

Conscience Allan Odegaard heard a brittle tinkling, a loud warning sounded by elfin chimes, as his pursuer brushed a crystalline flowering plant. He stopped at the end of a small clearing and turned to confront the danger. This deaf hunting animal had been on his trail for several minutes.

It was going to be close. The vegetation was thick and the carnivore would appear only a few meters away. Allan drew the spare pistol with his left hand and held it ready for a second shot. Bodies composed of siliceous tissue resisted even the cutting heat of a laser, and the small crystal in a handgun had to cool five seconds between pulses. Cappy Doyle had told him the scientists at this isolated research station always carried two weapons when working in the jungle. The ability to fire twice had saved lives that would have been lost in five seconds.

The powerful infrared lamp on the helmet of Allan's protective coverall sent a broad beam across the small open space, illuminating the wall of brush on the opposite side. His goggles, ground to accept wavelengths in a narrow band around the 10^{12} frequency, kept out all visible light. The infrared beam did not reflect off crystalline, or glass surfaces, as badly as white light, and he could see clearly.

The sounds of pursuit stopped. There was a slow movement at the rear of the clearing as a large head approached the edge of the brush.

The hunter paused, testing the wind, unaware that it could be seen by its intended prey. The huge mouth was open, and Allan saw a round silver tongue curling over pyramid-shaped teeth of unbreakable glass. And then a strong breeze started behind the human's back and carried his odor directly to the animal. They were so close he could see the skin crinkling around the flaring nostrils, hear the snuffling sound of heavy intakes. And then the wrinkled flesh smoothed out, and Allan knew with the certainty gained from encounters with strange beasts on a hundred worlds that it was not going to attack. To the carnivore his strong scent indicated a mistake. It signaled that he was not only alarmingly strange, but inedible.

Allan had a sudden dangerous impulse and yielded to it immediately, before reflection cost him his chance. He bolstered the left-hand gun and pulled down his goggles.

It was like opening a doorway into the softly lighted heart of a diamond. This planet had no moon, but stars hanging thick and close in the clear night sky provided a diffused illumination. Crystal was a unique world, where life had evolved with silicon instead of carbon as the anchor element. The proportions of hydrogen and nitrogen in living tissue were similar to his own, but the oxygen content had dropped from 76 to 68 percent and been replaced by metallic elements. Physically the planet was a virtual twin of Earth, and the structure and activity of its flora and fauna amazingly similar. But what on Earth would have been a tree became on Crystal a giant chandelier, with a trunk of shimmering crystal and leaves of tinted glass. The wind-rippled branches covered with innumerable tiny jewels, bending plant tissue where the metallics in every scale of bark colored the light and reflected it from a thousand glistening facets. In the daylight it was blinding, a visual fury of changing light of every color and intensity. A minute of open-eye exposure would burn out the color receptors in the fovea; five would blind a person. No one went outdoors without goggles similar to the ones he was wearing, ground to admit only a few wavelengths.

Even in the softer starlight the display was dazzling. After a few seconds Allan recognized the head of the hunter by the pattern of the teeth, glittering like diamond pyramids in what to the animal's protected eyes seemed shadow. And as Allan watched the mouth, that could cut him in two with one bite, slowly closed and the head receded, fading from view. There was a low sibilant rustling as hanging vines of vitreous crystal parted, and the fading sounds of padded feet on blades of glass.

Reluctantly, Allan pushed the goggles back over his eyes, and the visually dangerous beauty around him faded. The silence also died as the small jungle creatures who had quietly awaited the outcome of the stalk went back to their nightly business. And Allan had to return to his. He lived for moments like these, when some strange beauty burst on senses dulled by the monotony of months in space, or his work threw him into a situation so startling and new it surpassed previous human experience. But as a

Practical Philosopher he had a job to do, and little time in which to accomplish it. A Space Service neverlander was due next day, bringing World Council Member Celal Kaylin of Turkey, chairman of a subcommittee check-ing on the work of the P.P. Corps. Allan had been on his way to Earth for a needed vacation prior to testifying before the committee when he was unexpectedly ordered to Crystal. The scientists there had reported that an elusive creature they had been unable to capture was possibly in-telligent. And Council Member Kay-lin was going to accompany Allan on this assignment and observe a "Con-science" in action.

