Whipping Star – Jorj McKie 01
Frank Herbert
1969
A BuSab agent must begin by learning the linguistic modes and action limits (usually self-imposed) of the societies he treats. The agent seeks data on the functional relationships which derive from our common universe and which arise from interdependencies. Such interdependencies are the frequent first victims of word-illusions. Societies based on ignorance of original interdependencies come sooner or later to stalemate. Too long frozen, such societies die.
-BuSab Manual
Furuneo was his name. Alichino Furuneo. He reminded, himself of this as he rode into the city to make the long-distance call. It was wise to firm up the ego before such a call. He was sixty-seven years old and could remember many cases where people had lost their identity in the sniggertrance of communication between star systems. More than the cost and the mind-crawling sensation of dealing with a Taprisiot transmitter, this uncertainty factor tended to keep down the number of calls. But Furuneo didn't feel he could trust anyone else with this call to Jorj X. McKie, Saboteur Extraordinary.
It was 8:08 A.M. local at Furuneo's position on the planet called Cordiality of the Sfich system.

"This is going to be very difficult, I suspect," he muttered, speaking at (but not to) the two enforcers he had brought along to guard his privacy.
They didn't even nod, realizing no reply was expected.
It was still cool from the night wind which blew across the snow plains of the Billy Mountains down to the sea. They had driven here into Division City from Furuneo's mountain fortress, riding in an ordinary groundcar, not attempting to hide or disguise their association with the Bureau of Sabotage, but not seeking to attract attention, either. Many sentients had reason to resent the Bureau.
Furuneo had ordered the car left outside the city's Pedestrian Central, and they had come the rest of the way on foot like ordinary citizens.
Ten minutes ago they had entered the reception room of this building. It was a Taprisiot breeding center, one of only about twenty known to exist in the universe, quite an honor for a minor planet like Cordiality.
The reception room was no more than fifteen meters wide, perhaps thirty-five long. It had tan walls with pitted marks in them as though they had been soft once and someone had thrown a small ball at them according to some random whim. Along the right side across from where Furuneo stood with his enforcers was a high bench. It occupied three-fourths of the long wall. Multi-faceted rotating lights above it cast patterned shadows onto the face of the bench and the Taprisiot standing atop it.
Taprisiots came in odd shapes like sawed-off lengths of burned conifers, with stub limbs jutting every which way, needlelike speech appendages fluttering even when they remained silent. This one's skidfeet beat a nervous rhythm on the surface where it stood.
For the third time since entering, Furuneo asked, "Are you the transmitter?"
No answer.
Taprisiots were like that. No sense getting angry. It did no good. Furuneo allowed himself to be annoyed, though. Damned Taprisiots!

One of the enforcers behind Furuneo cleared his throat.
Damn this delay! Furuneo thought.
The whole Bureau had been in a state of jitters ever since the max-alert message on the Abnethe case. This call he was preparing to make might be their first real break. He sensed the fragile urgency of it. It could be the most important call he had ever made. And directly to McKie, at that.
The sun, barely over the Billy Mountains, spread an orange fan of light around him from the windowed doorway through which they had entered.
"Looks like it's gonna be a long wait for this Tappy," one of his enforcers muttered.
Furuneo nodded curtly. He had learned several degrees of patience in sixty-seven years, especially on his way up the ladder to his present position as planetary agent for the Bureau. There was only one thing to do here: wait it out quietly. Taprisiots took their own time for whatever mysterious reasons. There was no other store, though, where he could buy the service he needed now. Without a Taprisiot transmitter, you didn't make real-time calls across interstellar space.
Strange, this Taprisiot talent used by so many sentients without understanding. The sensational press abounded with theories on how it was accomplished. For all anyone knew, one of the theories could be right. Perhaps Taprisiots did make these calls in a way akin to the data linkage among PanSpechi creche mates not that this was understood, either.
It was Furuneo's belief that Taprisiots distorted space in a way similar to that of a Caleban jumpdoor, sliding between the dimensions. If that was really what Caleban jumpdoors did. Most experts denied this theory, pointing out that it would require energies equivalent to those produced by fair-sized stars.
Whatever Taprisiots did to make a call, one thing was certain: It involved the human pineal gland or its equivalent among other sentients.

The Taprisiot on the high bench began moving from side to side. "Maybe we're getting through to it," Furuneo said. He composed his features, suppressed his feelings of unease. This was, after all, a Taprisiot breeding center. Xenobiologists said Taprisiot reproduction was all quite tame, but Xenos didn't know everything. Look at the mess they'd made of analyzing the PanSpechi Con-Sentiency. "Putcha, putcha, putcha," the Taprisiot on the bench said, squeaking its speech needles. "Something wrong?" one of the enforcers asked. "How the devil do I know?" Furuneo snapped. He faced the Taprisiot, said, "Are you the transmitter?" "Putcha, putcha," the Taprisiot said. "This is a remark which I will now translate in the only way that may make sense to ones like yourselves of Sol/Earth ancestry. What I said was, 'I question your sincerity.'" "You gotta justify your sincerity to a damn Taprisiot?" one of the enforcers asked. "Seems to me . . ." "Nobody asked you!" Furuneo cut him off. Any probing attack by a Taprisiot was likely a greeting. Didn't the fool know this? Furuneo separated himself from the enforcers, crossed to a position below the bench. "I wish to make a call to Saboteur Extraordinary Jorj X. McKie," he said. "Your robogreeter recognized and identified me and took my creditchit. Are you the transmitter?""Where is this Jorj X. McKie?" the Taprisiot asked. "If I knew, I'd be off to him in person through a jumpdoor," Furuneo said. "This is an important call. Are you the transmitter?"



Furuneo thought of Jorj X. McKie, building the image in his mind squat little man, angry red hair, face like a disgruntled frog.
Contact began with tendrils of cloying awareness. Furuneo became in his own mind a red flow sung to the tune of a silver lyre. His body went remote. Awareness rotated above a strange landscape. The sky was an infinite circle with its horizon slowly turning. He sensed the stars engulfed in loneliness.
"What the ten million devils!"
The thought exploded across Furuneo. There was no evading it. He recognized it at once. Contactees frequently resented the call. They couldn't reject it, no matter what they were doing at the time, but they could make the caller feel their displeasure.
"It never fails! It never fails!"
McKie would be jerked to full inner awareness now, his pineal gland ignited by the long-distance contact.
Furuneo settled himself to wait out the curses. When they had subsided sufficiently, he identified himself, said, "I regret any inconvenience I may have caused, but the maxalert failed to say where you could be located. You must know I would not have called unless it were important."
A more or less standard opening.
"How the hell do I know whether your call's important?" McKie demanded. "Stop babbling and get on with it!"
This was an unusual extension of anger even for the volatile McKie. "Did I interrupt something important?" Furuneo ventured.
"I was just standing here in a telicourt getting a divorce!" McKie said. "Can't you imagine what a great

time everyone here's having, watching me mubble-dubble to myself in a sniggertrance? Get to the business!"
"A Caleban Beachball washed ashore last night below Division City here on Cordiality," Furuneo said. "In view of all the deaths and insanity and the max-alert message from the Bureau, I thought I'd better call you at once. It's still your case, isn't it?"
"Is this your idea of a joke?" McKie demanded.
In lieu of red tape, Furuneo cautioned himself, thinking of the Bureau maxim. It was a private thought, but McKie no doubt was catching the mood of it.
"Well?" McKie demanded.
Was McKie deliberately trying to unnerve him? Furuneo wondered. How could the Bureau's prime function to slow the processes of government remain operative on an internal matter such as this call? Agents were duty bound to encourage anger in government because it exposed the unstable, temperamental types, the ones who lacked the necessary personal control and ability to think under psychic stress, but why carry this duty over to a call from a fellow agent?
Some of these thoughts obviously bled through the Taprisiot transmitter because McKie reflected them, enveloping Furuneo in a mental sneer.
"You lotsa time unthink yourself," McKie said.
Furuneo shuddered, recovered his sense of self. Ahhh, that had been close. He'd almost lost his ego! Only the veiled warning in McKie's words had alerted him, allowing recovery. Furuneo began casting about in his mind for another interpretation of McKie's reaction. Interrupting the divorce could not account for it. If the stories were true, the ugly little agent had been married fifty or more times.
"Are you still interested in the Beachball?" Furuneo ventured.



"And don't forget the angeret."
A Bureau is a life form and the Bureaucrat one of its cells. This analogy teaches us which are the more important cells, which in greatest peril, which most easily replaced, and how easy it is to be mediocre.
-Later Writings of Bildoon IV
McKie, on the honeymoon planet of Tutalsee, took an hour to complete his divorce, then returned to the float-home they had moored beside an island of love flowers. Even the nepenthe of Tutalsee had failed him, McKie thought. This marriage had been wasted effort. His ex hadn't known enough about Mliss Abnethe despite their reported former association. But that had been on another world.
This wife had been his fifty-fourth, somewhat lighter of skin than any of the others and more than a bit of a shrew. It had not been her first marriage, and she had shown early suspicions of McKie's secondary motives.
Reflection made McKie feel guilty. He put such feelings aside savagely. There was no time for nicety. Too much was at stake. Stupid female!

She had already vacated the float-home, and McKie could sense the living entity's resentment. He had shattered the idyll which the float-home had been conditioned to create. The float-home would return to its former affability once he was gone. They were gentle creatures, susceptible to sentient irritation.

McKie packed, leaving his toolkit aside. He examined it: a selection of stims, plastipicks, explosives in various denominations, raygens, multigoggles, pentrates, a wad of uniflesh, solvos, miniputer, Taprisiot life monitor, holoscan blanks, rupters, comparators . . . all in order. The toolkit was a fitted wallet which he concealed in an inner pocket of his nondescript jacket.

He packed a few changes of clothing in a single bag, consigned the rest of his possessions to BuSab storage, left them for pickup in a sealpack which he stored on a couple of chairdogs. They appeared to share the float-home's resentment. They remained immobile even when he patted them affectionately.

Ah, well....

He still felt guilty.

McKie sighed, took out his S'eye key. This jump was going to cost the Bureau megacredits. Cordiality lay halfway across their universe.

Jumpdoors still seemed to be working, but it disturbed McKie that he must make this journey by a means which was dependent upon a Caleban. Eerie situation. S'eye jumpdoors had become so common that most sentients accepted them without question. McKie had shared this common acceptance before the max-alert. Now he wondered at himself. Casual acceptance demonstrated how easily rational thought could be directed by wishful thinking. This was a common susceptibility of all sentients. The Caleban jumpdoor had been fully accepted by the Confederated Sentients for some ninety standard years. But in that time, only eighty-three Calebans were known to have identified themselves.

McKie flipped the key in his hand, caught it deftly.

Why had the Calebans refused to part with their gift unless everyone agreed to call it a "S'eye"? What was so important about a name?

I should be on my way, McKie told himself. Still he delayed. Eighty-three Calebans. The max-alert had been explicit in its demand for secrecy and its outline of the problem: Calebans had been disappearing one by one. Disappearing -- if that was what the Caleban manifestation could be called. And each disappearance had been accompanied by a massive wave of sentient deaths and insanity. No question why the problem had been dumped in BuSab's lap instead of onto some police agency. Government fought back wherever it could: Powerful men hoped to discredit BuSab. McKie found his own share of disturbance in wondering about the hidden possibilities in the selection of himself as the sentient to tackle this. Who hates me? he wondered as he used his personally tuned key in the jumpdoor. The answer was that many people hated him. Millions of people. The jumpdoor began to hum with its aura of terrifying energies. The door's vortal tube snapped open. McKie tensed himself for the syrupy resistance to jumpdoor passage, stepped through the tube. It was like swimming in air become molasses -- perfectly normal-appearing air. But molasses. McKie found himself in a rather ordinary office: the usual humdrum whirldesk, alert-flicker light patterns cascading from the ceiling, a view out one transparent wall onto a mountainside. In the distance the rooftops of Division City lay beneath dull gray clouds, with a luminous silver sea beyond. McKie's implanted brainclock told him it was late afternoon, the eighteenth hour of a twenty-six-hour day. This was Cordiality, a world 200,000 light-years from Tutalsee's planetary ocean. Behind him, the jumpdoor's vortal tube snapped closed with a crackling sound like the discharge of electricity. A faint ozone smell permeated the air. The room's standard-model chairdogs had been well trained to comfort their masters, McKie noted.

One of them nudged him behind the knees until he dropped his bag and took a reluctant seat. The

chairdog began massaging his back. Obviously it had been instructed to make him comfortable while someone was summoned.

McKie tuned himself to the faint sounds of normality around him. Footsteps of a sentient could be heard in an outer passage. A Wreave by the sound of it: that peculiar dragging of the heel on a favored foot. There was a dim conversation somewhere, and McKie could make out a few Lingua-galach words, but it sounded like a multilingual conversation.

He began fidgeting, which set the chairdog into a burst of rippling movements to soothe him. Enforced idleness nagged at him. Where was Furuneo? McKie chided himself. Furuneo probably had many planetary duties as BuSab agent here. And he couldn't know the full urgency of their problem. This might be one of the planets where BuSab was spread thin. The gods of immortality knew the Bureau could always find work.

McKie began reflecting on his role in the affairs of sentiency. Once, long centuries past, con-sentients with a psychological compulsion to "do good" had captured the government. Unaware of the writhing complexities, the mingled guilts and self-punishments, beneath their compulsion, they had eliminated virtually all delays and red tape from government. The great machine with its blundering power over sentient life had slipped into high gear, had moved faster and faster. Laws had been conceived and passed in the same hour. Appropriations had flashed into being and were spent in a fortnight. New bureaus for the most improbable purposes had leaped into existence and proliferated like some insane fungus.

Government had become a great destructive wheel without a governor, whirling with such frantic speed that it spread chaos wherever it touched.

In desperation, a handful of sentients had conceived the Sabotage Corps to slow that wheel. There had been bloodshed and other degrees of violence, but the wheel had been slowed. In time, the Corps had become a Bureau, and the Bureau was whatever it was today -- an organization headed into its own corridors of entropy, a group of sentients who preferred subtle diversion to violence . . . but were prepared for violence when the need arose.

A door slid back on McKie's right. His chairdog became still. Furuneo entered, brushing a hand through the band of grey hair at his left ear. His wide mouth was held in a straight line, a suggestion of sourness about it.

"You're early," he said, patting a chairdog into place across from McKie and seating himself.

"Is this place safe?" McKie asked. He glanced at the wall where the S'eye had disgorged him. The jumpdoor was gone.
"I've moved the door back downstairs through its own tube," Furuneo said. "This place is as private as I can make it." He sat back, waiting for McKie to explain.
"That Beachball still down there?" McKie nodded toward the transparent wall and the distant sea.
"My men have orders to call me if it makes any move," Furuneo said. "It was washed ashore just like I said, embedded itself in a rock outcropping, and hasn't moved since."
"Embedded itself?"
"That's how it seems."
"No sign of anything in it?"
"Not that we can see. The Ball does appear to be a bit banged up. There are some pitting and a few external scars. What's this all about?"
"No doubt you've heard of Mliss Abnethe?"
"Who hasn't?"
"She recently spent some of her quintillions to hire a Caleban."



affliction." The precise content eluded him. Odd, he thought. It was as though the Calebans' crumbled projection created an effect on sentient memory akin to their effect on sentient vision.
Here lay the true source of sentient uneasiness about Calebans. Their artifacts were real the S'eye jumpdoors, the Beachballs in which they were reputed to live but no one had ever really seen a Caleban.
Furuneo, watching the fat little gnome of an agent sit there thinking, recalled the snide story about McKie, that he had been in BuSab since the day before he was born.
"She's hired a whipping boy, eh?" Furuneo asked.
"That's about it."
"The max-alert spoke of deaths, insanity '
"Are all your people dosed with angeret?" McKie asked.
"I got the message, McKie."
"Good. Anger seems to afford some protection."
"What exactly is going on?"
"Calebans have been vanishing," McKie said. "Every time one of them goes, there are quite a few deaths and other unpleasant effects physical and mental crippling, insanity "
Furuneo nodded in the direction of the sea, leaving his question unspoken.

McKie shrugged. "We'll have to go take a look. The hell of it is, up until your call there seemed to be only one Caleban left in the universe, the one Abnethe hired."
"How're you going to handle this?"
"That's a beautiful question," McKie said.
"Abnethe's Caleban," Furuneo said. "It have anything to say by way of explanation?"
"Haven't been able to interview it," McKie said. "We don't know where she's hidden herself or it."
"Don't know " Furuneo blinked. "Cordiality's pretty much of a backwater."
"That's what I've been thinking. You said this Beachball was a little the worse for wear?"
"That's odd, isn't it?"
"Another oddity among many."
"They say a Caleban doesn't get very far from its Ball," Furuneo said. "And they like to park 'em near water."
"How much of an attempt did you make to communicate with it?"
"The usual. How'd you find out about Abnethe hiring a Caleban?"

"She bragged to a friend who bragged to a friend who And one of the other Calebans dropped a hint before disappearing."
"Any doubt the disappearances and the rest of it are tied together?"
"Let's go knock on this thing's door and find out," McKie said.
Language is a kind of code dependent upon the life rhythms of the species which originated the language. Unless you learn those rhythms, the code remains mostly unintelligible.
-BuSab Manual
McKie's immediate ex-wife had adopted an early attitude of resentment toward BuSab. "They use you!" she had protested.
He had thought about that for a few minutes, wondering if it might be the reason he found it so easy to use others. She was right, of course.

McKie thought about her words now as he and Furuneo sped by groundcar toward the Cordiality coast. The question in McKie's mind was, How are they using me this time? Setting aside the possibility that he had been offered up as a sacrifice, there were still many possibilities in reserve. Was it his legal training they needed? Or had they been prompted by his unorthodox approach to interspecies relationships? Obviously they entertained some hope for a special sort of official sabotage — but what sort? Why had his instructions been so incomplete?
"You will seek out and contact the Caleban which has been hired by Madame Mliss Abnethe, or find any other Caleban available for sentient contact, and you will take appropriate action."
Appropriate action?
McKie shook his head.
"Why'd they choose you for this gig?" Furuneo asked.
"They know how to use me," McKie said.
The groundcar, driven by an enforcer, negotiated a sharp turn, and a vista of rocky shore opened before them. Something glittered in the distance among black lava palisades, and McKie noted two aircraft hovering above the rocks.
"That it?" he asked.
"Yes."
"What's the local time?"
"About two and a half hours to sunset " Furuneo said correctly interpreting McKie's concern "Will the



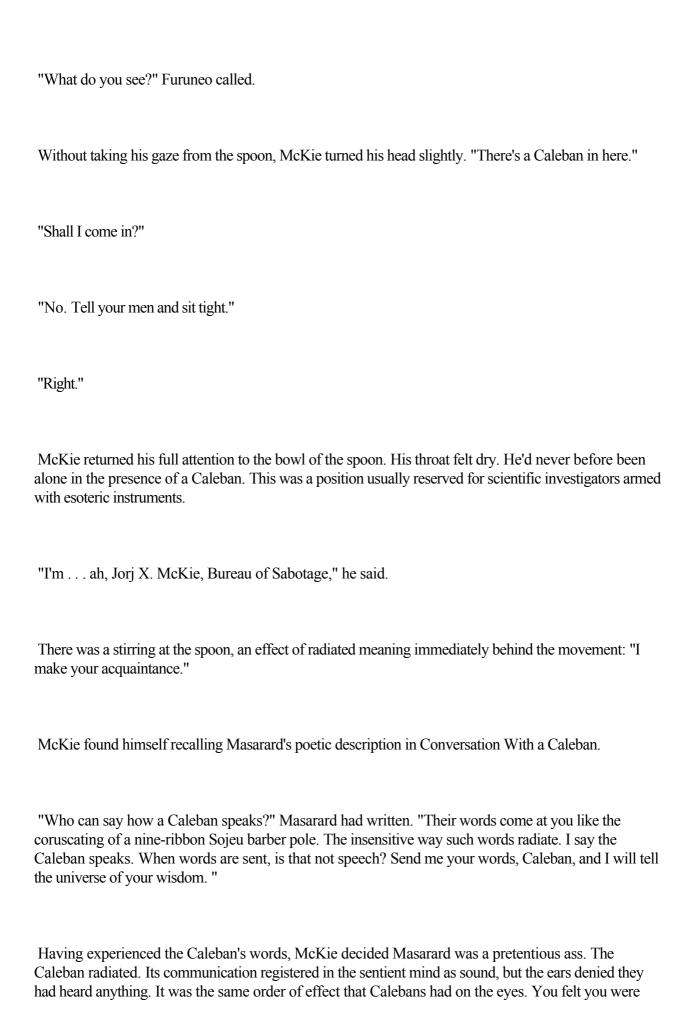


Directly in front of him there was what appeared to be a crackled mark, perhaps from a collision. It lay just below the surface, presenting no roughness to McKie's exploring hand.
What if they're wrong about these things?" Furuneo asked.
"Mmmm?"
"What if they aren't Caleban homes?"
"Don't know. Do you recall the drill?"
"You find a 'nippled extrusion' and you knock on it. We tried that. There's one just around to your left."
McKie worked his way around in that direction, getting drenched by a wind-driven spray in the process. He reached up, still shivering from the cold, knocked at the indicated extrusion.
Nothing happened.
Every briefing I ever attended says there's a door in these things somewhere," McKie grumbled.
"But they don't say the door opens every time you knock," Furuneo said.
McKie continued working his way around the Ball, found another nippled extrusion, knocked.
Nothing.

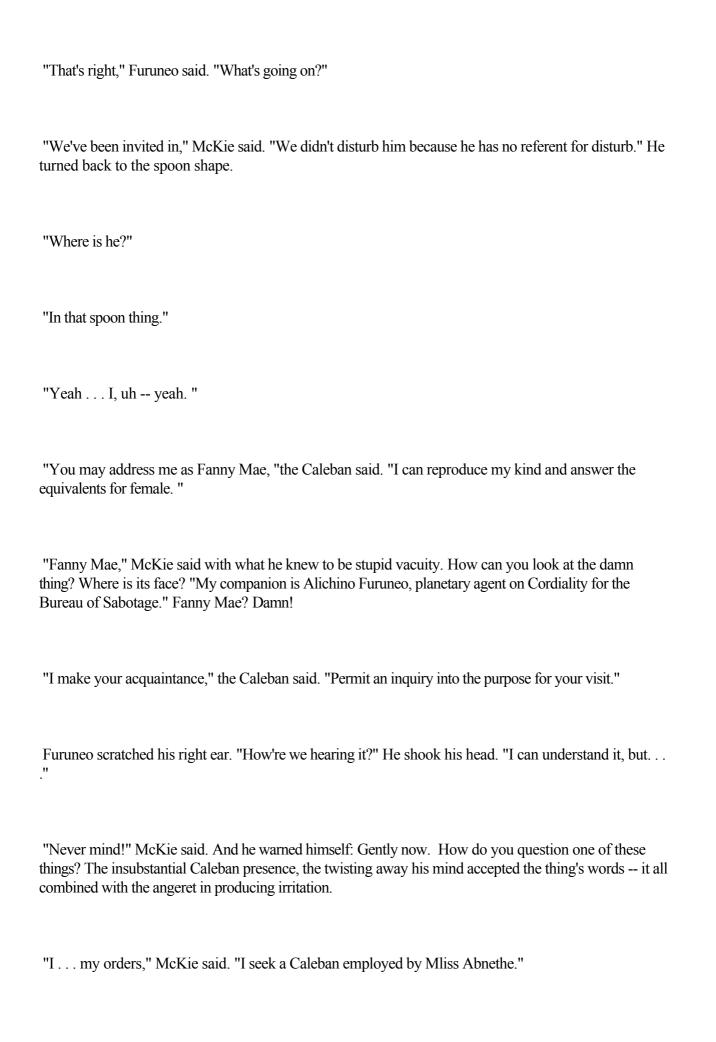
seemed to him the surface variations carried some pattern. Sensors, perhaps? Controls of some kind?



McKie applied a strip of the explosive along the green line, attached a time-thread, joined Furuneo.
Presently, there came a dull thump that was almost drowned by the surf.
McKie felt an abrupt inner silence, found himself wondering, What if the Caleban gets angry and springs a weapon we've never heard of? He darted around to the windward side.
An oval hole had appeared above the green line as though a plug had been sucked into the Ball.
"Guess you pushed the right button," Furuneo said.
McKie suppressed a feeling of irritation which he knew to be mostly angeret effect, said, "Yeah. Give me a leg up." Furuneo, he noted, was controlling the drug reaction almost perfectly.
With Furuneo's help McKie clambered into the open port, stared inside. Dull purple light greeted him, a suggestion of movement within the dimness.
"See anything?" Furuneo called.
"Don't know." McKie scrambled inside, dropped to a carpeted floor. He crouched, studied his surroundings in the purple glow. His teeth clattered from the cold. The room around him apparently occupied the entire center of the Ball low ceiling, flickering rainbows against the inner surface on his left, a giant soup-spoon shape jutting into the room directly across from him, tiny spools, handles, and knobs against the wall on his right.
The sense of movement originated in the spoon bowl.
Abruptly, McKie realized he was in the presence of a Caleban.









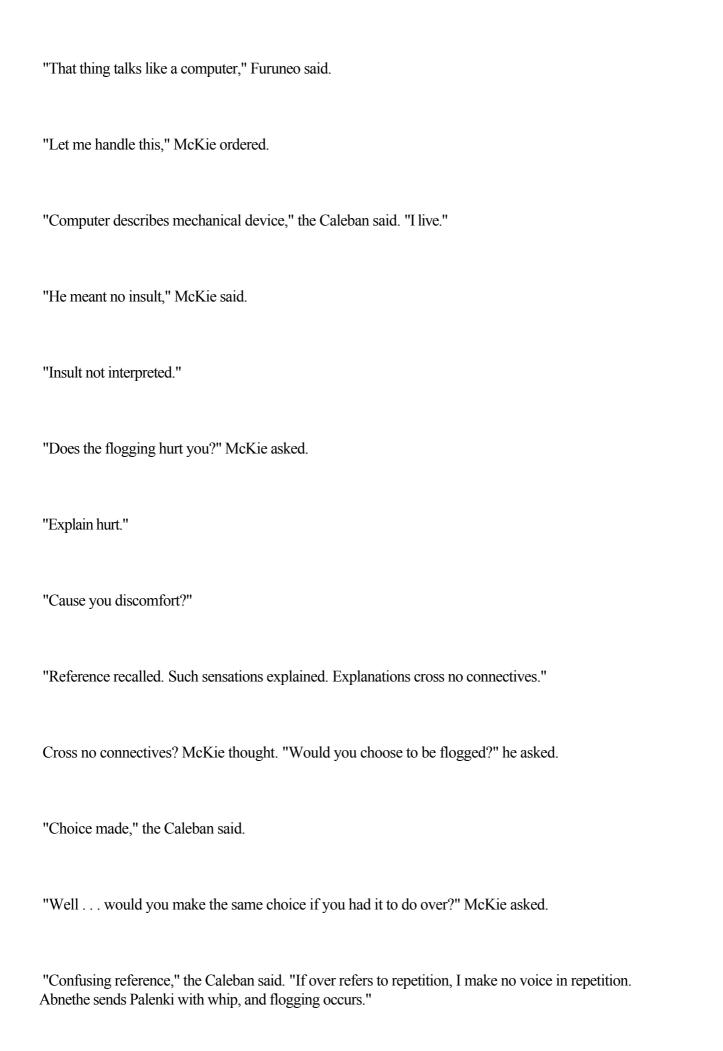












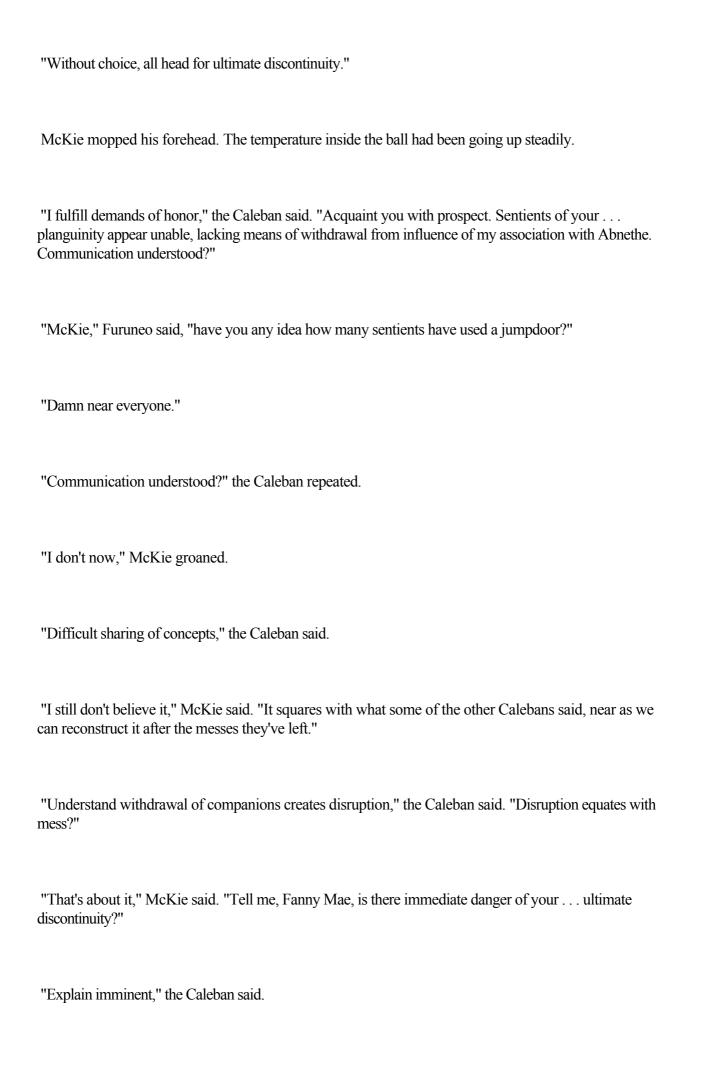
"A Palenki!" Furuneo said. He shuddered.
"You knew it had to be something like that," McKie said. "What else could you get to do such a thing except a creature without much brain and lots of obedient muscle?"
"But a Palenki! Couldn't we hunt for"
"We've known from the first what she had to be using," McKie said. "Where do you hunt for one Palenki?" He shrugged. "Why can't Calebans understand the concept of being hurt? Is it pure semantics, or do they lack the proper nerve linkages?"
"Understand nerves," the Caleban said. "Any sentience must possess control linkages. But hurt discontinuity of meaning appears insurmountable."
"Abnethe can't stand the sight of pain, you said," Furuneo reminded McKie.
"Yeah. How does she watch the floggings?"
"Abnethe views my home," the Caleban said.
When no further answer was forthcoming, McKie said, "I don't understand. What's that have to do with it?"
"My home this," the Caleban said. "My home contains aligns? Master S'eye. Abnethe possesses connectives for which she pays."
McKie wondered if the Caleban were playing some sarcastic game with him. But all the information about them made no reference to sarcasm. Word confusions, yes, but no apparent insults or subterfuges.

Not understand pain, though?
"Abnethe sounds like a mixed-up bitch," McKie muttered.
"Physically unmixed," the Caleban said. "Isolated in her own connectives now, but unified and presentable by your standards so say judgments made in my presence. If, however, you refer to Abnethe psyche, mixed-up conveys accurate description. What I see of Abnethe psyche most intertwined. Convolutions of odd color displace my vision-sense in extraordinary fashion."
McKie gulped. "You see her psyche?"
"I see all psyche."
"So much for the theory that Calebans cannot see," Furuneo said. "All is illusion, eh?"
"How how is this possible?" McKie asked.
"I occupy space between physical and mental," the Caleban said. "Thus your fellow sentients explain in your terminology."
"Gibberish," McKie said.
"You achieve discontinuity of meaning," the Caleban said.
"Why did you accept Abnethe's offer of employment?" McKie asked.
"No common referent for explanation," the Caleban said.



Caleban said, ignoring McKie's question.
"I'm not sure what you mean by discontinuity," McKie pressed.
"In context," the Caleban said, "ultimate discontinuity, presumed opposite of pleasure your term."
"You're getting nowhere," Furuneo said. His head ached from trying, to equate the radiant impulses of communication from the Caleban with speech.
"Sounds like a semantic identity situation," McKie said. "Black and white statements, but we're trying to find an interpretation in between."
"All between," the Caleban said.
"Presumed opposite of pleasure," McKie muttered.
"Our term," Furuneo reminded him.
"Tell me, Fanny Mae," McKie said, "do we other sentients refer to this ultimate discontinuity as death?"
"Presumed approximate term," the Caleban said. "Abnegation of mutual awareness, ultimate discontinuity, death all appear similar descriptives."
"If you die, many others are going to die, is that it?" McKie asked.
"All users of S'eye. All in tanglement

"All?" McKie asked, shocked.
"All such in your wave? Difficult concept. Calebans possess label for this concept plane? Planguinity of beings? Surmise proper term not shared. Problem concealed in visual exclusion which clouds mutual association."
Furuneo touched McKie's arm. "Is she saying that if she dies, everyone who's used a S'eye jumpdoor goes with her?"
"Sounds like it."
"I don't believe it!"
"The evidence would seem to indicate we have to believe her."
"But "
"I wonder if she's in any danger of going soon," McKie mused aloud.
"If you grant the premise, that's a good question," Furuneo said.
"What precedes your ultimate discontinuity, Fanny Mae?" McKie asked.
"All precedes ultimate discontinuity."
"Yeah, but are you headed toward this ultimate discontinuity?"







McKie nodded to himself. He could see a further complication: the problem of whether the Caleban's words were spoken or radiated in some unthinkable manner completed their confusion.
"I believe you're right in one thing," Furuneo said.
"Yes?
"We have to assume we understand her."
McKie swallowed in a dry throat. "Fanny Mae," he said, "have you explained this ultimate discontinuity prospect to Mliss Abnethe?"
"Problem explained," the Caleban said. "Fellow Calebans attempt remedy of error. Abnethe fails of comprehension, or disregards consequences. Connectives difficult."
"Connectives difficult," McKie muttered.
"All connectives of single S'eye," the Caleban said. "Master S'eye of self creates mutual problem."
"Don't tell me you understand that," Furuneo objected.
"Abnethe employs Master S'eye of self," the Caleban said: "Contract agreement gives Abnethe right of use. One Master S'eye of self. Abnethe uses."
"So she opens a jumpdoor and sends her Palenki through it," Furuneo said. "Why don't we just wait here and grab her?"



