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# A MOMENTARY TASTE OF BEING

By

**James Tiptree Jr.**

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*James Tiptree, Jr., lives in Virginia, not far from the capital, and prefers to let public attention center on his stories, not on his private life—so not much is generally known about his profession, marital status, childhood and upbringing, and such. He is willing to admit that he is a man of middle years who has traveled widely; all the rest is conjecture, at this point. His first science-fiction stories were published as recently as 1968, and within a few years he had become a favorite of readers for such dazzling tales as "Your Haploid Heart," "Painwise," "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," and "The Women Men Don't See." In 1973 fifteen of his best stories were collected in a volume called Ten Thousand Light-Years from Home. Tiptree's short story Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death was voted a Nebula by the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1974.*

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... A momentary taste

*Of Being from the Well amid the Waste—*

—Khayyam/Fitzgerald

# A MOMENTARY TASTE OF BEING

## Chapter I

... It floats there visibly engorged, blue-green against the blackness. He stares: It swells, pulsing to a terrifying dim beat, slowly extrudes a great ghostly bulge which extends, solidifies... it is a planet-testicle pushing a monster penis toward the stars. Its blood-beat reverberates through weeping immensities; cold, cold. The parsecs-long phallus throbs, probes blindly under intolerable pressure from within; its tip is a huge cloudy glans lit by a spark: Centaur. In grief it bulges,

*lengthens, seeking release—stars toll unbearable crescendo . . .*

It is a minute or two before Dr. Aaron Kaye is sure that he is awake in his temporary bunk in *Centaur's* quarantine ward. His own throat is sobbing reflexively, his eyes are weeping, not the stars. Another of the damn dreams. Aaron lies still, blinking, willing the icy grief to let go of his mind.

It lets go. Aaron sits up still cold with meaningless bereavement. What the hell is it, what's tearing at him? "Great Pan is dead," he mutters stumbling to the narrow wash-stall. The lament that echoed round the world. . . He sluices his head, wishing for his own quarters and Solange. He really should work on these anxiety symptoms. Later, no time now. "Physician, screw thyself," he jeers at the undistinguished, worried face in the mirror.

Oh Jesus—the time! He has overslept while they are doing god knows what to Lory. Why hasn't Coby waked him? Because Lory is his sister, of course; Aaron should have foreseen that.

He hustles out into Isolation's tiny corridor. At one end is a vitrex wall; beyond it his assistant Coby looks up, takes off his headset. Was he listening to music, or what? No matter. Aaron glances into Tighe's cubicle. Tighe's face is still lax, sedated; he has been in sleep-therapy since his episode a week ago. Aaron goes to the speaker grille in the vitrex, draws a cup of hot brew. The liquid falls sluggishly; Isolation is at three-fourths gee in the rotating ship.

"Where's Dr. Kaye—my sister?"

"They've started the interrogation, boss. I thought you needed your sleep." Goby's doubtless meaning to be friendly but his voice has too many sly habits.

"Oh, god." Aaron starts to cycle the cup out, forces himself to drink it. He has a persistent feeling that Lory's alien is now located down below his right heel.

"Doc."

"What?"

"Bruce and Åhlstrom came in while you were asleep. They complain they saw Tighe running around loose this morning."

Aaron frowns. "He hasn't been out, has he?"

"No way. They each saw him separately. I talked them into seeing you, later."

"Yeah. Right." Aaron cycles his cup and heads back up the hall, past a door marked *Interview*. The next is *Observation*. He goes in to a dim closet with viewscreens on two walls. The screen in front of him is already activated two-way. It shows four men seated in a small room outside Isolation's wall.

The gray-haired classic Anglo profile is Captain Yellaston, acknowledging Aaron's presence with a neutral nod. Beside him the two scout commanders go on watching their own screen. The fourth man is young Frank Foy, *Centaurs* safety officer. He is pursing his mouth over a wad of printout tape.

Reluctantly, Aaron activates his other screen one-way, knowing he will see something unpleasant. There she is—his sister Lory, a thin young red-haired woman wired to a sensor bank. Her eyes have turned to him although Aaron knows she's seeing a blank screen. Hypersensitive as usual. Behind her is Solange in a decontamination suit.

"We will go over the questions once more, Miss Kaye," Frank Foy says in a preposterously impersonal

tone.

"Dr. Kaye, please." Lory sounds tired.

"Dr. Kaye, of course." Why is young Frank so dislikable? Be fair, Aaron tells himself, it's the man's job. Necessary for the safety of the tribe. And he isn't "young" Frank any more. Christ, none of us are, twenty-six trillion miles from home. Ten years.

"Dr. Kaye, you were primarily qualified as a biologist on the Gamma scout mission, is that right?"

"Yes, but I was also qualified in astrogation. We all were."

"Please answer yes or no."

"Yes."

Foy loops the printout, makes a mark. "And in your capacity as biologist you investigated the planetary surface both from orbit and on the ground from the landing site?"

"Yes."

"In your judgment, is the planet suitable for human colonization?"

"Yes."

"Did you observe anything harmful to human health or well-being?"

"No. No, it's ideal—I told you."

Foy coughs reprovingly. Aaron frowns too; Lory doesn't usually call things ideal.

"Nothing potentially capable of harming human beings?"

"No. Wait—even water is potentially capable of harming people, you know."

Foy's mouth tightens. "Very well, I rephrase. Did you observe any life-forms that attacked or harmed humans?"

"No."

"But—" Foy pounces—"when Lieutenant Tighe approached the specimen you brought back, he was harmed, was he not?"

"No, I don't believe it harmed him."

"As a biologist, you consider Lieutenant Tighe's condition unimpaired?"

"No—I mean yes. He was impaired to begin with, poor man."

"In view of the fact that Lieutenant Tighe has been hospitalized since his approach to this alien, do you still maintain it did not harm him?"

"Yes, it did not. Your grammar sort of confuses me. Please, may we move the sensor cuff to my other arm? I'm getting a little capillary breakage." She looks up at the blank screen hiding the command staff.

Foy starts to object but Captain Yellaston clears his throat warningly, nods. When Solange unhooks the

big cuff Lory stands up and stretches her slim, almost breastless body; with that pleasant, snub-nosed face she could pass for a boy.

Aaron watches her as he has all his life with a peculiar mixture of love and dread. That body, he knows, strikes most men as sexless, an impression confirmed by her task-oriented manner. *Centaur's* selection board must have been composed of such men, one of the mission criteria was a low sex-drive. Aaron sighs, watching Solange reattach the cuff. The board had been perfectly right, of course; as far as Lory herself was concerned she would have been happy in a nunnery. Aaron wishes she was in one. Not here.

Foy coughs primly into the microphone. "I will repeat, Dr. Kaye. Do you consider the effect of the alien specimen on Lieutenant Tighe was injurious to his health?"

"No," says Lory patiently. It's a disgusting scene, Aaron thinks; the helpless, wired-up woman, the hidden probing men. Psychic rape. Do them justice, only Foy seems to be enjoying it.

"On the planet surface, did Commander Kuh have contact with these life-forms?"

"Yes."

"And was he affected similarly to Lieutenant Tighe?"

"No—I mean, yes, the contact wasn't injurious to him either."

"I repeat. Was Commander Kuh or his men harmed in any way by the life-forms on that planet?"

"No."

"I repeat. Were Commander Kuh or his men harmed in any way by the life-forms on that planet?"

"No." Lory shakes her head at the blank screen.

"You state that the scoutship's computer ceased to record input from the sensors and cameras after the first day on the surface. Did you destroy those records?"

"No."

"Was the computer tampered with by you or anyone?"

"No. I told you, we thought it was recording, no one knew the dump cycle had cut in. We lost all that data."

"Dr. Kaye, I repeat: Did you dump those records?"

"No."

"Dr. Kaye, I will go back once more. When you returned alone, navigating Commander Kuh's scoutship, you stated that Commander Kuh and his crew had remained on the planet because they desired to begin colonization. You stated that the planet was, I quote, a paradise and that nothing on it was harmful to man. Despite the totally inadequate record of surface conditions you claim that Commander Kuh recommends that we immediately send the green signal to Earth to begin full-scale emigration. And yet when Lieutenant Tighe opened the port to the alien specimen in your ship he suffered a critical collapse. Dr. Kaye, I put it to you that what really happened on that planet was that Commander Kuh and his crew were injured or taken captive by beings on that planet and you are concealing this fact."

Lory has been shaking her short red hair vigorously during this speech. "No! They weren't injured or

taken captive, that's silly! I tell you, they wanted to stay. I volunteered to take the message back. I was the logical choice, I mean I was non-Chinese, you know—"

"Please answer yes or no, Dr. Kaye. Did Commander Kuh or any of his people suffer a shock similar to Lieutenant Tighe?"

"No!"

Foy is frowning at his tapes, making tick-marks. Aaron's liver has been getting chilly; he doesn't need wiring to detect that extra sincerity in Lory's voice.

"I repeat, Dr. Kaye. Did—"

But Captain Yellaston stirs authoritatively behind him.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Foy."

Foy's mouth closes. On the blind side of the screen Lory says gamely, "I'm not really tired, sir."

"Nevertheless, I think we will complete this later," Yellaston says in his good gray voice. He catches Aaron's eye, and they all sit silent while Solange releases Lory from the cuff and body wires. Through Solange's visor Aaron can see her lovely French-Arab face projecting worried compassion. Empathy is Solange's specialty; a wire slips and Aaron sees her lips go "Ooh." He smiles, feels briefly better.

As the women leave, the two scout commanders in the other cubicle stand up and stretch. Both brown-haired, blue-eyed, muscular ectomesomorphs so much alike to Aaron's eye, although Timofaev Bron was born in Omsk and Don Purcell in Ohio. Ten years ago those faces had held only simple dedication to the goal of getting to a supremely difficult place in one piece. The failures of their respective scout missions have brought them back to *Centaur* lined and dulled. But in the last twenty days since Lory's return something has awakened in their eyes; Aaron isn't too eager to know its name.

"Report, please, Lieutenant Foy," says Yellaston, his glance making it clear that Aaron is to be included. The official recorder is still on.

Francis Xavier Foy sucks air through his teeth importantly; this is his second big interrogation on their entire ten-year voyage.

"Sir, I must regretfully report that the protocol shows persistent, ah, anomalous responses. First, the subject shows a markedly elevated and labile emotionality—" He glances irritably at Aaron to whom this is no news.

"The level of affect is, ah, suggestive. More specifically, on the question of injury to Commander Kuh, Dr. Kaye—Dr. Lory Kaye, that is—the physiological reactions contraindicate her verbal responses, that is, they are not characteristic of her base-line truth-type—" He shuffles his printouts, not looking at Aaron.

"Lieutenant Foy, are you trying to tell us that in your professional judgment Dr. Kaye is lying about what happened to the Gamma scout crew?"

Frank Foy wriggles, reshuffling tapes. "Sir, I can only repeat that there are contraindications. Areas of unclarity. In particular these three responses, sir, if you would care to compare these peaks I have marked?"

Yellaston looks at him thoughtfully, not taking the tapes.

"Sir, if we could reconsider the decision not to employ, ah, chemical supplementation," Foy says desperately. He means, scop and EDC. Aaron knows Yellaston won't do this; he supposes he is grateful.

Yellaston doesn't bother answering. "Leaving aside the question of injury to Commander Kuh, Frank, what about Dr. Kaye's responses on the general habitability of the planet?"

"Again, there are anomalies in Dr. Kaye's responses." Foy visibly disapproves of any suspicions being left aside.

"What type of anomalies?"

"Abnormal arousal, sir. Surges of, ah, emotionality. Taken together with terms like 'paradise,' 'ideal,' and so on in the verbal protocol, the indications are—"

"In your professional judgment, Lieutenant Foy, do you conclude that Dr. Kaye is or is not lying when she says the planet is habitable?"

"Sir, the problem is variability, in a pinpoint sense. What you have suggests the classic pattern of a covert *area*."

Yellaston ponders; behind him the two scout commanders watch impassively.

"Lieutenant Foy. If Dr. Kaye does in fact believe the planet to be eminently suitable for colonization, can you say that her emotion could be accounted for by extreme elation and excitement at the successful outcome of our long and difficult mission?"

Foy stares at him, mouth slightly open like a student.

"Elation, extreme—I see what you mean, sir. I hadn't—yes, sir, I suppose that could be one interpretation."

"Then do I correctly summarize your findings at this stage by saying that while Dr. Kaye's account of the events concerning Commander Kuh remains unclear, you see no specific counter-indication of her statement that the planet is habitable?"

"Ah, yes, sir. Although—"

"Thank you, Lieutenant Foy. We will resume tomorrow."

The two scout commanders glance at each other. They are solidly united against Foy, Aaron sees. Like two combat captains waiting for an unruly pacifist to be disposed of so the contest can start. Aaron sympathizes, he can't make himself like Foy. But he didn't like that tone in Lory's voice, either.

"Man, the samples, the sensor records," Don Purcell says abruptly. "They don't lie. Even if they only got thirty hours on-planet, that place is perfect."

Tim Bron grins, nods at Aaron. Yellaston smiles remotely, his eyes reminding them of the official recorder. For the thousandth time Aaron is touched by the calm command presence of the man. Old Yellowstone. The solid whatever-it-is that has held them together, stuffed in this tin can all through the years. Where the hell did they find him? A New Zealander, educated at some extinct British school. Chief of the Jupiter mission, etcetera, etcetera. Last of the dinosaurs.

But now he notices an oddity: Yellaston, who has absolutely no nervous mannerisms, is massaging the knuckles of one hand. Is it indecision over Lory's answers? Or is it the spark that's sizzling behind the

two scout commanders' eyes—the planet?

*The planet...*

A golden jackpot rushes uncontrollably up through some pipe in Aaron's midbrain. Is it really there at last? After all the gruelling years, after Don and then Tim came back reporting nothing but gas and rocks around the first two Centaurus suns—is it possible our last chance has won? If Lory is to be believed, Kuh's people are at this moment walking in Earth's new Eden that we need so desperately. While we hang here in darkness, two long years away. If Lory is to be believed—

Aaron realizes Captain Yellaston is speaking to him.

"—You judge her to be medically fit, Dr. Kaye?"

"Yes, sir. We've run the full program of tests designed for possible alien contact, plus the standard biomonitor spectrum. As of last night—I haven't checked the last six hours—and apart from weight loss and the ulcerative lesions in the duodenum which she suffered from when she got back to *Centaur*, Dr. Lory Kaye shows no significant change from her base-line norms when she departed two years ago."

"Those ulcers, Doctor; am I correct that you feel they can be fully accounted for by the strain of her solitary voyage back to this ship?"

"Yes, sir, I certainly do." Aaron has no reservations here. Almost a year alone, navigating for a point in space? My god, how did you do it, he thinks again. My little sister. She isn't human. And that alien thing on board, right behind her... For an instant Aaron can feel its location, down below the left wall. He glances at the recorder, suppressing the impulse to ask the others if they feel it too.

"Tomorrow is the final day of the twenty-one day quarantine period," Yellaston is saying. "An arbitrary interval, to be sure. You will continue the medical watch on Dr. Lory Kaye until the final debriefing session at oh-nine-hundred tomorrow." Aaron nods. "If there are still no adverse indications, the quarantine will terminate at noon. As soon as feasible thereafter we should proceed to examine the specimen now sealed in scoutship Gamma. Say the following day; will this give you sufficient time to coordinate your resources with the Xenobiology staff and be prepared to assist us, Dr. Kaye?"

"Yes, sir."

Yellaston voice-signs the log entry, clicks the recorder off.

"Are you going to wait to signal home until after we look at that specimen?" Don asks him.

"Certainly."

They go out then, four men moving carefully in cramped quarters. Roomier than they'd have on Earth now. Aaron sees Foy manage to get in Yellaston's way, feels a twinge of sympathy for the authority-cathected wretch. Anything to get Daddy's attention. He too has been moved by Yellaston's good-wise-father projection. Are his own responses more mature? The hell with it, he decides; after ten years self-analysis becomes ritual.

When he emerges into Isolation corridor Lory has vanished into her cubicle and Solange is nowhere in sight. He nods at Coby through the vitrex and punches the food-dispenser chute. His server arrives on a puff of kitchen-scented air. Protein loaf, with an unexpected garnish; the commissary staff seems to be in good form.

He munches, absently eyeing the three-di shot of Earth mounted above his desk in the office beyond the

wall. That photo hangs all over the ship, a beautifully clear image from the early clean-air days. What are they eating there now, each other? But the thought has lost its impact after a decade away; like everyone else on *Centaur*, Aaron has no close ties left behind. Twenty billion humans swarming on that globe when they went; doubtless thirty by now, even with the famines. Waiting to explode to the stars now that the technology is—precariously—here. Waiting for the green light from *Centaur*. Not literally green, of course, Aaron thinks; just one of the three simple codes they can send at this range. For ten long years they have been sending yellow—*Exploration continues*. And until twenty days ago they were facing the bleak red—*No planet found, returning to base*. But now, Lory's planet!

Aaron shakes his head, nibbling a slice of real egg, thinking of the green signal starting on its four-year trajectory back to Earth. *Planet found, launch emigration fleets, coordinates such-and-such*. Earth's teeming billions all pressing for the handful of places in those improbable transport cans.

Aaron frowns at himself; he rejects the "teeming billions" concept. Doggedly he thinks of them as people, no matter how many—individual human beings each with a face, a name, a unique personality, and a meaningful fate. He invokes now his personal ritual, his defense against mass-think, which is simply the recalling of people he has known. An invisible army streams through his mind as he chews. People... from each he has learned. What? Something, large or small. An existence... the face of Thomas Brown glances coldly from memory; Brown was the sad murderer who was his first psychosurgery patient a zillion years ago at Houston Enclave. Had he helped Brown? Probably not, but Aaron will be damned if he will forget the man. The living man, not a statistic. His thoughts veer to the reality of his present shipmates, the sixty chosen souls. Cream of Earth, he thinks, only half in sarcasm. He is proud of them. Their endurance, their resourcefulness, their effortful sanity. He thinks it is not impossible that Earth's sanest children are in this frail bubble of air and warmth twenty-six million miles away.

He cycles his server, pulls himself together. He has eighteen hours of biomonitor tapes to check against the base-line medical norms of Tighe, Lory, and himself. And first he must talk to the two people who thought they saw Tighe. As he gets up, the image of Earth catches his eye again: their lonely, vulnerable jewel, hanging there in blackness. Suddenly last night's dream jumps back, he sees again the monster penis groping toward the stars with *Centaur* at its tip. Pulsing with pressure, barely able to wait for the trigger that will release the human deluge. He swats his forehead; the hallucination snaps out. Angry with himself he plods back to the Observation cubby.

The image of Bruce Jang is waiting on the screen; his compatriot, the young Chinese-American engineer on a ship where everyone is a token something. Only not "young" any more, Aaron admonishes himself.

"They have me in the coop, Bruce. I'm told you saw Tighe. Where and when?"

Bruce considers. Two years ago Bruce had still looked like Supersquirrel, all fast reflexes, buck teeth, and mocking see-it-all eyes. Cal Tech's answer to the universe.

"He came by my quarters about oh-seven-hundred. I was cleaning up, the door was open, I saw him looking in at me. Sort of, you know, fon-nee." Bruce shrugs, a joyless parody of his old jive manner.

"Funny? You mean his expression? Or was there anything peculiar about him, I mean visually different?"

A complex pause.

"Now that you mention it, yes. His refraction index was a shade off."

Aaron puzzles, finally gets it. "Do you mean Tighe appeared somewhat blurred or translucent?"

"Yeah. Both," Bruce says tightly. "But it was him."



"Bruce, Tighe never left Isolation. We've checked his tapes." Very complex pause; Aaron winces, remembering the shadow waiting to enshroud Bruce. The near-suicide had been horrible. "I see," Bruce says too casually. "Where do I turn myself in?" "You don't. Somebody else saw Tighe, too. I'm checking them out next."

"Somebody else?" The fast brain snaps, the shadow is gone. "Once is accident, twice is coincidence." Bruce grins, ghost of Supersquirrel. "Three times is enemy action."

"Check around for me, will you, Bruce? I'm stuck here." Aaron doesn't believe in enemy action but he believes in helping Bruce Jang.

"Right. Not exactly my game of course, but—right." He goes out. The Man Without a Country. Over the years Bruce had attached himself to the Chinese scout team and in particular to Mei-Lin, their ecologist. He had confidently expected to be one of the two nonnationals Commander Kuh would, by agreement, take on the planet-seeking mission. It had nearly been a mortal blow when Kuh, being more deeply Chinese, had chosen Lory and the Aussie mineralogist.

The second Tighe-seer is now coming on Aaron's screen: Åhlstrom, their tall, blonde, more-or-less human computer chief. Before Aaron can greet her she says resentfully, "It is not right you should let him out."

"Where did you see him, Chief Åhlstrom?" "In my Number Five unit."

