my office.

VIII

Second entry:

Parks woke me up at three thirty this morning to give me the first report. He was on Night Watch in the Market so of course he noticed it first. I got out of my bed, went over and jammed the Receive Button on the emergency intercom. “What the hell’s the matter,” I said. “Has the sand count gone up again—”

“Captain, this is Parks down in the Market.”

“What in the world do you want at this hour of the morning?”

“I just checked the sand count, Captain. It’s been steady. But there’s something else, even worse—”

“Huh?”

“The hard radiation all over the City has just tripled. It’s not enough to bother anyone where you are, but I’m worried about its effect on the foetuses down here. I’ve tried to shield the stalls off, but I don’t know how much good it’s doing.”

“Well, what’s gone wrong? Have you found out which one of the reactors is haywire?”

“That’s just it. None of them. It’s coming from outside the City.”

“Are you sure? Have you contacted any of the other Cities to see if they’ve registered the same thing?”

“I wanted to call you first, Captain, and see what you said.”

“Then I’ll call up Alpha-9 and see what’s going on.”

“Right, Captain. Can I listen in?”

I got the Nine and waited for about five minutes for Riche to answer. Finally his voice came over: “Leela, well how’s my girl today?”

“She’s puzzled,” I said. “We’ve got radiation flooding our City. As of yet it’s not very high, but it’s coming from outside, so they tell me.”

“You too?” His voice grew a bit worried. “About twenty minutes ago somebody over here woke me up to tell me the same thing. I told him to go check everything from top to bottom and then went back to bed. I had a hard night over here arguing with

Judge Pilots. Somebody in one of the free-fall sectors pushed off too hard and smashed his head. Two One-Eyes found him and tried to help him but he died. Now the good Judge wants to press charges on them for interfering with a citizen. So I yelled at him all evening till he got tired. But I'm bushed too. What about this radiation business? I knew we'd hit light sand yesterday—"

Suddenly there was a burst of static in which I could detect voices that lasted for nearly a minute. Then it stopped and Captain Riche said, "Hey, what happened?"

"I don't know," I said. "Everything's all right over there?" But in the middle of my sentence the static started again, and this time the attention lights all over my desk began to blink at me.

I answered the closest one.

Meeker from Communications answered, "I don't know, but whatever it is, it's happening on Epsilon-7. They're trying to contact us, but something's way the hell wrong."

"Switch me on, will you?"

"O.K."

The static returned, and with it the unintelligible voices. Meeker overrode it once more with: "Turn on your video, Captain, and I'll relay what I'm getting."

I switched on the large screen above my desk. It went from gray to black, and a handful of luminous disks appeared against the far speckling of stars. It was the radio view of all the cities.

Somehow they cut through the static and the voices—which I now realized was only one voice echoing back on itself again and again—were intelligible for a brief period.

"... Epsilon-7 this is Epsilon-7, emergency red, emergency red, can anyone read me, can anyone read me... Epsilon-7—"

The other Cities must have all been tuned in by now. Finally

another voice came in, completely static-free. “This is Captain Vlyon of Delta-6. I read you clearly. Go ahead.” Apparently Delta-6 was having a lot less trouble with interference than we were.

“Thank God. This is One-Eyed Pike, calling from the One-Eyed Quarter of Epsilon-7. The rest of them are dead, the whole official quarter. I don’t know, they went crazy or something. Someone came, or something, a man with green...” Static again, and when it cleared Captain Vlyon was saying: “I’m sorry, I don’t understand your story. Please calm down, Pike, and tell me again.”

“The whole damn ship nearly exploded, I think. Maybe forty minutes ago. It was night cycle in the City, but there was a huge jerk, everybody woke up. A couple of people got hurt, and then they started to go crazy, because they didn’t know. And in the Concourse—I didn’t see, but they told me—a figure, all on fire, with green eyes began to walk. No, I don’t understand it. But they died. Twenty minutes ago, a group of us tried to get into the official sector, and there were corpses all over, just dead, all over, and a few screaming still, trying to tell us, and then we saw a light, and we fled back here.”

