

SPICE POGROM

Connie Willis

"You've got to talk to him," Chris said. "I've told him there isn't enough space, but he keeps bringing things home anyway."

"Things?" Stewart said absently. He had his head half-turned as if he were listening to someone out of the holographic image.

"Things. A six-foot high Buddha, two dozen baseball caps, and a Persian rug!" Chris shouted at him. "Things I didn't even know they had on Sony. Today he brought home a piano! How did they even get a piano up here with the weight restrictions?"

"What?" Stewart said. The person who had been talking to him moved into the holo-image, focusing as he entered, put a piece of paper in front of Stewart, and then stood there, obviously waiting for some kind of response. "Listen, Chris, darling, can I put you on hold? Or would you rather call me back?"

It had taken her almost an hour to get him in the first place. "I'll hold," she said, and watched the screen grimly as it went back to a two-dimensional wall image on the phone's screen and froze with Stewart still smiling placatingly at her. Chris sighed and leaned back against the piano. There was hardly room to stand in the narrow hall, but she knew that if she wasn't right in view when Stewart came back on the line, he'd use it as an excuse to hang up. He'd been avoiding her for the last two days.

Stewart's image jerked into a nonsmiling one and grew to a full holo-image again. With the piano in here, there wasn't really enough room for the phone. Stewart's desk blurred and dissolved on the keyboard, but Chris wanted Stewart to see how crowded the piano made the hall. "Chris, I really don't have time to worry about a few souvenirs," he said. "We've got real communications difficulties over here with the aliens. The Japanese translation team's been negotiating with them for a space program for over a week, but the Eahrohhs apparently don't understand what it is we want."

"I'm having communications difficulties over here, too," Chris said. "I

tell Mr. Ohghhi..." She stopped and looked at the alien's name she had written on her hand so she could pronounce it. "Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh that there isn't room in my apartment and that he's got to stop buying things, and he seems to understand what I'm saying, but he goes right on buying. I've only got a two-room apartment, Stewart."

"You could move your couch out of the living room," he said.

"Then where would I sleep? On top of the piano? You said you'd try to find him someplace else to stay."

"I'm giving the matter top priority, darling, but you don't know how impossible it is to find any kind of space at all, let alone space with the kinds of specifications Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh requires." A blond young woman moved into the image and put a computer printout down in front of Stewart. Chris braced herself against being put on hold again. "We were already full over here at NASA, and today Houston sent a dozen linguistic specialists up on the shuttle, and I don't know where we're going to put them." He shook his head. "With all these reporters and tourists coming up, there isn't a spare room on Sony."

"Can't you send some of these people back down to earth?" Chris said. "I've got two little girls living on my stairs who're here because they think Spielberg's bound to make a movie about the aliens so they came up here to try to get a part in it, which is ridiculous. I'm not even sure Spielberg's still alive, but if he is, he's got to be at least eighty. Isn't there some way to send people like that home?"

"You know Sony's got an automatic thirty-day travel permission wait. It's been in effect since Sony was first built so that immigrants couldn't change their minds before they got over shuttle-lag. NASA's trying to get the Japanese to limit the earth-to-Sony traffic, but so far they've refused because they like all the business it's bringing up."

"Can't NASA put on its own limits? They own the shuttle."

"We don't want to jeopardize relations with the Japanese. We've got too many of our own people who need to come up to see the aliens."

"And they're all using my bathroom," Chris said. "How long will it take you to find another apartment for him?"

"Chris, darling, I don't think you understand the overcrowding problem we've got over here. . . Hold on a second, will you?" he said, and flattened and froze.

"We've got an overcrowding problem over here, too, Stewart," Chris

said. Someone rang the bell. "Come in," Chris shouted, and then was sorry.

Molly came in. "My mother thaid to tell you to get off the phone," she said, lisping the word "said."

"I'm really six," Molly had told her without a trace of a lisp the day she and her mother moved onto the landing outside Chris's apartment, "but six is box-office poison, because your teeth are going to fall out pretty soon, so my screen age is four and a half." She was certainly dressed to look four and a half today, in a short yellow smock with ducks embroidered on it and a giant yellow bow in her shingled brown bob.

"My mother thayth to tell you we're eckthpecting a call from my agent," she said, with her dimpled hands on her hips.

"Your mother does not have phone privileges in this apartment. Your agent can call you on the pay phone in the hall."

"It'th a holo-call," Molly said, and strolled over to the piano. "He thaid he'd call at thickethteen-thirty. Did you know thum new people moved in on the thtairs today?"

"A slut and an old guy," Bets said, coming into the hall. She was wearing a pink dress with a sash, pink ribbon bows, and black patent-leather shoes. "My mother says to ask you how we're supposed to get the lead in Spielberg's movie if we can't talk to our agent."

"How could new people move in?" Chris said. Molly's mother had sublet half of the landing to Bets (who was also six according to Molly, even though she swore she was five) and her mother last week, and Chris had thought at the time that the only good thing about it was that nobody else could move in because Mr. Nagisha's cousins were renting the hall outside Chris's apartment, and Mr. Nagisha himself was living in the downstairs hall.

"Mr. Nagithha rented them the thtairth," Molly said, plunking the piano keys, "for twenty thouthand yen apiethe."

"The slut says she's in show business," Bets said archly, patting her golden curls, "but I think she's a hooker."

"The old guy came up to thee the alienth," Molly said, banging out "Chopsticks." "He thayth he'th alwayth wanted to meet one. My mother thayth he'th thenile."

"Chris," Stewart said, his face expanding out from the screen. Molly stopped banging on the piano. Bets tossed her yellow curls. They both turned and flashed Stewart a dimpled smile.

"They were just leaving," Chris said hastily, and pushed them out of the hall.

"What adorable little girls!" Stewart said. "Do they live in your apartment building?"

"They live on the stairs, Stewart. At last count, so do four other people, not counting Mr. Nagisha's cousins, who are living in the hall outside my apartment. They use my bathroom and make earthside calls on my phone, and I don't have room for them or for Mr. Ogyfen . . . whatever his name is."

"Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh," Stewart said disapprovingly. "You're going to have to learn how to pronounce his name properly. You don't want to make him angry. I've told you before how important it is we don't do anything that might offend the Eahrohhs."

"He can't stay here, Stewart."

He looked aghast. Chris thought about putting him on hold that way. It was better than his frozen smile. "You can't mean that, Chris. The negotiations are at an incredibly delicate stage. We can't risk having anything upset them. It's a matter of national security. Besides, NASA intends to make generous compensation to people whose apartments have been requisitioned."

"You work for NASA. Why can't he stay with you?"

"Chris, darling, we've been through all this before. You know Mother's xenophobic. Just the thought of the Eahrrohhs being on Sony has given her terrible migraines. And you know Mr. Oghhifoehnnahigrheeh has to have ceilings at least twelve feet high for his vertical claustrophobia, and you were the only other person I knew who had ceilings that high. The Japanese didn't design Sony for Americans. It's hard enough to find buildings with even normal American ceilings, let alone twelve-foot ones. And with the Eahrohhs' privacy fetish, we can't ask them to double up with people."

"I know, Stewart," Chris said, "but ..."

"The only twelve-foot ceilings on Sony are in the apartment buildings Misawa designed. Like your building."

And your mother's, Chris thought.

"It'll only be for a few more days. We're currently negotiating with the Japanese to transfer the Eahrohhs down to Houston. When that happens, you'll have your apartment all to yourself again." He pressed some buttons on his desk. "Darling, I've got a call coming in. Can't we ..."

The door to her apartment slid open, and someone said, "Hey, this is great!"

She looked back at Stewart. He had flattened out again, this time with a decidedly impatient look on his face.

"My room in here," Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh said, and squeezed past Chris carrying two shopping bags, a bouquet of cherry blossoms, and what looked like a tent. The pockets of his long orange coat looked lumpy, too, but Chris hadn't figured out yet which of the bulges and lumps were part of Mr. Ohghhifoennahigrheeh's peculiar shape and which weren't.

He looked a little like a sack of potatoes with short, wide legs and arms. His legs and arms were lumpy, too, and so was his head, except for the top, which was round and bald and surrounded by a fringe of fine pinkish-orange hair that extended down the sides of his face in wispy sideburns. "Except for he's an alien, he'd never make it in the movies," Bets had said the first time she'd seen him.

"Mr. Ohghhifoehh ..." She stopped and looked down at her hand to get the name right. "Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh, I have to talk to you. You've got to stop buying things. There simply isn't any more room for ..."

Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh smiled at her, his wide mouth curving upward toward the two pinkish-orange lumps that were his cheeks. He put down the two shopping bags and the thing that looked like a tent and handed Chris the bouquet of cherry blossoms. "*Hana*," he said. "Buy you."

Chris had no idea what *hana* meant. "Thank you for the cherry blossoms, but ..."

He shook his head vigorously, the wisps of cotton-candy hair flying out in all directions. "Hutchins buy *hana*."

"Hutchins?" Chris said, wishing she had the Japanese translation team here.

"Pete Hutchins," a tall young man said. He was wearing jeans and a satin bomber jacket and was trying to maneuver a duffel bag and a bicycle into the narrow hall. He held out a hand for her to shake. "He means I bought you the cherry blossoms. *Hana* means cherry blossoms in Japanese. You must be Chris. Okee's told me all about you."

"I'm very busy right now," Stewart said from the phone. "Can't this wait till tomorrow?"

"Hutchins stay here," Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh said. He slid open his door and ducked inside with the shopping bags and the tent before Chris could even get a glimpse of what was inside.

"Just a minute, Stewart," Chris said, and pushed the hold button. "Mr. Hutchins, what is it you want with Mr. Ohghhifoehnn . . ." She had to stop and read from her hand. "Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh?"

He twisted around to get a look at her hand. "Had to write it on there, huh?" he said. "I can't pronounce it either, so I just call him Okeefenokee. And you can call me Pete."

She closed her hand. "I don't know what Mr. ... he told you, but he doesn't speak English very well, and ..."

"I really appreciate Okee doing this. I just came up on the shuttle today, and I'm shot. So if you could just show me to my room ..."

"Excuse me. Is this where the John is?" a woman with an elaborate topknot of brass-colored hair said. She was holding a skimpy hapi coat closed with one hand and carrying a makeup case. "The little kids said it was in here. I'm Charmaine. I just moved in. Top half of the stairs, but I don't mind. The seventy percent gravity's great for me in my job. And I've never seen so many cute guys in my life. Do you live here?" she said to Hutchins.

"Yes," Hutchins said.

"No," Chris said. "There's been some misunderstanding."

"About the John?" Charmaine said nervously. "Mr. Nagisha told me I had bathroom privileges."

"No, I mean, you can use the bathroom, Charmaine. There isn't anybody in there." She turned back to Hutchins. "Mr. Hutchins, I don't know what Mr. Ohghhifoehnn ..."—she resisted the temptation to look at her hand—"... ackafee told you, but he sometimes has trouble understanding...."

" 'Scuse me," Charmaine said, and slithered past Hutchins, making no effort at all to stay away from him. "I gotta go do my makeup for my show. I'm a specialty dancer down at Luigi's. You oughta come see me." She wagged her fingers at him as she slid the bathroom door shut.

"Aren't you off the phone yet?" Molly said from the doorway. She had her dimpled arms folded across her yellow-ducked middle and was tapping a black-patented foot. "My mother thayth to tell you that my agent hath very important newth. He'th thyure Thpielberg ith on Thony and ..."

While she was talking, Bets was sidling past Molly and behind Hutchins, holding something behind her pink-sashed back. Chris reached around Hutchins and made a grab for it. She got hold of the curling iron

by the cord and took it away from Bets.

"Electrical appliances are not allowed in the bathroom," Chris said. She wrapped the cord around the curling iron and put it on top of the piano. "I told you last time I was going to take it away from you if it happened again. You're supposed to use the outlets in Mr. Nagisha's apartment."

"We can't use the ones in Mr. Nagisha's apartment. He blew a fuse, and our agent's calling us at eighteen o'clock!"

"Not on my phone he isn't," Chris said. "The phone! I forgot all about Stewart." She punched the *reinstate* button, wondering if he'd already hung up. Hutchins and the little girls backed up as the holo-image spread, but they were still in the way. Hutchins seemed to be standing in the middle of Stewart's desk. Molly and Bets's face were covered with blurry brown. Chris hit the flat-image button, and Stewart retreated to the screen. "I'm sorry, Stewart," she said.

He was writing busily. "Can this wait till tomorrow, Chris?" he said without looking up. "We'll have lunch and you can tell me all about it. The Garden of Meditation. In the ginza. Thirteen-thirty."

Hutchins was watching the screen. "All right, Stewart, but . . ." Chris said.

"Till then just go along with whatever Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh says. The negotiations are at a very delicate stage. Anything could break them off. Let him do anything he wants. I love you, darling. See you tomorrow," he said, still without looking up, and blanked the screen before Chris had a chance to say anything.

Hutchins was looking at her curiously. "Who is that guy?" he said.

"He's my fiancé," Chris said. Molly had climbed up on the piano bench and was kneeling on the keyboard, trying to reach the curling iron. Chris grabbed it away from her and put it behind her back.

"You better give my curling iron back!" Bets said. "I'm going to tell my mother you stole it."

"Out," she said. She escorted both of them out of her apartment, slid the door shut, and went into the living room. She lifted up the pile of folded blankets on the end of the couch and stuck the curling iron under it.

"You're really engaged to that guy on the phone?" Hutchins said, leaning against the door, his hands in his jeans pockets.

"Yes," she said, straightening back up. "Why?"

"Because 'let him do anything he wants,' covers a lot of territory. What if Okee decided he wanted to carry you off with him to Eahrohhsani, or wherever it is they came from, and make you his bride?"

"Mr. Ohghhifoehnn ... he is a very nice man. Alien. Eahrohh. And he would not ..."

"Earrose. They drop an *e* and add some *h*'s to make it plural."

"Earrose. Mr. Hutchins, I don't care what Mr. ... he told you. You can't stay here. There isn't any space. The landlord has people living on the stairs."

"Hutchins stay here," Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh said. He peeked around Hutchins and then disappeared back into the hall.

Chris went after him.

"Tall," he said, smiling and nodding. "High ceilings. Stay here."

"But there isn't any space. Mr. Ohghhifoehnnah ... where will he sleep?"

"My room." He took hold of the handlebars of the bike and started pulling it toward his door. Chris backed up against the piano to get out of the way of the handlebars. "I keep in here. Lots of space."

" 'Scuse me," Charmaine said brightly. She had put on her makeup, but not where Chris had expected it. She had the hapi coat draped over her arm.

"Where exactly do you work?" Chris said.

"Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria and Sutorippu. That means strip show. I'm in the Fan Tan Fannie number," she said. She turned around.

"I can see that," Chris said.

"Cute idea, huh?" she said. "I just love my fans."

"So do I," Hutchins said.

Charmaine started edging out of the hall, this time trying hard not to touch Hutchins for fear of smearing her makeup. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh went on tugging at the bicycle. Chris tried to turn around to get out from the piano so Charmaine could get past and found herself nose to nose with Hutchins. She backed into the piano. The keys made a crash of noise as her open hands hit them. "Listen," Hutchins said, taking a step toward her, and towering over her. He really was tall. "In all seriousness, there's obviously been a mix-up. I met Okee on the bullet, and he said he'd sublet half of his room to me, and I said okay. I'd just gotten in on the shuttle, and I guess I wasn't thinking clearly. I felt like hell."

He rubbed his hand across his forehead. He did look tired. Chris remembered what she had felt like when she came up on the shuttle. Everyone had kept telling her how lucky she was not to be nauseated, but she hadn't felt lucky. She'd felt bone-tired, so weary she had burst into tears at the thought of getting through customs, even in the zero gravity of Sony's axis.