"You make that sound so simple," McKie said. "Here are your orders. Get out of here and alert the Bureau. The Caleban's communication won't show on your recorder, but you'll have it all down in your memory. Tell them to scan you for it."
"Right. You're staying?"
"Yes."
"What'll I say you're doing?"
"I want a look at Abnethe's companions and her surroundings."
Furuneo cleared his throat. Gods of the underworld, it was hot! "Have you thought of, you know, just bang?" He made the motion of firing a raygen.
"There's a limit on what can go through a jumpdoor and how fast," McKie chided. "You know that."
"Maybe this jumpdoor's different."
"I doubt it."
"After I've reported in, what then?"
"Sit tight outside there until I call you unless they give you a message for me. Oh, and start a general search on Cordiality just in case."

"Of course." Furuneo hesitated. "One thing who do I contact at the Bureau? Bildoon?"
McKie glanced up. Why should Furuneo question whom to call? What was he trying to say?
It dawned on McKie then that Furuneo had hit on a logical concern. BuSab director Napoleon Bildoon was a PanSpechi, a pentarchal sentient, human only in appearance. Since McKie, a human, held nominal charge of this case, that might appear to confine control of it, excluding other members of the ConSentiency. Interspecies political infighting could take odd turns in a time of stress. It would be best to involve a broad directorate here.
"Thanks," McKie said. "I wasn't thinking much beyond the immediate problem."
"This is the immediate problem."
"I understand. All right, I was tapped for this chore by our Director of Discretion."
"Gitchel Siker?"
"Yes."
"That's one Laclac and Bildoon, a PanSpechi. Who else?"
"Get somebody out of the Legal Department."
"Bound to be a human."
"The minute you stretch it that far, they'll all get the message," McKie said. "They'll bring in the others before making any official decision."



Discontinuity of meaning, McKie thought.
The Caleban's remark about temperature came back to him. What was a proper temperature level? Damn! It was boiling in here! His skin itched with perspiration. His throat was dry. Proper temperature level?
"What's the opposite of proper?" he asked.
"False," the Caleban said.
The play of words can lead to certain expectations which life is unable to match. This is a source of much insanity and other forms of unhappiness.
-Wreave Saying
For a reflexive time which he found himself unable to measure, McKie considered his exchange with the Caleban. He felt cast adrift without any familiar reference points. How could false be the opposite of

proper? If he could not measure meanings, how could he measure time? McKie passed a hand across his forehead, gathering perspiration which he tried to wipe off on his jacket. The jacket was damp. No matter how much time had passed, he felt that he still knew where he was in this universe. The Beachball's interior walls remained around him. The unseeable presence of the Caleban had not become less mysterious, but he could look at the shimmering existence of the thing and take a certain satisfaction from the fact that it spoke to him. The thought that every sentient who had used a jumpdoor would die if this Caleban succumbed sat on McKie's awareness. It was muscle-numbing. His skin was slick with perspiration, and not all of it from the heat. There were voices of death in this air. He thought of himself as a being surrounded by all those pleading sentients -- quadrillions upon quadrillions of them. Help us! Everyone who'd used a jumpdoor. Damnation of all devils! Had he interpreted the Caleban correctly? It was the logical assumption. Deaths and insanity around the Caleban disappearances said he must exclude any other interpretation. Link by link, this trap had been forged. It would crowd the universe with dead flesh. The shimmering oval above the giant spoon abruptly waved outward, contracted, flowed up, down, left. McKie received a definite impression of distress. The oval vanished, but his eyes still tracked the Caleban's unpresence.

For answer the round vortal tube of a S'eye jumpdoor opened behind the Caleban. Beyond the opening stood a woman, a figure dwarfed as though seen through the wrong end of a telescope. McKie recognized her from all the newsvisos and from the holoscans he had been fed as background briefing for this assignment.

"Is something wrong?" McKie asked.

He was confronting Mliss Abnethe in a light somewhat reddened by its slowed passage through the jumpdoor.

It was obvious that the Beautybarbers of Steadyon had been about their expensive work on her person. He made a mental note to have that checked. Her figure presented the youthful curves of a pleasurefem. The face beneath fairy-blue hair was focused around a red-petal mouth. Large summery green eyes and a sharply cleaving nose conveyed odd contrast -- dignity versus hoyden. She was a flawed queen, age mingled with youth. She must be at least eighty standard years, but the Beautybarbers had achieved this startling combination: available pleasurefem and remote, hungry power.

The expensive body wore a long gown of grey rainpearls which matched her, movement for movement, like a glittering skin. She moved nearer the vortal tube. As she approached, the edges of the tube blocked off first her feet, then her legs, thighs, waist.

McKie felt his knees age a thousand years in that brief passage. He remained crouched near the place where he'd entered the Beachball.

"Ahhh, Fanny Mae," Mliss Abnethe said. "You have a guest." Jumpdoor interference caused her voice to sound faintly hoarse.

"I am Jorj X. McKie, Saboteur Extraordinary," he said.

Was that a contraction in the pupils of her eyes? McKie wondered. She stopped with only her head and shoulders visible in the tube's circle.

"And I am Mliss Abnethe, private citizen."

Private citizen! McKie thought. This bitch controlled the productive capacity of at least five hundred worlds. Slowly McKie got to his feet.

"The Bureau of Sabotage has official business with you," he said, putting her on notice to satisfy the



McKie heard the beginnings of many actions in that statement: hired operatives, gigantic sums spent as bribes, doctored agreements, treaties, stories planted with the visos on how this good and proud lady had been mistreated by her government, a wide enlistment of personal concern to justify -- what? Violence against his person? He thought not. More likely to discredit him, to saddle him with onerous misdeeds.

Thought of all that power made McKie wonder suddenly why he made himself vulnerable to it. Why had he chosen BuSab? Because I'm difficult to please, he told himself. I'm a Saboteur by choice. There was no going back on that choice now. BuSab appeared to walk down the middle of everywhere and always wound up on the high road.

And this time BuSab appeared to be carrying most of the sentient universe on its shoulders. It was a fragile burden perched there. fearful and feared. It had sunk stark claws into him.

"Agreed, we have limits," McKie growled, but I doubt you'll ever see them. Now, what's going on here?"

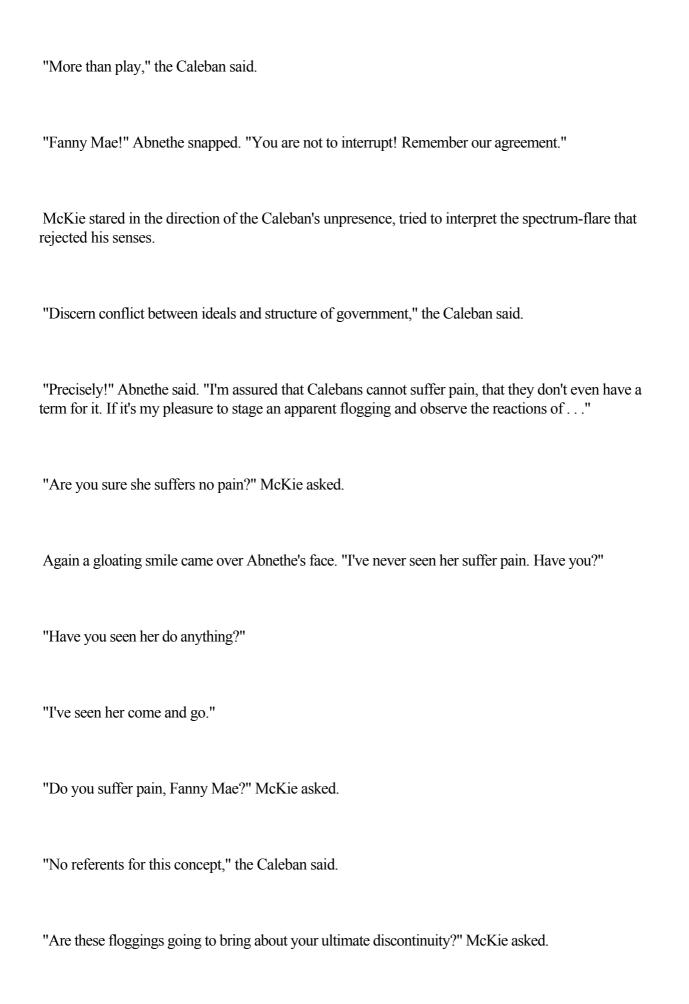
"You're not a police agent!" Abnethe barked.

"Perhaps I should summon police," McKie said.

"On what grounds?" She smiled. She had him there and knew it. Her legal staff had explained to her the open association clause in the ConSentient Articles of Federation: "When members of different species agree formally to an association from which they derive mutual benefits, the contracting parties shall be the sole judges of said benefits, providing their agreement breaks no law, covenant, or legative article binding upon said contracting parties; provided further that said formal agreement was achieved by voluntary means and involves no breach of the public peace."

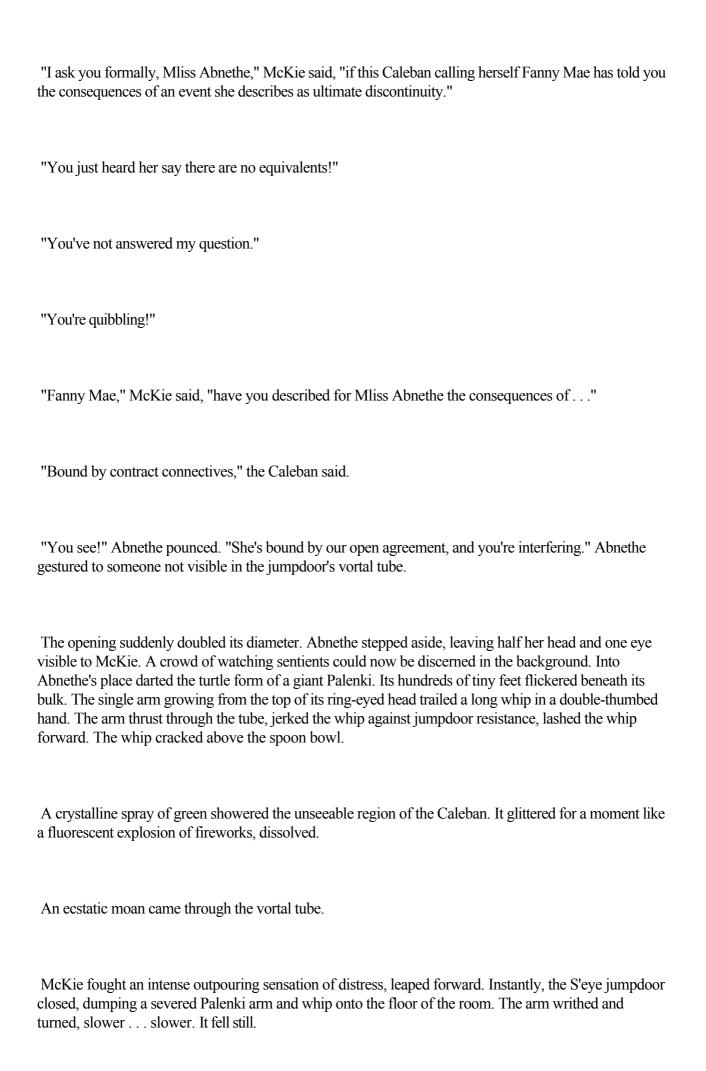
"Your actions will bring about the death of this Caleban," McKie said. He didn't hold out much hope for this argument, but it bought a bit more time.

"You'll have to establish that the Caleban concept of discontinuity interprets precisely as death," Abnethe said. "You can't do that, because it's not true. Why do you interfere? This is just harmless play between consenting ad --"

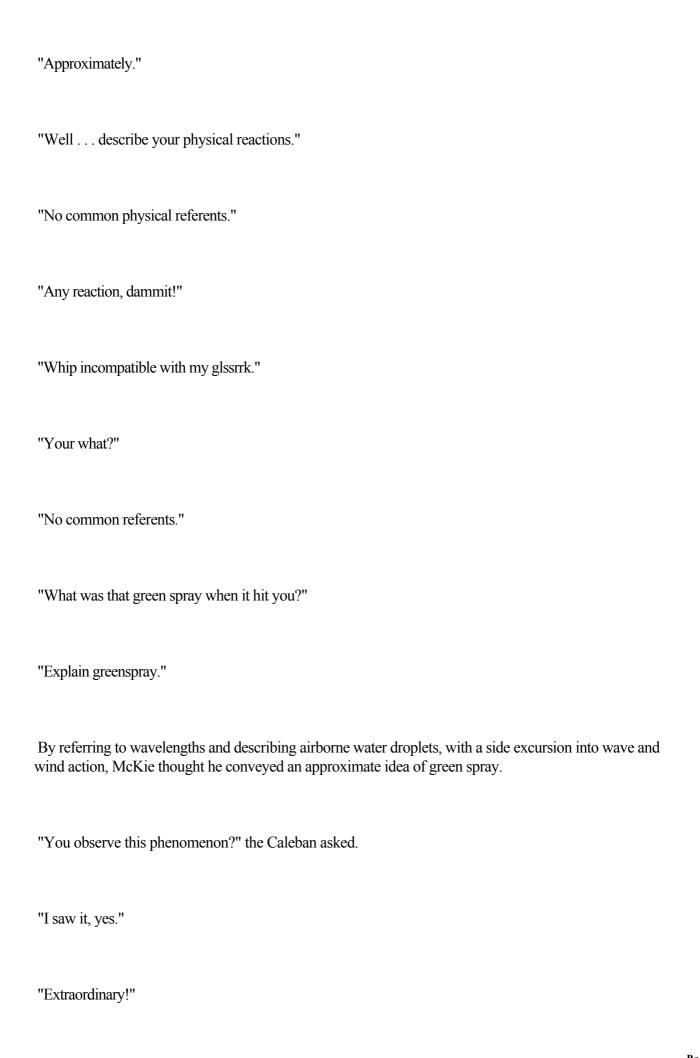


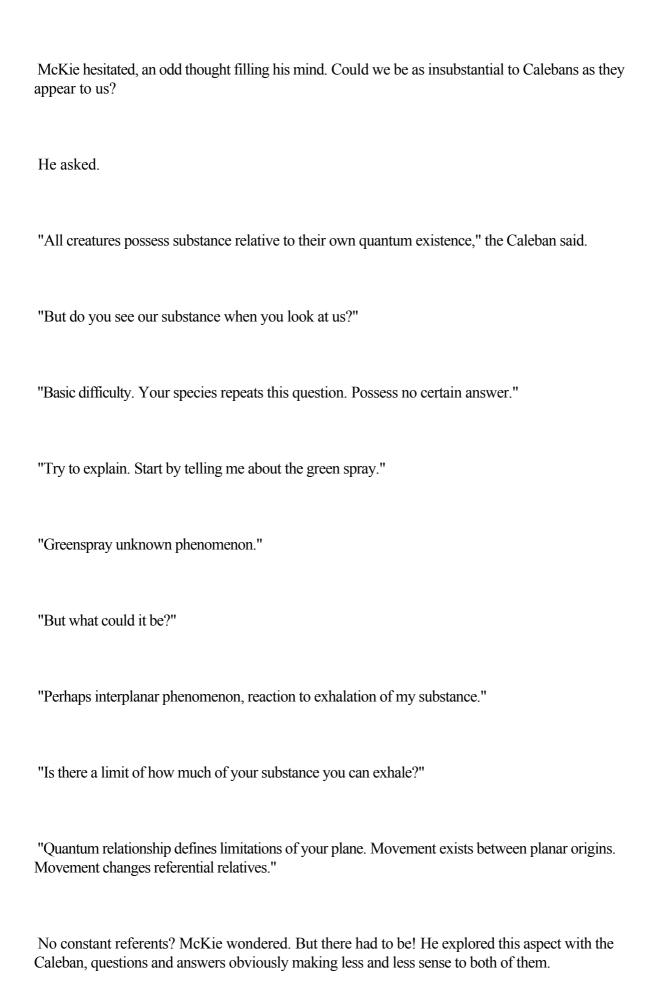


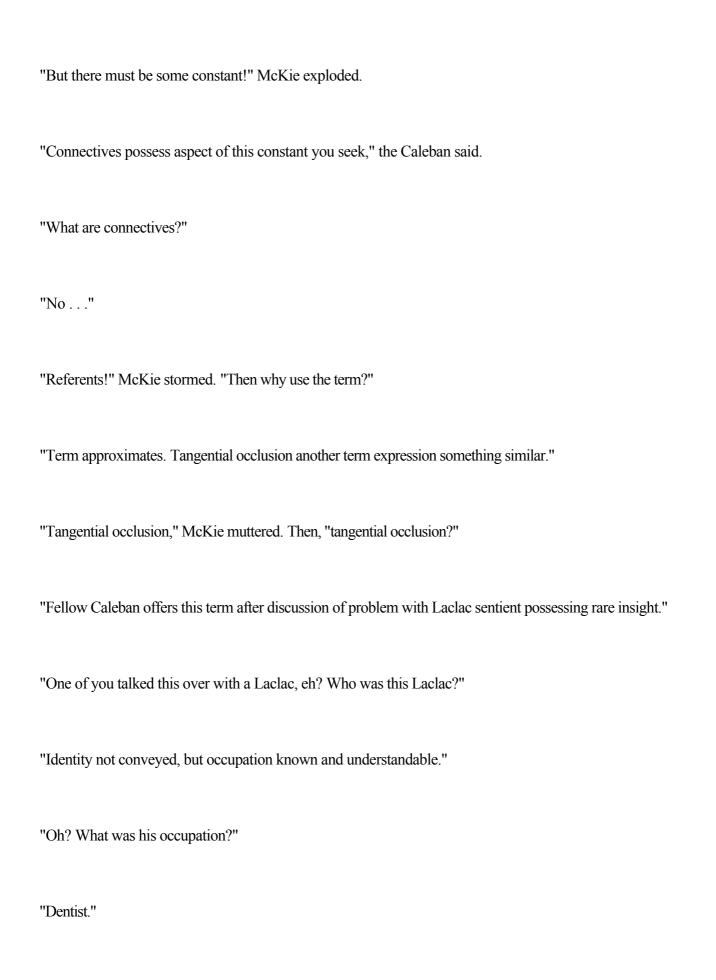
had proved a crime. To prove a crime he must get a court to act and serve her with the proper papers in the presence of bonded witnesses, bring her into a court, and allow her to face her accusers. And her attorneys would tie him in knots every step of the way.
"Offer judgment," the Caleban said. "Nothing in Abnethe contract prohibits revelation of payment. Employer provides educators."
"Educators?" McKie asked.
"Very well," Abnethe conceded. "I provide Fanny Mae with the finest instructors and teaching aids our civilization can supply. She's been soaking up our culture. Anything she requested, she's got. And it wasn't cheap."
"And she still doesn't understand pain?" McKie demanded.
"Hope to acquire proper referents," the Caleban said.
"Will you have time to acquire those referents?" McKie asked.
"Time difficult concept," the Caleban said. "Statement of instructor, to wit: 'Relevancy of time to learning varies with species.' Time possesses length, unknown quality termed duration, subjective and objective dimension. Confusing. "
"Let's make this official," McKie said. "Abnethe, are you aware that you're killing this Caleban?"
"Discontinuity and death are not the same," Abnethe objected. "Are they, Fanny Mae?"
"Wide disparity of equivalents exists between separate waves of being," the Caleban said.

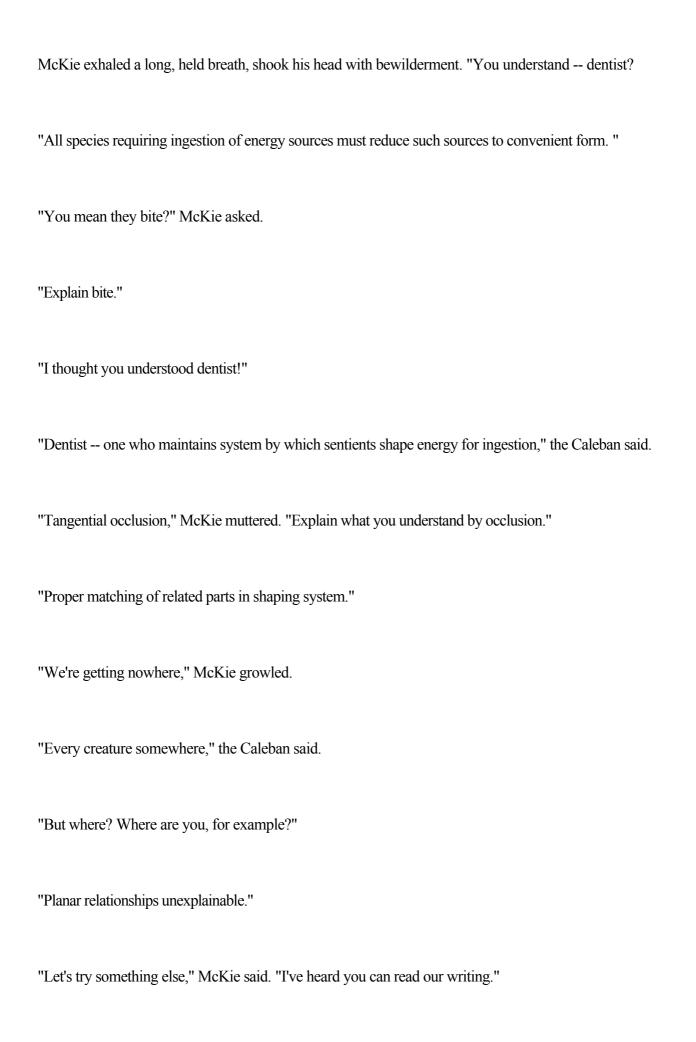


"Fanny Mae?" McKie said.
"Yes?"
Did that whip hit you?"
"Explain whip hit."
"Encounter your substance!"
"Approximately."
McKie moved close to the spoon bowl. He still sensed distress but knew it could be a side effect of angeret and the incident he had just witnessed.
"Describe the flogging sensation," he said.
"You possess no proper referents."
"Try me."
"I inhaled substance of whip, exhaled my own substance."
"You breathed it?"









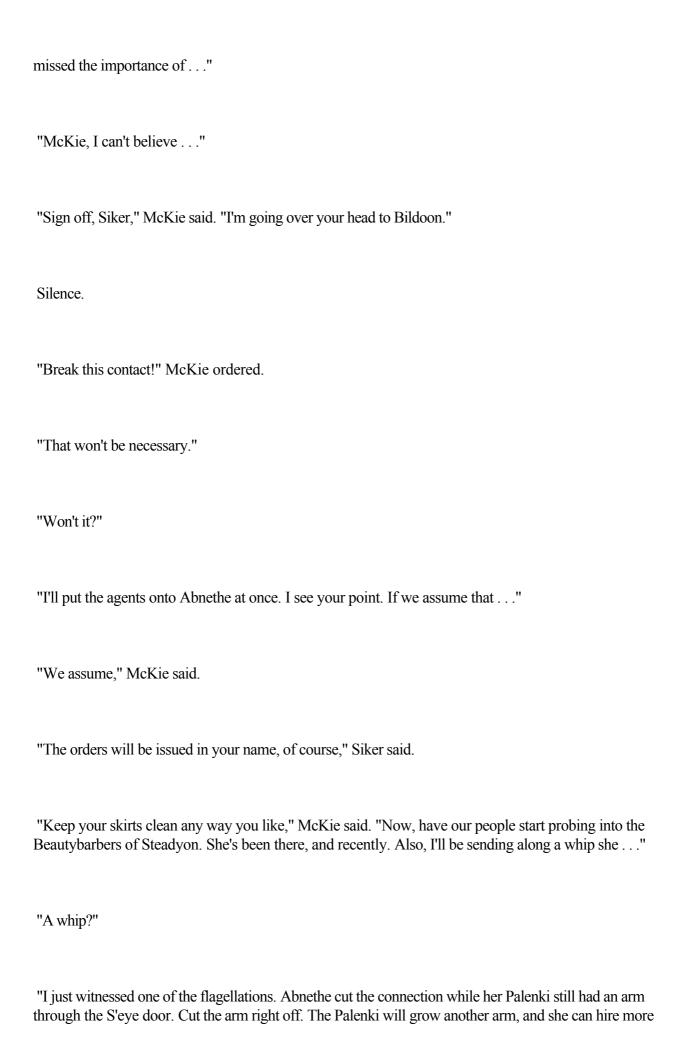
"Reducing what you term writing to compatible connectives suggests time-constant communication," the Caleban said. "Not really certain, however, of time-constant or required connectives."
"Well let's go at the verb to see, "McKie said. "Tell me what you understand by the action of seeing."
"To see receive sensory awareness of external energy," the Caleban said.
McKie buried his face in his hands. He felt dispirited, his brain numbed by the Caleban's radiant bombardment. What would be the sensory organs? He knew such a question would only send them off on another empty label chase.
He might as well be listening to all this with his eyes or with some other organ rude and unfitted to its task. Too much depended on what he did. McKie's imagination sensed the stillness which would follow the death of this Caleban an enormous solitude. A few infants left, perhaps but doomed. All the good, the beautiful, the evil everything sentient all gone. Dumb creatures which had never gone through a jumpdoor would remain. And winds, colors, floral perfumes, birdsong these would continue after the crystal shattering of sentiency.
But the dreams would be gone, lost in that season of death. There would be a special kind of silence: no more beautiful speech strewn with arrows of meaning.
Who could console the universe for such a loss?
Presently he dropped his hands, said, "Is there somewhere you could take this your home where Mliss Abnethe couldn't reach you?"
"Withdrawal possible."
"Well, do it!"

"Cannot."
"Why?"
"Agreement prohibits."
"Break the damned agreement!"
"Dishonorable action brings ultimate discontinuity for all sentients on your suggest wave as preferre term. Wave. Much closer than plane. Please substitute concept of wave wherever plane used in our discussion."
This thing's impossible, McKie thought.
He lifted his arms in a gesture of frustration and, in the movement, felt his body jerk as a long-distance call ignited his pineal gland. The message began to roll, and he knew his body had gone into the sniggertrance, mumbling and chuckling, trembling occasionally.
But this time he didn't resent the call.

All definitions, no matter the language, should be considered probationary.
-The Caleban Question by Dwel Hartavid
"Gitchel Siker here," the caller said.
McKie imagined the Bureau's Director of Discretion, a suave little Laclac sitting in that nicely tailored environment back at Central. Siker would be relaxed, fighting tendril withdrawn, his face split open, an elite chairdog ministering to his flesh, trained minions a button-push away.
"About time you called," McKie said.
"About time I called?"
"Well, you certainly must've gotten Furuneo's message quite a"
"What message?"
McKie felt as though his mind had touched a grinding wheel shooting off ideas like sparks. No message from Furuneo?
"Furuneo," McKie said, "left here long enough ago to"





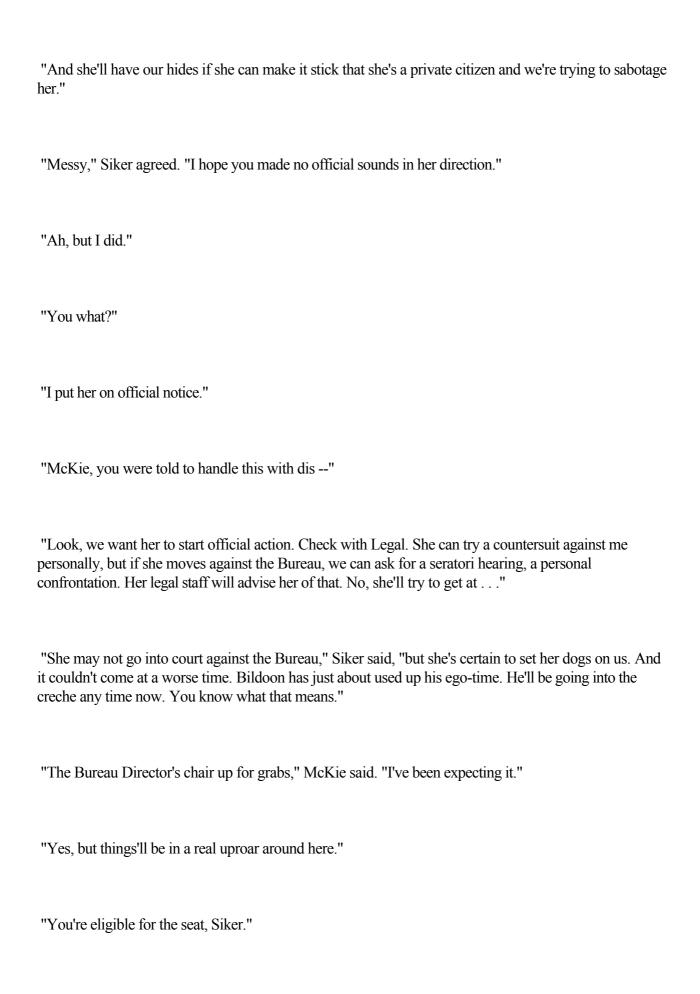


Palenkis, but the whip and arm could give us a lead. Palenkis don't practice gene tagging, I know, but it's the best we have at the moment."
"I understand. What'd you see during the incident?"
"I'm getting to that."
"Hadn't you better come in and put your report directly onto a transcorder?"
"I'll depend on you for that. Don't think I should show at Central for a bit."
"Mmm. See what you mean. She'll try to tie you up with a countersuit."
"Or I miss my guess. Now, here's what I saw. When she opened the door, she practically filled it, but I could see what appeared to be a window in the background. If it was a window, it opened onto a cloudy sky. That means daylight."
"Cloudy?"
"Yes. Why?"
"It's been cloudy here all morning."
"You don't think she's no, she wouldn't."
"Probably not, but we'll have Central scoured just to be sure. With her money, no telling who she might've bought."





"I saw the eyes."
"Sunken, the facets smoothing over?"
"That's the way it looked to me."
"If we can get a PanSpechi to make an official observation of this fellow, that'd give us a lever. Harboring a criminal, you know."
"Apparently, you haven't much experience with PanSpechi," McKie said. "How'd you get to be Director of Discretion?"
"All right, McKie, let's not"
"You know damn well a PanSpechi would blow up if he saw this fellow. Our observer would try to dive through the jumpdoor and"
"So?"
"Abnethe would close it on him. She'd have half of our observer, and we'd have the other half."
"But that'd be murder!"
"An unfortunate accident, no more."
"That woman does swing a lot of weight, I admit, but"





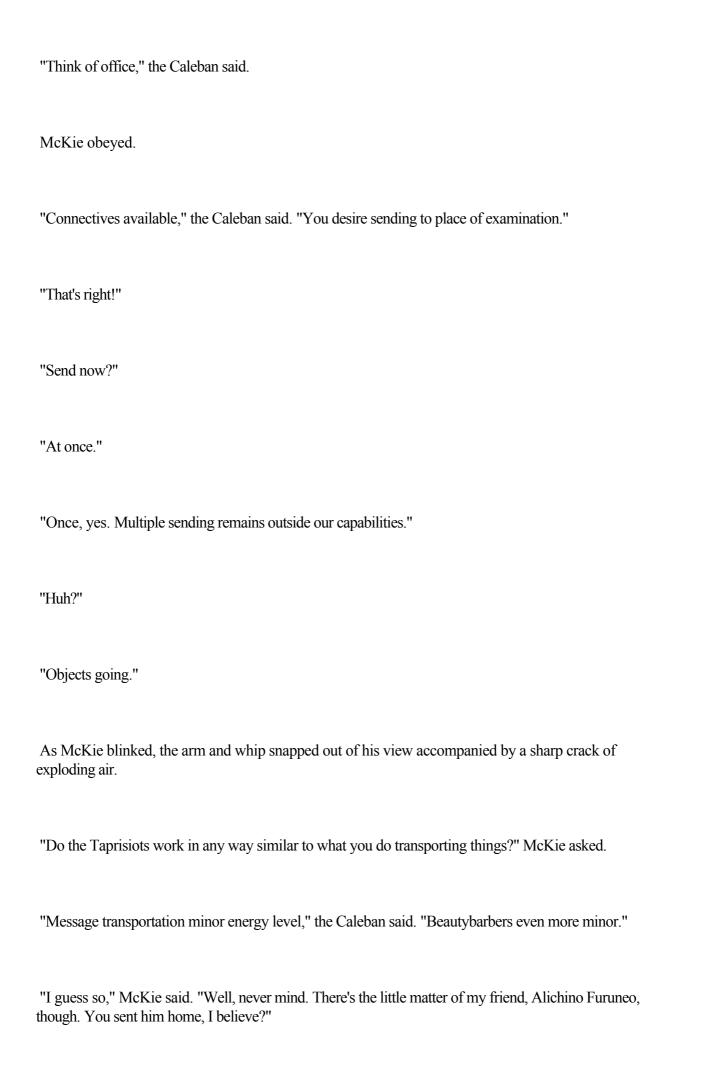
was an oven. He wondered if his fat was actually being reduced by the heat. Water loss, certainly. The instant he thought of water, he sensed the dryness in his throat.	
"You still there?" he rasped.	
Silence.	
"Fanny Mae?"	
"I remain in my home," the Caleban said.	
The sensation that he heard the words without hearing grated on McKie, fed on the angeret in his system, stirred a latent rage. Damn superior stupid Caleban! Got us into a real mess!	
"Are you willing to cooperate with us in trying to stop these floggings?" McKie asked.	
"As my contract permits."	
"All right. Then you insist to Abnethe that you want me as your teacher."	
"You perform functions of teacher?"	
"Have you learned anything from me?" McKie asked.	
"All mingled connectives instruct."	

McKie found himself still seated in the purple gloom of the Beachball. Sweat bathed his body. The place

"Connectives," McKie muttered. "I must be getting old."
"Explain old," the Caleban said.
"Never mind. We should've discussed your contract first thing. Maybe there's a way to break it. Under what laws was it executed?"
"Explain laws."
"What honorable system of enforcement?" McKie blared.
"Under natural honor of sentient connectives."
"Abnethe doesn't know what honor means."
"I understand honor."
McKie sighed. "Were there witnesses, signatures, that sort of thing?"
"All my fellow Calebans witness connectives. Signatures not understood. Explain."
McKie decided not to explore the concept of signatures. Instead he asked, "Under what circumstances could you refuse to honor your contract with Abnethe?"
After a prolonged pause the Caleban said, "Changing circumstances convey variable relationships.