As Allan started forward again, hearing the brittle crunch of small plants breaking beneath his thick boots, the Crier called from close ahead.

Cappy Doyle, the station director, had played several recordings of the thin, plaintive voice for Allan. It sounded like a high-pitched child who understood a few words of En-glish and used them interspersed throughout a string of gibberish. But one word that had been consistently repeated was "help," and another was "leave." Once they had recorded a clearly heard, "Help us; leave." The voice always spoke from the same area, at night, and when the wind was still. Limited vision and numerous carnivores who killed be-fore they realized their prey was in-edible kept night work in the jungle to a minimum. Two heavily armed parties had sought the elusive voice without success, and several daylight searches of the area revealed noth-ing. Allan was no braver than the resident biologists, but he had dared the night jungle alone because ex-perience had taught him shy crea-tures on the verge of intelligence were less likely to flee from a single person. And he did not want to keep the subcommittee chairman waiting while he made that first careful con-tact with the frightened Crier.

The sound came again, and Allan pushed away yielding fronds of spun glass and moved slowly ahead. He made no attempt to walk quietly be-cause it was impossible. What on Earth would have been a silent walk sounded on Crystal like a mad giant trampling on greenhouses. But the local fauna were equally noisy; every bird that landed on a branch, every insect blundering into a leaf, spread its own small circle of sound. It hardly mattered for most of them; only a few had hearing organs.

The wind died and the Crier called again, a long wail that lasted over a minute. Allan stopped and lis-tened carefully. He picked out the words "leave" and "difficult" in the jumble of sounds . . . and received a strong impression there were syl-lables of other words in the mixture.

Allan took a few more careful steps, stopping when he judged him-self within a few meters of the crea-ture. He waited, light focused directly ahead. He saw nothing, and heard only the crystalline chiming of vegetation shaking in the breeze. The vagrant wind gradually faded, and almost immediately the sound came again, so close it startled him. He was facing a bush a little taller than himself. Out of its shadows a high voice cried, "Leave us!"

Allan felt the hand still holding a laser tremble, and eased his finger back from the trigger. The distinct words were followed by nonsense, and he strained his eyes to find the speaker. When he still saw nothing he took a step forward. The bush he was searching had a slender trunk and straight branched limbs with only a moderate number of leaves. No animal larger than a very small bird could be hiding there.

Another gentle wraith of a night wind appeared, and the voice stopped. Allan strained his eyes, and when the breeze faded and the sound came again he finally saw the Crier.

At almost eye level with the hu-man one branch crossed beneath another. A saucer-shaped leaf, laced with silver threads, hung from the upper limb and grew into the lower; the normal growth pattern on both branches was upward. Two thick coils of silver wire, spun fine as spi-der silk, hung suspended in the air on both sides. The supple limbs, when not disturbed by the wind, kept the leaf pulled taut to form a crude but workable diaphragm. As Allan stared, almost unable to be-lieve his eyes, the leaf vibrated and the thin voice uttered a string of gib-berish.

The leaf and coils formed an elec-trically operated speaker. The Crier was the bush itself.

"A mountain of silver?" Allan asked, astonished.

Cappy Doyle laughed, his thin form shaking slightly in the locally-made glass chair. A supply ship had failed during the station's first year and the personnel had almost starved. Cappy, who had arrived middle-aged and plump, had chosen not to regain the lost weight. "Yes, a mountain, according to our

seismic readings. This little hill we are sitting on is just the top of the peak, with the rest deep underground. We've done some mining and smelting as hobby work. By using silver instead of lead in stained glass you can get some very beautiful effects, as you see in our windows."