“Now look a minute, Pike—”

“Now you look. God damn it, you come here and get us out! We’re hiding out in the web, but you can take the shuttle boats across. For God’s sake, come over here and get us out of this—” Over Pike’s voice came a scream; then Pike cried out. Then I saw why Meeker had put me onto visual.

One of the circles—Epsilon-7—wasn’t right. There was a nimbus around it and the ship was quivering. Then suddenly the radio went completely dead and on the screen Epsilon-7 began to break up. First it crushed in; then five or six fragments sped off in different directions as though they had been hurled. What was left just cracked apart like an eggshell. Within five minutes the twelve-mile hunk of metal was torn to bits in front of my eyes and

the pieces scattered through space.

By now there must have been people on all eleven remaining Cities watching what I had just seen. For ten minutes there was silence. I was beyond speech.

Finally Captain Alva's voice came through. "Captain Vlyon, are you still there? What happened?"

A very strained voice came back. "Yes. I'm... still here. I don't..."

He didn't finish. I felt that perhaps Captain Vlyon was not the same man whose voice we had heard before; I don't mean anything mysterious. Were any of us the same?

"I don't know," he repeated.

Third entry:

The shock had worn off, and in cessation, the rumor has fled over the City. Light sand continues, but compared to the destruction of a City, that is no problem. There is a still panic, no way to protect ourselves. Judge Cartrite greeted me affably this morning: "Well, at least one good thing has come out of this. A good many people have returned to the rituals."

I suppose he expected me to be overjoyed. Meeker and three other communication engineers in three other cities had enough presence of mind to record everything that went on that evening. Communications was busy all morning making a detailed comparison, as well as trying to unscramble some of the staticked out sections. They cleared up perhaps ten more words by the end of the afternoon which added nothing to what we already know. There was a depressing inter-city conference that afternoon during which we were supposed to offer suggestions.

First, five minutes of silence; then fifteen minutes of embarrassed, preposterous speculation. Finally the meeting was abandoned.

It was nearly dinner hour when Captain Alva called me again.

“What’s happened now,” I asked. “Something come up?”

“Just more trouble. Somehow the rumor got out that the One-Eyes on Epsilon-7 had taken it over and managed to blow it up.”

“What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing serious, but there’s talk of putting rigid enforcement on the Norm again.”

“Who came out with that idea?”

“I don’t know. The idea that the City could just go up like that is too much for most of them. You can almost watch each person turning around and around, looking for someone to blame it on. The One-Eyes are the easiest.”

“But why?”

“Oh, the logic works something like this: the last report we got from Epsilon-7 came from a One-Eye, so therefore they were the last people in charge of the City, therefore they must have taken it over from the officers, and so on and so forth.”

“And managed to destroy the whole City?”

“Don’t ask me. One of the ritual groups here has already incorporated it; they get themselves high on ether, then all stand around while their leader puts out the left eye of a large doll. Then every one moans and has visions of destruction.”

“Ether?” I asked. “I don’t like that at all.”

“Neither do I. As far as I’m concerned, the rituals can get as involved as they want to, but I draw the line at the use of

narcotics.”

I agreed with him. “I just hope this ritual business doesn’t get completely out of hand. This afternoon I got a complaint from Parks—he’s my head Market Research man—about the kid he’s training to be his assistant. Parks told me that the kid always brought a little pad of paper and pencil to work with him and would take it out and doodle on it occasionally. Parks always thought the kid was using it to figure out something. But when the kid came in today Parks couldn’t get any work out of him. He just sat there and doodled, and when Parks asked him why, he said that his ritual group always wrote down certain signs when certain categories of thoughts entered their heads. He wouldn’t say what they were but apparently he was thinking them all the time and had to sit in the corner making circles, crosses, and parallelograms.”

“I can believe it,” Captain Alva told me. “This whole business has me worried—which is the euphemism of the day.”

Fourth entry:

I had been at work in my office for perhaps fifteen minutes when Judge Cartrite sent through a request to see me.

“Come right in,” I said into the intercom, and a moment later the judge entered.

“Good morning, good morning. I just thought I would stop up and check through you before I got busy. There’ll be a lot of changes to be made now, a lot of lax laws will have to be enforced more strictly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, has it or hasn’t it been adopted as the official explanation of the catastrophe of Epsilon-7.”