"Did you speak to him? Did he touch anything?" "Nah. He went. But he was there. He should not be." "Tell me, please, did he look different in any way?" "Different, yah," the tall woman says scornfully. "He has half no head."

"I mean, outside of his injury," says Aaron carefully, recalling that Åhlstrom's humor had once struck him as hearty. "Nah."

"Chief Åhlstrom, Lieutenant Tighe was never out of this Isolation ward. We've verified his heartrate and respiration record. He was here the entire time."

"You let him out."

"No, we did not. He was here."

"Nah."

Aaron argues, expecting Åhlstrom's customary punchline: "Okay, I am stubborn Swede. You show me." Her stubbornness is a *Centaur* legend; during acceleration she had saved the mission by refusing to believe her own computers' ranging data until the hull sensors were rechecked for crystallization. But now she suddenly stands up as if gazing into a cold wind and says bleakly, "I could wish to go home. I am tired of this machine."

This is so unusual that Aaron can find nothing useful to say before she strides out. He worries briefly; if Åhlstrom needs help, he is going to have a job reaching that closed crag of a mind. But he is all the same relieved; both the people who "saw" Tighe seem to have been under some personal stress.

Hallucinating Tighe, he thinks; that's logical. Tighe stands for disaster. Appropriate anxiety symbol, surprising more people haven't cathected on him. Again he feels pride in *Centaur's* people, so steady after ten years' deprivation of Earth, ten years of cramped living with death lying a skin of metal away. And now something more, that spark of alien life, sealed in *China Flowers* hold, tethered out there. Lory's alien. It is now hanging, he feels, directly under the rear of his chair.

"Two more people waiting to see you, boss," says Goby's voice on the intercom. This also is mildly unusual, *Centaur* is a healthy ship. The Peruvian oceanographer comes in, shamefacedly confessing to insomnia. He is religiously opposed to drugs, but Aaron persuades him to try an alpha regulator. Next is Kawabata, the hydroponics chief. He is bothered by leg spasms. Aaron prescribes quinine, and Kawabata pauses to chat enthusiastically about the state of the embryo cultures he has been testing.

"Ninety percent viability after ten year cryostasis," he grins. "We are ready for that planet. By the way, Doctor, is Lieutenant Tighe recovering so well? I see you are allowing him freedom."

Aaron is too startled to do more than mumble. The farm chief cuts him off with an encomium on chickens, an animal Aaron loathes, and departs.

Shaken, Aaron goes to look at Tighe. The sensor lights outside his door indicate all pickups functioning: pulse regular, EEG normal if a trifle flat. He watches the alphascope break into a weak REM, resume again. The printouts themselves are outside. Aaron opens the door.

Tighe is lying on his side, showing his poignant Nordic profile, deep in drugged sleep. He doesn't look over twenty: rose-petal flush on the high cheekbones, a pale gold cowlick falling over his closed eyes. The prototype Beautiful Boy who lives forever with his white aviator's silk blowing in the wind of morning. As Aaron watches, Tighe stirs, flings up an arm with the i.v. taped to it, and shows his whole face, the long blond lashes still on his cheek.

It is now visible that Tighe is a thirty-year-old boy with an obscene dent where his left parietal arch should be. Three years back, Tiger Tighe had been their first—and so far, only—serious, casualty. A stupid accident; he had returned safely from a difficult EVA and nearly been beheaded by a loose oxy tank while unsuited in the freefall shaft.

As if sensing Aaron's presence Tighe smiles heartbreakingly, his long lips still promising joy. The undamaged Tighe had been the focus of several homosexual friendships, a development provided for in *Centaur's* program. Like so much else that has brought us through sane, Aaron reflects ruefully. He had never been one of Tighe's lovers. Too conscious of his own graceless, utilitarian body. Safer for him, the impersonal receptivity of Solange. Which was undoubtedly also in the program, Aaron thinks. Everything but Lory.

Tighe's mouth is working, trying to say something in his sleep.

"Hoo, huh." The speech circuits hunt across the wastelands of his ruined lobe. "Huhhh... Huh-home." His lashes lift, the sky-blue eyes find Aaron.

"It's all right, Tiger," Aaron lies, touches him comfortably. Tighe makes saliva noises and fades back into sleep, his elegant gymnast's body turning a slow arabesque in the low gee. Aaron checks the catheters and goes.

The closed door opposite is Lory's. Aaron gives it a brotherly thump and looks in, conscious of the ceiling scanner. Lory is on the bunk reading. A nice, normal scene.

"Tomorrow at oh-nine-hundred," he tells her. "The wrap-up. You okay?"

"You should know." She grimaces cheerfully at the biomonitor pickups.

Aaron squints at her, unable to imagine how he can voice some cosmic, lifelong suspicion with that scanner overhead. He goes out to talk to Coby.

"Is there any conceivable chance that Tiger could have got to where an intercom screen could have

picked him up?"

"Absolute negative. See for yourself," Coby says, loading tape-spools into the Isolation pass-through. His eyes flick up at Aaron. "I didn't bugger them."

"Did I say that?" Aaron snaps. But he's guilty, they both know it; because it was Coby who was Frank Foy's other important case, five years back. Aaron had caught his fellow doctor making and dealing dream-drugs. Involuntarily now, Aaron sighs. A miserable business. There had been no question of "punishing" Coby, or anyone else on *Centaur* for that matter; no one could be spared. And Coby is their top pathologist. If and when they got back to Earth he will face—who knows what? Meanwhile he has simply gone on with his job; it was then he had started calling Aaron "boss."

Now Aaron sees a new animation flickering behind Goby's clever-ape face. Of course—the planet. Never to go back. Good, Aaron thinks. He likes Coby, he relishes the unquenchable primate ingenuity of the man.

Coby is telling him that the Drive chief Gomulka has come in with a broken knuckle, refusing to see Aaron. Coby pauses, waiting for Aaron to get the implication. Aaron gets it, unhappily; a physical fight, the first in years.

"Who did he hit?"

"One of the Russkies, if I had to guess."

Aaron nods wearily, pulling in the tapes he has to check. "Where's Solange?"

"Over with Xenobiology, checking out what you'll need to analyze that thing. Oh, by the way, boss—" Coby gestures at the service roster posted on their wall—"you missed your turn on the shit detail. Last night was Common Areas. I got Nan to swap you for a Kitchen shift next week, maybe you can talk Berryman into giving us some real coffee."

Aaron grunts and takes the tapes back to Interview to start the comparator runs. It is a struggle to keep awake while the spools speed through the discrepancy analyzer, eliciting no reaction. His own and Lory's are all nominal, nominal, nominal, nominal—all variation within normative limits. Aaron goes out to the food dispenser, hoping that Solange will show. She doesn't. Reluctantly he returns to run Tighe's.

Here, finally, the discrepancy indicator stirs. After two hours of input the analyzer has summed a deviation bordering on significance; it hovers there as Aaron continues the run. Aaron is not surprised; it's the same set of deviations Tighe has shown all week, since his problematical contact with the alien. A slight, progressive flattening of vital function, most marked in the EEC Always a little less theta. Assuming theta correlates with memory, Tighe is losing capacity to learn.

Aren't we all, Aaron thinks, wondering again what actually happened in Gamma corridor. The scoutship *China Flower* has been berthed there with the ports sealed, attended by a single guard. Boring duty, after two weeks of nothing. The guard had been down by the stern end having a cup of brew. When he turned around Tighe was lying on the deck up by the scout's cargo hatch and the port was open. Tighe must have come out of the access ramp right by the port; he had been EVA team-leader before his accident, it was a natural place for him to wander to. Had he been opening or closing the lock when he collapsed? Had he gone inside and looked at the alien, had the thing given him some sort of shock? Nobody can know.

Aaron tells himself that in all likelihood Tighe had simply suffered a spontaneous cerebral seizure as he approached the lock. He hopes so. Whatever happened, Yellaston ordered the scoutship to be

undocked and detached from *Centaur* on a tether. And Tighe's level of vitality is on the downward trend, day after day.

Unorthodox, unless there is unregistered midbrain deterioration. Aaron can think of nothing to do about it. Maybe better so.

Bone-weary now, he packs up and forces himself to go attend to Tighe's necessities. Better say good night to Lory, too.

She is still curled on her bunk like a kid, deep in a book. *Centaur* has real books in addition to the standard microfiches; an amenity.

"Finding some good stuff?"

She looks up, brightly, fondly. The scanner will show that wholesome sisterly grin.

"Listen to this, Arn." She starts reading something convoluted; Aaron's ears adjust only in time to catch the last of it. "... *Grow upward, working out the beast, and let the ape and tiger die* ... It's very old, Arn. Tennyson." Her smile is private.

Aaron nods warily, acknowledging the earnest Victorian. He has had enough tiger and ape and he will not get drawn into another dialog with Lory, not with that scanner going.

"Don't stay up all night."

"Oh, this rests me," she tells him happily. "It's an escape into truth. I used to read and read on the way back."

Aaron flinches at the thought of that solitary trip. Dear Lory, little madwoman.

"Night."

"Good night, dear Arn."

He gets himself into his bunk, grumbling old curses at *Centaur's* selection board. Pedestrian clots, no intuition. Lory the non-sex-object, sure. Barring the fact that Lory's prepubescent body is capable of unhinging the occasional male with the notion that she contains some kind of latent sexual lightning, some secret super-sensuality lurking like hot lava in the marrow of her narrow bones. In their years on Earth, Aaron had watched a series of such idiots breaking their balls in the attempt to penetrate to Lory's mythical marrow. Luckily none on *Centaur*, so far.

But that wasn't the main item the selection board missed. Aaron sighs, lying in the dark. He knows the secret lightning in Lory's bones. Not sex, would that it were. Her implacable innocence—what was the old phrase, *a fanatic heart*. A too-clear vision of good, a too-sure hatred of evil. No love lost, in between. Not much use for living people. Aaron sighs again, hearing the frightening condemnation in her unguarded voice. Has she changed? Probably not. Probably doesn't matter, he tells himself; how could it matter that chance has put Lory's head between us and whatever's on that planet? It's all a technical problem, air and water and bugs and so on...

Effortfully he pushes the thoughts away. I've been cooped up here twenty days with her and Tighe, he tells himself; I'm getting deprivation fantasies. As sleep claims him his last thought is of Captain Yellaston. The old man must be getting low on his supplies.

## Chapter II

*... Immensely tall, eternally noble, the woman paces through gray streaming clouds. In rituals of grief she moves, her heavy hair bound with dark jewels; she gestures to her head, her heart, a mourning queen pacing beside a leaden sea. Chained beasts move slowly at her heels, the tiger stepping with sad majesty, the ape mimicking her despair. She plucks the bindings from her hair in agony, it streams on the icy wind. She bends to loose the tiger, urging it to freedom. But the beast-form wavers and swells, thins out; the tiger floats to ghostly life among the stars. The ape is crouching at her feet; she lays her long fingers on its head. It has turned to stone. The woman begins a death chant, breaking her bracelets one by one beside the sea...*

Aaron is awake now, his eyes streaming with grief. He hears his own throat gasping, *Uh—uhh—uhh*, a sound he hasn't made since—since his parents died, he remembers sharply. The pillow is soaked. What is it? What the hell is doing it? That was Lory's goddam ape and tiger, he thinks. Stop it! Quit.

He stumbles up, finds it's the middle of the night, not morning. As he douses his face he is acutely aware of a direction underfoot, an invisible line leading down through the hull to the sealed-up scouter, to the alien inside. Lory's alien in there.

All right. Face it.

He sits on his bunk in the dark. Do you believe in alien telepathic powers, Dr. Kaye? Is that vegetable in there broadcasting on a human wavelength, sending out despair?

Possible, I suppose, Doctor. Anything—almost anything—is *possible*.

But the tissue samples, the photos. They showed no differentiated structure, no neural organization. No brain. It's a sessile plant-thing. Like a cauliflower, like a big lichen; like a bunch of big grapes, she said. All it does is metabolize and put out a little bioluminescence. Discrete cellular potentials *cannot* generate anything complex enough to trigger human emotions. Or can they? No, he decides. We can't do it ourselves, for god's sake. And it's not anything physical like subsonics, not with the vacuum between. And besides, if it is doing this, Lory couldn't possibly have got back here sane. Nearly a year of living ten feet away from a thing sending out nightmares? Not even Lory. It has to be me. I'm projecting.

Okay; it's me.

He lies down again, reminding himself that it's time he ran another general checkup. He should expand the free-association session, too; other people may be getting stress phenomena. Those Tighe-sightings... Last time he caught two incipient depressions. And he'll do all that part himself, people won't take it from Coby he thinks, and catches himself in the fatuity. The fact is that people talk a lot more to Coby than they do to him. Maybe I have some of Lory's holy-holies. He grins, drifting off.

*... Tighe drifts in through the wails, curled in a foetal clasp, his genital sac enormous. But it's a different Tighe. He's green, for one thing, Aaron sees. And vastly puffy, like a huge cauliflower or a cumulus cloud. Not frightening. Not anything, really; Aaron watches neutrally as cumulus-cloud-green Tighe swells, thins out, floats to ghostly life among the stars. One bulbous baby hand waves slowly, Ta-ta...*

With a jolt Aaron discovers it really is morning. He lurches up, feeling vile. When he comes out Solange is sitting at the desk beyond the vitrex; Aaron feels instantly better.

"Soli! Where the hell were you?"

"There are so many problems, Aaron." She frowns, a severe frown. "When you come out you will see. I am giving you no more supplies."

"Maybe I'm not coming out." Aaron draws his hot cup.

"Oh?" The frown registers disbelief, dismay. "Captain Yellaston said three weeks, the period is over and you are perfectly healthy."

"I don't feel so healthy, Soli."

"Do you want to come out, Aaron?" Her dark eyes twinkle, her bosom radiates the shapes of holding and being held, she warms him through the vitex. Aaron tries to radiate back. They have been lovers five years now, he loves her very much in his low-sex-drive way.

"You know I do, Soli." He watches Goby come in with Aaron's printouts. "How'm I doing, Bill? Any sign of alien plague?"

Solange's face empathizes again: tender alarm. She's like a play, Aaron thinks. If a brontosaurus stubbed its toe, Soli would go *Oooh* in sympathy. Probably do the same at the Crucifixion, but he doesn't hold that against her. Only so much band-width for anybody; Soli is set low.

"Don't pick up a thing on visual, boss, except you're not sleeping too good."

"I know. Bad dreams. Too much excitement, buried bogies stirring up. When I get out we're going to run another general checkup."

"When the doc gets symptoms he checks everybody else," Coby says cheerfully, the leer almost unnoticeable. He's happy, all right. "By the way, Tiger's awake. He just took a pee."

"Good. I'll see if I can bring him out to eat."

When Aaron goes in he finds Tighe trying to sit up.

"Want to come out and eat, Tiger?" Aaron releases him from the tubes and electrodes, assists him outside to the dispenser. As Tighe *sees* Solange his hand whips up in his old, jaunty greeting. Eerie to see the well-practiced movements so swift and deft; for minutes the deficit is hidden. Quite normally he takes the server, begins to eat. But after a few mouthfuls a harsh noise erupts from his throat and the server falls, he stares at it tragically as Aaron retrieves it.

"Let me, Aaron, I have to come in." Solange is getting into her decontamination suit.

She brings in the new batch of tapes. Aaron goes down the hall to run them. The interview room is normally their data-processing unit. *Centaur's* builders really did a job, he muses while the spools spin nominal-nominal, as before. Adequate provision for quarantine, provision for every damn thing. Imagine it, a starship. I sit here in a ship among the stars. *Centaur*, the second one ever... *Pioneer* was the first, Aaron had been in third grade when *Pioneer* headed out for Barnard's star. He was in high school when the signal came back red: Nothing.

What circles Barnard's star, a rock? A gasball? He will never know, because *Pioneer* didn't make it back to structured-signal range. Aaron was an intern when they declared her lost. Her regular identity code had quit and there was a new faint radio source in her direction. What happened? No telling... She was a much smaller, slower ship. *Centaur's* builders had redesigned on the basis of the reports from *Pioneer* while she was still in talking distance.

Aaron pulls his attention back to the tapes, automatically suppressing the thought of what will happen if *Centaur* too finds nothing after all. They have all trained themselves not to think about that, about the fact that Earth is in no shape to mount another mission if *Centaur* fails. Even if they could, where next? Nine light-years to Sirius? Hopeless. The energy and resources to build *Centaur* almost weren't there ten years ago. Maybe by now they've cannibalized the emigration hulls, Aaron's submind mutters. Even if we've found a planet, maybe it's too late, maybe nobody is waiting for our signal.

He snaps his subconscious to order, confirms that the tapes show nothing, barring his own nightmare-generated peaks. Lory's resting rates are a little up too, that's within bounds. Tighe's another fraction down since yesterday. Failing; why?

It's time to pack up. Lory and Solange are waiting to come in and hook up for the final debriefing, as Yellaston courteously calls it. Aaron goes around into the Observation cubicle and prepares to observe.

Frank Foy bustles first onto his screen to run his response-standardizing questions. He's still at it when Yellaston and the two scout commanders come in. Aaron is hating the scene again; he makes himself admit that Don and Tim are wearing decently neutral expressions. Space training, they must know all about bodily humiliation.

Foy finishes. Captain Yellaston starts the sealed recorder and logs in the event-date.

"Dr. Kaye," Foy leads off, "referring to your voyage back to this ship. The cargo module in which you transported the alien life-form had a viewing system linked to the command module in which you lived. It was found welded closed. Did you weld it?"

"Yes. I did."

"Why did you weld it? Please answer concisely."

"The shutter wasn't light-tight. It would have allowed my daily light cycle to affect the alien. I thought this might harm it, it seems to be very photosensitive. This is the most important biological specimen we've ever had. I had to take every precaution. The module was equipped to give it a twenty-two hour circadian cycle with rheostatic graded changes, just like the planet—it has beautiful long evenings, you know."

Foy coughs reprovingly.

"You went to the length of welding it shut. Were you afraid of the alien?"

"No!"

"I repeat, were you afraid of the alien?"

"No. I was not—well, yes, I guess I was, a little, in a sense. You see I was going to be alone all that time. I was sure the life-form is harmless, but I thought it might, oh, grow toward the light, or even become motile. There's a common myxomycetes—a fungus that has a motile phase, *Lycogala epidendron*, called Coral Beads. I just didn't know. And I was afraid its luminescent activity might keep me awake. I have a little difficulty sleeping."

"Then you do believe the alien may be dangerous?"

"No! I know now it didn't do a thing, you can check the records."

"May I remind you to control your verbalization, Dr. Kaye. Referring again to the fact that the cover was

welded; were you afraid to look at the alien?"

"Of course not. No."

Young Frank really is an oddy, Aaron thinks; more imagination than I figured.

"Dr. Kaye, you state that the welding instrument was left on the planet. Why?"

"Commander Kuh needed it."

"And the scoutship's normal tool complement is also missing. Why?"

"They needed everything. If something went wrong I couldn't make repairs; it was no use to me."

"Please, Dr. Kaye."

"Sorry."

"Were you afraid to have a means of unsealing the alien on board?"

"No!"

"I repeat. Dr. Kaye, were you afraid to keep with you a tool by which you could unseal the port to the alien?"

"No."

"I repeat. Were you afraid to have a means of unsealing the alien?"

"No. That's silly."

Foy makes checks on his tapes; Aaron's liver doesn't need tapes, it has already registered that hyped-up candor. Oh god—what is she lying about?

"Dr. Kaye, I repeat—" Foy starts doggedly, but Yellaston has lifted one hand. Foy puffs out his cheeks, switches tack.

"Dr. Kaye, will you explain again why you collected no computerized data after the first day of your stay on the planet?"

"We did collect data. A great deal of data. It went to the computer but it didn't get stored because the dump cycle had cut in. Nobody thought of checking it, I mean that's not a normal malfunction. The material we lost, it's sickening. Mei-Lin and Liu did a whole eco-geologic stream bed profile, all the biota, everything—"

She bites her lips like a kid, a flush rising around her freckles. After ten years in outer space Lory still has freckles.

"Did you dump that data, Dr. Kaye?"

"No!"

"Please, Dr. Kaye, Now, I want to refresh your memory of the voice recording allegedly made by Commander Kuh." He flips switches; a voice says thinly: "Very... well, Dr. Ka-ye. You... will go."

It's Kuh's voice all right; Aaron knows the audiograms match. But the human ear doesn't like it.



"Do you claim that Commander Kuh was in good health when he spoke those words?"

"Yes. He was tired, of course. We all were."

"Please restrict your answers, Dr. Kaye. I repeat. Was Commander Kuh in normal physical health other than fatigue when he made that recording?"

"Yes."

Aaron closed his eyes. Lory, what have you done?

"I repeat. Was Commander Kuh in normal physical and mental—"

"Oh, *all right!*" Lory is shaking her head desperately. "Stop it! Please, I didn't want to say this, sir." She gazes blindly at the screen behind which Yellaston must be, takes a breath. "It's really very minor. There was—there was a difference of opinion. On the second day."