The research station windows justified the director's pride. The standard dome of poured foamfab had been modified by adding thick but narrow panes of stained glass. If the vibration barrier that surrounded the hilltop failed and a large animal got through, the narrow embrasures behind the windows would not admit it. The heavy coloring in the glass kept the chaotic light reflected by the crystal jungle from penetrating too strongly. From inside, the human eye saw a constant play of movement and color on the exterior of each window, a chromatic, living mosaic almost hypnotic in its intensity.

"We've found silver used in various ways in plant tissue," Cappy went on, "but the one you describe is unique. I suppose you realize that as hard-headed biologists we will have to see this speaker operate before we can accept it."

"I saw it and still don't believe it," said Allan, smiling. "But you'll have to perform your recordings and measurements in a hurry tonight. I want to substitute a better speaker for the makeshift one and try to establish communication."

The thin director shook his head, as though to clear it of incredulity, and got to his feet. "It's your show. But you realize, Conscience Odegaard, that the data we've already accumulated on silicon-based life will keep three Earth laboratories busy for a decade. And now you throw in a wild factor like possible plant intelligence . . ."

"The hazard of your profession," said Allan, also rising. "Mine is to determine whether a questionable species has developed the basics of intelligence. From the evidence so far this is going to be an easy decision. Now I'd like to get some sleep before our Council Member arrives."

"I'll have a crew ready to support you tonight," Cappy promised as Allan slid open the cloudy glass rectangle of his office door and stepped into the open community room. A few late risers were finishing their breakfasts at a long crystal table. Allan spoke to several of the men and women, but ignored an obvious overture to draw him into conversation. He was too tired. The Corps of Practical Philosophers was a semi-military organization and required its members to keep fit, but he was forty-one, a little on the plump side, and had landed out of cycle with Crystal and already behind on his sleep. And he was worried. The message from P.P. Administrator Wilson had been blunt and clear. Unless Kaylin could be convinced of an urgent need for the organization his subcommittee would recommend to the World Council that it be abolished. The official "Conscience of Mankind" had made numerous enemies by ruling that many potentially rich planets could not be colonized or exploited.

The P.P. Corps had been established as a civilian branch of the Space Service at the beginning of interstellar exploration. Its function was to determine if a questionable species was intelligent. No true civilization had been discovered on the thousands of worlds already explored in the Hyades, Ursa Major and Scorpio-Centaurus clusters, but many of the species ruled intelligent had very rapid growth potential. The Seals of Sister, indigenous to a planet ninety-nine percent water-covered, were linked by telepathy and together had a very powerful intellect. No simple yes or no sufficed in their case, and Allan had ruled that Sister could be colonized and the seas lowered, but the colonists must form working alliances with the Seals and help them emerge onto the land. There were many similar complex cases in the P.P. files. They were performing a vital function that prevented Man from repeating some of the atrocities simple greed had caused on Earth.

Allan tumbled into bed without bathing and slept soundly until called for dinner. In the dining room Cappy introduced him to Council Member and Mrs. Kaylin, who had arrived earlier. The C.M. from Turkey was a short, sturdy, dark-haired man, surprisingly young for such an important political appointment. His wife, Gilia, was a small, blond, and very beautiful Russian. This unusual field investigation made more sense to Allan when he learned they had signed their trial marriage contract just before leaving Earth, and that Gilia had been and still was on the C.M.'s staff. They were enjoying a honeymoon trip at World Council expense that only the very rich could afford on their own.

"Conscience Odegaard, I have heard much about your work," Giliasaid as they shook hands. "Yours must be the most interesting job in the galaxy."

"And one of the most difficult to justify," Kaylin said dryly. "Each time you throw Earthmen off a planet the demand to abolish the P.P. Corps grows stronger."

"The returns will more than pay for all sacrifices in the long run, as I hope to demonstrate here," said Al-lan. "Are you going to accompany us tonight?"

"We certainly are!" Gilia said immediately. Kaylin only sighed.