I put my fingers together and leaned back. “As far as I know, there has been no vaguely plausible explanation advanced.”

“Oh, come now,” said Judge Cartrite. “You don’t mean you haven’t heard. That’s why I came to see if it was official. It’s all over the City.”

“What’s all over the City?”

“That the One-Eyed sector of Epsilon-7 tried to take over their City, slaughtered the population, and blew up the ship.”

“Nothing of the kind has even been considered.”

“Well then perhaps you ought to—”

“And it’s preposterous.”

“Are you sure you can say that?”

“I am. Here, I want you to listen to a transcription of everything that came across from Epsilon-7 the night she went.”

I called Meeker and got him to pipe up the playback on both sound and video. The judge sat through it perfectly still. I’d seen it fifteen times so I’d forgotten what a shock the first run-through could be. He was silent and his face was drawn. At last he muttered, “Well...”

“Did that sound like a man who had just taken over a ship to you?”

“Well,” he repeated. “Perhaps it... wasn’t real, or was fixed or something. After all, what did take over the ship, then? The green man with the flaming eyes, or whatever that nonsense was?”

After the judge left, Parks gave me a ring. “You know, Captain, the radiation is still pretty high. The mutations that are going to come out of this will set the Norm jumping something awful.”

“I’ll come down and take a look.”

“Not that there’s anything anybody can actually do,” Parks said. Then he added, “But it would make us feel better.”

The Market is bright with fluorescent fixtures and stall after stall is sided with glittering tubes where infants are brought to term. The front of the Market is occupied with the genealogical files where the chromosome pattern of each person in the City is on record.

Parks’ assistant sat at the desk, blond head down, absorbed in his pad. A moment later Parks came up. “Hello,” he said, smiling. He saw me glance at his assistant and made a hopeless gesture. “Ignore him. I’ll show you what I’ve done.”

We went toward the back. “I’ve put lead foil around the early blastulas. They need it most. I don’t think anything over four months will be affected, but it’s still going to be nip and tuck.” One section of the glittering rack was dark where the tubes had been wrapped in lead.

Looking at the dull, crinkled foil, I suddenly felt the heaviness of the responsibility to these born and unborn thousands, hurtling between stars, lost somewhere in timelessness, sea and desert, life and catastrophe, spinning around one another like dots on dice.

“Well,” I told Parks, “like you said, there’s not much I can do. This place is depressing. Or maybe it just brings out the mother in me.”

Parks laughed. I left the Market and went back up to my cabin.

Fifth entry:

Captain Alva called this evening from Sigma-9, very upset. “Lee, what’s your situation with the One-Eyes.”

“Cartrite’s been annoying the hell out of them,” I told him.

I heard his breath whistle through the speaker. “It’s worse over here,” he said. “I’m going to ask something strange of you right now.”

“Go ahead,” I said, question mark implied.

“Will you join with me in an official request to the judicial offices of all the Cities not to persecute the One-Eyes. I’m asking all the captains to do the same. The way things are going here, they’ll be extinct in no time, and when their knowledge is gone, so is all humanity.”

“We’re not supposed to meddle with the judicials,” I mused.

“Lee—”

“Shut up, Alva, I’m just thinking out loud. But we’re not that far away from where you are. If you already had the consent of the other captains, I’d feel better about the whole thing. Oh, hell, what am I, a woman or a mouse? Sure, you’ve got my consent, Captain Alva; just send a wording of the statement to me before you present it.”

“Thanks, Lee.” The gratitude in his voice reflected the relief even I felt. “You’re the third captain who’s gone along with me.”

“I think you’ll get us all,” I told him, “if the condition in this City is any indication.” Then I added, “I hope it does some good.”

I heard Alva sigh. It was a long sigh; I bet it sent the stars outside shaking. “I hope so too, Lee.”