Yellaston lifts a warning finger at Foy. The two scout commanders are statues.

"Two members of the crew felt it was safe to remove their space suits," Lory swallows. "Commander Kuh—did not agree. But they did so anyway. And they didn't—they were reluctant to return to the scouter. They wanted to camp outside." She stares up in appeal. "You see, the planet is so pleasant and we'd been living in that ship so long."

Foy scents a rat, pounces.

"You mean that Commander Kuh removed his suit and became ill?"

"Oh no! There was a—an argument," Lory says painfully. "He was, he sustained a bruise in the laryngeal area. That's why—" She slumps down in the chair, almost crying.

Yellaston is up, brushing Foy away from the speaker.

"Very understandable, Doctor," he says calmly. "I realize what a strain this report has been for you after your heroic effort in returning to base alone. Now we have, I think, a very full account—"

Foy is staring bewilderedly. He has started a rat all right, but it is the wrong, wrong rat. Aaron understands now. The supersensitive Chinese, the undesirability of internal dissension on the official log. Implications, implications. There was a fracas among Kuh's crew and somebody wiped *China Flower's* memory.

So that is Lory's secret. Aaron breathes out hard, euphoric with relief. So that's all it was!

Captain Yellaston, an old hand at implications, is going on smoothly. "I take it, Doctor, that the situation was quickly resolved by Commander Kuh's decision to commence colonization, and his confidence that you would convey his report to us for transmission to Earth, as in fact you have done?"

"Yes, sir," says Lory gratefully. She is still trembling; everyone knows that violence of any sort upsets Lory. "You see, even if something serious happened to me, the scoutship was on automatic after midpoint. It would have come through. You picked it up."

She doesn't mention that she was unconscious from ulcerative hemorrhage when *China Flower's* signal came through the electronic hash from Centaurus's suns; it had taken Don and Tim a day to grapple and bring her in. Aaron looks at her with love. My little sister, the superwoman. Could I have done it? Don't ask.

He listens happily while Yellaston winds it up with a few harmless questions about the planet's moons and throws the screen open two-way to record a formal commendation for Lory. Foy is still blinking; the two scout commanders look like tickled tigers. Oh, that planet! They nod benevolently at Lory, glance at Yellaston as if willing him to fire the green signal out of the top of his head.

Yellaston is asking Aaron to confirm the medical clearance. Aaron confirms no discrepancies, and the quarantine is officially terminated. Solange starts unwiring Lory. As the command party goes out, Yellaston's eye flicks over Aaron with the expressionlessness he recognizes; the old man will expect him in his quarters that evening with the usual.

Aaron draws himself a hot drink, takes it into his cubicle to savor his relief. Lory really did a job there, he thinks. Whatever kind of dust-up the Chinese had, it must have shocked her sick. She used to get hives when I played hockey, he remembers. But she's really grown up, she didn't spill the bloody details all over the log. Don't mess up the mission. That idiot Foy... You did that nicely, little sister, Aaron tells the image at the back of his mind. You're not usually so considerate of our imperfect undertakings.

The image remains unmoving, smiling enigmatically. Not usually so considerate of official sensibilities? Aaron frowns.

Correction: Lory has *never* been considerate of man's imperfection. Lory has *never* been diplomatic. If I hadn't sat on her head Lory would be in an Adjustment Center with a burn in her cortex instead of on this ship. And she's been as prickly as a bastard with poor old Jan. Has a year alone in that scouter worked a miracle?

Aaron ponders queasily; he doesn't believe in miracles. Lory conscientiously lying to preserve the fragile unity of man? He shakes his head. Very unlikely. A point occurs unwelcomely; that story did save something. It saved her own credibility. Say the Chinese wrangle happened. Was Lory using it, letting Foy pry it out of her to account for those blips on the tape? To get herself—and something—through Francis Xavier Toy's PKG readouts? She had time to figure it, ample time—Aaron shudders from neck to bladder and strides out of his cubicle to collide with Lory coming out of hers.

"Hi!" She has a plain little bag in her hand. Aaron realizes the scanners are still on overhead.

"Glad to be getting out?" he asks lamely.

"Oh, I didn't mind." She wrinkles her nose. "It was a rational precaution for the ship."

"You seem to have become more, ah, tolerant."

"Yes." She looks at him with what the scanner will show as sisterly humor. "Do you know when Captain Yellaston plans to examine the specimen I brought back?"

"No. Soon, I guess."

"Good." The smiley look in her eye infuriates him. "I really brought it back for you, Am. I wanted us to look at it together. Remember how we used to share our treasures, that summer on the island?"

Aaron mumbles something, walks numbly back to his room. His eyes are squeezed like a man kicked in the guts. Lory, little devil—how could you? Her thirteen-year-old body shimmers in his mind, sends helpless heat into his penile arteries. He is imprinted forever, he fears; the rose-tipped nipples on her child's chest, the naked mons, the flushed-pearl labia. The incredible sweetness, lost forever. He had been fifteen, he had ended both their virginities on a spruce island in the Fort Ogilvy Officers' Recreational Reserve the year before their parents died. He groans, wondering if he has lost both their

souls, too, though he doesn't believe in souls. Oh, Lory... is it really his own lost youth he aches for?

He groans again, his cortex knowing she is up to some damn thing while his medulla croons that he loves her only and forever, and she him. Damn the selection board who had dismissed such incidents as insignificant, even healthy!

"Coming out, boss?" Goby's head comes in. "I'm opening up, right? This place needs a shake-out."

Aaron shakes himself out and goes out to check over Goby's office log. Lots of catching up to do. Later on when he is more composed he will visit Lory and shake some truth out of her.

He walks through the now-open vitrex, finds freedom invigorating. The office log reveals three more insomnia complaints, that's four in all. Alice Berryman, the Canadian nutrition chief, is constipated; Jan Ing, his Xenobiology colleague, has the trots. Quartermaster Miriamne Stein had a migraine. Van Wai, the Belgian chemist, has back spasm again. The Nigerian Photolab chief has sore eyes, his Russian assistant has cracked a toe-bone. And there's Gomulka's knuckle. No sign of whoever he hit, unless he broke Pavel's toe. Unlikely... For *Centaur*, it's a long list; understandable, with the excitement.

Solange bustles in carrying a mess of Isolation biomonitors. "We have much work to do on these, Aaron. Tighe will stay where he is, no? I have left his pickups on." She still pronounces it "peekups."

Warned, Aaron watches her coiling input leads. Surprising, the forcefulness some small women show. Such a seductive little person. He knows he shouldn't find it mysterious and charming that she is so capable with any kind of faulty circuit.

"Tighe's not doing too well, Soli. Maybe you or Bill can lead him around a bit, stimulate him. But don't leave him alone at any time. Not even for a minute."

"I know, Aaron." Her face has been flashing through her tender repertory while her hands wham the sensor boxes around. "I know. People are saying he is out."

"Yeah... You aren't getting any, oh, anxiety symptoms yourself, are you? Bad dreams, maybe?"

"Only of you." She twinkles, closing a cabinet emphatically, and comes over to lay her hand on the faulty circuits in Aaron's head. His arms go gratefully around her hips.

"Oh, Soli, I missed you."

"Ah, poor Aaron. But now we have the big meeting downstairs. Fifteen hundred, that is twenty minutes. And you must help me with Tighe."

"Right." Reluctantly he lets sweet comfort go.

By fifteen hundred he is in a state of tentative stability, going down-ramp to the main Commons Ring where gravity is Earth-normal. Commons is *Centaur's* chief amenity, as her designers put it. It really is an amenity, too, Aaron thinks as he comes around a tubbed sweet-olive tree and looks out into the huge toroid space stretching all the way round the hull, fragrant with greenery from the Farm. Kawabata's people must have moved in a fresh lot.

The unaccustomed sounds of voices and music intimidate him slightly; he peers into the varied lights and shadows, finding people everywhere. He can see only a chord of the great ring, with its rising perspective at each end showing only leaning legs and feet beyond the farthest banks of plants. He hasn't seen so many people all here at once since Freefall Day, their annual holiday when *Centaur's* roll is stopped and the floor viewports opened. And even the last few viewing days people tended to slip in and look alone.

Now they are all here together, talking animatedly. Moving around some sort of display. Aaron follows Miriamne Stein and finds himself looking at a bank of magnificent back-lighted photos.

Lory's planet.

He has been shown a few small frames from *China Flowers* cameras, but these blow-ups are overpowering. The planet seen from orbit—it looks like a flower-painted textile. Its terrain seems old, eroded to gentleness. The mountains or hills are capped with enormous gaudy rosettes, multi-ringed labyrinths ruffled in lemon-yellow, coral, emerald, gold, turquoise, bile-green, orange, lavender, scarlet—more colors than he can name. The alien vegetables or whatever. Beautiful! Aaron gapes, oblivious of shoulders touching him. Those "plants" must cover miles!

The next shots are from atmosphere, they show horizon and sky. The sky of Lory's planet is violet-blue, spangled with pearl-edged cirrus wisps. Another view shows alto-stratus over a clear silver-green expanse of sea or lake, reflecting cobalt veins—an enchanting effect. Everything exhales mildness; there is a view of an immense smooth white beach lapped by quiet water. Farther on, a misty mountain of flowers.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Alice Berryman murmurs in his general direction. She's flushed, breathing strongly; the medical fraction of Aaron's mind surmises that her constipation problem has passed.

They move on together, following the display which goes on and on across the Common's normal hobby bays and alcoves. Aaron cannot get his fill of looking at the great vegetable forms, their fantastic color and variety. It is hard to grasp their size; here and there Photolab has drawn in scales and arrows pointing out what appear to be fruits or huge seed-clusters. No wonder Akin's crew has sore eyes and stubbed toes, Aaron thinks; a tremendous job. He goes around an aviary cage and finds a spectacular array of night-shots showing the "plants" bioluminescence. Weird auroral colors, apparently flickering or changing continuously. What the nights must be like! Aaron peers at the dark sky, identifies the two small moons of Lory's planet. He really must stop calling it Lory's planet, he tells himself. It's Kuh's now if it's anybody's. Doubtless it will be given some dismal official name.

The mynah bird squawks, drawing his attention to another panel in the chess alcove: close-ups of the detached fruit-clusters or whatever they are, with infrared and high-frequency collations. It was one of these detached clusters that Lory brought back, along with samples of soil and water and so on. Aaron studies the display; the "fruits" are slightly warm and a trifle above background radiation level. They luminesce, too. Not dormant. A logical choice, Aaron decides, momentarily aware that the thing is out there on a line with his shoulder. Is it menacing? Are you giving me bad dreams, vegetable? He stares probingly at the pictures. They don't look menacing.

Beyond the aquariums he comes upon the ground pictures taken before the computer was dumped. The official first-landing photo, almost life-size, showing everybody in suits and helmets beside *China Flowers* port. Behind them is that enormous flat beach and a far-off sea. Faces are almost invisible; Aaron makes out Lory in her blue suit. Beside her is the Australian girl, her gloved hand very close to that of Kuh's navigator, whose name is also Kuh; 'little' Kuh is identifiable by his two-meter height. In front of the group is a flagstaff flying the United Nations flag. Ridiculous. Aaron feels his throat tighten. Ludicrous, wondrous. And the flag, he sees, is blowing. The planet has winds. Moving air, imagine!

He has been too fascinated to read the texts by each display, but now the word "wind" catches his attention. "Ten to forty knots," he reads. "Continuous during the period. We speculate that the dominant life-forms, being sessile, obtain at least some nourishment from the air constantly moving through their fringed 'foliage.' (See atmospheric analyses.) A number of types of air-borne cells resembling gametes or pollen have been examined. Although the dominant plantlike forms apparently reproduce by broadcast

methods, they may represent the culmination of a long evolutionary history. Over two hundred less-differentiated forms ranging in size from meters to a single cell have been tentatively identified. No self-motile life of any kind has been found."

Looking more closely at the picture, Aaron sees that the foreground is covered with a tapestry of lichenlike small growths and soft-looking tufts. The smaller forms. He moves on through to a series of photos showing the crew deploying vehicles out of *China Flower's* cargo port, and bumps into a ring of people around the end of the display.

"Look at that," somebody sighs. "Would you look at that." The group makes way and Aaron sees what it is. The last photo, showing three suited figures—with their helmets off.

Aaron's eyes open wide, he feels his guts stir. There is Mei-Lin, her short hair blowing in the wind. Liu en-Do, his bare head turned away to look at a range of hills encrusted with the great flower-castles. And "little" Kuh, smiling broadly at the camera. Immediately behind them is a ridge which seems to be covered with vermilion lace-fronds bending to the breeze.

Air, free air! Aaron can almost feel that sweet wind, he longs to hurl himself into the viewer, to stride out across the meadows, up to the hills. A paradise. Was it just after this that the crew ripped off their foul space suits and refused to go back to the ship?

Who could blame them, Aaron thinks. Not he. God, they look happy! It's hard to remember when we lived, really lived. A corner of his mind remembers Bruce Jang, hopes he will not linger too long by that picture.

The crowd has carried him half around the toroid now; he is entering a wide section full of individual console seats that is normally the library. With the privacy partitions down it is used for their rare general assemblies. The rostrum is at the middle, where the speaker's whole figure will be most visible. It's empty. Beyond it is a screen projecting the starfield ahead; year by year Aaron and his shipmates have watched the suns of Centaurus growing on that screen, separating to doubles and double-doubles. Now it shows only a single sun. The great blazing component of Alpha around which Lory's planet circles.

Several people are using the scanners while they wait. Aaron sits down beside a feminine back he recognizes as Lieutenant Pauli, Tim Bron's navigator. Her head is buried in the scanner hood. The title-panel on the console reads: GAMMA CENTAURUS MISSION. V, VERBAL REPORT BY DR. LORY KAYE, EXCERPTS FROM. That would be Lory's original narrative session, Aaron decides. Nothing about the "argument" there.

Pauli clicks off and folds down the scanner hood. When Aaron catches her eye she smiles dreamily, looking through him. Åhlstrom is sitting down just beyond; unbelievably, she's smiling too. Aaron looks around sharply at the rows of faces, thinking I've been shut away three weeks, I haven't realized what the planet is doing to them. Them? He finds his own risor muscle is tight.

Captain Yellaston is moving to the speaker's stand, being stopped by questions, Aaron hasn't heard so much chatter in years. The hall seems to be growing hot with so many bodies bouncing around. He isn't used to crowds any more, none of them are. And this is only sixty people. Dear god—*what if we have to go back to Earth?* The thought is horrible. He remembers their first year when there was another viewscreen showing the view astern; yellow Sol, shrinking, dwindling. That had been a rotten idea, soon abolished. What if the planet is somehow no good, is toxic or whatever—what if they have to turn around and spend ten years watching Sol expand again? Unbearable. It would finish him. Finish them all. Others must be thinking this too, he realizes. Doctor, you could have a problem. A big, big problem. But that planet *has* to be all right. It looks all right, it looks beautiful.

The hall is falling silent, ready for Yellaston. Aaron catches sight of Soli on the far side, Coby is by her with Tighe between them. And there's Lory by the other wall, sitting with Don and Tim. She's holding herself in a tight huddle, like a rape victim in court; probably agonized by her tapes being on the scanners.

Aaron curses himself routinely for his sensitivity to her, realizes he has missed Yellaston's opening words.

"... the hope which we may now entertain." Yellaston's voice is reticent but warm; it is also a rare sound on *Centaur*—the captain is no speechmaker. "I have a thought to share with you. Doubtless it has occurred to others, too. One of my occupations in the abundant leisure of our recent years—" pause for the ritual smiles—"has been the reading of the history of human exploration and migrations on our own planet. Most of the story is unrecorded, of course. But in the history of new colonies one fact appears again and again. That is that people have suffered appalling casualties when they attempted to move to a new habitation in even the more favorable areas of our own home world.

"For example, the attempts by Europeans to settle on the Northeast coast of America. The early Scandinavian colonies may have lasted a few generations before they vanished. The first English colony in fertile, temperate Virginia met disaster and the survivors were recalled. The Plymouth colony succeeded in the end, but only because they were continuously resupplied from Europe and helped by the original Indian inhabitants. The catastrophe that struck them interested me greatly.

"They came from northern Europe, from above fifty degrees north. Winters there are mild because the coast is warmed by the Gulf Stream, but this ocean current was not understood at that time. They sailed south by west, to what should have been a warmer land. Massachusetts was then covered by wild forests, like a park if we can imagine such a thing, and it was indeed warm summer when they landed. But when winter came it brought a fierce cold like nothing they had ever experienced, because that coast has no warming sea-current. A simple problem to us. But their technical knowledge had not foreseen it and their resources could not meet it. The effect of the bitter cold was compounded by disease and malnutrition. They suffered a fearful toll of lives. Consider: There were seventeen married women in that colony; of these, fifteen died the first winter."

Yellaston pauses, looking over their heads.

"Similar misfortunes befell numberless other colonies from unforeseen conditions of heat or drought or disease or predators. I am thinking also of the European settlers in my own New Zealand and in Australia and of the peoples who colonized the islands of the Pacific. The archeological records of Earth are filled with instance after instance of peoples who arrived in an area and seemingly vanished away. What impresses me here is that these disasters occurred in places that we now regard as eminently favorable to human life. The people were moving to an only slightly different terrain of our familiar Earth, the Earth on which we have evolved. They were under our familiar sun, in our atmosphere and gravity and other geophysical conditions. They met only very small differences. And yet these small differences killed them."

He was looking directly at them now, his fine light greenish eyes moving unhurriedly from face to face.

"I believe we should remind ourselves of this history as we look at the splendid photographs of this new planet which Commander Kuh has sent back to us. It is not another corner of Earth nor an airless desert like Mars. It is the first totally alien living world that man has touched. We may have no more concept of its true nature and conditions than the British migrants had of an American winter.

"Commander Kuh and his people have bravely volunteered themselves to test its viability. We see them in these photographs apparently at ease and unharmed. But I would remind you that a year has passed since these pictures were made, a year during which they have had only the meager resources of their

camp. We hope and trust that they are alive and well today. But we must remember that unforeseeable hazards may have assailed them. They may be wounded, ill, in dire straits. I believe it is appropriate to hold this in mind. We here are safe and well, able to proceed with caution to the next step. They may not be."

Very nice, Aaron thinks. He has been watching faces, seeing here and there a lip quirked at the captain's little homily, but mostly expressions like his own. Moved and sobered. He's our pacemaker, as usual. And he's taken the edge off our envy of the *China* crew. Dire straits—wonderful old phrase. Are they really in dire straits, maybe? Yellaston is concluding a congratulatory remark for Lory. With a start Aaron recalls his own suspicion of her, his conviction that she is hiding something. And ten minutes ago I was ready to rush out onto that planet, he chides himself. I'm losing balance, I have to stop these mood swings. A thought has been percolating in him, something about Kuh. It surfaces. Yes. Bruised larynxes croak or wheeze. But Kuh's weak voice had been clear. Should check on that.

People are moving away. Aaron moves with them, sees Lory over by the ramp, surrounded by a group. She's come out of her huddle, she's answering their questions. No use trying to talk to her now. He wanders back through the displays. They still look tempting, but Yellaston has broken the spell, at least for him. Are those happy people now lying dead on the bright ground, perhaps devoured, only skeletons left? Aaron jumps; a voice is speaking in his ear.

"Dr. Kaye?"

It's Frank Foy, of all people.

"Doctor, I wanted to say—I hope you understand? My role, the distressing aspects. One sometimes has to perform duties that are most repugnant, as a medical man you too must have had similar—"

"No problem." Aaron collects himself. Why is Frank so embarrassing? "It was your job."

Foy looks at him emotionally. "I'm so glad you feel that way. Your sister—I mean, Dr. Lory Kaye—such an admirable person. It seems incredible a woman could make that trip all alone."

"Yeah... By the way, speaking of incredible, Frank, I know Lory's voice pretty well. I believe I was able to spot the points that were bothering you, in fact I'm inclined to share your—"

"Oh, not at all, Aaron," Foy cuts him off. "You need say no more, I'm entirely satisfied. *Entirely*. Her explanation clears up every point." He ticks them off on his fingers. "The fate of the recording system, the absence of the welder and other tools, Commander Kuh's words, the question of injury—he *was* injured—the emotion about living on the planet. Dr. Kaye's revelation of the, ah, conflict dovetails perfectly."

Aaron has to admit that it does. Frank goes in for chess problems, he remembers; a weakness for elegant solutions.

"What about welding that alien in and being afraid to look at it? Between us, that thing gives me willies, too."

"Yes," Foy says soberly. "Yes, I fear I was giving in to my natural, well, is *xenophobia* the word? But we mustn't let it blind us. Undoubtedly Commander Kuh's people stripped that ship, Aaron. A dreadful experience for your sister, I felt no need to make her relive all that must have gone on. Among all those Chinese, poor girl."

When xenophobias collide... Aaron sees Foy isn't going to be much help, but he tries again.

"The business of the planet being ideal, a paradise and so on, that bothered me, too."