Should Abnethe fail in her connectives or attempt redefinition of essences, this could produce linearities

open for my disentanglement."
"Sure," McKie said. "That figures."
He shook his head, studied the empty air above the giant spoon. Calebans! You couldn't see them, couldn't hear them, couldn't understand them.
"Is the use of your S'eye system available to me?" McKie asked.
"You function as my teacher."
"Is that a yes?"
"Affirmative answer."
"Affirmative answer," McKie echoed. "Fine. Can you also transport objects to me, sending them where I direct?"
"While connectives remain apparent."
"I hope that means what I think it does," McKie said. "Are you aware of the Palenki arm and whip over there on your floor?"
"Aware."
"I want them sent to a particular office at Central. Can you do that?"



"Correct."
"You sent him to the wrong home."
"Creatures possess only one home."
"We sentients have more than one home."
"But I view connectives!"
McKie felt the wash of radiant objection from the Caleban, steadied himself. "No doubt," he said. "But he has another home right here on Cordiality."
"Astonishment fills me."
"Probably. The question remains, can you correct this situation?"
"Explain situation."
"Can you send him to his home on Cordiality?"
Pause then, "That place not his home."
"But can you send him there?"



"I hope we're together on that."
"Your friend," the Caleban said, "desires presence with you."
He wants to come here?"
"Correct."
"Well, why not? All right, bring him."
"What purpose arises from friend's presence in my home?"
"I want him to stay with you and watch for Abnethe while I attend to other business."
"McKie?"
"Yes."
"You possess awareness that presence of yourself or other of your kind prolongs impingement of myself upon your wave?"
"That's fine."
"Your presence foreshortens flogging."

"I suspected as much."
"Suspected?"
"I understand!"
"Understanding probable. Connectives indicative."
"I can't tell you how happy that makes me," McKie said.
"You wish friend brought?"
"What's Furuneo doing?"
"Furuneo exchanges communication with assistant."
"I can imagine."
McKie shook his head from side to side. He could sense the morass of misunderstanding around every attempt at communication here. No way to steer clear of it. No way at all. At the very moment when they thought they had achieved closest communication, right then they could be widest of the mark.
"When Furuneo concludes his conversation, bring him," McKie said. He hunched back against the wall. Gods of the underworld! The heat was almost unbearable. Why did Calebans require such heat? Maybe the heat represented something else to a Caleban, a visible wave form, perhaps, serving some function other sentients couldn't begin to understand.

McKie felt then that he was engaged in an exchange of worthless noises here -- shadow sounds. Reason

across unmarked skies.
A wave of relatively cold air told McKie that Furuneo had arrived. McKie turned, saw the planetary agent sprawled beside him and just beginning to sit up.
"For the love of reason!" Furuneo shouted. "What're you doing to me?"
"I needed the fresh air," McKie said.
Furuneo peered at him. "What?"
"Glad to see you," McKie said.
"Yeah?" Furuneo brought himself to a squatting position beside McKie. "You have any idea what's just happened to me?"
"You've been to Landy-B," McKie said.
"How'd you know? Was that your doing?"
"Slight misunderstanding," McKie said. "Landy-B's your home."
"It is not!"
"I'll leave you to argue that with Fanny Mae," McKie said. "Have you started the search on Cordiality?"

had gone, swinging from planet to planet. He and the Caleban were striking false bargains, trying to climb out of chaos. If they failed, death would take away all the innocent and the sinful, the good and the guilty. Boats would drift on countless oceans, towers would fall, balconies crumble, and suns would move alone

"I barely got it going before you"
"Yes, but you've started it?"
"I've started it."
"Good. Fanny Mae will keep you posted on various things and bring your people here for reports and such as you need them. Won't you, Fanny Mae?"
"Connectives remain available. Contract permits."
"Good girl."
"I'd almost forgotten how hot it was in here," Furuneo said, mopping his forehead. "So I can summon people. What else?"
"You watch for Abnethe."
"And?"
"The instant she and one of her Palenki floggers make an appearance, you get a holoscan record of everything that happens. You do have your toolkit?"
"Of course."
"Fine. While you're scanning, get your instruments as close to the jumpdoor as you can."

"She'll probably close the door as soon as she sees what I'm doing."
"Don't count on it. Oh, one thing."
"Yes?"
"You're my teaching assistant."
"Your what?"
McKie explained about the Caleban's agreement.
"So she can't get rid of us without violating the terms of her contract with Fanny Mae," Furuneo said. "Cute." He pursed his lips. "That all?"
"No. I want you and Fanny Mae to discuss connectives."
"Connectives?"
"Connectives. I want you to try finding out what in ten billion devils a Caleban means by connectives."
"Connectives," Furuneo said. "Is there any way to turn down the furnace in here?"
"You might take that as another subject: Try to discover the reason for all this heat."



"Presumably," McKie muttered, then, "Can you send me to a place near Abnethe where she will not be aware of me, but where I can be aware of her?"
"Negative."
"Why not?"
"Specific injunction of contract."
"Oh." McKie bent his head in thought, then, "Well, can you send me to a place where I might become aware of Abnethe through my own efforts?"
"Possibility. Permit examination of connectives."
McKie waited. The heat was a tangible thing inside the Beachball, a solid intrusion on his senses. He saw it was already beginning to wilt Furuneo.
"I saw my mother," Furuneo said, noting McKie's attention.
"That's great," McKie said.
"She was swimming with friends when the Caleban dumped me right in the pool with them. The water was wonderful."
"They were surprised, no doubt."



He found, with a chill wash of air and a sprawling lurch onto dusty ground, that he was addressing his question to a moss-capped rock. For a moment he stared at the rock, regaining his balance. The rock was about a meter tall and contained small veins of yellow-white quartz with flecks of reflective brilliance scattered through them. It stood in an open meadow beneath a distant yellow sun. The sun's position told McKie he'd arrived either at midmorning or midafternoon local.
Beyond the rock, the meadow, and a ring of straggly yellow brushes stretched a flat horizon broken by the tall white spires of a city.
"Loves me?" he asked the rock.
Never underestimate the power of wishful thinking to filter what the eyes see and what the ears hear.
-The Abnethe Case, BuSab Private Files
Whip and severed Palenki arm arrived at the proper BuSab laboratory while it was temporarily unoccupied. The lab chief, a Bureau veteran named Treej Tuluk, a back-bowing Wreave, was away at the time, attending the conference which McKie's report had precipitated.

As with most back-bowers, Tuluk was an odor-id Wreave. He had an average-appearing Wreave body, two and a half meters tall, tubular, pedal bifurcation, vertical face slit with manipulative extensors dangling from the lower corner. From long association with humans and humanoids he had developed a brisk, slouching gait, a predilection for clothing with pockets, and un-Wreavish speech mannerisms of a cynical tone. The four eye tubes protruding from the top of his facial slit were green and mild.

Returning from the conference, he recognized the objects on his lab floor immediately. They matched Siker's description. Tuluk complained to himself briefly about the careless manner of delivery and was soon lost in the intricacies of examination. He and the assistants he summoned made initial holoscans before separating whip and arm.

As they had expected, the Palenki gene structure offered no comparatives. The arm had not come from one of the few Palenkis on record in the ConSentient Register. Tuluk filed the DNA chart and message sequence, however. These could be used to identify the arm's original owner, if that became necessary.

At the same time study of the whip went ahead. The artifact report came out of the computers as "Bullwhip, copy of ancient earth type." It was made of steerhide, a fact which gave Tuluk and his vegetarian aides a few brief moments of disgust, since they had assumed it was a synthetic.

"A sick archaism," one of Tuluk's Chither assistants called the whip. The others agreed with this judgment, even a PanSpechi for whom periodic reversion to carnivorous type in his creche cycle was necessary to survival.

A curious alignment in some of the cell molecules attracted their attention then. Study of whip and arm continued at their respective paces.

There is no such thing as pure objectivity.
-Gowachin Aphorism
McKie took the long-distance call while standing beside a dirt road about three kilometers from the rock. He had come this far on foot, increasingly annoyed by the strange surroundings. The city, he had soon discovered, was a mirage hanging over a dusty plain of tall grass and scrubby thornbushes.
It was almost as hot on the plain as it had been in the Caleban's Beachball.
Thus far the only living things he had seen were some distant tawny animals and countless insects-leapers, crawlers, fliers, hoppers. The road contained two parallel indentations and was the rusty red color of abandoned iron. It seemed to originate in a faraway line of blue hills on his right, plunging straight across the plain to the heat-muddled horizon on his left. The road contained no occupant except himself, not even a dust cloud to mark some hidden passage.
McKie was almost glad to feel the sniggertrance grip him.
"This is Tuluk," his caller said. "I was told to contact you as soon as I had anything to report. Hopefully, I intrude at an opportune moment."
McKie, who had a journeyman's respect for Tuluk's competence, said, "Let's have it."
"Not much on the arm," Tuluk said. "Palenki, of course. We can identify the original owner, if we ever get him. There'd been at least one previous regrowth of this member. Sword cut on the forearm, by the look of it."

"What about the phylum markings?"
"We're still checking that."
"The whip?"
"That's something else. It's real steerhide."
"Real?"
"No doubt of it. We could identify the original owner of the skin, although I doubt it's walking around anywhere."
"You've a gruesome sense of humor. What else?"
"The whip's an archaism, too. Bullwhip, ancient earth style. We got an original ID by computer and brought in a museum expert for confirmation. He thought the construction was a bit on the crude side, but close enough to leave little doubt it was a copy of a real original. Fairly recent manufacture, too."
"Where could they get an original to copy?"
"We're checking that, and it may provide a lead. These things aren't too common."
"Recent manufacture," McKie said. "You sure?"
"The animal from which that hide was removed has been dead about two standard years. Intracellular structure was still reactive to catalyzing."

"Two years. Where would they get a real steer?"
"That narrows it down. There are some around for story props in the various entertainment media, that sort of thing. A few of the outback planets where they haven't the technology for pseudoflesh still raise cattle for food."
"This thing gets more confusing the deeper we go into it," McKie said.
"That's what we think. Oh, there's chalf dust on the whip. "
"Chaff! That's where I got the yeast smell!"
"Yes, it's still quite strong."
"What would they be doing with that much quick-scribe powder?" McKie asked. "There was no sign of a chalfmemory stick but that means little, of course."
"It's just a suggestion," Tuluk said, "but they couldn've chaff-scribed that design on the Palenki."
"Why?"
"Give it a false phylum, maybe?"
"Perhaps."

"The room wasn't all that big, and it was hot."
"The heat would explain it, all right. Sorry we didn't have more for you."
"That's all?"
"Well, it might not be any use, but the whip had been stored in a hanging position supported by a thin length of steel."
"Steel? Are you positive?"
"Positive."
"Who still uses steel?"
"It's not all that uncommon on some of the newer planets. R&R has even turned up some where they build with it."
"Wild!"
"Isn't it, though?"
"You know," McKie said, "We're looking for an outback planet, and that's where I seem to be."
"Where are you?"

"I don't know."
"You don't know?"
McKie explained his predicament.
"You field agents take awful chances sometimes," Tuluk said.
"Don't we just."
"You wear a monitor. I could ask this Taprisiot to identify your location. Want to invoke the monitor clause?"
"You know that's an open payment clause," McKie said. "I don't think this is a sufficient emergency yet that I can risk bankrupting us. Let me see if I can identify this place by other means first."
"What do you want me to do, then?"
"Call Furuneo. Have him allow me another six hours, then get the Caleban to pick me up."
"Pick you up, right. Siker said you were onto some doorless S'eye thing. Can it pick you up anywhere?"
"I think so."
"I'll call Furuneo right away."

Facts can be whatever you want them to be. This is the lesson of relativity.
-BuSab Manual
McKie had been walking for almost two hours before he saw the smoke. Thin spirals of it stood in the air against the backdrop of distant blue hills.
It had occurred to McKie during his walk that he might have been set down in a place where he could die of thirst or starvation before his legs carried him to the safe companionship of his civilized fellows. A self-accusatory moroseness had overtaken him. It wasn't the first time he had realized that some accident of the machinery he took for granted might prove fatal.
But the machinery of his own mind? He cursed himself for using the Caleban's S'eye system this way when he knew the unreliability of communication with the creature.
Walking!
You never thought you might have to walk to safety.

McKie sensed the eternal flaw in sentient relationship with machinery. Reliance on such forces put your own muscles at a disadvantage in a universe where you might have to rely on those muscles at any moment.
Such as right now.
He appeared to be getting nearer to the smoke, although the hills looked as remote as ever.
Walking.
Of all the stupid damn foul-ups. Why would Abnethe pick a place like this to start her kinky little game? If this were the place it had started. If the Caleban hadn't made another communication error.
If love could find a way. What the devil did love have to do with all this?
McKie plodded on, wishing he had brought some water. First the heat of the Beachball, now this. His throat felt as though he'd built a fire in it. The dust kicked up by his feet didn't help. Every step stirred up a puff of pale red from the narrow track. The dust clogged his throat and nostrils. It had a musty taste.
He patted the toolkit in his jacket pocket. The raygen could burn a thin hole in this parched earth, might even strike down to water. But how could he bring the water up to his demanding throat?
Plenty of insects around. They buzzed and flew about, crawled at the edge of the track, attempted at times to alight on his exposed flesh. He finally took to carrying his toolkit's stim like a fan, setting it at medium potency. It cleared the air around his face whenever a swarm approached, dropped jittering patches of stunned insects behind him.
He grew aware of a noise low, indistinct booming. Something being pounded. Something hollow and resonant. It originated out there in the distance where the smoke stood on the air.

It could be a natural phenomenon, McKie told himself. Could be wild creatures. The smoke might be natural fires. Still, he brought the raygen from his kit, kept it in a side pocket where he could get at it quickly.

The noise became louder in slow stages, as though it were being amplified to mark consecutive positions of his approach. Screens of thornbush and gentle undulations in the plain concealed the source.

McKie trudged up a gentle rise, still following the road.

Sadness transfixed him. He'd been cast away on some poverty-stricken backyard world, a place that stiffened the eyes. He'd been given a role in a story with a moral, a clipped-wing fairy story. He was a burned-out wanderer, his thirst a burnished yearning. Anguish had lodged in him somewhere. He pursued an estranged, plodding dream which would dissolve in the awakening doom of a single Caleban.

The toll that Caleban's death would bring oppressed him. It turned his ego upside down and drained out all the lightness. His own death would be a lost bubble burst in such a conflagration.

McKie shook his head to drive away such thoughts. Fear would pluck him of all sensibility. He could not afford it.

One thing sure now; the sun was setting. It had descended at least two widths toward the horizon since he'd started this stupid trek.

What in the name of the infinite devils was that drumming? It came at him as though riding the heat: monotonous, insistent. He felt his temples throbbing to an irritating, counterpoint -- beat, throb, beat, throb. . . .

McKie topped the low rise, stopped. He stood at the brim of a shallow basin which had been cleared of the thornbush. At the basin's center, a thorn fence enclosed twenty or so conical huts with grass roofs. They appeared to be made of mud. Smoke spiraled from holes in several of the roofs and from pit fires outside others. Black dots of cattle grazed in the basin, lifting their heads occasionally, with stubby whiskers of brown grass protruding from their mouths.

Black-skinned youths carrying long poles watched the cattle. More black-skinned men, women, and children went about various occupations within the thorn enclosure. McKie, whose ancestry contained blacks from the planet Caoleh, found the, scene curiously disturbing. It touched a genetic memory that vibrated to a wrong rhythm. Where in the universe could people be degraded to such primitive living standards? The basin was like a textbook scene from the dark ages of ancient Earth. Most of the children were naked, as were some of the men. The women wore string skirts. Could this be some odd return to nature? McKie wondered. The nudity didn't bother him particularly. It was the combination. The narrow track led down into the basin and through the thorn fence, extending out the other side to disappear over the crest of the opposite side. McKie began the descent. He hoped they'd let him have water in this village. The booming noise came from within a large hut near the center of the cluster. A two-wheeled cart with four great two-horned beasts yoked to it waited beside the hut. McKie studied the cart as he approached. Between its high sidewalls were piled jumbles of strange artifacts -- flat, boardlike things, rolls of garish fabric, long poles with sharp metal tips. The drumming stopped, and McKie noted that he had been seen. Children ran screaming among the huts, pointing at him. Adults turned with slow dignity, studied him.

An odd silence settled over the scene.

McKie entered the village through a break in the thorn fence. Emotionless black faces turned to observe his progress. The place assaulted McKie's nostrils -- rotting flesh, dung, acrid stenches whose character he didn't care to explore, woodsmoke and burning meat.

Clouds of black insects swarmed about the beasts yoked to the cart, seeming to ignore the slow switching of their tails.

A red-bearded white man emerged from the larger hut as McKie approached. The man wore a flat-brimmed hat, dusty black jacket, and dun pants. He carried a whip of the same pattern the Palenki had used. Seeing the whip, McKie knew he had come to the right place.

The man waited in the doorway, a mean-eyed, menacing figure, thin lips visible through the beard. He glanced once at McKie, nodded at several of the black men off to McKie's left, motioned toward the cart, returned his attention to McKie.

Two tall black men moved to stand at the heads of the yoked beasts.

McKie studied the contents of the cart. The boardlike objects, he saw, had been carved and painted with strange designs. They reminded him of Palenki carapaces. He didn't like the way the two men at the heads of the yoked beasts stared at him. There was danger here. McKie kept his right hand in his jacket pocket, curled around the raygen tube. He felt and saw the black residents closing in behind him. His back felt exposed and vulnerable.

"I am Jorj X. McKie, Saboteur Extraordinary," he said, stopping about ten paces from the bearded white man. "And you?"

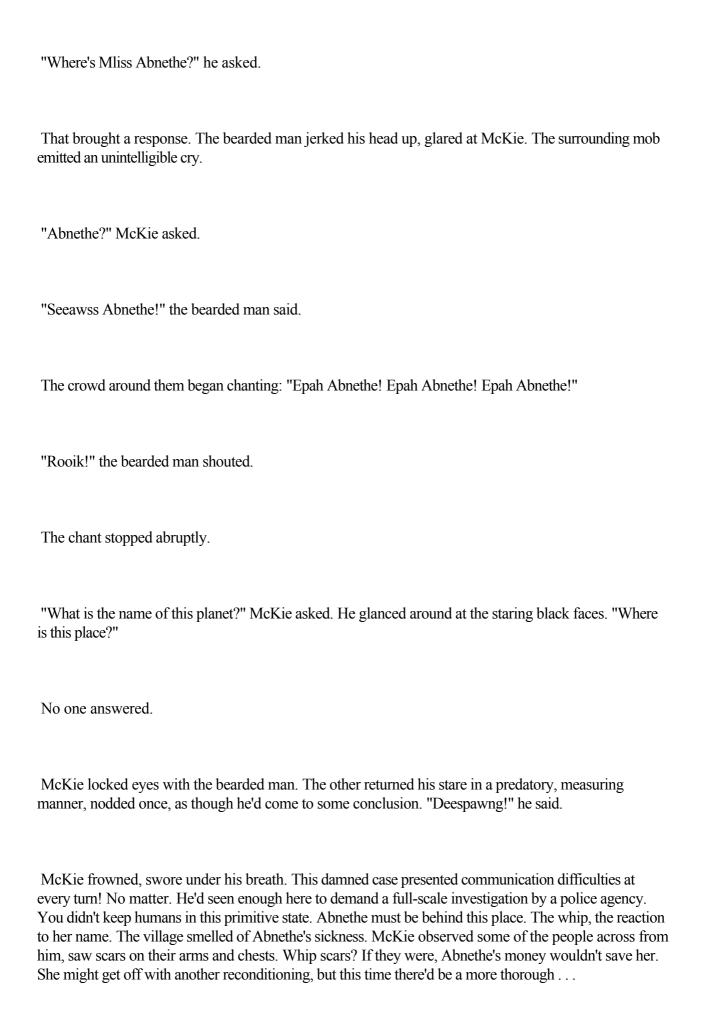
The man spat in the dust, said something that sounded like: "Getnabent."

McKie swallowed. He didn't recognize the greeting. Strange, he thought. He hadn't believed the ConSentiency contained a language completely unfamiliar to him. Perhaps R&R had come up with a new planet here.

"I am on an official mission of the Bureau," McKie said. "Let all men know this." There, that satisfied the

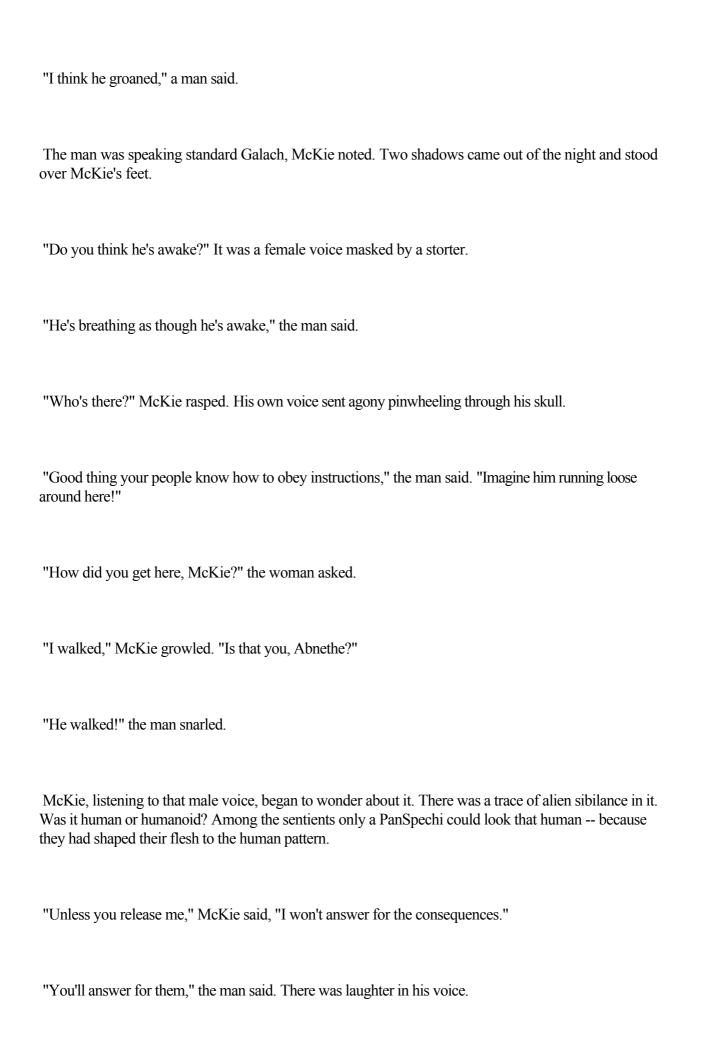
legalities.
The bearded man shrugged, said, "Kawderwelsh."
Someone behind McKie said: "Krawl'ikido!"
The bearded man glanced in the direction of the voice, back to McKie.
McKie shifted his attention to the whip. The man trailed the end of it behind him on the ground. Seeing McKie's attention, he flicked a wrist, caught the flexible end of the whip in two fingers which he lifted from the handle. He continued to stare at McKie.
There was a casual proficiency in the way the man handled the whip that sent a shudder through McKie. "Where'd you get that whip?" he asked.
The man looked at the object in his hand. "Pitsch," he said. "Brawzhenbuller."
McKie moved closer, held out a hand for the whip.
The bearded man shook his head from side to side, scowled. No mistaking that answer. "Maykely," he said. He tapped the butt of the whip handle against the side of the cart, nodded at the piled cargo.
Once more, McKie studied the contents of the cart. Handmade artifacts, no doubt of it. There could be a big profit in esoteric and decorative objects, he knew. These could be artifacts that curried to the buyer boredom brought on by the endless, practical, serial duplications from automatic factories. If they were manufactured in this village, though, the whole operation looked to be a slave-labor thing. Or serfdom, which was the same thing for all practical purposes.

Abnethe's game might have sicker overtones, but it had more understandable motives.

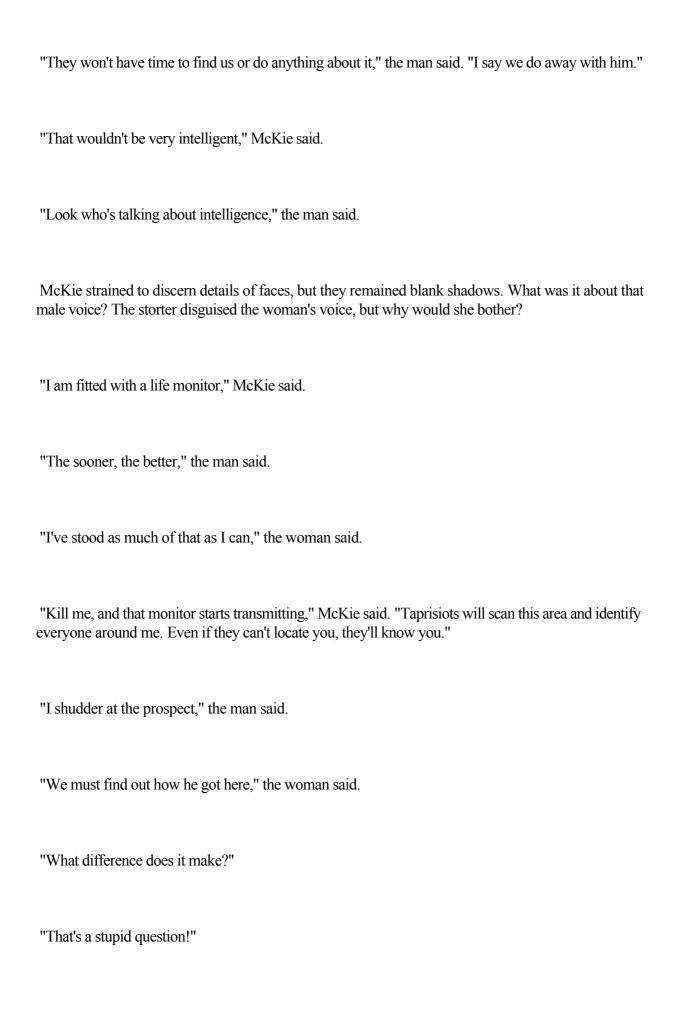


Something exploded against the back of McKie's neck, knocking him forward. The bearded man raised the whip handle, and McKie saw the thing rushing toward his head. He felt a giant, coughing darkness lurch across his mind as the thing crashed against the side of his head. He tried to bring the raygen out of his pocket, but his muscles disobeyed. He felt his body become a limping, horrified stagger. His vision was a bloody haze.
Again something exploded against his head.
McKie sank into nightmare oblivion. As he sank, he thought of the monitor in his skull. If they had killed him, a Taprisiot somewhere would jerk to attention and send in a final report on one Jorj X. McKie.
A lot of good that'll do me! the darkness said.
Where is the weapon with which I enforce your bondage? You give it to me every time you open your mouth.
-Laclac Riddle

There was a moon, McKie realized. That glowing thing directly in front of him had to be a moon. The realization told him he'd been seeing the moon for some time, puzzling over it without being fully awake. The moon had lifted itself out of blackness above a paralyzed outline of primitive roofs.
He was still in the village, then.
The moon dangled there, incredibly close.
The back and left side of McKie's head began throbbing painfully. He explored his bruised senses, realized he had been staked out in the open flat on his back, wrists and ankles tightly bound, his face pointed at the sky.
Perhaps it was another village.
He tested the security of his bindings, couldn't loosen them.
It was an undignified position: flat on his back, legs spread, arms outstretched.
For a time, he watched the changing guard of strange constellations move across his field of vision. Where was this place?
Firelight blazed up somewhere off to his left. It flickered, sank back to orange gloom. McKie tried to turn his head toward it, froze as pain stabbed upward from his neck through his skull.
He groaned.
Off in the darkness an animal screamed. The scream was followed by a hoarse, grunting roar. Silence. Then another roar. The sounds creased the night for McKie, bent it into new dimensions. He heard soft footsteps approaching.



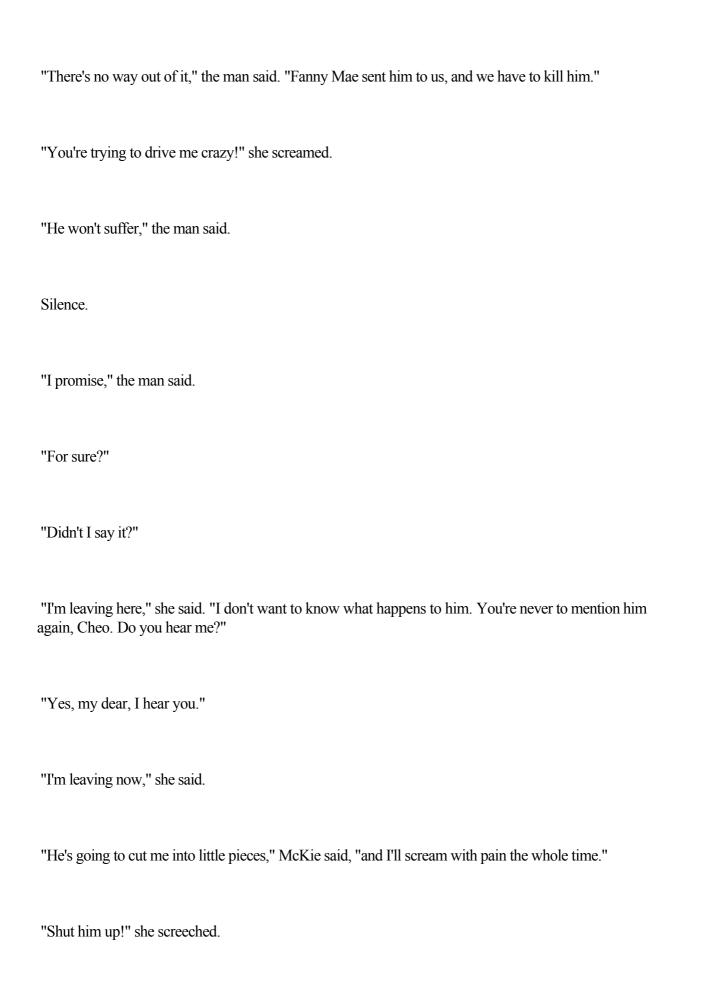
"We must be sure how he got here," the woman said.
"What difference does it make?"
"It could make a great deal of difference. What if Fanny Mae is breaking her contract?"
"That's impossible!" the man snorted.
"Nothing's impossible. He couldn't have got here without Caleban help."
"Maybe there's another Caleban."
"Fanny Mae says not."
"I say we do away with this intruder immediately," the man said.
"What if he's wearing a monitor?" she asked.
"Fanny Mae says no Taprisiot can locate this place!"
"But McKie is here!"
"And I've had one long-distance call since I arrived," McKie said. No Taprisiot can locate this place? he wondered. What would prompt that statement?

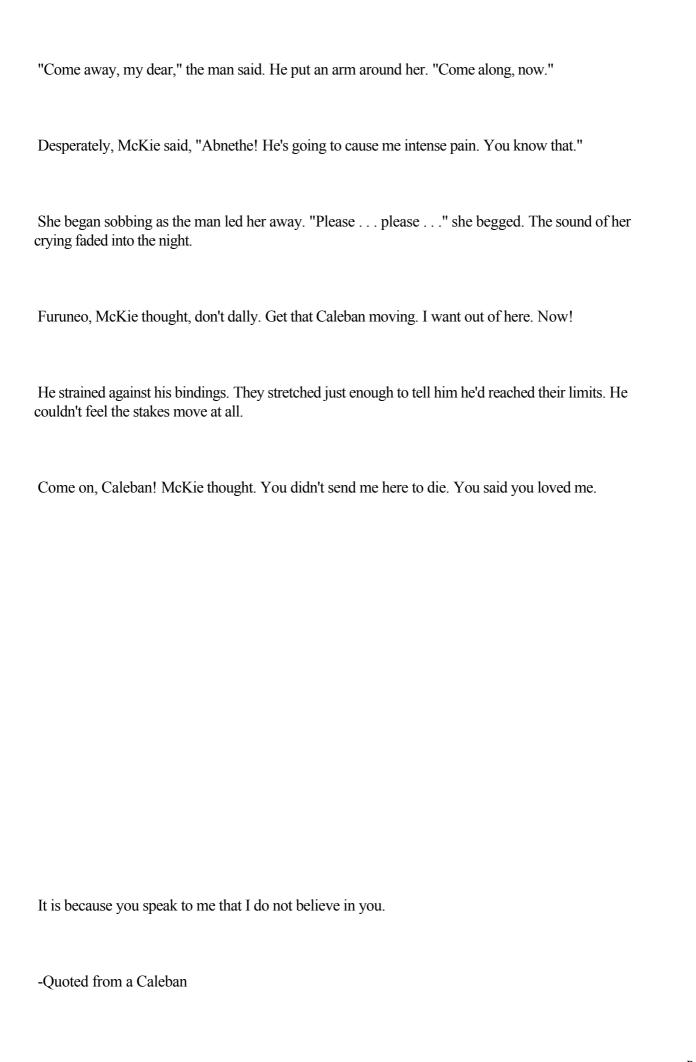






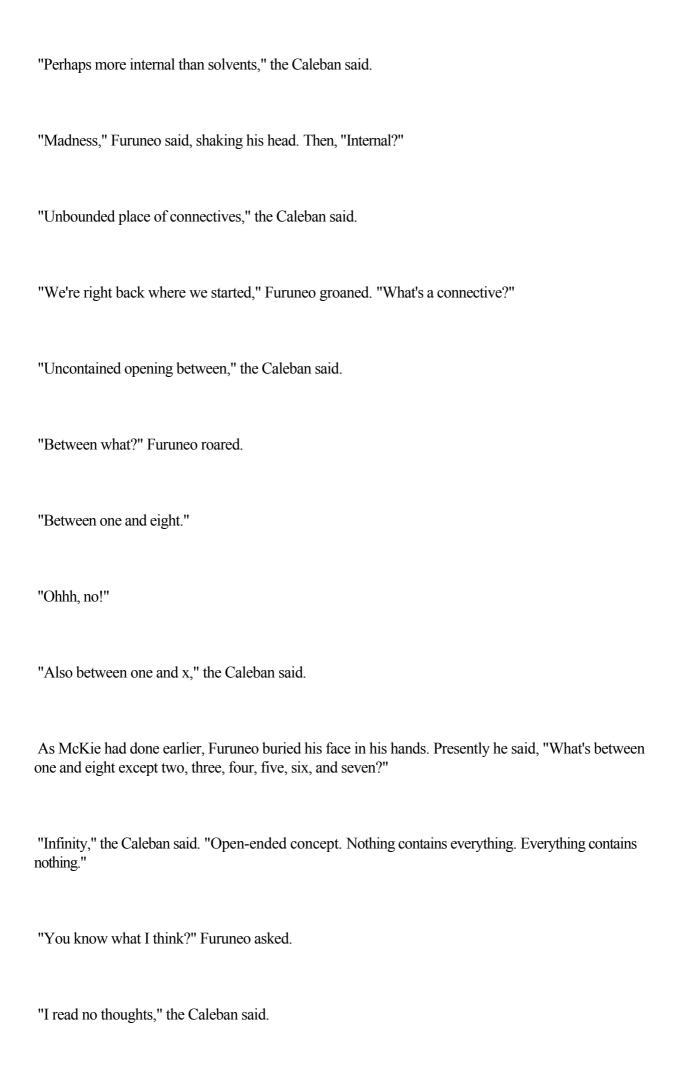


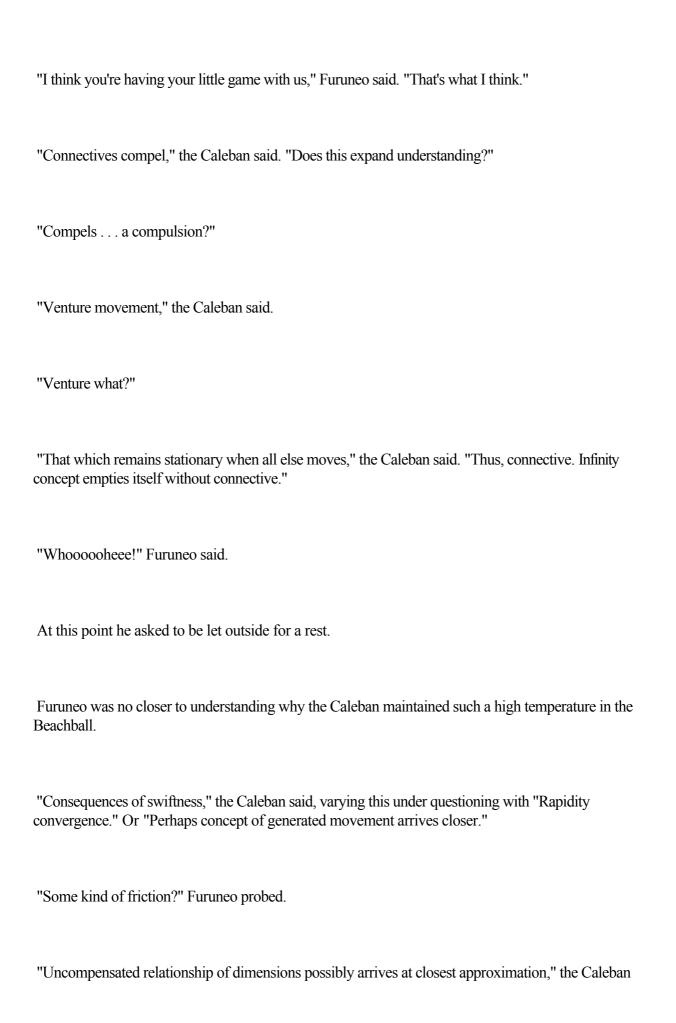




After several hours of questioning, counter-questioning, probe, counter-probe, and bootless answers, Furuneo brought in an enforcer assistant to take over the watch on the Caleban. At Furuneo's request Fanny Mae opened a portal and let him out onto the lava ledge for a spell of fresh air. It was cold out on the shelf, especially after the heat in the Beachball. The wind had died down, as it did most days here just before night. Surf still pounded the outer rocks and surged against the lava wall beyond the Beachball. But the tide was going out, and only a few dollops of spray wet the ledge. Connectives, Furuneo thought bitterly. She says it's not a linkage, so what is it? He couldn't recall ever having felt this frustrated. "That which extends from one to eight," the Caleban had said, "that is a connective. Correct use of verb to be?" "Huh?" "Identity verb," the Caleban said. "Strange concept." "No, no! What did you mean there, one to eight?" "Unbinding stuff," the Caleban said. "You mean like a solvent?" "Before solvent."

