

THE SWEET, SAD QUEEN OF THE GRAZING ISLES

By Frederik Pohl

At the World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago in 1982 I was part of a panel discussing the work of the late Cordwainer Smith (pseudonym of the Johns Hopkins political science professor, Paul M. A. Liriebarger). Paul Linebarger was an author whom I published extensively as long as he lived while I was editing *Galaxy* in the 1960s, and one whose work I greatly admire still. He was not merely a contributor but a friend, for which reason he tolerated my practice of changing almost every title of the Cordwainer Smith stories I published. (Other writers were less forgiving.) While talking about this on the panel, it occurred to me that it was a long time since I had made up a Cordwainer Smith story title. So I amused myself (in the boring periods while other people were talking) by inventing titles for stories Paul had never written, but should have. The one I liked best was this one. . . and so, that afternoon, as part of my self-imposed regime of defacing four pages of clean paper with writing every day of my life, I began to write a story to go with the title. I do not think it is a "Cordwainer Smith story" by any means. But I did borrow one of his favorite devices in the writing of it- perhaps some readers will detect which one.

In Twenty and Three, born at sea, Her daddy endowed her a legacy. In Twenty and Ten her brother Ben Stole the inheritance back again. She loves but she loses, she weeps as she smiles, The sweet, sad queen of the grazing isles

BECAUSE I DID THE OLD COMMODORE A FAVOR, he promised I would always have a job with the Fleet. I always did. I always do still, because even now I have the job. The title and the pay and the working conditions have changed a dozen times, and these times not the best of them. But even Jimmy Rex knows I have that right to a job, and grants it. Meanly.

The favor I did for Commodore Mackenzie was done long before he was a Commodore, and I could have gone to jail for it. Jason, he said, give me a month. I need an extension on my loans, thirty days at most, and if you give it me, you'll never have to worry again as long as you live. I will worry, though, I said-a boy still in his twenties, just a keypuncher in the records section of a bank-I'll worry about the law, at least until the statute of limitations runs out, because bugging the records is a penal offense. Only if they catch you, he said, laughing, and that they can't do. For you'll be at sea, where the land law cannot reach. It was his first oaty-boat that was building at the time, you see, and he had used up all his wife's money and all he could cajole out of his first two financial backers, and the third one, the big one, was trying to make up his mind to plunge.

He was a powerful man even then, James Mackenzie. No older than forty. no gigger than most but the blue eyes flashed and the smile was sure, and he knew how to talk a person toward any place he chose. But what decided me was not Mackenzie. It was his young wife, the lady Ella. She loved him. So I worked overtime one night, and displayed his file, and changed a few dates, sweating with fear. He had his thirty days. And the backer did, at the last minute, come through with the money to finish the boat,

and so James William Mackenzie became the Commodore.

He was a son of a bitch, Commodore Mackenzie, but he had style. Fifty shares of stock I got and a title: Executive Assistant to the Fleet Captain. Very grand. Even if the fleet was still only a single vessel. But even one oaty-boat is a huge and costly machine, two hundred thousand metric tons of hull and works, towing twenty kilometers of tubes and pumps, with a deck the size of a township. The Commodore did something you won't believe with that deck, or at least with the part forward of the bridge. He planted it. He pumped aboard half a million cubic meters of San Francisco Bay bottom muck while the boat was still at the builder's dock. The water ran off through the scuppers, and the soil remained. He sailed it up toward Tacoma for the deep-water fitting and steamed slowly around the wettest, stormiest part of the Pacific Coast until the rain had rinsed it clean. Seeds and slips and bulbs and saplings came aboard, and by the time we were on our first cruise there was grass there, and gardens, and the beginnings of a grove. For his dear lady Ella hated the sea. So Owner's Quarters were an apartment below deck and a terrace above, and if you looked only forward you could think you were in some fine manor house with the weather always balmy and the lawn as steady as any on Earth. The weather was always fine because oaty-boats are never in bad weather. That is why they are boats, instead of drilling platforms or moored barges, so that they can seek out the places where sea and air are best to do their work.

And for four years they were happy, and I was happy, and the great boat steamed slowly through the fruitful patches of the southern ocean, sucking up the cold and pitting it against the warm, and, oh, how the money rolled in! And we were happiest of all in the fourth year, when Ella was pregnant. She was a tiny, frail woman, all spirit and no stamina, and there were times when in even the calmest seas she seemed unwell. Yet as a pregnant woman she bloomed, prettier than ever and glowing with the child inside. The baby was born, even prettier than her mother. It was in the month of May, and so they called her May, and then the happiness stopped because Ella died. It was not childbirth alone-she had the best of doctors, flown in from Sydney and San Francisco. It was cancer. She had known she had it, and kept it secret, and wouldn't let them cut it away because it would have cut away the unborn child as well. Childbirth merely finished her off.

It was her wish to be buried on land. The Commodore walked dry-eyed through the crew quarters and crooked a finger at an oiler's mate named Elsie Van Dorn. A large, plain woman, but a kind one. And when he came back from the funeral, he took all the Fleet stock that was in Ella's name and put it into baby May's, and gave me a new job. "Van Dorn will be May's nursemaid, he said, "but you'll be her godfather. That was a joke, I think, because we had been told that money was his god. "You're Managing Director of the May Mackenzie Trust, and if you do anything wrong with it I'll kill you. Even if I die for it. Even if I die first, for I'll leave a little sum of money and some orders, and someone will be watching who has a gun. He still owed me for the favor I had done him, you see, but he remembered what it was.

And for seven years baby May grew, and wasn't a baby any more.

There are little girls with a face so fine and a look so sweet that they'll break your heart. May was one. She was slight for her age, and all her life. Yet even when she first toddled she would pause, and stick her thumb in her mouth, and gaze out over the privet and the boxwood hedges at the southern seas with an ancient mariner's look of sadness and resignation that made you forget the rumpled hair and the dragging diaper; and when she was old enough to talk and tie her shoes, I fell in love. It is not a thing I want to have laughed at and so I will say no more, but it's true. I did. I loved her truly and purely, and went on doing so. Not as a godfather.

She had a father's love for those seven years, though. She was the Commodore's only daughter and his only legitimate child-the only child of his I saw then, for the bastard was away at school and then at work

in the Fleet's landside offices. He was busy every minute, the Commodore, but he always found time to see May and to play with her, and to tuck her in at night. I was less busy than that. There was not much work attached to being the Managing Director of the May Mackenzie Trust, for every penny of it was invested in the oaty fleet, two ships, and then seven, and then a dozen; the money rolled in, but every spare penny went back into building more. So I competed with Elsie Van Dorn. I became May's other nanny. They were the best years I have ever lived. I took her with me around the boat. We watched the dry ammonia powder being pumped out of our belly into the hold of a tanker, kerchiefs to our noses to keep from sneezing, and we listened to the screaming hydrogen flow as it went into the refrigeration ships, the huge red flags warning us not to light a match or scratch a spark-as though anyone in the Fleet were such a fool! We watched the huge slow spinning of the low-pressure turbines as they transformed the heat into power, and we waved good-bye to the crews of the scout skimmers as they went out to seek colder depths and warmer air to steer toward. Every member of the crew knew May, and petted her when she would let them. They weren't truly a crew. They were more like a city, for we had power workers and fertilizer chemists and oceanographers and engineers and navigators and cooks and cleaning men and fire wardens and a ship's master and five assistants to guide us and half a dozen gardeners for the greensward and the farms on the afterdeck. There were more than eighteen hundred human beings on board, and I think May knew the name of every one. She knew none better than me. I was her godfather and her friend. There were a hundred other children on board, and four who were her special friends, but there was no person who was more special than I.

And then the Commodore one morning came to breakfast in May's room, as he always did when he was aboard, and looked tired, admitted he'd had a bad night's sleep, got up from the table, fell face down on his plate, and died.

I could forgive the Commodore for dying. He didn't plan to do it, and it happens to us all. But I will never forgive him for dying with his will so written that his bastardly bastard son, Ben, became May's guardian until she was thirty years old.

He was aboard before the body was cold and had moved into the Commodore's rooms before the smoke of the Commodore's cigars was aired out. The will gave him the voting rights on May's stock. I could forbid him to sell a share. I could take the dividends and invest them anywhere I chose-but where was there a better investment than the oaty fleet?
I could, in fact, do nothing.

For a month, then, I looked over my shoulder every minute, expecting to see the Commodore's hired assassin, but the assassin never came. All that came was a note, one day, mailed from Papua New Guinea via the boat's air service, and all it said was, "It's not your fault, this time.

The Commodore never broke a promise to me but two. The first was that he'd have me killed if I failed to protect May's interest. I did fail her then, and knew I had, but I didn't die. The other promise was that I would never have to worry again, because after he died, for twenty years and more. I did nothing else.

Later on, in Twenty-three, The queen she married, but not to me. Later still, in Twenty-four, A scowling imp of a son she bore. She bore him and raised him for years and miles, The son of the queen of the grazing isles.

When May was fifteen, Van Dorn went at last back to the engines, and May went off to school. She took her four friends with her, the four other Mays with whom she'd grown up, but Ben would not allow me to join them. "You can keep your job and your pay, Jason, he said to me, "but leave my sister May alone, for when she's ready to fall in love it will be with a rich boy and a sensible boy and a handsome boy, and not with a dirty old man who sleeps with her socks under his pillow. That was a lie. I told him it

was a lie. But what was behind it was no lie, for the love was still there. If May had been five years older, if she had been a year older even, I might easily have told her what I felt before I let her go. And might have got a good answer, perhaps. There was thirty years between us, and I am not handsome. But she was easy with me, and trusted me, and had good reason for trust.

So Ben the Bastard fouled Owner's Quarters with his fat dark wife and their sallow brat, Betsy, who never liked me. Nor I her, to be sure. That whole family was repellent. I never knew Ben's mother, but I knew who she was. A file clerk in a lawyer's office. The Commodore seduced her to get a look into the lawyer's contract files, where there was something worth money for him to see. He got his look. She got his child. He would never marry her, of course, for she hadn't a dime, and when she pupped his bastard, he was long gone away. I will say for the Commodore that he acknowledged the son. He paid the bills to bring him up, even when it was hard for him. He sent the boy through school and gave him a place with the Fleet, though not at sea, but would never give him his name.

So it was Benjamin (which means "gift of God") Zoll (for that was the woman's name) who came aboard with the will in his pocket and the resolve in his heart to reign.

Well, he had more than arrogance. He was a mean-hearted man, but a hardworking one. The first day he was over the side in a diving mask, discovering cracks in the antifouling plates and surfacing in a fury. Twenty maintenance workers lost their jobs that day, but the next crew kept the plates repaired, and we saved a thousand dollars worth of steaming fuel a week.

An ocean-thermal generating boat lives off the temperature difference between deep water and sun-warmed surface water. The top water warms the working fluid- a halocarbon with a low boiling point-and it becomes steam and goes through the low-pressure turbines to make electricity; the electricity splits water into hydrogen and fixes nitrogen from the air, and we sell what it makes. The difficulty is the halocarbon working fluid. It is too expensive to vent to the air. It must be condensed and recycled, and for that we need something cold. The sea gives us that. There is plenty of cold water in every deep sea, but it is half a kilometer down or more, and so we must pump it to the surface. Pumping and pumping. Pumping cold water up from the deep. Pumping the working fluid through the solar collectors. Pumping water past the electrodes to be split into its gases; pumping the gases into the refrigerator ships to be carried away. Out of every hundred kilowatt-hours of energy we make, ninety-seven go into running the gear itself.

But that three percent left over makes us rich, for once the boat is built it is all free.

Ben Zoll had never worked on an oaty-boat, and so he had much to learn. He learned it fast. If he did not have the Commodore's name, he had at least inherited his drive.

May had the name. And bastard Ben kept her from everything else, kept her from the presidency of the Fleet, kept her from the voting rights to her stock.

He did not begrudge her money. She had the best schools. She had horses to ride and clothes for a princess. It was no sacrifice to Ben to allow her any money she needed. The billions of land people hungered insatiably for every grain of ammonia and every wisp of hydrogen we could make. The company prospered under bastard Ben.

And so did I, for my pitiful fifty shares of stock had already made me a millionaire. I didn't need the job anymore. But I kept it, and I stayed on the O.T. Where else was there to go? No sensible person would want to live on a continent with all those writhing billions. Land people are a suing, assassinating, conniving bunch. And I had formed the habit of living under the Law of the Sea- And, besides, every

now and then May came home to visit.

She did not come often. But there were school holidays. Any time there were a few days together, she would take the long five-hour flight from Massachusetts to the Bismarcks or the Coral Sea or wherever we were grazing, and in the summers, always, for weeks on end. It was not May alone, for the four other Mays always came too, to visit their families and to get away from the stink and strife. They were beautiful girls. Girls to break a thousand hearts, and I suppose they did. There was Maisie Richardson, huge and blond and glowing with health, and May Holliston-Peirce, the hydrologist's daughter, with trusting blue eyes and a sweet, guileful tongue, and Tseling Mei, who became a movie star, and May Bancroft, black and handsome and the wisest of them all. And May herself. My May. She was always the most beautiful of them all. There are pretty babies who grow up blotchy or sullen or fat, but there was never a day in any company when May was not the most beautiful there. They were all almost of an age, May and the four other Mays, and, oh, heaven, how they brightened up the old O.T.! There was a May for any man's taste, and all of them for every taste, for they were kind and clever, they were lovely and loving. They chattered and whispered among themselves, and if ever a joke went the wrong way or a word touched a nerve, they made it up at once with a kindness and a kiss.

And then there was Betsy.

Betsy Zoll. Bitch child of the bastard, Ben. If you take the raw materials for two young women and give all of the beauty and kindness and grace to one—say, to May—what is left over is Betsy Zoll. May was a diamond. Betsy was flawed glass. When the Mays were not aboard, Betsy was the princess royal, and sometimes, on a good day, she almost looked the part. But in their shade she drooped and sulked. The shiny glass was beside true diamonds, and its luster was gone. They let her tag along with them, out of kindness. Out of envy, she wished them dead. So the holidays were no joy for Betsy Zoll, and she couldn't wait, couldn't wait for them to be over and the Mays back in school so she could try to reign again.

And then there was a Christmas season coming when Betsy was all smiles and triumph.

She must have hunted all over the boat for me, for I was down in the boiler room to see if there was a need, as ship's gossip said there was a plan, to buy new generators. "Well, Jason, she said, beaming so fondly that my heart sank, "getting ready for Christmas?"