"Oh, I feel that Captain Yellaston put his finger on the answer there, Aaron. The excitement, the elation. I hadn't appreciated it. Now that I've seen these, I confess I feel it myself."

"Yeah." Aaron sighs. In addition to the elegant solution, Frank has received the Word. Captain Yellaston (who art in Heaven) has explained.

"Aaron, I confess I *hate* these things!" Foy says unexpectedly.

Aaron mumbles, thinking, possible, maybe he does. On the surface, anyway. With a peculiar smiling-through-tears look Foy goes on, "Your sister is such a wonderful person. Her strength is as the strength of ten, because her heart is pure."

"Yeah, well..." Suddenly the evening chow-call chimes out, saving him. Aaron bolts into the nearest passageway. Oh, no. Not Frank Foy. No ball-breaking here, though. Abelard and Héloïse, so pure. A perfect match, really... What would Frank say if he told him about Lory and himself? Hey, Frank, when we were kids I humped my little sister all over the Sixth Army District, she screwed like a mink in those days. On second thought, forget it, Aaron tells himself. He knows how Frank would react. "Oh." Long grave pause. "I'm terribly sorry, Aaron. For you." Maybe even in priestly tones, "Would it help you to talk about it?" Etsanctimoniouscetera. A tough case, will the real Frank Foy ever stand up? No. Lucky it doesn't interfere with his being a damn good mathematician. Maybe it helps, for all I know. Humans!... A good food-smell is in his nose, lifting his mood. Chemoreceptors have pathways to the primitive brain. Ahead are voices, music, lights.

Maybe Foy's right, Aaron muses. How about that? Lory's story does dovetail. Am I getting weird? Sex-fantasies about Sis, I haven't had that trouble for years. It's being locked up with her, Tighe, that alien—a big armful of Soli, that's what I need. Solace, Soul-ass... Resolutely ignoring a sensation that the alien is now straight overhead outside the hull, Aaron fills a server and takes it over to a seat by Coby and Jan Ing, the Xenobiology chief with whom he will be working tomorrow. He's Lory's boss; Lory herself isn't here.

"Quite a crowd tonight."

"Yeah." In recent years more and more of *Centaurs* people have been eating alone at odd hours, taking their food to their rooms. Now there's a hubbub here. Aaron sees the Peruvian oceanographer has a chart propped by his server, he's talking to a circle of people with his mouth full, pointing. Miriamne Stein and her two girl friends—*women* friends, Aaron corrects himself—who usually eat together are sitting with Bruce Jang and two men from Don's crew. Åhlstrom is over there with Akin the Photo chief, for heaven's sake. The whole tranquillized ship is coming to life, tiger-eyes opening, ape-brains reaching. Even the neat sign which for so long has read, THE CENTRAL PROBLEMS OF OUR LIVES IS GARBAGE. PLEASE CLEAN YOUR SERVERS has been changed: someone has taped over GARBAGE and lettered BEAUTY.

"Notice the treat we're getting, boss," says Coby munching. "How did Alice get Kawabata to let loose some chicken? Oh, oh—look."

The room falls silent as Alice Berryman holds up dessert—a plate of real, whole peaches.

"One half for each person," she says severely. She is wearing a live flower over her ear.

"People are becoming excited," the XB chief observes. "How will it sustain itself for nearly two years?"



"If we go to that planet," Aaron mutters.

"I could make an amoral suggestion," Coby grins. "Trunks in the water supply."

Nobody laughs. "We've made out so far without, uh, chemical supplementation, as Frank would say," says Aaron. "I think we'll hold out."

"Oh, I know, I know. But don't say I didn't warn you it may come to that."

"About tomorrow," Jan Ing says. "The first thing we will get will be the biomonitor records from the command section of the scoutship, right? Before we proceed to open the cargo space?"

"That's the way I hear it."

"Immediately after opening the alien's module I plan to secure biopsy sections. Very minimal, of course. Dr. Kaye says she doesn't believe that will harm the alien. We're working on extension probes that can be manipulated from outside the hatch."

"The longer the better," Aaron says, imagining tentacles.

"Assuming the alien life-form is still alive..." The XB chief taps out a silent theme probably from Sibelius. "We'll know when we get our hands on the record."

"It should be." Aaron has been feeling the thing lying out beyond the buffet wall. "Tell me, Jan, do you ever have an impression that the thing is, well, *present*?"

"Oh, we're all conscious of that." Ing laughs. "Biggest event in scientific history, isn't that so? If only it is alive."

"You getting bad vibrations, boss? The dreams?" Coby inquires.

"Yeah." But Aaron can't go on, not with Goby's expression. "Yeah, I am. A xenophobe at heart."

They go into a discussion of the tissue-analyzing program and the type of bioscanners that will be placed inside the alien's module.

"What if that thing comes charging out into the corridor?" Coby interjects. "What if it's had kittens or split into a million little wigglers?"

"Well, we have the standard decontaminant aerosols," Jan frowns. "Captain Yellaston has emphasized the precautionary aspect. He will, I believe, be personally standing by the emergency vent control which could very quickly depressurize the corridor in case of real emergency. This means we will be wearing suits. Awkward working."

"Good." Aaron bites the delicious peach, delighted to hear that old Yellaston's hand will be on the button. "Jan, I want a clear understanding that no part of that thing is taken into the ship. Beyond the corridor, I mean."

"Oh, I entirely agree. We'll have a complete satellite system there. Including mice. It will be crowded." He swabs his server with cellulose granules from the dispenser, frowning harder. "It would be unthinkable to harm the specimen."

"Yeah." Lory has still not come in, Aaron sees. Probably eating in her room after that mob scene. He joins the recycle line, noticing that the usual glumness of the routine seems to have evaporated. Even Goby omits his scatological joke. What are Kuh's people eating now, Aaron wonders, telepathic

vegetable steaks?

Lory is quartered—naturally—in the all-female dorm on the opposite side of the ship. Aaron hikes up a spiral cross-ship ramp, as usual not quite enjoying the sharp onset of weightlessness as he comes to *Centaur's* core. Her central core is a wide freefall service shaft from bow to stern, much patronized by the more athletic members of the crew. Aaron kicks awkwardly across it, savoring the rich air. It comes from a green-and-blue radiance far away at the stern end—the Hydroponics Farm and the Hull Pool, their other chief amenity. He shudders slightly, recalling the horrible months when the air even here was foul and the passageways dark. Five years ago an antibiotic from somebody's intestinal tract had mutated instead of being broken down by passage through the reactor coolant system. When it reached the plant beds it behaved as a chlorophyll-binding quasi-virus and Kawabata had had to destroy 75 percent of the oxygenating beds. A terrible time, waiting with all oxygen-consuming devices shut down for the new seedlings to grow and prove clean. Brr... He starts "down" the exit ramp to Lory's dorm, past the cargo stores and service areas. People aren't allowed to live in less than three-quarters gee. Corridors branch out every few meters leading to other dorms and living units. *Centaur* is a warren of corridors, that's part of the program, too.

He comes to the tiny foyer or commons room outside the dorm proper and sees red hair beyond a bank of ferns: Lory—chewing on her supper, as he'd guessed. What he hadn't expected is the large form of Don Purcell, hunched opposite her deep in conversation.

Well, well! Mildly astounded, Aaron right flanks into another passage and takes himself off toward his office, blessing *Centaur's* design. The people of *Pioneer* had suffered severely from the stress of too much social contact in every waking moment; the answer found for *Centaur* was not larger spaces but an abundance of alternative routes that allow her people to enjoy privacy in their coinings and goings about the ship, as they would in a village. Two persons in a two-meter corridor must confront each other but in two one-meter corridors each is alone and free to be his private self. It has worked well, Aaron thinks; he has noticed that over the years people have developed private "trails" through the ship. Kawabata, for instance, makes his long way from Farm to Messhall by a weird route through the cold sensor blister. He himself has a few. He grins, aware that his mind is demonstrating his total lack of irritation at finding Lory with another man.

In the clinic office Bruce Jang is chatting up Solange. When Aaron comes in Bruce holds up five spread fingers meaningfully. Aaron blinks, finally remembers.

"Five more people think they've seen Tighe?"

"Five and a half. I'm the half, I only heard him this time."

"You heard Tighe's voice? What did he say?"

"He said good-bye. That's all right with me, you know?" Bruce shows his teeth.

"Bruce, does your five include Åhlstrom or Kawabata?"

"Kawabata, yes. Åhlstrom, no. Six then."

Solange is registering discovery, puzzlement. "Do these people understand they have not really seen him?"

"Kidua and Morelli, definitely no. Legerski is suspicious, he said Tighe looked weird. Kawabata—who knows? The oriental physiognomy, very opaque." Supersquirrel lives.

"I think it is good I brought him to the meeting," Solange said. "I had the hunch, so people will see he is around and not worry."

"Yeah, good." Aaron takes a breath. "I've been having nightmares lately, if it's of any interest. The last one featured Tighe. He said good-bye to me, too."

Bruce's eyes snap. "Oh? You're in Beta section. That's bad."

"Bad?"

"My five sightings had a common factor before you blew it. Everyone was in Gamma section, fairly near the hull, too. That was nice."

"Nice." Aaron knows at once what Bruce means; *China Flower's* official name is *Gamma*, and the Gamma section is above her berth. But of course she isn't docked, now.

"Bruce, does that tether extend straight out? I'm no engineer. I mean, we're rotating; is she trailing?"

"Not much. A shallow tractrix. She already had our rotation when they ran her out."

"Then that alien is right under all the people who hallucinated Tighe."

"Yeah. All but you. We're in Beta here. And of course Åhlstrom is pretty far forward."

"But Tighe himself is here," says Solange. "In Beta with you."

"Yeah, but look," Aaron leans back. "Aren't we getting into witch-doctoring? There are other common factors. First, we've all been under stress for a long time and we're in a damn spooky place. Then along come two big jolts—the news about the planet and a genuine alien from outer space no one can look at. You've seen the ship, Bruce, people are lighted up like Christmas. Hope is a terrible thing, it brings fear that the hope won't be realized. Suppress the fear and it surfaces as symbol—and poor Tiger is our official disaster symbol, isn't he? Talk about common factors, it's a wonder we aren't all seeing green space-boogies."

Aaron is pleased to find he believes his own argument; it sounds very convincing. "Moreover, Tighe is linked with the alien now."

"If you say so, Doc," says Bruce lightly.

"Well, I do say so. I say there's sufficient cause to account for the phenomena. Occam's razor, the best explanation is that requiring fewer unsupported postulates, or whatever."

Bruce chuckles. "You're citing the law of parsimony, actually." He jumps up, turns to examine a telescoping metal rod on Solange's desk. "Don't forget, Aaron, old William ended up proving god loves us. I shall continue to count."

"Do that," Aaron grins.

Bruce comes close, says softly to Aaron alone, "What would you say if I told you I also saw... Mei-Lin?"

Aaron looks up wordlessly. Bruce lays the rod diagonally across Aaron's console. "I thought so," he says dryly and goes out.

Solange comes over to take the rod, her face automatically tuned to the pity on his. Bruce hallucinating

Mei-Lin? That fits, too. It doesn't upset Aaron's theory. "What's this for, Soli?"

"The extension for the section cutter," she tells him, striking a fencing pose. "It needs many wires, it will be a mess."

"Oh Soli—" Aaron finally gets his arms around her, where they begin to feel alive at last. "Smart and beautiful, beautiful and smart. You're such a healthy person. What would I do without you?" He buries his unhealthy nose in her fragrant flesh.

"You would do your house calls," she tells him tenderly, her hips delicious in his hands.

"Oh god. Do I have to, now?"

"Yes, Aaron. Now. Think how it will be nice, afterward."

Ruefully Aaron extricates himself, confirming the board's estimate of his drives. Getting out his kit he recalls another duty and stuffs two liter flasks into the kit while Solange checks her file.

"Bustamente number one," she tells him. "I think he is very tense."

"I wish to god we could get him in here for an EKG."

"He will not come. You must do your best." She ticks off two more people Aaron would have visited during his weeks in quarantine, "And your sister, h'mm?"

"Yeah." Closing the kit, he wonders for the thousandth time if Solange knows about the flasks inside. And Coby? Christ, Coby has to know, he'd have been checking that distillation apparatus from Day One. Probably saving it for some blackmail scheme, who knows, Aaron thinks. Could I ever explain that I'm not doing what I damned him for? Or am I?

"Make the records nicely, please, Aaron."

"I will, Soli, I will. For you."

"Ha ha."

He wants poignantly to turn back, forces himself to trot up a ramp at random and discovers he is heading again toward Lory's dorm. Don must be long gone now, but still he reconnoiters the lounge area before going in. Lory's head—and good god, Don is still there! Aaron retreats, but not before he has seen that the shoulders actually belong to Timofaev Bron.

Feeling almost ludicrously dismayed, like a character in a bedroom farce, Aaron strides through the mixed-dorm commons, vaguely aware of the number of couples among the shadows. What the hell is Lory becoming, Miss Centaur? They have no right to bother Lory this way, he fumes, not with that ulcer still unhealed. Don't they know she needs rest? *I am the doctor* . . . The inner voice comments that more than Lory's ulcers are unhealed; he disregards it. If Tim is not out of there in thirty minutes he will break it up, and—what?

Sheepishly, he admits his intention to, well, question her, although he cannot for the moment recall the urgency of what he had to ask. Well, confession is good for ulcers, too.

The next turn-off leads to the quarters of his first patient, a member of Tim Bron's crew who came back to *Centaur* in full depressive retreat. Aaron has worked hard over him, prides himself on having involved the man in a set of correspondence chess games which he plays in solitary, never leaving his room. Now

he finds the privacy-lock open, the room empty. Has Igor gone to Commons? His chess book is gone. Another point for the planet, Aaron decides, and goes cheerfully on to André Bachi's room.

Bachi is out of bed, his slender Latin face looking almost like its old self despite the ugly heaviness of glomerule dysfunction.

"To think I will live to see it," he tells Aaron. "Look, I have here the actual water, Jan sent it to me. Virgin water, Aaron. The water of a world, never passed through our bodies. Maybe it will cure me."

"Why not?" The man's intensity is heartbreaking; can he live two years, assuming they do go to Lory's world? Maybe... Bachi is the board's only failure so far. Merhan-Briggs syndrome, exceedingly rare, Coby's brilliant diagnosis.

"With this I can die happy, Aaron," Bachi says. "My god, for an organic chemist to experience this!"

"Is there life in it?" Aaron gestures at Bachi's scanning scope.

"Oh yes. Fantastic. So like, so unlike. Ten lifetimes' work. I have only two mounts made yet; I am slow."

"I'll leave you to it." Aaron puts Bachi's urine and saliva vials in his kit.

When he comes out he will not turn back toward Lory; instead he takes a midship passage toward the bridge. *Centaur's* bridge is in her big, shielded nose-module, which is theoretically capable of sustaining them all in an emergency. Theoretically; Aaron does not believe that most of his fellow crewmen could bear to pack themselves into it now, merely to survive. Up here is most of their important hardware, Åhlstrom's computers, astrogation gear, backup generators, and the gyros and laser system, which are their only link with Earth. Yellaston, Don, and Tim have quarters just aft of the bridge command room. Aaron turns off before Computers at a complex of panels giving access to *Centaurs* circuitry and stops under the door-eye of *Centaur's* Communications chief. There is no visible call-plate.

Nothing happens—and then the wall beside his knee utters a grating cough. Aaron jumps.

"Enter, Doc, enter," says Bustamente's bass voice.

The door slides open. Aaron goes warily into a maze of shifting light-forms in which six or seven big black men in various perspectives are watching him.

"I'm working on something in your field, Doc. Comparing startle stimuli. Nonlinear, low decibels give a bigger jump."

"Interesting." Aaron advances gingerly through unreal dimensions; visiting Ray Bustamente is always an experience. "Which one is you?"

"Over here." Aaron strikes some land of mirrored surface and makes his way around it to comparative normality. Bustamente is on his lounge in a pose of slightly spurious relaxation.

"Roll up that sleeve, Ray. We have to do this, you know that."

Bustamente complies, grumbling. Aaron winds on the cuff, admiring the immense biceps. No fat on the triceps either; maybe the big man really does pay some heed to his advice. Aaron watches his digital read-out swing, relishing his feelings for Ray, what he thinks of as Ray's secret. The man is another rarity, a natural-born king. The real living original of which Yellaston is only the abstraction. Not a team-leader like Don or Tim. The archaic model, the Boss, Jefe, Honcho, whatever—the alpha human male who outfights you, outdrinks you, outroars you, outsmarts you, kills your enemies, begets his bastards on your

woman, cares for you as his property, tells you what to do—and you do it. The primordial Big Man who organized the race and for whom the race has so little more use. Ten years ago it hadn't been visible; ten years ago there was a tall, quiet young Afro-American naval electronics officer with impeccable degrees and the ability to tune a Mannheim circuit in boxing gloves. That was before the shoulders thickened and the brow-ridges grew heavy over the watchful eyes.

"I really wish you'd come by the clinic, Ray." Aaron tells him, unwinding the cuff. "This thing isn't a precision instrument."

"What the hell can you do if you don't like my sound? Give me a stupid-pill?"

"Maybe."

"I'm making that planet, you know, Doc. Dead or alive."

"You will." Aaron puts his instruments away, admiring Bustamente's solution to his problem. What does a king do, born into a termite world, barred even from the thrones of termites? Ray had seen the scene, spotted his one crazy chance. And his decision has brought him twenty trillion miles from the termite heap, headed for a virgin planet. A planet with room, maybe, for kings.

A girl-shape is wavering among the mirrors, suddenly materializes into Melanie, the little white-mouse air-plant tech. She has an odd utensil in her hand. Aaron identifies it as a food-cooking device.

"We're working on a few primitive arts," Bustamente grins. "What's it going to be tonight, Mela?"

"A tuber," she says seriously, pushing back her ash-pale hair. "It's sweet but not much protein, it would have to be combined with fish or meat. You'll get fat." She nods impersonally at Aaron, goes back behind the screens.

"She's mine, you know." Bustamente stretches, one eye on Aaron. "Is that air as good as it looks? Ask your sister if it *smells* good, will you?"

"I'll ask her when I drop by tonight."

"Lot of dropping by recently." Bustamente suddenly flicks a switch and a screen Aaron hadn't noticed comes to life. It's an overhead shot of the communications office. The gyro chamber beyond is empty. Bustamente grunts, rolls his switch; the view flips to the bridge corridor, flip-flip-flips to others he can't identify. No people in sight. Aaron goggles; the extent of Bustamente's electronic surveillance network is one of *Centaur's* standing myths. Not so mythical, it seems; Ray really has been weaving in *Centaur's* walls. Oddly, Aaron doesn't resent it.

"Tim dropped by the ship today. Just looking to talk, he said." Bustamente flips back to the gyro chamber, zooms in on the locked laser-console. There is a definitely menacing flavor to the show; Aaron recalls with pleasure the time Frank Foy tried to set a scanner on Coby without clearing with the Commo chief.

As if reading his thought, Bustamente chuckles. "To quote the words of an ancient heavyweight boxing champion, George Foreman, '*Many a million has fall and stumble when he meet Big George in that of black jungle...*' Plans to make, you know, Aaron? Melanie, that's one. She's tougher than she looks but she's kind of puny. Need some muscle. That big old Daniela, she's my number two. Marine biology, she knows fish."

He flicks another image on the screen. Aaron gets a flash of a strong female back, apparently in the Commons game-bay.

"You're selecting your, your prospective family?" Aaron is charmed by the big man's grab at the guts of life. A king, all right.

"I don't plan to hang in too close, you know, Doc." His eye is on Aaron. "Should have medical capability. You'll be sticking with the others, right? So I figure number three is Solange?"

"Soli?" Aaron stares, forces himself to hold his own grin. "But have you, I mean what does she—Ray, we're nearly two years away, we may not even—"

"Don't worry about that, Doc. Just thought I'd warn you. You can use the time to teach Soli what to do when the babies come."

"Babies." Aaron reels mentally; the word hasn't been heard on *Centaur* for years.

"Maybe time you did a little planning yourself. Never too soon, you know."

"Good thought, Ray." Aaron makes his way out through the light-show jungle, hoping his smile expresses professional cheer rather than the sickly grin of one whose mate has just been appropriated by The Man. Soli! Oh, Soli, my only joy... but there's years yet, nearly two years, he tells himself. Surely he can think of something. Or can he?

A ridiculous vision of himself fighting Bustamente in a field of giant cauliflowers floats through his mind. But the woman they're fighting for isn't Solange, Aaron realizes. It's Lory.

Shaking his head at his subconscious, Aaron goes on up to the command corridor, taps the viewplate at Captain Yellaston's door. He feels a renewed appreciation for the more abstract forms of leadership.

"Come in, Aaron." Yellaston is at his console, filing his nails. His eyes don't flicker; Aaron has never been able to catch him checking on his loaded kit. The old bastard knows.

"That speech was a good idea, sir," Aaron says formally.