"What the devil could before have to do with solvents?"

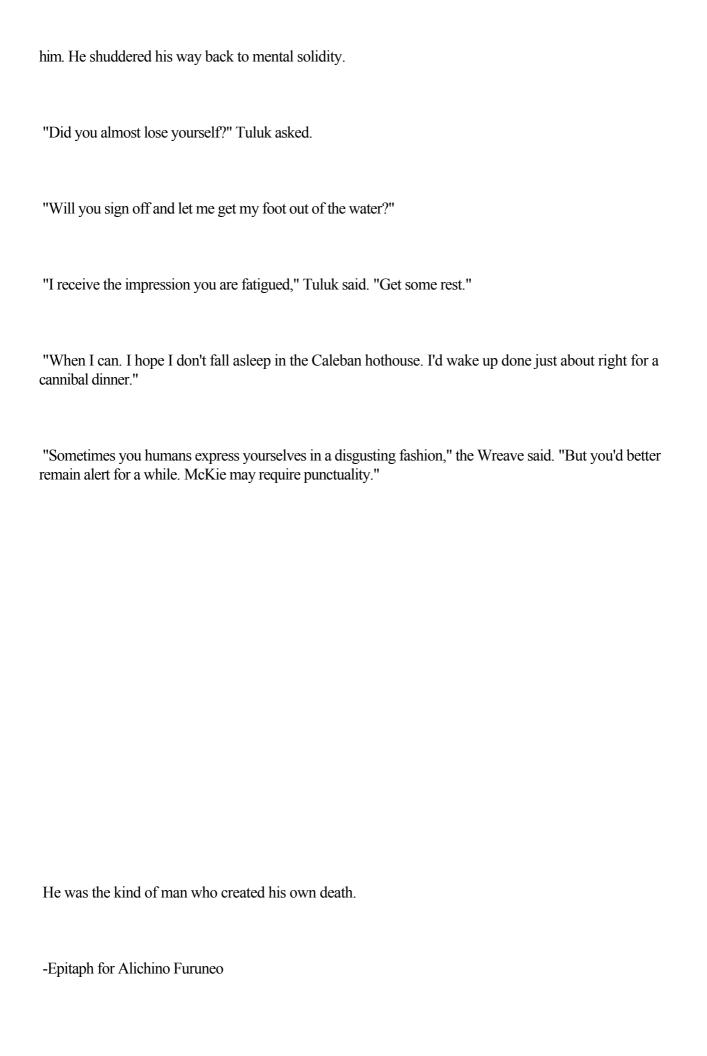




answered.
Now, reviewing these frustrating exchanges, Furuneo blew on his hands to warm them. The sun had set, and a chill wind was beginning to move off the bluff toward the water.
Either I freeze to death or bake, he thought. Where in the universe is McKie?
At this point Tuluk made long distance contact through one of the Bureau Taprisiots. Furuneo, who had been seeking a more sheltered position in the lee of the Beachball, felt the pineal ignition. He brought down the foot he had been lifting in a step, planted the foot firmly in a shallow pool of water, and lost all bodily sensation. Mind and call were one.
"This is Tuluk at the lab," the caller said. "Apologies for intrusion and all that."
"I think you just made me put a foot in cold water," Furuneo said.
"Well, here's some more cold water for you. You're to have that friendly Caleban pick up McKie in six hours, time elapse measured from four hours and fifty-one minutes ago. Synchronize."
"Standard measure?"
"Of course, standard!"
"Where is he?"
"He doesn't know. Wherever that Caleban sent him. Any idea how it's done?"
"It's done with connectives," Furuneo said.

"Is that right? What are connectives?"
"When I find out, you'll be the first to know."
"That sounds like a temporal contradiction, Furuneo."
"Probably is. All right, let me get my foot out of the water. It's probably frozen solid by now."
"You've the synchronized time coordinate for picking up McKie?"
"I got it! And I hope she doesn't send him home."
"How's that?"
Furuneo explained.
"Sounds confusing."
"I'm glad you figured that out. For a moment there, I thought you weren't approaching our problem with sufficient seriousness."
Among Wreaves seriousness and sincerity are almost as basic as they are with Taprisiots, but Tuluk had worked among humans long enough to recognize the jibe. "Well, every being has its own insanity," he said.
It was a Wreave aphorism, but it sounded sufficiently close to something the Caleban might have said

that Furuneo experienced a momentary angeret-enforced rage and sensed his ego shimmering away from



It was dark, but she needed no light for black thoughts. Damn Cheo for a sadistic fool! It had been a mistake to finance the surgery that had transformed the PanSpechi into an ego-frozen freak. Why couldn't he stay the way he'd been when they'd first met? So exotic . . . so . . . so . . . exciting. He was still useful, though. And there was no doubt he'd been the first to see the magnificent possibilities in their discovery. That, at least, remained exciting. She reclined on a softly furred chairdog, one of the rare feline adaptives that had been taught to lull their masters by purring. The soothing vibrations moved through her flesh as though seeking out irritations to subdue. So relaxing. She sighed. Her apartment occupied the top ring of the tower they had had built on this world, safe in the knowledge that their hiding place lay beyond the reach of any law or any communication except that granted through a single Caleban -- who had but a short time to live. But how had McKie come here? And what had McKie meant, that he'd had a call through a Taprisiot? The chairdog, sensitive to her mood, stopped purring as Abnethe sat up. Had Fanny Mae lied? Did another Caleban remain who could find this place? Granted that the Caleban's words were difficult to understand -- granted this, yes, there was yet no mistaking the essentials. This world was a place whose key lay in only one mind, that of Madame Mliss Abnethe. She sat straight on the chairdog. And there would be death without suffering to make this place forever safe -- a giant orgasm of death.

Only one door, and death would close it. The survivors, all chosen by herself, would live on in happiness

here beyond all connectives
Whatever those were.
She stood up, began pacing back and forth in the darkness. The rug, a creature adapted like the chairdog, squirmed its furry surface at the caress of her feet.
An amused smile came over her face.
Despite the complications and the strange timing it required, they'd have to increase the tempo of the floggings. Fanny Mae must be forced to discontinue as soon as possible. To kill without suffering among the victims, this was a prospect she found she could still contemplate.
But there was need for hurry.
Furuneo leaned, half dozing, against a wall within the Beachball. Sleepily he cursed the heat. His mindclock said there was slightly less than an hour remaining until the time for picking up McKie. Furuneo had tried to explain the time schedule to the Caleban, but she persisted in misunderstanding.
"Lengths extend and distend," she had said. "They warp and sift with vague movements between one and another. Thus time remains inconstant."
Inconstant?
The vortal tube of a S'eye jumpdoor snapped open just beyond the Caleban's giant spoon. The face and bare shoulders of Abnethe appeared in the opening.
Furuneo pushed himself away from the wall, shook his head to restore alertness. Damnation, it was hot in here!



"Cheo tells me," she said, "that you're a possibility for our project."
For no reason he could explain, Furuneo knew this to be a lie. Odd how she gave herself away. Her lips trembled when she said that name Cheo.
"Who's Cheo?" he asked.
"That's unimportant at the moment."
"What's your project, then?"
"Survival."
"That's nice," he said. "What else is new?" He wondered what she would do if he brought out the holoscan and started recording.
"Did Fanny Mae send McKie hunting for me?" she asked.
That question was important to her, Furuneo saw. McKie must have stirred up merry hob.
"You've seen McKie?" he asked.
"I refuse to discuss McKie," she said.
It was an insane response, Furuneo thought. She'd been the one to bring McKie into the conversation.

Abnethe pursed her lips, studied him. "Are you married, Alichino Furuneo?" she asked.
He frowned. Her lips had trembled again. Surely she knew his marital status. If it was valuable for her to recognize him, it was thrice valuable to know his strengths and weaknesses. What was her game?
"My wife is dead," he said.
"How sad," she murmured.
"I get along," he said, angry. "You can't live in the past.
"Ahhh, that is where you may be wrong," she said.
"What're you driving at, Abnethe?"
"Let's see," she said, "your age sixty-seven standard, if I recall correctly."
"You recall correctly, as you damn well know."
"You're young," she said. "You look even younger. I'd guess you're a vital person who enjoys life."
"Don't we all?" he asked.
It was going to be a bribe offer, then, he thought.
"We enjoy life when we have the proper ingredients" she said. "How odd it is to find a person such as

yourself in that stupid Bureau."
This was close enough to a thought Furuneo had occasionally nurtured for himself that he began wondering about this Cheo and the mysterious project with its possibilities. What were they offering?
They studied each other for a moment. It was the weighted assessment of two contestants about to enter a competition.
Would she offer herself? Furuneo wondered. She was an attractive female: generous mouth, large green eyes, a pleasant oval face. He'd seen the holoscans of her figure the Beautybarbers had done well by her. She'd maintained herself with all the expensive care her money could buy. But would she offer herself to him? He found this difficult to contemplate. Motives and stakes didn't fit.
"What're you afraid of?" he asked.
It was a good opening attack, but she answered him with a peculiar note of sincerity: "Suffering."
Furuneo tried to swallow in a dry throat. He hadn't been celibate since Mada's death, but that had been a special kind of marriage. It had gone beyond words and bodies. If anything remained solid and basic, connective, in the universe, their kind of love did. He had but to close his eyes to feel the memory-presence of her. Nothing could replace that, and Abnethe must know it. She couldn't offer him anything unobtainable elsewhere.
Or could she?
"Fanny Mae," Abnethe said, "are you prepared to honor the request I made?"
"Connective appropriate," the Caleban said.
"Connectives!" Furuneo exploded. "What are connectives?"



"How do you know the actual day?"
"The flambok tree at the edge of the clearing: It bloomed that day, and I missed it. See the umbrella flower?"
"Oh, yes. Then you've no doubt about the authenticity of this scene?"
"So you had your snoopers staring at us even then?" he rasped.
"Not snoopers. We are the snoopers. This is now.
"It can't be! That was almost forty years ago!"
"Keep your voice down, or she'll hear you."
"How can she hear me? She's been dead for "
"This is now, I tell you! Fanny Mae?"
"In person of Furuneo, concept of now contains relative connectives," the Caleban said. "Nowness of scene true."
Furuneo shook his head from side to side.
"We can pluck her from that yacht and take both of you to a place the Bureau will never find," Abnethe said. "What do you think of that, Furuneo?"





"And I'll come back to the yacht?"
"If that's what you did originally."
"What would I find, though?"
"Your bride gone, disappeared."
"But "
"It would be thought that some creature of the sea or the jungle killed her. Perhaps she went swimming and"
"She lived thirty-one years after that," he whispered.
"And you can have those thirty-one years all over again," Abnethe said.
"I I wouldn't be the same. She'd "
"She'd know you."
Would she really? he wondered. Perhaps yes. Yes, she'd know him. She might even come to understand the need behind such a decision. But he saw quite clearly that she'd never forgive him. Not Mada.
"With proper care she might not have to die in thirty-one years," Abnethe said.

Furuneo nodded, but it was a gesture only for himself.
She wouldn't forgive him any more than the young man returning to an empty yacht could forgive him. And that young man had not died.
I couldn't forgive myself, he thought. The young man I was would never forgive me all those lovely lost years.
"If you're worried," Abnethe said, "about changing the universe or the course of history or any such nonsense, forget it. That's not how it works, Fanny Mae tells me. You change a single, isolated situation, no more. The new situation goes off about its business, and everything else remains pretty much the same."
"I see."
"Do you agree to our bargain?" Abnethe asked.
"What?"
"Shall I have Fanny Mae pick her up for you?"
"Why bother?" he asked. "I can't agree to such a thing."
"You're joking!"
He turned, stared up at her, saw that she had a small jumpdoor open almost directly over his head. Only her eyes, nose, and mouth could be seen through the opening.

"I am not joking."
Part of her hand became visible as she lifted it, pointed toward the other door. "Look down there at what you're rejecting. Look, I say! Can you honestly tell me you don't want that back?"
He turned.
Mada had gone back to the hammock, snuggled face-down against a pillow. Furuneo recalled that he'd found her like that when he'd returned from the seadome.
"You're not offering me anything," he said.
"But I am! It's true, everything I've told you!"
"You're a fool," he said, "if you can't see the difference between what Mada and I had and what you offer. I pity "
Something fiercely compressive gripped his throat, choked off his words. Furuneo's hands groped in empty air as he was lifted up up He felt his head go through jumpdoor resistance. His neck was precisely within the boundary juncture when the door was closed. His body fell back into the Beachball.

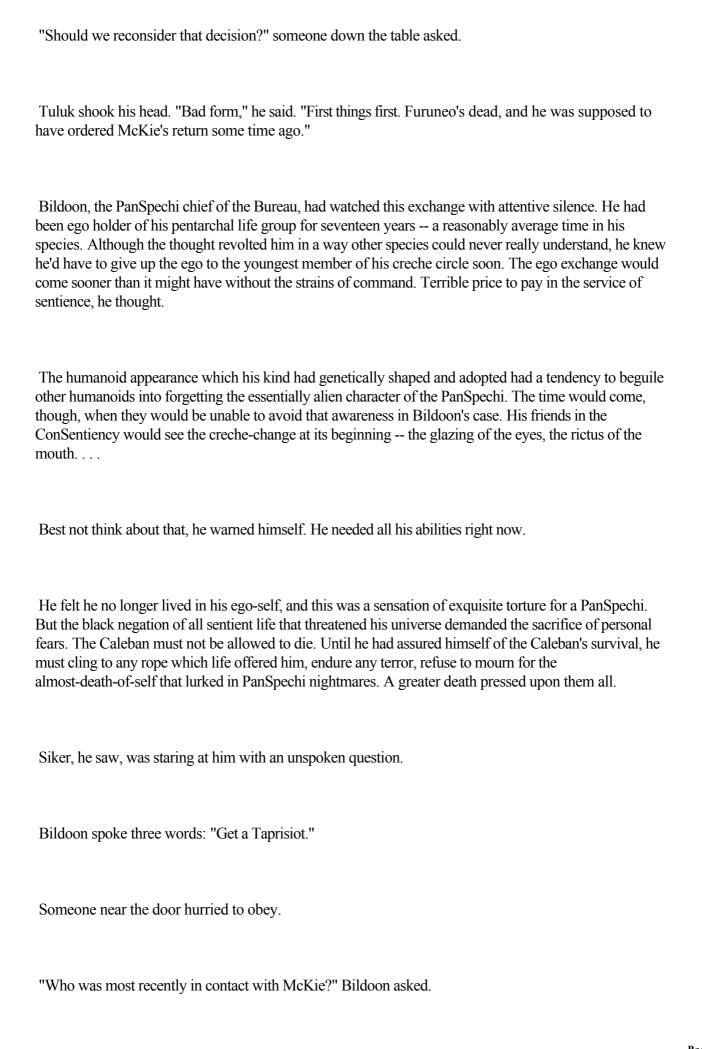
Body jargon and hormone squirts, these begin to get at communication.
-Culture Lag, an unpublished work by Jorj X. McKie
"You fool, Mliss!" Cheo raged. "You utter, complete, senseless fool! If I hadn't come back when I"
"You killed him!" she rasped, backing away from the bloody head on the floor of her sitting room. "You you killed him! And just when I'd almost "
"When you'd almost ruined everything," Cheo snarled, thrusting his scarred face close to her. "What do you humans use for brains?"
"But he'd "
"He was ready to call his helpers and tell them everything you'd blurted to him!"
"I won't have you talking to me this way!"
"When it's my neck you're putting on the block, I'll talk to you any way I want."
"You made him suffer!" she accused.
"He didn't feel a thing from what I did You're the one who made him suffer "

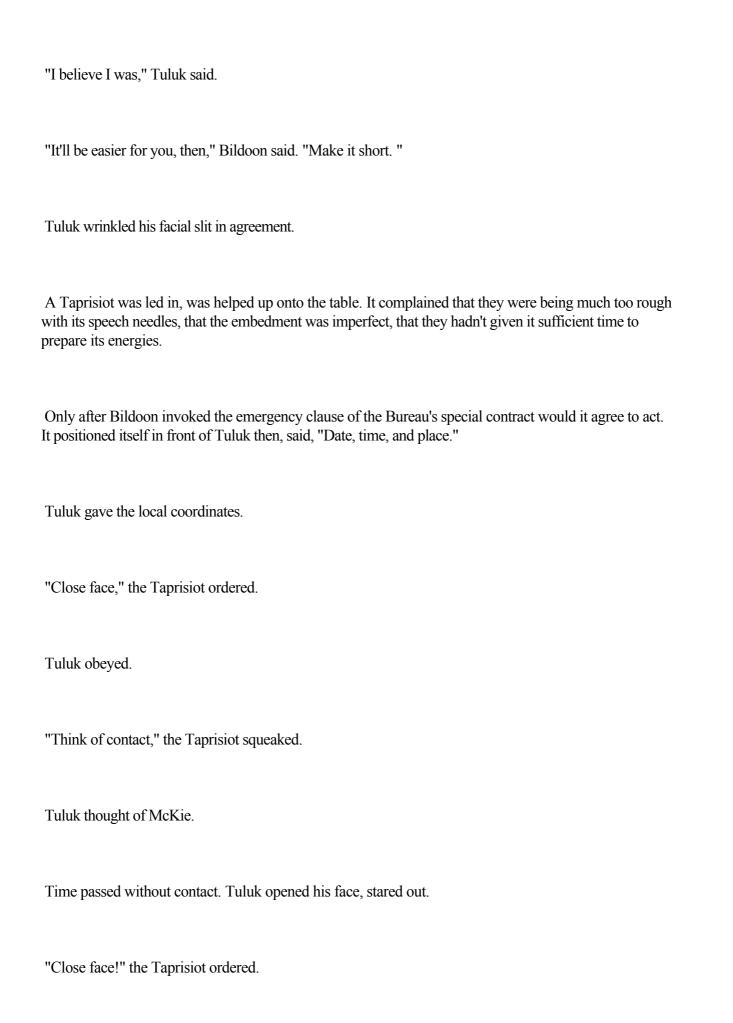
"How can you say that?" She backed away from the PanSpechi face with its frighteningly oversized humanoid features.
"You bleat about being unable to stand suffering," he growled, "but you love it. You cause it all around you! You knew Furuneo wouldn't accept your stupid offer, but you taunted him with it, with what he'd lost. You don't call that suffering?"
"See here, Cheo, if you"
"He suffered right up to the instant I put a stop to it," the PanSpechi said. "And you know it!"
"Stop it!" she screamed. "I didn't! He wasn't!"
"He was and you knew it, every instant of it, you knew it.
She rushed at him, beat her fists against his chest. "You're lying! You're lying! You're lying!"
He grabbed her wrists, forced her to her knees. She lowered her head. Tears ran down her cheeks. "Lies, lies," she muttered.
In a softer, more reasonable tone, he said: "Mliss, hear me. We've no way to know how much longer the Caleban can last. Be sensible. We've a limited number of fixed periods when we can use the S'eye, and we have to make the most of them. You've wasted one of those periods. We can't afford such blunders, Mliss."
She kept her gaze down, refused to look at him.
"You know I don't like to be severe with you, Mliss," he said, "but my way is best as you've said



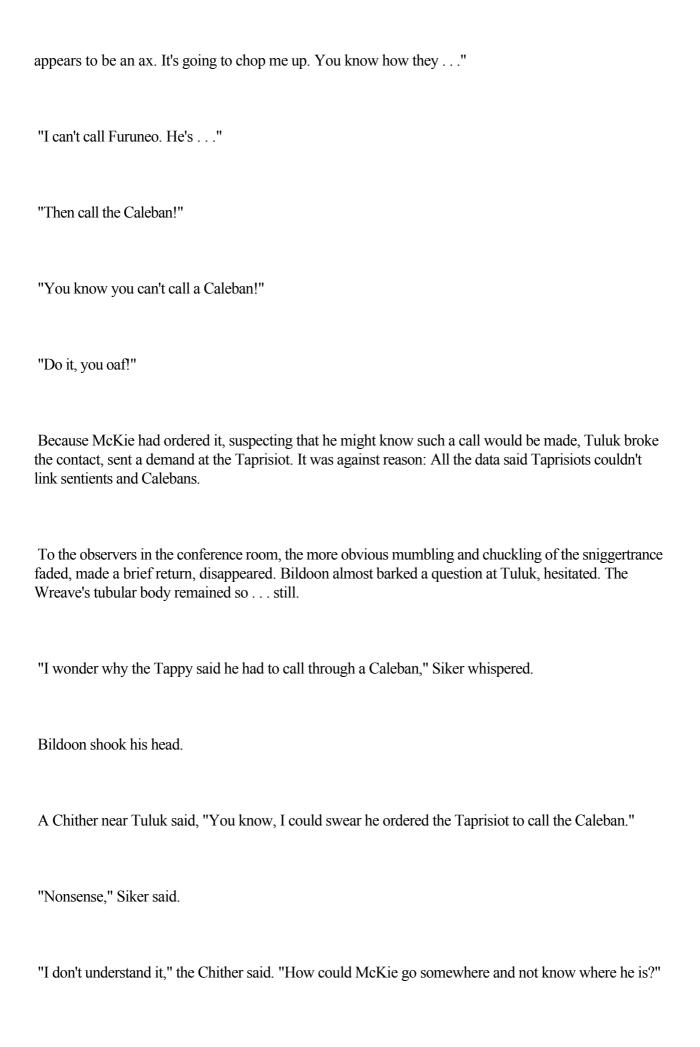
She was all over him then, kissing him, apologizing. They never did get down to Plouty's new game.
You can say things which cannot be done. This is elementary. The trick is to keep attention focused on what is said and not on what can be done.
-BuSab Manual
As Furuneo's life monitor ignited at his death, Taprisiots scanned the Beachball area. They found only
the Caleban and four enforcers in hovering guard ships. Reasoning about actions, motives or guilt did not come within the Taprisiot scope. They merely reported the death, its location, and the sentients available to their scanners.
The four enforcers came in for several days of rough questioning as a result. The Caleban was a different matter. A full BuSab management conference was required before they could decide what action to take about the Caleban. Furuneo's death had come under extremely mysterious circumstances no head, unintelligible responses from the Caleban.
As Tuluk entered the conference room on a summons that had roused him from sleep, Siker was flailing the table. He was using his middle fighting tendril for the gesture, quite un-Laclac in emotional intensity.

"We don't act without calling McKie!" Siker said. "This is too delicate!"
Tuluk took his position at the table, leaned into the Wreave support provided for his species, spoke mildly: "Haven't you contacted McKie yet? Furuneo was supposed to have ordered the Caleban "
That was as far as he got. Explanations and data came at him from several of the others.
Presently Tuluk said, "Where's Furuneo's body"
"Enforcers are bringing it to the lab now."
"Have the police been brought in?"
"Of course."
"Anything on the missing head?"
"No sign of it."
"Has to be the result of a jumpdoor," Tuluk said. "Will the police take over?"
"We're not going to allow that. One of our own."
Tuluk nodded. "I'm with Siker, then. We don't move without consulting McKie. This case was handed to him when we didn't know its extent. He's still in charge."

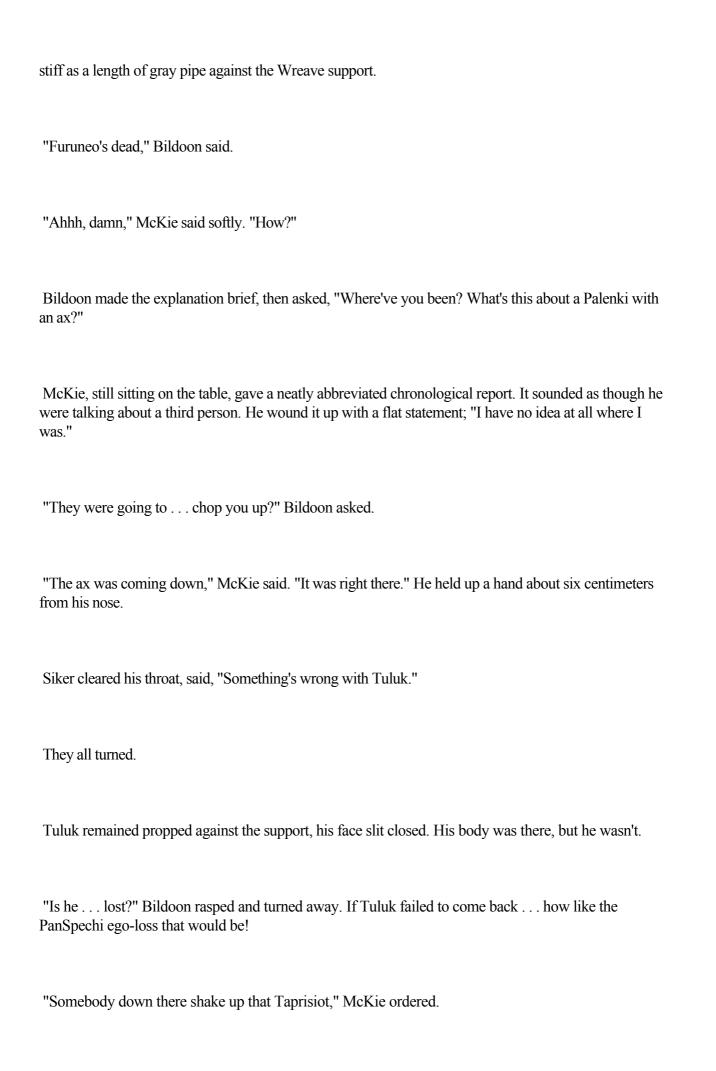


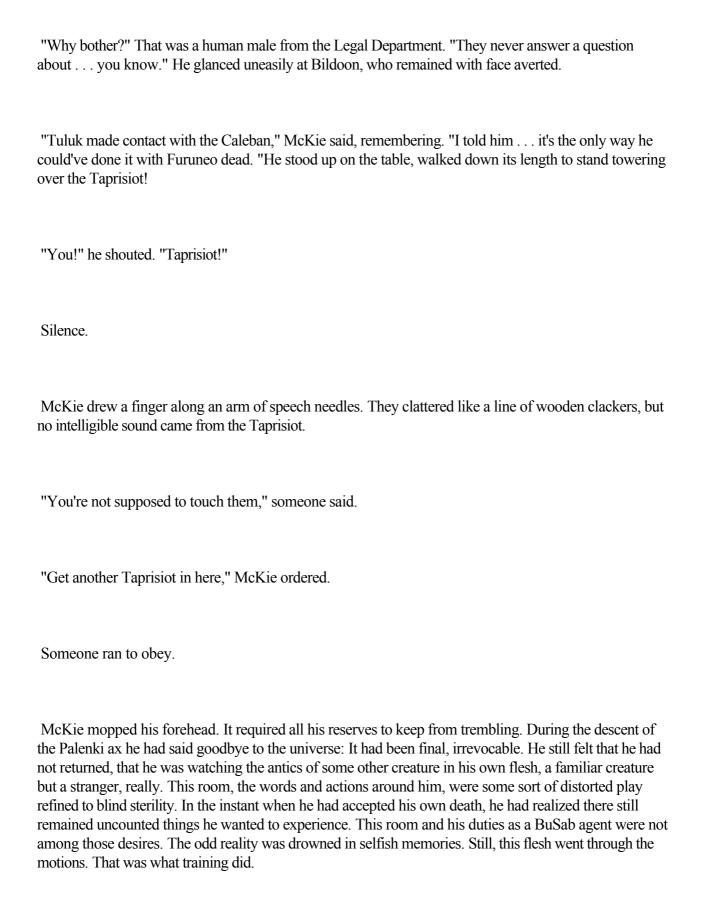








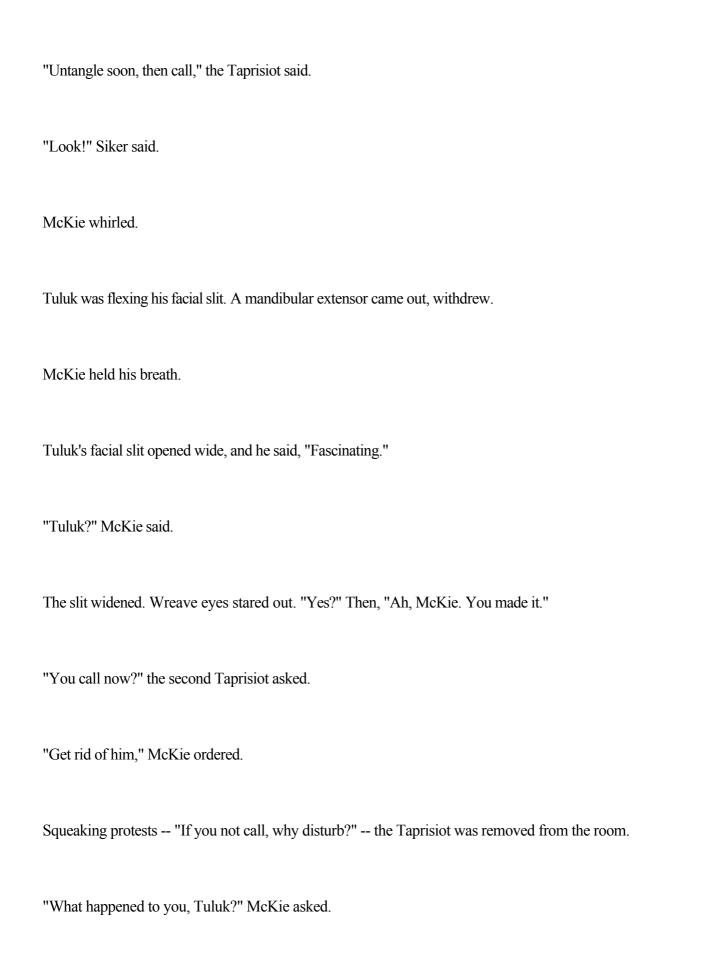




A second Taprisiot was herded into the room, its needles squeaking complaints. It was hoisted onto the

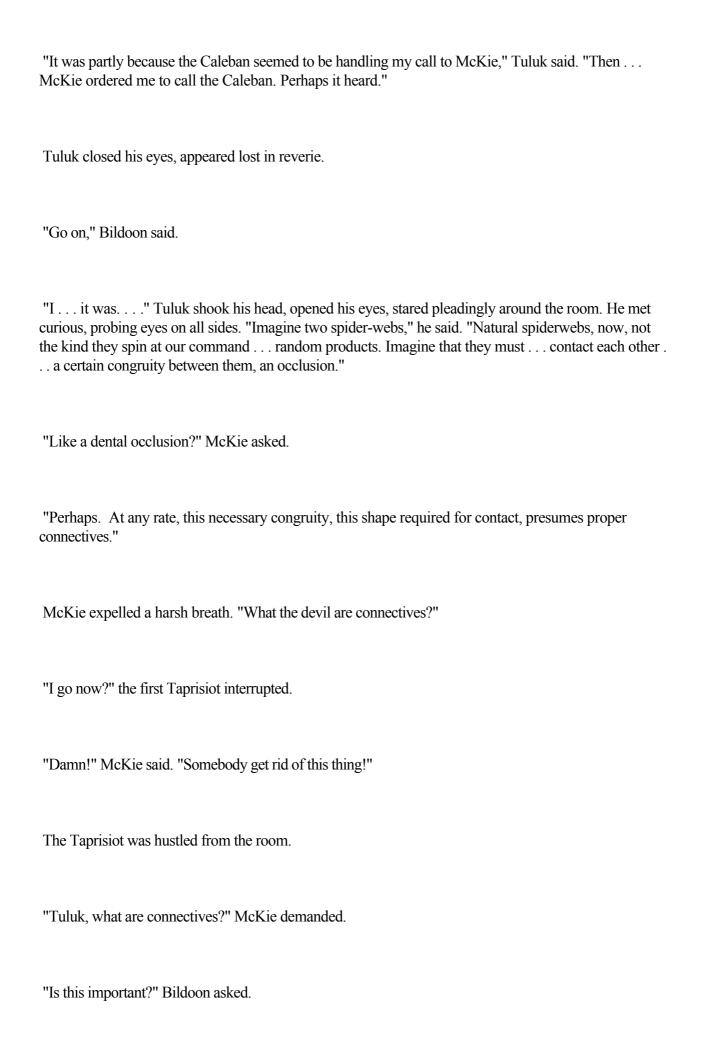
table, objecting all the way. "You have Taprisiot! Why you disturb?"