"As a matter of fact, I still feel like hell," he said.

"It's shuttle-lag," Chris said. "Aspirin helps. And vitamin A." She didn't say he should be glad he wasn't the kind to get nauseated. "And you should get some sleep."

"Sleep," he said, leaning against the piano. "You wouldn't know of any good hotels, would you?"

She shook her head. "There's only one hotel on Sony, and it's full of Eahrohhs. So's everything else. There are over four hundred of them, you know."

"Four hundred," he said, looking at Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh, who had gotten the handlebars and the front wheel turned around so the bike wouldn't budge. Hutchins helped him straighten it out. "Where are they putting them all?"

"All over. The officials, the headmen or chiefs or whatever you call them, and all the translators are staying at NASA. They're negotiating a treaty. They're going to give us a space program."

"Are they?" Hutchins said with an odd note in his voice. "What about the rest of them?"

"They put them anyplace there was room. Vacant apartments, extra rooms. It wasn't so bad when it was just the aliens, but now that all these sightseers have come up . . ."

"They're living on the stairs," Hutchins said. "What about that? Do you think your landlord would rent me a step or two?"

She bit her lip. "No. He lets as many extra people sleep on the stairs at night as the fire regulations will permit—he sells them 'overnight leases'—but he'd already sold out by nine this morning."

Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh had gotten the handlebars of the bike wedged in the screen of his bedroom door and was struggling with it. "Want Hutchins stay," he said.

If she threw Hutchins out and then Mr. Ohghhi . . . he got angry or refused to cooperate, Stewart would be furious. He had told her explicitly

to do whatever he wanted, and what he wanted was for Mr. Hutchins to stay. While she was on the phone, she had decided to insist that Stewart come home with her after lunch and talk to him about all these things he was buying. She could ask Stewart what to do then, and he could find Mr. Hutchins an apartment.

"All right," she said. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh got the handlebars unstuck and disappeared into his room with the bicycle.

"All right, what?" Hutchins said.

"You can stay here tonight and look for a room tomorrow."

"I love you," he said.

"Mr. Nagisha said you're violating your lease by taking my curling iron away from me," Bets said.

"It's in the living room. On the couch. But if I catch you with it in the bathroom one more time, I'm flushing it down the o-benjo," Chris said. Bets flounced off, stamping her feet so the ruffles on her petticoat showed.

"I'm only letting you stay because Mr. Ohghhi... he wants you to, and I don't want to upset him. Negotiations are at a very delicate stage. Tomorrow when I have lunch with my fiancé, I'll ask him about it, but I'm sure he'll want you to find another place to stay."

"Do you have any vitamin A?" Hutchins said.

"In the bathroom." Chris pointed at the door. It was shut. "Bets, you come out of there. You are not allowed to have electrical appliances in there."

Bets slid the door open. "I was brushing my teeth," she said indignantly, holding up a pink toothbrush shaped like a bunny.

"I'll bet." She got Hutchins aspirin and vitamin-A packets and herded Bets out of her apartment. "I'll get you a bathroom schedule and the apartment rules," she said.

Mr. Nagisha's cousins were squatting around a hibachi in the middle of the landing, cooking something vile smelling. Chris stepped over them and started down the steps. She wondered how Mr. Nagisha would take the news that Mr. Ohghhi . . . her alien had sublet half of his room to Mr. Hutchins. Probably not very well, unless he could think of a way to make money off the deal. Mr. Nagisha had welcomed him with open arms since NASA had agreed to pay the equivalent of a six months' lease.

Even at that, he had insisted on rent based on changing property values, which were soaring with the sudden influx of people. He was going to

make a killing.

Molly was sitting on the steps above the landing reading *Variety*. "Have you seen Mr. Nagisha?" Chris said.

"My mother's talking to him about how you took the curling iron away from Berth. She thays ..."

"Are they in the apartment? I need a copy of the bathroom schedule." She pushed down past their trunks and almost stepped on the old man who had just moved in. He had a baseball cap that read "Blue Harvest" pulled down over his eyes and was snoring loudly. She took hold of the banister to make the last jump over Mr. Nagisha's file drawers and lap terminal and knocked on his apartment door.

Mr. Nagisha had rented his own apartment out to as many people as it would hold and taken up residence on the bottom steps, but he wasn't in the apartment, even though half of Sony's population appeared to be. He'd better not say anything to me about my alien subletting half of his room, Chris thought. She went back out to Mr. Nagisha's terminal, entered Mr. Hutchins's name under Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh and asked for a revised schedule.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said, putting down one high-heeled shoe next to the printer. "I gotta leave for work. My shift doesn't start till nineteen, but I gotta walk on account of my makeup gets smeared on the bullet."

"I can imagine," Chris said. She tore off the printout and stood up. Charmaine was wearing a pink smock that stood out stiffly from her body and made her look much younger than she had in the hall. She had her hair done in an elaborate topknot. "You'd better take an umbrella. It might rain."

"I thought on the L-5's it was only supposed to rain at night after everybody'd gone to bed."

"It is, but the sprinklers are set to come on when a given area gets overheated, and with all these people, they've been coming on at funny times. Mr. Ohghhi . . .," she said, and glanced guiltily at her hand as if Hutchins were watching her, "foehnnahigrheeh and I got caught in the ginza yesterday." He hadn't been the least bit dismayed. He had gone into the nearest department store and bought five dozen oiled-paper umbrellas. "Why don't you ask Mr. . . . my alien to loan you an umbrella? He's got more than enough."

"Gee, thanks," Charmaine said, and started up the stairs.

"He doesn't speak English very well. Just say 'umbrella' and act it out."

She went through the motions of opening an umbrella and holding it above her head. "Better yet, ask Mr. Hutchins to ask him. He doesn't seem to have any trouble communicating with him."

"I bet he wouldn't have trouble communicating with anybody," Charmaine said, and clattered on up the stairs in her spike heels.

Chris printed out copies of the bathroom schedules and the apartment rules, tore them off, and started back up the stairs.

"He loaned me a red one to go with my fans," Charmaine said, twirling it as she came down the stairs. "I love it. I might use it in my single. Can I ask you something about this guy Hutchins? Is he your boyfriend?"

"No," Chris said. "I'm engaged."

"I knew it," Charmaine said. "The cute ones are always already taken. Even when the ratio of guys to women is as good as it is right now on Sony. Especially the tall cute ones."

"I'm not engaged to Mr. Hutchins. I don't even know him. NASA requisitioned half of my apartment for Mr. Ohghhi ... my alien, and he sublet half of it to Mr. Hutchins."

"Oh," she said, opening and closing the umbrella.

"The little kids told me he was moving in with you, so I figured he was your boyfriend."

"He is not my boyfriend. He is not my anything."

"So you wouldn't be mad if I put the moves on him, then? I mean, I'm here to try to find a husband, but I wouldn't want to steal your boyfriend or anything." She snapped the umbrella open and put it over her shoulder. "Is he a lawyer?"

"I don't know," Chris said, and frowned. Come to think of it, he hadn't said a word about what he did for a living or why he was on Sony.

"I hope not. They always try to make marriage into a real-estate deal or something." She sighed. "My old boyfriend down on earth was a lawyer, and gee, you woulda thought I was a condo or something. Well, I gotta go. See you at the show." She flounced out, twirling the umbrella.

Chris started back up the stairs, maneuvering between rolled-up bedding and a stack of dishes from the deli next door. The old man was sitting up, watching Charmaine's exit with a dazed expression. Mr. Nagisha's cousins were watching, too, and eating fried fish. Molly and Bets were leaning over the landing railing, their chins resting on their arms.

"I told you thye was a thlut," Molly said. "Did you thee those fanth on

her ath?"

"At least she's really in show business," Chris said. "Unlike some people I could name."

She went back into the apartment. Hutchins was in the hall, leaning against the door of her room with the aspirin packet still in his hand as if he were too tired to take it.

"Mr. Hutchins," she said, "I'm afraid this isn't going to work. I know Mr. Ohghhi ... he told you you could stay, but ..."

"But you've been talking to Hedda and Louella, and they've been busily spreading the news that you have a live-in lover. Are you sure they're not forty-year-old circus midgets?"

"No," Chris said, feeling sorry for him all over again. He had leaned his head against the wall as if it hurt, and even though he was smiling at her, it looked like it took an effort.

"Am I supposed to ache all over?"

"Yes. Did you take the vitamin A?"

"Yes."

"Good." She handed him the printouts. "These are the bathroom schedules. Everyone gets an initial two minutes in the morning using this schedule, which begins at five o'clock. At six-fifteen the second rotation begins, which allows you an additional five minutes. If you miss your turn, you automatically go to the end of the schedule. There's soap, and water for brushing your teeth in the bathroom. You get your shower water from the tank in the basement. You're allowed sixteen ounces."

"No electrical appliances in the bathroom," he said wearily.

"The apartment rules are on the other sheet. You'll feel better as soon as the aspirin starts working. I'll make you a cup of tea and you can lie down." She started past him into the living room, but he put his arm up with surprising speed.

"It's a great idea, but it won't work," he said.

"Why not? Did Mr. Ohghhi. . . my alien buy another piano while I was downstairs?"

"Worse," he said. "He wants us all to go out on the town. 'I want to drink sake and see a *sutorippu*,' was the way he put it." He handed Chris a card that said, "Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria and Sutorippu. Topless. Bottomless. Continuous shows."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Are you sure you're not the one who wants to see the *sutorippu*?" she said. "Mr. Ohghhifoehnn ..." She stopped and read from her hand, determined not to let him intimidate her.

"... ahigrheeh doesn't know enough English to say a sentence that long."

"How do you know?" he said. "You're so busy worrying about how to pronounce his name that you don't even listen to him."

"Well, you definitely shouldn't go," she said to change the subject. "This Luigi's place is down in Shitamachi, on the equator. You're shuttlelagged enough as it is. The last thing you need is full gravity."

"I'm doing okay. Your vitamin A must be working. And anyway, we don't have any choice in the matter. Your boyfriend said we had to do whatever Okee wanted, and what he wants is to watch a strip show."

Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh slid open the door to his room. He had combed down his wispy hair and put a pink tie on over his long orange coat. "Topless," he said happily. "Bottomless. Continuous shows."

They took the bullet. It was jammed. Chris spent the trip wedged between a large bearded man and a middle-aged woman who looked like she was the kind who *did* get nauseated on the shuttle. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh had bought a large paper kite on the platform when Chris wasn't looking, and he and Hutchins were holding it above their heads so it wouldn't get crushed.

The bullet got progressively more crowded as they got closer to the ginza and Shitamachi. In the crush to get off at their stop, Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh's kite got torn and Chris lost her shoe. Hutchins dived into the tangle of legs as the doors were closing and rescued it.

"Thank you, Mr. Hutchins," Chris said, leaning against a pillar to put it back on.

"Now you're mispronouncing my name," he said, with a grin that looked like he was feeling better. "It's Pete."

Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria was about the size of Chris's hall, if you took out the piano, only with such low ceilings that Hutchins had to duck. It was nearly as crowded as the bullet had been. There was no sign of a stage that Chris could see, and the tables were too small to dance on.

The waiter led them through the mob to a tiny table, pulled it out from the wall so Chris could sit down, and then shoved it back in place, pinning her firmly between Hutchins and Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh. The waiter

handed them menus that were bigger than the table and then stood there, holding a hand terminal and a stylus and looking impatient.

"In the tempura pizza, is it just the tomato sauce that's deep-fried in batter?" Hutchins asked. "Or do you dip in the whole pizza?"

"Have eat?" Chris asked Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh, pointing to the pictures on the menu. "Fish? Rice?" Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh smiled blankly at her and nodded. "Eat?" She picked up a pair of chopsticks and pantomimed eating. "Have eat?"

"What are you going to have, Okee?" Hutchins interrupted. "The sashimi lasagna looks good. I don't know about the linguini with eel sauce."

"Why do you talk to him like that?" Chris whispered. "You know Mr. Ohghhi ..."—she consulted her hand,—"foehnnahigrheeh only speaks a few words of English."

Hutchins took hold of her hand and looked at the palm. "Why do you have his name written on your hand?" he whispered back.

She tried to pull her hand away. "Stewart says the Eahrohhs are very sensitive about how their names are pronounced."

"Is Stewart the guy on the phone, the one you're engaged to?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you to talk to Okee like he's deaf and feebleminded, too? 'Have eat? Fish? Rice?' "

"Mr. Ohghhi ..." She tried to look at her hand, but Hutchins folded it firmly shut.

"Okee speaks better English than Charmaine. He's only talking that ridiculous pidgin to you because you've got him intimidated with all this correct pronunciation stuff. He's afraid if he talks to you, he'll mispronounce something, so he doesn't say anything. If you'd quit worrying about how to pronounce his name, and just talk to him ..."

"Your order, sigñor?" the waiter said. "Go ahead," Hutchins said. "Ask him what he'd like to have for dinner." His hand was still firmly closed over hers. The waiter tapped the stylus on his hand terminal. "Mr Ohghhi ...," she said.

"Okeefenokee," Hutchins said. "Like the swamp." "Okeefenokee," she said timidly, "what would you like to have for dinner?"

Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh's smile straightened out into an expression

Chris hadn't seen before. His cheek knobs seemed to grow more orange, and two lines formed above his nose. "I'll have the sushi and spaghetti," he said. "And you do have any sake? *Majori*? Good. I'd like a bottle. And three cups." Chris stared at him.

"And you, *signorina*?" the waiter said.

"She'll have the sushi and spaghetti," Hutchins said.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said, brushing past the waiter. She was wearing another hapi coat, made of a glittery fabric you could see through. "They told me you guys were here," she said, "and I would've come right over only on the way down here some guy pinched me. I had to do one of my fans all over again."

"We'll all have the sushi and spaghetti," Hutchins said, "and bring another sake cup."

"Oh, gee, no, not for me," she said, bending over the table to talk to Hutchins. "I'm on at nineteen o'clock. Right after Omiko and Her Orbiting Colonies." She leaned over farther.

"Great," Hutchins said.

"Would you like to sit down?" Chris said.

"I can't. On account of my fans." She looked around the room. "This is a great place to work. Three guys have proposed to me already."

"Charmaine came up here to find a husband," Chris told Hutchins.

"Yeah," Charmaine said. She leaned over Hutchins. "I wanted to go someplace romantic, someplace where guys wouldn't treat me like I was a piece of real estate. I guess you think that's kind of a crazy reason, huh? But I've met some people whose reasons are even *crazier*. Did you know that sweet old guy who lives above me on the steps came up because he'd always wanted to meet an alien? And this weird guy I met tonight told me he came up because he figures these arrows guys are going to kill us all, and he wants to get it over with. No offense, Mr. Fenokee," she said, turning to lean over Okee. His face twisted up in an unfathomable expression.

"Why did you come up to Sony, Mr. Hutchins?" Chris said hastily.

"Not to get married. So you thought Sony was a romantic place to come?" he said, watching Charmaine lean over the table.

"Gee, yeah," she said, leaning over even farther. "I mean, the stars and the moon are right outside and everything. It's bound to have a romantic effect on a guy. It might even have a romantic effect on my old boyfriend,

but I doubt it. I mean, he acted like he was a prospective buyer and I was a two-bedroom split-level. He kept calling our wedding a closing, and instead of going on a honeymoon, he wanted to 'establish occupancy.' Can you believe that?" She sighed an impressive sigh. "But I don't know if Sony's going to be any better. Omiko says the marriage contracts up here are really real-estate deals, with property clauses and everything, and that people get married all the time just to get their hands on a place to live."

"Does your fiancé have his own apartment?" Hutchins asked.

"He lives with his mother," Chris said stiffly. "Stewart says the lack of space on Sony makes property very valuable, and the marriage laws are bound to reflect that, but it doesn't mean ..."