Sixth entry:

They’re gone. Must I cry, rage; the City of Delta-6 is destroyed. This time it took ten hours. It began with a blast of

static that wiped out the broadcast of One-Eyed Jack's trial which we were all monitoring. Faint signals started coming through, panic had broken out on the ship, then a call for help from the Communications Department. Then more static. Apparently the green-eyed being was back. It was fantastic. I don't know how to take it seriously. It would be easier to think it some cosmic joke. But it is real, and the lives of all the citizens of the City depend on perceiving the reality correctly. Toward the end, the only communication was from the One-Eyes. Help, help, and help again. Some green-eyed being who stole their sanity as well as their organization marched among the survivors on that ruined ship for ten hours, and at the end, there was destruction. At the end, I relayed to Captain Alva: "Can't we do something? What if I go over there...?"

"Don't be silly, Lee. What can you do?"

"At least find out... at least..."

Over the intercom someone was screaming.

"If you die, will that do any good, Lee?"

"It will if I can find out what's killing off the rest of them."

Then on the vision screen, the ship began to break apart... God, the screaming—

IX

"Skip the next couple of pages," the boy said.

So Joneny turned them over. His eyes caught up the words again at:

And when I heard Captain Alva shrieking over the clattering speaker, “Help, oh, for God’s sake, will somebody help us,” what could I do?

I radioed down to Meeker, “Get an inter-city ferry ready. I’m going over there to take a look.”

“But Captain,” Meeker said, “if you get caught...”

“The last one lasted ten hours. That should give me time enough to get there and back.”

“The one before that lasted sixteen minutes. This one could be longer, shorter, or the same. And what about the sand count...”

“I’m going, Meeker. Get the shuttle ready.”

When I was swinging out of my office five minutes later, suddenly someone from an adjoining corridor barked, “Captain!”

“What is it, Judge Cartrite?”

“Meeker just informed me you were heading over to Sigma-9.”

“And what the hell business is it of yours?” I snapped angrily.

“Captain, I forbid you to go. And if you do go, I certainly forbid you to come back.”

That brought me up short. “And where do you come off with the authority to say what I can or cannot do?”

“If you remember, I have charge of the responsibility of morals on this ship. I feel, that if you returned from Sigma-9 it would be demoralizing...”

“For God’s sake, Judge, what are you afraid of... ?”

“Well suppose you bring the Destroyer back with you?”

“The Destroyer... ?”

“Yes, the green-eyed creature that is wrecking—”

I interrupted him. “Well, at least you’re off blaming it on the One-Eyes. I’m going, Judge...”

I wasn’t paying too much attention to him because I was both frightened and furious.

I got to the boat, locked the locks behind me, unplugged my ears, opened my eyes, and radioed myself clear. The triple ports swung back and I barreled out into the sand. The meter read three point seven. The Sigma-9 grew in the view screen like a shimmering egg.

The robot receiver announced: “Your ears are unplugged—” I switched on my radio—“and your eyes are seeing.”

The hatch opened up and as I drifted into the lock, the sand meter swung down. The tunnel attached itself, and as I stepped out, my stomach retreated against my backbone in fear of what I might find. I felt a slight metal tingling, which I assumed at first was part of my own anticipation. As I walked up the corridor—it was empty—it grew stronger, until, as I was walking toward the navigation offices, I realized there was something ringing in my head like a buzzer. I turned toward the City Plaza, wondering where on the road to destruction I was.

Suddenly I saw a few people ahead. They were staggering silently away from me. One fell, then two more. The other wove to the side—one leaned against a column for a moment, then she too slipped to the ground.

I tried my belt radio, thinking maybe I could zero in on where the remaining forces of the City were held up. When I turned the switch, the buzzing left my head and became real. Just as I was trying to figure out what to do, the hum on the speaker began to rise and fall, and then articulated into a voice. “*Who are you?*”

“Huh?” I said in surprise, and wanted to know—though I didn’t say it—who the hell are you?

“I am the Destroyer. Your people call me the Destroyer. Who are you come to hunt the Destroyer?”

It was weird. I thought maybe somebody who’d lost their nuts had gotten hold of what communications devices were left.

“Where are you?” I demanded. The radio wasn’t two-way, but in the frustration, I guess I must have forgotten it. I remember I called out, “Where are you? I’m trying to help you!”

And the radio, blared out in the oscillating voice: *“I’m here.”*

Then it happened. I think most of it happened in my head. Things just went crazy, emotions, thoughts, impressions, and through the whirling chaos around me, something great and shimmering staggered into the concourse, the great form of a man—naked, huge, but like some sort of ghost, with flowing eyes.