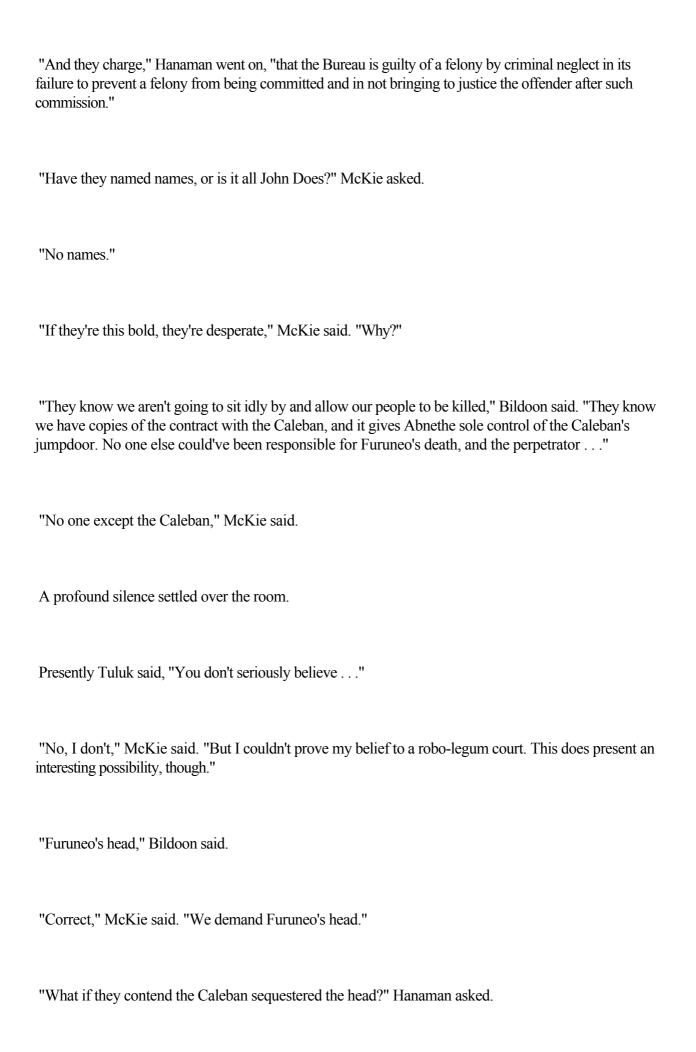
"Will you all take my word for it and let him answer?" McKie asked. "It's important. Tuluk?"
"Mmmmmm," Tuluk said. "You realize, of course, that artificiality can be refined to the point where it's virtually indistinguishable from original reality?"
"What's that have to do with connectives?"
"It's precisely at that point where the single distinguishing characteristic between original and artificial is the connective," Tuluk explained.
"Huh?" McKie said.
"Look at me," Tuluk said.
"I am looking at you!"
"Imagine that you take a food vat and produce in it an exact fleshly duplicate of my person," Tuluk said.
"An exact fleshly"
"You could do it, couldn't you?" Tuluk demanded.
"Of course. But why?"
"Just imagine it. Don't question. An exact duplicate down to and including the cellular message units. This flesh would be imbued with all my memories and responses. Ask it a question you might ask me, and it would answer as I might answer. Even my mates wouldn't be able to distinguish between us."

"So?" McKie said.
"Would there be any difference between us?" Tuluk asked.
"But you said"
"There'd be one difference, wouldn't there?"
"The time element, the"
"More than that," Tuluk said. "One would know it was a copy. Now, that chairdog in which Ser Bildoon sits is a different matter, not so?"
"Huh?"
"It's an unthinking animal," Tuluk said.
McKie stared at the chairdog Tuluk had indicated. It was a product of genetic shaping, gene surgery and selection. What possible difference could it make that a chairdog was an animal however remotely descended? '
"What does the chairdog eat?" Tuluk asked.
"The food tailored for it, what else?" McKie turned back to the Wreave, studied him.
"But neither the chairdog nor its food is the same as their ancestral flesh," Tuluk said. "The vat food is an

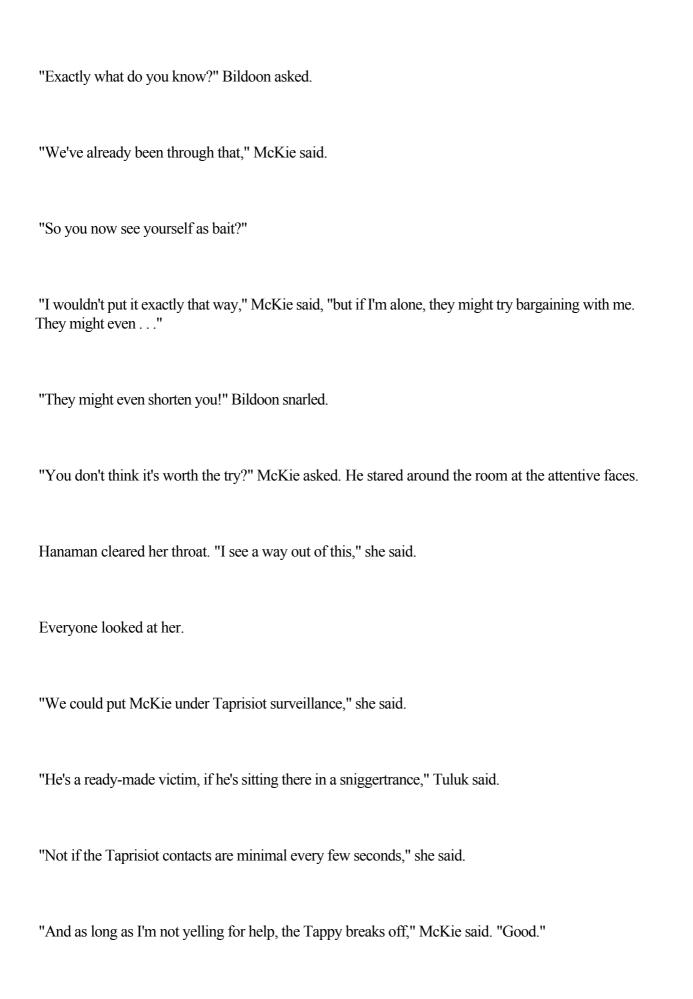
endless, serial chain of protein. The chairdog is flesh which is ecstatic in its work."
"Of course! That's the way it was made." McKie's eyes went wide. He began to see what Tuluk was explaining.
"The differences, these are the connectives," Tuluk said.
"McKie, do you understand this gibberish?" Bildoon demanded.
McKie tried to swallow in a dry throat. "The Caleban sees only these refined differences?" he asked.
"And nothing else," Tuluk said.
"Then it doesn't see us as shapes or dimensions or"
"Or even as extensions in time the way we understand time," Tuluk said. "We are, perhaps, nodes on a standing wave. Time, for the Caleban, isn't something squeezed out of a tube. It's more like a line which your senses intersect."
"Hahhhhh," McKie breathed.
"I don't see where this helps us one bit," Bildoon said. "Our major problem is to find Abnethe. Do you have any idea, McKie, where that Caleban sent you?"
"I saw the constellations overhead," McKie said. "Before I leave, we'll get a mindcord on what I saw and have a computer check on the star patterns."
"Provided the pattern's in the master registry," Bildoon said.

"What about that slave culture McKie stumbled on?" one of the legal staff asked. "We could ask for a \dots ."
"Haven't any of you been listening?" McKie asked. "Our problem is to find Abnethe. I thought we had her, but I'm beginning to think this may not be that easy. Where is she? How can we go into a court and say, 'At some unknown place in an unknown galaxy, a female believed to be Mliss Abnethe, but whom I didn't really see, is alleged to be conducting ' "
"Then what do we do?" the legal staffer growled.
"With Furuneo dead, who's watching Fanny Mae?" McKie asked.
"We have four enforcers inside, watching where she is, and four outside, watching them," Bildoon said. "Are you sure you've no other clue to where you were?"
"None."
"A complaint by McKie would fail now," Bildoon said. "No a better move might be to charge her with harboring a" he shuddered "a PanSpechi fugitive."
"Do we know who that fugitive is?" McKie asked.
"Not yet. We haven't decided the proper course yet." He glanced at a Legal Department representative, a human female seated near Tuluk. "Hanaman?"
Hanaman cleared her throat. She was a fragile-looking woman, thick head of brown hair in gentle waves, long oval face with soft blue eyes, delicate nose and chin, wide full mouth.
"You think it advisable to discuss this in council now?" she asked.

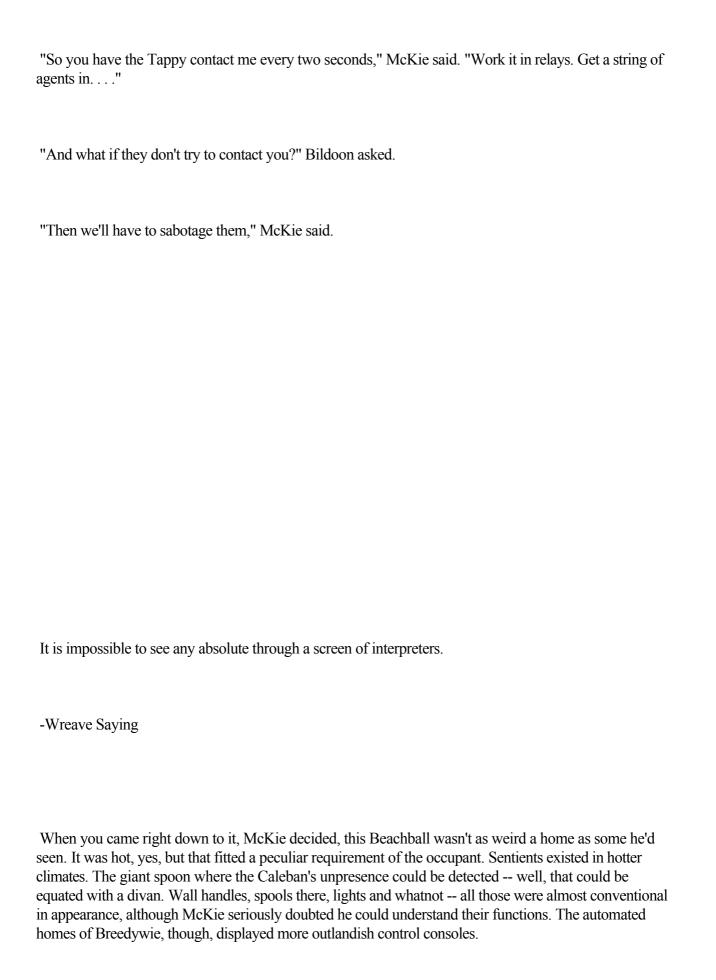
"I do, or I wouldn't have called on you," Bildoon said. For an instant McKie thought the reproof might bring real tears to Hanaman's eyes, then he saw the controlled downtwist at the corners of her mouth, the measuring stare she swept around the conference room. She had brains, he saw, and knew there were those here susceptible to her sex. "McKie," she said, "is it necessary for you to stand on the table? You're not a Taprisiot." "Thanks for reminding me," he said. He jumped down, found a chairdog opposite her, stared back at her with a bland intensity. Presently she focused on Bildoon, said, "To bring everyone up to date, Abnethe with one Palenki tried to flog the Caleban about two hours ago. Acting on our orders, an enforcer prevented the flogging. He cut off the Palenki's arm with a raygen. As a result, Abnethe's legal staff is already seeking an injunction." "Then they were prepared ahead of time," McKie said. "Obviously," she agreed. "They're alleging outlaw sabotage, misfeasance by a bureau, mayhem, misconduct, malicious mischief, felonious misprision . . ." "Misfeasance?" McKie demanded. "This is a robo-legum case, not a Gowachin jurisdiction," Hanaman said. "We don't have to exonerate the prosecutor before entering the . . . " She broke off, shrugged. "Well, you know all that. BuSab is being held to answer for collective responsibility in the consequences of unlawful and wrongful acts committed by its agents in pursuance of the authority permitted them . . ." "Wait a minute!" McKie interrupted. "This is bolder than I expected from that crowd."



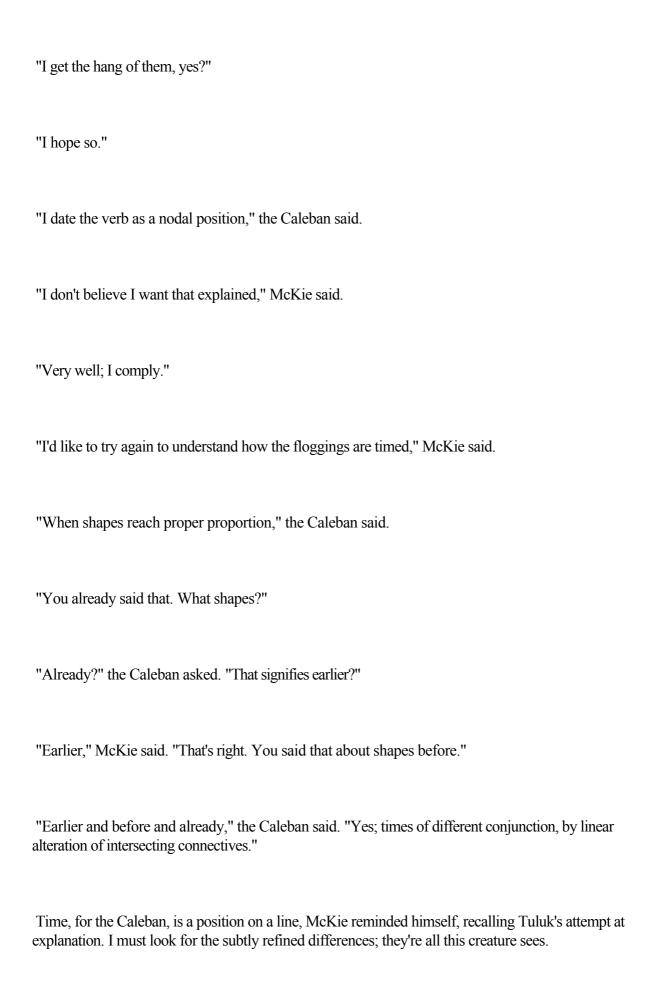
"I don't intend asking them for it," McKie said. "I'm going to ask the Caleban."
Hanaman nodded, her gaze intent on McKie and with a light of admiration in her eyes. "Clever," she breathed. "If they attempt to interfere, they're guilty. But if we get the head" She looked at Tuluk.
"What about it, Tuluk?" Bildoon asked. "Think you could get anything from Furuneo's brain?"
"That depends on how much time has passed between the death and our key-in, Tuluk said. "Nerve replay has limits, you know."
"We know," Bildoon said.
"Yeah," McKie said. "Only one thing for me to do now, isn't there?"
"Looks that way," Bildoon said.
"Will you call off the enforcers, or shall I?" McKie asked.
"Now, wait a minute!" Bildoon said. "I know you have to go back to that Beachball, but"
"Alone," McKie said.
"Why?"
"I can give the demand for Furuneo's head in front of witnesses," McKie said, "but that's not enough. They want me. I got away from them, and they've no idea how much I know about their hidey hole."





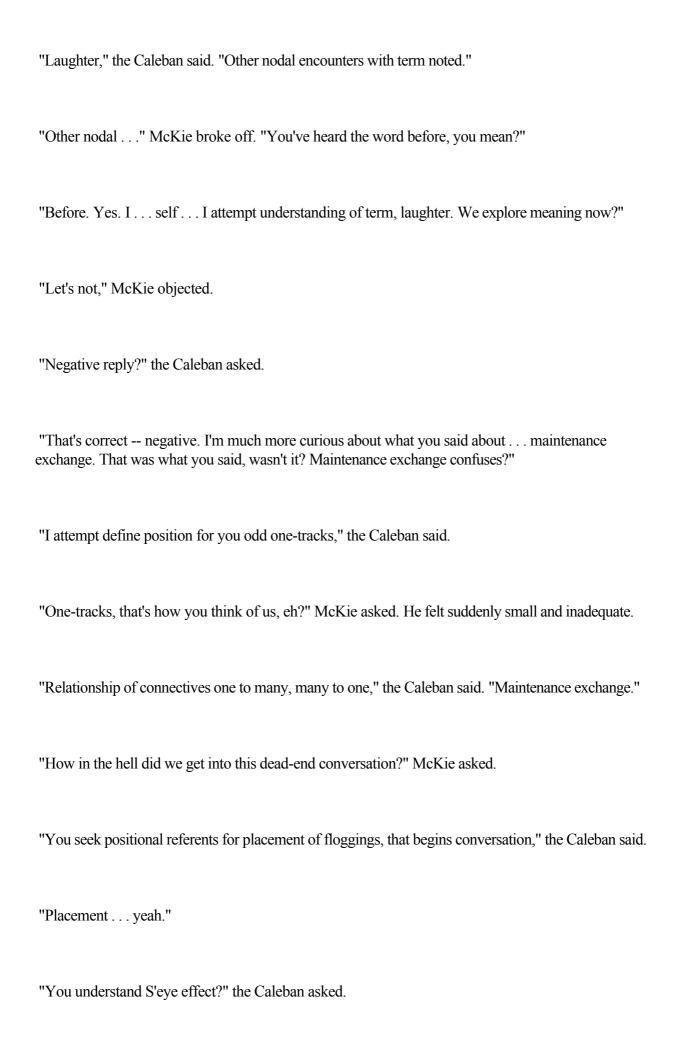


The ceiling here was a bit low, but he could stand without stooping. The purple gloom was no stranger than the variglare of Gowachin, where most offworld sentients had to wear protective goggles while visiting friends. The Beachball's floor covering did not appear to be a conventional living organism, but it was soft. Right now it smelled of a standard pyrocene cleaner-disinfectant, and the fumes were rather stifling in the heat. McKie shook his head. The fly-buzz "zzzt" of Taprisiot contact every two seconds was annoying, but he found he could override the distraction. "Your friend reached ultimate discontinuity," the Caleban had explained. "His substance has been removed." For substance read blood-and-body, McKie translated. He hoped the translation achieved some degree of accuracy, but he cautioned himself not to be too sure of that. If we could only have a little air current in here, McKie thought. Just a small breeze. He mopped perspiration from his forehead, drank from one of the water jugs he had provided for himself. "You still there, Fanny Mae?" he asked. "You observe my presence?" "Almost." "That is our mutual problem -- seeing each other," the Caleban said. "You're using time-ordinal verbs with more confidence, I note," McKie said.



"What shapes?" McKie repeated.
"Shapes defined by duration lines," the Caleban said. "I see many duration lines. You, oddly, carry visual sensation of one line only. Very strange. Other teachers explain this to self, but understanding fails extreme constriction. Self admires molecular acceleration, but maintenance exchange confuses."
Confuses! McKie thought.
"What molecular acceleration?" he asked.
"Teachers define molecule as smallest physical unit of element or compound. True?"
"That's right."
"This carries difficulty in understanding unless ascribed by self to perceptive difference between our species. Say, instead, molecule perhaps equals smallest physical unit visible to species. True?"
What's the difference? McKie thought. It's all gibberish. How had they gotten off onto molecules and acceleration from the proper proportion of undefined shapes?
"Why acceleration?" he insisted.
"Acceleration always occurs along convergence lines we use while speaking one to another."
Oh, damn! McKie thought. He lifted a water jug, drank, choked on a swallow. He bent forward, gasping. When he could manage it, he said, "The heat in here! Molecular speedup!"
"Do these concepts not interchange?" the Caleban asked.





McKie exhaled slowly. To the best of his knowledge, no Caleban had ever before volunteered a discussion of the S'eye effect. The one-two-three of how to use the mechanism of the jumpdoors yes this was something they could (and did) explain. But the effect, the theory
"I \dots uh, use the jumpdoors," McKie said. "I know something of how the control mechanism is assembled and tuned to \dots "
"Mechanism not coincide with effect!"
"Uhhh, certainly," McKie agreed. "The word's not the thing."
"Precisement! We say I translate, you understand? we say, 'Term evades node.' You catch the hanging of this term, self thinks."
"I uh, get the hang of it," McKie agreed.
"Recommend hang-line as good thought," the Caleban said. "Self, I believe we approach true communication. It wonders me."
"You wonder about it."
"Negative. It wonders about me."
"That's great," McKie said in a flat voice. "That's communication?"
"Understanding diffuses scatters? Yes understanding scatters when we discuss connectives. I observe connectives of your psyche. For psyche, I understand 'other self.' True?"

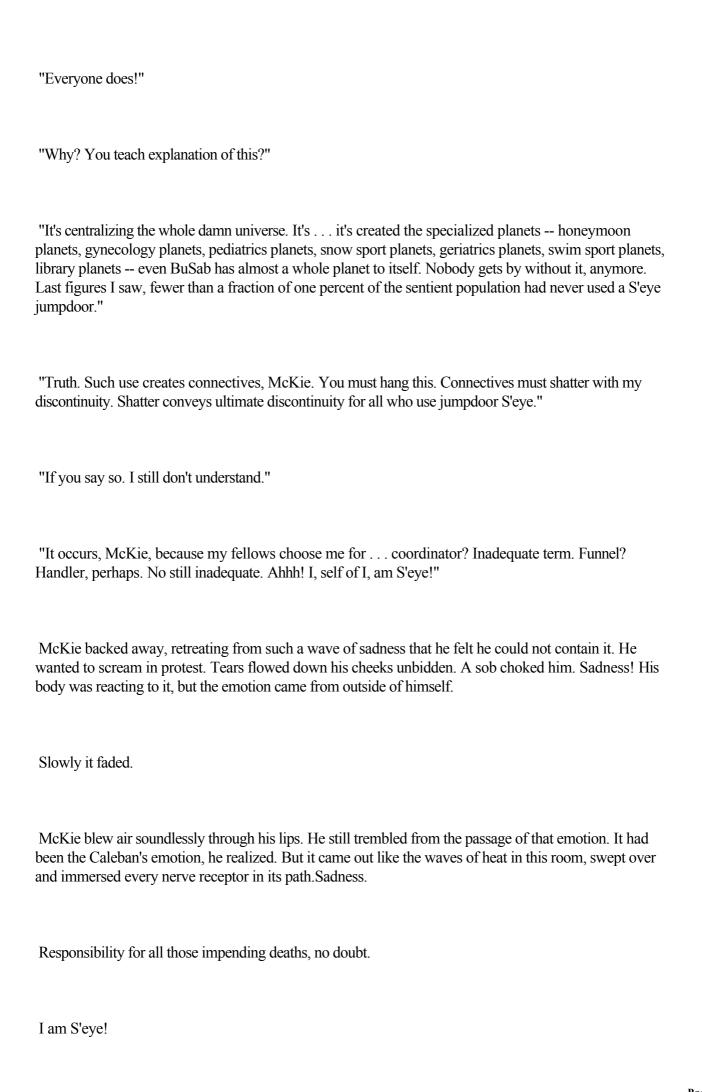
"Why not?" McKie asked. "I see," the Caleban said, ignoring McKie's defeated tone, "psyche patterns, perhaps their colors." Approachments and outreaching touch by awareness. I come, through this, to unwinding of intelligence and perhaps understand what you mean by term, stellar mass. Self understands by being stellar mass, you hang this, McKie?" "Hang this? Oh, sure . . . sure." "Good! Comes now an understanding of your . . . wandering? Difficult word, McKie. Very likely this an uncertain exchange. Wandering equals movement along one line for you. This cannot exist for us. One moves, all move for Caleban on own plane. S'eye effect combines all movements and vision. I see you to other place of your desired wandering." McKie, his interest renewed by this odd rambling, said, "You see us . . . that's what moves us from one place to another?" "I hear sentient of your plane say sameness, McKie. Sentient say, 'I will see you to the door.' So? Seeing moves." Seeing moves? McKie wondered. He mopped his forehead, his lips. It was so damned hot! What did all this have to do with "maintenance exchange"? Whatever that was! "Stellar mass maintains and exchanges," the Caleban said. "Not see through the self. S'eye connective discontinues. You call this . . . privacy? Cannot say. This Caleban exists alone or self on your plane. Lonely." We're all lonely, McKie thought. And this universe would be lonely soon, if he couldn't find a way to escape their common grave. Why did the problem have to hang on such fumbling communication?

It was a peculiar kind of torment trying to talk to the Caleban under these pressures. He wanted to speed the processes of understanding, but speed sent all sentiency hurtling toward the brink. He could feel time flying past him. Urgency churned his stomach. He marched with time, retreated with it and he'd started somehow on the wrong foot.
He thought about the fate of just one baby who'd never passed through a jumpdoor. The baby would cry and there'd be no one to answer.
The awesome totality of the threat daunted him.
Everyone gone!
He put down a surge of irritation at the zzzt-beat of the Taprisiot intrusions. That, at least, was companionship.
"Do Taprisiots send our messages across space the same way?" he asked. "Do they see the calls?"
"Taprisiot very weak," the Caleban said. "Taprisiot not possess Caleban energy. Self energy, you understand?"
"I dunno. Maybe."
"Taprisiot see very thin, very short," the Caleban said. "Taprisiot not see through stellar mass of self. Sometimes Taprisiot ask for boost? Amplification! Caleban provide service. Maintenance exchange, you hang? Taprisiot pay, we pay, you pay. All pay energy. You call energy demand hunger, not so?"
"Oh, hell!" McKie said. "I'm not getting the half of"

A brawny Palenki arm carrying a whip inserted itself into the space above the giant spoon. The whip







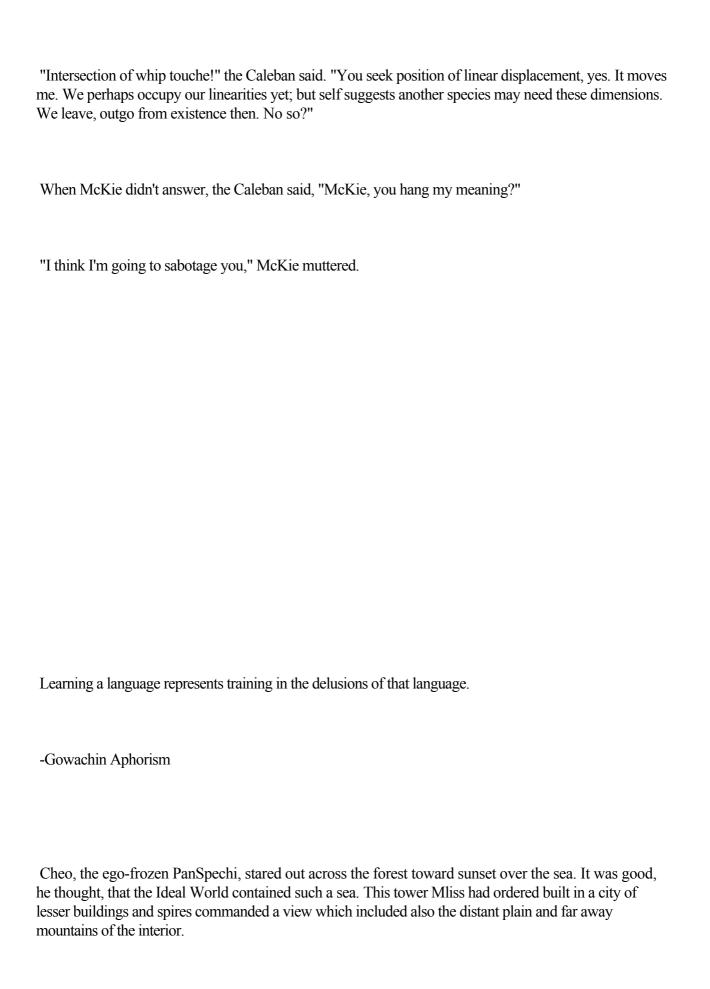
effect trailed threads of itself through the jumpdoors. Was that it? Fanny Mae had used the word "funnel." Every traveler went through her hands? Whatever. And when she ceased to exist, the threads broke. All died.
"Why weren't we warned about this when you offered us the S'eye effect?" McKie asked.
"Warned?"
"Yes! You offered "
"Not offer. Fellows explain effect. Sentients of your wave expose great joy. They offer exchange of maintenance. You call this pay, not so?"
"We should've been warned."
"Why?"
"Well, you don't live forever, do you?"
"Explain this term, forever."
"Forever always. Infinity?"
"Sentients of your wave seek infinity?"

What in the name of all devils in the universe could the Caleban mean by such a strange claim? He thought of each jumpdoor passage. Connectives? Threads, perhaps. Each being caught by the S'eye

"Not for individual members, but for"
"Sentient species, they seek infinity?"
"Of course they do!"
"Why?"
"Doesn't everyone?"
"But what about other species for which yours must make way? You not believe in evolution?"
"Evo" McKie shook his head sharply. "What's that have to do with it?"
"All beings have own day and depart," the Caleban said. "Day correct term? Day, unit of time, allotted linearity, normal extent of existence you hang this?"
McKie's mouth moved, but no words came out.
"Length of line, time of existence," the Caleban said. "Approximately translated, correct?"
"But what gives you the right to terminate us?" McKie demanded, finding his voice.
"Right not assumed, McKie," the Caleban said. "Given condition of proper connectives, another of my fellows takes up S'eye control before self reaches ultimate discontinuity. Unusual circumstance rejects such solution here. Mliss Abnethe and associates shorten your one-track. My fellows leave."

"They ran for it while they had time; I understand," McKie said.
"Time yes, your single-track line. This comparison provides suitable concept. Inadequate but sufficient."
"And you are definitely the last Caleban in our wave?"
"Self alone," the Caleban said. "Terminal end-point Caleban yes. Self confirms description."
"Wasn't there any way to save yourself?" McKie asked.
"Save? Ahhh avoid? Evade! Yes, evade ultimate discontinuity. This you suggest?"
"I'm asking if there wasn't some way for you to escape the way your fellows did."
"Way exists, but result same for your wave."
"You could save yourself, but it would end us, that it?"
"You not possess honor concept?" the Caleban asked. "Save self, lose honor."
"Touche," McKie said.
"Explain touche," the Caleban said. "New term."
"Eh? Oh that's a very old ancient term "

"Linear beginning term, you say? Yes, those best with nodal frequency."
"Nodal frequency?"
"You say often. Nodal frequency contains often."
"They mean the same thing; I see."
"Not same; similar."
"I stand corrected."
"Explain touche. What meaning conveys this term?"
"Meaning conveys yeah. It's a fencing term."
"Fencing? You signify containment?"
McKie explained fencing as best he could with a side journey into swordsmanship, the concept of single combat, competition.
"Effective touch!" the Caleban interrupted, her words conveying definite wonder. "Nodal intersection! Touche! Ahhh-ahhh! This contains why we find your species to fascinate us! This concept! Cutting line: touche! Pierced by meaning: touche!"
"Ultimate discontinuity," McKie snarled. "Touche! How far away is your next touche with the whip?"



A steady wind blew against his left cheek, stirred his yellow hair. He wore green trousers and an open-mesh shirt of dull gold and gray. The clothing gave a subtle accent to his humanoid appearance, revealing the odd ripples of alien muscles here and there about his body.

An amused smile occupied his mouth, but not his eyes. He had PanSpechi eyes, many-faceted, glistening -- although the facets were edge-faded by his ego-surgery. The eyes watched the insect movements of various sentients on streets and bridgeways below him. At the same time, they reported on the sky overhead (a faraway flock of birds, streamers of sunset clouds) and told him of the view toward the sea and the nearby balustrade.

We're going to pull it off, he thought.

He glanced at the antique chronograph Mliss had given him. Crude thing, but it showed the sunset hour. They'd had to disengage from the Taprisiot mindclock system, though. This crude device showed two hours to go until the next contact. The S'eye controls would be more accurate, but he didn't want to move.

They can't stop us.

But maybe they can. . . .

He thought about McKie then. How had the BuSab agent found this place? And finding it, how had he come here? McKie sat in the Beachball with the Caleban right now -- bait, obviously. Bait!

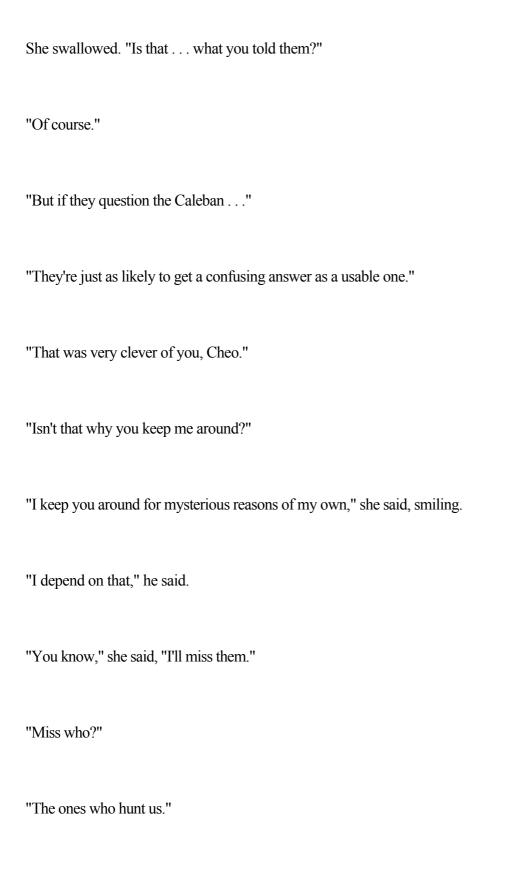
For what?

