

Science Fiction

Waiting for the Earthquake

By Robert Silverberg


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It was eleven weeks and two days and three hours—plus or minus a little—until the earthquake that was going to devastate the planet, and suddenly Morrissey found himself doubting that the earthquake was going to happen at all. The strange notion stopped him in his tracks. He was out strolling the shore of the Ring Ocean, half a dozen kilometers from his cabin, when the idea came to him. He turned to his companion, an old fux called Dinoov who was just entering his postsexual phase, and said in a peculiar tone, “What if the ground doesn't shake, you know?”

“But it will,” the aborigine said calmly.

“What if the predictions are *wrong*?”

The fux was a small elegant blue-furred creature, sleek and compact, with the cool all-accepting demeanor that comes from having passed safely through all the storms and metamorphoses of a fux's reproductive odyssey. It raised its hind legs, the only pair that remained to it now, and said, "You should cover your head when you walk in the sunlight at flare time, friend Morrissey. The brightness damages the soul."

"You think I'm crazy, Dinoov?"

"I think you are under great stress."

Morrissey nodded vaguely. He looked away and stared westward across the shining blood-hued ocean, narrowing his eyes as though trying to see the frosty crystalline shores of Farside beyond the curve of the horizon. Perhaps half a kilometer out to sea he detected glistening patches of bright green on the surface of the water—the spawning bloom of the

balloons. High above those dazzling streaks a dozen or so brilliant iridescent gasbag-creatures hovered, going through the early sarabandes of their mating dance. The quake would not matter at all to the balloons. When the surface of Medea heaved and buckled and crumpled, they would be drifting far overhead, dreaming their transcendental dreams and paying no attention.

But maybe there will be no quake, Morrissey told himself.

He played with the thought. He had waited all his life for the vast apocalyptic event that was supposed to put an end to the thousand-year-long human occupation of Medea, and now, very close to earthquake time, he found a savage perverse pleasure in denying the truth of what he knew to be coming. No earthquake! No earthquake! Life will go on and on and on! The thought gave him a chilling prickling feeling. There was an odd

sensation in the soles of his feet, as if he were standing with both his feet off the ground.

Morrissey imagined himself sending out a joyful message to all those who had fled the doomed world: *Come back, all is well, it didn't happen! Come live on Medea again!* And he saw the fleet of great gleaming ships swinging around, heading back, moving like mighty dolphins across the void, shimmering like needles in the purple sky, dropping down by the hundred to unload the vanished settlers at Chong and Enrique and Pellucidar and Port Medea and Madagozar. Swarms of people rushing forth, tears, hugs, raucous laughter, old friends reunited, the cities coming alive again! Morrissey trembled. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms tight around himself. The fantasy had almost hallucinatory power. It made him giddy, and his skin, bleached and leathery from a lifetime under the

ultraviolet flares of the twin suns, grew hot and moist. *Come home, come home, come home! The earthquake's been canceled!*

He savored that. And then he let go of it and allowed the bright glow of it to fade from his mind.

He said to the fux, "There's eleven weeks left. And then everything on Medea is going to be destroyed. Why are you so calm, Dinoov?"

"Why not?"

"Don't you *care?*"

"Do you?"

"I love this place," Morrissey said. "I can't bear to see it all smashed apart."

"Then why didn't you go home to Earth with the others?"

“Home? Home? This is my home. I have Medean genes in my body. My people have lived here for a thousand years. My great-grandparents were born on Medea and so were *their* great-grandparents.”

“The others could say the same thing. Yet when earthquake time drew near, they went home. Why have you stayed?”

Morrissey, towering over the slender little being, was silent a moment. Then he laughed harshly and said, “I didn't evacuate for the same reason that you don't give a damn that a killer quake is coming. We're both done for anyway, right? I don't know anything about Earth. It's not my world. I'm too old to start over there. And you? You're on your last legs, aren't you? Both your wombs are gone, your male itch is gone, you're in that nice quiet burned-out place, eh, Dinoov?” Morrissey

chuckled. "We deserve each other. Waiting for the end together, two old hulks."

The fux studied Morrissey with glinting, unfathomable, mischievous eyes. Then he pointed downwind, toward a headland maybe three hundred meters away, a sandy rise thickly furred with bladdermoss and scrubby yellow-leaved anglepod bushes. Right at the tip of the cape, outlined sharply against the glowing sky, were a couple of fuxes. One was female, six-legged, yet to bear her first litter. Behind her, gripping her haunches and readying himself to mount, was a bipedal male, and even at this distance Morrissey could see his frantic, almost desperate movements.

"What are they doing?" Dinoov asked.

Morrissey shrugged. "Mating."

"Yes. And when will she drop her young?"

"In fifteen weeks."

"Are they burned out?" the fux asked. "Are they done for? Why do they make young if destruction is coming?"

"Because they can't help—"

Dinoov silenced Morrissey with an upraised hand. "I meant the question not to be answered. Not yet, not until you understand things better. Yes? Please?"

"I don't—"

"—understand. Exactly." The fux smiled a fuxy smile. "This walk has tired you. Come now: I'll go with you to your cabin."

* * * *

They scrambled briskly up the path from the long crescent of pale blue sand that was the beach to the top of the bluff, and then walked more slowly down the road, past the abandoned holiday cabins toward Morrissey's place. Once this had been

Argoview Dunes, a bustling shoreside community, but that was long ago. Morrissey in these latter days would have preferred to live in some wilder terrain where the hand of man had not weighed so heavily on the natural landscape, but he dared not risk it. Medea, even after ten centuries of colonization, still was a world of sudden perils. The unconquered places had gone unconquered for good reason; and, living on alone since the evacuation, he needed to keep close to some settlement with its stores of food and materiel. He could not afford the luxury of the picturesque.