The whole thing took me so I just cried out, “Stop that!”

And it stopped. My head jarred back into place on my shoulders, and I could see the figure glittering, fading, disappearing and reaffirming itself across the shattered wreckage over the plaza.

“I am here,” it repeated, but this time the voice reverberated from the vague area of its head.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, and was only then struck by the impossibility that I had all along been communicating.

“Help me,” it said. *“I—I—I don’t know.”*

“You’re killing us,” I cried. “That’s what you’re doing!”

“I approached slowly,” it said. *“Very carefully into their minds, but they died screaming. Their minds are not big enough.”* It swayed and staggered, gaining form and losing it like a dream.

My heart was pounding, though I was beginning to recover.

“But you’re not killing me,” I said.

“You told me to stop. I’m not in your mind now, just the image in your eyes and ears.”

I wasn’t too sure what it was talking about, so I said, “Well bring your image a little closer, but don’t do anything that will... hurt my mind. I want to see you.”

Three steps carried him across the floor, till he stood green eyed, towering above me.

“You don’t really see me,” he said. *“I took this image from their minds, to try and come closer with. But their minds break up, even when I come slowly.”*

“And what about me?” I asked, unsure what I was really talking about.

“I came to you fast, and you yelled stop, so I stopped.”

“Oh,” I said, “well, thanks.” I remembered what coming fast had meant. Suddenly I remembered. “Where is Captain Alva?”

“He’s dead, and so are most of the others... there, they are all dead now .”

“All... ?”

“They didn’t say stop.”

Suddenly it hit me. “Well then you stay stopped, damn you. All? What in the— Don’t move ever again. Why didn’t you stop anyway? What the hell do you think you are?” I screamed it, and maybe some more besides; I don’t remember. When I stopped I was quivering, mad, and scared.

It didn’t say anything, it just shook there in front of me. At last I could only ask, “What are *you*?”

And more softly, as if it had understood on a deeper level, it repeated, *“I don’t know.”*

Then it occurred to me to ask: “Where are you from?”

“Outside, outside the City. I exist in the—the sand, you call it, the meson fields outside the star-ships.”

“You’re—” The idea came to me as something too big trying to fit in the too small space of my head. “You’re... a living being from the sea and the sand?”

He nodded.

I had been going up till now on a hysterical drive that had battered up against what it met without question. But now the impossibilities began to flood my mind and I struck at them with questions.

“But who—how—how can you communicate with me?”

“I can’t, really,” it explained. *“I took apart their minds, and I know your words and your images, but your minds are too small for me. I can’t really communicate with you, but I know what you are thinking. I took the image, so you could see something of me. But I took the image from your people.”*

I let the breath, which had somehow stopped, come back into my lungs. “I see.”

“I did not realize,” it went on, *“that you were alive until just now when you told me to stop. That was the first time any of you addressed me directly.”*

Again I nodded.

“The image comes to me of one of your people breaking open an anthill to see what is inside. That is how I broke open your ships. I saw the confusion, but I did not realize it was wrong until you told me.”

“You are a very different sort of life form than we are,” I said. “Are your people common all over interstellar space?”

“No people. There is only me.”

“You must be very lonely,” I said.

“Lonely...?”

And I actually heard the rising inflection of interrogation.

“I... lonely,” and then something odd happened. The room began to quiver around me, and for a moment I thought the chaos was going to begin.

“Yes, I am very lonely. But I did not know it until you told me the word .”

The quivering began again, and there was a shift in color values.

“For pity’s sake,” I called out, *“what’s happening to you?”*

And from the green eyes I suddenly saw tears flowing, flooding over those shimmering cheeks.

“You see, I am doing what you would call crying.”

“Try and control yourself,” I said. *“I... understand... It would be hard to discover that you were all alone. You discover that as soon as you meet somebody.”*

“Yes.” There was a pause. *“As soon as you meet somebody who is not alone, like you.”*

“You don’t think I’m alone?” I said.