"Gee, your fiancé sounds just like my old boyfriend," Charmaine said, leaning over about as far as she could go. "I mean, there's gotta be a romantic guy around somewhere."

The waiter came back with the bottle of sake and four porcelain cups the size of soup bowls.

"'Scuse me, I gotta go get ready for my number." She wriggled away between the tables.

"Now there's a woman whose property value is in the high forties," Hutchins said, pouring out the sake.

"My wife has large cups, too," Okee said. Hutchins poured sake on the table. Chris bit her lip. "They are not painted and made of ..." Okee stopped and searched for a word. His face was screwed up into that odd expression again. He looked like a newborn baby about to cry.

"Porcelain?" Chris said calmly, picking up the empty sake cup and handing it to Okee. "These cups are made of a kind of glazed clay called porcelain."

"Porcelain," he said, the two lines above his nose deepening. "My wife would like these cups."

Chris passed the empty cup to Hutchins so he could fill it. Now he was the one with the odd expression, and she didn't seem to be any better at interpreting his than Okee's.

"Cups," he said thoughtfully, and poured some more sake on the table.

"I didn't know you were married, Mr. Okeefenokee," Chris said, mopping up sake with her napkin.

"Yes," he said, and his face screwed up again. He drank down his bowlful of sake in one swallowless gulp and set it in front of Hutchins. "My

wife and I drink . . ."—he said an unpronounceable word with enough s's in it to defeat Molly's lisp—"out of cups like these. It is better than sake."

" 'Scuse me," Charmaine said. She had put on her headdress, which consisted of giant red-lacquered chopsticks stuck at various angles into her brass-colored topknot. If she bent over Hutchins like she'd been doing before, she would do herself an injury. "Can I borrow Mr. Fenokee for a minute? The girls in the show all want to meet him."

Okee took another incredibly large swallow of sake and followed her through the crowd.

"Don't you think we should go with him?" Chris said, watching the bobbing red headdress work its way through the crowd.

"He'll be all right. How did you know he was talking about the sake cups and not Charmaine's, um, selling points?"

She reached for her cup of sake. "Just because they were the first thing that sprang to your mind...."

He put his hand over hers. "I'm serious. How did you know for sure he was talking about the sake cups?"

"Because he asked me at breakfast what the coffee cups were called, and I told him they were cups, so I knew he knew the word, and he doesn't seem to be able to absorb more than one meaning of a word."

His grip tightened on her hand. "Give me an example," he said urgently.

"All right. Yesterday at breakfast we had rolls, and he asked me what they were called. When I told him, he took two of them and went out and gave them to Molly and Bets. 'Here roll,' he said, and Bets said, 'We asked if you could get us a role. In the alien movie. Not this kind of roll,' and threw it at him."

"A regular Shirley Temple. Did you try to explain what a role in a movie was?"

"Yes, I told him there were two words that sounded like roll and that Bets meant an acting job in a movie, but I could tell he didn't understand. He started nodding and smiling the way he always does when I tell him he's got to stop buying things."

"Because there isn't any more room in your apartment," he said, and caught up her hand in both of his. "That's why . . ."

" 'Scuse me," Charmaine said sharply. She had brought Mr. Okeefenokee back. Chris hastily withdrew her hand from Hutchins's.

"You'll never guess who just showed up," Charmaine said. "My old

boyfriend. He said he came up to Sony to find me."

"That sounds pretty romantic," Chris said.

"Yeah, I know." She sighed. "I told him I'd go out with him after I get off work, but if he says one word about escrow or closings ... I gotta go. Thanks, Mr. Fenokee."

Okee had several lipstick prints on the top of his bald head, and his face had smoothed out into that new expression, his mouth straight across, his cheeks bright orange.

"After we see the *sutorippu*," he said, "I would like you to get married."

The waiter appeared suddenly and slammed down three orders of sushi and spaghetti in compartmentalized bento-bako boxes. "Will there be anything else, sigñor?" he asked Hutchins. "The first show is about to start."

Hutchins didn't answer him. He was still looking worried. Chris wondered if his aspirin was starting to wear off. She hoped not. Between the shuttle-lag and the sake, he would really crash. Okee motioned the waiter over and said something she couldn't hear.

"Please move over next to the gentlemen, sigñora," the waiter said, and waved her over toward Hutchins, motioning her to turn the chair around so it was facing the wall. She moved the chair so hers and Hutchins's were side by side.

"Chris," Hutchins said, leaning toward her and yawning, "there's something I've got to tell you about this subletting situation. ..."

There was a sudden blast of music, and the wall in front of Chris rolled up and revealed Omiko and her Orbiting Colonies. Chris was glad she'd moved her chair. She would have fallen over into the orchestra pit. Mr. Okeefenokee was watching the activities on stage, which involved clear plastic stars and tassels, with the broad smile and wobbling nod that usually meant that he was going to buy something.

"If he buys Omiko and her orbiting colonies I'm evicting him," she shouted at Hutchins over the deafening music. He didn't answer. A heavy weight came down on her shoulder. He's probably smiling and nodding at those LaGrangian points, too, and doesn't even realize he's got his hand on my shoulder, she thought. "What about the subletting situation?" she said suspiciously, and turned to glare at him.

He was sound asleep, his mouth a little open and his face looking somehow more tired in sleep. "Well," Chris thought, feeling oddly pleased.

The music ground up to a finale, and Omiko put enough spin on her colonies to induce full gravity. Hutchins began to snore. "My wife does that," Mr. Okeefenokee said, watching the stage, and let out a wail like an air-raid siren.

Hutchins slept all the way home on the bullet. Chris spent the trip explaining to Mr. Okeefenokee why he couldn't buy anything else. He smiled and nodded, trying to juggle the two dozen bento-bako boxes and Fan Tan Fannie's fan against the uneven motion of the bullet. Chris held the box containing the porcelain sake cups.

"There just isn't any more room in my apartment," Chris said. "Tomorrow I'm going to see my fiancé and ask him if he can store some of the things in his apartment, but ..."

"Tomorrow you and Hutchins get married. Have closing. Honeymoon." He pronounced honeymoon "hahnahmoon."

"People who get married don't really have closings. They have weddings. And they don't just get married. They have to be in love, they have to know each other."

"No?" Okee said.

"No. I mean, they have to be friends, to talk to each other."

"You and Hutchins talk. You are friends."

Chris glanced at Hutchins, who had his arm slung through one of the hanging straps to keep himself more or less upright, wishing he would wake up and explain things to Mr. Okeefenokee. "You can't just be friends. You have to spend time alone together so you can talk without other people listening, and so you can ..."

"Neck," Hutchins said, yawning. He eased his arm out of the strap.

"Neck?" Okee said, with the smile starting again that meant he didn't understand. He put his hand on his neck.

"Mr. Hutchins means kissing," Chris said, glaring at Hutchins. He was looking at Okee, though, with that thoughtful expression on his face again. "This is our stop."

It was raining when they came out of the station. People were asleep on the sidewalks, huddled under umbrellas and makeshift tents. There were half a dozen asleep under the overhang of Chris's building. Inside, Mr. Nagisha lay curled up by the front door with his arm around his lap

terminal and disk files.

"Shh," she said, and tiptoed to the stairs.

Hutchins tiptoed after her, stopping to take off his shoes. Mr. Okeefenokee followed, juggling his bento-bako boxes. Fan Tan Fannie's fan dragged across Mr. Nagisha's nose. He sneezed but didn't wake up.

Chris started up the stairs. The old man was stretched out like a corpse on the third step up, his hands crossed on his breast and the baseball cap over his face. His running shoes were on the step above him, and his feet in their pink socks stuck through the banisters.

There were at least five extra people sleeping on the landing, each clutching an overnight lease contract. Mr. Nagisha must be making a killing. Molly and Bets's mothers were asleep sitting up against the banister, still holding an open copy of *Variety* between them.

Molly was asleep against the door of Chris's apartment, wrapped in a sleeping bag with blue kittens on it. Chris couldn't get the door open without cracking Molly on the head. Hutchins took hold of a corner of the sleeping bag and pulled her out of the way, yawning. "Here's Dorothy, but where's Lillian?" he said, and yawned again. "Shh," Chris said, and unlocked the door. Hutchins and Mr. Okeefenokee both seemed to snap awake at the whirr of her key being read. Okee hoisted up his dragging fan and managed to make it through the door before she did, and Hutchins straightened to his full height and cleared his throat. Chris looked at him warily and opened the door to her room.

The blankets she had left stacked on the end of the couch were draped unevenly over it, the tail of one of the quilts trailing on the floor. In the middle of them, sound asleep, lay Bets, her golden curls spread out endearingly against the pillow and her thumb in her mouth. She was hugging a teddy bear and a frayed pink blanket. Chris glanced at Hutchins, wondering if this was what all the throat-clearing had been about, but he was bending over Bets, shaking his head. "I was wrong about the kid's acting ability. She's doing an amazing imitation of an innocent child asleep."

"Bets," Chris said sternly. "Wake up. What are you doing in here?"

Bets sighed, a sweet, babyish sigh, and turned over.

"I know you're awake, Bets," Chris said. She knelt down and snatched the teddy bear away from her. "Tell me what you're doing in here, or I'll call your agent and tell him both your front teeth fell out."

"You better not," Bets said. She sat up, her cheeks pink and her eyes

bright with sleep. "You better give me back my teddy bear."

Chris stuck the teddy bear behind her back. "Not until you tell me what you're doing in here."

"The door was open and I came in here just for a minute and your bed looked so soft I guess I just fell asleep." She shrugged daintily.

"She ate my porridge all up, too," Hutchins said. "Where's your phone, Chris?"

Bets stood up in the middle of the couch. Her pink nightgown had a ruffle around the bottom that almost covered her bare toes. "My mother says we're first on the list and you can't just sublet your room to some boyfriend of yours. She says ..."

"I did not sublet my room to anybody. Mr. Okeefenokee sublet his room to Mr. Hutchins."

"Oh, yeah?" Bets said. "Then what's that doing in here?" She pointed up at the ceiling.

"What is that?" Chris said, looking up at the hammocklike arrangement of straps and white padding hanging from the ceiling. There was an aluminum ladder hooked onto the wall above the couch,

"It's an astronaut's sleep restraint," Hutchins said. "Okee bought it at the NASA Surplus Store. It was used on the space station, but don't worry. It's been reinforced for seventy percent gravity. It won't fall down."

"It won't fall down because you're taking it down. I agreed to let you stay in Mr. Okeefenokee's room, not in here."

"I know, but Okee has trouble understanding more than one meaning of a word. That's what I was trying to tell you at Luigi's. You told him there wasn't any more room in your apartment, so he thinks 'room' means 'available storage space.' " He pointed at the ceiling. "He apparently decided this space was available."

Chris didn't wait for him to finish. She marched down the hall and pounded on the door of Mr. Okeefenokee's room. "Mr. Okeefenokee!" she shouted. "I have to talk to you."

"Shh," Hutchins said. "You'll wake up that DeMille crowd scene outside."

"I don't care if I wake the orbiting dead. You're not sleeping in my room."

"You'd better give me back my teddy bear," Bets said.

Okee pushed open his shoji screen an inch and a half and peeked out.

"Mr. Okeefenokee, there's been a misunderstanding. Mr. Hutchins can't sleep in my room. I said you could sublet *your* room." She could see the smile coming.

"Remember 'role'?" Hutchins said. "Remember 'cups'? Remember 'neck'? I spent fifteen minutes trying to explain the difference to him this afternoon."

"And then you suggested that we go out for dinner so we wouldn't get back here until it was too late for me to do anything about it," she said furiously. "You probably timed it so it was raining, too."

"Look, I'm too tired to argue with you, and in about five minutes I'm going to be too lagged to even make it up that ladder and into bed. So if we could please talk about it in the morning ..."

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm calling Stewart."

"What for? He told you to do whatever Okee wants. Okee wants me to stay."

"Stewart was not talking about a man sleeping in my room.

"I'm not sleeping in your room. I'm sleeping in Okee's room, which happens to be above your room." He shuffled off down the hall. "I'm going to bed. G'night." Bets padded barefoot after him. They disappeared into the living room.

Chris punched in Stewart's number and let it ring. After the first ring, she hit the time key on the screen. It flashed twenty-three o'clock. Stewart's mother went to bed at twenty-one-thirty. Chris hit the hang-up button.

Okee was still peeking at her through the tiny space in the sliding door. "All right," she said, "he can stay tonight, but tomorrow ..."

"Tomorrow you and Hutchins get married," he said, and slid the screen shut with a bang.

Hutchins was already in the sleep restraint, one arm dangling limply over the side. Bets and Molly were in Molly's sleeping bag, which they had dragged over next to the couch. Their eyes were squeezed shut and their hands were tucked up under their cheeks.

"I said Mr. Hutchins could stay," Chris said. "I didn't say anything about you two. Out."

Molly sat up and rubbed her eyes with her chubby little fists. "We have to thtay to thyaperone you," she said, "tho people won't think you're a

thlut."

Chris was suddenly too tired to argue with them. It's the sake, she thought irrationally. He tried to get me drunk so I'd let him stay. He had the whole thing planned.

She undressed in the bathroom and put on her nightshirt, even though there wasn't enough room in there to raise her arms over her head. Molly and Bets had kicked their covers off. She put Bets's pink blanket over them, turned off the lights, and got into bed.

She could hear Hutchins breathing above her in the darkness, a heavy, even breathing that meant he was already asleep. Poor guy, she thought in spite of herself.

When she had emigrated to Sony, she'd barely made it through customs and into the Hilton before collapsing. There was no way she could have made it through a dinner and a *sutorippu*. Half a *sutorippu*, she thought, feeling pleased all over again at the way he'd fallen asleep during Omiko's act.

Bets turned over and murmured something that sounded like "I'm going to be a star!" A sound like the shuttle taking off roared from Mr. Okeefenokee's room. It went on for a full minute, subsided, and then started up again.

"What in the hell's that?" Hutchins said. She could hear the sleep restraint creak as if he had sat up.

"It's Mr. Okeefenokee," Chris whispered.

"What's he doing?"

"Snoring, I think. He does it every night."

"You're kidding," he said, and she could hear his head flop back against the pillow. "No wonder you wanted to get rid of him."

"I didn't want to get rid of him. I like him. It's just that it's such a little apartment, and he keeps bringing things home with him, like the piano, and I'm running out of room for . . . where's the piano? It wasn't in the hall."

"I helped him shove it into his room this afternoon," Hutchins said. "It sounds like he's got a spaceship in there, too. You don't suppose he bought one at NASA Surplus when I wasn't looking?"

"He might have," Chris said ruefully. "I didn't see him buy the bento-bako boxes tonight. Or Fan Tan Fannie's fan."

They both listened to the whooshing roar for a while. "How long does

this go on?" Hutchins said finally, in between takeoffs.

"Sometimes he stops," Chris said, thinking how she would have felt if she'd had to put up with this and shuttle-lag, too.

"And sometimes he doesn't. But either way you have to put up with it because your prospective buyer told you to let him do anything he wants. Has he ever heard him snore?"

Chris didn't answer. She was thinking that the next time Stewart tried to put her on hold she should play a tape of Okeefenokee's snoring.

"I'll bet he has," Hutchins said, answering his own question, "and that's why he pushed him off on you. Why is he staying here anyway? How come he isn't with the rest of the Eahrohhs or keeping your boyfriend and his mother awake tonight?"

"He had to have a place with high ceilings," she said, and hoped he wouldn't ask how high Stewart's mother's ceilings were. "He has vertical claustrophobia."

"Which explains why Okee couldn't stand to ride the bullet tonight or sit in Luigi's. Did your prospective buyer tell you that? Face it, he found out about the snoring."