In any case the wilderness was rapidly reclaiming its own now that most of the intruders had departed. In the early days this steamy low-latitude tropical coast had been infested with all manner of monstrous beasts. Some had been driven off by methodical campaigns of extermination and others, repelled by

the effluvia of the human settlements, had simply disappeared. But they were starting to return. A few weeks ago Morrissey had seen a Scuttlefish come ashore, a gigantic black-scaled tubular thing, hauling itself onto land by desperate heaves of its awesome curved flippers and actually digging its fangs into the sand, biting the shore to pull itself onward. They were supposed to be extinct. By a fantastic effort the thing had dug itself into the beach, burying all twenty meters of its body in the azure sand, and a couple of hours later hundreds of young ones that had tunnelled out of the mighty carcass began to emerge, slender beasts no longer than Morrissey's arm that went writhing with demonic energy down the dunes and into the rough surf. So this was becoming a sea of monsters again. Morrissey had no objections. Swimming was no longer one of his recreations.

He had lived by himself beside the Ring Ocean for ten years in a little low-roofed cabin of the old Arcan wingstructure design, that so beautifully resisted the diabolical Medean winds. In the days of his marriage, when he had been a geophysicist mapping the fault lines, he and Nadia and Paul and Danielle had had a house on the outskirts of Chong on Northcape within view of the High Cascades, and had come here only in winter; but Nadia had gone to sing cosmic harmonies with the serene and noble and incomprehensible balloons, and Danielle had been caught in the Hotlands at doubleflare time and had not returned, and Paul, tough old indestructible Paul, had panicked over the thought that the earthquake was only a decade away, and between Darkday and Dimday of Christmas week had packed up and boarded an Earthbound ship. All that had happened within the space of four months, and afterward Morrissey found he had lost

his fondness for the chilly air of Northcape. So he had come down to Argoview Dunes to wait out the final years in the comfort of the humid tropics, and now he was the only one left in the shore-side community. He had brought persona-cubes of Paul and Nadia and Danielle with him, but playing them turned out to be too painful, and it was a long time since he had talked with anyone but Dinoov. For all he knew, he was the only one left on Medea. Except, of course, the fuxes and the balloons. And the scuttlefish and the rock demons and the wingfingers and the not-turtles and all of those.

Morrissey and Dinoov stood silently for a time outside the cabin, watching the sunset begin. Through a darkening sky mottled with the green and yellow folds and streaks of Medea's perpetual aurora, the twin suns Phrixus and Helle—mere orange red daubs of feeble light—drifted toward the horizon. In a few

hours they would be gone, off to cast their bleak glow over the dry-ice wastelands of Farside. There could never be real darkness on the inhabited side of Medea, though, for the oppressive great sullen bulk of Argo, the huge red-hot gas-giant planet whose moon Medea was, lay just a million kilometers away. Medea, locked in Argo's grip, kept the same face turned toward her enormous primary all the time. From Argo came the warmth that made life possible on Medea, and also a perpetual dull reddish illumination.

The stars were beginning to come out as the twin suns set.

"See there," Dinoov said. "Argo has nearly eaten the white fires."

The fux had chosen deliberately archaic terms, folk-astronomy; but Morrissey understood what he meant. Phrixus and Helle were not the only suns in Medea's sky. The two

orange-red dwarf stars, moving as a binary unit, were themselves subject to a pair of magnificent blue-white stars, Castor A and B. Though the blue-white stars were a thousand times as far from Medea as the orange-red ones were, they were plainly visible by day and by night, casting a brilliant icy glare. But now they were moving into eclipse behind great Argo, and soon—eleven weeks, two days, one hour, plus or minus a little—they would disappear entirely.

And how, then, could there not be an earthquake?

Morrissey was angry with himself for the pathetic soft-headedness of his fantasy of an hour ago. No earthquake? A last-minute miracle? The calculations in error? Sure. Sure. If wishes were horses, beggars might ride. The earthquake was inevitable. A day would come when the configuration of the heavens was exactly *thus*, Phrixus and Helle positioned *here*,

and Castor A and B *there*, and *there* and *there*, and Argo as ever exerting its inexorable pull above the Hotlands, and when the celestial vectors were properly aligned, the gravitational stresses would send a terrible shudder through the crust of Medea.

This happened every 7,160 years. And the time was at hand.

Centuries ago, when the persistence of certain apocalyptic themes in fux folklore had finally led the astronomers of the Medea colony to run a few belated calculations of these matters, no one had really cared. Hearing that the world will come to an end in five or six hundred years is much like hearing that you yourself are going to die in another fifty or sixty: it makes no practical difference in the conduct of everyday life. Later, of course, as the seismic tickdown moved along, people began to think about it more seriously, and beyond doubt it had been a depressive factor in the Medean economy for the past century or

so. Nevertheless, Morrissey's generation was the first that had confronted the dimensions of the impending calamity in any realistic way. And in one manner or another the thousand-year-old colony had melted away in little more than a decade.

"How quiet everything is," Morrissey said. He glanced at the fux. "Do you think I'm the only one left, Dinoov?"

"How would I know?"