Again a pause, and the colors returned more or less to normal. *“You are, I see from your mind, but not as much as I am.”* Again the pause, then the quivering, then the kaleidoscope. It said, *“I love you.”*

“What?” I said.

The words repeated, and there was less sensory confusion.

“You love me?” I asked. *“Why?”*

“Because you are a power among your people; you are alone, and not alone.”

It was complete confusion, and at the same time I thought I saw.

“That’s... very flattering.”

“Will you love me?”

That brought me up short. I had been feeling all sorts of empathy with this creature, had begun to understand, if not forgive its destruction, but this... ?

“I don’t even know what that would mean,” I said. “I don’t want to laugh at you, but I couldn’t even begin to comprehend what loving you would mean.”

“The word is from your mind,” came its answer. *“If I give you something that you want very much, will you love me?”*

“I still don’t...”

It interrupted me: *“More than anything else, you want descendants who will be able to live among the stars, and you know as well that most of your people could not do so now. I will promise you that I will break apart no more of your ships, and that your progeny will be able to live among the stars, as well as communicate with me, throughout all time...”*

I guess everybody has a pressure point that you just have to touch to make everything go bang. The colors changed this time because my irises suddenly opened. The quivering was inside me. I don’t know what the emotion was:

It said, *“You love me,”* and opened its great glittering arms. *“Come,”* and I started forward.

What happened next, oh all the powers and audience of the stars, what happened? I don’t know—the colors, the pain, the flood of sensation that caught me up and broke me apart in swirls of metallic ice, that burned me with myriad thoughts, complete and incomplete. The color, breaking from white through red, down through cascading green, soaring through gold that glittered and turned to emeralds, emerald as his eyes. The pain, transparent as

unbearable pleasure, loosed in my knees and cool in my loins, to surge again and flood the whole column of me, explode and glisten on my fingers, writhe in the center of tension, wave upon wave, gleaming on a clean beach. The flood, it rose, rose, fell, and rose again mounting till I screamed and laughed and covered my mouth with open fingers, as the whole musculature of my body tensed and flattened against itself, quivering toward a release that came like thunder surging forward through my pelvis from the base of my spine to flower there, burn, and bloom... I held all his flickering presence, gentle as mist in my arms, hard as metal.

Next entry:

The Sigma-9 tore apart, heaving, two minutes after my inter-city shuttle took off. The radio interference knocked my eyes coal black and something was goofy in the gravity spin so I drifted all the way back in free fall, feeling like I had a stiff hang-over.

I radioed for entrance, and after the robot went through its little bit, suddenly a voice cut in, "This is Smythers of the judicial office, Captain Lee. Judge Cartrite has told us we are not to allow you entrance to the City."

"You *what?*"

"I said Judge Cartrite doesn't want..."

"You open that damn lock this instant, or when I get in there I'll tear you to pieces."

"I'm sorry..."

"Put Cartrite on the phone. He's been waiting for me to jet outside the City; but he's out of his mind if he thinks he is going to keep me locked up here."

"We have two others here and the three of us are to examine

you. Maybe if you went away and came back some other time, Judge Cartrite...”

“Have you all gone *nuts?*”

“No, Captain, but our rituals.”

“I don’t give a damn about your rituals.”

“Captain,” it was another voice, “can you tell me what note this is?”

Something that sounded for all the world like a trumpet rang through the speaker.

“No I can’t,” I said. “Why should I?”

“Well, it’s part of the ritualistic examination Judge Cartrite set up for your entrance. The note of the trumpet signifies the call that came to our ancestors...”

“I’ll kill you,” I said. “When I find out who you are, I’m going to declare you insane and have you put in the Death’s Head. Now let me in. I said I was coming back and I’ve come back. Suppose I told you I’ve found out what caused the wreck of the other cities. Suppose I told you that I can stop it from happening here... if you let me in.”

There was silence.

“You’ve found the green-eyed leader of the rebellious One-Eyes?”

“You haven’t brought him back with you?” demanded the other.

“Of course I haven’t,” I snapped. “And it’s no man, one or two-eyed.”

“Well what was it?” asked the third lawyer, the one with the trumpet.

“Why don’t I just sit here and let you guess, until you decide

time is running out.”

“I’m going to get Judge Cartrite,” I heard one say, and tootle his trumpet.