They ate a meal of carefully pre-*pared* concentrates—not an ounce of edible food grew on Crystal—and af-*terwards* Allan met Carlson and Ma-nabe, the two biologists who were to accompany them. Cappy had chosen for youth, strength, and a good shooting eye. Carlson was a large blond with long hair and a drooping moustache who looked more like a displaced Viking than a scientist. Manabe, a small, lithe Asian, was a specialist in bioelectric systems, and Allan asked his help in preparing some special equipment. It took only a few minutes to assemble the simple device they needed. An hour after dark the small expedition was ready.

Cappy Doyle had decided to per-*sonally* safeguard his important vis-*itors*, and joined them to make a party of six. All were wearing the protective coveralls and helmets that shielded tender skin from the cutting edges on a great deal of the glass ve-*getation*. Allan led them down the hill to the vibration barrier at its foot, where Cappy used his key to deactivate a gateway. All the men, except Kaylin, were carrying por-*table* equipment. Allan swung his head to both sides as they passed through the safe area. The infrared lamp revealed several surface roots, mindlessly pressing to the edges of the low wire coils. Their tips were being oscillated into free molecules as they grew. The barrier could dis-*integrate* even a large animal, but there was no portable equivalent for a personal weapon.

They had barely entered the heavy vegetation outside the barrier when a carnivore appeared. The wind was blowing, creating such a cacaphony of small noises Allan did not at first recognize the purposeful sound of a large approaching body. When he realized they were in danger it was almost too late to fight. A long snout suddenly thrust through the vege-*tation* only a few meters away, two eyes like giant rubies staring down at them from a head twice Allan's height off the ground.

"Hold your fire!" Allan called quickly, cutting through Gilia's star-*tled* scream. His order was unnece-*sary*; the biologists had all noticed the flaring nostrils above the two long U-shaped rows of pointed teeth. They waited, while the dim-witted creature's eyes and nose argued over their edibility. The nose won and it turned away; the noise of its passage gradually faded into the constant small sounds around them.

"That was a close one," Cappy Doyle said, his voice shaking slightly. "We call that large lad the elacroc, unofficially. He's big as an elephant and has teeth like a croco-*dile*."

^The Kaylins both laughed ner-*vously*, but Allan heard what seemed real fear in the C.M.'s voice. The short walk to the speaker-equipped plant, which was near the barrier but halfway around the hill, did nothing to relieve that fear. As the humans were approaching their destination they filet a second hungry night prowler. This one launched itself from a tree where it had crouched in waiting, bowling over Carlson. Allan heard the sound of metallic claws ripping at the fabric of the downed man's coverall, and saw diamond-hard teeth close on the thin metal of the helmet. Then a beam from the laser ready in his hand cut into the lucent flesh of the neck, and two more from Cappy and Manabe hit it in the side. Three burns were too much even for the silicate flesh of the tree climber. It leaped away, threshing violently in its death agony, and the cacaphony of sound created by shattering vegetation al-*most* deafened the humans. The ani-*mal* was a catlike creature about twice the size of a man. When it stopped moving Allan lowered his goggles for a moment, and told Gilia to try it. He heard her gasp when she saw a slim pointed head of what seemed sparkling quartz, filled with teeth like two curved rows of pyramidal crystals.

When they arrived at the bush it took the three biologists five minutes to get over the awe, and two hours to film, record, and measure. Allan vol-*unteered* to stand guard, and Kaylin and Gilia at first watched the three men work. When they grew bored the visitors from Earth lowered their goggles, and at once were standing in a fairyland beautiful beyond words. Allan noticed the normal jungle noises slowly returning as the smaller denizens resumed their inter-*rupted* nighttime routines. He kept his infrared beam in constant mo-*tion*, scanning both nearby trees and the ground, but saw nothing dan-*gerous*.

"If you could transport a section of this jungle back to Earth, it would be quite an attraction," said

Kaylin, bending to examine a closed flower of fragile beauty. A huge insect with gossamer wings as large as Allan's hand fluttered to a landing on the same bush. The C.M. stared at it, utterly absorbed. Gilia uttered a low cry of appreciation.