The engineers and oilers watched us from a distance, whispering to themselves, although no one needed to whisper with the great coughing sigh of the low-pressure turbines in every ear. I wished her a Merry Christmas civilly and excused myself to let my office know where I was—there was no reason not to now, you see, because Betsy had already found me. When I finished with the phone, she giggled. "Next week that will cost you a quarter, she said.

I had known she would bring bad news, of course, because that was her nature, but what she said was astonishing. "It will cost money to use the ship's phone? She pursed her lips and inclined her head. "To use the phone, and to run your video, and to turn on a fan, yes, she said, the sallow face and the pale eyebrows twitching with pleasure. "Father says it's time we started charging for all the electricity the crew uses. Fifty cents a kilowatt-hour to start, Father says.

"It makes no sense!

"*Dollars* and cents, she said gleefully. "That's our electricity, old man. It's worth money. Why should we

give it away when we can sell it?

I drew back from her, because she had pressed her face almost into mine and her breath was like a sewer. Betsy was fifteen years old then, but the freshness of youth had never touched her. I said, "We can't sell electricity, Betsy, only what we can make from it. If we want to produce more to sell, we'll have to devote more space to conversion processes, and where's the space to come from?"

"Good question, old man, she said triumphantly. "Father has of course thought of all that. To begin with, there's a thousand cubic meters wasted under the foredeck. We'll do our hydrogen electrolysis up there, which gives more room amidships for the ammonia and-

"Owner's Quarters! I said.

"Old man, she lectured, "people like us won't live on this little tub forever. We've got new boats building ten times the size of this. We're going to move the flag.

The ship's gossip was not only gossip, then, and the truth was worse than the gossip. It was worse than I knew, in fact, for Betsy had saved the worst for the last. "When May comes home for Christmas, we'll see what she has to say, I said, for it was in the Commodore's will that May's own quarters were hers forever. And I had delivered myself into Betsy's hands.

"When May comes home for Christmas, she parroted spitefully, "what we'll see, old man, is that she isn't coming home for Christmas. Why, Jason! Do you mean she never told you that she's got a boyfriend? His name's Frank Appermoy, and she's spending her Christmas with him and his mother.

And May had not written me a word! As Betsy well knew. She did not bother to disguise her triumph as she glanced at her watch and moved her lips for a moment before she spoke, that charnel breath well suited to the words she said. "Allowing for the time differences, she said, "I'd guess they're probably humping in his big water bed on Hawaii right now. Tough shit, old man, she said, and turned and left me standing.

Back in my office, the first thing I did was order up all the data we had in store on Frank Appermoy and the rest of the Appermoy clan. The second thing, while I was waiting for the readouts, was to put through a call to May at the Appermoy estate on the Big Island. It was 10 P.M. on the 'Kona coast, and according to the butler who answered my call, Miss May and Master Frank were at a luau and were not expected to return for at least two hours. So I asked them to call me, and got down to the hard-copy prints.

I already knew that the Appermoyes were rich. I even knew that they competed with us, or wanted to, though their total production of nitrogen and hydrogen in a year was less than that of the smallest of our boats. Their process was not the same as ours, either.

The Appermoy money came, in the first place, from radioactive waste. Old Simon Appermoy had been as clever as the Commodore and as diligent. He had worked out a plan, and then had sought out and signed disposal contracts with every nuclear power plant he could find and half a dozen national defense departments, all of them so madly happy to find anyone who would take their waste radionuclides away that they paid huge amounts for every ton. Then Simon Appermoy vitrified the dirty stuff. He dissolved it in glassy chunks, and then he did the clever thing. He bought a couple of seamounts in the Pacific, the tail end of the Hawaiian chain, the volcanic islands that had risen from the sea bottom and been planed flat by

the waves over tens of millions of years. Whether the sovereign state of Hawaii had any title to sell them was a whole other question, but a clouded title never worried old Appermoy-I'll say why in a minute. Then he drilled holes in the flat summits of the seamounts and dumped the glassy radionuclides in.

So far it was simple waste disposal. Enough to make him rich, but only the beginning. His next step was to become our competitor.

Some unsung genius on Appermoy's payroll had informed him that all that hot stuff a thousand fathoms down would start a warm-water plume moving up toward the surface; and that plume contained energy that Appermoy could suck out with slow, huge, vertical-axis blades. And so he did, and used that energy just as we did, to make electricity that would fix nitrogen and split water into fuel. But he did not suck all the energy out, because he wanted some of that warmed plume to reach the surface so that it could carry with it the organic detritus from the bottom that had accumulated for tens of millions of years. If you saw that trash in your living room, you would call it filth and try to mop it away; but if you saw it in your garden, it would delight your heart, for it was rich in organics. And as it came to the surface, it fed microorganisms to feed krill to feed fish. Any kind of fish Appermoy chose to stock, in fact, because the steel skeletons that held his works above the seamounts made marvelous habitats for food fish and game fish and every fish that swam in the sea. I don't know what reward Simon Appermoy gave the flunky who devised this plan. Most likely Appermoy gave him cement overshoes and a quick drop without a face mask to the surface of the seamount, where his poor empty-eyed skull could watch the muck swirl slowly upward.

But it all worked. It was almost the opposite of our process, you see. We pumped up cold water to condense the warmed vapor that the sun boiled for us. Appermoy warmed the waters of the deep with his radioactive filth- to make much of the same end products, yes, but also to gain what we did not, several thousand tons a day of high- quality ocean fish to feed the billions on the land.

A rich family they were. A decent family they were not. Their empire was built on poisons at the base, and the money that gave Appermoy his start was more poisonous still. He got it the same way the Commodore did- he married it-but while the Commodore married a lady, what Simon Appermoy married was the spawn of four generations of Mafia chiefs. That was how they got their first contracts for disposing of radioactive waste. That was how they kept competition away. Others saw what Appermoy had done and tried to find seamounts of their own, but if strikes did not befall them, unexplained accidents did.

So the family was foul; young Frank Appermoy himself, less so. There were no great sins to his record in the datastore, unless you call polo playing a sin. He did not, however, meet Ben Zoll's specifications except for the first of them. He was rich. But you can't call someone who lives to hit a little ball from horseback sensible, and handsome he certainly was not. One of his horses had thrown him and kicked him. He was not yet fully recovered, the datastore said, and the picture confirmed it. Although the right side of his face had been very much rebuilt since the accident, he looked odd. He did not look terrifying or repulsive, but not even a mother could call him handsome-not even the mother of all lies and wickedness who had borne him, Simon Appermoy's wretched wife.

And yet my May had chosen him to wed.

The scouts had found us a nice flow of cold water in the deeps south of the Philippines, and that is always a great treasure. Every extra degree of differential between surface temperature and deep makes a great enhancement in power yield when you work with such short margins as ours. So we were

thousands of kilometers west of Hawaii, and yet it was well dark before May and her gallant called me back. I was sitting on my private little weather deck, gazing at the Southern Cross and wishing I had been born a couple of decades later than I was, when the phone rang.

There they were, the two of them. His arm was around her shoulder, and he was grinning at me with that twisted- but not evil-face, and May was looking apologetic but ecstatic. "It has all gone so very fast, Uncle Jason. She had never called me "uncle before. "I wanted to call you a thousand times, but-

"It doesn't matter," I said, lying.

"You will come to the wedding, though, won't you? Please?"

As though there were any doubt of that! But the boy added his pleas as well. "You're the only real family May has, sir. None of her young men had ever called me "sir before, either. "My mother says she'll try to be her mother, too, since I never had a sister, and heaven knows, sir, I'll do all I can to make her happy! And it wouldn't be right to marry May if you weren't here.

The statute of limitations had expired long since, of course, but there was nothing I wanted on land. Even on an island. Especially an island belonging to the Appermoy. But he added the clincher: "You really have to, sir, because we want you to give her away.

And I gave her away.

I gave her away on the steps of the mansion at South Point, with Kilauea steaming behind the house, with a lei around May's sweet neck and the priest wearing a microphone in his collar so that all the fourteen hundred guests could hear, and Betsy grinning wickedly at me from the first row, and the groom white-faced and sweating, for he had had some kind of convulsion just before the ceremony. He had good enough manners, young Frank Appermoy. But I did not want to give May away to any man, with good manners or bad, rich or poor, young or old, as long as that man was not me. Especially not to one who, as I learned, every now and then had blinding headaches and convulsions. I wish that horse had kicked a little harder.

Whether they were happy or not I do not know.. I suppose they were. The next year they had a baby, James Reginald Appermoy, and the year after that young Frank's scrambled brain quit trying to keep him alive and my May was a widow at twenty-two. The bitch mother-in-law said she killed him.

At one and twenty to a husband was wed. At two and twenty the husband was dead. Her mother, no mother, called her no wife. Her sister, no sister, plagued all of her life. Her living was bounded in snares and guiles, The sweet, luckless queen of the grazing isles.

May could not stay on the Big Island with the old Appermoy woman spreading scandalous tales about her. Ben the bastard invited her home. Not to the boat she had grown up on, because her old home there had become part of the new electrolysis plant, but to the homes on the biggest of the new oaty-boats. Two million deadweight tons! The oaties weren't boats anymore, they were floating islands, and there was room for a dozen large families in owner's country on the foredeck. In spite of this, Ben claimed at first that there was no room for me, but that was only to make May beg. "Oh, well, he said, giving in as he had planned to all along, "at least he can change the baby's diapers. I'll find him quarters with the crew.

Quarters with the crew. And I custodian of May's vast estate and a part owner in my own right, with my fifty shares. May owned three Fleet shares to bastard Ben's one, but they did us little good. For Ben had

the will, and control of the voting rights until she reached the age of thirty. I could not believe the Commodore had been so insane. Yet when I slipped away to Reykjavik and spoke to a lawyer at the Sea court, he told me the will was firm, and I went back to May with a shifty lie about where I had been and watched her nurse the child. I did not know what to say to her.

But May did not ask. In those first months she was all for the child, singing to him, petting him, nursing him- wincing now and then, for he was a terrible biter. And a terribly ugly little brat, too. May would sit by the great oval pool among the palms on the foredeck with Jimmy Rex in her arms or whimpering in a bed beside her; and I would be there to give her company; and surely, almost every time, there would be Betsy as well, practicing her dives off the high board or sipping mai tais with one of the corrupt, pretty young men who were always her houseguests. And always with one eye on May and the child.

It was easy to know what Betsy wanted. Whatever May had, that was it. She had even wanted that sorry, spasmed Frank Appermoy-and had got him, at least long enough for a tumble in his water bed, and made sure I knew she had. Now she wanted Appermoy's child. At first I thought all she wanted was a child. She could have had one easily enough, with all those young studs sniffing after her; I thought what stopped her was, a little, the bother of marrying one of them or, most of all, the unpleasantness and pain of actually giving birth. In that I was wrong. What she wanted was James Reginald Appermoy, with all his tantrums and colics, and only because he was May's.

So for half a year May was the perfect young mother bereft, with the imperfect wretch of a babe. Then the brat was weaned, and she seemed to come back to the world. Perhaps she realized at last that she was lonely. She had no friend but me on the oaty-boat. If anyone in the huge seven-thousand-man crew showed signs of becoming a friend, Betsy told Ben, and Ben transferred him away. Even the four other Mays could come on board only for a day or two at a time, with all the long flight to get there and the other to leave again, for we were mostly far from any land. So it was no wonder that my sweet girl began to look elsewhere for pleasure. It was a house party here, and a fox hunt there, and Switzerland for the skiing, and Tokyo to see the shows. If she was to be away for just a few days, she would leave Jimmy Rex with me, nasty child whom I tried with all my heart to love. If it was a matter of weeks they would both be gone, and I had nothing to do and no one to do it with, for my friends were suddenly needed badly on another boat as well. I wished for another Elsie Van Dorn, but Elsie herself was now a second engineer on the old boat, and I did not want to involve her in Ben's anger. So I had a succession of cooks' assistants and young things from the typing pool. None lasted more than a few weeks. The ones who were not kind enough and strong enough to put up with the brat I had to send back to their regular work, and the others Ben transferred away.

And the unsigned messages came in. One a month. Some came from Australia and some from Seoul, and one from Capetown, but they all said much the same thing:

"If you value your life, help her now.

But how was I to do that?

I did not need the unknown assassin's reminder to want to help my May. I made an excuse to slip away again and this time found a better lawyer, or at least a- more high- priced one. He did not simply tell me the Commodore's will could not be broken. He gave me two days of his time, quoting the Law of the Sea and citing precedents. He charged accordingly, and it all came out to much the same. Ben had the law on his side until May was thirty.

It was the only time I was on land that year. I thought of following May to her parties, to see if she would talk freely off the boat, or more truthfully just for the pleasure of being near her. I could have done

it. I would have, I surely would have, if she had said a word or given a look to say she wanted me. The word never came. The look, maybe.

She was off to New York City this time, May and the child. I carried Jimmy Rex to the airplane and handed him over to her at the door. "New York for the opera season"? I didn't know you loved opera that well, I said, and May smiled at me.

"A little culture would do neither of us any harm, Jason, dear," she said, and paused, and thought for a moment, looking out over the wide, warm sea. I knew that look. I almost expected to see her with her thumb in her mouth and her hip-huggers sagging to the ground, for it was a lost and thoughtful look. The pilot was flipping his control surfaces back and forth and glancing back over his shoulder at us, for he had a schedule to keep, but May stared at the sea for some time. Then she turned back to me as though she were about to speak.

She did not. She looked past me, over my shoulder, and changed her mind. "Good-by, then, dear Jason," she said, and kissed me. She took the baby from my arms and was gone.

As I stepped back to get out of the way of the VTO jets, I bumped into what had changed her. It was brother Ben. He was looking worn and fretful, for all he was only a dozen years older than May, and sullen Betsy was scowling at his side.

The hydrogen flame screamed and licked against the baffles, and the plane lifted in a blue-white burn too bright to look at. Betsy turned to me. "We came to say good-by," she said nastily, "but I guess May doesn't want to waste good manners on the family."

The plane was a kilometer up now, and moving away. Ben shaded his eyes to squint after it. "Jason, he said without looking at me, "let's talk business. I'll buy your stock."

"You will not," I said, "for I don't want to sell to you."

He gave me a hooded look. It was the look of a man who has some pieces to a puzzle, but not enough to make the pattern clear. "Have you been enjoying your trips to Iceland?" he asked.

I had never doubted that he was spying on me. I didn't bother to answer. He said, "I'll pay you more than your shares are worth."