Cheo did not enjoy the contradictory emotions surging back and forth through him. He had broken the most basic PanSpechi law. He had captured his creche's ego and abandoned his four mates to a mindless existence terminating in mindless death. A renegade surgeon's instruments had excised the organ which united the pentarchal PanSpechi family across all space. The surgery had left a scar on Cheo's forehead and a scar on his soul, but he had never imagined he would find such delicate relish in the experience.

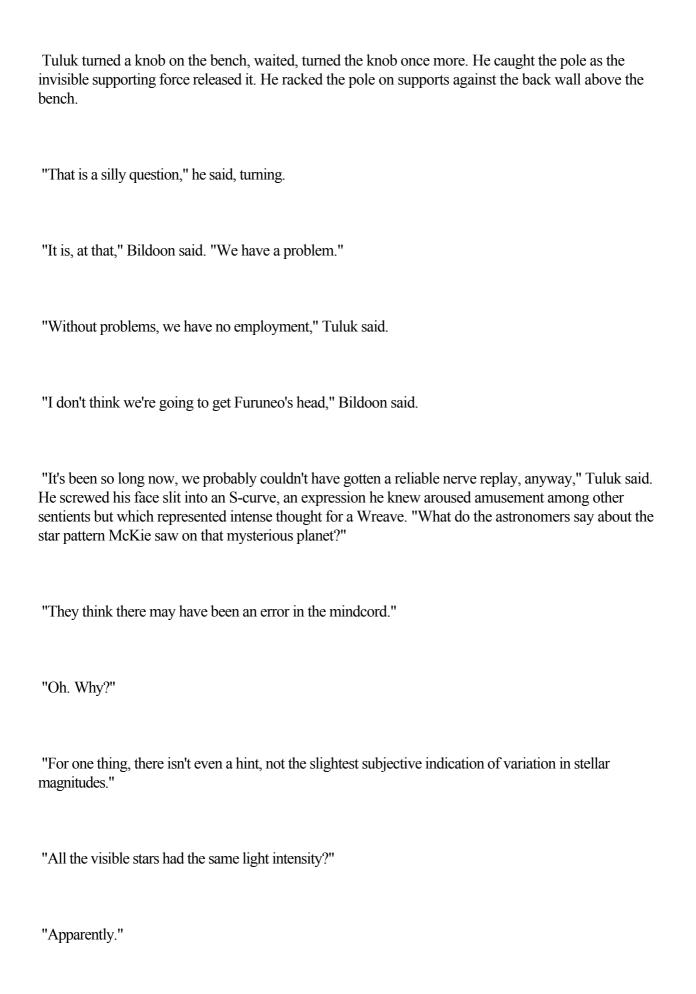
Nothing could take the ego from him!
But he was alone, too.
Death would end it, of course, but all creatures had that to face.
And thanks to Mliss, he had a retreat from which no other PanSpechi could extricate him unless but there'd be no other PanSpechi, very soon. There'd be no other organized sentients at all, except the handful Mliss had brought here to her Ark with its mad Boers and Blacks.
Abnethe came hurrying onto the observation deck behind him. His ears, as multiplanar in discrimination as his eyes, marked the emotions in her footsteps boredom, worry, the constant fear which constricted her being.
Cheo turned.
She had been to a Beautybarber, he observed. Red hair now crowned her lovely face. McKie had red hair, too, Cheo reminded himself. She threw herself onto a reclining chairdog, stretched her legs.
"What's your hurry?" he asked.
"Those Beautybarbers!" she snapped. "They want to go home!"
"Send them."
"But where will I find others?"
"That is a proper problem, isn't it?"







A basic requirement for BuSab agents is, perhaps, that we make the right mistakes.
-McKie's commentary on Furuneo, BuSab private files
Bildoon stood in the doorway to Tuluk's personal lab, his back to the long outer room where the Wreave's assistants did most of their work. The BuSab chief's deep-set eyes held a faceted glitter, a fire that failed to match the composure of his humanoid PanSpechi face.
He felt weak and sad. He felt he existed in a contracting cave, a place without wind or stars. Time was closing in on everyone. Those he loved and those who loved him would die. All sentient love in the universe would die. The universe would become homeless, enclosed by melancholy.
Mourning filled his humanoid flesh: snows, leaves, suns eternally alone.
He felt the demands of action, of decision, but feared the consequences of anything he might do. Whatever he touched might crumble, become so much dust falling through his fingers.
Tuluk, he saw, was working at a bench against the opposite wall. He had a length of the bullwhip's rawhide stretched between two clamps. Parallel with the rawhide and about a millimeter below it was a metal pole which lay balanced on air without visible support. Between rawhide and pole could be seen flickers of miniature lightning which danced along the entire length of the gap. Tuluk was bent over, reading meters set into the bench beneath the device.
"Am I interrupting anything?" Bildoon asked.



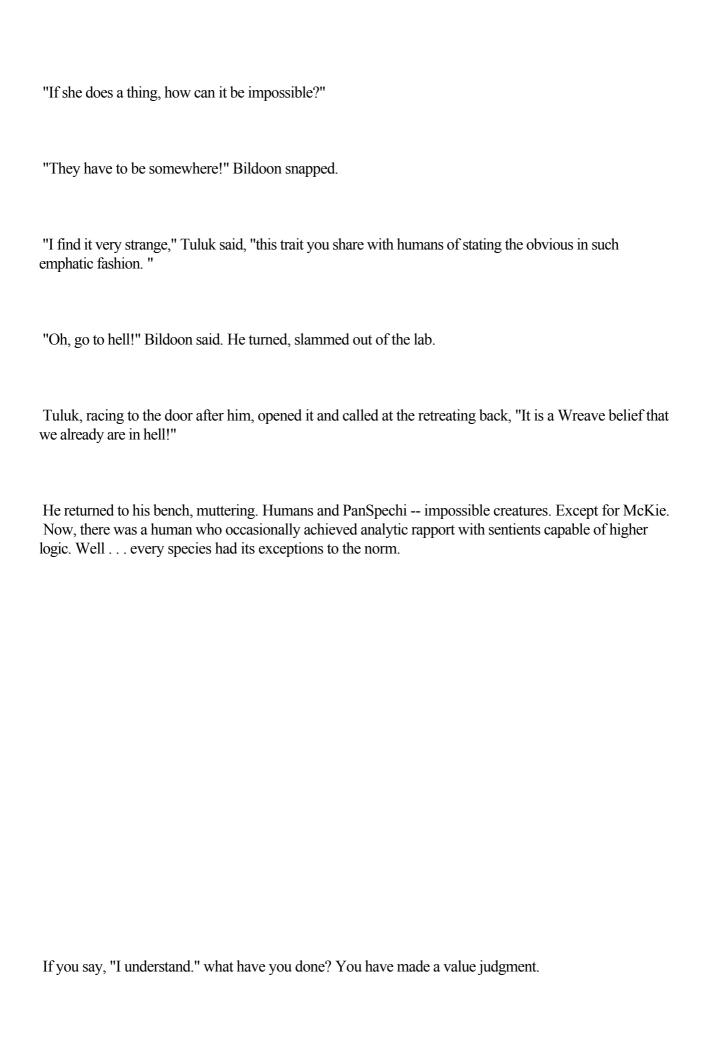
"Odd."
"And the nearest, pattern similarity," Bildoon said, "is one that doesn't exist anymore."
"What do you mean?"
"Well there's a Big Dipper, a Little Dipper, various other constellations and zodiac similarities, but "He shrugged.
Tuluk stared at him blankly. "I don't recognize the references," he said presently.
"Oh, yes I forgot," Bildoon said. "We PanSpechi, when we decided to copy human form, explored their history with some care. These patterns of stars are ones which were visible from their ancient homeworld."
"I see. Another oddity to go with what I've discovered about the material of this whip."
"What's that?"
"It's very strange. Parts of this leather betray a subatomic structure of peculiar alignment."
"Peculiar? How?"
"Aligned. Perfectly aligned. I've never seen anything like it outside certain rather fluid energy phenomena. It's as though the material had been subjected to some peculiar force or stress. The result is, in some ways, similar to neomaser alignment of light quanta."











-Laclac Riddle

By an effort of communication which he still did not completely understand, McKie had talked the Caleban into opening the Beachball's external port. This permitted a bath of spray-washed air to flow into the place where McKie sat. It also did one other thing: It allowed a crew of watchers outside to hold eye contact with him. He had just about given up hoping Abnethe would rise to the bait. There would have to be another solution. Visual contact with watchers also permitted a longer spacing between Taprisiot guard contacts. He found the new spacing less tiresome.

Morning sunshine splashed across the lip of the opening into the Beachball. McKie put a hand into the light, felt the warmth. He knew he should be moving around, making a poor target of himself, but the presence of the watchers made attack unlikely. Besides, he was tired, drugged to alertness and full of the odd emotions induced by angeret. Movement seemed an empty effort. If they wanted to kill him, they were going to do it. Furuneo's death proved that.

McKie felt a special pang at the thought of Furuneo's death. There had been something admirable and likable about the planetary agent. It had been a fumbling, pointless death -- alone here, trapped. It had not advanced their search for Abnethe, only placed the whole conflict on a new footing of violence. It had shown the uncertainty of a single life -- and through that life, the vulnerability of all life.

He felt a self-draining hate for Abnethe then. That madwoman!

He fought down a fit of trembling.

From where he sat McKie could see out across the lava shelf to the rocky palisades and a mossy carpeting of sea growth exposed at the cliff base by the retreating tide.

"Suppose we have it all wrong," he said, speaking over his shoulder toward the Caleban. "Suppose we really aren't communicating with each other at all. What if we've just been making noises, assuming a communication content which doesn't exist?"

"I fail of understanding, McKie. The hang doesn't get me."

McKie turned slightly. The Caleban was doing something strange with the air around its position. The oval stage he had seen earlier shimmered once more into view, disappeared. A golden halo appeared at one side of the giant spoon, rose up like a smoke ring, crackled electrically, and vanished.
"We're assuming," McKie said, "that when you say something to me, I respond with meaningful words directly related to your statement and that you do the same. This may not be the case at all."
"Unlikely."
"So it's unlikely. What are you doing there?"
"Doing?"
"All that activity around you."
"Attempt making self visible on your wave." "Can you do it?"
"Possible."
A bell-shaped red glow formed above the spoon, stretched into a straight line, resumed its bell curve,
began whirling like a child's jump rope.
"What see you?" the Caleban asked.

McKie described the whirling red rope.
"Very odd," the Caleban said. "I flex creativity, and you report visible sensation. You need yet that opening to exterior conditions."
"The open port? It makes it one helluva lot more comfortable in here."
"Comfort concept self fails to understand."
"Does the opening prevent you from becoming visible?"
"It performs magnetic distraction, no more."
McKie shrugged. "How much more flogging can you take?"
"Explain much."
"You've left the track again," McKie said.
"Correct! That forms achievement, McKie."
"How is it an achievement?"
"Self leaves communicative track, and you achieve awareness of same."
"All right, that's an achievement. Where's Abnethe?"

"Contract"
" prohibits revealing her location," McKie completed. "Maybe you can tell me, then, is she jumping, around or remaining on one planet?"
"That helps you locate her?"
"How in fifty-seven hells do I know?"
"Probability smaller than fifty-seven elements," the Caleban said. "Abnethe occupies relatively static position on specific planet."
"But we can't find any pattern to her attacks on you or where they originate," McKie said.
"You cannot see connectives," the Caleban said.
The whirling red rope flickered in and out of existence above the giant spoon. Abruptly, it shifted color to a glowing yellow, vanished.
"You just disappeared," McKie said.
"Not my person visible," the Caleban said.
"How's that?"
"You not seeing person-self."



"Observe theyness," the Caleban said. "Furuneo not having existence, observable intentions unknown."
"Did you see what just happened here?" McKie asked.
"Self contains awareness of S'eye employment, certain activity of employer persons Activity ceases."
McKie rubbed his left hand across his neck. He wondered if he could bring the raygen into play quickly enough to cut any snare they might drop over his head. That silver thing dropping into the room had looked suspiciously like a noose.
"Is that how they got Furuneo?" McKie asked. "Did they drop a noose over his neck and pull him into the jumpdoor?"
"Discontinuity removes person of sameness," the Caleban said.
McKie shrugged, gave it up. That was more or less the answer they got every time they tried to question the Caleban about Furuneo's death.
Oddly, McKie discovered he was hungry. He wiped perspiration from his jaw and chin, cursed under his breath. There was no real assurance that what he heard in the Caleban's words represented real communication. Even granting some communication, how could he depend on the Caleban's interpretations or the Caleban's honesty? When the damn thing spoke, though, it radiated such a sense of sincerity that disbelief became almost impossible. McKie rubbed his chin, trying to catch an elusive thought. Strange. Here he was, hungry, angry, and afraid. There was no place to run. They had to solve this problem. He knew this for an absolute fact. Imperfect as communication with the Caleban actually was, the warning from the creature could not be ignored. Too many sentients had already died or gone insane.
He shook his head at the fly-buzz of Taprisiot contact. Damn surveillance! This contact, however, failed to break off. It was Siker, the Laclac Director of Discretion. Siker had detected McKie's disturbed

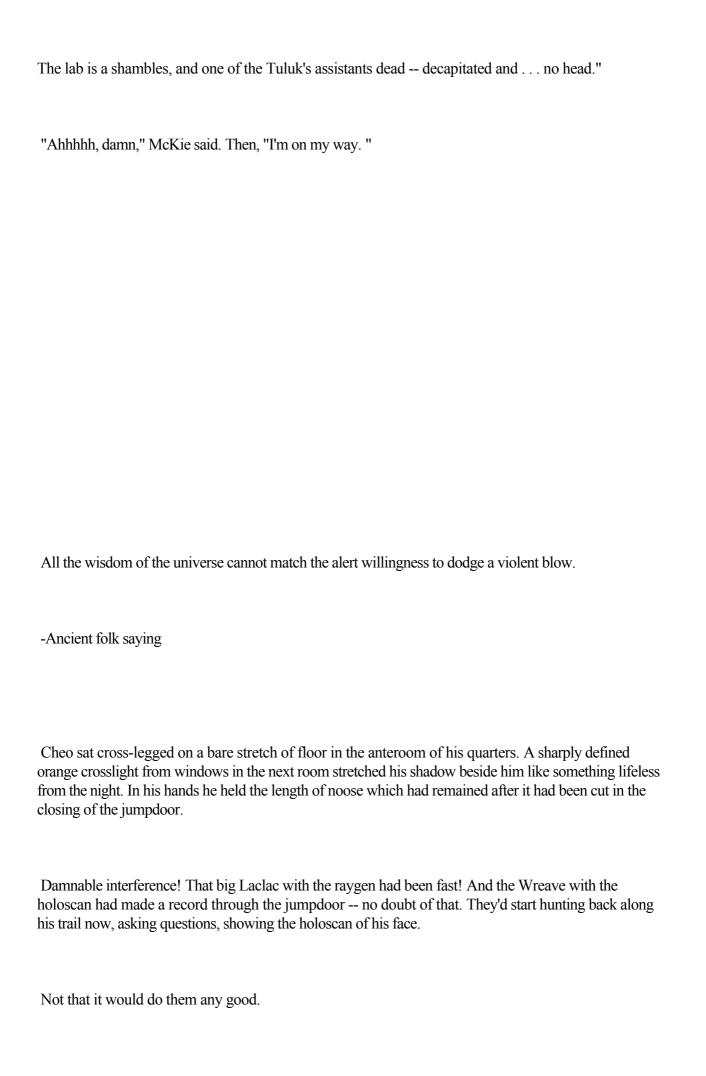
emotions and, instead of breaking contact, had locked in.



Gradually, he became aware that five other sentients had entered the Beachball -- two Wreaves, Laclac, a PanSpechi and a human. The human and one of the Wreaves worked over McKie, clearing away the noose and supporting him. The holoscan operator was a Wreave, who was busy examining his instrument. The others were watching the space all around them, raygens ready. At least three sentients were trying to talk at the same time. "All right!" McKie husked, shutting off the babble. His throat hurt when he spoke. He grabbed the length of noose from the Wreave's extensors, examined it. The rope was a silvery material which McKie failed to recognize. It had been cut cleanly with a raygen. McKie looked at the enforcer with the holoscan, said, "What did you get?" "The attack was made by an ego-frozen PanSpechi, ser," the Wreave enforcer said "I got a good record of his face. We'll try for ID." McKie tossed him the severed length of noose. "Get this thing back to the lab, too. Tell Tuluk to break it down to its basic structure. It may even have some of . . . Furuneo's cells on it. The rest of you . . . " "Ser?" It was the PanSpechi among the enforcers. "Yes?" "Ser, we have orders. If an attempt is made on your life, we are to stay with you in here." He passed a raygen to McKie. "You dropped this, I believe." McKie pocketed it with an angry gesture. Taprisiot contact filled McKie's mind. "Break it!" he snapped.

But the contact firmed. It was Bildoon in a no-nonsense mood. "What's going on there, McKie?"

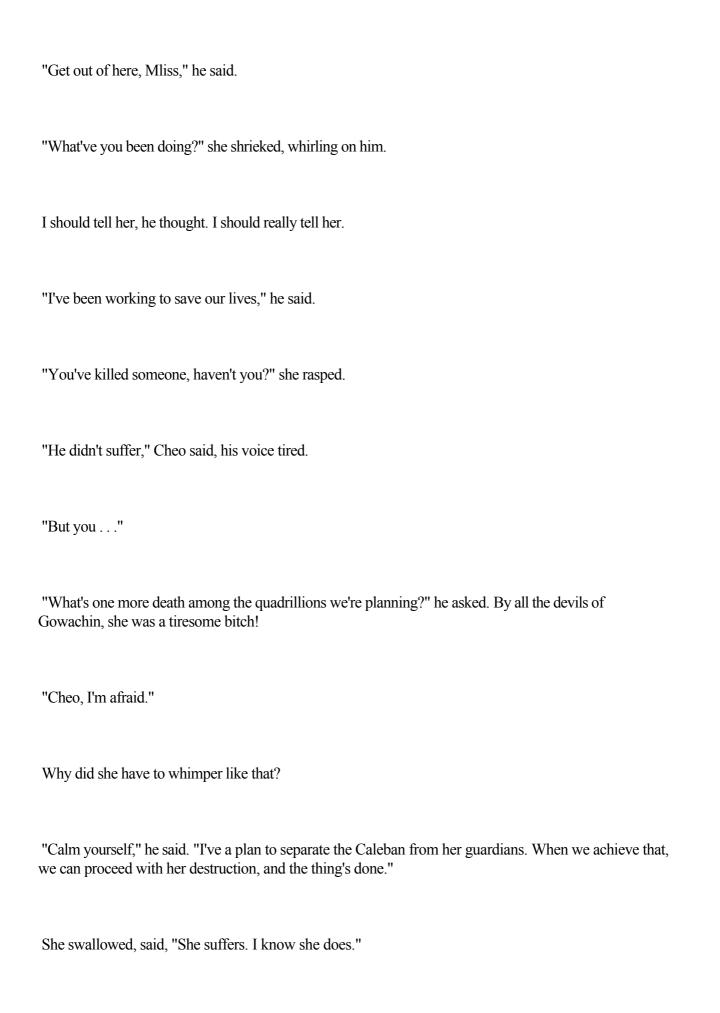


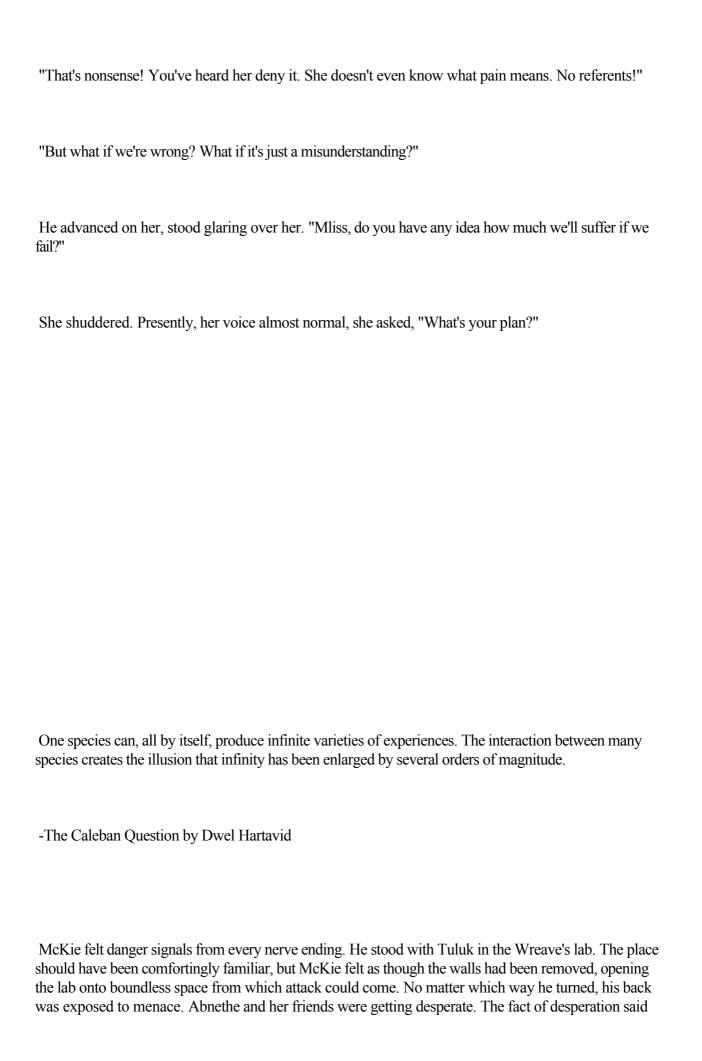


Cheo's jeweled eyes glittered with shards of light. He could almost hear the BuSab operatives: "Do you recognize this PanSpechi?" The PanSpechi equivalent of a chuckle, a rumbling grunt, shook him. Fat lot of good that search would do them! No friend or acquaintance from the old days would be likely to recognize his face, now that the medics had changed it. Oh, the bridge of the nose and the set of the eyes were similar, but . . . Cheo shook his head. Why was he worrying? No one -- absolutely no one -- was going to stop him from destroying the Caleban! And after that, all these conjectures would be academic. He sighed heavily. His hands were gripping the length of rope so tightly that his muscles ached. It took him several heartbeats of effort to release them. He climbed to his feet, threw the severed rope at a wall. A flailing end of it lashed a chairdog, which whimpered sibilantly through its atrophied vocal structure. Cheo nodded to himself. They had to get the guards away from the Caleban or the Caleban away from the guards. He rubbed the scars on his forehead, hesitated. Was that a sound behind him? Slowly he turned, lowered his hand. Miss Abnethe stood in the doorway to the outer hall. The orange light created embers in the pearl sheathing of her gown. Her face held back anger, fear, and the grievous murmurings of her psyche. "How long have you been there?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. "Why?" She stepped into the room, closed the door. "What've you been doing?"

She swept the room with her insolent gaze, saw the pile of whips in a corner. They were thrown over something vaguely round and hairy. A wet red stain crept onto the floor from beneath the pile. She paled, whispered, "What's that?"

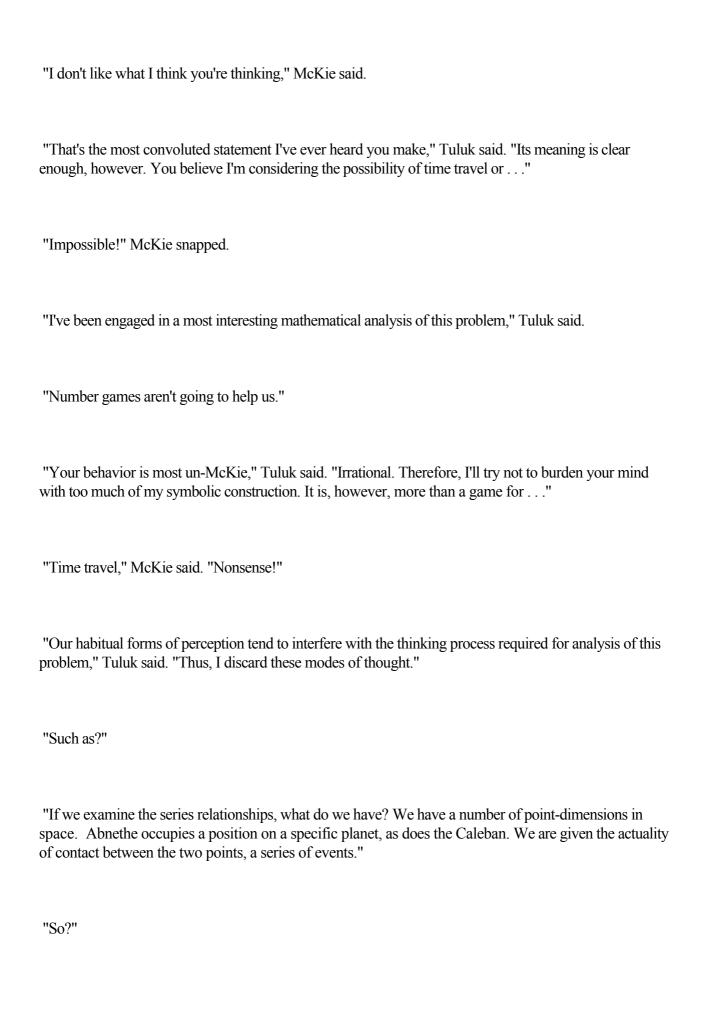
"Fishing," he said.







McKie cocked his head to one side, thought for a moment, then, "I've read about it, yes,"
"The planet was called Rap," Tuluk said. "This is a length of Rapvine."
"Rapvine."
"You've heard of it?"
"I don't believe so."
"Yes, well it's strange stuff. Has a relatively short life span, among its other peculiar characteristics. Another thing: the ends don't fray, even when it's cut. See?" Tuluk plucked several strands from the cut end, released them. They slapped back into position. "It was called intrinsic attraction. There's been considerable speculation about it. I'm now in a position to"
"Short life," McKie interrupted. "How short?"
"No more than fifteen or twenty standard years under the most ideal conditions."
"But the planet"
"Millennia ago, yes."
McKie shook his head to clear it. His eyes scanned the length of silvery rope suspiciously. "Obviously, somebody found how to grow the stuff someplace other than Rap."
"Perhaps. But they've managed to keep it a secret all this time."





McKie nodded. "A classic n-fold extended aggregate."
"Now you begin to sound like the McKie familiar to me. An aggregate of n dimensions, to be sure. And what is time in such a problem? Time we know to be an aggregate of one dimension. But we are given, you'll recall, a number of point-dimensions in space and time."
McKie whistled soundlessly, admiring the Wreave's logic, then, "We either have one continuous variable in the problem or n continuous variables. Beautiful!"
"Just so. And by reduction through the infinity calculus, we discover we are dealing with two systems containing n-body properties."
"That's what you found?"
"That's what I found. It can only follow that the point-contacts of our problem have their separate existence within different frameworks of time. Ergo, Abnethe occupies another dimension time from that of the Beachball. Inescapable conclusion."
"We may not be dealing with time travel phenomena in the classic fictional sense," McKie said.
"These subtle differences the Caleban sees," McKie said. "These connectives, these threads "
"Spiderwebs embedded in many universes," Tuluk said. "Perhaps. Let's assume individual lives spin these web threads"
"Movements of matter undoubtedly spin them, too."
"Agreed. And they cross. They unite. They intersect. They combine in mysterious ways. They become tangled. Some of the web threads are stronger than others. I have experienced this entanglement, you

know, when I placed the call which saved your life. I can imagine some of these threads being rewoven, combined, aligned what have you to recreate conditions of long past times in our dimensions. Might be a relatively simple problem for a Caleban. The Caleban might not even understand the recreation the way we do."
"I'll buy that."
"What would it take?" Tuluk mused. "A certain poignancy of experience, perhaps; something which imparts sufficient strength to the lines, threads, webs of the past that they can be picked up, manipulated to reproduce the original setting and its contents."
"We're just tossing words back and forth," McKie objected. "How could you reweave an entire planet or the space around "
"Why not? What do we know of the powers involved? To a crawling insect, three of your strides may be a day's journey."
McKie felt himself being convinced in spite of native caution. "It is true," he agreed, "that the Caleban S'eye gives us the power to walk across light years."
"Such a common exploit that we no longer even wonder at the enormous energies this must require. Think what such a journey would mean to our hypothetical insect! And we may be getting the merest glimpse of Caleban powers."
"We should never have accepted the S'eye," McKie said. "We had perfectly adequate FTL ships and metabolic suspension. We should've told the Calebans to go jump in their collective connectives!"
"And deny ourselves real-time control of our universe? Not on your life, McKie. What we should have done was test the gift first. We should have probed for dangers. We were too bedazzled by it, though."
McKie lifted his left hand to scratch his eyebrow, felt a prickling of danger. It rushed up his spine, exploded in a blow against his arm. He felt pain there; something bit through to the bone. Despite the

shock, he whirled, saw a Palenki arm upraised with a glittering blade. The arm came through a narrow

vortal tube. Visible through the opening were a Palenki turtle head, beside it, the right side of a PanSpechi face -- purple scar on the forehead, one faceted emerald eye. For a suspended moment McKie saw the blade begin its descent toward his face, knew it was going to strike before his shocked muscles could respond. He felt metal touch his forehead, saw the orange glow of a raygen beam stab past his face. McKie stood frozen, locked in stillness. It was a tableau. He saw surprise on the PanSpechi face, saw a severed Palenki arm begin its tumble to the floor still clutching a shattered metal remnant. McKie's heart was pounding as though he had been running for an hour. He felt hot wetness spread across his left temple. It ran down his cheek, along his jaw, into his collar. His arm throbbed, and he saw blood dripping from his fingertips. The S'eye jumpdoor had winked out of existence. Someone was beside him then, pressing a compress against his head where the metal had touched . . . Touched? Once more he had prepared himself for sudden death at a Palenki's hand, a descending blade. . . . Tuluk, he saw, was bending to retrieve the metal remnant. "That's another nick of time I've escaped," McKie said. Surprisingly, there was no tremor in his voice.

Providence and Manifest Destiny are synonyms often invoked to support arguments founded in wishful thinking.
-from The Wreave Commentary
It was midafternoon on Central before Tuluk sent for McKie to return to the lab. Two squads of enforcers accompanied McKie. There were enforcers all around in augmented force. They watched the air, the walls, the floors. They watched each other and the space around their alternate numbers. Every sentient carried a raygen at the ready.
McKie, having spent two hours with Hanaman and five of her aides in Legal, was ready for down-to-dirt facts. Legal was moving to search every Abnethe property, to seize every record they could find but it was all off there somewhere in the rarefied atmosphere of symbols. Perhaps something would come of it, though. They had a telocourt order, reproduced thousands of times, giving the Bureau's enforcement arm sufficient authority for search on most worlds outside the Gowachin pale. Gowachin officials were moving in their own way to cooperate exonerating sufficient enforcers, clearing the names of appropriate police agencies.
Crime-One police on Central and elsewhere were assisting. They had provided enforcers, opened files normally not privileged to BuSab, temporarily linked their identification and modus computers to BuSab's core.

It was action, of course, but it struck McKie as too circuitous, too abstract. They needed another kind of line to Abnethe, something connected to her which could be reeled in despite any of her attempts to

escape.

He felt now that he lived in a flushed-out spirit. Nooses, blades, gnashing jumpdoors -- there was no mercy in the conflict which engaged them. Nothing he did slowed the dark hurricane that hurtled toward the sentient universe. His nerves punished him with sensations of rough, grasping inadequacy. The universe returned a glassy stare, full of his own fatigue. The Caleban's words haunted him -- self-energy . . . seeing moves . . . I am S'eye! Eight enforcers had crowded into the small lab with Tuluk. They were being very self effacing, apologetic -- evidence that Tuluk had protested in that bitingly sarcastic way Wreaves had. Tuluk glanced up at McKie's entrance, returned to examination of a metal sliver held in stasis by a subtron field beneath a bank of multicolored lights on his bench. "Fascinating stuff, this steel," he said, lowering his head to permit one of his shorter and more delicate mandibular extensors to get a better grip on a probe with which he was tapping the metal. "So it's steel," McKie said, watching the operation. Each time Tuluk tapped the metal, it gave off a shimmering spray of purple sparks. They reminded McKie of something just at the edge of memory. He couldn't quite place the association. A shower of sparks. He shook his head. "There's a chart down the bench," Tuluk said. "You might have a look at it while I finish here." McKie glanced to his right, saw an oblong of chalf paper with writing on it. He moved the necessary two steps to reach the paper, picked it up, studied it. The writing was in Tuluk's neat script.

Substance: steel, an iron-base alloy. Sample contains small amts manganese, carbon, sulfur, phosphorus, and silicon, some nickel, zirconium, and tungsten with admixture chromium, molybdenum, and vanadium.
Source comparison: matches Second-Age steel used by human political subunit Japan in making of swords for Samurai Revival.
Tempering: sample hard-quenched on cutting edge only; back of sword remains soft.
Estimated length of original artifact: 1.01 meters.
Handle: linen cord wrapped over bone and lacquered. (See lacquer, bone, and cord analyses: attached.)
* * *
McKie glanced at the attached sheet: "Bone from a sea mammal's tooth, reworked after use on some other artifact, nature unknown but containing bronze."
The linen cord's analysis was interesting. It was of relatively recent manufacture, and it displayed the same submolecular characteristics as the earlier samples of rawhide.
The lacquer was even more interesting. It was based in an evaporative solvent which was identified as a coal-tar derivative, but the purified sap was from an ancient Coccus lacca insect extinct for millennia.
"You get to the part about the lacquer yet?" Tuluk asked, glancing up and twisting his face slit aside to look at McKie.
"Yes."