"For the time being." Yellaston smiles—a surprisingly warm, almost maternal smile on the worn Caucasian face. He puts the file away. "There's a point or two we should discuss, Aaron, if you're not too pressed."

Aaron sits, noting that Yellaston's faint maxillary tic has surfaced again. The only indicator he has ever given of the solitary self-combat locked in there; Yellaston has an inhuman ability to function despite what must be extensive CNS toxicity. Aaron will never forget the day *Centaur* officially passed beyond Pluto's orbit; that night Yellaston had summoned him and announced without preamble, "Doctor, I am accustomed to taking an average of six ounces of alcohol nightly. I have done so all my life. For this trip I shall reduce it to four. You will provide them." Staggered, Aaron had asked him how he had come through the selection year? "Without." Yellaston's face had sagged then, his eyes had frightened Aaron. "If you care for the mission, Doctor, you will do as I say." Against every tenet of his training, Aaron had. Why? He has wondered that many times, he knows all the conventional names for the demons the old man must poison nightly. Hidden ragings and cravings and panics, all to be exorcised thusly. His business the names—but the fact is that Aaron suspects the true name of Yellaston's demon is something different. Something inherent in life itself, time or evil maybe, for which he has no cure. He sees Yellaston as a complicated fortress surviving by strange rituals. Perhaps the demon is dead now, the fort empty. But he has never dared to risk inquiring.

"Your sister is a very brave girl." Yellaston's voice is extra warm.

"Yes, incredible."

"I want to be sure you know that I appreciate the full extent of Dr. Kaye's heroism. The record will so show. I am recommending her for the Legion of Space."

"Thank you, sir." Aaron acknowledges Yellaston's membership in the Love-Lory Club. Suddenly he wonders, Is this the start of one of Yellaston's breaks? It has only happened a few times, the giving-way of the iron man's defenses, but it has caused Aaron much grief. The first was when they were about two years out, with young Alice Berryman. Yellaston began chatting with her. The chats became increasingly intense. Alice was star-eyed. So far nothing wrong, only puzzling. Alice told Miriamne that he spoke of strange strategic and philosophical principles that she found hard to grasp. The culmination came when Aaron found her weeping before breakfast and hauled her to his office to let the story out. He had been dismayed. Not sex—worse. A night of incoherent, unstoppable talk, ending in maudlin childhood. "How can he be so, so *silly*—?" All stars gone, traumatic disgust. Daddy is dead. Aaron had tried to explain to her the working of a very senior, idiosyncratic old primate; hopeless. He had given up and shamelessly narco-twisted her memory, made her believe it was she who had been drunk. For the good of the mission. . . After that he had kept watch. There were three more, periodicity about two years. The poor bastard, Aaron thinks; childhood must have been the last time he was free. Before the battle began. So far Yellaston has never used him for release. Perhaps he values his bootlegger; more likely, Aaron has decided, he is simply too old. Is that about to change?

"Her courage and her accomplishment will be an inspiration."

Aaron nods again, warily.

"I wanted to be sure you understand I have full confidence in your sister's report."

She snowed him, Aaron thinks dismally. Oh Lory. Then he catches the tension in the pause and looks up. Is this leading somewhere?

"There is too much at stake here, Aaron."

"That's right, sir," says Aaron with infinite relief. "That's what I feel, too."

"Without in any way subtracting from your sister's achievement, it is simply too much to risk on anyone's unsupported word. Anyone's. We have no objective data on the fate of the Gamma crew. Therefore I shall continue to send code yellow, not code green, until we arrive at the planet and confirm."

"Thank god," says Aaron the atheist.

Yellaston looks at him curiously. It's the moment for Aaron to speak about the Tighe-sightings, the dreams, to confess his fears of Lory and alien telepathic vegetables. But there's no need now, Yellaston wasn't snowed, it was just his weird courtesy.

"I mean I do agree. . . Does this mean we're going to the planet, that is, you've decided before we check out that specimen?"

"Yes. Regardless of what we find, there is no alternative. Which brings up this point." Yellaston pauses. "My decision with respect to the signal may not be entirely popular. Although two years is a very short time."

"Two years is an eternity, sir." Aaron thinks of the flushed faces, the voices; he thinks of Bustamente.

"I realize it may seem so to some. I wish it could be shortened. *Centaur* does not have the acceleration of the scouters. More pertinently, Aaron, some crew members may also feel that we owe it to the home world to let them know as soon as possible. The situation there must be increasingly acute."



They are both silent for a moment, in deference to the acuteness of Earth's "situation."

"If *Centaur* were to have an accident before we verify the planet, this could deprive Earth of knowledge of the planet's existence, perhaps forever. The fear of such a catastrophe will weigh heavily with some. On the other hand, we have had no major malfunctions and no reason to think we shall. We are proceeding as planned. The most abysmal error we could make would be to send the green code now and then discover, after the ships have been irreversibly launched, that the planet is uninhabitable. Those ships cannot return."

Aaron perceives that Yellaston is using him to try out pieces of his formal announcement; a bootlegger has many uses. But why not his logical advisors, his execs, Don and Tim? Oh, oh. Aaron begins to suspect who "some" people may include.

"We would doom all the people in the pipeline. Worse, we would end forever any hope of a new emigration effort. Our hastiness would be criminal. Earth has trusted us. We must not risk betraying her."

"Amen."

Yellaston broods a moment, suddenly gets up and goes over to his cabinet wall. Aaron hears a gurgle. The old man must have saved his last one until relief arrived.

"God damn it." Yellaston suddenly sets a flask down hard. "We never should have had women on this mission."

Aaron grins involuntarily, thinking, there speaks the dead dick. Thinking also of Soli, of Åhlstrom, of all the female competences on *Centaur*, of the debates on female command that had yielded finally to the policy of minimal innovation on a mission where so much else would be new. But he knows exactly what Yellaston means.

Yellaston turns around, letting Aaron see his glass; an unusual intimacy. "Going to be a bitch, Doctor. These two will be the toughest we've had to face. Two years. The fact that we're going to the planet ourselves will suffice for most, I think." He massages his knuckles again. "It might not be a bad idea for you to keep your eyes and ears rather carefully open, Aaron, during the time ahead."

Implications, implications. Doctors, like bootleggers, have their uses, too.

"I believe I see what you mean, sir."

Yellaston nods. "On a continuing basis," he says authoritatively. He and Aaron exchange regards in which is implicit their mutual views of the relevance of Francis Xavier Foy.

"I'll do my best," Aaron promises; he has recalled his general checkup plan, maybe he can use that projective-recall session to spot trouble.

"Good. Now, tomorrow we examine that specimen. I'd like to hear your plans." Yellaston comes back, glassless, to his console and Aaron gives him a rundown on his arrangements with the Xenobiology chief.

"All the initial work will take place in *situ*, right?" Aaron concludes, conscious that the alien's *situ* is now directly to his left. "Nothing goes into the ship?"

"Right."

"I'd like to have authority to enforce that. And guards on the corridor entrances, too."

"The authority is yours, Doctor. You'll have the guards."

"That's fine." Aaron rubs his neck, remembering his medikit. "There've been a couple of, oh, call them psychological reactions to the alien I'm looking into. Nothing serious, I think. For instance, have you experienced an impression of localization, about the alien, I mean? A sense of where the thing is, physically?"

Yellaston chuckles. "Why yes, as a matter of fact I do. Right north, over there." He points high toward Aaron's right. "Is that significant, Doctor?"

Aaron grins in relief. "Yeah, it is to me. It signifies that my personal orientation still isn't any good after ten years." He picks up his kit, moves over to Yellaston's cabinets. "I thought the thing was down under your bunk." Unobtrusively he substitutes the full flasks, noting that that drink was indeed the old man's last.

"Give your sister my personal regards, Aaron. And don't forget."

"I'll remember, Captain."

Obscurely moved, Aaron goes out. He knows he must do some serious thinking; if Don or Tim decide to kick up, what the hell can Dr. Aaron Kaye do about it? But he is euphoric. The old man isn't buying Lory's story blind, he isn't going to rush it. Daddy will save us from the giant cauliflowers. I better get some exercise, he thinks, and trots down-ramp to one of the long outer corridors on the hull. There are six of these bow-stern blisters; they form the berths that hold the three big scoutships. Gravity is strong down here, slightly above Earth-normal, and people use the long tubes for games and exercise—another good program-element, Aaron thinks approvingly. He comes out into Corridor Beta, named for Don Purcell's scouter. *Beta* has long been known as the *Beast*, as in beast-of-Fascist-imperialism, a joke of *Centaurs* early years when Tim's *Alpha* was likewise christened the *Atheist Bastard*. Kuh's *Gamma* became only *China Flower*—the flower which is now hanging on her stem with her cryptic freight.

This corridor is identical to Gamma where the alien will be examined tomorrow. Aaron strides along effortfully savoring the gee-loading, counting access portals which will need guards. There are fourteen, more than he had thought. Ramps lead down here from all over the ship—the scouters were designed as lifeboats, too. The corridor is so long the far end is hazy. He fancies he can feel a chill on his soles. Imagine, he is in a starship! A fly walking the wall of a rotating can in cosmic space; there are suns under his feet.

He remembers the scenes of ceremony that had taken place in these corridors three years back, when the scoutships were launched to reconnoiter the suns of Centaurus. And the sad returns four months ago when first Don and then Tim had come back bearing news of nothing but methane and rock. Will the *Beast* and the *Bastard* soon be ferrying us down to Lory's planet?—I mean in two years, and it's Kuh's planet, Aaron corrects himself, so preoccupied that he bumps blindly into the rear of Don Purcell, backing out of Beta's command lock.

"Getting ready to land us, Don?"

Don only grins, the all-purpose calm grin that Aaron believes he would wear if he were going down in flames. Tough to get behind a grin like that if Don really was, well, disaffected. He doesn't look mutinous, Aaron thinks. Hard to imagine him leading an assault on Ray's gyros. He looks like an order man, a good jock. Like Tim. Kuh was the same breed, too. Transistorized. The genotype that got us here, the heavy-duty transport of the race.

Aaron ducks into the ramp that leads to Lory's quarters, imagining Don and the scoutships and them all superimposed on that planet, that mellow flowery world. Pouring out to make a new Earth. Will they find

Kuh's colony, or silent bones? But the freedom, the building... and then, then will come the fleet from Earth. Fifteen years, that's what we'll have, Aaron thinks, assuming we send the green signal when we land. Fifteen years. And then the emigration ships will start coming in, the—what was it Yellaston called it—the pipeline. Typical anal imagery. The pipeline spewing Earth's crap across the light-years. Technicians first, of course, basic machinery, agriculture. Pioneer-type colonists. And then pretty soon people-type people, administrators, families, politicians—whole industries and nations all whirling down that pipeline onto the virgin world. Covering it, spreading out. What of Bustamente, then? What of himself and Lory?

He is by Lory's door now, the lounge is empty at last.

When she opens it Aaron is pleased to see she's doing nothing more enigmatic than brushing her hair; the same old hygienic black bristles pulling through the coppery curls which are now just frosted gray, nice effect, really. She beckons him in, brushing steadily; counting, he guesses.

"Captain sends you his personal regards." As he sits it occurs to him that Foy may have bugged her room. No visuals, though. Not Foy.

"Thank you, Arn... seventy... Your personal regards, too?"

"Mine too. You must be tired, I notice you had company. Tried to look in earlier."

"Seventy-five... Everybody wants to hear about it, it means so much to them."

"Yeah. By the way, I admired your tactfulness about our battling Chinese. I didn't know you had it in you, Sis."

She brushes harder. "I didn't want to *spoil* it. They—they stopped all that, anyway. There." She lays the brush down, smiles. "It's such a peaceful place, Arn. I think we could really live a new way there. Without violence and hatred and greed. Oh, I know how you—but that's the feeling it gave me, anyway."

The light tone doesn't fool him. Lory, lost child of paradise striving ever to return. That look in her eye, you could cast her as the young Jeanne, reminding the Dauphin of the Holy Cause. Aaron has always had a guilty sympathy for the Dauphin.

"There'll always be some bad stuff as long as you have people, Lor. People aren't all that rotten. Look at us here."

"Here? You look, Arn. Sixty hand-picked indoctrinated specimens. Are we really good? Are we even gentle with each other? I can feel the—the *savagery* underneath, just waiting to break loose. Why, there was a *fight* yesterday. Here."

How does she hear these things?

"It's a hell of a strain, Lor. We're human beings."

"Human beings must change."

"Goddamnit, we don't have to change. Basically, I mean," he adds guiltily. Why does she do this to him? She makes me defend what I hate, too. She's right, really, but, but—"You might try caring a little for people as they are—it's been recommended," he says angrily and hates the unctuousness in his voice.

She sighs, straightens the few oddments on her stand. Her room looks like a cell. "Why do we use the word human for the animal part of us, Arn? Aggression—that's human. Cruelty, hatred, greed—that's

human. That's just what *isn't* human, Arn. It's so sad. To be truly human we must leave all that behind. Why can't we try?"

"We do, Lor. We do."

"You'd make this new world into another hell like Earth."

He can only sigh, acknowledging her words, remembering too the horrible time after their parents died, when Lory was sixteen... Their father had been Lieutenant-General Kaye, they had grown up sheltered, achievement-oriented in the Army enclaves' excellent schools. Lory had been into her biology program when the accident orphaned them. Suddenly she had looked up and seen the world outside—and the next thing Aaron knew he was hailing her out of a Cleveland detention center in the middle of the night. The ghetto command post had recognized her Army ID plate.

"Oh, Arn," she had wept to him in the copter going home. "It isn't right! It isn't *right*." Her face was blotched and raw where the gas had caught her, he couldn't bear to look.

"Lor, this is too big for you. I know it isn't right. But this is not like setting up a dog shelter on Ogilvy Island. Don't you understand you can get your brains cut?"

"That's what I mean, they're doing obscene things to people. It isn't *right*."

"You can't fix it," he'd snapped at her in pain. "Politics is the art of the possible. This isn't possible, you'll only get killed."

"How do we know what's possible unless we try?"

Oh god, that next year. Their father's name had helped some, luck had helped more. In the end what probably saved her was her own implacable innocence. He had finally tracked her down in the back shed of a mortuary in the old barrio section of Dallas; emaciated, trembling, barely able to speak.

"Arn, oh—they—" she whimpered while he wiped vomit off her chin, "Dave refused to help Vicky, he—he wants him to get caught... So he can be leader... He won't let us help him."

"I think that happens, Lor." He held her thin shoulders, trying to stop the shaking. "That does happen, people are human."

"No!" She jerked away fiercely. "It's terrible. It's terrible. They—we were fighting among ourselves, Arn. Fighting over *power*. Dave even wants his woman, I think—they hit each other. She, she was just property."

She heaved up the rest of the soup he'd brought her.

"When I said that they threw me out."

Aaron held her helplessly, thinking, her new friends can't live up to her any more than I can. Thank god.

"Am," she whispered. "Vicky... *he took some money*. I know..."

"Lor, come on home now. I fixed it, you can still take your exams if you come back now."

"... All right."

Aaron shakes his head, sitting in *Centaur* twenty trillion miles from Dallas, looking at that same fierce vision on the face of his little sister now going gray. His little sister whom chance has made their sole link

with that planet, that thing out there.

"All right, Lor." He gets up, turns her around to face him. "I know you. What the hell happened on that planet? What are you covering?"

"Why, nothing, Am. Except what I told you. What's the *matter* with you?"

Is it too innocent? He distrusts everything, cannot tell.

"Please let go of me."

Conscious of Foy's problematical ears he lets go, steps back. This would sound crazy.

"Do you realize this isn't games, Lor? Our lives are depending on it. Real people's lives, much as you hate humanity. You better not be playing."

"I don't hate humanity, I just hate some of the things people do. I wouldn't *hurt* people, Arn."

"You'd liquidate ninety percent of the race to achieve your Utopia."

"What a *terrible* thing to say!"

Her face is all soul, he aches for her. But Torquemada was trying to help people, too.

"Lor, give me your word that Kuh and his people are absolutely okay. Your faithful word."

"They *are*, Am. I give you my word. They're beautiful."

"The hell with beauty. Are they physically okay?"

"Of course they are."

Her eyes still have that look, but he can't think of anything else to try. Praise be for Yellaston's caution.

She reaches out for him, thin electric hand burning his. "You'll see, Am. Isn't it wonderful, we'll be together? That's what kept me going, all the way back. I'll be there tomorrow when we look at it."

"Oh, no!"

"Jan Ing wants me. You said I'm medically fit. I'm his chief botanist, remember?" She smiles mischievously.

"I don't think you should, Lor. Your ulcers."

"Waiting around would be much worse for them." She sobers, grips his arm. "Captain Yellaston—he's going to send the green, isn't he?"

"Ask him yourself. I'm only the doctor."

"How sad. Oh well, he'll see. You'll all see." She pats his arm, turns away.

"*What'll we see?*"

"How harmless it is, of course... Listen, Arn. This is from some ancient work, the martyr Robert Kennedy quoted it before he was killed. To tame the savage heart of man, to make gentle the life of this world'... Isn't that fine?"

"Yeah, that's fine, Lor."

He goes away less than comforted, thinking, the life of this world is not gentle, Lory. It wasn't gentleness that got you out here. It was the drives of ungentle, desperate, glory-hunting human apes. The fallible humanity you somehow can't see...

He finds he has taken a path through the main Commons. Under the displays the nightly bridge and poker games are in session as usual, but neither Don nor Tim are visible. As he goes out of earshot he hears the Israeli physicist ante what sounds like an island. An island? He climbs up toward the clinic, hoping he heard wrong.

Solange is waiting for him with the medical log. He recites Ray and Bachi's data with his head leaning against her warm front, remembering he has another problem. Forget it, he tells himself, I have two years to worry about Bustamente.

"Soli, tomorrow I want to rig up an array of decontaminant canisters over the examination area. With the release at my station. Say a good strong phytocide plus a fungicide with a mercury base. What should I get from Stores?"

"Decon Seven is the strongest, Aaron. But it cannot be mixed, we will have to place many tanks." Her face is mirroring pity for the hypothetically killed plants, concern for the crew.

"Okay, so we'll place many tanks. Everything the suits will take. I don't trust that thing."

Soli comes into his arms, holds him with her strong small hands. Peace, comfort. *To make gentle the life of mankind*. His body has missed her painfully, demonstrates it with a superior erection. Soli giggles. Fondly he caresses her, feeling like himself for the first time in weeks. Do I see you as property, Soli? Surely not... The thought of Bustamente's huge body covering her floats through his mind; his erection increases markedly. Maybe the big black brother will have to revise his planning, Aaron thinks genially, hobbling with her to his comfortable, comforting bunk. Two years is a long time...

Drifting asleep with Soli's warm buttocks in his lap Aaron has a neutral, almost comic hypnagogic vision: Tighe's face big as the wall, garlanded with fruits and flowers like an Italian bambino plaque. The pink and green flowers tinkle, chime elfland horns. *Tan tara!* Centripetal melodies. *Tan tara! Tara! TARA!*

—and fairy horns turn into his medical alarm signal, with Soli shaking him awake. The call is from the bridge.

He leaps out of bed, yanking shorts on, hits the doorway with one shoulder and runs "up" to the freefall shaft. His kit is somehow in his hand. He has no idea what time it is. The thought that Yellaston has had a heart attack is scaring him to death. Oh god, what will they do without Yellaston?

He kicks free, sails and grabs clumsily like a three-legged ape, clutching the kit, is so busy figuring alternative treatment spectrums that he almost misses the voices coming from the Commo corridor. He gets himself into the access, finds his feet and scurries "down" still so preoccupied that he does not at first identify the dark columns occupying the Communication step. They are Bustamente's legs.

Aaron pushes in past him and confronts a dreadful sight. Commander Timofaev Bron is sagging from Bustamente's grasp, bleeding briskly from his left eye.

"All right, all right," Tim mutters. Bustamente shakes him.

"What the hell was that power drain?" Don Purcell comes in behind Aaron.

"This booger was sending," Bustamente growls. "Shit-eater, I was too slow. He was sending *on my beam*." He shakes the Russian again.

"All right," Tim repeats unemotionally. "It is done."

The blood is coming from a supra-orbital split. Aaron disengages Tim from Bustamente, sits him down with his head back to clamp the wound. As he opens his kit a figure comes slowly through the side door from Astrogation: Captain Yellaston.

"Sir—" Aaron is still confusedly thinking of that coronary. Then Yellaston's peculiar rigidity gets through to him. Oh Jesus, no. The man is not sick but smashed to the gills.

Bustamente is yanking open the gyro housing. The room fills with a huge humming tone.

"I did not harm the beam," Tim says under Aaron's hands. "Certain equipment was installed when we built it; you did not look carefully enough."

"Son of a bitch," says Don Purcell.

"What do you mean, equipment?" Bustamente's voice rises, harmonic with the processing gyros. "What have you done, flyboy?"

"I was not sent here to wait. The planet is there."