"They're worth more to me than they are to you, Ben," I said, and turned my back on him. As I walked to the lift I could hear him coughing behind me. He was a sick man.

I went to my desk and began to study my reports, but I did not have my mind on them. Part was on May, as part of my mind was always. But part was on Ben. I wished the bastard no good at all, but I did not wish him dead. I knew who would inherit his stock when he died. And the Reykjavik lawyer had told me that Ben could name his successor as May's guardian and, for all that she was years younger and the guardianship a mockery, I knew who he would name.

I could not get out of my head that May had been about to say something to me before she left, and so I decided to hear what it was. Three days after she was gone, I called in my assistant and told him he was on his own for a week, and took the same plane.

We were cruising in the Philippine sea at the time, so it was VTO jet to Manila, then orbital craft to the great floating terminal off Sandy Hook, and a helicopter to the roof of my hotel.

I do not like the land. I do not like the crowds and the roar and the stink of the land, and especially I do not like a city. I had taken rooms in the same hotel where May was staying, and I did not intend to leave it except to see her. So as soon as I was settled in my suite I walked out into the hall and took the elevator a dozen flights and knocked on the door. Tse-ling Mei opened it. "Uncle Jason! she cried, with pleasure and surprise in her voice, and maybe a little worry, too. "Oh, come in, please!

All four of the other Mays were there. So was little Jimmy Rex, bawling at the walls of his room because he was being made to take a nap, but my May was not.

The young beauties sat me down and clustered around me like meadow flowers in the spring. "Some tea? asked Mei, and, "Have you eaten? from Maisie, and "What Jason probably needs most is a drink, from May Bancroft, and from May Holliston-Peirce, "Oh, tell us what's new on the boats!

So we chattered for a while and I felt almost at ease, though concerned that they seemed to have no idea when May would be back. Then May Bancroft sighed and said, "Oh, hell. We all turned and looked. Jimmy Rex was standing in the doorway, glowering at us, escaped from his crib and come to make us unhappy. In one hand he waved the perfectly dry diaper he had managed to squeeze out of. With the other he guided himself as he pissed deliberately on the Auhusson rug. Do you see what a foolish lottery we gamble in when we make a child? He could have taken after his mother, May. Even after his father, and been nothing worse than a fool. But in the random lottery of the DNA exchanges he had caught the very soul of May's bitch mother-in-law, and how heavily that has cost me since.

It cost me then, too, because it broke the mood of the party. I got up to go. Tse-ling Mei was holding the brat down while Maisie tried to pin the diaper back on him, and May Holliston-Peirce was bringing towels from a bathroom to mop up the rug. May Bancroft said, "I'll walk you to your taxi, Uncle Jason. I had no intention of a taxi, but the look on her face stopped me from saying so.

So we walked through the hall with her hand in mine, and dropped like stones in the elevator-my heart in my mouth, for there are no such high-speed lifts on the oatyboats-and she walked me through the lobby to a back entrance, and around a corner and another until she found a taxi that suited her. I was dressed for the Philippine sea, not New York in November, and May not much more warmly, not to mention the crush, and the stink, and the noise. But I let her keep up her chatter all the way without interrupting. Tse-ling Mei had been given a marvelous new part, and one May was to be married and another to run a hospital somewhere in New Jersey or Indiana, and May Bancroft herself was back in school for a law degree. And then she peered inside a parked cab and nodded her head and leaned forward to kiss my ear. She did not give me just a kiss. She gave me an address and a room number, and then turned and hurried off without looking back. I had wit enough to change cabs and walk a bit before I hailed the second one, although I nearly froze while I was doing it, but in five minutes I was there.

The address was the seediest of old hotels. The room number was on the seediest floor. The air in the hall was choked with marijuana fumes and the smell of human sweat, and the door was opened by a man of forty or more. He was wearing pants that he had zipped but not belted, no shoes, and a shirt that he had left unbuttoned. He was a sober-looking, serious sort of a man, not what you would expect to find in a whore's hangout like this, far from good-looking but solid.

And behind him, lying on an unmade bed, wearing a thin muumuu, was my May. Her expression was filled with fear.

"It's not what you think, Uncle Jason, she said to me at once, and to the man, "Hurry! Let him in!

The man moved quickly to do it. He pulled me in by the elbow, showing surprising strength for a pudgy little man not much younger than myself. He stuck his head out into the hall, and looked both ways before he closed the door. Then he turned to me.

"I'm Jefferson Ormondo, he said, "and I'm an investment banker. I apologize for this place and the way we look, but the windows don't open and the heat won't turn off. And Ben Zoll has willing ears in too many places. He was buttoning his shirt while he spoke. He sat to put on his shoes and said, "I'll take a look around the lobby to make sure it's all right. May will tell you what's going on. And he was gone, and there I was in a sweaty halfhour room with my sweet May gazing up at me out of a rumpled bed.

"We're going to get Ben's guardianship set aside, she said.

"That's impossible, I said-with my voice, but I know that what my face was saying was, *That's unfair, May, to try such a thing without me!* And she answered my face.

"Jason, dear, it's no secret from you. I can't do it without you.

"The best lawyers in Reykjavik say you can't do it at all, I told her, "for the will is in proper form.

"But what if it is forged, Jason?"

I goggled at her.

"Forged, she said, nodding. "Not all of it. Just the matter of dates. The guardianship was supposed to stop when I was twenty, and Ben had someone get into the datastores and add ten years to the time.

Now, that was getting close to a line of conversation I did not want to pursue. I didn't know-I have never known-if the Commodore ever told his daughter about the favor I had done him. She did not say anything then, or ever, to give me an answer one way or another, but hurried on: "And that is fraud, Jason, and somebody may well go to jail. But proving it! It's so hard. And Ben has everything on the boats bugged, of course. I couldn't speak to you there-and besides, she said, sitting beside me and touching my arm, "he knows you're smarter than I am, so he watches you twice as hard.

I said, "You don't have to explain anything to me, May. But I wanted explanations all the same. I got them. The plump little bald-headed man, Ormondo, worked for the bank that held Ben's stocks, and it had seemed to him that there was something funny about the records. For one thing, the will should have existed in several data- stores, not just the bank's. But the Commodore's own bank had been swallowed up by another and its records were unavailable, and in the hall of records where the will had been filed the system had crashed, all the data lost.

Ormondo came to believe that there was a forgery. He could not prove it, but it made him curious to look further. There was plenty to find.

Ben had been milking the fleet. He had set up corporations of his own to buy the hydrogen from the oatyboats and to sell the ammonia on land, and to lease to us the pilot cutters that prospected for cold, deep water, and even the aircraft that carried us to shore. Everything the Fleet bought cost a little more than it should, and everything we sold went for a little less, and the difference went to Ben.

And then Ormondo had met May at a party, not by chance, and whispered in her ear.

And ever since then, for the best part of a year, the two of them had been searching out records and

interviewing people who might know things. Whispers had got back to Ben, surely. But Ormondo was a careful man.

And they had the pattern almost complete.

"The next step, Jason, she said, "was going to be to talk to you. I almost asked you to come with me this time. I'm glad you didn't wait to be asked.

"Of course I'll do everything you want, I assured her.

She smiled sweetly and touched my arm. "Of course you will, dear Jason. There's one other thing.

She looked embarrassed. She pursed the pretty lips, hesitating, her eyes gazing at the chipped paint on the ugly wall as though she were staring over the wide sea. Then she said, "I need a husband, Jason.

She had caught me unaware. "A husband?

"I need a husband for me, and for help in this fight, because it will be a terrible one. And most of all I need one because of Jimmy Rex. He must have a father, Jason. Not a silly boy. A grown man, wise and kind and sensible. It doesn't matter if he's older than I am. It only matters that he be someone I can trust and love with all my heart.

These were the words I had been dreaming of hearing for all the long years. I could hardly speak. "Of course, my dearest, I said, and reached out for her, and was puzzled by the astonishment that sprang into her eyes.

It was a terrible fight, indeed. For months we were more on Iceland than in our proper home, all of us. That was a high enough price to pay in itself, for me. Iceland is where the Law of the Sea is administered, and indeed it is land that has come from the sea, bubbling up in roaring steam, some of it within the memory of living men. But it is still the land, and all the geothermal steam and hot swimming pools do not make up for losing the warm breezes of the southern seas.

But we won. Or mostly we won. Bastard Ben might well have gone to jail indeed, if he had not gone to the hospital instead and did not come out alive.

So it was Betsy who lost the suit, not Ben, and she did not lose it all. We could not prove the falsification of the will. The litigation was long-drawn and savage, and three of our witnesses disappeared, but the records of the dummy corporations did not. So May settled at last for a division. The guardianship was annulled. All Ben's contracts to buy and sell were voided. The Fleet was divided in two. Half the oaty-boats went to Betsy, the rest, with half the money from Ben's loot, to May. And Betsy began at once to build more... but we were at ease at last, back at home on that first old boat, steaming slowly through the Strait of Malacca, and the Commodore's daughter was at last the undisputed queen of the grazing isles. She ruled us happily, along with her child.

And with her husband. Who was not me.

She was the kindest of women, my May, but she could not be kind enough to allow me to forget how foolishly I had missed her meaning when she was trying to tell me that she meant to marry Jefferson Ormondo.

III

For the sake of her son and to claim her due, At four and twenty she wed number two. They battled and won in the struggle to keep Her fair-owned gifts from the generous deep. Blest was the respite from worries and trials In this short happy time for the queen of the isles.

Although I had lost her again, it was a good time. May was happy. Jefferson Ormondo had the good sense to be happy-well, what else could he be? Even little Jimmy Rex became more tractable, since he was away from Betsy's constant need to spur on his own born-in meanness.

We even made a sort of peace with Betsy herself. It was not easy or comfortable. Yet she came to pay a visit to our quaint old thermal grazer, and then there was nothing to do but for us to visit her great new flagship. Though I took no joy in seeing Betsy, I was glad enough of the trip. Her Works Captain was a decent enough man-we'd sailed together under the Commodore-and besides, I wanted to see some of their engineering.

What we want for the heat exchangers is the hottest surface water we can get, the top meter if we can get it, for that's where the sun's heat is strongest. But when you pump a hundred tons a second, the suction tubes are not fastidious about what they take. So when Captain Havrila took me up on his bridge, beaming with pride, I knew what he was going to show me. I'd seen it from the air. The boat was surrounded with a screen that lay thirty meters away from the hull in all directions; I'd seen it, and realized at once that there was a shallow lip all around. "You pump direct from the hull, I guessed, ~ and you've trapped surface water in a moat. The screen's to keep out fish?

He grinned ruefully. "I knew once you laid eyes on it, Jason, I wouldn't have to say a word. We pump from a reservoir ten meters deep, but all that comes in to replenish it is the very top of the sea.

"It's a nice solution. I complimented him. "But doesn't it cut down your maneuvering, with all that drag?

"It *destroys* it, he said happily, "but we're not going anywhere very fast anyway. And we've been getting delta-Ts of twenty and up -well, most days, he corrected himself. "Tell me, Jason, what are you doing about organic fouling? "Same as you, I guess. Reverse fluse every ten days with little plastic marbles. We lose nearly half of them every time, though. The sea is full of little living things that want something to cling to-unfortunately, they don't care what. The lining of our intake tubes is as good a place as any. There's not too much trouble with the deep- water intakes, because the water down there is too cold for them to be very active. But the surface intakes are another story.

"We're recovering nearly a hundred percent on the surface, he boasted. "It's all trapped in the moat, you see, so we just scoop them up again.

"Good job. But what do you do when the perimeter screens begin to foul? And he laughed and offered to buy me a drink, for that was the weakness in the system.

I took his drink, and a lot more than one over the three days we were there. I had no quarrel with Betsy's captains or Betsy's crews, but I did not like Betsy's friends. I didn't like May's liking them, either. The women called themselves actresses or models-polite lies. The men lied less politely. They called themselves men. There was Simon Kellaway, Las Vegas-born, slim and quick and temporarily living at sea on Betsy's charity because there was a murder charge in Nevada that he couldn't hush up. There was Dougie d'Agasto from Miami Beach, tall and fair and a pimp's recruiter if I ever saw one. They came from Chicago and Los Angeles and New Orleans, and they all had money, or acted as though they did,

and I did not believe that even one of them had got it inside the law.

The one I liked least was d'Agasto, the handsomest and emptiest of men. What I liked least of all was that May did not reject his company. They sat together at dinner the first night. I assumed he was Betsy's bedmate. I assumed that of every man I saw her with, for she was always, and after Ben died openly, available, accessible and even aggressive about it. Even, to my surprise, with me, for at two in the morning she knocked on my door to announce that she wasn't in the mood for sleep. When I told her that I was, she shrugged and said, "Well, you'd probably be no good to me anyway, old man, especially after you've starched your sheets already over May. She left without protest, and I-I wished we had never come there.

So I spent my time as far away from Betsy and Betsy's friends as I could. Captain Havrila fed me in the ship's officers' mess. We talked shop-openly-pretty openly, because there were things I did not mention to them, and I know there were a good many they didn't tell me. A lot of what we talked about, though, was no secret. I knew that Betsy was diversifying, because what she sold to the land became public knowledge the minute she sold it. I didn't know, but I would have found out shortly anyway, that she was planning to try total manufacture-refining steel, even. Electric refining, mostly. "The ships that come in are in ballast anyway, said their marketing chief, Jim Mordecai, "so they might as well carry ore-and we've got the electricity-and we've got a lot of extra oxygen, because if we keep on expanding L-H-2 production the way we're going, the extra oxygen's sure to depress the world market. And then there's pollution.

"Pollution? Out here? I asked.

"Here's the place for it, Jason, at sea, where it won't make the land worse than it is-although- he grinned- don't know if the folks in Tahiti are going to agree with me. He glanced at the captain before he went on, "We do have a kind of pollution problem, though. The captain must have signaled it was all right, because he completed his thought. "We're pumping so much deep water here that the dissolved CO₂ doesn't dissipate right away. We're up to pretty nearly five hundred parts per million.

"Oh? I didn't notice anything.

"Well, you won't, boomed Captain Havrila. "As far as we can tell there's no health risk-and actually Miss Betsy says she kind of likes it. It does make the plants grow in her garden! Care for a brandy now, Jason?

I did. I had one. I even had two with them, but they all had work to do, and I couldn't keep them from it. So I volunteered to take Jimmy Rex for a walk, and we headed for the gardens so I could see for myself, and indeed it was true. Bougainvillea and orchids and flowering ginger-everything was lush and beautiful.