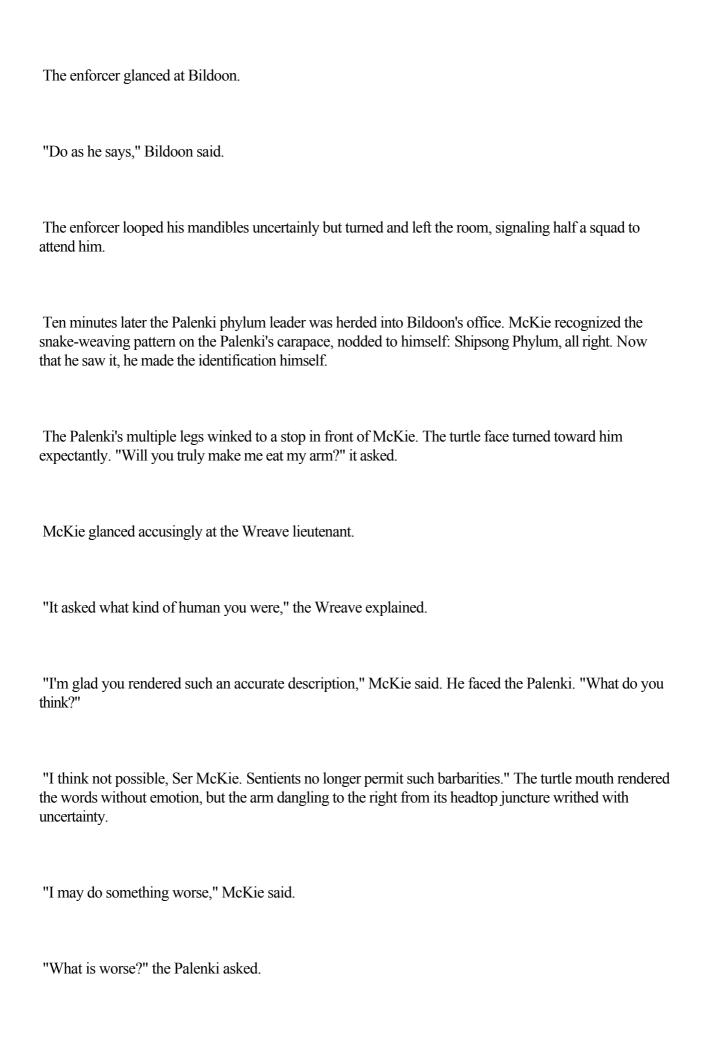
The interphone above Tuluk's bench chimed twice, and the face of Hanaman from Legal appeared on i "Oh, there you are, McKie," she said, peering past Tuluk.
"What now?" McKie asked, his mind still dazed by Tuluk's statement.
"We've managed to get those injunctions," she said. "They lock up Abnethe's wealth and production on every sentient world except the Gowachin."
"But what about the warrants?" McKie demanded.
"Of course; those, too," Hanaman said. "That's why I'm calling. You asked to be notified immediately."
"Are the Gowachin cooperating?"
"They've agreed to declaration of a Consent emergency in their jurisdiction. That allows all Federation police and BuSab agencies to act there for apprehension of suspects."
"Fine," McKie said. "Now, if you could only tell me when to find her, I think we can pick her up."
Hanaman looked from the screen with a puzzled frown. "When?"
"Yeah," McKie snarled. "When."

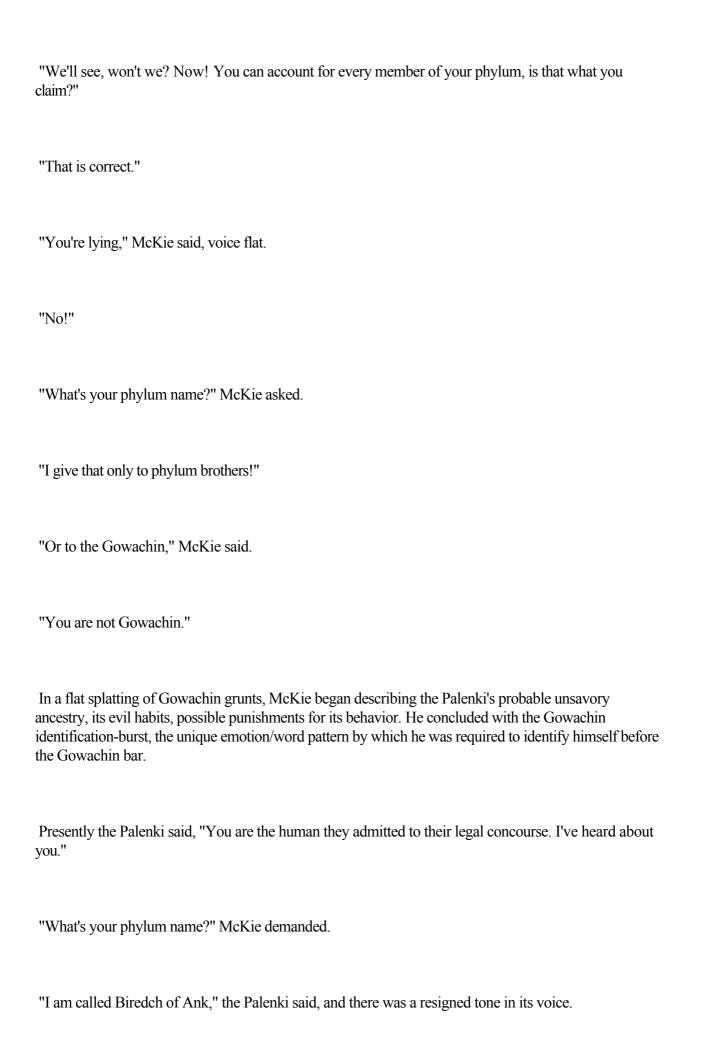


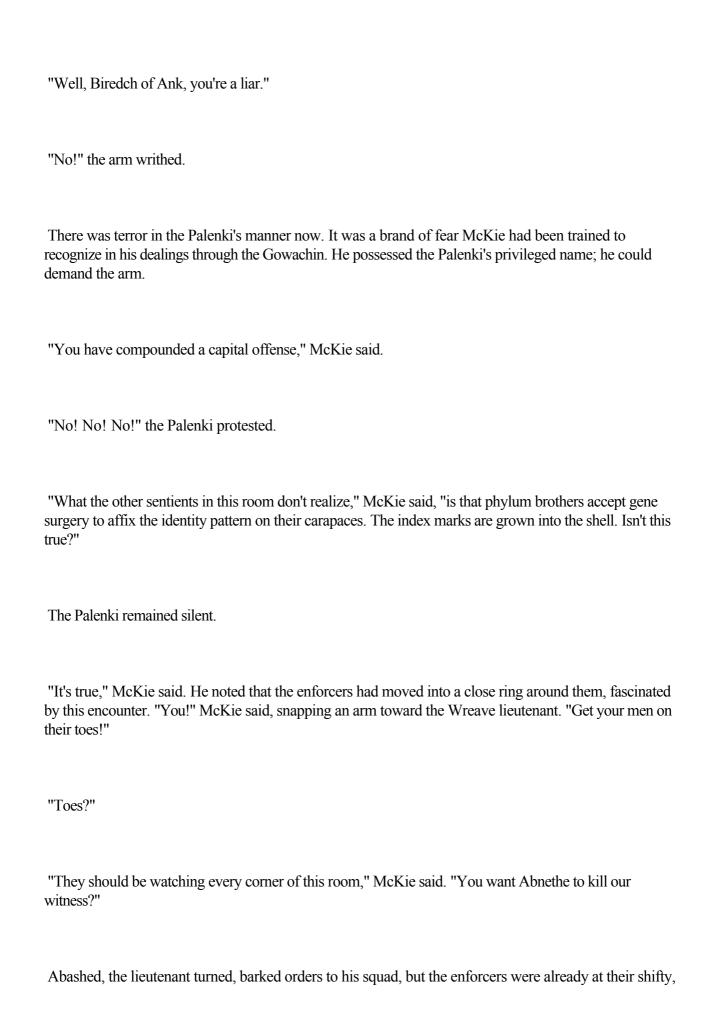
"True?"
"We're trying to check it, but how can you be sure? They keep no written records. It's just a Palenki's word, whatever that's worth."
"Sworn by its arm, too, no doubt," McKie said.
"Of course." Bildoon stopped the chairdog massage, sat up. "It's true that phylum identification patterns can be used illegitimately."
"It takes a Palenki three or four weeks to regrow an arm," McKie said.
"What's that signify?"
"She must have several dozen Palenkis in reserve."
"She could have a million of 'em for all we know."
"Did this phylum leader resent its pattern being used by an unauthorized Palenki?"
"Not that we could see."
"It was lying," McKie said.
"How do you know?"

"According to the Gowachin juris-dictum, phylum forgery is one of the eight Palenki capital offenses. And the Gowachin should know, because they were assigned to educate the Palenkis in acceptable law when R&R brought those one-armed turtles into the Consent fold."
"Huh!" Bildoon said. "How come Legal didn't know that? I've had them researching this from the beginning."
"Privileged legal datum," McKie said. "Interspecies courtesy and all that. You know how the Gowachin are about individual dignity, privacy, that sort of thing."
"You'll be read out of their court when they find out you spilled this," Bildoon said.
"No. They'll just appoint me prosecutor for the next ten or so capital cases in their jurisdiction. If the prosecutor accepts a case and fails to get a conviction, he's the one they execute, you know."
"And if you decline the cases?"
"Depends on the case. I could draw anything from a one-to-twenty sentence for some of them.
"One-to you mean standard years?"
"I don't mean minutes," McKie growled.
"Then why'd you tell me?"
"I want you to let me break this phylum leader."

"Break him? How?"
"You any idea how important the mystique of the arm is to the Palenki?"
"Some idea. Why?"
"Some idea," McKie muttered. "Back in the primitive days, Palenkis made criminals eat their arms, then inhibited regrowth. Much loss of face, but even greater injury to something very deep and emotional for the Palenkis."
"You're not seriously suggesting"
"Of course not!"
Bildoon shuddered. "You humans have a basically bloodthirsty nature. Sometimes I think we don't understand you."
"Where's this Palenki?" McKie asked.
"What're you going to do?"
"Question him! What'd you think?"
"After what you just said, I wasn't sure."
"Come off that, Bildoon. Hey, you!" McKie gestured to a Wreave enforcer lieutenant. "Bring the Palenki in here."



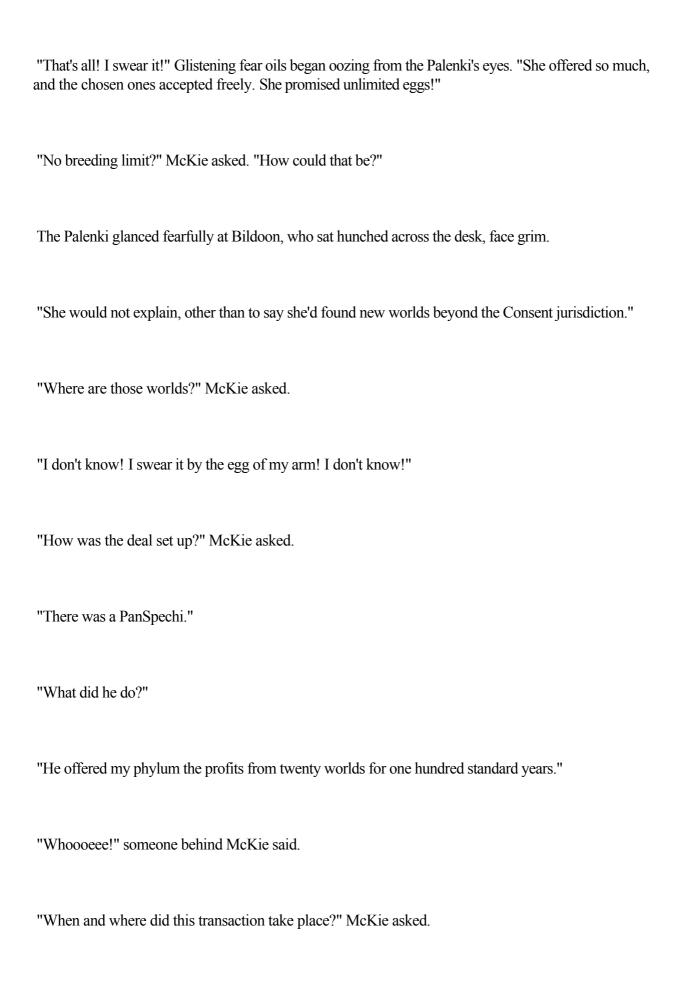


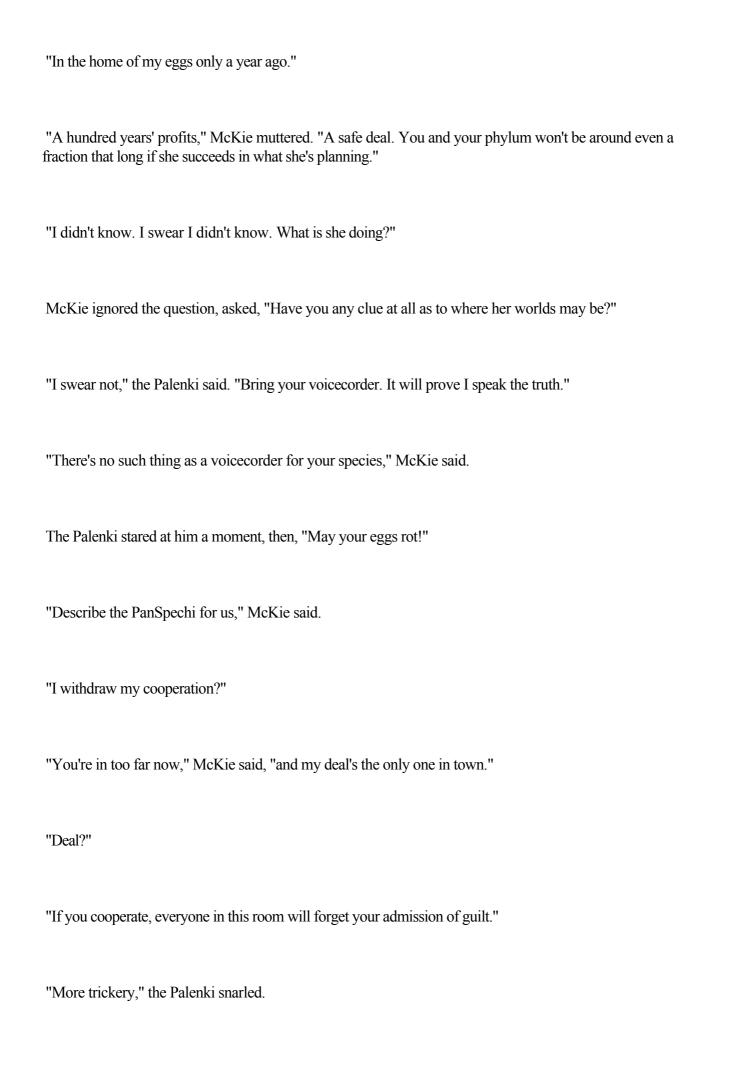


turning, eye-darting inspection of the room. The Wreave lieutenant shook a mandible angrily, fell silent.
McKie returned his attention to the Palenki. "Now, Biredch of Ank, I'm going to ask you some special questions. I already know the answers to some of them. If I catch you in one lie, I'll consider a reversion to barbarism. Too much is at stake here. Do you understand me?"
"Ser, you cannot believe that"
"Which of your phylum mates did you sell into slave service with Mliss Abnethe?" McKie demanded.
"Slaving is a capital offense," the Palenki breathed.
"I've already said you were implicated in a capital offense," McKie said. "Answer the question."
"You ask me to condemn myself?"
"How much did she pay you?" McKie asked.
"Who pay me what?"
"How much did Abnethe pay you?"
"For what?"
"For your phylum mates?"
"What phylum mates?"

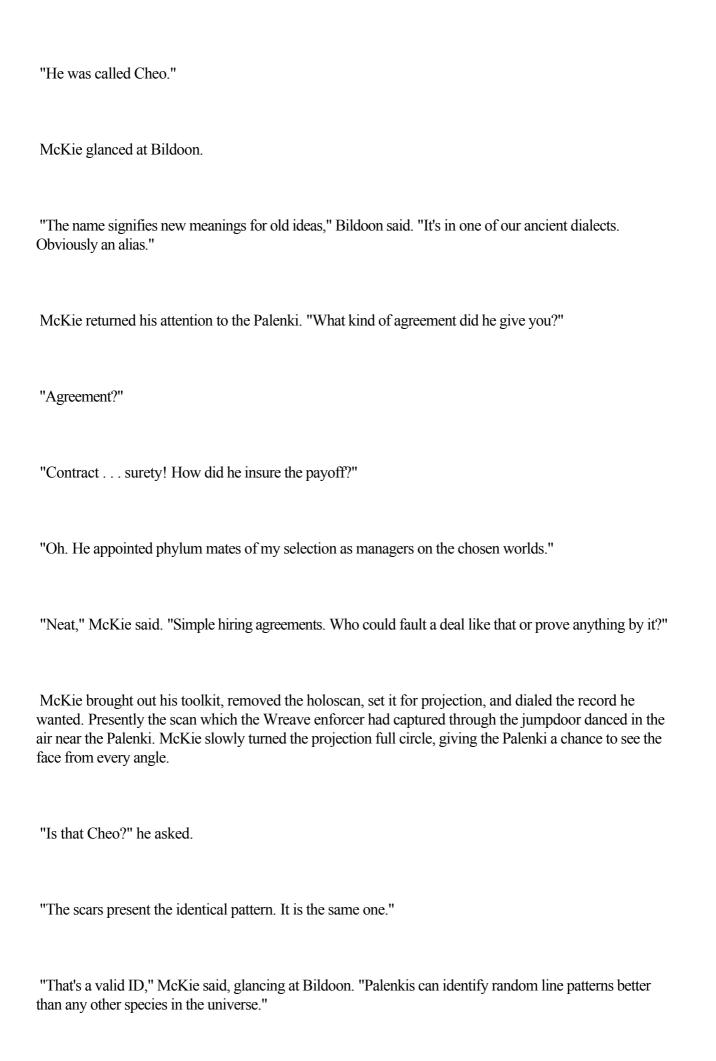












"Our phylum patterns are extremely complex, "the Palenki boasted.
"We know," McKie said.
"What good does this do us?" Bildoon asked.
"I wish I knew," McKie said.
No language has ever really come to grips with temporal relationships.
-A Gowachin Opinion
McKie and Tuluk were arguing about the time-regeneration theory, ignoring the squad of enforcers
guarding them, although it was obvious their companions found the argument interesting.

The theory was all over the Bureau by this time -- about six hours after the session with the Palenki phylum leader, Biredch of Ank. It had about as many scoffers as it had supporters.

At McKie's insistence, they had taken over one of the interspecies training rooms, had set up a datascan console, and were trying to square Tuluk's theory with the subatomic alignment phenomenon discovered in the rawhide and other organic materials captured from Abnethe.

It was Tuluk's thought that the alignment might point toward some spatial vector, giving a clue to Abnethe's hideout.

"There must be some vector of focus in our dimension," Tuluk insisted.

"Even if that's true, what good would it do us?" McKie asked. "She's not in our dimension. I say we go back to the Caleban's . . . "

"You heard Bildoon. You don't go anywhere. We leave the Beachball to enforcers while we concentrate on . . ."

"But Fanny Mae's our only source of new data!"

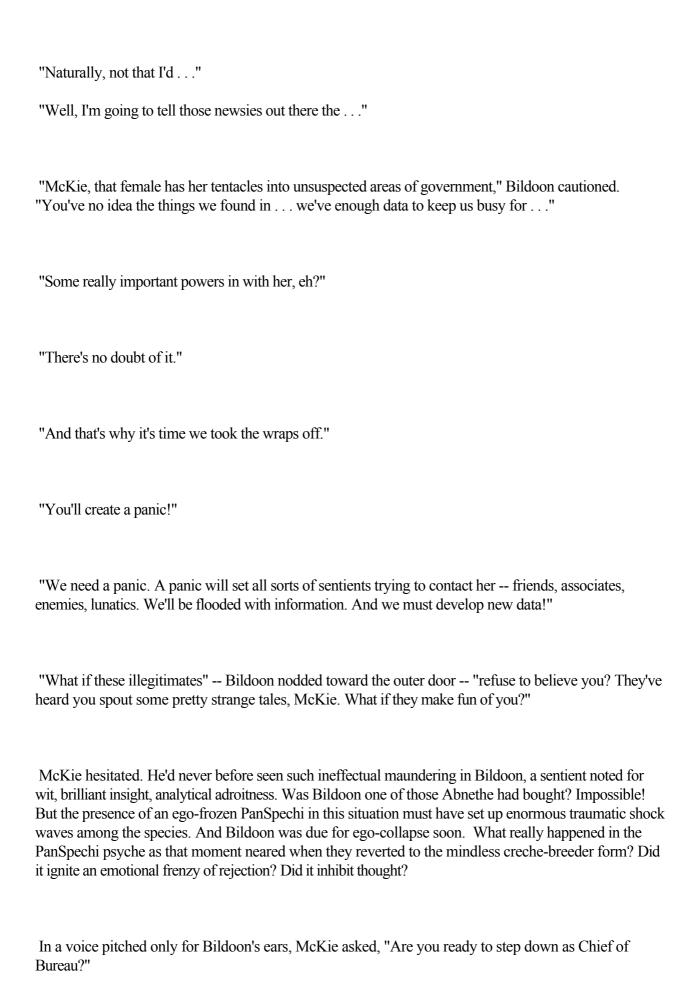
"Fanny . . . oh, yes; the Caleban."

Tuluk was a pacer. He had staked out an oval route near the room's instruction focus, tucked his mandibles neatly into the lower fold of his facial slit, and left only his eyes and breathing/speech orifice exposed. The flexing bifurcation which served him as legs carried him around a chairdog occupied by McKie, thence to a point near a Laclac enforcer at one extreme of the instruction focus, thence back along a mixed line of enforcers who milled around across from a float-table on which McKie was doodling, thence around behind McKie and back over the same route.

Bildoon found them there, waved the pacing Wreave to a halt. "There's a mob of newspeople outside," he growled. "I don't know where they got the story, but it's a good one. It can be described in a simple sentence: 'Calebans linked to threatened end of universe!' McKie, did you have anything to do with this?"

"Abnethe," McKie said, not looking up from a complicated chalf doodle he was completing.
"That's crazy!"
"I never said she was sane. You know how many news services, 'caster systems, and other media she controls?"
"Well certainly, but"
"Anybody linking her to this threat?"
"No, but"
"You don't find that strange?"
"How could any of these people know she"
"How could they not know about Abnethe's corner on Calebans?" McKie demanded. "Especially after talking to you!" He got up, hurled his chalf scribe at the floor, started up an aisle between rows of enforcers.
"Wait!" Bildoon snapped. "Where're you going?"
"To tell 'em about Abnethe."
"Are you out of your mind? That's all she needs to tie us up a slander and libel case!"

"We can demand her appearance as accuser," McKie said. "Should've thought about this earlier. We're not thinking straight. Perfect defense: truth of accusation."
Bildoon caught up with him, and they moved up the aisle in a protective cordon of enforcers. Tuluk brought up the rear.
"McKie," Tuluk called, "you observe an inhibition of thought processes?"
"Wait'll I check your idea with Legal," Bildoon said. "You may have something, but"
"McKie," Tuluk repeated. "do you"
"Save it!" McKie snapped. He stopped, turned to Bildoon. "How much more time you figure we have?"
"Who knows?"
"Five minutes, maybe?" McKie asked.
"Longer than that, surely."
"But you don't know."
I have enforcers at the Caleban's well, they're keeping Abnethe's attacks to a min"
"You don't want anything left to chance, right?"



"Of course not!"
"We've known each other a long time," McKie whispered. "I think we understand and respect each other. You wouldn't be in the king seat if I'd challenged you. You know that. Now one friend to another: Are you functioning as well as you should in this crisis?"
Angry contortions fled across Bildoon's face, were replaced by a thoughtful frown.
McKie waited. When it came, the ego-shift would send Bildoon into shambling collapse. A new personality would step forth from Bildoon's creche, a sentient knowing everything Bildoon knew, but profoundly different in emotional outlook. Had this present shock precipitated the crisis? McKie hoped not. He was genuinely fond of Bildoon; but personal considerations had to be put aside here.
"What are you trying to do?" Bildoon muttered.
"I'm not trying to expose you to ridicule or speed up any natural process," McKie said. "But our present situation is too urgent. I'll challenge you for the Bureau directorship and throw everything into an uproar, if you don't answer truthfully."
"Am I functioning well?" Bildoon mused. He shook his head. "You know the answer to that as well as I do. But you've a few lapses to explain, as well, McKie."
"Haven't we all?" McKie asked.
"That's it!" Tuluk said, stepping close to them. He glanced from Bildoon to McKie. "Forgive me, but we Wreaves have extremely acute hearing. I listened. But I must comment: The shock waves, or whatever we wish to call them, which accompanied the departure of the Calebans and left behind such death and insanity that we must buffer ourselves with angeret and other"
"So our thought processes are mucked up," Bildoon said.







"Perhaps we PanSpechi share this power," Bildoon said, "but if so, the sharing is entirely unconscious. I will say no more. You come close to invasion of creche privacy."
McKie nodded. Creche privacy was the ultimate defensive citadel of PanSpechi existence. They would kill to defend it. No logic or reason could prevent the automatic reaction once it was ignited. Bildoon had displayed great friendship in issuing his warning.
"We're desperate," McKie said.
"I agree," Bildoon said, overtones of profound dignity in his voice. "You may proceed as you've indicated."
"Thanks," McKie said.
"It's on your head, McKie," Bildoon added.
"Provided I can keep my head," McKie said. He opened the outer door onto a clamor of newspeople. They were being held back by a harried line of enforcers, and it occurred to McKie, grasping this scene in its first impact, that all those involved in this turmoil were vulnerable from this direction.

Delusions demand reflex reactions (as though they had autonomic roots) where doubts and questioning not only aren't required, but are actively resisted.
-BuSab Manual
Crowds were already forming on the morning-lighted palisades above the Beachball when McKie arrived:
News travels fast, he thought.
Extra squads of enforcers, called in anticipation of this mob scene, held back sentients trying to get to the cliff's edge, barred access to the lava shelf. Aircraft of many kinds were being blocked by a screen of BuSab fliers.
McKie, standing near the Beachball, looked up at the hectic activity. The morning wind carried a fine mist of sea spray against his cheek. He had taken a jumpdoor to Furuneo's headquarters, left instructions there, and used a Bureau flier for the short trip to the lava shelf.
The Beachball's port remained open, he noted. Mixed squads of enforcers milled about in a confused pattern around the Ball, alert to every quarter of their surroundings. Picked enforcers watched through the port where other enforcers shared this uneasy guardianship.
It was quite early in Cordiality's day here, but real-time relationships confused such arbitrary time systems, McKie thought. It was night at Central's headquarters, evening at the Taprisiot council building where Bildoon must still be arguing and only Immutable Space knew what time it was wherever Abnethe had her base of operations.
Later than any of them think, no doubt, McKie told himself.

He shouldered his way through the enforcers, got a boost up through the port, and surveyed the familiar purple gloom inside the Beachball. It was noticeably warmer in here out of the wind and spray, but not as warm as McKie remembered the place.
"Has the Caleban been talking?" McKie asked a Laclac, one of the enforcers guarding the interior.
"I don't call it talking, but the answer is not recently."
"Fanny Mae," McKie said.
Silence.
"You still there, Fanny Mae?" McKie asked.
"McKie? You invoke presence, McKie?"
McKie felt he had registered the words on his eyeballs and relayed them to his hearing centers. They definitely were weaker than he remembered.
"How many floggings has she undergone in the past day?" McKie asked the Laclac.
"Local day?" the Laclac asked.
"What difference does it make?"
"I presumed you were asking for accurate data." The Laclac sounded offended.

"I'm trying to find out if she's been under attack recently," McKie said. "She sounds weaker than when I was here before." He stared toward the giant spoon where the Caleban maintained her unpresence.
"Attacks have been intermittent and sporadic but not very successful," the Laclac said. "We've collected more whips and Palenki arms, although I understand they're not being successfully transmitted to the lab."
"McKie invokes presence of Caleban self called Fanny Mae?" the Caleban asked.
"I greet you, Fanny Mae," McKie said.
"You possess new connective entanglements, McKie," the Caleban said, "but the pattern of you retains recognition. I greet you, McKie."
"Does your contract with Abnethe still lead us all toward ultimate discontinuity?" McKie asked.
"Intensity of nearness," the Caleban said. "My employer wishes speech with you."
"Abnethe? She wants to talk to me?"
"Correct."
"She could've called me anytime," McKie said.
"Abnethe conveys request through self of me," the Caleban said. "She asks relay among anticipated connective. This connective you perceive under label of 'now.' You hang this, McKie?"
"I hang it," McKie growled. "So let her talk."

"Abnethe requires you send companions from presence."
"Alone?" McKie demanded. "What makes her think I'd do such a thing?" It was getting hotter in the Beachball. He wiped perspiration from his upper lip.
"Abnethe speaks of sentient motive called curiosity."
"I've my own conditions for such a conference," McKie said. "Tell her I won't agree unless I'm assured she'll make no attack on you or on me during our talk."
"I give such assurance."
"You give it?"
"Probability in Abnethe assurance appears incomplete. Approximate descriptive. Assurance by self runs intense strong. Direct? Perhaps."
"Why do you give this assurance?"
"Employer Abnethe indicates strong desire for talk. Contract covers such catering? Very close term. Catering."
"You guarantee our safety, is that it?"
"Intense assurance, no more."
"No attack during our talk," McKie insisted.

"Thus propels connective," the Caleban said.
Behind McKie, the Laclac enforcer grunted, said, "Do you understand that gibberish?"
"Take your squad and get out of here," McKie said.
"Ser, my orders "
"Deface your orders! I'm acting under the cartouche of Saboteur Extraordinary with full discretion from the Bureau Chief himself! Get out!"
"Ser," the Laclac said, "during the most recent flogging nine enforcers went mad here despite ingestion of angeret and various other chemicals we'd believed would protect us. I cannot be responsible for"
"You'll be responsible for a tide station on the nearest desert planet if you don't obey me at once," McKie said. "I will see you packed off to boredom after an official trial by"
"I will not heed your threats, ser," the Laclac said. "However, I will consult Bildoon himself if you so order."
"Consult, then, and hurry it! There's a Taprisiot outside."
"Very well." The Laclac saluted, crawled out the port. His companions in the Beachball continued their restive watch, with occasional worried glances at McKie.
They were brave sentients, all of them, McKie thought, to continue this duty in the face of unknown peril. Even the Laclac demonstrated extraordinary courage with his perversity. Only obeying orders though; no doubt of that.

Although it galled him, McKie waited.
An odd thought struck him: If all sentients died, all power stations of their universe would grind to a half It gave him a strange feeling, this contemplation of an end to mechanical things and commercial enterprise.
Green, growing things would take over trees with golden light in their branches. And the dull sounds of nameless metal devices, things of plastic and glass, would grow muffled with no ears to hear them.
Chairdogs would die, unfed. Protein vats would fail, decompose.
He thought of his own flesh decomposing.
The whole fleshly universe decomposing.
It would be over in an instant, the way universe measured time.
A wild pulse lost on some breeze.
Presently the Laclac reappeared in the port, said, "Ser, I am instructed to obey your orders, but to remain outside in visual contact with you, returning to this place at the first sign of trouble."
"If that's the best we can do, that's it," McKie said. "Get moving."
In a minute McKie found himself alone with the Caleban. The sense that every place in this room lay behind him persisted. His spine itched. He felt increasingly that he was taking too much of a risk.



break into the Beachball. He saved his protests, swallowed. The room remained utterly still.
"Privacy, then," he agreed.
"That's better," Abnethe said. "We must reach agreement, McKie. You're becoming somewhat of a nuisance."
"Oh, more than a nuisance, certainly?"
"Perhaps."
"Your Palenki, the one who was going to chop me up I found him a nuisance, too. Maybe even more than a nuisance. Now that I think about it, I recall that I suffered."
Abnethe shuddered.
"By the way," McKie said, "we know where you are."
"You lie!"
"Not really. You see, you're not where you think you are, Mliss. You think you've gone back in time. You haven't."
"You lie, I say!"
"I have it pretty well figured out," McKie said. "The place where you are was constructed from your connectives your memories, dreams, wishes perhaps even from things you expressly described."

"What nonsense!" She sounded worried.
"You asked for a place that would be safe from the apocalypse," McKie said. "Fanny Mae warned you about ultimate discontinuity, of course. She probably demonstrated some of her powers, showed you various places available to you along the connectives of you and your associates. That's when you got your big idea."
"You're guessing," Abnethe said. Her face was grim.
McKie smiled.
"You could stand a little session with your Beautybarbers," he said. "You're looking a bit seedy, Mliss."
She scowled.
"Are they refusing to work for you?" McKie persisted.
"They'll come around!" she snapped.
"When?"
"When they see they've no alternative!"
"Perhaps."
"We're wasting time, McKie."