"How'th a perthon thuppothed to get any thleep around here?" Molly shouted in Chris's ear.

Chris snapped on the light. "You're the one who wanted to sleep in here," she said. Molly was standing over her, clutching her rag doll and Bets's blanket. Bets was rolling up the sleeping bag. "You're doing thith on purpothe to get rid of uth," Molly said darkly, and stomped out in her footed pajamas after Bets.

"She wants to be alone with him so they can—*you know!*" Bets said loudly, and slammed the door. Chris turned out the light.

"It's an ill wind ...," Hutchins said. "I wonder why Okee needs high ceilings. Or if that's what he really needs."

"What do you mean?" Chris said.

"Remember the incident of the rolls? Maybe he needed sealings, S-E-A-L-I-N-G-S, whatever they are. The Japanese word for 'ceiling' is *tenjo*, but *tenjo* also means palace. Maybe he really asked for a palace. Have you been in his room since he moved in?"

"No. He comes out when he wants to talk to me, and when he leaves, he locks the door. The first day when we went shopping in the ginza, I was going to go in and help him put things away, but ..."

"He wouldn't let you. I know. I offered to go get my bicycle and leave it outside. I wonder what he's doing in there besides making lift-off noises," he said thoughtfully. "Do you have a key to his room?"

"No. I gave him mine. And besides ..."

"I know, your prospective buyer told you to let him do anything he wants to." He was speaking into a sudden silence from the other room. He stopped talking. "You don't suppose we woke him up, do you?" he whispered. The whisper made him seem somehow closer.

Chris didn't answer. There was another long minute of silence, and another sound started up, high-pitched and rising.

"What's that?" Hutchins said. "It's what he did at Luigi's. When the stripper came on."

"No more *sutorippu* for him. And no more sake."

The sound rose to the same keening note it had in the nightclub and then dropped and rose again. Whether it was because of the high ceilings, though, or because there was a wall between them, it didn't sound like an air-raid siren this time. It sounded like an impossibly high trumpet, sweet and somehow sad.

"I think Omiko and her Orbiting Colonies reminded him of his wife," Chris said.

"Ummm," Hutchins said sleepily. "I missed her. That was when I was sleeping on you."

"I know," Chris said.

"Hutchins?" she said the next time Okee's solo faded, and was answered by a faint snore that was nothing like Mr. Okeefenokee's. "Good night," she said, feeling pleased all over again.

"I don't believe you," Chris heard Bets say from the hall. "Why would he do that?"

"You don't have to believe me," Hutchins said. He was in the hall, too. That meant he had climbed down the ladder past her and it hadn't even woken her up. She wondered what time it was. "All I said is that if I were Spielberg, I wouldn't want two million little girls following me around, begging me for a part in my movie. I'd come up to Sony in disguise so I could get close to the aliens and decide which little girl I wanted in the movie. Sort of a close encounter of the Hollywood kind."

Chris got up and pulled on a robe.

"He could be anybody," Hutchins went on, and Chris wondered what he was talking about. "Me or Okee or one of Mr. Nagisha's cousins, but whoever he is, he could be watching you right now. He could be giving you a screen test this very minute."

"Mr. Nagithya'th couthinth aren't watching uth. They got thrown out," Molly said.

Chris came into the hall. Hutchins was standing against the wall where the piano had been, holding two towels and two shower bottles. Molly and Bets were sitting on the floor in fuzzy robes and bunny slippers looking at a movie magazine. A young man with blond hair whom Chris had never seen before came out of the bathroom, trailing his shower bottle hose, and grinned at Chris as he went out the door.

"Who was that?" Chris said.

"Charmaine's old boyfriend. The lawyer. He moved in this morning," Hutchins said.

"Mr. Okeefenokee didn't sublet another half of my apartment, did he?"

"No, he's living on the landing. But, listen, speaking of moving in, I want you to know I really appreciate your letting me stay here last night. I was so lagged, I'd probably be dead this morning if you hadn't. And I wanted to tell you why I ..."

"Mr. Nagisha's cousins got evicted," Bets said, studying a picture in the movie magazine. "We told Mr. Nagisha they were cooking on the stairs in violation of their lease."

"You girls won't even be extras at this rate," Hutchins said.

"I don't believe you," Molly said. "Thpielberg wouldn't dreth up like an alien."

"I didn't say he'd dress up like an alien. Maybe he's dressed up like Charmaine. And if he is, I'll bet he doesn't appreciate being called a thlut."

"I thtill don't believe you," Molly said. "You're jutht doing thith tho we'll act nither."

"Fine. Don't believe me. It's your funeral."

"But Mr. Nagisha's cousins weren't supposed to use the bathroom till after nine," Chris said. "What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty," Hutchins said. He handed her a towel and a shower bottle. "What time's this lunch with your prospective buyer?"

"I'm meeting Stewart at thirteen-thirty," Chris said stiffly. "Nine-thirty! Then what are you doing in line? You were supposed to be"—she squinted at the schedule on the wall—"seven forty-five."

"I traded places with Charmaine. She had a date with her old boyfriend, remember?"

"We mited our turn, too," Molly said. "And it'th all your fault. If you hadn't kept uth awake with all that thnoring and talking ..."

"Speaking of thnoring," Hutchins said. "Okee said to give this to you." He handed her a flat metal disk on a short chain. "You wear it around your neck." He opened the odd-looking clasp and moved around behind her.

Chris caught a glimpse of metal under his shirt collar. "When did he buy this?"

"This morning. He got up early and went out to get rolls and coffee for breakfast."

"He went out by himself? What else did he buy? A set of encyclopedias?"

Hutchins fastened the chain. The disk came right to the hollow between her collar bones and seemed almost to stick there. Chris tried to pull it out to see what was on the back, but the chain was too short. "What is this thing?" she said.

"There's an earplug thingee that goes with it," he said, and dropped it into the palm of her outstretched hand.

"My mother says we should have stuck cotton in our ears and stayed right where we were last night," Bets said. "She says possession is nine tenths of the law."

"Did you put her up to this?" Chris said to Hutchins.

"Not me. It's not a bad argument, though. Go ahead. Put it on."

Chris looked warily at the smaller round disk and put it in her ear. "Mr. Okeefenokee didn't go out again, did he?"

(No,) Hutchins said. His lips didn't move. (He's in the bathroom. And after breakfast .. Oh, that reminds me.) He dug his hand in his pocket and came up with a handful of crumpled yen. (I had to get money out of your purse to give Okee for the rolls and coffee. This is your change.) He handed it to her.

Chris looked at the little girls, but they had their heads together over the movie magazine again.

(After breakfast he's going back to bed,) Hutchins said, still without opening his mouth. (He says our talking kept him awake last night.)

She jammed the yen in her pocket, still watching his mouth and wondering if the thing around her neck was some sort of ventriloquist's device. "What is this thing?"

(Okee called it something that sounded like "the Everglades,") Hutchins said. (It picks up subvocalizations and amplifies them so any other person similarly equipped can hear them. Go ahead, say something. Under your breath. Your lips don't have to move. In fact, all I do is think the words.)

(He said our talking kept him awake?) Chris said cautiously under her breath, her hand on the disk.

(Yep. He said tonight we were supposed to use these, which means he wants me to stay here tonight. And besides, if I spend the whole day moving out, I can't keep an eye on Okee. He'll probably end up buying a steam calliope.)

(You've done a great job of watching him so far,) she thought. (When did he buy these subvocalizers?)

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully, and she could tell by the way the little girls looked up from their movie magazine that he had spoken aloud. It hadn't sounded markedly different from when he used the subvocalizer, only a little farther away.

Molly and Bets were watching Hutchins suspiciously. "Well, I don't know either," Chris said, as if they had been carrying on a rational conversation, "but I'd say his time in the bathroom is definitely up." She tapped on the bathroom door. "Mr. Okeefenokee, your time is up."

He opened the bathroom door and came out, his wispy hair wet and practically invisible. His body looked even lumpier than usual under his Japanese yukata.

Hutchins ducked in. "You could have traded platheth with uth," Molly shouted after him. "We have a holo-interview thith afternoon."

"You are wearing your thuwevrherrnghladdis," Mr. Okeefenokee said, nodding and smiling. It did sound like "the Everglades."

"Yes, thank you. It's lovely." She put her hand up to the disk.

"Have you and Hutchins talked alone?"

"Yes." She looked at Molly and Bets, but they were immersed in their movie magazine again.

Bets was pointing at a picture. "It does look a little bit like him," she

whispered to Molly. "See how lumpy he is."

"But what about his batheball cap? Thpielberg alwayth wearth a batheball cap."

"Good," Mr. Okeefenokee said. His mouth straightened out and his cheeks turned bright orange. "Now you can get married. Have closing. Hahnahmoon."

Both girls looked up.

"No! I mean, talking alone isn't enough." She wished Okee were wearing one of the subvocalizers so they could discuss this privately, but he didn't seem to be.

(People have to know each other a long time before they get married,) she thought at Okee, but he only smiled at her.

"People have to know each other a long time before they get married," she said aloud. "They have to ..." She hesitated, trying to think of a word that he might understand.

"Thyeeth talking about theckth," Molly said wisely. "And if you athk me, they've already ..."

"Nobody asked you," Chris said. "Why don't you two go find somebody else you can get evicted?" She shoved them out the door.

"Theckth?" Mr. Okeefenokee said.

Chris tried to think what she could tell him. She couldn't just say people had to love each other. "Love" was far too nebulous a term, and he'd already heard Charmaine say she loved Sony and her job and the fans painted on her ath. "Last night you were thinking about your wife, weren't you?" she said, watching for any sign of understanding. To her surprise, he stopped nodding. "And it made you sad?"

"Yes," he said solemnly. "Sad."

"And you wished you could talk to her and see her and be close to her." She put her arms out and brought them back again toward her and hugged herself. "Close." "Closing," he said.

"Not, not closing. Close."

"Hahnahmoon?"

"No," she said. "See, when two people love each other, they want to be as near each other as they can, and they ..."

"Wife," he said, "sad," and screwed his face up.

"Oh, Mr. Okeefenokee, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," she said, but she was too late. He let out a wail like a fire engine.

"What did you do to him?" Hutchins said, coming out of the bathroom.

"He misses his wife," Chris said.

"She probably told him about sex," Bets said. She and Molly came back in.

"What did thye do to you?" Molly said, patting Okee awkwardly on the back.

"You can have our turn in the bathroom if you want," Bets said, her forefinger stuck in one of her dimples. "We don't really need a shower." She held out her shower bottle to him.

Okee stopped wailing and looked at the little girls, an expression on his face that Chris had never seen before. She had no idea how to interpret it, but at least he had stopped keening.

"Here. You can have my rubber duckie. Hith name ith Tham," Molly said with a sickeningly sweet smile.

Okee continued to look at them for a long moment and then took the yellow duck and the shower bottle and went back into the bathroom.

(How did you do that?) Chris said wonderingly.

(I told them that if I were Spielberg, I'd disguise myself as an alien and do secret screen tests.) It was disconcerting to be watching him grin while he was talking to her. (I thought it might improve their general deportment.)

Chris looked at Molly and Bets, who were whispering about something, curls and hairbows bobbing. "Okay, but we'll have to hurry," Bets said, and they ran out of the hall and down the steps. "He'll be out of the bathroom in a few minutes."

"You don't suppose they'll try to kidnap him and hold him for ransom?" Chris said.

"I hope not," Hutchins said. (What we talked about last night . . . have you noticed Okee having trouble understanding any other words?) He had gone back to using the subvocalizer even though there was nobody else left in the hall.

(He can't seem to tell the difference between closing and close,) she thought (and he has trouble pronouncing some words, like "honeymoon.") He still thinks we're getting married, but that's Charmaine's fault. With all her real-estate talk, I think he's gotten the idea marriage is something you

can go out and buy.) She tried to think. (He doesn't understand when I tell him he should stop buying things.)

(Has he ever talked to you about the space program thing the Eahrohhs are supposed to be negotiating?)

(No. Stewart said the Japanese linguists had figured out that there was a small core group of officials and a couple of translators and that everybody else was a passenger. Stewart said Okee's one of the passengers. *Noru hito*.)

(*Noru hito*, huh? Did you know that some Japanese words have as many as ten different meanings? *Noru hito* also means ...)

There was a racket on the steps, and Molly and Bets burst in wearing leotards covered with red, white, and blue sequins, and sequined military hats. Bets was carrying a Sony chip recorder. "Ith he out of the bathroom yet?" Molly said breathlessly.

"No," Hutchins said.

"Good," Molly said. "We'll have time to practith." She adjusted the chin strap on her hat. Bets stuck a music program into the Sony recorder and pushed down the *play* key. They both positioned themselves in front of the bathroom door, clanking as they walked.

"Those are tap shoes," Chris said.

"I know," Hutchins said. "Baby June and Gypsy strike again."

"Ready and . . .," Bets said. "Hop, shuffle, step. Hop, shuffle, step."

She was late to lunch. Okee had refused to come out of the bathroom until Molly and Bets stopped tap-dancing, and then they demanded their turn in the bathroom. While they were in there, they used the curling iron and blew a fuse. It was almost noon before Chris could have her shower.

By the time she was dressed, Hutchins and Okee had both disappeared. She went out into the hall. Charmaine's lawyer had set up an ancient Apple and two disk drives on a chair. He had the case off the Apple and was digging around inside and swearing to himself. The old man with the baseball cap was playing solitaire on the top three steps. Molly and Bets were on the landing in pink tutus and ballet slippers, hanging on to the railing as if it were a barre and practicing the ballet positions. The chip recorder was blaring, "The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy."

"Do you know where Mr. Okeefenokee is?" Chris shouted, and then

realized it was a stupid question. If they knew, they would be subjecting him to the Sugarplum Fairy.

"Don't interrupt uth," Molly said. "We're trying to practith."

"He's in with Mr. Nagisha," Charmaine said. She was sitting on the second step from the bottom, watching Mr. Nagisha's TV and painting fans on her fingernails. She was dressed in a red strapless dress and spike-heeled shoes. "He asked him to explain leases, but I think he's really hiding from the cast of *Swan Lake*."

"Is Hutchins in there with him?" Chris said, coming down the stairs toward her.

"No. About half an hour ago he said he had something he had to do and left."

Chris looked at her watch. "Oh, dear, I'm supposed to meet Stewart for lunch, and I don't dare leave Mr. Okeefenokee alone."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Charmaine said, blowing on her fingernails. "I don't have anything better to do."

"I thought you had a date."

"'Had' is right," she said, jabbing the fingernail-polish stylus in the direction of the landing. "He didn't come up here to find me. He came up because he figured with all this overcrowding there'd be lots of real-estate contracts to draw up. And marriage contracts. Only he can't seem to tell the difference." She jammed the cap on the stylus. "He wanted to know if I'd be interested in a lease option. That's where you get to move in before you close the deal, *if* there's a closing. Go on. Don't be late for your lunch."

"All right," Chris said, wondering what had made Hutchins run off like that. "Let Mr. Okeefenokee do anything he wants, but whatever you do, don't let him go shopping."

The bullet was jammed with people carrying flight bags and looking exhausted. Getting off at the ginza, she almost lost her shoe again. This time, since Hutchins wasn't there, she curled her toes and jammed them against the end of the shoe, and it stayed on, but just barely, and she got such a cramp in her foot that she could hardly walk.

The ginza was jammed with bicycles and people carrying huge, bulky suitcases who had a tendency to stop suddenly in the middle of the footwalk to stare at the city far above. It took nearly fifteen minutes to get the half block from the bullet to the Garden of Meditation.

Stewart was standing outside, tapping his foot and looking at his watch.

"Where have you been?" he said. "I've been waiting half an hour."

"I couldn't get into my bathroom," she said. "Molly and Bets ..."