Aaron sees Captain Yellaston's lips moving effortfully, achieving a strange pursed look. "You indicated..." he says eerily, "you indicated... that is, you have preempted the green..."

The others stare at him, look away one by one. Aaron is stabbed with unbearable pity, he is suspecting that what has happened is so terrible it isn't real yet.

"Son of a bitch," Don Purcell repeats neutrally.

*The green signal has been sent*, Aaron realizes. To the Russians, anyway, but everybody will find out, everybody will start. It's all over, he's committed us whether that planet's any good or not. Oh god, Yellaston—he saw this coming, if he'd been younger, if he'd moved faster—if half his brains hadn't been scrambled in alcohol. I brought it to him.

Automatically his hands have completed their work. The Russian gets up. Don Purcell has left, Bustamente is probing the gyro-chamber with a resonator, not looking at Tim. Yellaston is still rigid in the shadows.

"It was in the hull shielding," Tim says to Bustamente. "The contact is under the toggles. Don't worry, it was one-time."

Aaron follows him out, unable to believe in any of this. Lieutenant Pauli is waiting outside; she must be in it, too.

"Tim, how could you be so goddam sure? You may have killed everybody."

The cosmonaut looks down at him calmly, one-eyed. "The records don't lie. They are enough, we will find nothing else. That old man would have waited forever." He chuckles, a dream-planet in his eye.

Aaron goes back in, leads Yellaston to his quarters. The captain's arm is trembling faintly. Aaron is trembling too with pity and disgust. That old man, Tim had called him. That old man... Suddenly he realizes the full dimensions of this night's disaster.

*Two years*. The hell with the planet, maybe they won't even get there. Two years in this metal can with a captain who has failed, an old man mocked at in his drunkenness? No one to hold us together, as Yellaston had done during those unbearable weeks when the oxygen ran low, when panic had hung over all their heads. He had been so good then, so right. Now he's let Tim take it all away from him, he's lost it. We aren't together any more, not after this. It'll get worse. *Two years*...

"In the... fan," Yellaston whispers with tragic dignity, letting Aaron put him onto his bed. "In... the fan... my fault."

"In the morning," Aaron tells him gently, dreading the thought. "Maybe Ray can figure some way."

Aaron heads hopelessly for his bunk. He knows he won't sleep. *Two years* . . .

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## Chapter III

*Silence... Bright, clinical emptiness, no clouds, no weeping. Horizon, infinity. Somewhere words rise, speaking silence: I AM THE SPOUSE. Cancel sound. Aaron, invisible and microbe-sized, sees on the floor of infinity a very beautifully veined silver membrane which he now recognizes as an adolescent's prepuce, the disjecta of his first operation...*

Almost awake now, in foetal position; something terrible ahead if he wakes up. He tries to burrow back into dream but a hand is preventing him, jostling him back to consciousness.

He opens his eyes and sees Coby handing him a hot cup; a very bad sign.

"You know about Tim." Aaron nods, sipping clumsily.

"You haven't heard about Don Purcell, though. I didn't wake you. No medical aspects."

"What about Don Purcell? What happened?"

"Brace yourself, boss."

"For Christ's sake, don't piss around, Bill."

"Well, about oh-three-hundred we had this hull tremor. Blipped all Tighe's tapes. I called around, big flap, finally got the story. Seems Don fired his whole scouter off on automatic. It's loaded with a complete set of tapes, records, everything he could get his hands on. The planet, see? They say it can punch a signal through to Earth when it gets up speed."

"But Don, is Don in it?"

"Nobody's in it. It's set on autopilot. The *Beast* had some special goodies, too, our people must have a new ear up someplace. Mars, I heard."

"Jesus Christ..." So fast, it's happening, Aaron thinks. Where does Coby get his information, anything bad he knows it all.

Then he sees the faint appeal under Coby's grin; this is what he can do, his wretched offering.

"Thanks, Bill." Aaron gets up effortfully... First Tim and now Don—war games on *Centaur*. It's all wrecked, all gone.



"Things are moving too fast for the old man." Coby leans back familiarly on Aaron's bunk. "Good thing, too. We have to get a more realistic political organization. This great leader stuff, he's finished. Oh, we can keep him on as a figurehead... Don and Tim are out, too, for now anyway. First thing to start with, we elect a working committee."

"You're crazy, Bill. You can't run a ship with a committee. We'll kill ourselves if we start politics."

"Want to bet!" Coby grins. "Going to see some changes, boss."

Aaron sluices water over his head to shut off the voice. Elections, two years from nowhere? That'll mean the Russian faction, the U.S. faction, the Third and Fourth Worlders; scientists versus humanists versus techs versus ecologists versus theists versus Smithites—all the factions of Earth in one fragile ship. What shape will we be in when we reach the planet, if we live that long? And any colony we start—Oh, damn Yellaston, damn me—

"General meeting at eleven hundred," Coby is saying. "And by the way, Tighe really did go wandering for about twenty minutes last night. My fault, I admit it, I forgot the isolation seal was off. No harm done. I got him right back in."

"Where was he?"

"Same place. By the port where *China* was."

"Take him with you to the meeting," Aaron says impulsively, punishing them all.

He goes out to get some breakfast, trying to shake out of the leaden feeling of oversleep, of doom impending. He dreads the meeting, dreads it. Poor old Yellaston trying futilely to cover his lapse, trying to save public face. A figurehead. He can't take that, he'll go into depression. Aaron makes himself set up Tighe's tapes to occupy his thoughts.

Tighe's tapes are worse than before, composite score down another five points, Aaron sees, even before the twenty-minute gap. His CNS functions are coming out of synch, too, an effect he hasn't seen in an ambulant patient, especially one as coordinated as Tighe. Curious... Have to study it, Aaron thinks apathetically. All our curves are coming out of synch, we're breaking up. Yellaston was our pacemaker. Can we make it without him?... Am I as dependent as Foy?

It is time for the meeting. He plods down to the Commons, sick with pity and dread; he is so reluctant to listen that he does not at first notice the miracle: There is nothing to pity. The Yellaston before his eyes is firm-voiced, erect, radiating leaderly charisma; is announcing, in fact the *Centaur's* official green code for the Alpha sun was beamed to Earth at oh-five-hundred this morning.

"What?"

"As some of you are aware," Yellaston says pleasantly, "our two scout commanders have also taken independent initiative to the same effect in messaging their respective Terrestrial governments. I want to emphasize that their actions were pursuant to specific orders from their superiors prior to embarkation. We all regret, we here who are joined in this mission have always regretted—that the United Nations of Earth who sponsored our mission were not more perfectly united when we left. We may hope they are now. But this is a past matter of no concern to us, arising from tensions on a world none of us may ever visit again. I want to say now that both Tim Bron and Don Purcell—" Yellaston makes a just-perceptible fatherly nod toward the two commanders, who are sitting quite normally on his left, despite Tim's taped eye "—faithfully carried out orders, however obsolete, just as I or any of us would have felt obligated to do in their places, had we been so burdened. Their duties have now been discharged. Their independent

signals, if they arrive, will serve as confirmation to our official transmission to Earth as a whole.

"Now we must consider our immediate tasks."

Jesus god, Aaron thinks, the old bastard. The old fox, he's got it all back, he took the initiative right out from under them while I thought he was dead out. Fantastic. But how the hell? Running those lasers up is a job. Aaron looks around, catches a hooded gleam from Bustamente. OF Black George was cooking in his electronic jungle, lie and Yellaston. Aaron grins to himself. He is happy, so happy that he ignores the inner murmur: *At a price*.

"The biologic examination of the planetary life-form returned to us by Commander Kuh will start at about sixteen hundred this afternoon. It will be conducted in Corridor Gamma One under decontaminant seal, but the entire operation will be displayed on your viewers." Yellaston smiles. "You will probably see it better than I will. Next, and concurrently, the Drive section will prepare to initiate change of course toward the Alpha planet. Each of you will secure your areas for acceleration and course-change as speedily as possible. The vector loadings will be posted tomorrow. Advise Don and Tim of any problems in their respective sections. First Engineer Singh will deal with Gamma section in the absence of Commander Kuh. And finally, we must commence the work of adapting and refining our general colonization plan to the planetary data now at hand. Our first objective is a planetary atlas incorporating every indicator that your specialties can extract from the *Gamma* tapes. On this we can build our plans. I remind you that this is a task requiring imagination and careful thought of every contingency and parameter. Gentlemen, ladies: The die is cast. We have only two years to prepare for the greatest adventure our race has known."

Aaron starts to smile at the archaism, finds he has a fullness in the throat. The hush around him holds for a minute; Yellaston nods to Don and Tim and they get up and exit with him. Perfect, Aaron thinks. We'll make it, we're okay. Screw Coby. Daddy lives. Everyone is jabbering now, Aaron makes his way through them past the great flowering wonder of Lory's—of the Alpha planet. Our future home. Yellaston will get us there, he's pulled it out.

But at a price, the gloomy corner of his forebrain repeats. The big green light is on its way to Earth. Not only we but all the people of Earth are committed, committed to that world. That planet *has* to be all right now.

He goes to assemble his equipment, irrationally resolved to double his emergency decontaminant array.

*log 124 586 sd 4100 X 2200 notice to all personnel*

*corridor gamma one will be under space hazard seal starting 1545 this day for the purpose of bioanalysis of alien life specimen//attendance will be limited to: [1] centaur command cadre alpha [2] designated xenobiosurvey/medical personnel [3] eva team charlie [4] safety/survival staff assigned to corridor access locks// the foregoing personnel will be suited at all times until the unsealing of the corridor//because of the unknown risk-factor in this operation additional guards will also be stationed on the inboard side of all access ports: see special-duty roster attached//unauthorized personnel will not, repeat not, enter gamma one starting as of now//video cover of the entire operation from the closest feasible points will be available on all screens on ship channel one, starting approximately 1515 hours*

*yellaston, cmdg*

In Corridor Gamma One, the major risk-factor is wires. Aaron leans on a bulkhead amid his tangle of equipment, holding his bulky suit and watching Jan Ing wrangle with Electronics. The Xenobiology chief wants a complete computer capability in the corridor; there is no way of passing the cable through the lock seals. The EVA team is appealed to but they refuse to give up any of their service terminals. Finally the issue is resolved by sacrificing an access-lock indicator panel. Engineer Gomulka, who will double as a guard, starts cutting it out to bring the computer leads in.

Wires are snaking all over the deck. XB has brought in half their laboratory, and he can see at least eight other waldo-type devices in addition to the biomonitor extension equipment. On top of it all the camera crew is setting up. One camera opposite the small hatch that will open into *China Flower's* command section, two by the big cargo hatch behind which the alien thing will be, plus a couple of overhead views. They are also mounting some ceiling slave screens for the corridor, Aaron is glad to find. He is too far back to see the hatches. The Safety team is trying to get the cables cleared into bundles along the wall, but the mess is bound to get worse when the suit umbilicals come into use. Mercifully, general suiting-up will not take place until the EVA team has winched *China Flower* up to her berth.

Aaron's station is the farthest one away at the stern end of the corridor. In front of him is an open space with the EVA floor lock, and then starts the long Xenobiology clutter. Beyond XB is the cargo hatch and then the small hatch, and finally in the distance is the corridor command station. Command Cadre Alpha means Yellaston and Tim Bron. Aaron can just make out Tim's eye-patch, he's talking with Don Purcell who will go back to man *Centaur's* bridge. In case of trouble... Aaron peers at his racks of decontaminant aerosols mounted opposite the hatches. They have wires, too, running to a switch beside his hand. He had trouble with XB about those cans; Jan Ing would rather be eaten alive than risk damaging their precious specimen of alien life.

A hand falls on his shoulder—Captain Yellaston, coming in the long way round, his observant face giving no hint of what must be the chemical conditions in his bloodstream.

"The die is cast," Aaron observes.

Yellaston nods. "A gamble," he says quietly. "The mission... I may have done a fearful thing, Aaron. They were bound to come, on the strength of the other two."

"The only thing you could have done, sir."

"No." Aaron looks up. Yellaston isn't talking to him; his eyes are on some cold cosmic Scoreboard. "No. I should have sent code yellow and announced I had sent the green. Ray would have kept silent. That would have held back the U.N. ships at least. It was the correct move. I failed to think it through in time."

He moves on down the corridor, leaving Aaron stunned. Sent the yellow and lied to us for two years? *Captain Yellaston*? But yes, Aaron sees slowly, that would have saved something, in case the planet is no good. It would have been better. What he did was good but it wasn't the best. Because he was drunk... My fault My stupid susceptibilities, my romanticism—People are jostling past him, it's the EVA team, suited and ready to go out. The last man by punches Aaron's arm—Bruce Jang, giving him a mean wink through his gold-washed face-plate. Aaron watches them file down into the EVA blister lock, remembering the same thing three weeks ago when they had gone out to bring in *China Flower* with Lory unconscious inside. This time all they have to do is reel up the tether. Risky enough. The rotational mechanics could send a man into space, Aaron thinks; he is always awed by skills he doesn't have.

A videoscreen comes to life, showing stars. A space suit occults them; when it passes, three small yellow stars are moving toward a blackness—the helmet lights of the team going down to *China Flower* far below. Aaron's gut jumps; an *alien* is out there, he is about to meet an *alien*. He blinks, begins to sort

and assemble the extensor mounts on which his sensors will be intruded into the scouter's cargo hold. As he does so, he notices faces peering at him through the vitrex of the nearest access lock. He waves. The faces, perceiving that the scenario has not yet started, go away. It will be, Aaron realizes, a long afternoon.

By the time he and Ing have lined up their equipment all non-operational people except the suit team have left the corridor. The hull has been groaning softly; *China Flower* is rising to them on her winch. Suddenly the wall beside him clanks, grinds reverberatingly—the port probes engage, the grinding stops. Aaron shivers involuntarily: the alien is here.

As the EVA lock cycle begins flashing, Tim Bron's voice says on the audio, "All hands will now suit up."

The EVA team is coming back inside. The suit men work down the corridor, checking and paying out the umbilicals as neatly as they can. It's going to be cramped working. The suit team reach him last. As he seals in he sees more faces at the side lock. The videoscreens are all on now giving a much better view, but still the faces remain. Aaron chuckles to himself; the old ape impulse to see with the living eye.

"All nonoperational personnel will now clear the area."

The EVA team is lined up along the wall opposite *China Flower's* command hatch. The plan is to open this first in order to retrieve the scoutship's automatic records of the alien's life-processes. Is it still alive in there? Aaron has no mystic intuitions now, only a great and growing tension in his gut. He makes himself breathe normally.

"Guards, secure the area."

The last corridor entrances are dogged tight. Aaron sees a faceplate turned toward him three stations up the XB line. The face belongs to Lory. He flinches slightly; he had forgotten she would be here. He lifts his gloved hand, wishing he was between her and that cargo port.

The area is secure, the guards stationed. Bruce Jang and two other EVA men move up to open the lock coupled to *China Flower's* command port. Aaron watches the close-up on the overhead screen. Metal clinks, the lock hatch slides sideways. The EVA men go in carrying vapor analyzers, the hatch rolls shut. Another wait. Aaron sees the XB people tuning their suit radios, realizes the EVA men are reporting. He gets the channel: "Nominal... Atmosphere nominal (crackle, crackle)..." The hatch is sliding back again, the men come out accompanied by a barely perceptible fogginess. Lory looks back at him again; he understands. This is the air she had breathed for nearly a year. The ship's tapes are being handed out. The alien is, it appears, alive.

"Metabolic trace regular to preliminary inspection, envelope unchanged," Jan Ing's voice comes on the audio. "Intermittent bio-luminescence, two to eighty candlepower." Eighty candlepower, that's *bright*. So Lory hadn't lied about that, anyway. "A strong peak coinciding with the original docking with *Centaur*... a second peak occurred, yes, about the time the scoutship was removed from its berth."

That would be about when Tighe did—or didn't—open its container, Aaron thinks. Or maybe it was stimulated by moving the ship.

"One of the fans which circulate its atmosphere is not operating," the XB chief goes on, "but the remaining fans seem to have provided sufficient movement for adequate gas exchange. Its surface atmosphere requires continuous renewal, since it is adapted to constant planetary wind. It also exhibits pulslike internal pressure changes—"

Aaron's mind is momentarily distracted by the vision of himself stepping out into planetary wind, a stream

of wild unrecycled air. That creature in there dwells on wind. A podlike mass about four meters long, Lory had described it. Like a big bag of fruit. Squatting in there for a year, metabolizing, pulsing, luminescing—what else has it been doing? The functions of life: assimilation, excitation, reproduction. Has it been reproducing? Is the hold full of Goby's tiny monsters waiting to pounce out? Or ooze out, swallowing us all? Aaron notices he has drifted away from his de-contaminant switches; he moves back.

"The mass is constant, activity vectors stable," Jan concludes.

So it hasn't been multiplying. Just squatting there. Thinking, maybe? Aaron wonders if those bioluminescence peaks would correlate with any phenomena on *Centaur*. What phenomena? Tighe sightings, maybe, or nightmares? Don't be an idiot, he tells himself; the imp in his ear replies that those New England colonists didn't correlate ocean currents and winter temperatures, either... Absently he has been following the EVA team's debate on whether to cut open the viewport to the alien that Lory welded shut. It is decided not to try this but to proceed directly to the main cargo lock.

The team comes out and the men assigned to the extension probes pick up their equipment, cables writhing in a slow snake dance. Bruce and the EVA chief undog the heavy cargo hatch. This is the port through which the scoutship's groundside equipment, their vehicles and flier and generator were loaded in. The hatch rolls silently aside, the two men go into the lock. Aaron can see them on the videoscreen, unsealing the scouter's port. It opens; no vapor comes out because the hold is unpressurized. Beyond the suited figures Aaron can see the shiny side of the cargo-module in which the alien is confined. The sensor men advance, angling their probes into the lock like long-necked beasts. Aaron glances up at another screen which shows the corridor as a whole and experiences an odd, oceanic awareness.

Here we are, he thinks, tiny blobs of life millions and millions of miles from the speck that spawned us, hanging out here in the dark wastes, preparing with such complex pains to encounter a different mode of life. All of us, peculiar, wretchedly imperfect—somehow we have done this thing. Incredible, really, the ludicrous tangle of equipment, the awkward suited men, the precautions, the labor, the solemnity—Jan, Bruce, Yellaston, Tim Bron, Bustamente, Alice Berryman, Coby, Kawabata, my saintly sister, poor Frank Foy, stupid Aaron Kaye—a stream of faces pours through his mind, hostile, suffering each in his separate flawed reality: all of us. Somehow we have brought ourselves to this amazement. Perhaps we really are saving our race, he thinks, perhaps there really is a new earth and heaven ahead...

The moment passes; he watches the backs of the men inside *China*, still struggling with the module port. The sensor men have closed in, blocked the view. Aaron glances up at the bow end of the corridor where Yellaston and Tim Bron stand. Yellaston's arm is extended stiffly to the top of his console. That must be the evacuation control; if he pulls it the air ducts will open, the corridor will depressurize in a couple of minutes. So will the alien's module if it's open. Good; Aaron feels reassured. He checks his own canister-release switch, finds he has again strayed forward and moves back.

Confused exclamations, grunts are coming over the suit channel; apparently there is a difficulty with the module port. One of the sensor men drops his probe, moves in. Another follows. What's the trouble?

The screen shows nothing but suit backs, the whole EVA team is in there—Oh! Sudden light, cracks of radiance between the men silhouetting them blue against a weird pink light—Is it fire? Aaron's heart jumps, he clammers onto a stanchion to see over heads. Not fire, there's no smoke. Oh, of course, he realizes—that light is the alien's own luminescence! They have opened the module.

But why are they all in there, why aren't they falling back to push the sensors in? Wide rosy light flashes, hidden by bodies. They must have opened the whole damn port instead of just cracking it. Is that thing trying to come out?

"Close it, get out!" Aaron calls into his suit mike. But the channel is a bedlam of static. Everybody is crowding forward toward that hatch, too. That's dangerous. "Captain!" Aaron shouts futilely. He can see Yellaston's hand still on the panel, but Tim Bron seems to be holding onto his arm. The EVA men are all inside *China Flower*, inside the module even, it's impossible to tell. A pink flare lights up the corridor, winks out again.

"Move back! Get back to your stations!" Yellaston's voice cuts in on the command channel override and the intercom babble goes dead. Aaron is suddenly aware of pressure around him, discovers that he is all the way up at the XB stations, being crowded by someone behind. It's Akin's face inside the safety guard visor. They disengage clumsily, move back.

"Go back to your stations! EVA team, report." Aaron is finding movement oddly effortful. He wants very much to open his stifling helmet. "George, can you hear me? Get your men out." The screen is showing confused movement, more colored flashes. Is somebody hurt? There's a figure, coming slowly out of the hatch.

"What's going on in there, George? Why is your helmet open?" Aaron stares incredulously as the EVA chief emerges into the corridor—his face-plate is open, tipped back on his head. What the hell is happening? Did the alien grab them? The chief's arm goes up, he is making the okay signal; the suit-to-suit channel is still out. The others are coming out behind him, the strange light shining on their backs, making a great peach-colored glow in the corridor. Their visors are open, too. But they seem to be all right, whatever happened in there.