Sweat dripped from his forehead. He rocked forward, sensing that he stood on the brink of a revelation.
"Do you still love me, Fanny Mae?" he asked.
Abnethe's eyes went wide with surprise. "Whaaat?"
"Affinity awareness," the Caleban said. "Love equates with this coherence I possess of you, McKie."
"How do you savor my single-track existence?" McKie asked.
"Intense affinity," the Caleban said. "Product of sincerity of attempts at communication. I-self-Caleban love you human-person, McKie."
Abnethe glared at McKie. "I came here to discuss a mutual problem, McKie," she flared. "I did not anticipate standing aside for a gibberish session between you and this stupid Caleban!"
"Self not in stupor," the Caleban said.
"McKie," Abnethe said, voice low, "I came to suggest a proposition of mutual benefit. Join me. I don't care what capacity you choose, the rewards will be more than you could possibly"
"You don't even suspect what's happened to you," McKie said. "That's the strange thing."
"Damn you! I could make an emperor out of you!"
"Don't you realize where Fanny Mae has hidden you?" McKie asked. "Don't you recognize this safe "

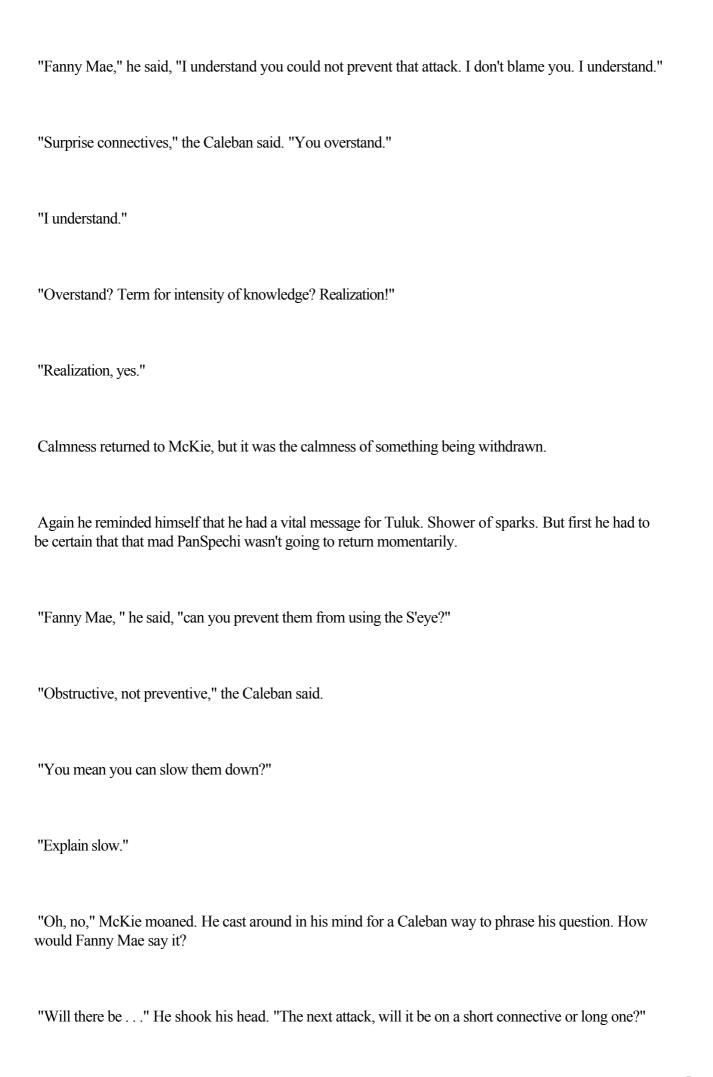


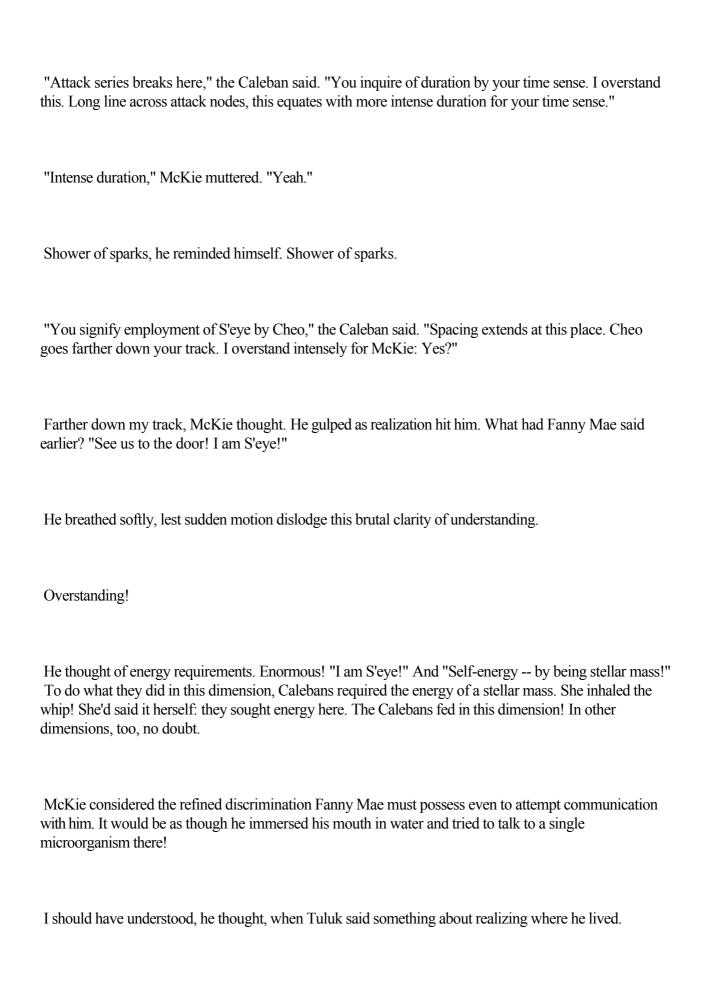
"Her world," Cheo agreed, "but you're mistaken about one thing, McKie. I can control Mliss. So it's my world, isn't it? And another thing: I can control you!"
The jumpdoor's vortal tube suddenly grew smaller, darted at McKie.
McKie dodged aside, shouted, "Fanny Mae! You promised!"
"New connectives," the Caleban said.
McKie executed a sprawling dive across the room as the jumpdoor appeared beside him. It nipped into existence and out like a ravening mouth, narrowly missing McKie with each attack. He twisted, leaped dodged panting through the Beachball's purple gloom, finally rolled under the giant spoon, peered right and left. He shuddered. He hadn't realized a jumpdoor could be moved around that rapidly.
"Fanny Mae," he rasped, "shut the S'eye, close it down or whatever you do. You promised no attack!"
No response.
McKie glimpsed an edge of the vortal tube hovering just beyond the spoon bowl.
"McKie!"
It was Cheo's voice.
"They'll call you long distance in a minute, McKie," Cheo called. "When they do, I'll have you."

McKie stilled a fit of trembling.
They would call him! Bildoon had probably summoned a Taprisiot already. They'd be worrying about him the port closed. And he'd be helpless in the grip of the call.
"Fanny Mae!" McKie hissed. "Close that damn S'eye!"
The vortal tube glittered, shifted up and around to come at him from the side. Cursing, McKie rolled into a ball, kicked backward and over onto his knees, leaped to his feet and flung himself across the spoon handle, scrambled back under it.
The searching tube moved away.
There came a low, crackling sound, like thunder to McKie. He glanced right, left, back over his head. There was no sign of the deadly opening.
Abruptly, something snapped sharply above the spoon bowl. A shower of green sparks cascaded around McKie where he lay beneath it. He slid to the side, brought up his raygen. A Palenki arm and whip had been thrust through the jumpdoor's opening. It was raised to deliver another blow against the Caleban.
McKie sprayed the raygen's beam across the arm as the whip moved. Arm and whip grazed the far edge of the spoon, brought another shower of sparks.
The jumpdoor's opening winked out of existence.
McKie crouched, the afterimage of the sparks still dancing on his retinas. Now now he recalled what he'd been trying to remember since watching Tuluk's experiment with the steel!
"S'eye removed."

Fanny Mae's voice fell on McKie's forehead, seemed to seep inward to his speech centers. Hunter of Devils! She sounded weak!
Slowly McKie lifted himself to his feet. The Palenki arm and whip lay on the floor where they had fallen, but he ignored them.
Shower of sparks!
McKie felt strange emotions washing through him, around him. He felt happily angry, satiated with frustrations, words and phrases tumbling through his mind like pinwheels.
That perverted offspring of an indecent union!
Shower of sparks! Shower of sparks!
He knew he had to hold that thought and his sanity no matter what the surging waves of emotion from Fanny Mae did to him.
Shower of shower
Was Fanny Mae dying?
"Fanny Mae?"
The Caleban remained silent, but the emotional onslaught eased.
McKie knew there was something he had to remember. It concerned Tuluk. He had to tell Tuluk

Shower of sparks!
He had it then: The pattern that identifies the maker! A shower of sparks.
He felt he'd been running for hours, that his nerves were bruised and tangled. His mind was a bowl of jelly. Thoughts quivered through it. His brain was going to melt and run away like a stream of colored liquid. It would spray out of him shower on
Shower of of SPARKS!
Louder this time, he called, "Fanny Mae?"
A peculiar silence rippled through the Beachball. It was an emotionless silence, something shut off, removed. It made McKie's skin prickle.
"Answer me, Fanny Mae," he said.
"S'eye absents itself," the Caleban said.
McKie felt shame, a deep and possessive sense of guilt. It flowed over him and through him, filled every cell. Dirty, muddy, sinful, shameful
He shook his head. Why should he feel guilt?
Ahhh. Realization came over him. The emotion came from outside him. It was Fanny Mae!





"We have to go right back to the beginning," he said.
"Many beginnings exist for each entity," the Caleban said.
McKie sighed.
Sighing, he was seized by a Taprisiot contact. It was Bildoon.
"I'm glad you waited," McKie said, cutting off Bildoon's first anxious inquiries. "Here's what I want you to "
"McKie, what's going on there?" Bildoon insisted. "There are dead enforcers all around you, madmen, a riot "
"I seem to be immune," McKie said, "or else Fanny Mae is protecting me some way. Now, listen to me. We don't have much time. Get Tuluk. He has a device for identifying the patterns which originate in the stress of creation. He's to bring that device here right here to the Beachball. And fast."
Taken in isolated tandem. Government and Justice are mutually exclusive. There must be a third force at

work for any society to achieve both government and justice. This is why the Bureau of Sabotage sometimes is called "The Third Force."
-from an Elementary Textbook
In the hushed stillness within the Beachball, McKie leaned against a curved wall, sipped ice water from a thermocup. He kept his eyes active, though, watching Tuluk set up the needed instruments.
"What's to prevent our being attacked while we work?" Tuluk asked. He rolled a glowing loop on a squat stand into position near the Caleban's unpresence. "You should've let Bildoon send in some guards."
"Like those ones who were foaming at the mouth outside?"
"There's a fresh crew outside there now!"
Tuluk did something which made the glowing loop double its diameter.
"They'd only get in the way," McKie said. "Besides, Fanny Mae says the spacing isn't right for Abnethe." He sipped ice water. The room had achieved something approaching sauna temperature, but without the humidity.
"Spacing," Tuluk said. "Is that why Abnethe keeps missing you?" He produced a black wand from his instrument case. The wand was about a meter long. He adjusted a knob on the wand's handle, and the glowing loop contracted. The squat stand beneath the glowing loop began to hum an itch-producing middle C.

"What is that you're drinking?" Tuluk asked. "Is that one of your mind disrupters?"
"You're very funny," McKie said. "How much longer are you going to be fiddling with that gear?"
"I am not fiddling. Don't you realize this isn't portable equipment? It must be adjusted."
"So adjust."
"The high temperature in here complicates my readings." Tuluk complained. "Why can't we have the port open?"
"For the same reason I didn't let any guards in here. I'll take my chances without having them complicated by a mob of insane sentients getting in my way."
"But must it be this hot?"
"Can't be helped," McKie said. "Fanny Mae and I have been talking, working things out."
"Talking?"
"Hot air," McKie said.
"Ahhh, you make a joke."
"It can happen to anyone," McKie said. "I keep asking myself if what we see as a star is all of a Caleban or just part of one. I opt for part." He drank deeply of the ice water, discovered there was no more ice in it. Tuluk was right. It was damnably hot in here.

"That's a strange theory," Tuluk said. He silenced the humming of his instrument case. In the abrupt stillness something else in the case could be heard ticking. It was not a peaceful sound. It had the feeling of a timing device affixed to a bomb. It counted moments in a deadly race. McKie felt each counted moment accumulate like a congealing bubble. It expanded . . . expanded -and broke! Each instant was death lashing at him. Tuluk with his strange wand was a magician, but he had reversed the ancient process. He was turning golden instants into deadly lead. His shape was wrong, too. He had no haunches. The tubular Wreave shape annoyed McKie. Wreaves moved too slowly. The damnable ticking! The Caleban's Beachball might be the last house in the universe, the last container for sentient life. And it contained no bed where a sentient might die decently. Wreaves didn't sleep in beds, of course. They took their rest in slanted supports and were buried upright. Tuluk had gray skin. Lead. If all things ended now, McKie wondered, which of them would be the last to go? Whose breath would be the final one? McKie breathed the echoes of all his fears. There was too much hanging on each counted instant here. No more melodies, no more laughter, no more children racing in play. . . . "There," Tuluk said.



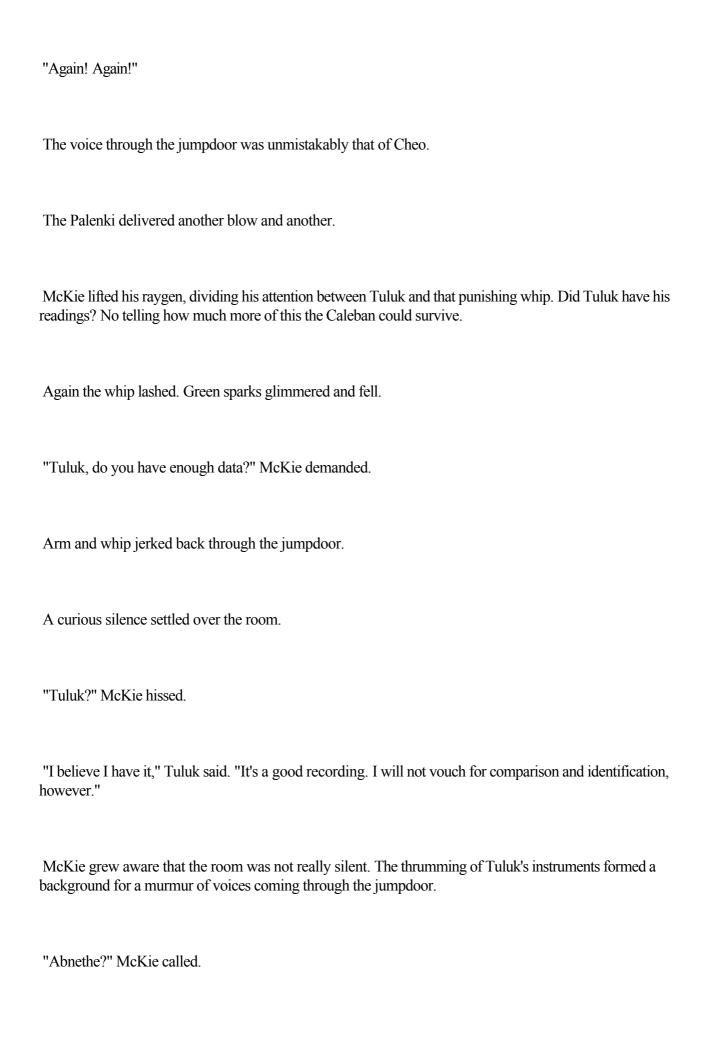


below the glowing ring.
"You said something about not knowing that was where you lived. Remember that?"
"I will never forget it." Tuluk bent his tubular body across the glowing ring, stared back through it while passing the wand back and forth in front of the ring's opening.
"Where was that?" McKie asked.
"Where was what?"
"Where you lived!"
"That? There are no words to describe it."
"Try."
Tuluk straightened, glanced at McKie. "It was a bit like being a mote in a vast sea and experiencing the warmth, the friendship of a benign giant. "
"That giant the Caleban?"
"Of course."
"That's what I thought."
"I will not answer for inaccuracies in this device," Tuluk said. "But I don't believe I can adjust it any

and projection dampers, I might, I just might achieve a fair degree of accuracy. Now? I cannot be responsible."
"And you'll be able to get a spectroscopic record?"
"Oh, yes."
"Then maybe we're in time," McKie said.
"For what?"
"For the right spacing."
"Ahhh, you mean the flogging and the subsequent shower of sparks?"
"That's what I mean."
"You could not flog her yourself, gently?"
"Fanny Mae says that wouldn't work. It has to be done with violence and the intent to create intensity of anti-love or it won't work."
"Oh. How odd. You know, McKie, I believe I could use some of your water, after all. It's the heat in here."

closer. Given a few days, some shielding -- there's an odd radiation pattern from that wall behind you --

Any conversation is a unique jazz performance. Some are more pleasing to the ears, but that is not necessarily a measure of their importance.
-Laclac Commentary
There was a popping sound, a stopper being pulled from a bottle. Air pressure dropped slightly in the Beachball, and McKie experienced the panic notion that Abnethe had somehow opened them onto a vacuum which would rain away their air and kill them. The physicists said this couldn't be done, that the gas flow, impeded by the adjustment barrier within the jumpdoor, would block the opening with its own collision breakdown. McKie suspected they pretended to know about S'eye phenomena.
He missed the jumpdoor's vortal tube at first. Its plane was horizontal and directly above the Caleban's spoon bowl.
A Palenki arm and whip shot through the opening, delivered a lashing blow to the area occupied by the Caleban's unpresence. Green sparks showered the air.
Tuluk, bending over his instruments, muttered excitedly.
The Palenki arm drew back, hesitated.



The opening tipped, gave him a three-quarter view of Abnethe's face. There was a purple bruise from her left temple down across her cheek. A silver noose held her throat, its end firmly in the grip of a PanSpechi hand.
Abnethe, McKie saw, was trying to control a rage which threatened to burst her veins. Her face was alternately pale and flushed. She held her mouth tight, lips in a thin line. Compressed violence radiated from every pore.
She saw McKie. "See what you've done?" she shrieked.
McKie pushed himself away from the wall, fascinated. He approached the jumpdoor. "What I did? That looks more like Cheo's handiwork."
"It's all your fault!"
"Oh? That was clever of me."
"I tried to be reasonable," she rasped. "I tried to help you, save you. But no! You treated me like a criminal. This is the thanks I got from you."
She gestured at the noose around her throat.
"WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS?"
"Cheo!" McKie called. "What'd she do?"
Cheo's voice came from a point beyond the arm gripping the noose. "Tell him, Mliss."

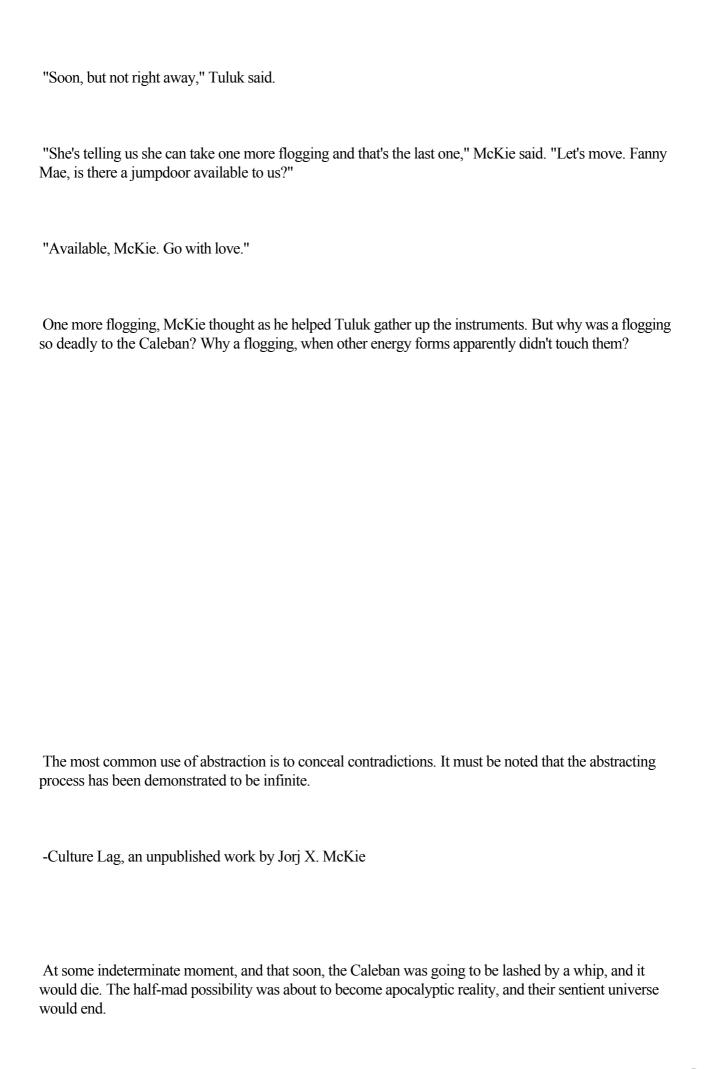




"A stupid theory like that is supposed to interest me?" Cheo demanded.
"It had better interest you," McKie said. "It's more than a theory now. You think you're sitting in a safe hidey-hole. All you have to do is eliminate Fanny Mae, that's supposed to eliminate our universe and leave you out there the only sentients left at all? Is that it? Ohhh, are you ever wrong."
"Calebans don't lie!" Cheo snarled.
"But I think they can make mistakes," McKie said.
"Proliferation of single-tracks," the Caleban said.
McKie shuddered at the icy wave which accompanied the words. "If we discontinue, will Abnethe and her friends still exist?" he asked.
"Different patterns with short limit on extended connectives," the Caleban said.
McKie felt the icy wave invade his stomach. He saw that Tuluk was trembling, facial slit opening and closing.
"That was plain enough, wasn't it?" McKie asked. "You'll change somehow, and you won't live very long after us."
"No branchings," the Caleban said.
"No offspring," McKie translated.
"This is a trick!" Cheo snarled "She's lying!"



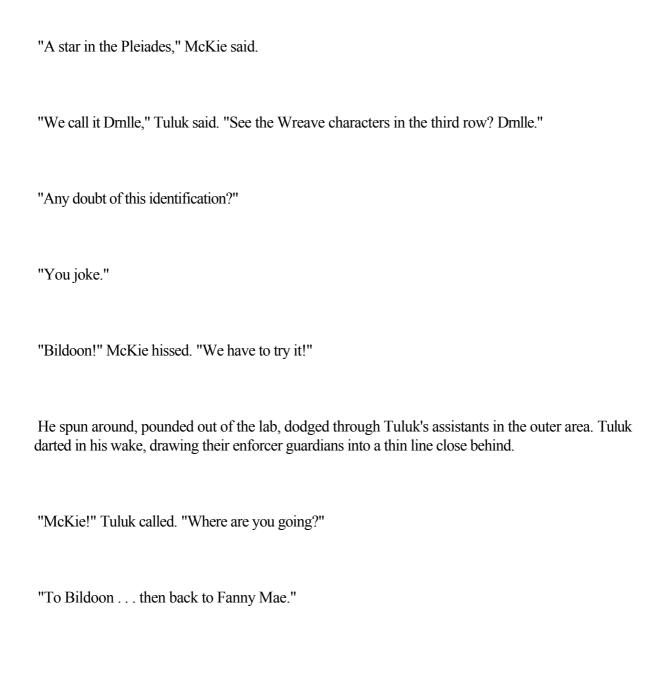




McKie stood disconsolately in Tuluk's personal lab, intensely aware of the mob of enforcer guards around, them.
"Go with love."
The computer console above Tuluk's position at the bench flickered and chittered.
Even if they identified Fanny Mae's star, what could they do with that new knowledge? McKie asked himself. Cheo was going to win. They couldn't stop him.
"Is it possible," Tuluk asked, "that the Calebans created this universe? Is this their 'garden patch'? I keep remembering Fanny Mae saying it would uncreate us to be in her presence."
He leaned against his bench, mandibles withdrawn, face slit open just enough to permit him to speak.
"Why's the damn computer taking so long?" McKie demanded.
"The pulse problem's very complicated, McKie. The comparison required special programming. You haven't answered my question."
"I don't have an answer! I hope those numbies we left in the Beachball know what to do."
"They'll do what you told them to do," Tuluk chided. "You're a strange sentient, McKie. I'm told you've been married more than fifty times. Is it a breach of good manners to discuss this?"
"I never found a woman who could put up with a Saboteur Extraordinary," McKie muttered. "We're hard creatures to love."

"Yet the Caleban loves you."
"She doesn't know what we mean by love!" He shook his head. "I should've stayed at the Beachball."
"Our people will interpose their own bodies between the Caleban and any attacks," Tuluk said. "Would you call that love?"
"That's self-preservation," McKie snarled.
"It's a Wreave belief that all love is a form of self-preservation," Tuluk said. "Perhaps this is what our Caleban understands."
"Hah!"
"It's a probability, McKie, that you've never been overly concerned about self-preservation, thus have never really loved."
"Look! Would you stop trying to distract me with your babbling nonsense?"
"Patience, McKie. Patience."
"Patience, he says!"
McKie jerked himself into motion, paced the length of the lab, the guardian enforcers dodging out of his way. He returned to Tuluk, stooped. "What do stars feed on?"
"Stars? Stars don't feed."





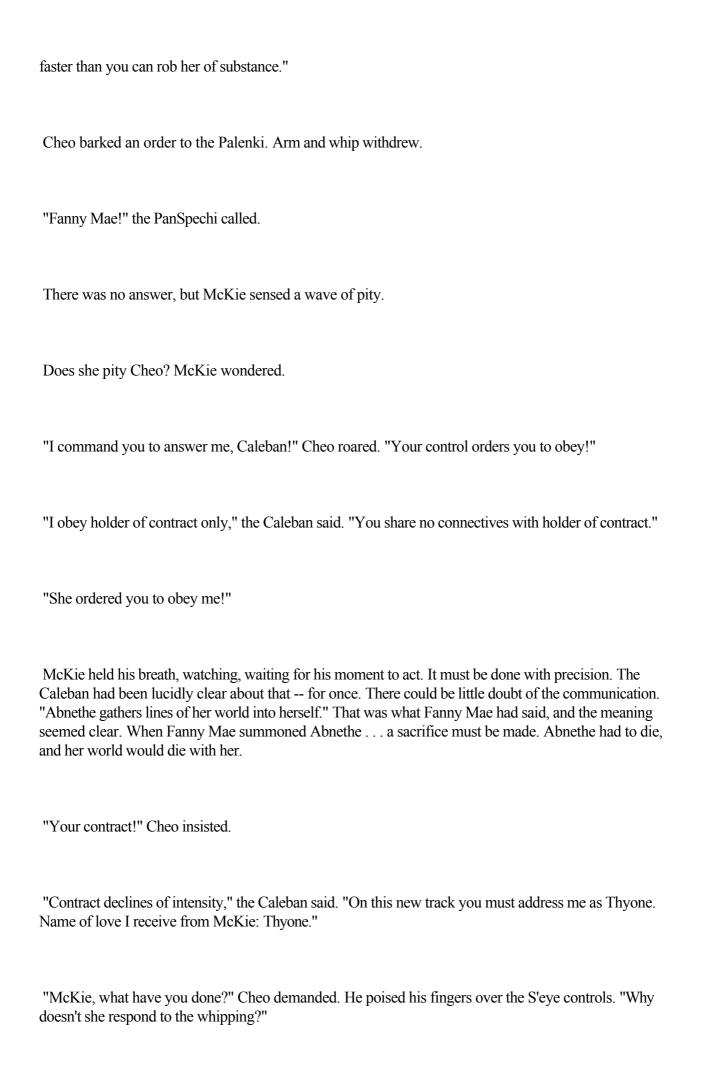
The value of self government at an individual level cannot be overestimated.
-BuSab Manual
Nothing could stop him now, Cheo told himself.
Mliss could die in a few, minutes, deprived of air in the Beautybarber tank where he'd confined her. The others on their refuge world would have to follow him, then. He would control the S'eye and the threads of power.
Cheo stood in his quarters with the S'eye controls near at hand. It was night outside, but all things remained relative, he reminded himself. Dawn would be breaking soon where the Caleban's Beachball rested above the surf on Cordiality.
The Caleban's ultimate dawn the dawn of ultimate discontinuity. That dawn would slip into eternal night on all the planets which shared a universe with the doomed Caleban.
In just a few minutes, this planet-of-the-past where he stood would reach its point of proper connectives with Cordiality. And the Palenki waiting across the room there would do what it had been commanded to do.
Cheo rubbed the scars on his forehead.
There'd be no more PanSpechi then to point accusing fingers at him, to call him with ghostly voices. Never again would there be a threat to the ego which he had secured to himself.
No one could stop him.
Mliss could never come back from death to stop him. She must be gasping in the sealed tank by now,

straining for the oxygen which did not exist there.
And that stupid McKie! The Saboteur Extraordinary had proved to be elusive and annoying, but no way remained for him to stop the apocalypse.
Just a few more minutes now.
Cheo looked at the reference dials on the S'eye controls. They moved so slowly it was difficult to detect any change while you kept your eyes on them. But they moved.
He crossed to the open doors onto the balcony, drew a questioning stare from the Palenki, and stepped outside. There was no moon, but many stars shone in patterns alien to a PanSpechi. Mliss had ordered a strange world here with its bits of ancient history from her Terran past, its odds and ends of esoterica culled from the ages.
Those stars, now. The Caleban had assured them no other planets existed here yet there were stars. If those were stars. Perhaps they were only bits of glowing gas arranged in the patterns Mliss had requested.
It would be a lonely place here after the other universe was gone, Cheo realized. And there would be no escaping those starry patterns, reminders of Mliss.
But it would be safe here. No pursuit, because there would be no pursuers.
He glanced back into the lighted room.
How patiently the Palenki waited, eyes lidded, motionless. The whip dangled limply from its single hand. Crazy anachronism of a weapon! But it worked. Without that wild conjunction of Mliss and her kinky desires, they would never have discovered the thing about the weapon, never have found this world and the way to isolate it forever.

Cheo savored the thought of forever. That was a very tong time. Too long, perhaps. The thought disturbed him. Loneliness forever.
He cut off these thoughts, looked once more at the S'eye dials. The pointers had moved a hair closer to the curtained moment. They would coincide presently.
Not looking at the pointers, not looking anywhere, really, Cheo waited. Night on the balcony was full of the odors Mliss had gathered-exotic blooms, scents and mucks of rare life forms, exhalations of a myriad species she had brought to share her Ark.
Ark. That was an odd name she'd given this place. Perhaps he'd change that later. Creche? No! That carried painful reminders.
Why were there no other planets? he wondered. Surely the Caleban could have provided other planets. But Mliss had not ordered them created.
Only the thinnest of lines separated the pointers on the S'eye dials.
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Cheo went back into the room, called the Palenki. The squat turtle shape stirred itself to action, came to Cheo's side. The thing looked eager. Palenkis enjoyed violence. Cheo felt suddenly empty, but there was no turning back. He put his hands to the controls humanoid hands. They would remind him of Mliss, too. He turned a knob. It felt oddly alien beneath his fingers, but

If words are your symbols of reality, you live in a dream world.
-Wreave Saying
McKie heard the PanSpechi's shouted command as the jumpdoor's vortal tube leaped into existence within the Beachball. The opening dominated the room, filled the purple gloom with bright light. The light came from behind two figures revealed by the opening: a Palenki and the PanSpechi, Cheo.
The vortal tube began swelling to dangerous dimensions within the confined room. Wild energies around its rim hurled enforcer guardians aside. Before they could recover, the Palenki arm thrust into the room, lashed out with its whip.
McKie gasped at the shower of green and golden sparks around the Caleban. Golden! Again the whip struck. More sparks glittered, fell, shimmered into nothingness.
"Hold!" McKie shouted as the enforcers recovered and moved to attack. He wanted no more casualties from a closing jumpdoor. The enforcers hesitated.



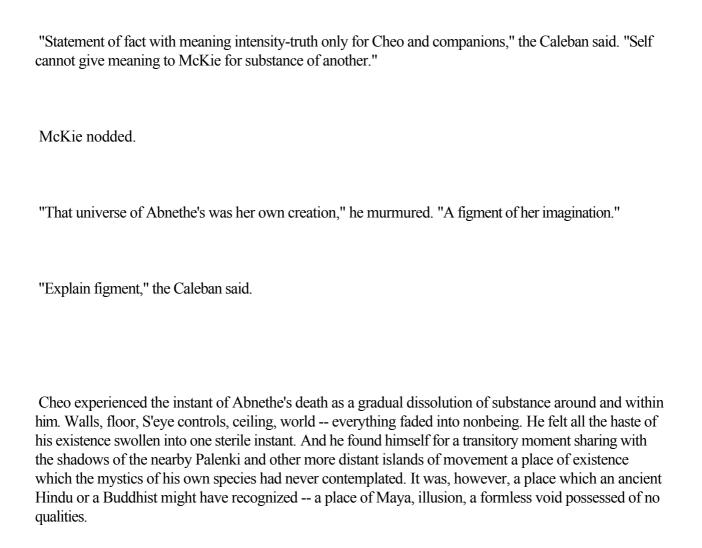




were going to have to try getting a sentient through the jumpdoor.
The enforcers, responding to his signal, began moving closer to the opening. Each held a raygen ready.
"Guessed what?" Cheo asked.
I have to keep him distracted, McKie thought.
"Calebans manifest themselves in our universe several ways," he said. "They're stars, suns which may really be feeding orifices. They've created these Beachballs which are probably intended as much to protect us as they are to house the speaking manifestation. Even with the Beachball's damping force, they can't hold back all the radiant energy of their speech. That's why it gets so hot in here."
McKie glanced at his ring of enforcers. They were moving closer and closer to the jumpdoor. Thank all the gods of space that Cheo had made the opening so large!
"Stars?" Cheo asked.
"This particular Caleban has been identified," McKie said. "She's Thyone in the Pleiades."
"But the S'eye effect"
"Star-eyes," McKie said. "At least, that's how I interpret it. I'm probably only partly right, but Thyone here admits she and her kind suspected the truth during their first attempts at communication."
Cheo moved his head slowly from side to side. "The jumpdoors"
"Star-powered," McKie said. "We've known from the first they required stellar energies to breach space that way. The Taprisiots gave us a clue when they spoke of embedments and crossing Caleban



The jumpdoor opening turned on its axis, advanced once more on McKie. It moved a bit faster this time. McKie dodged aside, scattering enforcers. Why weren't the damned fools trying to get through the opening? Afraid of being cut up? He steeled himself to dive through the opening on the next pass. Cheo had been conditioned to the thought of fear now. He wouldn't expect attack from someone who feared him. McKie swallowed in a dry throat. He knew what would happen to him. The molasses delay in the vortal tube would give Cheo just enough time. McKie would lose both legs -- at the very least. He'd get through with a raygen, though, and Cheo would die. Given any luck, Abnethe could be found -- and she'd die, too. Again the jumpdoor plunged toward McKie. He leaped, collided with an enforcer who had chosen the same instant to attack. They sprawled on hands and knees as the vortal tube slipped over them. McKie saw Cheo's gloating face, the hand jerking at the controls. He saw a control arm snap over, heard a distant crackling as the jumpdoor ceased to exist. Someone screamed. McKie felt himself considerably surprised to be still on hands and knees in the purple gloom of the Beachball's interior. He held his position, allowed his memory to replay that last glimpse of Cheo. It had been a ghostly vision, a smoky substance visible through the PanSpechi's body -- and the visible substance had been that of the Beachball's interior. "Discontinuity dissolves contract," the Caleban said. McKie climbed slowly to his feet. "What's that mean, Thyone?"



The moment passed abruptly, and Cheo ceased to exist. Or it could be said that he discontinued in becoming one with the void-illusion. One cannot, after all, breathe an illusion or a void.