Two minutes later, before the judge got there, one of them—you could hear him gnashing his nails—said, “I’m going to let her in.”

And the triple lock rolled back. I figured they’d be crying before the judge got through with them, but I didn’t really care.

Twenty minutes later I was talking to Judge Cartrite on the phone, and I told him enough that I think his hair began to singe. But I didn’t let the cat out of the bag. For the next week I kept to my quarters. The first day my feet were sore from the no gravity of the ride back, but after that I was just being careful.

Finally I went down to the Markets. “Parks,” I said. His assistant was doodling over at the desk. Behind us the rows on rows of embryo flasks were banked to the ceiling. “Parks, I’ve got a problem; maybe you can help me.”

“What is it, Captain?”

“I’m pregnant, Parks.”

“You’re *what?*”

“I said I was going to have a baby.”

He sat down on the desk. “But... how?”

“That’s a very good question,” I said. “And I’m not too sure of the answer. But I want you to get it out of me.”

“You mean an abortion?”

“Hell, no,” I said. “I want you to remove it with tender loving care and get it into one of those embryo flasks of yours.”

“I still don’t see... I mean everybody on the ship is kept harmonically sterile. How did you...” Then he said, “Are you

sure?”

“Examine me,” I said.

He did, and told me, “Well, I guess you are. When do you want it transferred?”

“Right away,” I said. “Keep it alive, Parks. I’d bring it to term myself, but there’s nobody in the whole nation that has the muscles left to go through labor, and come out alive.”

“It’ll be alive,” said Parks.

I had a local anesthetic and watched the whole business through a series of mirrors. It was fascinating, and when I was finished, I was hungry as could be. I went upstairs, had dinner in my room, and thought some more.

While I was thinking, Parks suddenly buzzed me from the Market. “Captain Lee, Captain Lee—” and then he got caught on something that sounded like choking.

“Is the kid all right?” I demanded.

“Oh, yeah, he’s fine. But Captain, the rest, they’re dying. They’re dying all over the place. I’ve lost half the supply already.”

“Has the radiation on our ship gone up?” My first thought was that the Destroyer had broken its promise and moved in on us. But the wreck of the Sigma-9 still drifted along with us.

“It’s you, Captain. Check yourself, that’s all I can think of. I checked your embryo, and it’s soaked with radiation. I can’t understand why it’s still alive. But it is, and doing very well. But sometime or other, this place was blasted by enough hard gamma to upset everything and kill off half the stores here. Even I’m feeling a little woozy and had to undergo decontamination.”

“I see,” I said. “I’ll call you back and tell you what I find.”

I switched off and turned to the scintillator. It said that I had been dead since I arrived on the ship. I was going to phone Parks

when I was interrupted by a *beep*. Judge Cartrite's face came together on the screen.

“Captain, I’m sorry to bother you, but I thought this was something I’d better see to in person.”

“What is it?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to place you under arrest.”

“Arrest? For what?”

“Leela RT-857 vs. The Norm.”

“And aside from the trivia, how do I differ from the run of the mill?”

“It’s not trivial, Captain. You were pregnant. And in this City that’s unforgivable as well as illegal.”

“Who told you?” I wanted to know. I couldn’t imagine Parks giving out something like that.

But the answer when it came was all too believable. “Parks’ new assistant overheard...”

After a few more lines, the entries stopped.

Joney closed the book. The boy, still in the gell, was holding another book, a similar diary. “This one is Hodge’s,” he said. “Hodge, the executioner.”

Joney took it, frowning, and as he turned through the laconic mentions of death after death, verses of the ballad threaded through his mind once more:

“She walked through the gate and the voices cried,
She walked through the market and the children died,
She walked past the courthouse and the judge so still,
She walked to the bottom of Death’s Head hill.”

And the one-eyed woman who held her green-eyed child? The last few pages were in more detail: Hodge had written:

The trial is over now. It went very quickly. There was no defense. I was not there, but I heard.

I see her in the death cell every few hours when she walks slowly in front of the long thin window. Death is heavy on her shoulders. I do not think she is afraid. Once she stopped and called to me. I came over, opened the little door in the top so I could hear better, and she said: “Hodge, what’s happening in the rest of the City?”