"Don't play those games with me. Your people have ways of circulating information that we were only just beginning to suspect. You know."

The fux said gravely, "The world is large. There were many human cities. Probably some others of your kind are still living here, but I have no certain knowledge. You may well be the last one."

"I suppose. Someone had to be."

"Does it give you satisfaction, knowing you are last?"

"Because it means I have more endurance, or because I think it's good that the colony has broken up?"

"Either," said the fux.

"I don't feel a thing," Morrissey said. "Either way. I'm the last, if I'm the last, because I didn't want to leave. That's all. This is my home and here I stay. I don't feel proud or brave or noble for having stayed. I wish there wasn't going to be an earthquake, but I can't do anything about that, and by now I don't think I even care."

"Really?" Dinoov asked. "That's not how it seemed a little while ago."

Morrissey smiled. "Nothing lasts. We pretend we build for the ages, but time moves and everything fades and art becomes artifacts and sand becomes sandstone, and what of it? Once

there was a world here and we turned it into a colony. And now the colonists are gone and soon the colony will be gone and this will be a world again as our rubble blows away. And what of it?"

"You sound very old," said the fux.

"I am very old. Older even than you."

"Only in years. Our lives move faster than yours, but in my few years I have been through all the stages of my life, and the end would soon be coming for me even if the ground were not going to shake. But you still have time left"

Morrissey shrugged.

The fux said, "I know that there are starships standing fueled and ready at Port Medea. Ready to go, at the push of a button."

"Are you sure? Ships ready to go?"

"Many of them. They were not needed. The Ahya have seen them and told us."

"The balloons? What were they doing at Port Medea?"

"Who understands the Ahya? They wander where they please. But they have seen the ships, friend Morrissey. You could still save yourself."

"Sure," Morrissey said. "I take a flitter thousands of kilometers across Medea, and I singlehandedly give a starship the checkdown for a voyage of fifty light-years, and then I put myself into coldsleep and I go home all alone and wake up on an alien planet where my remote ancestors happened to have been born. What for?"

"You will die, I think, when the ground shakes."

"I will die, I think, even if it doesn't."

"Sooner or later. But this way, later."

"If I had wanted to leave Medea," Morrissey said, "I would have gone with the others. It's too late now."

"No," said the fux. "There are ships at Port Medea. Go to Port Medea, my friend."

Morrissey was silent. In the dimming light he knelt and tugged at tough little hummocks of stickweed that were beginning to invade his garden. Once he had exotic shrubs from all over Medea, everything beautiful that was capable of surviving the humidity and rainfall of the Wetlands, but now as the drew near, the native plants of the coast were closing in, smothering his lovely whiptrees and dangletwines and flamestripes and the rest, and he no longer was able to hold them back. For minutes he clawed at the sticky stoloniferous killers, baleful orange against the tawny sand, that suddenly were sprouting by his doorway.

Then he said, "I think I will take a trip, Dinoov."

The fux looked startled. "You'll go to Port Medea?"

"There, yes, and other places. It's years since I've left the Dunes. I'm going to make a farewell tour of the whole planet." He was amazed himself at what he was saying. "I'm the last one here, right? And this is almost the last chance, right? And it ought to be done, right? Saying good-bye to Medea. Somebody has to make the rounds, somebody has to turn off the lights. Right? Right. Right. Right. And I'm the one."

"Will you take the starship home?"

"That's not part of my plan. I'll be back here, Dinoov. You can count on that. You'll see me again, just before the end. I promise you that."

"I wish you would go home," said the fux, "and save yourself."

"I will go home," Morrissey answered. "To save myself. In eleven weeks. Plus or minus a little."

* * * *

Morrissey spent the next day, Darkday, quietly—planing his trip, packing, reading, wandering along the beach front in the red twilight glimmer. There was no sign all day of Dinoov or indeed of any of the local fuxes, although in mid-afternoon a hundred or more balloons drifted by in tight formation, heading out to sea. In the darkness their shimmering colors were muted, but still they were a noble sight, huge taut globes trailing long coiling ropy organs. As they passed overhead Morrissey saluted them and said quietly, “A safe flight to you, cousins.” But of course the balloons took no notice of him.

Toward evening he drew from his locker a dinner that he had been saving for some special occasion, Madagozar oysters and filet of vandaleur and newly ripened peeperpods. There were two bottles of golden red Palinurus wine left and he opened one of them. He drank and ate until he started to nod off at the

table; then he lurched to his cradle, programmed himself for ten hours' sleep, about twice what he normally needed at his age, and closed his eyes.

When he woke it was well along into Dimday morning with the double sun not yet visible but already throwing pink light across the crest of the eastern hills. Morrissey, skipping breakfast altogether, went into town and ransacked the commissary. He filled a freezercase with provisions enough to last him for three months, since he had no idea what to expect by way of supplies elsewhere on Medea. At the landing strip where commuters from Enrique and Pelluciday once had parked their flitters after flying in for the weekend, he checked out his own, an '83 model with sharply raked lines and a sophisticated moire-pattern skin, now somewhat pitted and rusted by neglect. The powerpak still indicated a full charge—ninety-year half-life; he wasn't

surprised—but just to be on the safe side he borrowed an auxiliary pak from an adjoining flitter and keyed it in as a reserve. He hadn't flown in years, but that didn't worry him much: the flitter responded to voice-actuated commands, and Morrissey doubted that he'd have to do any manual overriding.

Everything was ready by mid-afternoon. He slipped into the pilot's seat and told the flitter, "Give me a systems checkout for extended flight."