"Those two cunning moppets I saw on the phone yesterday?" Stewart said, taking her arm and steering her into the restaurant's anteroom. "I don't think I've ever seen two such adorable little girls."

"They're circus midgets," Chris said, but Stewart didn't hear her.

He was waving wildly at a waitress. "For heavens' sake, take your shoes off, so if they do have a table we can sit right down. I don't have much time. If you'd been on time we could have gotten right in, but now we'll probably have to wait." He pulled his shoes off and started through the crowd to find the waitress.

Chris took her shoes off and gave them to the pretty Japanese attendant. She flexed her cramping toes. I should get tap shoes with straps, like those "two charming moppets," she thought.

(Lose your shoe in the bullet again?) Hutchins said at her ear, and she whirled around, but there was no one behind her but the attendant and a wizened old woman who couldn't seem to find her shoes.

"No," Chris said. The attendant was looking at her oddly, which meant she had spoken aloud again. She clamped her mouth shut and said silently, (Where are you?)

(At Luigi's. Sorry to run off this morning, but Charmaine told me about a job waiting tables, and I thought I'd better check it out. I can't keep taking breakfast money out of your purse forever. Is Okee with you?)

(No, I got Charmaine to watch him, but you're not going to be staying long enough to worry about breakfast. I'm going to have Stewart find you and Mr. Okeefenokee another apartment this afternoon and . . .)

Stewart came back, elbowing his way past the wrinkled crone, who was still rummaging through the shoes. "They gave our table to somebody else fifteen minutes ago," he said accusingly, "and they won't have anything else for an hour and a half. We'll have to eat at the sushi counter." He led her through the crowd to the wooden counter and scanned it for seats. "Have you ever seen such a mob?"

"Yes," Chris said. "In line for my bathroom. Stewart, since I talked to you yesterday, Mr. Okeefenokee ..."

"There aren't two seats together," he said, pointing at the only empty stools, which were separated by an exhausted-looking man with a camera and a shuttle bag, "which is what happens when you aren't on time for

your reservations." He motioned her toward one of the stools, sat down on the other, and handed her a menu. A waitress appeared immediately. Stewart snatched the menu out of Chris's hands. "I'll have the jiffy lunch. What is it?"

"Eel. It comes with fries."

"I'll have that, and she'll have the sushi salad."

"I want you to come home with me this afternoon," Chris said across the exhausted-looking man, who had propped his arms on the sushi counter. "You've got to talk to Mr. Okeefenokee. Yesterday he—"

"Okeefenokee?" Stewart said, with the same horrified look he'd had on the phone the day before. "I have asked you repeatedly to learn the correct pronunciation of his name. You obviously don't realize how delicate our relationship with the Eahrohhs is right now or you wouldn't ..."

"I'm sorry, Stewart, but Mr. Ohghhi ..." She automatically opened her hand to look at what wasn't written there anymore.

(Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh,) Hutchins said.

"Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh," Chris said. "Yesterday he brought home—"

(How delicate is the relationship with the Eahrohhs right now?) Hutchins said.

"Well?" Stewart said. "Don't just stop in the middle of a sentence like that. What did he bring home?"

(Ask him,) Hutchins said insistently. (Ask him what he means by a delicate relationship.)

(How do you know what's he's saying?) Chris said. (I thought these subvocalizers only picked up what the person said under his breath.)

(It does. You're subvocalizing what Stewart's saying. Okee says that happens when the person's upset.)

(I am not upset,) Chris thought. (And would you please stop eavesdropping on this conversation?)

(No. Ask him how the negotiations are going. This is important, Chris. Please.)

"I took the time for this lunch because you told me you had to talk to me," Stewart said, "and now all you do is sit there staring into space."

"I'm sorry, Stewart," Chris said.

(Please,) Hutchins said.

"How are the negotiations going, Stewart?" she said. The exhausted-looking man was lying in his sushi.

"We've had a breakdown in communications. Nothing for you to worry about, though. In fact, it may work to your benefit. The Japanese have decided that because the negotiations are taking longer than we expected, they'll match the compensation NASA's been paying. Which is only fair since this mess is their fault. If they'd allowed NASA to build the size shuttle base they wanted, this overcrowding problem would never have happened."

(What kind of breakdown in communications?) Hutchins said.

"What kind of breakdown in communications?" Chris said.

"It seems the Eahrohhsian the Japanese team thought was their headman isn't in charge, after all, or he used to be and isn't anymore or something. Their concept of roles is apparently different from ours."

"Yes," Chris said, thinking of Molly asking Mr. Okeefenokee to get her a role in Spielberg's movie.

"This mix-up could jeopardize the whole space program, and the American linguistics team is furious. They want to transfer the Eahrohhsians down to Houston immediately, where they can use translation computers to ..."

(Immediately?) Hutchins said, but Chris had already said it out loud.

"If they can get the Japanese to agree to it. I think they will as soon as they've had time to save face. Two or three more days at the most, and Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh will be out of your life forever."

And so will Hutchins, Chris thought.

The waitress came back with Stewart's eel and a check, which she stuck under the fingers of the sleeping man. "We're out of sushi salad," the waitress said. "We got tacos and Hungarian goulash. Do you want one of them?"

"Two or three more days, and you'll have your apartment back and we can think seriously about going condo. But in the meantime, you've got to make sure you don't do anything to upset Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh. The smallest thing, and our chances of negotiating a space program could blow up in our faces."

(Let him do anything he wants,) Hutchins said. (I don't care what it is. Rape and pillage. Anything.)

"Oh, shut up!" Chris said.

"Look, don't take it out on me," the waitress said. "It's not my fault we're out of the sushi salad." She flounced off.

"I realize having to share your apartment with an alien has been a strain," Stewart said stiffly, "but you didn't have to yell at the waitress."

"I didn't," she said, thinking furiously at Hutchins (This is all your fault. Go away and don't say one more word to me.)

"Who were you yelling at, then?" Stewart said. "Me?"

"No," Chris said, "Mr. Ohghhifoehnn ..." She stopped and waited, listening. Hutchins didn't say anything. Good, she thought, I'm glad he's gone. The waitress reappeared and lifted the sleeping man's head up so she could take the sushi board out from under him. She pointedly did not look at Chris. "Yesterday the alien brought home ..."

"Can I have the check, please?" Stewart said. "And wrap this up so I can take it with me." He slapped down a credit card and slid off the stool. Three people dived for it. "I've got to be back at the office by fourteen-thirty." Chris struggled through the crowd after him. By the time she made it to the anteroom, he had found his shoes in the jumble by the door and was pulling them on. "Let him bring home anything he wants," he said, bending down to tie his shoelaces. "And whatever he wants to do, let him do it. I don't care what it is. It's only for a couple of days."

Chris waited for Hutchins to say, even rape and pillage? but he didn't. He'd gone away, and in a couple of days he really would have gone away because Mr. Okee-fenokee would have been transferred down to Houston, and he wouldn't be able to use the excuse anymore that Mr. Okeefenokee wanted him to stay, and she'd never see him again.

"Now," Stewart said, straightening up. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Chris looked around the suddenly quiet anteroom. There was no one in it except the attendant, who was patiently lining up pairs of shoes by the door. The old woman who'd been in there before must have found her shoes.

"Well?" Stewart said.

"I wanted to talk to you about all the things Mr. Ohghhi ... the alien's been buying, but yesterday after I talked to you, I had a long talk with him, and he promised not to buy anything else. That's what I wanted to tell you."

He looked worried. "Are you sure you should have done that? You don't want to do anything that might..."

"Upset negotiations?" Chris said. The waitress brought Stewart his credit card and a cardboard container with a metal handle. Two teenaged girls wearing "Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind" T-shirts came in and began looking for their shoes. "I'm sure I did the right thing. Don't worry. It won't upset your negotiations. I'll go along with anything he wants."

"Good," he said, putting his credit card away. "Oh, and listen, when this is all over, I want you to come over and look at the apartment next to Mother's. With the compensation we could buy it and sublet yours."

He and the teenaged girls left together, and Chris started looking for her shoes. They weren't there. "Very busy. Much shoes," the attendant said in a passable imitation of the way Mr. Okeefenokee used to talk. "Not steal. Wrong take."

Chris thought of Hutchins diving bravely into the bullet to rescue her shoe. You could get my shoes back for me, she thought at him. "Where are you?"

There wasn't any answer. "Wrong take. You mine," the attendant said, and removed her getas, which were no more than a size four.

"Not fit. Wear size eight," Chris said in a passable imitation of the way she had talked to Mr. Okeefenokee before she met Hutchins, and wished again that he were here.

The attendant finally found her a pair of disposable tabis. The thick, toed socks were better than nothing, she thought, and smiled and thanked the attendant, but before she had gone twenty steps, she had come to the conclusion that they weren't. She stepped up in a doorway and tried to massage her crushed instep. It was only half a block to the bullet platform, but she would never make it. And even if she did, she'd be crippled for life by the crowd on the bullet.

She leaned out as far as she could from the doorway and peered down the crowded ginza, trying to spot a shoe vendor. There was everything else: a man selling mylar balloons with a picture of the Eahrohhs' ship on them, a Sony outlet selling chip recorders, a flower vendor with a backpack full of cherry blossoms shouting, "*Hana!* Cheap!"

Mr. Okeefenokee would love it here, she thought, and remembering that she had told Charmaine she'd be back by sixteen o'clock gave her the courage to step back down onto the footwalk, where the balloon man stepped squarely on her foot.

She retreated back up into the doorway to peer the other way. I wonder how far Mitsukoshi's Department Store is, she wondered. They'd have

shoes.

(It's ten blocks,) Hutchins said in her ear. (We'll have to take the bullet.)

She knew he was miles away and using the subvocalizer again, but the feeling that he was right behind her was irresistible. She turned around. He was standing there, holding a pair of red spike heels by the straps. "You're lucky Charmaine wears a size eight," he said, and handed them to her. "I know these aren't great, but they're not size fours either. And when we get back to Mitsukoshi's, Okee says he'll buy you a new pair."

"Mitsukoshi's?" she said, balancing herself against the doorway to take the tabis off. "You left Okee alone at Mitsukoshi's?"

"I had to come get you. Your exact words, as I recall, were, 'Where the hell is Hutchins? I don't have any shoes.' Do you realize you subvocalize when you're upset?"

"Yes," she said ruefully, and wondered what else he'd heard her think. She stepped into the shoes, which were at least six inches high, and bent down to velcro the red straps.

"Don't worry about Okee," Hutchins said. "He's not alone. I left him with Charmaine. At the makeup counter. She was trying out blusher colors on the top of his head."

"What were you doing at Mitsukoshi's? I thought you had a job interview."

"I did," he said, and helped her out of the doorway. She stepped warily onto the footwalk. It seemed a long way down. "I went in at noon, and Luigi was pretty busy, so he told me to come back this afternoon. You didn't subvocalize what Stewart said when you told him he had to find Okee and me an apartment, which means you're not upset, which must mean he said he would. Which means—"

"I'm starving to death," Chris said. "I didn't get any lunch."

Hutchins bought her a tempura dog on a stick, and she focused her attention on eating it and keeping her balance for the half block to the bullet platform.

"Is Stewart coming over this afternoon to move Okee and me to another apartment or to throw me out?" Hutchins said after they had pushed their way through to the edge of the platform.

"Here comes the bullet," Chris said, looking at her feet so the spindly heels wouldn't catch in the narrow space between the platform and the magnetic rail. The bullet slid to a stop, and the people behind pushed

forward. Chris stumbled and looked down at her feet.

"Come on!" Hutchins yelled, and yanked her up onto the bullet by both arms as the doors closed. They slid shut with a whoosh, and she found herself pinned between a lady with a shopping bag and Hutchins. He was still gripping her arms.

"You didn't answer my question," he said. "What did Stewart say?"

"Why do you have to ask?" she said, still looking at her feet. "You listened in on the whole conversation."

"Not that part," he said. "Charmaine asked what I thought of this makeup she was trying on, and the next thing I knew you were hollering for your shoes." He let go of her and put his arms around her.

"Hey," the woman with the shopping bag said, "quit shoving." She hoisted her shopping bag up into her arms, a movement that had the effect of squashing Chris and Hutchins closer together.

"Look," Hutchins said, "I should have told you this morning and now it's probably too late, but it's important that Okee and I stay where we are. I'm not talking about the hammock. I tried to get one of Mr. Nagisha's overnight leases, but he's booked up through next week, so I asked Charmaine if I could bunk on one of her steps. She said she's got a friend moving in with her, but I'll see if her lawyer friend will let me sleep on the landing. The important thing is that Okee stay in his room and do whatever it is he's planning on doing. When did Stewart say he was moving Okee out?"

"He didn't," she said.

"Good," he said, sounding relieved. "Maybe he won't have found anything by tonight and—"

"I didn't tell Stewart."

"What?"

She looked up. Charmaine's shoes put her on a level with him, and when she looked up, it was straight into his eyes. "I didn't tell him Okee sublet the apartment to you."

"Why not?"

"The negotiations are at a very delicate stage," she said, trying not to look at him. She didn't dare duck her head, because they were so close that his lips might brush her forehead, and if she turned her head, he would be whispering in her ear, just as he had been with the subvocalizer. "It's only for a couple of days and ..." And I was afraid I'd never see you

again, she thought, and then tried to stifle the thought so Hutchins wouldn't hear her. She would have taken the subvocalizer off if she could, but her arms were pinned against his chest, and she was afraid to move them for fear it would bring her closer to him. "Why is it so important that you and Mr. Okeefenokee stay?" she said.

He was looking at her with that thoughtful expression he had had the night before. She could hear his heart beating in her pinioned arms. "Because he asked for a room with high ceilings. Do you know what else the word for 'high' means in Japanese? It means losing your temper, howling, roaring, growing older, and excelling. Take your pick. I don't know what he wants with that room, and neither does that team of Japanese linguists, but it has something to do with the negotiations that are so delicate right now, and with the space program they're negotiating for. If it's a space program. The word for 'space' also means harmony, leisure, room, or eye. The Eahrohhs could be offering us a new kind of glasses or some time off or a way to beat the house on Vegas Two." He stopped and looked across at her. "Chris . . .," he said.

He's going to hear what I'm thinking, she thought, and took a frightened step back.

"Quit shoving," the lady with the shopping bag said.

"You heard her," Hutchins said, grinning. He pulled her back against him. "Quit shoving."

"I'm letting you stay," she said, keeping her head averted, "but it's only because of Mr. Okeefenokee. You said you'd asked Charmaine if you could bunk with her. I think maybe that would be a good idea."

(I don't want to sleep with Charmaine,) Hutchins said in her ear. (I want to sleep with you.)

She was so surprised she lifted her head, but he wasn't looking at her. He was watching the station markers through the bullet doors.

Did you know you subvocalize when you're upset? she thought, feeling oddly pleased.

"What?" Hutchins said.

"Get out of the way," the lady with the shopping bag said. "This is my stop."

"I said, this is the stop for Mitsukoshi's," Chris said.

Charmaine was still at the makeup counter. "What do you think of this?" she said, holding up a bright-pink lipstick. "It's called Passion

Pink. I'm working up a new single called 'Cherry Blossom Time.' "

"Where's Mr. Okeefenokee?" Chris said. "Up in Furniture," she said, trying out the pink lipstick on a space above the bodice of her strapless dress. "He said he wanted to buy a bed."

"I'd better go get him," Hutchins said. "I'll come with you," Chris said. "Can I have my shoes back first?" Charmaine said. She reached into a shopping bag and pulled out a box. "Mr. Fenokee bought you a new pair."

"I'll catch up with you," Chris said, and leaned against the makeup counter to take off the red heels. "Thanks for loaning them to me," she said, handing them back to Charmaine by the straps.