Jimmy Rex was being not particularly awful, for he liked picking flowers. He crushed them as soon as he picked them, threw them away and picked more, but there were plenty of flowers. I let him do pretty much as he pleased, following slowly after him and thinking the unpromising thoughts of an aging bachelor, till I heard voices and saw him dart into a cluster of dirty-boy shrubbery. "Come back, James Reginald, I shouted. For a wonder, he did, looking abashed. I heard someone moving away out of sight, and in a moment some other someone came around the shrubs to see who I was.

It was Dougie d'Agasto. He was partly dressed in shorts and unlaced tennis shoes, carrying a sports shirt slung over one bare shoulder. "Oh, it's you, Jason, he said, smiling-at least I give him the credit of saying that he probably meant it for a smile, though it had a lot of smirk in it. "I figured if Jimmy Rex was

here you couldn't be far behind. I'm glad you two didn't get here ten minutes sooner!

Well, I had no interest in his tacky whoring in the bushes. I put my hand on Jimmy Rex's shoulder-he was behaving well enough to let me-and said, "We were just going."

He nodded absently, stretching, yawning, pulling the shirt on over his head, but he kept his eyes on us. "You're smart to keep close to the kid. he said.

I said stiffly, "I don't let him near the rail. D'Agasto looked at me as though I were talking a foreign language.

"I'm not talking about accident, for God's sake. I'm talking about snatch. Kidnap, he amplified, and this time it definitely was a smirk. "Do you know what that kid's worth for ransom?"

Now, if you'd met d'Agasto on a tennis court, say, you might easily think he was just another bright and handsome young sportsman, because he had the wide-eyed good humor and the trim, strong body of healthy youth. I had never thought that. Not for a single second, because before I ever met him I knew he was some sort of second-rate kin to one of the lesser Mob families in Florida. Even if I had ever thought it, listening to him talk would have straightened me out in two sentences. The way his mind worked!

And went on working. "What is it you've got now, Jason? he ruminated. "Eighteen boats in May's fleet? There's probably construction loans against every one of them, but, say, ten million dollars apiece average net worth? And that's only pocket change, because when old lady Appermoy kicks off, there's no heir left but the kid. Why, you've got your hand on a billion dollars, pal! What say you just quietly sneak him on the plane when I leave and don't say anything until I'm in San Francisco-we'll split the ransom fifty-fifty!

He was watching my face, so he winked and turned away and left without waiting for an answer. Jimmy Rex stared after him with scared delight. "Was he just making a joke, Uncle Jay?" he asked.

"What a stupid question! Of course it was just a joke!

But it wasn't.

I was glad to be back on our own ship, and the first thing I did was have a talk with the security chief. From that moment on there was somebody near Jimmy Rex every minute he wasn't with me or his parents.

I didn't stop worrying, but after a while I didn't worry as much. For May and Jefferson Ormondo it was the best time of their lives. When they walked about the boat, they were hand in hand. He was a good husband to her, for all he was no beauty, and would have been a good father to Jimmy Rex if the boy had been capable of being a son.

The money grew and grew. The more fuel we made, the more hungrily the land people clamored to burn it. We could not fix nitrogen fast enough to meet the demand for fertilizer, and so the price went up and up. We weren't The only boats on the sea anymore - now and then we'd catch sight of Japanese ones, or Australian. We built more of our own, and bigger ones, and yet there was plenty for all.

When Jimmy Rex was three years old, we moved us all to the newest and hugest oaty-boat on the sea. Two million eight hundred thousand tons. We could have run a nation off the power we produced. It was well along in the shipyards before Jefferson Ormondo ever saw it, but he cherished it as his own, for the

last of the fitting, and most of the owner's country, was his own design. May encouraged him to plan on a grand scale. And grand it surely was-but I had been happy enough on the old one. "You're a sentimental man, Jason, said May when I told her as much, "and a very dear one to me. But it's such an *old* boat. And little-why, it doesn't even have a decent bridle path!

She was trying to tease me cheerful-she knew I'd never ridden a horse. "So we're going to sell it for scrap metal, then?

"No! Then less emphatically, "I don't think so. What can we do with it, Jason? The Gulf of Mexico?

I'd thought of that myself, but it wasn't good sense. There was good grazing in the gulf for smaller boats, but it didn't seem to me there was enough sea room for an aging oaty-boat to get out of the way of bad weather. "Maybe the Brazil Triangle, I said-that was good, too, from the eastern coast of South America to the African Gold Coast-but how did you get it there? It would never go through the Canal, of course, or even the Straits of Magellan, and the seas south of Cape Horn would probably sink it. "I'll think of something, I said, and after a while I did. I sold it to May's old in-laws. They moored it for a fixed OTEC station in the straits off Lahaina, for the gray whales to stare at. It was no joy dealing with the old witch, but she made us a fair price, and even sent May a wedding present into the bargain-a year late and a lot too little, but May took it kindly and even offered to let Jimmy Rex visit his grandmother now and then out of gratitude.

But I missed the old boat. The big one wasn't just bigger. It was better designed. We put in a new cold-water intake system, with a single pipe five kilometers long and six meters wide. The thicker the pipe was, the better the surface-to-volume ratio, so the water didn't warm up as much on the way up. It does warm a little, of course. But the dissolved gases expand a little, which tends to cool it-in fact, we had to install relief valves along the pipe to bleed out the excess pressure; otherwise it would have ruptured. We were reliably getting a delta-T of 26 or 27-once even 29 for five days in a row. But the damn pipe was so long it wanted to curl up like spaghetti, and so we had to divert scout subs from prospecting for cold-water lenses to pushing it back into shape almost every day. And because we were bringing up so much in the way of nutrients, the fishing fleets from Korea and Peru followed us around. I didn't begrudge them the fish, but I liked it better when we couldn't see other ships on the horizon.

May just laughed at me when I said as much. "You just don't like to change anything, she told me, halfway between teasing and tenderness. We were on a lower deck, Jimmy Rex pretending to shoot the dolphins that were larking around our moat. Naturally, I'd installed the same sort of warm-water trap as Betsy's flagship, and naturally, the dolphins weren't going to let a little two-meter-high screen keep them from jumping over into a new playpen.

I said, "I like things to get better, not just different.

She sighed and pulled Jimmy Rex back from the rail. "And isn't this better'?

"It is in some ways.

"Name one it isn't!

I pointed over the screen, at the open ocean waters. "We didn't see dead squid floating around the old boat.

"Jason, be fair! That's not the boat's fault. There are fish kills all over this part of the Pacific- And then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the boy had climbed up onto the rail to get a better

make-believe shot. "James Reginald Appermoy! she yelled, and dragged him back just as he was about to go over.

Well, it wouldn't have hurt him much, a twelve-meter fall into a warm bathtub, but he wouldn't have liked it, either. He was good for almost a minute, and even let me put my arm around him for almost that long. But I was still worrying about the squid. A dead fish at sea is a curiosity; as soon as anything slows down enough to be dying, something else is sure to eat it. "I hear they're worse off on Hawaii, I said, and May said:

"Oh, that reminds me. Jimmy Rex is going to see his grandmother next week.

I said nothing, but I didn't have to. "It's all right, she reassured me.

"It's all right if he can take Pan and Jeremy along, I bargained-they were the two security men Jimmy Rex hated least.

"Well, if you don't think Grandma's feelings will be hurt- She saw my eyes and dropped it. ~They'll go, she promised. "But after all, the Appermoy's are family. And so's Betsy, and when Jimmy Rex comes back from Hawaii, I'm thinking of inviting some of her friends over.

"Betsy's family, I admitted, "but the trash she keeps around her are not.

"But they're amusing, Jason. With all the space we've got now, it's no trouble to have a few guests.

"That, I said, "is another way the old boat was better.

But I could not really argue against family. And if we entertained Betsy and her friends, then Betsy must entertain us and ours, so May and Jeff and the boy and the four Mays and I flew over to visit good queen Betsy. Our flagships were not usually very far apart-I speak geographically. With the scouts for both our fleets getting better at finding the best delta-Ts and the hydrologists improving their predictions about how stable they were and the navigators getting more skilled at plotting courses that would graze where the deltas were greenest- well, there are only so many optimal solutions to a problem, especially as we each copied the other's technology as soon as it was proved. It was no wonder that we often came to the same solutions. And the same problems, for looking over the side of Betsy's flagship with Havrila by my side, I said, "I see you've got dead squid, too.

"The fishing fleet's complaining, too. He nodded gravely and then laughed. "Best thing we ever didn't do, he said, "was diversify into fishing.

"We thought about it for a while, too, I said, "and decided to stay out of perishables. There are plenty of other fields!

And there were. We were getting into dozens of them. Mining the hot heavy-metal brine from the springs of the East Pacific Rise. Scooping up manganese pellets from the ocean bottom. The only "perishable we got into was fresh water-we built two experimental sailing tugs, huge devils with revolving masts to catch the winds, and used them to tow icebergs from Antarctica to the Persian Gulf.

All the ventures prospered-though nothing more than the ocean-thermal that was our core money spinner- even the icebergs. They were Jefferson's own pet. He was land-born and land-oriented, and he could not resist something that would make things better for people on land. He went off to supervise the project now and then, a week at a time. I didn't like his leaving May alone. I liked it least when it began

to be so that, as Jeff was leaving, some of Betsy's giddy friends would arrive. The one who came most often was Dougie d'Agasto.

There was bound to be trouble, and it came. Dougie stayed a day too long. Jeff came home, and he must have been looking for his family with field glasses as the plane came in, for he didn't bother to go to their rooms. He dropped his bags with a deckhand and headed straight for the pool. May, looking ethereally ravishing in her skimpy suit, was watching to keep Jimmy Rex from drowning himself-heaven knows why. Dougie d'Agasto was standing beside her, whispering in her ear. His arm was around her waist, and his fingers were toying delicately with the elastic of her trunks. Jeff did not look like a fighter. His bald head gleamed sweatily in the Pacific sun, and he was shorter and fatter. But he spun d'Agasto around and decked him with one punch. Into the pool went Dougie d'Agasto, and came up screaming and fingering his bloody, but not broken, perfect nose. He was off the boat in an hour, and what May and Jefferson said to each other about it I do not know.

I know what I said to May. First chance I got her alone I said, "You're a fool to risk Jeff for that little pimp.

Was it any of my business? At least she didn't tell me it was not. She said seriously, "I am not risking Jeff, Uncle Jason. Dougie's flattering, though. He's such a beautiful boy.~

"He's a louse.

"He's almost family.

"He's some kind of poor relation to your former mother- in-law, yes, and that's Mob family. Those people are criminals. Drug pushers. Arm breakers. Murderers.

She laughed good-humoredly and pecked my cheek. "Dougie never murdered anybody, Jay, except maybe a few women he loved to death. But you're right. I shouldn't let him think he's being encouraged. And I won't.

So for six months I saw nothing of Dougie d'Agasto, but long before that he'd written both May and Jefferson most abject letters of apology. Jeff relented-he didn't ask my advice. Then Betsy came over for a party, and she brought d'Agasto with her.

We were competing in earnest then, and actually the visit was partly so that we could talk over some business. There's a lot of ocean, but only narrow bands of it, and short, where the temperature difference between surface and chilly deep is enough to run the turbines at full speed. We both were sticking pretty close to the equator, too. It wasn't so much for the solar heat, although there was plenty there. It was for protection from the storms. Our boats were getting a lot too big and clumsy to risk in a hurricane. You don't get hurricanes on the equator, or anyway very rarely. The equator isn't north and it isn't south, so there's no Coriolis force to speak of. The funnel doesn't know which way to turn, so the big funnel storms don't develop there.

So more often than not the ocean wasn't empty anymore. There were other oaty-boats in sight, often ours, more often hers--or Russians or Japanese or Norwegians. The time was coming just beyond the horizon when there might be more grazers than forage for OTECs. So there was some high-powered arguing between Betsy's nav chiefs and ours before the party started, and I can't honestly say the question ever really got resolved. Still, the guests had a good time at the party. It was New Year's Eve, and we'd given everybody any time off that could be spared at all. The guests were all over the boat, the crews were welcomed in owners' country; I saw Betsy and May singing "Auld Lang Syne with the

kitchen staff and Dougie d'Agasto slapping the back of an assistant pipe fitter, and if we were out to cut each others' throats in the marketplace as soon as the party was over, the swords were sheathed while it lasted. And the next morning, while most of the ship was nursing hangovers, Jefferson Ormondo was inspecting intake gauges on a hydrogen freezer-ship line.

There was a leak. Any leak was dangerous, but it shouldn't have been a disaster for two reasons. The first reason was that hydrogen in the open floats quickly up and away. Anyway, as soon as they heard the shriek of escaping gas, Jefferson and every body else broke for the rail-it was only a twenty-meter drop, and the water in the moat was calm and warm. The second reason was that there was no reason for a spark to ignite it. Nothing that could make a spark was ever on a hydrogen ship's intake stage.

Except this time. I had guarded the wrong member of the family.

Even if there had been an explosion within a few meters of jeff, he should have survived. But he was within the explosion. He was inside a mass of mixed hydrogen and air, and the same mixture was inside his lungs. When the explosion came, it exploded outside him and in. He lived an hour. The whole time he kept trying to scream in agony, but he hadn't lung enough left to scream with anymore.

The only damage to the oaty-boat was some scorched paint and a few fittings. That didn't matter to May. She didn't want to live on it anymore. Jimmy Rex needed a good school, she said, and so she was taking him and herself off to live in Florida. What it was that May needed I only guessed. Did not want to guess. Could not helping guessing when, a few months later, she phoned me and said, "I have news for you, Uncle Jay.

That sweet, sad face on the phone, it melted my heart. All I said was, "Who's the lucky man?"

Pause. "Please don't say anything against him when I tell you, promise?"

My mouth was dry and my heart was pounding, but I managed to smile. "It's Dougie d'Agasto, right? And you've made up your mind?"

"I have, dear Jay. He's a nicer man than you think he is.

"I hope so.

"Oh, Jay, please! Try to see it my way. I married one husband because Ben insisted, and another because I needed his help. This one's for me, Jay. Please say it's all right!"

"May, I said to my lifelong love, "whatever you do is all right with me, always. Twice a widow at her age-- could I blame her?"

No. It was easier to blame myself. And bastard Ben had been right. He said she would marry a rich boy and a sensible boy and a handsome boy. He never said they would all be the same man.

Consort the first was slow to learn. Consort the second was quick to burn. The higher her worth, the meaner her fall, And consort the third was the worst of them all. Sweet Truth despises and high Honor reviles The last man to king the queen of the isles.