The screen is showing the module port; all Aaron can make out is a big rectangle of warm-colored light. It seems to be softly bubbling or shifting, like a light show—globes of rose, yellow, lilac—it's beautiful, really. Hypnotic. They should close it, he thinks, hearing Yellaston ordering the men to seal their helmets. With an effort Aaron looks away, sees Yellaston still by his station, his arm rigid. Tim Bron seems to have moved away. It's all right, nothing has happened. It's all right. "Get those suits closed before I depressurize!" The EVA chief is slowly pulling his face-plate down, so are the others. Their movements seem vague, unfocused. One of them stumbles over the biopsy equipment. Why doesn't he pick it up? Something is wrong with them. Aaron frowns. His brain feels gassy. Why aren't they carrying out the program, doing something about the bioluminescence? It's probably all right, though, Yellaston is there. He's watching.

At this moment he is jostled hard. He blinks, recovers balance, looks around. Jesus—he's in the wrong place—everybody is in the wrong place. The whole corridor is jamming forward of where it's supposed to be, staring at that marvelous glow. The guards—they're not by the ports! Something is not all right at all, Aaron realizes. It's that light, it's doing something to us! *Close the port*, he wills, trying to get back to his station. It's like moving in water. The emergency switch—he has to reach it, how did he ever get so far away? And the ports, he sees, the vitrex is crowded with faces, people are in the access ramps staring into the corridor. They've come from all over the ship. What's wrong? What's happening to us?

Cold fear bursts up in his gut. He catches the EVA lock and clings to it fighting an invisible slow tide. Part of him wants to push his helmet off and run forward to the radiance coming from that port. People ahead of him are opening their visors—he can see Jan Ing's sharp Danish nose.

"Stand away from that port!" Yellaston shouts. At that Jan Ing darts forward, pushing people aside. "Stop," Aaron yells into his useless mike, finds himself opening his own visor, moving after Jan. Voices, sounds fill his ears. He grabs another stanchion, pulls himself up to look for Yellaston. The captain is still there; he seems to be struggling slowly with Tim Bron. The light is gone now, bidden by a press of bodies around the port. That thing in there is doing this, Aaron tells himself; he is terrified in a curious unreal way, his head is singing thickly. He is also angry with those people down there—they are going in, blocking it.

Lost! But is it they who are lost or the wonderful light?

Someone bumps breast-to-breast with him, pulling at his arm. He looks down into Lory's blazing face. Her helmet is gone.

"Come on, Ami We'll go together."

Primal distrust sends an icicle into his mind; he grabs her suit, anchors himself to a console with his other arm. Lory! She's in league with that thing, he knows it, this is her crazy plot. He has to stop it. Kill it! Where is his emergency release? It's too far, too far—

"Captain!" he shouts with all his strength, fighting Lory, thinking, two minutes, we can get out.  
"Depressurize! Dump the air!"

"No, Arn! It's beautiful—don't be afraid!"

"Dump the air, kill it!" he yells again, but his voice can't override the confusion. Lory is yanking on his arm, her exultant face fills him with sharp fright. "What is it?" He shakes her by the belt. "What are you trying to do?"

"It's time, Arn! It's *time*, come on—there're so many people—"

He tries to get a better grip on her, hearing metal clang behind him and realizes too late he has let go his hold on the console. But her words are now making a kind of sense to him—there are too many people, it is important, quite important to get there before something is all used up. Why is he letting them hide that light? Lory has his hand now, drawing him toward the press of people ahead.

"You'll see, it will all be gone, the pain... Arn dear, we'll be together."

The beauty of it floods Aaron's soul, washes all fear away. Just beyond those bodies is the goal of man's desiring, the fountain—the Grail itself maybe, the living radiance! He sees an opening by the wall, pulls Lory through—and is suddenly squeezed by more bodies from the side, a wall of people flooding out of the access port. Aaron fights to hold his ground, hold Lory, only dimly aware that he is struggling against familiar faces—Åhlstrom is beside him, smiling orgasmically, he pushes past Kawabata, ducks under somebody's arm. As he does, a force slams their backs—he is clouted into something entangling and falls down under an XB analyzer still clutching Lory's wrist.

"Arn, Arn, come on!"

Legs are going by him. It was Bustamente who hit him, forging past followed by a forest of legs. They have all come here to claim the shining glory in the port! Wildly enraged, Aaron struggles up, falls again with his own leg deep in a web of cables.

"Am, get up!" She jerks at him fiercely. But he is suddenly calmer, although he does not cease to wrench at his trapped leg. There is a small intercom screen by his head, he can see two tiny struggling figures—Yellaston and Tim Bron, their helmets gone. Dreamlike, tiny... Tim breaks away. Yellaston nods once, and fells Tim from behind with a blow of both locked fists. Then he slowly steps over the fallen man and goes off screen. Pink light flares out.

They have all gone in there, Aaron realizes, heartbroken. It has called us and we have come—I *must go*. But he frowns, blinks; a part of him has doubts about the pull, the sweet longing. It feels fainter down here. Maybe that pile of stuff is shielding me, he thinks confusedly. Lory is yanking at the cables around his legs. He pulls her up to him.

"Lor, what's happening to them? What happened to—" he cannot recall the Chinese commander's name "—what happened to your, your crew?"

"Changed," she is panting. Her face is incredibly beautiful. "Merged, healed. Made whole. Oh, you'll see, hurry—Can't you *feel* it, Am?"

"But—" He can feel it all right, the pull, the promising urgency, but he feels something else too—the ghost of Dr. Aaron Kaye is screaming faintly in his head, threatening him. Lory is trying to lift him bodily now. He resists, fearing to be drawn from his shielded nook. The corridor around them is empty now but he can hear people in the distance, a thick babbling down by that hatch. No screams, nothing like panic. Disregarding Lory, he cranes to get a look at the big ceiling screen. They are all there, milling rather aimlessly, he has never seen so many people pressed so close. This is a medical emergency, he thinks. I am the doctor. He has a vision of Dr. Aaron Kaye getting to the levers that will seal that cargo hatch, standing firm against the crowd, saving them from whatever is in that hold. But he cannot; Dr. Aaron Kaye is only a thin froth of fear on a helpless, lunging desire to go there himself, to fling himself into that beautiful warm light. He is going to be very ashamed, he thinks vaguely, tied here like Ulysses against the siren call, huddling under an analyzer bench while the others—What? He studies the screen again, he can see no apparent trouble, no one has fallen. The EVA men came out all right, he tells himself. What I have to do is get out of here.

Lory laughs, pulling at his legs; she has freed him, he sees. He is sliding. Effortfully he reaches into his suit, finds the panic syringe.

"Arn dear—" Her slender neck muscles are exposed; he grabs her hair, seats the spray. She wails and struggles maniacally but he holds on, waiting for the shot to work. His head feels clearer. The aching pull is less; maybe all those people are blocking it somehow. The thought hurts him. He tries to disregard it, thinking, if I can get across the corridor, into that access ramp, I can seal it behind me. Maybe.

Suddenly there is movement to his left—a pair of legs, slowly stepping by his refuge. Pale gold legs he recognizes.

"Soli! Soli, stop!"

The legs pause, a small hand settles on the overturned stand beyond him. Just within reach—he can spring and grab her, letting go of Lory—to reach her he must let Lory go. He lunges, feels Lory pull away and clutches her again. He falls short. The hand is gone.

"Soli! Soli! Come back!" Her footsteps move on down the corridor, languidly. Dr. Aaron Kaye will be ashamed, ashamed; he knows it. "The EVA men were okay," he mutters. Lory is weakening now, her eyes vague. "No, Arn," she sighs, sighs deeply again. Aaron rolls her, gets a firm grip on her suit-belt and crawls out into the corridor.

As his head clears the shelter, the sweet pull grabs him again. There—down there is the goal! "I'm a doctor," he groans, willing his limbs. A thick cable is under his hand. From miles away he recognizes it—the XB computer lead, running toward the inboard lock. If he can follow that across the corridor he will be at the ramp.

He clasps it, starts to shuffle on his knees, dragging Lory. The thing down there is pulling at the atoms of his soul, his head is filled with urgent radiance calling to him to drop the foolish cable and run to join his mates. "I'm a *doctor*," he mumbles; it requires all his strength to slide his gloved hand along his lifeline, he is turning away from bliss beyond his dreams. Only meters to go. It is impossible. Why is he refusing, going the wrong way? He will turn. But something has changed. . . He is at the lock, he sees; he must let go the cable and drag Lory over the sill.



Sobbing, he does so; it is almost more than he can bear to nudge the heavy port with his heel and send it swinging closed behind them.

As it closes the longing lessens perceptibly. Metal, he thinks vacantly, it has blocked it a little, maybe it is some kind of EM field. He looks up. A figure is standing by the lock.

"Tiger! What are you doing here?" Aaron pulls himself upright with Lory huddled by his feet. Tighe looks at them uncertainly, says nothing.

"What's in that boat, Tiger? The alien, did you see it? What is it?"

Tighe's face wavers, crumples. "Mu... muh," his mouth jerks. "Mother."

No help here. Just in time, Aaron notices his own hands opening the port-lever. He takes Lory under the arms and drags her farther away up the ramp to the emergency intercom panel. Her eyes are still open, her hands are fumbling weakly at her suit-fastenings.

Aaron breaks out the caller. It's an all-ship channel.

"Don! Commander Purcell, can you hear me? This is Dr. Kaye, I'm in ramp six, there's been trouble down here."

No answer. Aaron calls again, calls Coby, calls the Commo and Safety COs, calls everybody he can think of, calls himself hoarse. No answer. Has everybody on *Centaur* gone into corridor Gamma One, is the whole damned ship out there with that—

Except Tighe. Aaron frowns at the damaged man. He was in here, he didn't join the stampede.

"Tiger, did you go out there?"

Tighe mouths, emits what could be a negative. He seems uninterested in the port. What does it take to stay sane near that thing, Aaron wonders, cortical suppressants? Or did one contact immunize him? Can we prepare drugs, can I lobotomize myself and still function? He notices he has drifted closer to the port, that Lory is crawling toward it, half out of her suit. He pulls her out of it, gets them both back up the ramp.

When he looks up there is a shadow on the port view-panel.

For a terrified instant Aaron is sure it is the alien coming for him. Then he sees a human hand, slowly tapping. Somebody trying to get in—but he dare not go down there.

"Tiger! Open the port, let the man in." He gestures wildly at Tighe. "The port, look! You remember, hit the latch, Tiger. Open up!"

Tighe hesitates, turns in place. Then an old reflex fires; he sidesteps and slaps double-handed at the latch with perfect coordination—and as quickly sags again. The port swings open. Captain Yellaston stands there. Deliberately he steps through.

"Captain, captain, are you all right?" Aaron starts to run forward, checks himself. "Tiger, close the port."

Yellaston is walking stiffly toward him, looking straight ahead. Face a little pale, Aaron thinks, no injuries visible. He's all right, whatever happened. It's all right.

"Captain, I—" But there are more figures at the port, Aaron sees, Tim Bron and Coby, coming in past Tighe. Others beyond. Aaron has never been so glad to see his assistant, he yells something at him and

turns to catch up with Yellaston.

"Captain—" He wants to ask about sealing off the corridor, about examining them all. But Yellaston does not look around.

"The red," Yellaston says in a faint remote voice. "The red... is the correct... signal." He walks on, toward the bridge.

Some sort of shock, Aaron thinks, and sees movement by the wall ahead—it is Lory, up and staggering away from him. But she isn't going toward the corridor, she's going up a ramp into the ship. The clinic is where she belongs. Aaron starts after her, confident that the drug will slow her down. But his suit is awkward, he has not counted on that feral vitality. She stays ahead of him, she gains speed up the twisting tube as the gees let go. He pounds up after her, past the dormitory levels, past Stores; he is half-sailing now. Lory dives into the central freefall shaft—but not going straight, he sees her twist left, toward the bridge.

Cursing, Aaron follows her in. His feet miss the guides, he ricochets, has trouble regaining speed. Lory is a receding minnow-shape ahead of him, going like a streak. She shoots through the command-section sphincter, checks. Damn, she's closing it against him.

By the time he gets it open and goes through, the core shaft is empty. Aaron kicks on into the Astrogation dome. Nobody there. He climbs out of the freefall area and starts back around the computer corridor. Nobody here either. Åhlstrom's gleaming pets are untended. This has never happened before. It's like a ghost ship. Station after station is empty. The physics display-screen is running a calculation, unobserved.

A sound breaks the silence, coming from the next ring aft. Oh god, Bustamente's Commo room! Aaron can't find the inside door, he doubles back out into the corridor, races clumsily sternwards, terror in his guts as the sound rises to a scream.

The Commo room is open. Aaron plunges in, checks in horror. Lory is standing in the sacred gyro chamber. The scream is coming from the open gyro housings. Her arm jerks out sending a stream of objects—headsets, jacks, wrenches—into the flying wheels.

"Stop!" He lunges for her, but the sound has risen to a terrible yammering. A death cry—the great pure beings who have spun there faultlessly for a decade holding their lifeline to Earth are in mortal agony. They clash, collide horribly. A cam shoots past him, buries itself in the wall. She has killed them, his mad sister.

Gripping her he stands there stunned, scarcely able to take in other damage. The housing of the main laser crystals is wrecked; they have been hit with something. That hardly matters now, Aaron thinks numbly. Without the gyros to aim them the beam is only an idiot's finger flailing across the stars.

"We, we'll go together now, Arn." Lory hangs on him, weak now. "They can't—stop us any more."

Aaron's substrate takes over; he utters a howl and starts to shake her by the neck, squeezing, crushing—but is startled into stasis by a voice behind him, saying "Bustamente."

He wheels. It is Captain Yellaston.

"I will send... the red signal... now."

"You can't!" Aaron yells in rage. "You can't, it's broken! *She* broke it!" Preadolescent fury floods him, ebbs as he sees that remote, uncomprehending face.

"You will send... the red signal." The man is in shock, all right.

"Sir, we can't—we can't send anything right now." Aaron releases Lory, takes Yellaston's arm. Yellaston frowns down at him, purses his lips. A two-liter night. He lets himself be turned away, headed toward his quarters. Aaron is irrationally grateful: As long as Yellaston hasn't seen the enormity it isn't real. He pulls back the captain's glove, checks the pulse as they go. About sixty; slow but not arrhythmic.

"The technical capacity..." Yellaston mutters, going into his room. "If you have the efficiency... you'll wake up in the morning..."

"Please He down awhile, Captain." Aaron closes the door, sees Lory wandering behind him. He takes her arm and starts back toward his office, resisting the faint urge to turn toward Gamma One. If he can only get to his office he can begin to function, decide what to do. What has hit *Centaurs* people, what did that alien do? A static discharge, maybe, like an electric eel? Better try his standard adrenergic stim-shot, if the heartrates are okay. That overwhelming attractant—he can feel it now, even here in Beta corridor on the far side of the ship. Like a pheromone, Aaron decides. That thing is a sessile life-form, maybe it attracts food, maybe it gets itself fertilized that way. Just happens that it works on man. A field, maybe, like gravity. Or some fantastically attenuated particle. The suits didn't stop it completely. I should seal it off, that's the first thing, he tells himself, leading Lory, docile now. They are passing Don's scoutship berth. But the *Beast* isn't here, it's god knows how many thousand miles away now, blating out its message.

Someone is here—Don Purcell is standing by an access ramp, staring at the deck. Aaron drags Lory faster.

"Don! Commander, are you okay?"

Don's head turns to him; the grin is there, the eyes have smile-wrinkles. But Aaron sees his pupils are unequally dilated, like a poleaxed steer. How severe was that shock? He takes the unresisting wrist.

"Can you recognize me, Don? It's Aaron. It's Doc. You've had a physical shock, you shouldn't be wandering around." Pulse slow, like Yellaston's; no irregularity Aaron can catch. "I want you to come with me to the clinic."

The strong body doesn't move. Aaron pulls at him, realizes he can't budge him alone. He needs his syringe-kit, too.

"That's a medical order, Don. Report for treatment."

The smile slowly focusses on him, puzzled.

"The power," Don says in the voice he uses at chapel. "The hand of the Almighty on the deep..."

"See, Am?" Lory reaches out toward Don, pats him. "He's changed. He's gentle." She smiles tremulously.

Aaron leads her on, wondering how seriously people have been hit. *Centaur* can sustain itself for days, that part's all right. He will not think of the more fearful hurt, the murdered gyros; Bustamente—Bustamente can do something, somehow. But how long are people going to remain in shock? How many of them got hit by that thing, who is functioning besides himself? Could it be permanent damage? Impossible, he tells himself firmly; a shock that severe would have finished poor Tighe. Impossible.

As he turns off to the clinic Lory suddenly pulls back.

"No, Am, this way!"

"We're going to the office, Lor. I have work to do."

"Oh no, Arn. Don't you *understand*? We're going now, together." Her voice is plaintive, with a loose, slurred quality. Aaron's training wakes up. Chemical supplementation, as Foy said—this is the time to get some answers from the subject.

"I'm scared, Sis. Talk to me a minute, then we'll go. What happened to them, what happened to Mei-Lin and the others on the planet?"

"Mei-Lin?" she frowns.

"Yes, what did you see them do? You can tell me now, Lor. Did you see them out there?"

"Oh, yes..." She gives a vague little laugh. "I saw them. They left me in the ship, Am. They, they didn't want me." Her lips quiver.

"What did they do, Lor?"

"Oh, they walked. Little Kuh had the video, I could see where they went. Up the hills, toward the, toward the beauty... It was hours, hours and hours. And then Mei-Lin and Liu went on ahead, I could see them running—Oh, Arn, I wanted to run too, you can't imagine how they look—"

"What happened then, Lor?"

"They took off their helmets and then the camera fell down, I guess the others were all running too. I could see their feet—it was like a mountain of jewels in the sun—" Tears are running down her face, she rubs her fist at them like a child.

"What did you see then? What did the jewel-thing do to them?"

"It didn't do anything." She smiles, sniffing. "They just touched it, you know, with their minds. You'll *see*, Arn. Please—let's go now."

"In a minute, Lor. Tell me, did they fight?"

"Oh, no!" Her eyes widen at him. "No! Oh, I made that up to protect it. No hurting any more, never. They came back so gentle, so happy. They were all changed, they shed all that. It's waiting for us, Arn, see? It wants to deliver us. We'll be truly human at last." She sighs. "Oh, I wanted so much to go, too, it was terrible. I had to tie myself, even in the suit. I *had* to bring it back to you. And I did, didn't I?"

"You got that thing in the scouter all by yourself, Lor?"

She nods, dream-eyed. "I found a little one, I poked it with the front-end loader." The contrast between her words and her face is weird.

"What were Kuh and his men doing all this time? Didn't they try to stop you?"

"Oh no, they watched. They were around. Please Arn, come *on*."

"How long did it take you!"

"Oh, days, Arn, it was so hard. I could only do a little at a time."

"You mean they didn't recover for days? What about that tape, Lor; you faked it, didn't you?"

"I, I edited it a little. He wasn't... interested." Her eyes shift evasively. Control returning. "Am, don't be *afraid*. The bad things are over now. Can't you feel it, the goodness?"

He can—it's there, pulling at him faint and bliss-laden. He shudders awake, discovers he has let her lead him nearly to the core, toward Gamma One. Angrily he makes himself grab the handrail and start hauling her back toward the clinic. It is like moving through glue, his body doesn't want to.

"No, Arn, no!" She pulls back, sobbing. "You *have* to, I worked so hard—"

He concentrates grimly on his feet. The clinic door is ahead now, to his infinite relief he can see Coby inside at the desk.

"You aren't coming!" Lory wails and jerks violently out of his grasp. "You—Oh—"

He jumps for her, but she is running away again, running like a goddamned deer. Aaron checks himself. He cannot chase after her now, he has evaded his duty too long as it is. Days, she said. This is appalling. And they were walking around. Brain damage... Don't think of it.

He goes into the office. Coby is looking at him.

"My sister is in psychotic fugue," Aaron tells him. "She damaged our communication equipment. Sedation ineffective—" He perceives he is acting irrationally, he should tackle the major medical situation first.

"How many people got shocked by that thing, Bill?"

Goby's noncommittal gaze does not change. Finally he says dully, "Shock. Oh, yes. Shock." His lip twists in a ghostly sneer.

Oh, god no... Coby was in that corridor, too.

"Jesus, Bill, did it get you? I'm going to give you a shot of AD-twelve. Unless you have other ideas?"

Goby's eyes are following him. Maybe he isn't as severely affected, Aaron thinks.

"Post coitum tristum." Coby's voice is very low. "I am tristum."

"What did it do to you, Bill, can you tell me?"

The silent, sad stare continues. Just as Aaron opens the hypo-kit Coby says clearly, "I know a ripe corpus luteum when I see one." He gives a faint, nasty chuckle.