Lights went on and off on the control panels. It was an impressive display of technological choreography, although Morrissey had forgotten what the displays signified. He called for verbal confirmation, and the flitter told him in a no-nonsense contralto that it was ready for takeoff.

"Your course," Morrissey said, "is due west for fifty kilometers at an altitude of five hundred meters, then north-northeast as

far as Jane's Town, east to Hawkman Farms, and southwest back to Argoview Dunes. Then without landing, head due north by the shortest route to Port Kato. Got it?"

Morrissey waited for takeoff. Nothing happened.

"Well?" he said.

"Awaiting tower clearance," said the flitter.

"Consider all clearance programs revoked."

Still nothing happened. Morrissey wondered how to key in a program override. But the flitter evidently could find no reason to call Morrissey's bluff, and after a moment takeoff lights glowed all over the cabin, a low humming came from aft. Smoothly the little vehicle retracted its wind-jacks, gliding into flight position, and spun upward into the moist, heavy, turbulent air.

* * * *

He had chosen to begin his journey with a ceremonial circumnavigation of the immediate area—ostensibly to be sure that his flitter still could fly after all these years, but he suspected also that he wanted to show himself aloft to the fuxes of the district, to let them know that at least one human vehicle still traversed the skies. The flitter seemed all right. Within minutes he was at the beach, flying directly over his own cabin—it was the only one whose garden had not been overtaken by jungle scrub—and then out over the dark, tide-driven ocean. Up north then to the big port of Jane's Town, where tourist cruisers lay rusting in the crescent harbor, and inland a little way to a derelict farming settlement where the tops of mighty gattabangus trees, heavily laden with succulent scarlet fruit, were barely visible above swarming strangler vines. And then back, over sandy scrubby hills, to the Dunes. Everything below

was desolate and dismal. He saw a good many fuxes, long columns of them in some places, mainly six-leg females and some four-leg ones, with mates leading the way. Oddly, they all seemed to be marching inland toward the dry Hotlands, as though some sort of migration were under way. Perhaps so. To a fux the interior was holier than the coast, and the holiest place of all was the great jagged central peak that the colonists called Mount Olympus, directly under Argo, where the air was hot enough to make water boil and only the most specialized of living creatures could survive. Fuxes would die in that blazing terrible highland desert almost as quickly as humans, but maybe, Morrissey thought, they wanted to get as close as possible to the holy mountain as the time of the earthquake approached. The coming round of the earthquake cycle was the

central event of fux cosmology, after all—a millennial time, a time of wonders.

He counted fifty separate bands of migrating fuxes. He wondered whether his friend Dinoov was among them. Suddenly he realized how strong was his need to find Dinoov waiting at Argoview Dunes when he returned from his journey around Medea.

The circuit of the district took less than an hour. When the Dunes came in view again, the flitter performed a dainty pirouette over the town and shot off northward along the coast.

* * * *

The route Morrissey had in mind would take him up the west coast as far as Arca, across the Hotlands to Northcape and down the other coast to tropical Madagozar before crossing back to

the Dunes. Thus he would neatly touch base wherever mankind had left an imprint on Medea.

Medea was divided into two huge hemispheres separated by the watery girdle of the Ring Ocean. But Farside was a glaciated wasteland that never left Argo's warmth, and no permanent settlements had ever been founded there, only research camps, and in the last four hundred years very few of those. The original purpose of the Medea colony had been scientific study, the painstaking exploration of a wholly alien environment, but of course, as time goes along original purposes have a way of being forgotten. Even on the warm continent human occupation had been limited to twin arcs along the coasts from the tropics through the high temperate latitudes, and timid incursions a few hundred kilometers inland. The high desert was uninhabitable, and few humans found the bordering Hotlands hospitable,

although the balloons and even some tribes of fuxes seemed to like the climate there. The only other places where humans had planted themselves was the Ring Ocean, where some floating raft-cities had been constructed in the kelp-choked equatorial water. But during the ten centuries of Medea the widely scattered human enclaves had sent out amoeboid extensions until they were nearly continuous for thousands of kilometers.

Now, Morrissey saw, that iron band of urban sprawl was cut again and again by intrusions of dense underbrush. Great patches of orange and yellow foliage already had begun to smother highways, airports, commercial plazas, residential suburbs.

What the jungle had begun, he thought, the earthquake would finish.

* * * *

On the third day Morrissey saw Hansonia Island ahead of him, a dark orange slash against the breast of the sea, and soon the flitter was making its approach to the airstrip at Port Kato on the big island's eastern shore. Morrissey tried to make radio contact but got only static and silence. He decided to land anyway.

Hansonia had never had much of a human population. It had been set aside from the beginning as an ecological-study laboratory, because its population of strange life-forms had developed in isolation from the mainland for thousands of years, and somehow it had kept its special status even in Medea's boom years.

A few groundcars were parked at the airstrip. Morrissey found one that still held a charge, and ten minutes later he was in Port Kato.

The place stank of red mildew. The buildings, wicker huts with thatched roofs, were failing apart. Angular trees of a species Morrissey did not know sprouted everywhere, in the streets, on rooftops, in the crowns of other trees. A cool hard-edged wind was blowing out of Farside. Two fuxes, four-leg females herding some young six-leggers, wandered out of a tumbledown warehouse, and stared at him in what surely was astonishment. Their pelts were so blue they seemed black—the island species, different from mainlanders.