They made their home in Miami. Miami! I could not imagine how my May could be happy among land people, especially those land people, but her letters were cheerful enough. They were short, yes, and infrequent. But the only news they ever contained was good. Dougie, she wanted me to know, had

buckled down and was studying ocean-thermal engineering! It was too bad that it kept him away from home so much, but he was very clever at learning it. May herself was swimming, golfing, riding- always busy. And Jimmy Rex was happy to be back in his school. There was no word of whether the school was happy to have him. So there was some kind of a bright side for me. If I didn't have May, at least I didn't have Jimmy Rex, either.

So owner's country was all mine, and I rattled around in it lonesomely. I was in no mood for parties, and if Betsy wanted to be invited, she had the good sense not to tell me so. I kept busy. We were in a dozen big industries by then. We were selling liquid gases-oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen; solid CO₂ ammonia, methanol, chlorine, caustic soda; small quantities of argon and helium, too, when we could find anyone to buy them. I was toying with the idea of microwaving energy to a low satellite and beaming it back to, say, Australia or Japan. Betsy's steel industry wasn't going anywhere, but I'd taken a tip from what Captain Havrila had said about the ships coming in in ballast: I had ours syphon sand up from the port bottoms for ballast, and then we used the sand to make a slurry to scour out the fouling organisms in our deep intake pipes-no need to try to recover it! Of course, I wasn't the owner of the Fleet, and everything I did I had to ask permission of May for. But she gave it, every time. Because I had plenty to do, I should have been happy- or as happy as I could be expected to be, with my May married to a rodent that walked like a man. If I wasn't happy, part of the reason was that I got the letter I had been expecting for weeks. No return address. No name. Just the message:

The Commodore's orders are still in effect. I didn't know whether it was time for me to carry them out or not, so I flipped a coin. You won this time.

I almost wished the coin had come up the other way- better, I wished that my unknown pen pal would come and talk to me about it. If he decided to kill me afterward, well-I didn't want him to, but there were some bad nights when it seemed like a way out of a place where I didn't want to be. But God knew I needed advice-even from my assassin.

And then May's weekly letter said, "Please come and visit us, and enclosed with it was one from Dougie d'Agasto:

We have some important business to talk over, Jason. You'll come out of it rich. Besides, it's what May wants.

Even when the man was trying to be ingratiating he raised the hackles on the back of my neck. I had not forgotten the last deal he had offered me! I did not for one second think that he wouldn't have made the same offer again-except that he'd found a better one for himself. You don't have to steal the child when you can capture the mother.

I certainly did not want to talk over anything with Dougie d'Agasto, no matter how rich he proposed to make me. But it was May who'd asked me to come.

It is not a long flight from Papeete to Miami, but it uses up a whole night-you cross over five time zones. And so I arrived at ten in the morning with no more than an hour's sleep and my disposition cranky. I took a taxi from the airport to the address Dougie had given me. What I wound up in looked like a warehouse district and smelled like the city dump. A couple of gasoline-burner cars, half dismantled, rusted along the curb. We were only a block or two from Biscayne Bay-that accounted for part of the smell. At least two of the low-rise buildings on the block had been burned out and boarded up. An elderly black woman was throwing a bucket of hot, soapy water on the sidewalk in front of a little grocery store and attacking it with a broom. I walked up to her, carrying my overnight case. "Excuse me, I'm looking for Douglas d'Agasto, I said.

She straightened up. "Round back, she said. I thought there was some hostility in the way she looked at me, but she added, "You want me to help you with that bag?"

"Thank you, no. But it's kind of you to offer: I gestured at the soapy sidewalk. "I didn't really expect to see anybody doing that around here.

"I ain't from around here, she said, dismissing me. At least there seemed to be one decent person in the neighborhood to keep May company, I thought-but could d'Agasto really have May living in this wretched slum? Well, of course he could, if it suited his purpose-but not himself!

Of course, I had made a wrong assumption. Neither of them lived there. It was an office, not a home, and once you got to the inner courtyard, obviously a luxurious one. A slim black man appeared from a vined trellis and circled a marble fountain to ask what my business was. When I gave my name, he passed me on through a door- there was a very thick frame around it; weapons detectors, I realized- and into a handsome, huge waiting room. There a handsome small woman with rose-red hair conducted me to the very office of Douglas d'Agasto himself.

I've seen pictures of a bigger office. It belonged to that old dictator, Mussolini. "Uncle Jason, d'Agasto cried welcomingly, rising to wait for me to cover the fifteen meters to his desk before he stretched out his hand. "Glad you could come! Sorry to make you come to my office first, but I figured we might as well get the business out of the way so you could relax when we get to the house.

I let him shake my hand. "What's the business we're talking about?"

He nodded approval of my directness. He was just as direct. "May wants to own the Fleet free and clear. No more trustee. No other owners. So we want you to turn the trust over to her and sell her your stock. We'll pay you fifty million dollars for it, Uncle Jason.

He had not invited me to sit down, but I sat down anyway. "I'm not your uncle, I said, "and my stock's not worth that much. Fifteen or twenty at most. It doesn't matter, though, because I don't want to sell.

"May really wants you to-

"What May wants me to do, May will tell me to do herself.

The look he threw me was instant anger on top. That didn't bother me a bit. Underneath was a cocky confidence, though, and that did. "In that case, he said, spreading the dimples on the sun-tanned face with a wide smile, "we better just get our asses out to the house so she can do that little thing. I think you're going to like our place.

If what Dougie meant was that I would think it very luxurious, I knew that sight unseen. I had been signing the fund transfers into May's account to pay for it. The luxury started long before we got there. We were only a block or two from Dougie's boat dock on the bay, but there was a chauffeured car waiting in the courtyard to take us there. As we pulled out into the street, I saw the old black woman pause in shining her cracked store window to glare at us over her shoulder. I appreciated that; at least now I knew who the hostility belonged to. We got in a hydrofoil with a three-man crew and screamed down the waterway, under causeway bridges, past small islands, until we came to a large one. We coasted along it for a while. There were lavish estates along the shore; then there were none, just mangroves and cypress, until we came to a dock that could have handled an oaty-boat. Well, not really. I exaggerate. But the dock was an exaggeration, too. There was no vessel he might want to own that

would need that much space.

The house was as grand as I could have expected, but the grandest part was May running down the green, green lawn to meet me. She hugged me twice as tightly as I had expected, then leaned back to look at me. And I at her. It was my veritable sweet May, as ever was, the clean, clear face, the thoughtful, wide-set eyes, the silky hair- "You look tired, I said. I hadn't meant to, but it was true. It was not polite, so I added, "Too much golf, I suppose.

The smile flickered, but it came back fast. "It's more like too much not seeing you, Jay. Come on in! Oh, Jason-I've missed you so much!

If consulted by the tribunal when it is time to decide how long Dougie d'Agasto should roast in hell, I will say on his behalf that at least he let us alone to talk. He excused himself at once. He went up to his "study for an hour, came down for lunch, and immediately took off in the stiltboat for most of the afternoon-it was for his tutoring in thermal engineering, he said. So I had May to myself. I saw the house. I heard how Jimmy Rex was doing. May told me that the secessionist mobs were pretty worrying when they rioted, but maybe they were right and this part of Florida should anschluss with Cuba. She wanted to know if I'd seen much of the big new Chinese boats that were being launched, or any more dead fish. I even had time for a nap before dinner; and not once did she bring up the trust, or I.

Dinner wasn't grand-just very good, with all the things in it that May had known I liked all her life. When the coffee was on the table, Dougie chased the servants out of the dining hall and leaned back.

"So tell him, honey, he said with that smile that was on the very verge of curdling into a smirk.

May looked reluctant, but she didn't put it off. She put her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, and she gazed at me. "You've been as good a father to me as my father ever was, Jason.

Those were not the words I most wanted to hear from her, but under the circumstances they were about the best I could expect. I reached across and patted her hand.

"So don't think I'm not grateful to you, dear, because I am. I always will be. But I'm not a child anymore. I'm a grown woman, married- Three times married, I thought, and she was thinking the same because she hesitated- married, with a child. As much of an adult as I'm ever going to be, Jason. So I'm asking you to dissolve the trust. Dougie pursed his lips and nodded judiciously, as though he had just heard the idea for the first time and thought that by and large it might be sound. He didn't say anything. That was just as well, for I might have said something in return that could never be unsaid. "You don't have to sell your own stock if you don't want to, Jay, she went on. "Dougie thought that might be a good idea for you, but it's up to you. But, please, will you do the other"?

I didn't look at Dougie again. I didn't have to, for I could feel the temperature of his smile..., and I could feel it drop to zero as I said, "If I do that, May, I will be killed. It's your father's orders. And I spread before them the nineteen letters I had received from my unknown assassin. And I told them what the Commodore had said to me.

Dougie slammed his fist down on the table. It was thick teak, but it shook. I didn't look at him, and he didn't say a word. May, with tears in her voice, said, "You mean my father paid someone to have you *killed*? But that's horrible!

I touched her hand again. "No, love, it's not. He was right to make sure of me. If I'd failed you, it would be fair punishment. And wished I were more sure that I hadn't failed her already.

May was crying openly now. It was her husband's place to comfort her. but her husband was studying the nineteen letters, their envelopes, their postmarks. I got up and went around the table, knelt beside her, and put my arms around her. No one said anything for a while. I would not have minded if that while had gone on indefinitely, with May warm and unresisting in my arms, but at last Dougie had finished his chain of thought. He swept the letters in a fan across the table and sat back. "I guess you're not lying, he stated.

In my arms May stirred and detached herself. "Jason doesn't lie to me, she told him, "ever!

"I don't think he could have cooked up all these letters, he said, "so let's say you're right. What about it, Jay"? Don't you have any idea who this person is?

I hesitated, but it was too late to do the person any harm. "I thought for a while it might be Captain Havrila, I admitted, "but he died six months ago, and I've had letters since.

"Never tried to find out? See where they were mailed from? Find the people who mailed them?

"How could I? For that matter, why would I want to? I had accepted the situation as just when the Commodore had laid it on me.

He nodded. He wasn't agreeing, he was only recognizing the fact that I didn't have the guts or the determination to do anything about the situation. "What we can do, he proposed, "is get you the best damn guards you ever saw in your life. Twenty-four hours, round the clock. As long as you live. And forget about fifty million, I'll go to-

"Dougie, stop it! cried May. He blinked at her, but she stared him down. Then she turned to me. "What you've said changes everything, of course. So that's out. We'll go on the way we are for the present.

And I expected an explosion from Dougie. I didn't get one. I was slow to learn that the only safe expectation about Dougie d'Agasto was that he would never do what I expected him to do, but always something worse. He nodded, and picked up the letters and stuffed them in a pocket and gave us both a sunny smile.

"In that case, he said, "anyone for a game of billiards?

If Dougie d'Agasto did not get what he wanted out of our meeting, he got quite a lot in other ways. He got the right to tell me what to do. Every one of his letters of instruction was countersigned by May herself, but there was no doubt who had written them.

His instructions were not all that wicked or dumb, to be honest-perhaps there had been worse ones that May refused to sign. Cancel the plans for another ore pumper-well, the manganese nodules were a drug on the market these days, with so many boats fishing for them. Kill the iceberg project and sell off the tugs-it had become a running sore in our cash-flow accounts anyway. He never attempted to keep me from spending any sum on keeping the Fleet seaworthy and comfortable for its crews, but he did veto almost every plan for expansion. He was hoarding capital, it seemed. No doubt there was a plan, and no doubt I would find out about it sooner or later.

Meanwhile I followed his orders, and life was not all that bad. The officers and crews liked me, I think. Not just on the flagship. When I flew to Dubai to sign the sale papers on the sailing tugs and pay off the crews, they took me out for a night on the town. I could not have expected that from forty men and

women I had just fired, and they weren't angling for other places in the Fleet-they were all fine sailors, and there were plenty of jobs. They were simply saying good-bye to a friend, and I was touched. I was also very, very drunk, and when at last I got back to the flagship I was still parched and headachy, but not unhappy-at least not until I saw that Betsy's private VTO was parked on the landing deck.

"I thought, she said, "it was time I paid you a visit, since you don't ever come to see me.

She was not a person I wanted for a friend, but I didn't particularly want to offend her. "You are always welcome on May's fleet, I told her, with a great deal of politeness and not nearly as much truth, and I called the housekeepers' section chief to tell them that they were to prepare suitable accommodations. Of course, they were way ahead of me. They had put fresh flowers in the vases and ice in the bowls in the suite that sheikhs and sovereigns occupied when they were our guests. For a wonder, Betsy didn't pout when I told her I had to work for a bit- "I've been away quite a while, I said, "and I really need to- And she put her finger against my lips, with a smile that under any other circumstances I would have called flirtatious.

"May I try your pool out, Jay? she asked, quite politely, and she occupied herself with swimming and lazing around the big waterfall that sheeted down the glass of the owners' suite and into the pool, while I did what I had to do. Which was only partly business. Mostly it was sucking oxygen out of a bottle and swallowing aspirin, because if I had Betsy for a guest I wanted a clear head.

She had asked that dinner be served out in the garden, and when I came out to see her, she was wearing something long and filmy and white, with white hibiscus tucked into a diamond tiara on her hair. "How very nice you look, I said, as required. She smiled dreamily, watching the butler pour the wine.

"To us, she said, and then, when we had each taken a sip, "How fresh and clean the air is here, Jay.

"I hope it stays that way, I said, because there had been rumors of Betsy's next plan for expansion and diversification. She gave me a thoughtful look, but she was too busy being sweet to follow it up. All through the meal she was all sweet prattle and gossip about rich friends and reckless doings. It was quite a meal. The chef had had time to do his best, and so it was mahimahi and rack of lamb from our own flock, and a compote of mostly ugly-fruit for dessert with enough kirsch in it so that I didn't require an after-dinner brandy. Or, after the previous few days in Dubai, at all want one. Betsy had no such restraint. She ate every scrap and drank all that was poured, and when it was done she sighed, "I wish I had your cook, Jay! I guess I can tell you that I've tried to hire him away.

"I know, I said. I also knew the reason he had told me for turning her down-young Betsy was a terror to her servants.

"You know a lot about my business, don't you? she purred, watching me. "I think you meant something by that remark about the air pollution.

I shrugged. "I have heard, I said carefully, "that you are contracting for large amounts of Australian coal. The only thing I can think of you wanting to do with it is pyrolize it into gasoline, so we'll have a floating Galveston out here.

"You have very good sources of information, Jay. I do too. You were a fool to turn Dougie down, you know.