"What?" Obscene visions leap to life in Aaron's head as he bares Coby's elbow and sends the epidermal jet into the vein. "Did you, you didn't have some sort of intercourse with that thing, Bill?"

"In-ter-course?" Coby echoes in a whisper. "No... not ours, anyway. If somebody had... in-ter-course it was god, maybe... Or a planet... Not us... It had *us*."

His pulse is slow, skin cold. "What do you mean, Bill?"

Coby's face quivers, he stares up into Aaron's eyes fighting to hang on to consciousness. "Say we were carrying it... carrying a load of jizzum in our heads, I guess... And the jizzum meets... the queen couzy, the queen couzy of all time... and it jumps... jumps across. It makes some kind of holy... zygote, out there... see? Only we're left... empty... What happens to a sperm's tail... afterwards?"

"Take it easy, Bill." Aaron will not listen, oh no, not to delirium. His best diagnostician raving.

Coby emits another ghastly snicker. "Good old Aaron," he whispers. "You didn't..." His eyes go blank.

"Bill, try to pull yourself together. Stay right there. People are in shock, they're wandering around disoriented. I have work to do, can you hear me? Stay here, I'll be back."

Visions of himself hustling through the ship, reviving people—more important, sealing off that corridor, too. He loads a kit of stim-hypos, adds cardiotropics, detoxicants. An hour too late, Dr. Aaron Kaye is on the job. He draws hot brew for them both. Coby doesn't look.

"Drink up, Bill. I'll be back."

He sets off to Stores, steering against the pull from Gamma One. It is weak here. He can make it quite easily. Is it in refractory phase maybe? Shot its bolt. How long to recovery? Better attend to that first, can't let it get them all over again.

Miriamne Stein is at her desk, her face absolutely quiet.

"It's Doc, MM. You've had a shock, this will help you." He hopes, administering it to her passive arm. Her empty eyes slowly turn. "I'm checking out some EVA rope, see? I'll leave you a receipt right here, MM, look. You stay there until you feel better."

Outside, he lets himself start across the ship, going with the pull. Joy opens in him, it is like a delicious sliding, like letting go sexually in his head... Am I acting rationally? He probes himself, scared. Yes—he can make himself turn, make himself go forward toward the first bow-ramp. His plan is to close all the ports the crowd left open on their way into the corridor. Fourteen. After that—after that he can, he knows, vent the air from the inboard side. Depressurizing will kill it, of course. The sensible thing to do. No, surely that isn't necessary? He will think about it later, something is hurting him right now.

At the bow-ramp his head still feels okay, the thing's... lure is weak. The port is open; Don probably came this way. Cautiously, Aaron risks going down to it without tying his rope. All right; he has it swinging shut. As it closes he peeks out down the corridor. A mess, no people he can see—but the rosy living radiance—his heart misses, jumps—and the port closes almost on his nose.

A near thing. He must take no chances on the next one—it will be nearer to that marvelous light, will be in fact behind the command console where Yellaston was. Aaron finds his feet hurrying, stops himself at the last turn in the ramp and ties one end of the tether to a wall-hold. The other end he knots around his waist. Multiple knottings, must not be able to untie these in a hurry. It's well he did so, he finds; he is already stepping into the corridor itself, stumbling on helmets, gloves, cables. The great flare of warm light is about twenty meters ahead. He must go back, go back and close the port. He stops himself at the command console and looks up at the videoscreen, still focussed on *China Flowers* fiery heart. It is like jewels in there, he sees, awestruck—great softly glowing globes, dazzling, changing color as he looks... some are dark, like a heap of fiery embers burning out. *Dying?* Grief wells up in him, he puts his hand up to hide it, looks away. There are his useless, evil canisters... and the corridor a shambles. Aftermath of a stampede... What was Goby muttering about, sperm. They went through here, tails thrashing—"Arn—you camel."

From nowhere Lory is hugging his arm.

"Oh, Arn dear, I waited—"

"Get out of here, Lori" But she is working at his waist, trying to untie knots. Her face is ecstatic—a load

of jizzum in the head, all right. "Go away, Lor. I'm going to depressurize."

"We'll be *together*, don't be afraid."

Angrily he pushes her behind him. "I'm going to vent the air, can't you hear me? The air is going out!"

He tries to head her back toward the ramp, but she twists away from him, gasping, "Oh, Arn, please Arn, I can't—" And she is running to the light, to *China's* hatch.

"Come back here!" He runs at her, is brought up by the rope. She wavers just beyond him outlined in pale fire, turning, turning, her fists at her mouth, sobbing, "I—I'm going—alone—"

"No! Lor, wait!"

His own hands are ripping at the knots but she is going, slipping away from him across the tangled floor. "No, no—" The warm light enwraps her, she has turned, is walking into it, is gone—

A harsh warble breaks into his ears, waking him. He staggers back, finally makes out that the flashings on the console are launch warnings. Somebody is in *China Flower*, taking off!

"Who's in there? Stop!" He flips channels at random. "You in the ship, answer me!"

"Good-bye, boy..." Bustamente's voice echoes from the speakers.

"Ray, are you in there? This is Aaron, Ray, come out, you don't know what you're doing—"

"I know to... set course. Keep your shit... world." The deep voice is flat, mechanical.

"Come out here! Ray, we need you. Please listen, Ray—the gyros are broken. The *gyros*."

"... Tough."

A heavy metal purring shivers the walls.

"Ray, wait!" Aaron screams. "My sister is in there, she'll be killed—your hatch is open! I'll be killed too, please, Ray, let her come out. I'll close it. Lory! Lory, get out!"

His eyes are seeking desperately for the hatch control, his hands tear at the knots.

"She can come, too." A deathlike chuckle—another lighter voice briefly there, too. Ray's women—is Soli in there? The knots are giving.

"I'm going to... that planet... boy."

"Ray, you'll wake up a million miles in space, for Christ's sake wait!" He jerks, pulls loose—he has to get there, get Lory out—he has to save that living beauty, that promise—Other lights are flashing, there is a shudder in the walls. *The ship, Lory*, his brain cries faintly. He pulls the rope free and sees her shadow, her body wavering out blue against the radiance waiting there, waiting for him. With his last sanity he strikes the hatch lever, shoves it home.

The big hatch starts to slide shut across the radiant port.

"No, wait! No!" Aaron starts to run to it, his hand still grasping the rope, he is running toward all he has ever longed for—but the walls clang, scrape thunderously, and a wind buffets him sideways. He grips the rope in reflex, sees Lory stagger and start to slide in the howling air, everything is sliding toward the

closing hatch. *China Flower* is going, falling away—taking it from him. They will all be blown out after her—but as Lory nears it the hatch slides home, the last ray vanishes.

The wind stops, the corridor is totally silent.

He stands there, a foolish man holding a rope, knowing that all sweetness is fading. Life itself is falling out to the dark beneath him, going away forever. Come back, he whispers, aching. Oh, come back.

Lory stirs. He lets fall the idiotic rope, goes to her bowed under a loss beyond bearing. What have I saved, what have I lost? Going away, fainter, fainter yet.

She looks up. Her face is clear, empty. Very young. All gone now, the load in her head... A feeling of dumb weight comes over him. It is *Centaur*, the whole wonderful ship he had been so proud of, hanging over him mute and flaccid in the dark. The life-spark gone away. Voiceless, unfindable in the icy wastes...

His gut knows it is forever now, nothing will ever be all right again.

Gently he helps Lory up and starts walking with her to noplacé, she trustful to his hand; little sister as she had been long ago. As they move away from the corridor his eyes notice a body lying by the wall. It is Tighe.

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## Chapter IV

... Dr. Aaron Kaye recording. The ghosts, the new things I mean, they're starting to go. I see them quite well now awake. Yesterday—wait, was it yesterday? Yes, because Tim has only been here one night, I brought him in yesterday. His, his body, I mean. It was his ghost I saw—Christ, I keep calling them that—the *things*, the new things, I mean. The ghost is in Tim's bed. But I saw his go, it was still out in Beta corridor. Did I say they're fairly stationary? I forget what I said. Maybe I should go over it, I have the time. They're more or less transparent, of course, even at the end. They float. I think they're partly out of the ship. It's hard to tell their size, like a projection or afterimage. They seem big, say six or eight meters in diameter, but once or twice I've thought they may be very small. They're alive, you can tell that. They don't respond or communicate. They're not... rational. Not at all. They change, too, they take on colors or something from your mind. Did I say that? I'm not sure they're really visible at all, maybe the mind senses them and constructs an appearance. But recognizable. You can see... traces. I can identify most of them. Tim's was by ramp seven. It was partly Tim and partly something else, very alien. It seemed to swell up and float away out through the hull, as if it was getting closer and farther at the same time. The first one to go, so far as I know. Except Tighe's. I dreamed that. They do *not* dissipate. It throbbed—no, that isn't quite right. It swelled and floated. Away.

They're not ghosts, I should repeat that.

What I think they are—my subjective impression, I mean, a possible explanatory hypothesis—Oh, hell, I don't have to talk that way any more. What I think they are is, some kind of energy-thing, some—

What I think they are is blastomeres.

Holy zygotes, Coby said. I don't think they're holy. They're just there, growing. Definitely not spirits or ghosts or higher essences, they're not the *person* at all. They're a, a combined product. They develop. They stay at the site awhile and then... move on out.



Maybe I should record the order they go in, maybe it will correlate with the person's condition. That would be of scientific interest. The whole thing is of deep scientific interest, of course. Who will it be of scientific interest to? That's a good question. Maybe somebody will stumble on this ship in about a thousand years. Hello, friend. Are you human? If you are you won't be long. Kindly listen to Dr. Aaron Kaye before you—Oh, god, wait—This is Dr. Aaron Kaye recording a message of deep scientific interest. Where was I? It doesn't matter. Tim—I mean Commander Timofaev Bron died today. I mean Tim himself. That's the first actual death except Tighe. Oh, and Bachi—I reported him, didn't I? Yes. The others are still functioning more or less. In a vegetable way. They feed themselves now and then. Since the meals stopped I carry rations around. We go over the ship every day or so. I'm pretty sure no one else has died. Some of them are still playing cards in Commons, they even say a word or two sometimes. Some cards have fallen down, the ten of spades has been by Don's foot for days. I made them drink water yesterday. I'm afraid they're badly dehydrated... Kawabata's the worst off, I think, he's sleeping in a soil bed. Earth to earth... He'll probably go soon. I have to learn to run all that, I suppose. If I go on... I know now I'll never be able to fix that laser. Christ, I spent a week in Ray's spookhouse. Funny thing, they gave us a big nondirectional Mayday transmitter. That means, "Come here and rescue us." But how can I send, "Stay the hell away?" Flaw in the program. That's all too short-range, anyway... I could blow up the ship, I guess I could work that out. What good would it do? It wouldn't stop them coming. They'd figure we had an accident. Too bad, hazards of space. Baby, you'll find out...

... Wonder where Ray is now, how long he lasted? His, his thing is here, of course. In Gamma One. The women too. I found Soli's, it's, no, I think we won't talk about that. They were with him, their bodies, I mean. *Them*... He was so strong, he did something, he acted, afterward. No use of course. The dead saving the dead. Help me make it through the night—quit that.

... Functioning, we were discussing functioning. The most intact is Yellaston. I mean, he isn't intact at all but we talk a little, sort of, when I go up there. Maybe a lifetime practice in carrying on with half of his cortex shot. I think he understands. It's not a highly technical concept, after all. He knows he's dying. He saw it as death, the whole thing. Intuition in his locked-up guts, the fear—Sex equals death. How right you are, old man. Funny, I used to treat patients for thinking that. Therapy—Of course it was a different, let's say order of sex. He's quit drinking. The thing he was holding in, the load, it's gone... I think of what's left as him, damn it, it is him, the human part. I've seen his, his product, it's by the bow-port. It's very strange. I wonder, has he seen it? Does a spent sperm recognize the blastomere? I think he must have. I found him crying, once. Maybe it was joy, I don't think so...

... Hello, friend. This is Dr. Aaron Kaye, your friendly scientific reporter. Dr. Aaron Kaye is also getting the tiniest bit ethanolized, maybe you'll forgive it. It has occurred to me as a matter of scientific justice that Coby deserves credit for the, the formulation of the hypothesis. Superb diagnostician, Coby, to the end. That's Dr. William F. Coby, late of Johns Hopkins/M.I.T. Originator of Coby's final solution—hypothesis, I mean. Remember his name, friend. While you can. I tried to get him to record this but he doesn't talk any more. I think he's right; I know he's right. He still functions, though, in a dying way. Goes to the narcotics locker quite openly. I let him. Maybe he's trying something. Why is he so intact? Didn't he have much of whatever it is they lost, not much jizzum there? No—that's not fair. Not even true... Funny thing, I find myself liking him now, really liking him. Dangerous stuff all gone, I guess. Comment on me. Call me Lory—no, we aren't going to talk about Lory, either. We were talking about, I was talking about Goby. His hypothesis. Listen, friend. You on your way with a load in your head.

Goby's right, I know he's right. We're gametes.

Nothing but gametes. The dimorphic set—call it sperm. Two types, little boy sperms, little girl sperms—half of the germ-plasm of... something. Not complete beings at all. Half of the gametes of some... creatures, some race. Maybe they live in space, I think so. The, their zygotes do. Maybe they

aren't even intelligent. Say they use planets to breed on, like amphibians going to the water. And they sowed their primordial seed-stuff around here, their milt and roe among the stars. On suitable planets. And the stuff germinated. And after the usual interval—say three billion years, that's what it took us, didn't it?—the milt, the sperm evolved to *motility*, see? And we made it to the stars. To the roe-planet. To fertilize them. And that's all we are, the whole damn thing—the evolving, the achieving and fighting and hoping—all the pain and effort, just to get us there with the loads of jizzum in our heads. Nothing but sperms' tails. Human beings—does a sperm think it's somebody, too? Those beautiful egg-things, the creatures on that planet, evolving in their own way for millions of years... maybe they think and dream, too, maybe they think they're people. All the whole thing, just to make something else, all for nothing—

... Excuse me. This is Dr. Aaron Kaye, recording two more deaths. They are Dr. James Kawabata and Quartermaster Miriamne Stein. I found her when I was taking Kawabata's body to cold Stores. They'll all be there, you'll find them, friend. Fifty-nine icicles and one dust pile... maybe. Cause of death—have I been reporting cause of death? Cause of death, acute—Oh, hell, what does a sperm's tail die of? Acute loss of ability to live any more. Acute post-functional irrelevance... Symptoms; maybe you'd like to know the symptoms. You should be interested. The symptoms start after brief contact with a certain life-form from the Alpha planet—did I mention that there does seem to have been momentary physical contact, apparently through the forehead? The gross symptoms are disorientation, apathy, some aphasia, anorexia. All responses depressed; aprosexia, speech echolalic. Reflexes weakly present, no typical catatonia. Cardiac functions subnormal, nonacute. Clinically—I've been able to test six of them—clinically the EEG shows generalized flattening, asynchrony. Early theta and alpha deficits. It is unlike, repeat totally unlike, post-ECS syndrome. Symptoms cannot be interpreted as due to a physical shock, electric or otherwise. Adrenergic systems most affected, cholinergic relatively less so. Adrenal insufficiency is not, repeat not, confirmed by hormonal bioassay. Oh hell—they've been drained, that's what it is. Drained of something... something vital. Prognosis... yes.

The prognosis is death.

This is of great scientific interest, friend. But you won't believe it, of course. You're on your way there, aren't you? Nothing will stop you, you have reasons. All kinds of reasons—saving the race, building a new world, national honor, personal glory, scientific truth, dreams, hopes, plans—does every little sperm have its reasons, thrashing up the pipe?

It calls, you see. The roe calls us across the light-years, don't ask me how. It's even calling Dr. Aaron Kaye, the sperm who said no—Oh, Christ, I can feel it, the sweet pull. *Why did I let it go?* ... Excuse me. Dr. Aaron Kaye is having another drink now. Quite a few, actually. Yellaston was right, it helps... The infinite variety of us, all for nothing. Where was I?... We make our rounds, I check them all. They don't move much any more. I look at the new things, too... Lory comes with me, she helps me carry things. Like she used to, little sister—we're particularly not going to talk about Lory. The things, the zygotes—three more of them went away today, Kawabata's and the two Danes. Don's is still in Commons, I think it's going soon. Do they leave when the, the *person* dies? I think that's just coincidence. We're totally... *irrelevant*, afterward. The zygote remains near the site of impregnation for a variable period before moving on to implant. Where do they implant, in space, maybe? Where do they get born?—Oh, god, what are they like, the creatures that generated us, that we die to form? Can a gamete look at a king? Are they brutes or angels? Ah, Christ, it isn't fair, *it isn't fair!*

... Sorry, friend. I'm all right now. Don Purcell collapsed today, I left him in Commons. I visit my patients daily. Most of them are still sitting. Sitting at their stations, in their graves. We do what we can, Lory and I. *Making gentle the life of this world* ... It may be of great scientific interest that they all saw it different, the egg-things I mean. Don said it was god, Coby ova. Åhlstrom was whispering about the tree Yggdrasil. Bruce Jang saw Mei-Lin there. Yellaston saw death. Tighe saw Mother, I think. All Dr.

Aaron Kaye saw was colored lights. Why didn't I go, too? Who knows. Statistical phenomenon. Defective tail. My foot got caught... Lory saw Utopia, heaven on earth, I guess. We will not talk about Lory... She goes 'round with me, looking at the dying sperms, our friends. All the things in their rooms, the personal life, all this ship we were so proud of. *Mono no aware*, that's the pathos of things, Kawabata told me. The wristwatch after the wearer has died, the eyeglasses... the pathos of all our things now.

... Yes, Dr. Aaron Kaye is getting fairly well pissed, friend. Dr. Aaron Kaye, you see, is avoiding contemplating what he'll do, afterward... after they are all gone. Coby broke his leg today. I found him, I think he was pleased when I put him to bed. He didn't seem to be in much pain. His, the thing he made, it went away quite a while ago, I guess I haven't been recording too well. A lot of them have gone. Not Yellaston's last time I looked. He's up in Astrogation, I mean Yellaston himself. Gazing out the dome. I know he wants to end there. Ah Christ, the poor old tiger, the poor ape, everything Lory hated—all gone now. Who cares about a sperm's personality? Answer: Another sperm... Dr. Kaye grows maudlin. Dr. Kaye weeps, in fact. Remember that, friend. It has scientific interest. What will Dr. Kaye do, afterward? It will be quiet around here on the good ship *Centaur*, which will probably last forever, unless it falls into a star... Will Dr. Kaye live out the rest of his life here, twenty-six trillion miles from his home testis? Reading, listening to music, tending his garden, writing notes of great scientific interest? Fifty-nine frozen bodies and one skeleton. Keep your eye on the skeleton, friend... or check on that last scoutship, *Alpha*. Will Dr. Kaye one day take off in little old *Alpha*, trying to head for somewhere?

Where? You guess... Tail-end Charlie, last man in the oviduct. Over the viaduct, via the oviduct. Excuse me.

... Not the last. Not at all, let's not forget all those fleets of ships, they'll start from Earth when the green signal gets there. And they'll keep on coming for a while anyway... The green got sent, didn't it, no matter how we tried? The goal of man's desiring. No way to stop it. No hope at all, really.

But of course it's only a handful, the ones that will ever make it to the planet, compared to the total population of Earth. About the proportion of one ejaculandum to total sperm production, wouldn't you say? Should compute sometime, great scientific interest there. So most of the egg-creatures will die unfertilized, too. Nature's notorious wastefulness. Fifty million eggs, a billion sperm—one salmon...

... What happens to the people who don't go, the ones who stay on Earth, all the rest of the race? Let us speculate, Dr. Kaye. What happens to unused sperm? Stuck in testes, die of overheating. Reabsorbed. Remind you of anything? Calcutta, say. Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles... Previews. Born too soon or too late—too bad. Rot away unused. Function fulfilled, organs atrophy... End of it all, just rot away. *Not even knowing*—thinking they were people, thinking they had a chance...

Dr. Kaye is getting rather conclusively intoxicated, friend. Dr. Kaye is also getting tired of talking to you. What good will it do you on your way up the pipe? Can you stop, man? Can you? Ha ha. As—someone used to say... God damn it, why can't you try? Can't you stop, can't you stay human even if we're—Oh Lord, can a half of something, can a gamete build a culture? I don't think so... You poor doomed bastard with a load in your head, you'll get there or die trying—Excuse me. Lory stumbled a lot today... Little sister, you were a good sperm, you swam hard. You made the connection. She wasn't crazy, you know. Ever, really. She knew something was wrong with us... Healed, made whole? All those months... a wall away from heaven, the golden breasts of god. The end of pain, the queen couzy... fighting it all the way... Oh,

Lory, stay with me, don't die—*Christ, the pull, the terrible sweet pull*—

... This is Dr. Aaron Kaye signing off. Maybe my condition is of deep scientific interest... I don't dream

any more.