“You come back?” one asked. Local accent, too.

“Just for a visit. Are there any humans here?”

“You,” said the other fux. He thought they laughed at him.

“Ground shake soon. You know?”

“I know,” he said.

They nuzzled their young and wandered away.

For three hours Morrissey explored the town, holding himself aloof from emotion, not letting the rot and decay and corruption get to him. It looked as if the place had been abandoned at least fifty years. More likely only five or six, though.

Late in the day he entered a small house where the town met the forest and found a functioning personacube setup.

The cubes were clever things. You could record yourself in an hour or so—facial gestures, motion habits, voice, speech patterns. Scanners identified certain broad patterns of mental response and coded those into the cube, too. What the cube playback provided was a plausible imitation of a human being, the best possible memento of a loved one or friend or mentor, an electronic phantom programmed to absorb data and modify its own program, so that it could engage in conversation, ask

questions, pretend to be the person who had been cubed. A soul in a box, a cunning device.

Morrissey jacked the cube into its receptor slot. The screen displayed a thin-lipped man with a high forehead and a lean, agile body. "My name is Leopold Brannum," he said at once. "My specialty is xenogenetics. What year is this?"

"It's '97, autumn," Morrissey said. "Ten weeks and a bit before the earthquake."

"And who are you?"

"Nobody particular. I just happen to be visiting Port Kato and I felt like talking to someone."

"So talk," Brannum said. "What's going on in Port Kato?"

"Nothing. It's pretty damned quiet here. The place is empty."

"The whole town's been evacuated?"

"The whole planet, for all I know. Just me and the fuxes and the balloons still around. When did you leave, Brannum?"

"Summer of '92," said the man in the cube.

"I don't see why everyone ran away so early. There wasn't any chance the earthquake would come before the predicted time."

"I didn't run away," Brannum said coldly. "I left Port Kato to continue my research by other means."

"I don't understand."

"I went to join the balloons," Brannum said.

Morrissey caught his breath. The words touched his soul with wintry bleakness.

"My wife did that," he said after a moment. "Perhaps you know her now. Nadia Dutoit—she was from Chong, originally—"

The face on the screen smiled sourly. "You don't seem to realize," Brannum said, "that I'm only a recording."

"Of course. Of course."

"I don't know where your wife is now. I don't even know where I am now. I can only tell you that wherever we are, it's in a place of great peace, of utter harmony."

"Yes. Of course." Morrissey remembered the terrible day when Nadia told him that she could no longer resist the spiritual communion of the aerial creatures, that she was going off to seek entry into the collective mind of the Ahya. All through the history of Medea some colonists had done that. No one had ever seen any of them again. Their souls, people said, were absorbed, and their bodies lay buried somewhere beneath the dry ice of Farside. Toward the end the frequency of such defections had doubled and doubled and doubled again, thousands of colonists every month giving themselves up to whatever mystic engulfment the balloons offered. To Morrissey it

was only a form of suicide; to Nadia, to Brannum, to all those other hordes, it had been the path to eternal bliss. Who was to say? Better to undertake the uncertain journey into the great mind of the Ahya, perhaps, than to set out in panicky flight for the alien and unforgiving world that was Earth. "I hope you've found what you were looking for," Morrissey said. "I hope she has."

He unjacked the cube and went quickly away.

* * * *

He flew northward over the fog-streaked sea. Below him were the floating cities of the tropical waters, that marvelous tapestry of rafts and barges. That must be Port Backside down there, he decided—a sprawling intricate tangle of foliage under which lay the crumbling splendors of one of Medea's greatest cities. Kelp

choked the waterways. There was no sign of human life down there and he did not land.

Pellucidar, on the mainland, was empty also. Morrissey spent four days there, visiting the undersea gardens, treating himself to a concert in the famous Hall of Columns, watching the sun set from the top of Crystal Pyramid. That last evening dense drifts of balloons, hundreds of them, flew oceanward above him. He imagined he heard them calling to him in soft sighing whispers, saying, *I am Nadia. Come to me. There's still time. Give yourself up to us, dear love. I am Nadia.*

Was it only imagination? The Ahya were seductive. They had called to Nadia, and ultimately Nadia had gone to them. Brannum had gone. Thousands had gone. Now he felt the pull himself, and it was real. For an instant it was tempting. Instead of perishing in the quake, life eternal—of a sort. Who knew what

the balloons really offered? A merging, a loss of self, a transcendental bliss—or was it only delusion, folly, had the seekers found nothing but a quick death in the icy wastes? *Come to me. Come to me.* Either way, he thought, it meant peace.

I am Nadia. Come to me.

He stared a long while at the bobbing shimmering globes overhead, and the whispers grew to a roar in his mind.

Then he shook his head. Union with the cosmic entity was not for him. He had sought no escape from Medea up till now, and now he would have none. He was himself and nothing but himself, and when he went out of the world he would still be only himself. And then, only then, the balloons could have his soul. If they had any use for it.

* * * *

It was nine weeks and a day before the earthquake when Morrissey reached sweltering Enrique, right on the equator. Enrique was celebrated for its Hotel Luxe, of legendary opulence. He took possession of its grandest suite, and no one was there to tell him no. The air conditioning still worked, the bar was well stocked, the hotel grounds still were manicured daily by fux gardeners who did not seem to know that their employers had gone away. Obliging servomechanisms provided Morrissey with meals of supreme elegance that would each have cost him a month's earnings in the old days. As he wandered through the silent grounds, he thought how wonderful it would have been to come here with Nadia and Danielle and Paul. But it was meaningless now, to be alone in all this luxury.