She was sitting between me and the setting sun. I moved to get the sun out of my eyes so that I could see her better, and she laughed and hitched her chair closer to me. "You're always a surprise to me,

Jason, she said. "Those nineteen letters coming in all these years, and nobody knew but you.

I had finally puzzled it out. "You've got a spy in May's house, I said.

"My dear Jason! Of course I'm always interested in what's happening with my sister.

"She's not your sister.

"I think of her as my sister. She hitched her chair a bit closer, and our knees touched. "Would you like to know how I think of you?"

Now, the advancing years had not made me any more handsome. I was older than Betsy's father. I could not think of any reason why she would be after my body, but her eyes were half closed, and her lips were half smiling, and her voice was husky.

I got up to replenish her drink, and when I was seated again, we were no longer touching. "Why was I stupid, Betsy?"

"Accidents happen, she whispered over the rim of her glass. "You've got a few good years left if you're careful, Jay. I moved restlessly, rejecting the implication. "May has more than that, she went on, "unless there was an accident. Why, do you know, Jason, under the terms of the Commodore's will, if May died your trusteeship would terminate? And then you'd have nothing to say about what happened to her stock.

"It would just go to Jimmy Rex.

"And if something happened to Jimmy Rex?"

I was getting angry-it was not because she was putting new thoughts in my head, for what angered me was that these same thoughts had occurred to me long since. Fortunately for my peace of mind I had reasoned out an answer to that. "May's money, I said, "is a lot, but it's nothing compared to what Jimmy Rex is going to inherit from his grandmother. The Appermoyes have *billions*, and Jimmy's the only heir.

And Betsy laughed out loud. "To think, she marveled, "that you were the one who got us interested in the dead fish!"

I nodded as though I understood. I doubt that I fooled her. I did not understand at all, and to make time to help puzzle it out I poured myself a brandy after all. I dawdled, savoring the Courvoisier. Either she was being deliberately mystifying, or I was more tired and hung over and, yes, already slightly drunk all over again than I thought. Perhaps I had not made myself clear? The logic was very simple. Nothing would happen to Jimmy Rex-at least nothing that Dougie might arrange-as long as his grandmother was alive, because Dougie would not endanger his chances of somehow getting his hands on the Appermov fortune. What dead fish had to do with all this I did not know, and Betsy was not helping me think. She leaned forward, with her eyes as close to sparkling as she knew how to make them, and licked the lobe of my ear. "You're an exciting man, Jason, she whispered.

"For God's sake, Betsy! I protested, not quite sure whether it was the sense of what she was saying that I objected to, or her warm, moist tongue in my ear. I was getting to be an elderly man, but I wasn't dead. I didn't like Betsy at all. She was not beautiful. But she was young, and she was healthy, and she was wearing at least a hundred dollars' worth of French perfume in the folds of the clinging gossamer gown. I tried to redirect the conversation. "Will you please tell me what you're trying to say?"

She smiled mistily and leaned back-it was not a way of putting space between us, it was only so that she could throw her breasts out. I did not fail to notice them. "Jason, she murmured, "I think better when I'm lying down. In bed. With a nice warm body next to me.

There was no possible doubt in my mind that it was Betsy's intention to add me to her already outstanding collection of lovers. I am embarrassed to say that at that moment I could almost believe that it was for my own aging body's sake-almost. I croaked. "Why are you doing this, Betsy?"

"Aw She pouted. Then she shrugged. "Because I want everything that belongs to May. But I promise you it'll be worth it. I'm really good, Jason. And I also promise you, she added, getting slowly up and tugging me to my feet, "that in that nice big bed that you sleep in, that used to be May's, after the important stuff has been taken care of, I will tell you everything you want to know, and it will truly fascinate you.

On that promise she cheated me, though not on anything else. I did not sleep much that night. When I woke at daylight and remembered who I had for a bedmate, she was gone. I pulled myself raggedly out of bed and threw a robe on, and while I was puzzling over what had happened, I heard a jet scream. I went to the lanai and there was Betsy's plane, a bright blue-white trail streaking across the pink morning sky. She had gotten what she wanted, and gone.

She spoiled my sleep for more than one night. I could not get out of my mind what she had said and hinted. The worst was the implication that Jeff's death had not been an accident. Dougie was filth, of course. I had not thought he was a murderer, at least in my conscious mind; but now that Betsy had made me think about it, I could not doubt it anymore.

I called in the security chief again, and from then on I was never without a couple of huskies within call.

But that protected only me. What could protect my May? Logic told me that it would not make sense for Dougie to harm May as long as the boy would simply inherit-nor would it be reasonable for him to want the boy out of the way as long as Jimmy Rex stood to inherit the vast Appermoy billions. It would surely pay Dougie to bide his time, at least until the old lady died.

But the stink of dead fish showed me there was something wrong with that chain of reasoning. Betsy knew what it was but, typically, had not told me. So I started other inquiries into motion.

They weren't necessary. Before my agents had a chance to report, a morning came when I was awakened by the Fleet bursar pounding at the door, bursting with news.

The dead fish had done the Appermoy's in.

For old man Appermoy had not been able to resist one more villainy before he died. The glassy pellets he dissolved the radionuclides in for disposal were not expensive. It was not usually worth his while to steal in so trivial an area. But there was a strike in a settling farm that he had not been able to buy off, and an accident to one of the vitrifying plants that put him behind schedule, and so he had eight hundred tons of high-level radio active waste with no legitimate place to put them. He had dumped them, raw, into his seamount. Of course, they had begun to dissolve into the sea almost at once.

Appermoy had not killed the Pacific Ocean, for it was too big for even him. But he had so polluted three million square kilometers that fish were dying. The family had been able to keep the lid on-it is cheaper to bribe than to comply-until the weather betrayed them. For a solid month the Hawaiian winds blew the wrong way. They swept the waters out of the west, and washed radioactively hot waves onto Oahu and

Maui and the Kona coast.

The damage was too immense for bribes to work anymore, and they were a land-based conglomerate. So the land law could reach them, and that meant something like twenty billion dollars in damage suits already, with more in the offing, and the lax government agencies forced at last to stir themselves. "I'm sure, said the bursar gleefully, "that the old lady's tucked a few million away in pocket change here and there. But the company's bust!

So Jimmy Rex had lost most of his legacy. . . and May had lost her insurance.

Since I no longer believed that Jeff's accident had been an accident, I had to believe that an accident could easily happen to May and her son. What could I do to prevent it? I ruminated a thousand plans. I could confront Dougie with my suspicions and warn him that he was being watched-foolish idea! The one thing you could not do to Dougie d'Agasto was frighten him off. I could warn May. I could tell her what I believed and beg her to leave him. But that was almost as foolish. If she had been willing to listen, she would never have married the creature in the first place. The best plan was the one that I rejected most positively and at once. I could, I thought out of my anger and despair, do to Dougie himself what I feared he would do to May.

But I could not stoop so low, though for many years I have wished I had.

And while I was stewing over whether to call May, and what to say to her if I did, I got a call from her. She looked troubled and very weary, but she was trying to sound happy. "Good news, Jason," she cried, though her eyes made liars of her words. "Dougie says we won't have to worry about that-that *letter* problem, anymore. He says he is certain of it. He has gone to get documentary proof, and he'll bring it to you. But she added, although I could see that it cost her, "But you're the one who has to decide if the proof is enough, Jay. I'll abide by whatever you decide.

And two days later, before dawn, Dougie's plane screamed in. It woke me from my sleep. By the time I got to the landing strip he was gone, the pilot waiting by the ship to pass on his instructions for me. Mr. d'Agasto had had the deck crew take his materials down to the scavenging deck. Mr. d'Agasto would wait for me there. Mr. d'Agasto asked that I join him at once.

Mr. d'Agasto was getting on my nerves. Why the scavenging deck? It was not much more than a sewer head- when we built lips around the oaty-boats, we could no longer throw our garbage over the side, so there was a well that opened out under the hull. It was a tiny, dirty chamber down near the waterline, not a place where anyone went for choice. I didn't like Dougie's choice of a place, I didn't like getting orders from him-most of all, of course, I didn't like Dougie himself. But I went. And all the way down on the hoist, and all across the wide, hissing, rumbling of the boat's workings as the tram carried me through the low-pressure turbine decks, I was wondering if this was a scheme of Dougie's to kill me and dump me down the scavenging well. I had not forgotten what he was.

I also had not forgotten some of the other things Betsy had told me. They were not useful things. They were what she thought were sexually stimulating things. They had to do with Dougie's tastes: How he liked to do that, she said showing me *that* and also this, demonstrating *this*, and most of all he likes to do these others... But some of those others I would not allow at all, and my stomach turned as the images formed in my mind of what went on between Dougie and my May in their private hours. So I did not want to see the man at all. And if it was his plan to kill me-well, then at least I would never again be troubled with these poisonous thoughts.

He did not have any such plans, it turned out.

He was alone in the scavenging chamber. It reeked, for he had opened the main access hatch and the oily, warm water was only a few meters below, with all its leftover stinks. Dougie had a great packing ease at his feet, and he was smoking a joint to combat the stench. "Close the door, he ordered.

I did as I was told. Dougie could see that I was ill at ease. It amused him. "This won't take long, he promised. "Help me open the box.

I did that, too, very obedient to his instructions. The box was very heavy, and there was waterproof sacking around it, a metal container nearly two meters long. It was sealed and locked. "You take good care of your documents, I panted as I lifted one corner so that Dougie could unlock the strapping.

He laughed-I did not then know why. It took him some time to get the lid open- The lid of the coffin. A terrible miasma of decay poured out. The body inside was days dead, but I could recognize the tired old face. In life it had belonged to Elsie Van Dorn. "I never thought of her, I gasped.

"You don't have to think of her anymore, chuckled Dougie. "You're really pretty dumb, old man. It stood to reason that the Commodore would have arranged for your guard dog to get some money. All I had to do was get a look at his private bequests-you know how that's done, don't you? I flinched, but didn't meet his eyes. "Once I found her, it wasn't hard. She even had copies of the letters in her safe deposit box.

I could not speak. I could only stare at poor Elsie, who had loved the child she had cared for and at the last paid the tariff on that love.

"You've seen enough? You're convinced? And Dougie shoved the box into the scavenging chute. It was a two- meter drop, splash, gone forever into the secret deeps of the ocean. "So you don't have any excuse anymore, old man, said Dougie, "and I've had the papers drawn up for you. Here they are. Sign.

And of course, as soon as he could get back to Miami with the signed papers, May turned over all her stock to him. I had begged her not to. She wouldn't meet my eyes on the phone as she said, "I feel-anyway, I hope-that once he has what he needs, he won't have to-

She stopped there and shook her head, not wanting to name what he "had to do otherwise. And Dougie d'Agasto was crowned king of the grazing isles.

Toll the bell, sound the knell, My lady she married the lord of hell. Her life she gave as wife and slave To a treacherous, lecherous, blood-soaked knave, An impudent villain whose touch defiles The sweetness and woe of the queen of the isles.

The oaty-boats had a long run for their money, but there were clouds on the horizon. There was a new land- based energy source, deep methane from far under the crust; there was a new sky-based one, with MHD generators in orbit beaming down floods of microwave power. And every month a new huge oaty-boat appeared, or more than one, to add to our fleet or Betsy's or some foreigner's. They all had five-kilometer intakes now, and we were all huddling in the same patches of ocean, sucking out the delta-Ts. It was not just that the sea was never empty now, it was worse than that. The sweet Pacific reeked of oil. My suspicions about Betsy's plans were correct though it wasn't just gasoline she was making. She bought cheap coal from Australia, pyrolyzed it to make liquid hydrocarbons, and reacted them with her electrolysis gases to turn the waste char into fuel alcohol. It was cheap fuel to ship and cheap fuel to store, for it needed no liquefying, and she sold every drop of it back to the Australians, or to the Americans or the Europeans or the Japanese. And left the stink of her oil and the smudge of her

filth far beyond the horizon.

Half the other fleets were beginning to do the same, and Dougie called me on the carpet to find out why I had not proposed it for ourselves. They were back in the owner's country now, he and May and the boy, for he simply had overruled her objections to living in the place where Jeff had died. He kept me standing before his huge teak desk for ten minutes while he punched out data sets to study, face impassive, head twisted back to avoid the drifting smoke from the joint he never took out from between his lips, and then he confronted me: "Well? Can you explain why we missed the boat on this?"

Dougie d'Agasto's opinion of me didn't matter at all, but I didn't want him convincing May I was an old fool. "The market has peaked already, I said. "There's too many boats doing it.

"Because we're getting to it too late!

I shook my head. "Because hydrogen's a cleaner fuel- I saw that wasn't registering with him- and will always get a higher price- that did- and this little boom won't last long enough to amortize the cost of the pyrolytic converters. All it will do is turn the Pacific into Los Angeles. And indeed, there were days when my eyes stung out in the open sea wind.

"Well, he said, as though he were giving me one more chance and begrudging it, "we'll say no more about it. Anyway, I've got plans of my own.

But he didn't tell me what they were. I didn't ask. I confess to curiosity, though, because to give the reptile his due, Dougie had not entirely wasted his time in "studying" oceanthermal industrial processes in Miami. He hadn't wasted much time doing any actual studying, either; I do not believe more than one hour a week went to his tutoring, and where the rest of it went I could guess-and so could May, for the lines on her face were not all due to too much golf and sunshine. He found that there was a simpler way, though. He simply bought the school. He hired away twenty of the expert instructors and flew them to the Fleet. He knew enough to make good choices, anyway. All of them were skilled, and one or two I knew myself-Desmond MacLean had worked as a junior engineer on the Commodore's first boat, before going back to school and winding up a teacher. But even Desmond did not volunteer what Dougie's plans were.

I must give the devil one more measure of due. He was a worker. He worked as hard as Jeff Ormondo even, though how he found time for it all I could not guess. When they were aboard the boat, he was everywhere, looking into every hold and engine room and control point; but he and May lived jet-set lives, parties everywhere, on all the seas and on the land. He took May away from me for three weeks out of four. It was not only May he took. Dougie was grossly and tastelessly-and after a while almost openly-an addicted womanizer. I could not forgive him his infidelity, for was there any other man alive in the world who would have wanted more woman than May?"

I understood at last what Dougie wanted: Everything. He wanted it all. He had grown up as a very junior poor relation in his mob family. Now he was almost the richest of them-but that "almost was the iron in his soul. He wanted Betsy's half of the Fleet back to add to May's. If he had twenty thermal engineers on the payroll, he had ten times as many lawyers-but so did Betsy. When they met, which at one ball or race meet or another was often, they joked with each other about their lawsuits, and both would have pointed the jests with steel if they had dared.