"I didn't have any choice in the matter," she said, pushing out her chest and looking at it in the mirror. "Hutchins practically knocked me over getting them off. I thought you said you didn't like him."

"I didn't," Chris said. "I mean, I don't. I mean, I'm engaged to Stewart and ..." She hastily opened the shoe box. "Oh, good," she said brightly. "They're flats. I don't know how you wear such high heels."

"I was trying on green eye makeup, you know, for my fans, and I asked Hutchins what he thought of Jade Royal." She pulled the bodice of her dress down farther and drew a wide line of rose-colored lipstick on the exposed area. "And he said it was fine, but I could tell he wasn't really listening because he had this kind of faraway look on his face, and I mean, gee, most guys want to help me put the makeup on, and then all of a sudden he says, 'What size shoes do you wear? Give me your shoes. Chris needs them,' and takes off."

She pulled the bodice down still farther and tried a bright-coral lipstick. Chris wondered how far down the greens had gotten. "And I turned to Mr. Fenokee and said, 'How does he know Chris needs my shoes?' and you know what he said?"

Chris ducked her head so Charmaine couldn't see her face and put on her new shoes. "Maybe I'd better go see where Mr. Okeefenokee is," she said. "He's probably buying a dining-room set."

"He said you and Hutchins are getting married today and asked me what kinds of things people needed for a honeymoon," Charmaine said. "Only he pronounced it 'hahnahmoon.' "

"What did you tell him?"

"Gee, you know, just the basics. Champagne and a black lace nightie and a bed. And diamonds. I figured diamonds are a girl's best friend."

"A bed?" Chris said. "Oh, no, I told him there wasn't any space in my apartment. I've got to go stop him."

She left as abruptly as Hutchins apparently had and took the escalator up to Furniture. Halfway up, she met Hutchins and Mr. Okeefenokee on their way down. "Did he buy anything?" she shouted after them.

(No,) Hutchins said in her ear. (I caught him just in time. He was looking at a washer and dryer. Meet us at the foot of the escalator.)

Chris ran the rest of the way up to Furniture, wondering if she should check with the clerk to see whether Mr. Okeefenokee had bought a bed that Hutchins didn't know about.

(I'm going to have you take Okee home, if that's all right,) Hutchins said, sounding as if he were on the step above her. (I'm already late to my interview. It's already sixteen o'clock. Why don't you and Okee just stay here and shop and then meet me at Luigi's for dinner? That way you won't have to go home.)

(I don't think that's a good idea,) Chris said. (Mr. Okeefenokee could buy the whole store by supper-time.)

There wasn't any answer, and when Chris arrived at the bottom of the escalator, Hutchins was already gone. Mr. Okeefenokee was at the lingerie counter being handed a large white box. He stuffed it in a bulging shopping bag. Chris took him back over to the makeup counter. "I'm taking Mr. Okeefenokee home before he buys anything else," Chris told Charmaine. "He has no business being in a place like this."

"Gee, I know," Charmaine said, wiping lipstick off her bosom. "I told Hutchins you'd said he wasn't supposed to go shopping, but he said you wouldn't care if he bought a few souvenirs."

"He said what?" Chris said.

"I need twenty of the Prom Night Pink and fifteen of the Tokyo Rose," Charmaine said to the salesgirl. "Gee, you wouldn't believe how much makeup a person goes through. We ran into him up on the axis this morning, and—"

"What were you doing up on the axis?"

"Mr. Fenokee wanted to go see some of the other arrows guys, I guess he was homesick or something, and you said to let him do anything he wanted as long as it wasn't shopping, and so I took him up there and we ran into Hutchins."

"What was *he* doing on the axis?"

"I don't know. He was coming out of the NASA building. So anyway he suggested we all go shopping and ..."

"When was this?"

"Gee, I don't know. Around twelve." She turned back to the salesgirl. "I hope this pink is right. You know how lipstick always looks a different color when you try it on your hand than on your lips? Well, I have the same problem with my fans."

"Charmaine," Chris said carefully, "do you happen to know of any job openings at Luigi's?"

"Gee, no. That old guy who lives on the stairs asked me that this morning, and I had to tell him Luigi isn't even taking applications, he's had so many people come in.

"Can you bring Okee home?" Chris said rapidly. "I've got to ..." She couldn't even think of what excuse to give her. "I have to go," she repeated lamely! I have to follow Hutchins and see why he's been lying to me, she thought, and was infinitely glad Charmaine wasn't wearing a subvocalizer.

"Sure," Charmaine said, and asked to see the eyeliners.

Chris had no idea where Hutchins was going except that it wasn't Luigi's and that he would probably have to take the bullet to get there. If he had to wait for the bullet, she might have a chance of catching up with him and following him. She took off her subvocalizer and put her hand up to her ear, trying to hear any stray thought he might have about where he was going.

Maybe she should use the subvocalizer and just ask him, she thought. She could make up some excuse about needing to go with him to Luigi's. And he would make up an excuse about why she couldn't, the way he had made up the interview with Luigi. Anyway, it was too risky. She might pause, the way she had with Charmaine, unable to think of an excuse, and the truth would come tumbling out because she was upset. She might say, "I need to go with you because that's not where you're going and what were you doing up at the axis this morning and why did you lie to me?" She stuck the subvocalizer in her pocket.

He was still on the bullet platform, though just barely. He was getting on the bullet, and she saw with a sinking feeling that it wasn't the one for Shitamachi. She got on at the farthest door down from him, glad she was wearing flats. She huddled down behind a young woman with a headdress like the one Charmaine wore and watched him through the red-and-black-lacquered chopsticks until he got off.

He looked worried and almost as tired as he had the night before, and she would have felt sorry for him all over again, but his shirt collar was open, and she could see that he wasn't wearing his subvocalizer either.

The young woman got off when he did, and Chris followed her onto the platform and then ducked behind a pillar. She didn't need to see him to know where he was going. This was her stop. Maybe he's still shuttle-lagged, she thought, and he didn't get enough sleep last night with Okee snoring and Molly and Bets and everything, and he's come home to take a nap. But if that was true, why had he taken his subvocalizer off? And why had he lied about the job interview?

She gave him a ten-minute head start and then followed him into her apartment building. She opened the door quietly, afraid that Molly and Bets might have waylaid him with the Sugarplum Fairy, but he was nowhere to be seen, and the little girls were sitting halfway up the stairs talking to a redheaded man with a chip recorder.

They had changed out of their tutus and into navy-sailor dresses and white patent-leather shoes. "I've been in show biz since I was two," Bets was saying in her clear childish voice. "I'm four and a half now."

The old man in the baseball cap had fallen asleep playing solitaire. The cards were still on the step above him, and the young woman with the chopsticks in her hair was leaning over, picking them up. When she leaned over, she looked a lot like Charmaine.

"Hi," she said. She put the cards in a neat stack and laid them next to the old man. "I'm Omiko. I just moved in with Charmaine, and I was wondering if I could use your bathroom."

Chris glanced warily up at the door. "We blew a fuse," she said. "Mr. Hutchins is fixing it, but it'll probably be an hour. Why don't you ask Mr. Nagisha if you can use his bathroom?"

"Would you pleathe be quiet!" Molly said from the landing. "We're being interviewed."

Chris went on up the stairs past Molly and Bets. "I danthed in the road thyow of *Annie Two*," Molly said to the redheaded man and then dropped to a stage whisper as Chris went past. "That'th her!"

"The woman who rents the apartment?" he said.

"Yes," Bets said, and whispered something Chris couldn't hear.

In the hall Charmaine's lawyer was standing by his printer, watching it chug out copies of something. "Tell Okee I'll have these ready for him by tonight."

"All right," Chris said, not really listening to him. She inserted her key in the door, thinking, please let him be taking a nap. But he wasn't in the hammock or the hall, and the door to the bathroom was open. So was the door to Mr. Okeefenokee's room. A key was still in the lock. She pulled it out, put it in her pocket, and went in.

Mr. Okeefenokee had bought a bed. Though he must not have bought it today, Chris thought, because there wouldn't have been time to deliver it, let alone get it in here and pile all those things on it.

The bento-bako boxes were stacked on the foot of the bed next to a tangle of paper umbrellas and a set of encyclopedias. The rest of the bed was piled to the ceiling with boxes that appeared to be microwave ovens.

She came around the end of the bed into a narrow aisle formed by stacks of boxes that went clear to the ceiling. One of the boxes read, "One gross dental floss." Hutchins's bicycle was propped against the boxes. Next to it was a baby buggy with a Christmas tree in it. She couldn't see the piano anywhere, but there were four accordions sitting in the middle of the aisle.

Against the back wall was a trampoline propped on its side with six pairs of roller skates and a wind sock hanging from it. Hutchins was kneeling in front of the trampoline, digging in a box full of Styrofoam packing. He lifted out a lava lamp and looked at it.

"How did you get in here?" Chris said.

He laid the lava lamp back in the box and stood up. "Okee gave me his key," he said. "I thought you were going shopping."

"I thought you had a job interview at Luigi's," Chris said steadily.

"I did, but I called Luigi and told him I'd be a little late. Okee wanted me to check on whether he'd bought a Japanese-English dictionary or not. He couldn't remember. It's no wonder with all the junk he's got in here. At least we know what he wanted the high ceilings for. You don't see a dictionary anywhere, do you?"

"There aren't any job openings at Luigi's," Chris said. "Charmaine told me he's not even taking applications." He stopped pretending to look for the dictionary. "She also told me she saw you on the axis this morning."

"Chris," he said.

She backed away from him into the Christmas tree. The balls rattled. "You're a spy, aren't you?"

He looked genuinely astonished. "A spy? Of course I'm not a spy."

"Then what are you doing in here? And why did you lie to me about the job interview?"

"All right," he said. "I didn't have a job interview. I went up to NASA to get my subvocalizer checked. I wanted to know what made it tick."

"Because you're a spy," Chris said, still backing. "I'm calling Stewart."

"No!" he said, and then in a calmer and even more unsettling tone, "No. You aren't calling anybody. As soon as NASA works out a deal with the Japanese, they're taking Okee down to Houston. I've got maybe two days to figure out what he means by 'space program' before the NASA people start demanding that he deliver a space program he doesn't know anything about. I don't have time to mess with your idiot fiancé."

"He's not an idiot," Chris said, feeling behind her back for something she could hit him with. Her hand closed on a golf club.

"Oh, isn't he? He's engaged to you, for God's sake, and he doesn't even exercise his option. He puts you on hold and goes off and leaves you barefoot in the ginza and lets strange men sleep in your room. If I were engaged to you, I'd ... I'm not a spy. I'm a linguist."

Chris's grip tightened on the golf club. "I don't believe you," she said. "Stewart said the American linguistics team was at NASA, talking to the Eahrohhs' leaders."

"Okee's the leader."

She let go of the golf club, and the whole bag of clubs went over and spilled out. "But Stewart said he was just a passenger."

"The Eahrohhs told the Japanese linguistics team that Okee was *noru hito*. That means passenger. It also means proclaiming one. That means he's the one who's supposed to deliver the space program, only I don't think he's got one. Do you remember what you said to Okee when I moved in? You said, 'There isn't any space.' "

"Oh, no," Chris said. "And he only understands one meaning of a word."

"The first one he hears. But those idiots over at NASA think that if an alien who has known our language less than two weeks says space program, he has to mean astronauts, rockets, and zero-gravity bathrooms. It never even crosses their minds that 'space' also means a vacuum, that 'program' also means a series of musical numbers. Okee could be giving us radio, for God's sake."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do what I've been doing for the last two days—try to figure

out what the hell he means by 'space program.' He can't pronounce 'honeymoon' right. What if he can't pronounce 'space program' either? What if he's offering us a spice program and NASA's going to find itself with eighty tons of cinnamon? What if it's a spaze program, whatever the hell that is? Or a space pogrom? We've got to find out before he goes down to Houston. That's why I was in here. I thought maybe he was keeping some machine in here or secret plans or something, but all he's got is a swing set and a gross of Girl Scout flashlights. I don't know. Maybe he's a smug-gler."

"What about the subvocalizers?" Chris said. "You said you tried to find out what made them work."

"Nothing," Hutchins said. He pulled his out of his pocket and looked at it. "It's two pieces of metal with five millimeters of air between them, not even vacuum, just air." He put the subvocalizer back on. "All they could tell me over at NASA was that it does what it's supposed to." "It does what it's supposed to," Chris said. She thought about him taking it off so he could come over here without being followed, about talking to her at lunch with it. "Your giving me the subvocalizer, that was all a setup, wasn't it, so you could make sure I didn't tell Stewart about you?"

"I couldn't risk your moving me out. I needed to be where I could talk to Okee."

"Did you really come up on the shuttle yesterday, or was that part of the act, too?"

"It wasn't an act. I was supposed to come up with the rest of the team, but I'd heard how much trouble the Japanese team was having communicating with the Eahrohhs. I figured it was because everybody was trying so hard to get the names pronounced right and learn the language that it made the Eahrohhs nervous. So I thought if I could come up here incognito—"

"Like Spielberg," Chris said bitterly.

" 'Scuse me," Charmaine's cheery voice floated up from downstairs.

"They're home!" Hutchins said. "We can't let him find us in here!" He dashed back into the aisle of boxes. Chris scrambled to pick up the bento-bako boxes and stack them on the bed again. Hutchins jammed the golf clubs back into the bag and came to help her.

"I gotta be at work at nineteen o'clock, Mr. Fenokee," Charmaine said, sounding so close she could have been using a subvocalizer. "We better get all this stuff put away."

Chris and Hutchins dived out the door and slid the shoji screen shut. "Where's the key?" he said.

Chris pulled it out of her pocket and fumbled to lock the door. The lock seemed to take forever to read the key. She pulled it out.

"Can you get the door, please, Molly?" Charmaine said, there was a long pause, and the door of the apartment slid open. Chris put her hands behind her back.

" 'Scuse me," Charmaine said. She was carrying an unsteady stack of boxes and a shopping bag. Hutchins took half of the boxes for her. "Gee, thanks. Would you believe that rotten kid wouldn't even open the door for me? She said after tonight she was going to be a star and wouldn't have to do anything anybody told her." She bent over in her red strapless dress to put the rest of the boxes down.

"Where's Mr. Okeefenokee?" Chris said.

"He stopped to talk to my ex-boyfriend," she said. "Look, I gotta be at work in half an hour, and I don't even have my cherry blossoms on yet, so could you guys help put this stuff away?"

"Sure," Hutchins said. Charmaine grabbed a small sack out of the shopping bag and disappeared into the bathroom.

"Chris," Hutchins said. Chris pretended not to hear him. She put the key in her pocket and started for her room.

"Did you take our chip recorder?" Bets said indignantly from the door. She was wearing an aproned blue dress. Her yellow curls peeked out from under a turned-up Dutch cap. "It had 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips' on it." She stamped her wooden shoe. "You better give it back."

"I don't have it," Chris said, and amazingly, Bets turned around and stomped out. Chris heard her say loudly, "She says she doesn't have it, but I'll bet she took it. She's always doing mean things like that to us."

"Chris, listen," Hutchins said, putting out his hand to keep her from passing. "I should have told you the truth to begin with."

"Yes," she said. "You should have."

"The first thing I heard you say to Stewart was that you didn't have any room for the piano." He looked thoughtfully at Mr. Okeefenokee's door. "I didn't see the piano in there, did you?"

"No," Chris said. "So you figured if I didn't have room for a piano, I certainly wouldn't have room for you, and you were going to have to romance the landlady into giving you a place to sleep. So you fell asleep on

my shoulder and brought me Charmaine's shoes and fed me a tempura dog."

"Now you and Hutchins get married," Mr. Okeefenokee said, carrying two shopping bags full of boxes and Mitsukoshi sacks. His wispy orange-pink hair was flying out in all directions. "Go on hahnahmoon."