“It’s in chaos,” I told her. “The rituals have gotten out of hand, and people have raided the web and are killing the One-Eyes. They go out in hunting parties now, with gas and spears. Ralf is dead I know. I don’t go there any more.”

She had looked calm before but her face seemed struck now. “Can you get Parks here to see me?” she said softly.

“I’m not supposed to,” I said. “But I will, Captain.”

Parks, from the Market, hurried up there so fast he was panting. He looked at me like he wanted me to go away, but I couldn't do that. So finally the Captain told him to go ahead anyway, and that I could be trusted. When she said that, he glanced at me with hate and said, "Trusted to kill you?"

"That too," said the Captain. "Go on, Parks, what about the child. Is it safe?"

He nodded. "They tried to break in, and a lot of the tubes were smashed. But after the first attack... well, I got an idea. You see, Captain, someone's with us now."

She frowned.

"After one of the raids on the web, when Ralf was killed, Merrill came to us in the Market. She knows I'm friendly, anyway. And, well, the same way we took it out of you, we put it into her. She'll hold it up until a week or so before normal labor would occur, and then we'll remove it by Caesarean. At least it will be in a mobile container, and any more stupid tube-smashing parties won't get it."

"Good," I said.

"Just what does that child mean, Captain?" Parks asked. "There's something special about it, isn't there? It has to do with what happened on the Sigma-9?"

"That's right." And then she told him. It didn't make too much sense to me. But she said a lot of scientific-sounding things, and

at the end, Parks said, “Then we will make it to the stars,” very slowly, very softly. Then, “They won’t get at it. The One-Eyes who’re left will raise it. Merrill thought it was something like that. But I didn’t realize—” He stopped. “Merril cried for you, Captain. When we were in the Market, there, talking about your execution, she—we cried.”

She just held on to the edge of the window, hard, and a muscle in her jaw jumped a few times. All she said was, “Make sure it lives.”

The last two entries in Hodge’s Journal were:

“The riots are growing, they are threatening to come even here.”

And:

“Executed today, four o’clock in the afternoon, Captain Leela RT-857.”

Joney turned to the Destroyer’s child. “It lived,” he said.

The boy nodded. “After I was grown, I could make as many duplicates as we wanted, without going through the whole birth process.”

Joney suddenly frowned. “And that explains all your antics, then. You, like your father, exist a little outside time, and that’s why the shimmering and the movement during time-stop.” Suddenly Joney frowned. “But the promise, he made her a promise, that you would someday reach the stars, and be able to make contact!”

“He didn’t say when. Aren’t you going to take me back to the

University for study?”

“Well of course, but...” Suddenly Joneny began to laugh. “With your mind reading, you *can* make contact with any race. And that coupled with the extra-time facility, why this might be the biggest discovery in galactic anthropology since... since I don’t even know.”

The boy nodded. “That’s what we were made for. We can bring all the information back to my father, and he will digest it for you, and then we’ll give it to you. You’ll take us to the places where you want to make contact, and that’s what we’ll do.”

Joneny was about to burst. “And that’s living up to the promise more than ever, because you’ll be making contact for not only half humans, but for them all, the great-grandchildren of completely genetic humans as well. And you’ll be sort of a go-between for you and your father. Are you in contact with him all the time, no matter where he is, and no matter where you are?”

The boy tilted his head and nodded. “My father and I are one,” he said.

Back in his cruiser, Joneny once more reviewed the whole of the *Ballad of Beta-2*, and marveled at how clear it seemed now. The story of Leela’s attempt to save her people was as immediate to him through those compressed verses as many incidents he had lived through. Who had written the Ballad, he wondered. Some last One-Eye? Or perhaps someone from the official sector in whom impotent compassion turned potently to words? He was already planning how to make use of the Destroyer’s Children in his research into Creton III, yet through his planning, still the closing verse of the hymn—it was a hymn in a way—came back:

*Fire and blood, meat, dung and bone,
Down on your knees, steel, stone, and wood
Today are dust, and the City's gone,
But she came back like she said she would.*

Scanned by Highroller.

Proofed by unknown hero.