The three men finally finished, and Carlson replaced Allan as guard. Using a field-sensitive meter Ma-nabe had brought Allan made a few simple measurements of his own, obtaining readings on the operating current to the silver magnetic coils. The wind had been blowing intermittently since their arrival and the speaker had uttered some gibberish in the quiet period, but no discernible words. Kaylin paid little attention to the biological speaker after an initial inspection, but Gilia seemed fascinated.

It was the work of a minute to adjust the speaker and microphone on the unit Allan and Manabe had prepared to operate on the very low plant voltage. Manabe muttered that so little power would hardly move the diaphragm, and started tying in a spare preamplifier stage on the input side.

Allan was carefully checking the wire in the silver coils; it was insulated by a layer of silicon-based tissue only a few molecules thick. The upper wires emerged from a layer of bark, formed the coils, and disappeared beneath the bark of the lower limb. Allan scraped off insulation and connected the leads from his input speaker on both sides of one coil. A breeze had started and there was no current flowing at the moment. He hesitated, and then hooked the leads from his microphone to the opposite coil in the same way. This was the procedure in which he had the least confidence. The plant should learn quickly that the diaphragm in the new speaker had an automatic return to neutral, and the primitive device of a magnetic coil on both sides was unnecessary. Whether or not it could recognize signals coming in on what to it had been half of a coordinated output was another matter.

The breeze died, and almost immediately the receiving speaker on Allan's unit muttered some low static.

There was a pause and then the sound came again, a little louder; the leaf-speaker was also rattling. Allan took a measured risk and quickly clipped the tiny wires below his attachments from the input speaker, pulling the silver coil free. The speaker sounded again, now much stronger. The noise continued for a moment while the sounds subtly changed, gained form and substance, became syllables, became words. The speaker said, "You have provided an air-vibration device."

Allan felt his heart racing and knew his hands were trembling. He heard a harsh intake of air as someone resumed breathing, but the other humans were locked in silence. He reached and cut the silver wires to the plant's second coil, laying it on the ground. Bending his face to the microphone that would feed a signal to whatever circuitry existed inside the plant, he said, "Yes, we have provided you with an air-vibration device, called a 'speaker.' This signal is generated by a similar device called a 'microphone.'"

The plant was silent, and he repeated the message. There was no doubt of the plant's intelligence, but seeing how quickly it could recognize the incoming signal and interpret the content would be a measure of its adaptability. Allan knew a moment of near exaltation when the speaker said, "I have made the necessary changes to accept your signal. With the two air-vibration devices you have provided we may now freely communicate."

There was a low murmur from the three biologists, and Gilia laughed; she sounded on the verge of hysteria. Allan had not realized until then how great the tension had become, or that Carlson was neglecting his guard duty. There were so many questions it was difficult to know where to start. He finally settled on the most basic of all and asked, "What have you been trying to tell us with your improvised speaker?"

"My extraction roots cannot cross beneath the killing barrier you have placed around the local supply of silver. The next source is far away and I must expend great energy to transport from there. Help; remove the barrier."

"Ask it why it needs the silver!" Cappy said quickly.

Allan did, and the voice replied, "I am a multiple-body entity. All forms such as the one before you are a part of my Unity. Each form in the circle of my being connects with all others through a system of underground nerves made of silver protected by my tissue. All young growing parts require silver for the communications and storage matrix that exists in every individual. I must have more silver for young

growths in this area."

"Conscience! Ask it if all its individual forms are identical in structure!" Carlson demanded, unable to restrain himself. The voice they were hearing was toneless and mechanical, without inflection or intonation other than pauses for periods. The excited scientist had spoken loudly enough for the speaker to hear. The monotonous voice said, "All my parts are not identical. Some are grown to produce electricity which is distributed to all. Others grow with trunks much larger than the one before you. The extra space in these is supplied with silver in matrix form and used for the storage of accumulated knowledge. Unity draws upon any part as necessary."