"Mr. Okeefenokee, I thought I explained . . .," Chris said.

"We're thyre you took it," Molly said, with her hands on the hips of her Dutch dress. "If you don't give it back, we're going to tell our interviewer all the thingth you did."

"Fine. Mr. Okeefenokee," she said again, but he had already disappeared through his door.

"I hope we didn't miss any bento-bako boxes," Hutchins whispered to her. The door slid open and Mr. Okeefenokee emerged, picked up the packages Charmaine had left on the floor, and disappeared into the room again.

"You'll be thorry you were mean to uth." Molly slid the apartment door shut with a crash, and Chris and Hutchins were abruptly alone.

"Thanks for not spilling the beans to Okee," Hutchins said.

"What would you have done if I'd tried? Bought me another tempura dog? Fallen asleep on my shoulder again? You're no better than Charmaine's prospective buyer, you know that? Talk about your real-estate deals."

"What do you think of my cherry blossoms?" Charmaine said, emerging from the bathroom with the red dress over her arm. "Do you think that pink's too dark?" She peered over her shoulder. "It always looks different on your—"

"It looks fine," Chris said.

"Omiko said to tell you guys to come to the show tonight, and she'll see that Mr. Fenokee catches her orbiting colonies' tassels," she said, and clattered out. Chris watched her red high heels.

(Chris, listen, I wasn't romancing you for a place to sleep,) Hutchins said in her ear. (I was—)

She turned around furiously, yanked the receiver off her ear, and handed it to him. "It doesn't matter," she said, fishing her subvocalizer out of her pocket and putting it in his outstretched hand. "You can stay. I won't tell Mr. Okeefenokee who you are. Just leave me alone." She pulled the door of her apartment open. "I'll go ask Charmaine if I can bunk with

her tonight."

"You don't have to do that," Hutchins said, looking down at the subvocalizer in his hand. "I'll sleep in the bathroom," but she went on out anyway, slamming shut the sliding door with almost as much force as Molly.

Charmaine had already left. She tried to catch her, brushing past Molly and Bets, who stopped in the middle of singing "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" to glare at her from the landing, and practically stepping on the old man in the baseball cap, who was, amazingly, sleeping through it, but by the time she got to the door, Charmaine had already disappeared into the crowd.

She came back up the stairs. Molly and Bets stopped for her again, folding their arms and tapping their wooden shoes impatiently, and then started up again as soon as she was off the landing, singing their own accompaniment in piping, slightly flat voices. Hutchins was at the end of the hall, talking earnestly to Charmaine's lawyer and frowning.

Chris slid her door open. "Why did you refuse to sublet your apartment to Molly and Bets?" the redheaded man said. He stuck a chip-cam in her face. She tried to brush past him. "So you admit you refused to share your apartment with two innocent tykes and then blatantly rented half of it to—"

She got the door shut with some difficulty since his foot was wedged in it, went in the living room and shut and locked that door, too, and then leaned against it, feeling as tired as if she had just come up on the shuttle.

Chris spent the evening huddled on the couch under a blanket.

"I brought you some supper," Hutchins called through the door about nineteen o'clock. "No tempura dogs. I'll leave it outside the door."

Chris opened the door. "I've changed my mind," she said, not looking at him. "I'm sleeping in here. You can sleep with Charmaine," and then was afraid he would say, "I don't want to sleep with Charmaine. I want to sleep with you," but he only said, "I'll sleep in the hall," and handed her a pastrami sandwich and a packet of milk.

He knocked again at twenty-thirty and called out, "Molly and Bets's interview is on. Mr. Nagisha's got his TV set up on the landing. The little girls told me to tell you because, and I quote, 'Thith ith what thye getth for thtealing our recorder.' I thought maybe you might want to come see

what revenge they've cooked up."

"No, thank you."

"Okay," he said, and knocked again immediately.

"Go away," Chris said.

"You and Hutchins get married tonight," Mr. Okeefenokee said. "I must talk to you about closing."

She opened the door. Mr. Okeefenokee came in, wearing his solemn expression. "Why are you not wearing your *thuwevrherrnghladdis*?"

Chris put her hand up to her throat. "It hurt to wear it," she said. "Charmaine said to ask you if you'd like to go see the show at Luigi's tonight."

"I cannot go. You and Hutchins get married tonight."

"We can't get married, Mr. Okeefenokee," Chris said. "I'm engaged to Stewart, and even if I weren't, Hutchins doesn't want to marry me. He just wanted a place to stay."

"You like my wife," he said, continuing to look at her solemnly, the lines above his nose deepening.

"I thought Omiko reminded you of your wife."

"Omiko sake cups like wife," he said, reverting to pidgin. His cheek knobs were bright orange. "But you like her, most."

"You miss your wife, don't you?" Chris said, and then remembered that he wouldn't understand that meaning of "miss." "It makes you sad that she is far away."

"Far away," he said, nodding and smiling vigorously.

"Far away," she said, walking to the end of the hall.

"Far away." She came back and stood in front of him.

"Close."

"Closing," he said, and his face smoothed out into his expression of understanding. "Hahnahmoon. I bought bed. Put on subvocalizer. You and Hutchins get married after interview." He went bustling out, his wispy hair trailing behind him, like sunset clouds.

"I don't think so," Chris thought sadly, sliding the door shut. I'm engaged to Stewart and Hutchins just wanted a place to stay. Mr. Okeefenokee hadn't understood her when she'd said that. "I bought bed," he'd said, and he hadn't understood "close" either. Or "far away." She had

a sudden terrible vision of Stewart trying to explain what a space program was. "Space program," she could hear him saying, "go far way," and Mr. Okeefenokee would nod and smile vigorously.

I'd better tell Hutchins about "far away," she thought. She went out in the hall to look for him. He wasn't on the stairs, but everybody else was, including Mr. Nagisha's evicted cousins. They were watching Molly and Bets's holographic images in front of the TV. Molly and Bets, still in costume, were dancing alongside their three-dimensional images, and both Mollys were bawling "Tiptoe Through the Tulipth."

Chris went back inside and went to bed, locking her apartment door but leaving the door of her room slightly open so she could hear Hutchins when he came back. If he comes back, she thought sadly. After a while she heard someone come in, and got up, but it was only Mr. Okeefenokee. He disappeared into his room and began to snore almost before he had the shoji screen shut.

"Chris, wake up," Hutchins said in her ear, and at first she thought he was using the subvocalizer.

"I took it off," she said sleepily, and opened her eyes. He was squatting beside the couch, his hand on her shoulder. He had on jeans and no shirt. "What time is it?" she said, reaching for the light. "And what are you doing in here?"

"Twenty-one o'clock," he whispered. "Don't turn on the light. You'll wake Butch and Sundance." He pointed at the floor, where Molly and Bets were curled up in the pink blanket. "Where's the key to Okee's room? I can't get him to open the door."

"How did *they* get in here?" she said, rummaging through her clothes at the end of the couch.

"I don't know. Probably Molly had another key."

She found the key and handed it to him. "*Another* key?"

"This is Molly's key, too. I threatened to tell her redheaded interviewer that she was really eleven if she didn't give it to me." He stepped over Molly and Bets.

Chris hunted for her robe for nearly a full minute before she realized she was hearing the sound of Mr. Okeefenokee's snoring. "He's asleep," she said, but Hutchins was already out in the hall. She went after him. "He's asleep."

"Remember how he said we woke him up with our talking? Well, I've been shouting through the door at him for the last fifteen minutes. I've done everything short of kicking in his shoji screen." He fitted the key in the door and waited for it to be read. "Something's wrong." He slid the screen open. "Okee? Are you in here?"

The snoring continued. Chris followed him inside and slid the door shut behind her. Hutchins was staring at the bed. Mr. Okeefenokee had cleared off the bento-bako boxes and the microwave ovens and made up the bed with red-and-green-patterned sheets. There was a stack of boxes on the foot of the bed with a piece of paper and a deck of playing cards on top of it. Molly's chip recorder was lying on the pillow.

"Charmaine must have picked out the sheets," Chris said. "There are fans on them."

Hutchins picked up the recorder and hit a button. The snoring stopped. "He's gone," Hutchins said.

"Gone where? And how did he get out? I thought you were sleeping in the hall."

"I didn't come in until after he was asleep." He stopped and corrected himself. "Until I thought he was asleep. I was down in Mr. Nagisha's apartment trying to get Charmaine's boyfriend to tell me what Okee'd been talking to him about, while Okee and everybody else were watching Sacco and Vanzetti tiptoe through the tulips on TV. Charmaine's lawyer kept pleading client confidentiality until the interview was over, and when I came back up here, I could hear Okee snoring." He tapped the recorder on his hand. "He must have hidden in the hall till I came in and then sneaked out."

Chris picked up the piece of paper and looked at it. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he'd found out I'd been lying to him. We probably missed one of the bento-bako boxes or Molly and Bets told him I'd been in here or something. Damn it, coming up here incognito was a truly inspired idea! If I knew where Spielberg was, I'd tell him to come out of hiding before he hurts somebody! Okee's probably halfway back to Eahrohhsani by now!"

"He didn't go home," Chris said. She handed him the list. "He's probably down at Luigi's trying to catch one of Omiko's tassels." She pointed to the middle of the paper. "This is number three: 'Time alone. Talk.' "

He read the list aloud. " 'Be friends, talk, time alone, neck, bed, close,

honeymoon.' What is this?"

"It's his list. 'You and Hutchins get married.' I told him people have to have a chance to be alone to talk before they got married." She picked up the deck of cards and looked at it.

"And I said, 'Neck.' "

"Which is number four." There weren't any black cards in the deck. She fanned them out to look at them.

There weren't any hearts either. "You notice those aren't checked off yet. He's trying to give us some time alone."

Hutchins reached for one of the boxes. He took the lid off and held up a black lace nightgown. "It looks like he thought of everything."

"Yeah," she said, spreading out the cards so he could see them. "Charmaine told him diamonds are a girl's best friend."

"So he got you diamonds," he said. He tossed the list on the bed. "God only knows what he thinks a closing is. Or a hahnahmoon."

"Or a space program. We'd better go look for him. Maybe if I asked him about his space program, he'd explain it to me."

"In a minute," he said. He put the nightgown back in the box. "Okee wanted us to talk alone. Your prospective buyer said to do anything Okee wanted."

She was suddenly very aware of her skimpy nightshirt and Hutchins's bare chest. "You leave Stewart out of this."

"I'd be glad to. The hell with what Stewart says. The hell with what Okee wants. I want to talk to you alone."

Chris backed away from him, knocking over the bento-bako boxes again. "I don't want to talk to you," she said unsteadily.

"Fine. Don't say anything. I'll do the talking. I didn't 'romance' you, as you call it, because I needed a place to stay. And I didn't pretend to be shuttle-lagged. I was shuttle-lagged, damn it, and all I could think of was keeping close to Okee." He came around the bed, ignoring the scattered bento-bako boxes. "It took about one good look at you to make me realize I should tell you the truth, but every time I tried, we were interrupted by some damned vaudeville act."

Chris kept backing down the narrow aisle between boxes, which was even narrower now that the microwaves were stacked on one side. "And that's why you kept interrupting my lunch with Stewart?" she said, and crashed into the Christmas tree. Two ornaments hit the floor and

bounced. "Because you were trying to tell the truth?"

"I was trying to keep you from marrying somebody who only wants your apartment," he shouted. "He doesn't care about you! He pawns some alien off on you without even knowing if he's friendly. What if it is a space pogrom and Okee'd decided to start with you? What if he'd decided to take you home to Eahrohhsani or marry you off to someone else?"

"He did," Chris said.

"And Stewart doesn't know about it, right? No, of course not. Because he's too busy telling you to do whatever Okee wants. So, fine, let's get married!"

There was nowhere left to back. Another ornament hit the floor and rolled, and tinsel shimmered onto Chris's hair and shoulders. "Married?" she said.

"Sure. Why not?" he shouted. "Okee's got everything we need right here: champagne, diamonds, Stewart's permission." He waved his arm at the room. "I'll bet if we dug through this mess, Okee's even got a justice of the peace in here someplace."

Hutchins was very close, and since they were both barefoot, he loomed over her. "I thought you didn't want to get married," Chris said unsteadily.

He looked at her for a long, silent minute. Then he reached forward and plucked a piece of tinsel out of her hair. "I changed my mind," he said.

The shoji screen slid open. "I know they're in here," Molly said. "I heard them thyouting."

"Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh!" Stewart called. "Chris! Where are you?" He appeared at the end of the hall. "Where's Mr. Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh?" he said hurriedly, giving Hutchins and Chris the barest of glances. "We need him up at NASA immediately."

"He's not here, Stewart," Chris said.

"Obviouthly," Molly said, her arms folded across her chest.

"Well, where is he, Chris?" Stewart said impatiently.

"I don't know," Chris said, shaking tinsel out of her hair.

"What do you mean, you don't know? This is an emergency. The linguistics team just discovered that Ohghhifoehnnahigrhee's the leader of the Eahrohhs. If they find out up at NASA that he's missing—"

"He's not missing," Hutchins said, stepping forward. "Pete Hutchins, Navy Intelligence Linguistics Unit."

"This is just a little misunderstanding," Stewart said, looking daggers at Chris. "My fiancée doesn't really mean he's missing."

"I know," Hutchins said. "I've had Okee under observation for the last two days."

"That'th not all he'th had under obthervation," Molly said, looking at Chris's bare feet.

"Right now he's at Luigi's Tempura Pizzeria watching the *sutorippu*," Hutchins went on imperturbably. Stewart took out a pad and pencil and began scribbling. "It's down in Shitamachi. On Osaka Street."

"Osaka Street," Stewart said. "I'll call NASA and have him picked up immediately." He started out to the hall.

"Picked up?" Chris said, following him.

"He'th not really there at all," Molly said. "They jutht want you to leave tho they can have theckth."

"Theckth?" Stewart said.

"Too much noise," Mr. Okeefenokee said. He appeared at the end of the aisle, his orange-pink hair mashed down on one side as if he'd been lying on it. "Can't sleep."

"Mr. Okeefenokee, what are you doing here?" Chris said.

"Thee?" Molly said. "I told you he wathn't at Luigi'th."

Mr. Okeefenokee bent over and picked up one of the ornaments and hung it back on the tree. "Too much noise. Fighting. Sleep in back." He gestured in the direction of the back wall, where the trampoline and the roller skates were.

Chris said, "But what about the recorder you—"

"Left a message on saying you were going to Luigi's?" Hutchins interrupted smoothly. "Did you leave it because you didn't want to be disturbed?"

"Message," Mr. Okeefenokee said, smiling and nodding.

"You need to accompany me up to NASA immediately," Stewart said. "You are needed for the negotiations on the space program."

"Space program," he said, his head bobbing even more vigorously. "Closing."

"Hutchins, you'd better come with us to help translate," Stewart said. "I'll call NASA and let them know we're on our way." He went out into the

hall to the phone.

Molly picked up the cards on the bed and looked at them. "Doeth that old man know you thtole hith cardth?" she asked Okee. Mr. Okeefenokee beamed at her.

Hutchins pulled Chris back into the aisle. "Where's your subvocalizer?" he said softly.

"I gave it to you. Don't you have it?"

"I gave it to Okee. I asked him to try to talk you into wearing it again."

Chris frowned. "He asked me why I wasn't wearing it and told me to put it on, but he didn't give it back to me."

"Great," Hutchins said. "Now he doesn't understand the word 'give' either, so how can he give us a space program?" He gripped her arms. "Look, I can't let Okee go up to NASA by himself. I've got to go with him."

"I know," Chris said.

"If you had your subvocalizer, you could listen in on what's happening, but . . . I'll call you as soon as I can, okay?" He looked at her. "Maybe it's just as well you don't have it on. I might subvocalize what I'm thinking."