"Mr. d'Agasto, said Desmond MacLean, "says I can tell you now. Come up on the weather bridge. And he only grinned at me without a word as we rode the hoist up to the snug cabin on top of everything. He punched in his present location to the ship's circuits and waved an arm in a half circle. "What do you see,

Jason? he asked.

What I saw was what I had seen every day. The great mass of the vessel stretched out for hundreds of meters in every direction, and beyond our decks was the sea with its dozen vessels steaming slowly through the sooty air.

I see stink, I said.

"So you'll be glad to see us making more hydrogen and cheaper, won't you? he asked cheerfully.

I shrugged. "Where are you going to get the delta-Ts?"

"That's the problem, right. He punched in the commands and displayed on his intercom console a map of the Pacific Ocean. "Here's where we are- pointing- "in the middle of this shaded green oval here, stretching from New Guinea to Hawaii. There are now four hundred oaty-boats grazing it, and each one pumps nearly a hundred tons a second average. That's- he punched out the calculations- "eighty billion liters a day, thirty trillion a year. Every year we move thirty cubic kilometers of water from the deeps to the surface!

"There are plenty of cubic kilometers in the Pacific, I said, unwilling to believe that our puny pipes could change anything in the majestic mass of the ocean.

"But not plenty that we need at the five-kilometer depth, he said.

"Well, of course. That's why we stay out of each other's wakes-or try to.

"We do, he agreed, "as long as we can. But either we settle for coming close to another boat or we work lenses that aren't quite as cold as we'd like. Look at the arithmetic. When we have deep water at six degrees and surface water at thirty-two, which is what our turbines are designed for, we've got a delta-T of twenty-six. The efficiency goes up with the cube of the temperature difference. So the figure of merit for those temperatures is twenty-six cubed- 17,576.

"We've not had a twenty-six degree delta-T for some time, I admitted.

"And we won't for a while longer, because we're competing with the heart of the oaty-boat fleet. We're cooling the surface water and sucking up the best lenses of cold. So most of the time we're dealing with top water that's as much as three degrees cooler than it should be, and bottom water sometimes three degrees warmer. Delta-T, twenty. Cubed figure of merit, eight thousand. Which means just about half the energy we should be getting.

"As bad as that!

"And going to get worse, he said, but cheerfully, so that I asked irritably:

"All right, come on! Tell me what you've got up your sleeve.

"We go deeper! he said triumphantly. He shook his head when I started to object, and keyed the map back. This time it was featureless. "Here are unexploited areas with a surface temperature of thirty or more- He displayed areas hatched in red lines, and as I peered at them I began to object again- "Wait a minute, Jason! And here are huge lenses of three-degree deep water. Three degrees, you understand me? And look-there's a patch five hundred kilometers across where we've got both. Thirty- three

degrees on the surface, three degrees at depth- delta-T, thirty-cube that for a figure of merit, Jason!

I didn't have to. It was an oaty-boater's dream. "Shit, Des, I said contemptuously, "you're talking about *bottom* water.

"Damn near. Ten kilometers down, most of it.

"And I know those charts. What you don't show there is that there are mid-depth warm currents. You try to drop a suction intake down through them, and they'll curve into spaghetti!

He grinned smugly. "Right, he said, "and wrong. I'm not talking about a rubber hose. I'm talking about steel tubing, bouyed along its length to keep it neutral, dynamically positioned by its own engines. Of course, those figures of merit aren't all profit. A hell of a lot goes into energy to keep the currents from tying the tubes in knots, and a hell of a lot of capital into building them in the first place. But I did the feasibility studies myself! With a figure of merit of twenty-seven thousand you can afford a lot.

I only had one question left. "When? I begged.

"It's already started, Jason! The contracts have been let out for the new gear, deliveries will start in sixty days. Mr. d'Agasto has started hiring construction crews and they'll be coming aboard next month-

"Aboard? Here?

There was a shadow on Desmond's happy face as he said, "Well, yes. The conversion's going to be done at sea. That's Mr. d'Agasto's plan. I really think, he said wistfully, "that we'd do better taking the boats in one at a time to some nice deep harbor, maybe in the Sunda straits, and refit there. I showed him the figures. It'd be cheaper and faster. . . but he's the boss, Jason.

I nodded. He was. He was showing it. He hadn't said a word to me-hadn't even allowed Desmond MacLean to whisper it to me until now, when the work was already begun and the secret would be no secret anymore. He was the boss. And I-was superfluous.

Prophecies fulfill themselves; a man who thinks himself useless becomes so. The best estimate I could make of myself was that I was an old fool who was in the way.

So I got out of the way. I took myself off to New Zealand.

It could just as easily have been Okinawa or Iceland. There was no place on the Earth where I was particularly needed, or had any particular reason to be. I thought I might like to see geysers before I died, so New Zealand won the toss. There were one or two people there I had some sort of friendly relations with-shiping agents and freight forwarders, and a banker named Sam Abramowitz whom I had known for forty years. I was shy of meeting Sam, for I had known him first while I was a scared kid in the accounting department of the bank, and he was one of the few people in the world who knew I had juggled the books to give the Commodore his start. But he made me at ease when I hinted at the subject. "Ah, Jason, he said, "that was a hundred years ago in another world. That was back in America, and we've both gone a long way away from what we were then. For he'd been personal banker for a lot of Mob money, until his stomach wouldn't take it anymore and he emigrated. "Forget it. Have a drink. And in the morning I'll take you to see all the damn geysers you want. .

So I dawdled away a month, and then half of another. The geysers didn't keep me interested that long. Neither did New Zealand, for when all was said and done it was still land, though only a fairly small piece

of it and remote. I longed to be back on the sea, but more than I wanted that I wanted to be wanted there. And so when at last May phoned me, it was all I could do to keep my voice calm and my face bland. "A party?" I said. "Well, I'm not much of a one for parties, my dear.

"Oh, please. Jason! The Mays are going to be here, and a lot of our other friends-it'll be the biggest party we ever gave.

"I would like to see the Mays, I admitted.

"Not as much as they want to see you! I don't know if they'll even come if I can't tell them you'll be here. And, Jason- there was real sweetness in her voice and in her half-fearful smile- I've missed you *so*.

Well, of course I went! I was getting pretty sick of sheep, anyway-and even sicker of being on the land.

May had kept my rooms for me, but there was going to be a crush of guests. I gladly vacated them for May Bancroft and Tse-ling Mei to share, and I moved in with the crew. There was not much more room there. The work crews were coming aboard for the refit. When I looked them over, they were the sorriest, meanest bunch of roughnecks I have ever seen. If I had not been told they were deep water construction workers, I would have guessed them to be knee breakers for the Mob. Every one of them was allowed a hundred and fifty kilos of personal luggage, and I did not believe that any of it was musical instruments or books.

They did not help morale on the boat. Dougie cleared six hundred of our own people out of their quarters and put the new ones in one whole section together. They ate together, they talked together, they kept together. The rest of us were doubled up and excluded. In the first day the boat's security staff arrested a couple for hard drugs, but Dougie was having none of that. He ordered the charges dropped, and then ordered the security forces to stay out of the construction workers' area entirely. Not just the security forces. All of us were told to stay away, and hard-nosed types that had come aboard with the new work crews stood guard at the passages to keep the rest of us out. The new ones all wore a new kind of uniform- scarlet sea jackets and crash helmets-and they looked as much like an invading army as anything else.

They felt that way, too. There was a meanness in the air on our boat that I had never felt before, not even when bastard Ben was king triumphant. I tried to talk myself out of it. Old man Jason, I said to me, although I was still not yet sixty and not really old at all, old man, you are seeing ghosts and worrying without cause, for how can things get worse than they are already? They can't, I said, to reassure myself. But at sixty I had a lot still to learn.

I went to May and told her I didn't like the new people. She was trying on her new party dresses, with two of her maids fluttering around and admiring her and them, and indeed she was as beautiful as she had ever been-a little thinner, a little sadder, but the most beautiful woman in the world-and the dresses nearly did her justice. "These people are only for a little while, Jason, dear, she said. "As soon as the new intakes are installed, they'll be gone.

"I'd hate to be the one that had to throw them off the ship, I grumbled. She didn't look at me for a moment.

She stood there, staring out over the gardens towards the sea, as she used to stare when she was two years old.

Then she said, "Perhaps you ought to talk to Dougie about them instead of me. She had made up her

mind not to interfere with her chosen love's way of running the empire she had given him. I had to respect her wishes.

So I did talk to Dougie. He laughed at me and told me to get lost. He was busy, he said.

That was what he said, and that, in fact, he was, for the refit was a huge task, and there was the party coming up. The party was to celebrate the public announcement of what everyone in the trade had known for weeks, that we were going deeper and finding more. He had invited people from the Russian and Japanese fleets. He had invited a few of our principal customers from even the land. And of course he had invited Betsy. Because May asked me to be, I was polite to her-as polite as to Captain Tsusnehshov or to old Baron Akagana when they came aboard. I greeted her politely and offered her a drink and helped her get settled in her rooms; and I did the same for the Japanese and the Russians, and then went off to see the Mays. If they were a little older than the last time I saw them, they were at least that much more charming and beautiful, too. Tse-ling Mei was one of the world's most loved movie stars. Maisie Gerstyn, who had once been Maisie Richardson, had brought her handsome husband and her two fair, bright twin boys. We all sat around the lanai that was part of my suite-theirs now-gossiping and enjoying one another's company until the sun was low and it was time for them to dress for the party.

I was in no hurry to dress, or to go to the party at all, for that matter. I was ambling slowly toward my room when the pager called my name. Desmond MacLean wanted me to join him in the high bridge, and his voice sounded strange.

The principal reason his voice sounded that way was that he was half drunk. He wasn't alone, either. He was sitting there with his face flushed and his tongue tripping over the hard words, and there with him, matching him drink for drink, was Betsy Zoll. "You idiot, I snarled at him, you're out of your class! Can't you see she's pumping you for information?"

He shook his head stubbornly. "Other way, he mumbled. "Y'unnerstan me? It's the other way. She's doing the talking.

I had no patience with the man-or with Betsy, either, who sat there serene and smiling. I called for a medic with a tank of oxygen and some black coffee. "You'd better stay away from the party, I said bitterly, "for you'll disgrace the boat. He shrugged hopelessly. "Damn it, I cried, "what's the matter with you? Don't you see what a fool you are? And what did you call me for, anyway?"

He pointed to Betsy. "Tell'm, he mumbled, and submitted himself to the attentions of the medic, who had just arrived.

While MacLean was choking down coffee and inhaling as much of the O2 as the medic could force into him, Betsy stood up. I'm sure she'd had as much to drink as Desmond, but the only sign was that she moved very carefully, as though the floor were rocking. There was nothing wrong with her speech. "What I told him, old man, she said, "was nothing you couldn't have seen for yourself. Just look around you.

"At what? I demanded. She pointed out the window.

But there was nothing to be seen that I didn't already know was there. True, Betsy's own flagship was hull down on the horizon, and two others of our own fleet and one of hers in sight-but I'd known that, for some reason or other, we'd been steaming closer and closer to other boats for the past few days. The only other thing that was in any way unusual was the flotilla of stiltboats and fast hovers in the water just outside the lip. And that was easily understood. It was to ferry our guests back and forth, of course-though it was, I thought as I looked closer, a touch strange that the crews manning them all owre

the scarlet seas jackets of the new construction crews.

"I don't know what I'm looking at, I admitted stiffly.

Betsy laughed and turned to the medic. "Out, she ordered. The woman glanced at me, then left, her expression resentful. "Have you looked at the landing strip? Betsy demanded.

"Why should I? But I did, and then I looked again. There were a dozen aircraft parked at the side of the strip, and instead of bringing them down to the hangar deck, more were coming up on the elevator.

"Old man, she said contemptuously, "what you won't see, you can't see. I knew this was happening weeks ago. I only came to make sure.

"Sure of what'?

"Ah, Jason, what a fool you are! Can't you recognize an invasion force when you see one?

"There's no need, I said, misunderstanding her, "for Dougie to invade the boat, since May has given him the whole fleet.

"Not her fleet, you old fool! Mine! He wants to steal my ships!

"You stole them yourself in the first place, I said stubbornly, not quite taking it in, "or your bastard father did.

She stared at me with scorn. "Everybody steals everything; how else can anybody ever get rich? How did the Commodore get them in the first place, but with you to help him in the stealing? God help you, old man, you've blinded yourself. If you won't believe me, ask your drunken friend, she cried, grinning, and left the bridge.

By then Des was nearly coherent. Still, it took him a long time to get the story out. Betsy had plied him with drink and got him babbling, and what he had babbled was what I should have known for myself. He had poked among the incoming stores for the new "work crews and found that there were pumps and engines and tubing, all right, but there were also rifles and grenades and bigger, worser weapons than that. It was true. The reconstruction was a ruse to import his storm troopers; the party was a ruse, too, to get Betsy aboard as hostage.

God knows how long Dougie had planned this madness. God knows how many of Betsy's people he had offered bribes or how many fortunes he had squandered to buy arms and hire his battalions. God knew-but I should have known, too! If I hadn't let myself fling off to New Zealand in a fit of pique, I might have seen it happening in time to prevent it. But even so, I should have known. I should have realized months earlier that Dougie would never settle for half of anything. He wanted all of the Fleet, not just May's boats.

And he wound up with nothing. For God knew, and I should have known-but Betsy did know. People who take a bribe will take a bigger one. As I was scrambling down the ladder to Dougie's command bridge I heard the distant scream of a stiltboat and saw Betsy's boat rising on its skis. She was on her way back to her own ship, and Dougie was caught with egg on his face. For by the time I got past his uglies to confront him, she was home free and talking to him on the intercom. "Give it up, sonny! she taunted. "You missed your chance!

He roared obscenities into the microphone, and finished with threats, but she cut him off. "It's too late, she said. "Look to your starboard! He did. I did, too- we all did.

And wished we had not.

I had never seen a mininuke at work before. The oatyboat next to us in the grazing comb was a sister ship to our own. Two million tons, and most of ten thousand people aboard. You would not think to look at that vast, slow juggernaut that anything could halt it, or even slow it down, much less do it harm-you might as well try to sink Gibraltar! But a hundred-K nuke into its engine room was too much weapon for even an oaty-boat.