"How did you learn to speak English?" demanded Kaylin loudly. Allan had forgotten the politician was there. He looked at Gilia. Her lovely face was almost ecstatic with the joy of discovery. She felt his stare, lifted her rapt gaze to meet his, and Allan experienced a sudden and intense moment of sadness. This woman should have become a Conscience. Instead she would finish her government-paid honeymoon and become a politician's wife on Earth. It seemed a terrible waste of potential.

"All my individual forms have leaves sensitive to slow vibrations transmitted through the air. Other leaves and roots are sensitive to temperature-electrical potential-touch- and kinesthetics. I am aware of my own structure down to the level you think of as molecular. When your vibrations appeared in the air I realized they were a new form of slow communication. I transformed all slow vibrations to the faster ones that could be stored in my memory and accumulated them. Analysis revealed the structure of the communication and over several years I slowly learned the meaning of individual words. When I felt ready to communicate with you I changed the growth pattern of the form before you to create an air-vibration device. It is of poor quality and I have had difficulty in producing the correct sounds. The one you have provided is much more efficient. The signaling device you have attached to my nerves enables me to receive your communication in the electrical form which is acceptable without transformation."

"Why did you operate your air-vibration device only at night?" asked Cappy Doyle.'

There was a moment of silence. Allan sensed that the question posed a strain for the plant's still limited vocabulary. After a moment the speaker said, "I do not possess the quality you think of as intelligence when my forms are receiving sunlight. All my sensors and storage banks function but the Unity that is speaking to you does not exist while each individual form accumulates energy. When the sunlight ends and the energy cycle reverses Unity resumes from the previous night."

Crystal had only one small continent in the temperate zone; most of the planet's surface was hidden beneath water or ice. Unity was restricted to one plant form on the single warm land mass. So far as Allan knew this creature, like its world, was unique. It was not only the first intelligent plant, it was the first life form that covered an entire continent with what must be millions of interconnected individuals.

Unity spoke again; "Will you remove the barrier and permit my roots to reach the silver I need?"

"Certainly!" and "Of course!" Cappy and Allan said simultaneously. They glanced at each other, and Allan gestured for Cappy to speak. The thin biologist said, "Tomorrow we will deactivate small sections of our barrier at frequent intervals around the circle. You may send roots in through all of them. If it would help you, we will bring pure silver here."

"I cannot utilize the process you call smelting," Unity replied. "My roots must absorb silver as it is found in small quantities in the natural state. Open places in the barrier will serve my needs."

"Hadn't we better be getting back?" Kaylin asked suddenly. "You people are paying no attention to guarding us, and I don't want one of those glass-toothed monsters taking a bite out of Gilia."

"Celal!" Gilia protested immediately. "I've never been so enthralled in my life!"

The C.M. was right; they were being inexcusably careless. Allan glanced at Cappy, who nodded. "We will return tomorrow night and talk with you again," Allan said into the microphone. "You have learned a great deal from listening to us; we wish to learn from you. In return we will provide you with better access to our knowledge, which is greater perhaps than you can store in your memory trees. For now we will say good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Unity tonelessly. The term could have no meaning for a creature whose separate parts were always connected by an electrical system, but Unity had learned something of human

cus-toms during its eavesdropping.

Allan disconnected his leads from the silver nerves, examined the delicate wires, and decided not to attempt to replace the fragile magnetic coils. After he left, Cappy could provide Unity with a permanent communications system, wired directly into the research station.

There were no attacks by carnivores on the return trip. Allan glanced at his chronometer as they entered the door and saw to his amazement that it was barely mid-night on Crystal. The slow walk and the talk with Unity had seemed to last many hours. The Kaylins said good night and retired to their quarters immediately, but Allan and the three biologists gathered in the deserted community room for some shop talk. Allan's decision was a forgone conclusion Crystal could not be colonized or turned into a vacation resort but there was no harm in the research station remaining indefinitely. Cappy wanted Allan to press for a larger appropriation in his report, and he had no choice but to agree. The P.P. budget and that of the research group were determined by different Council agencies, but a recommendation by a Conscience always carried weight.