Was he alone, though? On his first night, and again the next, he heard laughter in the darkness, borne on the thick dense

sweet-scented air. Fuxes did not laugh. The balloons did not laugh.

On the morning of the third day, as he stood on his nineteenth-floor veranda, he saw movements in the shrubbery at the rim of the lawn. Five, seven, a dozen male fuxes, grim two-legged engines of lust, prowling through the bushes. And then a human form! Pale flesh, bare legs, long unkempt hair! She streaked through the underbrush, giggling, pursued by fuxes.

“Hello!” Morrissey called. “Hey! I’m up here!”

He hurried downstairs and spent all day searching the hotel grounds. Occasionally he caught glimpses of frenzied naked figures, leaping and cavorting far away. He cried out to them, but they gave no sign of hearing him.

In the hotel office Morrissey found the manager's cube and turned it on. She was a dark-haired young woman, a little wild-eyed. "Hey, is it earthquake time yet?" she asked.

"Not quite yet."

"I want to be around for that. I want to see this stinking hotel topple into a million pieces."

"Where have you gone?" Morrissey asked.

She snickered. "Where else? Into the bush. Off to hunt fuxes. And to be hunted." Her face was flushed. "The old recombinant genes are still pretty hot, you know? Me for the fuxes and the fuxes for me. Get yourself a little action, why don't you? Whoever you are."

Morrissey supposed he ought to be shocked. But he couldn't summon much indignation. He had heard rumors of things like this already. In the final years before the cataclysm, he knew,

several sorts of migration had been going on. Some colonists opted for the exodus to Earth and some for the surrender to the Ahya soul-collective, and others chose the simple reversion to the life of the beast. Why not? Every Medean, by now, was a mongrel. The underlying Earth stock was tinged with alien genes. The colonists looked human enough, but they were in fact mixed with balloon or fux or both. Without the early recombinant manipulations the colony could never have survived, for human life and native Medean organisms were incompatible, and only by genetic splicing had a race been brought forth that could overcome that natural biological enmity. So now, with doom-time coming near, how many colonists had simply kicked off their clothes and slipped away into the jungles to run with their cousins the fuxes? And was that any worse, he wondered, than climbing in panic aboard a ship bound for Earth

or giving up your individuality to merge with the balloons? What did it matter which route to escape was chosen? But Morrissey wanted no escape. Least of all into the jungles, off to the fuxes.

* * * *

He flew on northward. In Catamount he heard the cube of the city's mayor tell him, "They've all cleared out, and I'm going next Dimday. There's nothing left here." In Yellowleaf a cubed biologist spoke of genetic drift, the reversion of the alien genes. In Sandy's Mishigos, Morrissey could find no cubes at all, but eighteen or twenty skeletons lay chaotically on the broad central plaza. Mass immolation? Mass murder, in the final hours of the city's disintegration? He gathered the bones and buried them in the moist, spongy ochre soil. It took him all day. Then he went on, up the coast as far as Arca, through city after city.

Wherever he stopped, it was the same story—no humans left, only balloons and fuxes, most of the balloons heading out to sea and most of the fuxes migrating inland. He jacked in cubes wherever he found them, but the cube-people had little new to tell him. They were clearing out, they said: one way or another they were giving up on Medea. Why stick around to the end? Why wait for the big shudder? Going home, going to the balloons, going to the bush—clearing out, clearing out clearing out.

So many cities, Morrissey thought. Such an immense outpouring of effort. We smothered this world. We came in, we built our little isolated research stations, we stared in wonder at the coruscating sky and the double suns and the bizarre creatures. And we transformed ourselves into Medeans and transformed Medea into a kind of crazy imitation of Earth. And

for a thousand years we spread out along the coasts wherever our kind of life could dig itself in. Eventually we lost sight of our purpose in coming here, which in the beginning was to *learn*. But we stayed anyway. We just stayed. We muddled along. And then we found out that it was all for nothing, that with one mighty heave of its shoulders this world was going to cast us off, and we got scared and packed up and went away. Sad, he thought. Sad and foolish.

He stayed at Arca a few days and turned inland, across the hot, bleak desert that sloped upward toward Mount Olympus. It was seven weeks and a day until the quake. For the first thousand kilometers or so he still could see encampments of migrating fuxes below him, slowly making their way into the Hotlands. Why, he wondered, had they permitted their world to be taken from them? They could have fought back. In the

beginning they could have wiped us out in a month of guerrilla warfare. Instead they let us come in, let us make them into pets and slaves and flunkies while we paved the most fertile zones of their planet, and whatever they thought about us they kept to themselves. We never even knew their own name for Medea, Morrissey thought. That was how little of themselves they shared with us. But they tolerated us here. Why? Why?

The land below him was furnace-hot, a badland streaked with red and yellow and orange, and now there were no fuxes in sight. The first jagged foothills of the Olympus scarp knobbed the desert. He saw the mountain itself rising like a black fang toward the heavy low-hanging sky-filling mass of Argo. Morrissey dared not approach that mountain. It was holy and it was deadly. Its terrible thermal updrafts could send his flitter

spinning to ground like a swatted fly; and he was not quite ready to die.