It was God's grace for us that the explosion was inside the hull, for we were spared our eyes. Even the secondhand radiation that bounced off the water and made a bright haze of the smoggy air blinded me, and the concussion shook our boat. When the wave came. it swamped Dougies floatilla and drowned hundreds of his thugs, but then it was over. The only real change was that our sister boat was not there anymore. All that remained of it was a glowing, rising cloud of steam.

Dougie did not know when to give up. He actually thought, I believe, that his hired killers would be loyal to their pay. When he tried to get them to attack Betsy's boat as planned, no matter that the same torpedo tubes that had just disintegrated one oaty-boat were now trained on ours, the mercenaries did what mercenaries do best- changed sides-and told him they were arresting him. He would not submit. That didn't help; they only killed him instead.

The Russians and the Japanese ranted and raved, but what could they do? There was no law left on the sea. And no peace, either. When Betsy came aboard again, it was as a conqueror, with twenty armed hoodlums at her back, and she demanded that May sign over every vessel in the Fleet to her.

My May was poised and lovely, but very pale. She looked at me for strength but, chained and gagged in a chair, I had none to give her. "The world will not condone piracy! she cried, but Betsy only grinned.

"The world, she said, "has troubles of its own, and besides, who would lift a finger to help a murderess?"

I groaned and struggled, for I could guess what was coming. May could not. It was her greatest weakness, that she could never gauge what evil really was. "You murdered your husband, Betsy announced. "The second one, anyhow-I don't know about the others! May didn't bother to tell her she was lying; she only waited to hear what form the lie would take. But it wasn't all lie. For Betsy said, "I have a confession from the oiler who helped Dougie d'Agasto murder Jeff, and proof that it's true. And the confession says that you were as guilty as Dougie. Planned it together - she grinned -"for everyone knows that you and Dougie were lovers long before you killed Jeff to get him out of the way!

And all I could do was groan.

Later, when the papers were signed and May was taken away, Betsy got around to me. "Well, she said when the gag was out of my mouth, "what shall we do with you, old man?"

"Whatever you want to, I said. "But you know May was no part of that murder! You have no evidence that will stand one second in court!

"But the only court there is, old Jay, is me. No land court will try her. She'll never be on land again, you see, because I'm going to keep her near me as long as she lives.

"Treat her kindly at least, I begged, abject at last.

"Why not? In fact, she said, in high good humor, "I'll let you be her jailer, old man-providing we can make an agreement on what your other duties are! And then you can treat her as kindly as you like.

And so all the years of peace were over, forever.

Thrice widowed was wasted her beauty fair. Her son, no son, was her only heir. Her sister, no sister, pent her there, In a cage on the grazing isles.

I did it for a year, and three months, and a week, and how I did it that long I do not now know. Then I went to Betsy. "You'll have to wait, said her butler. "Miss Zoll is engaged just now.

"I'll wait, I said, and I did, for an hour and more in her "morning room. It was a bright and cheery place, high over the foredeck and its gardens. May had no gardens. May had four comfortable rooms all to herself, and whatever she liked to eat and all the video disks and books she asked for, but except for me and the servants she had them all to herself. Three visitors were allowed. I was one. Betsy was another, but she had the grace never to go there, and the third, who would have been the most welcome of all but never came, was Jimmy Rex. Betsy had designed May's jail herself. It had bright, large windows, but they looked on nothing but the sea. It had one door, and there was an armed guard outside it always. At a push of a button the door would lock and steel shutters would slam across the windows, but there was never any need for the button. There was nowhere for May to go.

So I waited the time in Betsy's morning room as patiently as I could, and then she emerged in a robe, drowsily yawning and stretching, absently petting the hairy shoulder of the scoutship pilot who was her favorite of the moment. "Well, old man? What do you want now? Isn't May happy in her home? Would she like a little trip to relieve the monotony-say, a week or two in Miami with her drug pushers and arms runners"?

I would not let her anger me. "I've come to sell you my stock, I said.

She frowned at me in silence for a moment. Then she slapped the pilot's rump and pointed to the door. When he was gone, she said, "What's the trick, Jay? There was no feeling to her voice at all. It might have been a machine talking, with a machine's requirement for more data on which to base the emotionless, compassionless decision of a machine. I felt myself chilled.

"I don't like what you do, I said. "I can't stop you, but I don't have to be an accomplice.

She rubbed thoughtfully at her lips, which were bruised and swollen, and then clapped her hands. At once her maid appeared in the door, peering through with an armed guard looking alertly over her shoulder. Betsy gestured drinking from a cup of coffee, and the maid produced a service for her at once. "You're not lying to me, I think, she said then. "but there's some kind of truth you're not telling me. What do you want to do with the money"?

"Go away.

"Leave your precious May?

I kept my voice steady. "I have to get out of here for a while, Betsy. I'll come back later and go on being a prison guard, but I need some time off. And I need to plan for my future. She looked unconvinced. I said the rest of it: "You're' the tyrant here, Betsy. It has pleased you let May live, but some day you'll be

drunk, or doped, or in a rage at whoever is sharing your bed that day. And you'll take it out on her. When I can't help May anymore, I want to see what I can do for me.

She sipped the coffee, studying me over the lip of the cup, and then shrugged. "I'll accommodate you, Jay. I'll give you ten million dollars for your stock.

When I had turned down fifty! "Twenty-five, I bargained, and she shook her head and said:

"Nine.

And nine it was.

May could see at once that I had something to tell her, but she played the hostess and asked after my health and inquired wistfully after Jimmy Rex. She let me come to it in my own time. So, with a glass of wine in my hand, I said, "I'm going to New Zealand for a bit.

"Oh?

"Just for a while, May. A few weeks maybe. Then I'll be back, I promise.

"Of course you will, Jay, dear. But you're absolutely right. You should get out of this for a while. And New Zealand's a lovely place-I remember, the skiing is first-rate! And then, her eyes longingly on the open window and the emptiness beyond it, she said in a tone that wanted to be light, "I'd love to be there again. I couldn't do Betsy any harm there. She knew that every word was heard as well as I did, and I suppose she was talking to Betsy as much as to me, though she knew how little good that would do. "I would give my word not to, she said, "and I've never broken it.

I left her before the tears began to trickle down my cheek. I knew that May's word was good. I also knew that Betsy, the mother of lies, would never believe it.

And, oh! my Mary, oh Mary, my May, Blest was the hope and accursed the day, Curst was the day when I brought you away, Away from the grazing isles.

New Zealand was not an idle choice. It had three things going for it. First, it was lightly populated and far from rest of the miserable landlocked world. Second, their geothermal springs made them poor customers for the Fleet, and so less likely to want to keep in Betsy's good graces. Third, I had a friend there.

Betsy's eyes did not stop at the hull of the oaty-boat. So on the first day in Auckland I visited six different banks to talk about investing my nine million dollars. On the second day I toured the sheeplands by air, on the pretext of buying a ranch, and that night I allowed myself to have two or three more drinks than usual in the guests' lounge at the little hotel. To anyone who would listen I explained what a vindictive bitch Betsy Zoll was, and how I had at last given up hope that my sweet May would ever be free again. I did not know which of the ranchers or barmen or guests would be passing the word on to Betsy, but I had no doubt she would know everything I said.

And on the third day I went to visit an offshore oatie and there, in the low-pressure turbine room, I met Sam Abramowitz, as we had arranged on the first. "No one can hear us here, he said over the hiss and groan of the generators. "What do you want me to do? And then, when I told him, "You're insane!

I agreed that it was an insane world all over. "Still, I said, "what I need is a scout vessel with a pilot, and

an aircraft willing to take the chance of being fired on, for a million dollars.

He pursed his lips. He didn't answer at first, but turned and gazed around the booming, gasping turbine room as though he were suddenly less sure that we couldn't be spied on. Then he said, "I couldn't set it up overnight, you know.

"I don't want it overnight, Sam. I want some time to pass, so Betsy will relax a little. At least a month. Six would be better. Just send me a message when you've got it set up-something about investing in a new sheep-shearing machine, maybe-and the pilot must wear something I'll recognize, so I'll know he's there.

He shook his head slowly, not to refuse, only to say it was an outlandish idea. "A million dollars, did you say? It may cost more.

"I've got more, I said. He sighed. It meant yes. I reached out and grasped his hand in both of mine. "You're a good friend, Sam. It's not just for me, you know. It's for the finest lady who ever drew breath.

He looked away and didn't answer. There was a strain in the set of his jaw that I didn't understand and didn't much like. But the important thing was that he had agreed. Then and there I wrote a power of attorney for him, to draw what he liked and spend as he chose. If there was nothing left of the nine million when he was done, well, then I would be a penniless old man. But I would be free, and so would May.

And so should May have been, for it was a good plan and Sam Abramowitz a better friend than I deserved. He was also careful and cunning. When at last the signal came and the scoutship showed up, it was from one of the new Argentinian boats, and the pilot came to Betsy with a fine, false tale of locating unsuspected patches of deep cold that he was willing to sell for a price. And the pilot wore the green scarf that identified him. I could not talk to him, for he was closeted with Betsy, driving his bargain and delivering his goods, but I went down to the sternways and studied the vessel with care. A scoutship has no more beauty of line than an egg. Speed is not important, nor looks. What is important is the strength of hull to withstand whatever pressures it may encounter as it dives deep and sends its probes deeper still to measure the bottom water. It looked solid. Once in it and well away, we had our chance. It would be a run for the bottom to hide under the thermoclines and the scuttering layers, and then away, well out of reach of any of Betsy's eyes or guns. We had range enough to make it to Australia or Hawaii or Japan, or anywhere between. I had settled on Manila. Of all destinations that was the most dangerous for us, since the islands were small and sea visitors frequent, but therefore the one where Betsy would be least likely to look while we did what we had to do to change our appearance and find our way to a new home.

All that was needed was the aircraft.

And so, as soon as it was dark, I went down to May's room. She was sewing as interminably she did, pausing to read for a while and then to return to the needle. "It's a hot night, I said, stepping to the port and gazing at the warm sea, twenty meters below. By leaning out and craning my neck I could see the scoutboat moored to the sternways, just past the gate in the mesh. There was a man in a long green scarf where he was supposed to be. He was paying for the fuel he had bought, and his orders were to stall until the aircraft arrived.

Which would not be long.

I said, ~ I wish we could go for a swim. May gave me a sharp glance. "Look, I said, catching her hand and drawing her to the port. "It's not much of a dive. And on a night like this we could swim to Hawaii if

we chose, and see the palms and the black beaches again. It was foolish talk, and I was grinning foolishly as I raised her hand to my lips and kissed it. When I let her hand go, it was curled around the scrap of paper I'd written out before. It said:

"When I say jump we both jump, and there will be a boat to take us free.

"Have a drink, dear Jay, May said gently, nodding me to the bar. And a while later she excused herself to the bathroom, and when she came out she went back to her sewing, only looking up to gossip about the fine fresh pineapple they'd served her for dinner and the strange dream she'd awakened with that morning.

Half an hour later we were still chattering away, when the first-level aircraft-warning bells began to ring. I assumed an expression of surprise and curiosity, and pulled May toward the port to look out.

And May's door opened, and little Jimmy Rex walked in.

He was eight years old then, spoiled rotten by Betsy for the past three, and for that matter born with his father's family's rotten blood in him. You must know that in three years the boy had visited his mother just twice. It was Betsy who had sent him, of course. His eyes were bright with an eight-year-old's devilry. "Are you going to do something foolish, mother May?" he asked, the voice clear, the face pure, the heart made up of equal parts brat and bully. I stood between them.

"What makes you ask a question like that?" I demanded.

He pouted up at me. "Betsy says it's very strange, he complained, "that you've become a drunk, and sold your stock, and stopped asking me to visit here. And there's a plane from the Soviet fleet that showed up on our screens a few minutes ago, claiming that they've lost their electronics and don't know if we're their home boat or not.

I had not expected Betsy to make so quick a connection. But outside the door the guard was paying no attention to us. He was listening to the ship's intercom, his scarred, mean face envious as he heard the challenges to the Russian VTOL. The Russian was earning his pay, for he knew as well as I that the boat's surface-to-air missiles were homing in on him at that very second. I opened my mouth to answer Jimmy Rex, but May caught my arm.

"Can't we take him, Jason?" she begged.

"We can *not*, I cried. "And we have no time to argue! For if Betsy was suspicious enough to send him here, we had minutes, maybe seconds, and the diversion of the aircraft would not puzzle her for long.

There was no weakness in May's brain. She understood me well. She knew I spoke the truth. But she was also a mother, whose only child had been lost to her. She gazed on him one moment more before she sobbed and turned to the port.

That was one moment too many. "No!" shrilled little Jimmy Rex, and did the only thing he could do to stop her. He darted out into the corridor and jerked the handle that would seal May's cabins off and keep her from getting through.

He did not keep all of her inside.

The door slammed.., and the terrible strong shutters slashed closed upon my May.

There I was, alone with what was left of May. And minutes later the steel outer door grudgingly slid open again, and there was Betsy storming in, with Jimmy Rex crowding behind her. Betsy looked furious and triumphant and outraged all at once. . . and then, when she saw that it was only May's headless body that lay bleeding in my arms, more than anything else, relieved.

For Jimmy Rex I will say this much. He wept beside his mother's decapitated corpse. He screamed and sorrowed, and I believe he truly grieved-for ten minutes or so.

Even Betsy was shaken, though not as long as that, for he was still shrieking when she turned to me with an expression of awe and delight. "You old fool, she said admiringly, "I knew you'd do something dashing and stupid to solve all my problems. I ought to thank you.

"if you do, I said as steadily as I could, "there'll be two dead women in this room. And there would have, though by then her goons were holding me fast.

The room was mad, with medics covering May's poor body and a guard leading Jimmy Rex away and blood everywhere-everywhere! But Betsy looked only at me, and this time I could not read her expression at all. If I had not known her so well, I would have thought there was pity in it.

At last she sighed and shook her head. "Old man, she said roughly, "keep your lonely illusions. Get off my boat."

She nodded to the guards, and twenty minutes later the great OT was disappearing behind me as the scoutship that should have carried May to freedom instead carried only me to-I am not sure what.

And so the queen she met her end. The axe was raised by her dearest friend. Her son, no son, made the blade descend To finish the queen of the isles. The fair, sweet queen, the sorrowful queen, Oh, pity the queen of the isles!

For more than a year after that I woke shaking every night from a dream of the great steel shutter chopping May's dear head off. It was bad, and what I woke to was perhaps even worse. What "illusions made nasty Betsy pity me?

I never found an answer to that question. Perhaps I did not want one.