At the community breakfast Allan learned to his surprise that the Kaylins were leaving that morning. The Space Service neverlander that had brought them was waiting overhead, and the C.M. wanted to make several other stops on planets where P.P.'s were at work.

The Kaylins left to pack and Allan started preparing his report. He had two more weeks before a neverlander scheduled for Earth would stop for him, two weeks to enjoy honest gravity without the constant side-pull of rotation. He wanted to get this decision off and enjoy it.

When Kaylin and Gilia were ready Allan and Cappy carried their luggage to the shuttle, waiting in a clear area behind the station. The C.M. stood fidgeting as the shuttle pilot stored their gear, something obviously troubling him. When the pilot sealed the compartment door and it was time to board, Kaylin abruptly said, "I hope you two don't really think you've fooled me all that easily."

Allan felt a sudden coldness along his spine. Cappy looked a startled inquiry at Kaylin. "Oh, I don't really blame you for trying to preserve the P.P. Corps, Allan, or Cappy for wanting his budget enlarged. Everyone does it, though not many come up with as elaborate a game as you two played last night. But, if you think I really believed all that about an intelligent plant that covers this continent . . . gentlemen, I'm not that naive!"

Allan saw the expression of half-angry cynicism on Kaylin's dark face, the weary look of a man subject to constant pressures who had learned not to believe even his own eyes. The C.M. went on, "It couldn't have been very hard to make those coils and that bent leaf, and, of course, someone was hiding in the jungle and speaking into a mike on the other end of those silver wires. I'll admit it was very impressive, and Gilia certainly enjoyed the show, but I'm not convinced."

"Celal!" said Gilia, distress in her voice. Kaylin patted her hand, and abruptly turned and started climbing the steep metal ladder to the air lock. She stared after him, perplexed, and Allan saw the struggle on her face as she tried to decide if her husband were right. The battle was quickly resolved. She impulsively stepped to

Allan, took his hand, and said rapidly, "I'll work on him; between now and home I have four weeks in which to change his mind. He's doing you an injustice, but I hope you can forgive him. If you saw some of the schemes people pull to trick him, you'd understand."

Allan bent and kissed her cheek. "Don't worry about it. I'll be at that hearing when it convenes. I've an idea I think will convince both Celal and all the other committee members that we are really worth our money."

Gilia turned and quickly followed Kaylin. She waved at the airlock door and disappeared inside. Allan and Cappy moved back to watch the shuttle lift off, then walked to the station in silence.

"I'll be going back to the speaker plant tonight, and I'd like to go alone," Allan said as they entered. Cappy gave him a sharp look, but said nothing.

Shortly after dark Allan was on his way through the now familiar but always dangerous jungle, laser ready in his hand. This time he reached the Crier without incident, and carefully connected the speaking device to the silver nerves.

"Are you ready to communicate?" Allan spoke into the microphone.

"I am ready. I have found the in-active areas in the vibration barrier. Some of my roots are already near the silver."

"Good; I hope the harm we have done you will be swiftly overcome," Allan said. "I have a question that is very important to me. Can you impress enough knowledge on one of your storage forms to enable it to live, speak and think as if it were a small version of Unity?"

There was a short silence, as though electrical impulses were rushing from nerve center to nerve center, through a million plants and across an entire continent. The speaker said, "I can accomplish this within six activity periods."

"Will you do this for me, and allow me to remove that individual and take it to my home planet, if I guarantee that it will be returned and reconnected into the Unity un-harmed?"

This time the silence was shorter. The speaker said, "I will."

Allen lowered his goggles and looked at the dazzling beauty of crystal for the first time that night. All the desk-bound committee members should have come with their chairman. But perhaps they would be like Kaylin, unable to believe their eyes and ears.

Unity had said it understood the structure of its forms down to the molecular level. Introducing a plant as a hearing witness, and having it submit obviously valuable new knowledge as a justification for the work of the P.P. Corps, was a means of bringing something of Crystal to the committee.

Allan chuckled; it was going to be another unique experience.