He swung northward again and journeyed up the barren and forlorn heart of the continent toward the polar region. The Ring Ocean came into view, coiling like a world-swallowing serpent beyond the polar shores, and he kicked the flitter higher, almost to its maximum safety level, to give himself a peek at Farside, where white rivers of CO₂ flowed through the atmosphere and lakes of cold gas filled the valleys. It seemed like six thousand years ago that he had led a party of geologists into that forbidding land. How earnest they had all been then! Measuring fault lines, seeking to discover the effects the quake would have over there. As if such things mattered when the colony was doomed by its own hand anyway. Why had he bothered? The quest for pure knowledge, yes. How futile that

quest seemed to him now. Of course, he had been much younger then. An aeon ago. Almost in another life. Morrissey had planned to fly into Farside on this trip, to bid formal farewell to the scientist he had been, but he changed his mind. There was no need. Some farewells had already been made.

He curved down out of the polar regions as far south as Northcape on the eastern coast, circled the wondrous red-glinting sweep of the Cascades, and landed the airstrip at Chong. It was six weeks and two days to the earthquake. In these high latitudes the twin suns were faint and feeble even though the day was a Sunday. The monster Argo itself far to the south, appeared shrunken. He had forgotten the look of the northern sky in his ten years in the tropics. And yet, and yet, had he not lived thirty years in Chong? It seemed like only a moment, as all time collapsed into this instant of now.

Morrissey found Chong painful. Too many old associations, too many cues to memory. Yet he kept himself there until he had seen it all, the restaurant where he and Danielle had invited Nadia and Paul to join their marriage, the house on Vladimir Street where they had lived, the Geophysics Lab, the skiing lodge just beyond the Cascades. All the footprints of his life.

The city and its environs were utterly deserted. For day after day Morrissey wandered, reliving the time when he was young and Medea still lived. How exciting it had all been then! The quake was coming someday—everybody knew the day, down to the hour—and nobody cared except cranks and neurotics, for the others were too busy living. And then suddenly everyone cared, and everything changed.

Morrissey played no cubes in Chong. The city itself, gleaming, a vast palisade of silver thermal roofs, was one great cube for him, crying out the tale of his years.

When he could take it no longer, he started his southward curve around the east coast. There were four weeks and a day to go.

His first stop was Meditation Island, the jumping-off point for those who went to visit Virgil Oddums's fantastic and ever-evolving ice sculptures out on Farside. Four newlyweds had come here, a billion years ago, and had gone, laughing and embracing, off in icecrawlers to see the one miracle of art Medea had produced. Morrissey found the cabin where they all had stayed. It had faded and its roof was askew. He had thought of spending the night on Meditation Island, but he left after an hour.

Now the land grew rich and lush again as he passed into the upper tropics. Again he saw balloons by the score letting themselves be wafted toward the ocean, and again there were bands of fuxes slowly journeying inland, driven by he knew not what sense of ritual obligation as the quake came near.

Three weeks two days five hours. Plus or minus.

He flew low over the fuxes. Some were mating. That astounded him—that persistence in the face of calamity. Was it merely the irresistible biological drive that kept the fuxes coupling? What chance did the newly engendered young have to survive? Would their mothers not be better off with empty wombs when the quake came? They knew what was going to happen, and yet they mated. And yet they mated. It made no sense to Morrissey.

And then he thought he understood. The sight of those coupling fuxes gave him an insight into the Medean natives that explained it all, for the first time. Their patience, their calmness, their tolerance of all that had befallen them since their world had become Medea. Of course they would mate as the catastrophe drew near! They had been waiting for the earthquake all along, and for them it was no catastrophe. It was a holy moment, a purification—so he realized. He wished he could discuss this with Dinoov. It was a temptation to return at once to Argoview Dunes and seek out the old fux and test on him the theory that just had sprung to life in him. But not yet. Port Medea, first.

The east coast had been settled before the other, and the density of development here was intense. The first two colonies—Touchdown City and Medeatown—had long ago coalesced into the urban smear that radiated outward from the

third town, Port Medea. When he was still far to the north, Morrissey could see the gigantic peninsula on which Port Medea and its suburbs sprawled: the tropic heat rose in visible waves from it, buffeting his little flitter as he made his way toward that awesome, hideous concrete expanse.

Dinoov had been right. There were starships waiting at Port Medea—four of them, a waste of money beyond imagination. Why had they not been used in the exodus? Had they been set aside for emigrants who had decided instead to run with the rutting fuxes or give their souls to the balloons? He would never know. He entered one of the ships and said, “Operations directory.”

“At your service,” a bodiless voice replied.

“Give me a report on ship status. Are you prepared for a voyage to Earth?”

"Fueled and ready."

"Everything operational."

Morrissey weighed his moves. So easy, he thought, to lie down and go to sleep and let the ship take him to Earth. So easy, so automatic, so useless.

After a moment he said, "How long do you need to reach departure level?"

"One hundred sixty minutes from moment of command."

"Good. The command is given. Get yourself ticking and take off. Your destination is Earth and the message I give you is this: *Medea says good-bye. I thought you might have some use for this ship. Sincerely, Daniel F. Morrissey. Dated Earthquake Minus two weeks one day seven hours.*"

"Acknowledged. Departure-level procedures initiated."

"Have a nice flight," Morrissey told the ship.

He entered the second ship and gave it the same command. He did the same in the third. He paused before entering the last one, wondering if there were other colonists who even now were desperately racing toward Port Medea to get aboard one of these ships before the end came. To hell with them, Morrissey thought. They should have made up their minds sooner. He told the fourth ship to go home to Earth.

On his way back from the port to the city, he saw the four bright spears of light rise skyward, a few minutes apart. Each hovered a moment, outlined against Argo's colossal bulk, and shot swiftly into the aurora-dappled heavens. In sixty-one years they would descend onto a baffled Earth with their cargo of no one. Another great mystery of space to delight the tale tellers, he thought. The Voyage of the Empty Ships.

With a curious sense of accomplishment he left Port Medea and headed down the coast to the sleek resort of Madagozar, where the elite of Medea had amused themselves in tropic luxury. Morrissey had always thought the place absurd. But it was still intact, still purring with automatic precision. He treated himself to a lavish holiday there. He raided the wine cellars of the best hotels. He breakfasted on tubs of chilled spikelegs caviar. He dozed in the warm sun. He bathed in the juice of gilliwog flowers. And he thought about absolutely nothing at all.

The day before the earthquake he flew back to Argoview Dunes.

* * * *

“So you chose not to go home after all,” Dinoov said. Morrissey shook his head. “Earth was never my home.

Medea was my home. I went home to Medea. And then I came back to this place because it was my last home. It pleases me that you're still here, Dinoov."

"Where would I have gone?" the fux asked.

"The rest of your people are migrating inland. I think it's to be nearer the holy mountain when the end comes. Is that right?"

"That is right."

"Why have you stayed, then?"

"This is my home, too. I have so little time left that it matters not very much to me where I am when the ground shakes. But tell me, friend Morrissey: was your journey worth the taking?"

"It was."

"What did you see? What did you learn?"

"I saw Medea, all of it," Morrissey said. "I never realized how much of your world we took. By the end we covered all the land

that was worth covering, didn't we? And you people never said a word. You stood by and let it happen."

The fux was silent.

Morrissey said, "I understand now. You were waiting for the earthquake all along, weren't you? You knew it was coming long before we bothered to figure it out. How many times has it happened since fuxes first evolved on Medea? Every 7160 years the fuxes move to high ground and the balloons drift to Farside and the ground shakes and everything falls apart. And then the survivors reappear with new life already in the wombs and build again. How many times has it happened in fux history? So you knew when we came here, when we built our towns everywhere and turned them into cities, when we rounded you up and made you work for us, when we mixed our genes with yours and changed the microbes in the air so we'd be more comfortable

here, that what we were doing wouldn't last forever, right? That was your secret knowledge, your hidden consolation, that this, too, would pass. Eh, Dinoov? And now it has passed. We're gone and the happy young fuxes are mating. I'm the only one of my kind left except for a few naked crazies in the bush."

There was a glint in the fux's eyes. Amusement? Contempt? Compassion? Who could read a fux's eyes?

"All along," Morrissey said, "you were all just waiting for the earthquake. Right? The earthquake that would make everything whole again. Well, now it's almost upon us. And I'm going to stand here alongside you and wait for the earthquake, too. It's my contribution to inter-species harmony. I'll be the human sacrifice. I'll be the one who atones for all that we did here. How does that sound, Dinoov? Is that all right with you?"

"I wish," the fux said slowly, "that you had boarded one of those ships and gone back to Earth. Your death will give me no pleasure."

Morrissey nodded. "I'll be back in a few minutes," he said, and went into his cabin.

The cubes of Nadia and Paul and Danielle sat beside the screen. Not for years had he played them, but he jacked them into the slots now, and on the screen appeared the three people he had most loved in all the universe. They smiled at him, and Danielle offered a soft greeting, and Paul winked, and Nadia blew a kiss. Morrissey said, "It's almost over now. Today's earthquake day. I just wanted to say good-bye, that's all. I just wanted to tell you that I love you and I'll be with you soon."

"Dan—" Nadia said.

"No. You don't have to say anything. I know you aren't really there, anyway. I just wanted to see you all again. I'm very happy right now."

He took the cubes from their slots. The screen went dark. Gathering up the cubes, he carried them outside and carefully buried them in the soft moist soil of his garden. The fux watched him incuriously.

"Dinoov?" Morrissey called. "One last question."

"Yes, my friend?"

"All the years we lived on Medea, we were never able to learn the name by which you people called your own world. We kept trying to find out, but all we were told was that it was taboo, and even when we coaxed a fux into telling us the name, the next fux would tell us an entirely different name, so we never

knew. I ask you a special favor now, here at the end. Tell me what you call your world. Please. I need to know."

The old fux said, "We call it Sanoon."

"Sanoon? Truly?"

"Truly," said the fux.

"What does it mean?"

Why, it means the World," said Dinoov. "What else?"

"Sanoon," Morrissey said. "It's a beautiful name."

The earthquake was thirty minutes away—plus or minus a little. Sometime in the past hour the white suns had disappeared behind Argo. Morrissey had not noticed that. But now, he heard a low rumbling roar, and then he felt a strange trembling in the ground, as though something mighty were stirring beneath his feet and would burst shortly into wakefulness. Not far offshore terrible waves rose and crashed.

Calmly Morrissey said, "This is it, I think."

Overhead a dozen gleaming balloons soared and bobbed in a dance that looked much like a dance of triumph.

There was thunder in the air and a writhing in the heart of the world. In another moment the full force of the quake would be upon them and the crust of the planet would quiver and the first awful tremors would rip the land apart and the sea would rise up and cover the coast. Morrissey began to weep, and not out of fear. He managed a smile. "The cycle's complete, Dinoov. Out of Medea's ruins Sanoon will rise. The place is yours again at last."

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