"I knew you thtole my recorder," Molly said. She brandished it at Chris. "Wait till I tell Bets about thith." She stomped out.

"What did you say to upset that poor, dear child?" Stewart said. "I got through to NASA. I told them we were on our way. Perhaps you should get dressed, Mr. Hutchins."

"Yeah," Hutchins said. He went out into the hall. Mr. Okeefenokee followed him.

"I think I should go with you, Stewart," Chris said. "Mr. Okeefenokee doesn't understand English very well, and I couldn't ..."

"I hardly think you'd have anything to contribute to the space-program negotiations when you haven't even bothered to learn to pronounce his name correctly," Stewart said.

"How do you know it's a space program?"

"What?"

"I said, how do you know *Mr. Okeefenokee*," she said, saying his name with emphasis, "is talking about the same kind of space program you are? What if he's talking about something else?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, walking around the bed to look at the

microwave boxes. "What else could he possibly be talking about?"

A spice program, Chris thought. A space pogrom. Radio. "Aren't you going to ask me what I was doing here in my nightgown with Pete Hutchins?"

Stewart bent over to look to the accordions. "What's all this stuff doing in here?"

"You told me to do whatever Mr. Okeefenokee wanted. He wanted to buy things."

"I meant anything within reason," he said, picking up one of the bento-bako boxes. "How in heaven's name did he expect to get all this home with him?"

"How *did* he expect to get all this home?" Hutchins said, frowning. He had put on his shirt and a tweed jacket.

"It wath right there!" Molly said, pointing at the bed. "In plain thight."

"She stole it just like she stole our curling iron," Bets said. "That's what I told the interviewer." She struck a pose. "I said, 'She steals things and she won't let us use her phone or her bathroom and . . .'"

"Out," Chris said. She took hold of the pink ribbons on Bets's nightgown and used them to propel her out the door.

"You're just trying to get rid of us so you can be alone with Hutchins, but we fixed you! We—" Chris slid the door shut.

"What was all that about?" Stewart said. "You didn't actually steal that darling tot's recorder, did you?"

"Molly's practicing her lines for a screen test," Hutchins said. "A remake of *The Bad Seed*. Okee, are you ready to go up to NASA?" Okee nodded and smiled. Hutchins herded him downstairs.

"I really think I should go with you, Stewart," Chris said.

He started down the stairs. "It's not necessary," he said, stepping over the old man, who was laying out a hand of solitaire. "You stay here and help the kiddies rehearse for their screen test. Besides, you're not even dressed," he said, and then turned and looked back up at her in surprise.

"Call me," Chris said, and looked over his head at Hutchins standing by the door. "Please."

"I doubt if we'll be able to," Stewart said crisply from the foot of the stairs. "I should imagine we'll be in negotiations all night."

They went out. Chris hesitated a moment and then started to run back

up the stairs to get dressed so she could go with them.

"Wait," Mr. Nagisha said from the door of his apartment. "I have something to give you." She came back down the stairs, stepping carefully over the laid-out cards, and he handed her a folded paper.

"What is it?" Chris said.

"An eviction notice. You are in violation of your lease."

"I am not," she said, unfolding the paper. "How am I in violation?"

"Subletting without landlord's permission to a person not a relative and withholding of rent."

"What? You mean Mr. Okeefenokee? I didn't sublet my apartment to him. NASA requisitioned it, and Stewart paid you. I saw him. Nobody withheld any rent, and if you're talking about Mr. Hutchins, Mr. Okeefenokee was the one who asked him to stay with him. If you think he should be paying rent, too, you'll have to talk to NASA."

"I have evidence. You must be out by seven o'clock tomorrow morning. I have rented your apartment to other tenants."

"What kind of evidence?"

He flourished a chip at her, and for a minute Chris thought it was the missing recording of "Tiptoe Through the Tulips," but Mr. Nagisha walked past the old man, stepping squarely on the cards, and up to the landing, where he stuck the chip into the TV.

The title, "Orphans of the Stairs" appeared in front of the screen followed by a shot of the apartment building. A voice-over, which sounded suspiciously like the redheaded interviewer, said, "Inside this building is one of the apartments NASA has requisitioned so the aliens will have a place to live. But what about all those people on Sony who *don't* have a place to live? Today I met two of them." The interviewer appeared on the landing with

Molly and Bets in their navy-sailor dresses. They curtsied as he introduced them, all their dimples showing.

Mr. Nagisha fast-forwarded and then stopped. The interviewer said, "Let's see these budding performers in action," and Molly and Bets clomped out in their wooden shoes. Mr. Nagisha fast-forwarded it before they could get started on "Tiptoe Through the Tulips." He stopped it.

"Spielberg, are you out there?" the interview said. "All these two talented tots ask is a chance to break into show biz."

He hit the fast-forward button, and when he stopped the chip again,

Molly was saying, "Thyee and the alien have thith whole apartment, but thyee won't let uth use the bathroom or the phone or anything, even if we're eckthpecting an important call from our agent."

"And then last night she kicked us out of her room," Bets said, stepping neatly in front of Molly. "We just wanted to sleep on the floor." She began a pretty pout and then seemed to realize that if she stopped talking, Molly would jump in, and added hastily, "I think she wanted us out of there so she could be alone with him."

"Who?" the interviewer said, his ears perking up. "The alien?"

"Of courth not," Molly said, putting her arm up so it was in front of Bets's face. "Mr. Negeethya doethn't know it, but thyee rented her apartment to thith other guy."

"His name's Hutchins," Bets said, wrestling Molly's arm down to where she could see over it. "We saw him give her the rent. It was a whole bunch of yen. She's not supposed to rent to anybody without telling Mr. Nagisha."

"He wasn't paying me rent," Chris said. "He took some money out of my purse to pay for breakfast. He was giving me my change."

The scene in front of the TV cut suddenly to Chris trying to shut the door on the interviewer's foot. "The occupant of the apartment, Ms. Christine Arthur, was unavailable for comment," the interviewer said.

"I did not rent my room to Mr. Hutchins," Chris said. "Mr. Okeefenokee asked him to stay. He doesn't understand English very well, and he thought 'room' meant any available space and ..."

"Evidence," Mr. Nagisha said.

"Look, I'm sure we can clear this whole thing up if you'll just let me call Stewart."

The interviewer said, peering over Molly's and Bets's simpering faces, "When this reporter checked with NASA, they had no record of having requisitioned Ms. Arthur's apartment, which raises further questions about the alleged alien and Ms. Arthur's refusal to sublet to . . ." Mr. Nagisha popped the chip out of the TV and stepped over the old man in the baseball cap. "Seven o'clock," he said, and went into his apartment and shut the door.

"Molly and Bets are mad at me because they think I stole their chip recorder," Chris shouted at the door. "They told me they'd get even."

The door stayed shut. The old man in the baseball cap looked up blankly

and then went back to laying out his cards. He'll never get anywhere without the diamonds, Chris thought irrelevantly, and tore back upstairs, clutching the eviction notice, and tried to call Stewart.

The blond woman who was always laying papers on Stewart's desk for him to sign told her that he couldn't come to the phone. "Have him call me as soon as you can," Chris told her. "This is an emergency!"

She got dressed and tried again. This time the call wouldn't go through. She stared at the screen for a while and then grabbed the eviction notice and her purse and ran downstairs. At the bottom of the steps she collided with Charmaine's lawyer. He was swinging a tassel idly in one hand and whistling.

"Hey!" he said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Mr. Nagisha's having me evicted because of Hutchins. I've got to go find him."

"And leave your apartment? If you leave, you're liable to find your furniture out on the stairs when you get back." He looked at the eviction notice. "You go back upstairs and sit tight. I'll go try to talk Mr. Nagisha out of this. If it doesn't work, I'll go find Hutchins for you. Go on. Mr. Nagisha's probably already changing the locks." Chris tore back upstairs, hopelessly scattering the old man's cards. "I'm sorry," she said breathlessly. "You wouldn't have won anyway. Your diamonds are in Mr. Okeefenokee's room."

The locks hadn't been changed, but the door was standing open. Molly and Bets were in the living room, arranging their dolls on the couch.

"I get the bedroom," Molly said. "You can thleep in the hammock."

"I get the bedroom," Bets said. "Out," Chris said. Both of the little girls turned to look at her in surprise.

"Didn't Mr. Nagisha talk to you?" Bets said. "This isn't your apartment anymore. It's ours."

"Either you get out or I'm knocking those pearly little front teeth of yours down your throats, and then we'll see how many parts you get."

"You wouldn't dare," Bets said, but she grabbed one of her dolls by the arm and clutched two others to her stomach. Molly scooped up the rest of them, and they trooped out. "We're moving in at theven o'clock and you'd better be out of here by then," Molly said.

Chris locked the door and shoved a chair against it. She tried Stewart again, and then the operator, but she still couldn't get through.

Charmaine's lawyer came up to tell her he hadn't gotten anywhere with Mr. Nagisha. He didn't sound particularly worried, but he said he was going up to NASA to look for Hutchins and Okee. "You don't have to barricade yourself in," he said, pointing at the chair. "Just don't leave. And keep trying to get in touch with Hutchins from this end."

"I will," she promised, trying to think where Mr. Okeefenokee might have put her subvocalizer. As soon as Charmaine's lawyer was gone, she went into Mr. Okeefenokee's room to look for it. She looked through the bento-bako boxes and under the bed and in the baby buggy, and then started in on the endless stacks of boxes. I wonder how he planned on getting all this home, she thought, sticking her hand inside the roller skates.

The phone rang. It was Hutchins. "I've only got a minute," he said rapidly. "Have you found the subvocalizer yet? Okee doesn't have it. They did a metals search on him when we came in. I asked him where he put it, and he said, and I quote, 'You put on. Closing. Hahnahmoon.' Do you realize what that means? There isn't any space program. He hasn't understood a word we've been saying."

"Pete, you've got to come back right away," she said to the suddenly blank screen. "I'm being evicted." She prodded the *reinstate* button until an operator came onscreen. "I was just cut off," she said, and gave her Stewart's number. This time the phone rang. And went on ringing. Chris let it ring twenty-eight times and then went back into the bedroom and sat down on the bed.

She picked up the list Mr. Okeefenokee had written. He had checked off "time alone" and "closing" and crossed off "neck." The only thing left on the list was "hahnahmoon," which he had spelled the way he pronounced it.

"Honeymoon," Chris said out loud. "I wonder what he thinks that means." She picked up the old man's diamonds and took them out to him, but he was asleep again, stretched out across the stairs, his baseball cap in his hands. Chris sat down on the step above him and shuffled the diamonds into his deck. The phone rang.

It was Stewart. "I'm being evicted," Chris said before they could be cut off.

"Evicted?" he said, looking horrified. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. Mr. Nagisha claims I withheld rent from him."

"That's ridiculous," Stewart said. "I paid him myself when

Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh moved in."

"He's not talking about Mr. Okeefenokee. He's talking about Hutchins. You've got to tell him to come back here so he can explain to Mr. Nagisha that he wasn't paying me rent, he was just giving me back my change from breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Stewart said. "How long has Hutchins been over there?"

"Two days. He's got to come explain that Mr. Okeefenokee was the one who asked him to stay. And you've got to bring over the requisition forms that show my apartment was requisitioned by NASA."

"I'll be right over," he said hurriedly.

"Bring Hutchins with you. And Mr. Okeefenokee."

"I can't do that," he said.

"I know they're in negotiations, but they've got to talk to Mr. Nagisha. What if I have Mr. Nagisha come up here and they can talk to him on the phone?"

"That won't work either."

"Why not?"

"They're on their way down to Houston. They left on the shuttle half an hour ago."

" 'Scuse me," Charmaine said, and came into the living room, wearing her pink smock and carrying the red paper umbrella Mr. Okeefenokee had given her. She switched on the light. "I didn't knock 'cause I thought you might be asleep. Did you know Molly's got a key to your apartment?"

Chris nodded numbly. "Hutchins is gone."

"Yeah, I know," she said. She sat down on the couch beside Chris. "How long have you been sitting here in the dark?"

"I don't know. What time is it?"

"Three o'clock."

"They're probably in Houston by now. I hope Hutchins didn't get shuttle lag."

"You look pretty lagged yourself. Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"I can't. I'm being evicted."

"Yeah, I know that, too. My lawyer stopped by Luigi's to tell me what

had happened. The way I figure it, your prospective buyer figured he better get rid of Hutchins before he made you a better offer." She put her arm around Chris. "Don't worry about your apartment. My lawyer say's he's got a plan to fight the eviction. He wouldn't tell me what it was, but he said not to worry, he wouldn't let those brats get your apartment, and I believe him. He knows practically everything there is to know when it comes to real-estate deals."

There was a knock on the door. Charmaine went to answer it and came back in with her lawyer and Stewart.

"Well, you've gotten yourself in a nice mess, Chris," Stewart said. "Mr. Nagisha showed us the chip. How could you jeopardize your apartment by letting some stranger move in?"

"You told me to do whatever Mr. Okeefenokee wanted. He wanted Hutchins to move in. Did you show him the NASA requisition form?"

"There isn't one," Charmaine's lawyer said, looking happier than Stewart. "And we don't have a prayer of taking this to court when he's got two cute kids to testify for him. I guess we'll have to go with my plan after all."

"What do you mean there isn't one?" Chris said.

"I was afraid there'd be a great deal of red tape," Stewart said, "getting you cleared and so on ..."

"NASA requisitioned dozens of people's apartments. None of them had any trouble getting cleared. You told NASA he was staying with you, didn't you? So you'd get the compensation?"

"It doesn't really matter which apartment was requisitioned, since we're getting married."

"It matters to me," Chris said. "I'm being evicted."

"No, you're not," Charmaine's lawyer said cheerfully. "We've come up with a plan. All you have to do is marry Hutchins. Then he doesn't have to pay rent because he's a relative."

"I can't," Chris said. "He's in Houston."

"He doesn't have to be here," Stewart said. "We can do a beam-up call, take the vows over the phone, transmit the papers and have them signed on both ends. I've cleared it with NASA."

"I don't understand," Chris said bewilderedly. "How will getting married now help? We weren't married when he stayed here."

"Sony law allows occupancy before closing," Charmaine's lawyer said,

looking positively jovial.

"What do you say?"

"It's the only way we can save your apartment," Stewart said. "You're not really getting married. There's an automatic buyer-backout clause if the deal isn't closed in twenty-four hours, which of course it won't be. You'll have your apartment back, and with the requisition money I get from NASA we'll be able to buy that apartment next door to Mother's and turn this into a rental."

"What if Mr. Nagisha finds out and tries to stop it?"

"He won't," Charmaine's lawyer said. "Omiko sent him down to Luigi's for the *sutorippu*, and I paid Molly and Bets off."

"I want to talk to Hutchins."

"You can talk to him during the wedding," Stewart said, looking relieved. "I'll call NASA."

"Omiko's out getting a Shinto priest," Charmaine's lawyer beamed. "I'll go get the marriage contracts drawn up. We'll have you married in nothing flat." They both hurried out.

"Gee, this is so exciting," Charmaine said. "I've got a veil from the wedding number you can borrow. I'd loan you the wedding dress to go with it, only it's not a dress exactly."

Charmaine's lawyer came back in with the marriage contracts and one of Mr. Nagisha's evicted cousins. "He's a notary," her lawyer said, and Mr. Nagisha's cousin pulled a seal out of his pocket.

"It'll serve him right," he said. "All we were doing was stir-frying a little blowfish."

"You can sign these now, and then we'll transmit them over the phone. It's a simple death-do-you-part deed, no lease option, no appraisal. Just a minute. I've got to get another witness."

He came back in with the old man in the baseball cap. Chris signed the copies and then watched carefully as the old man countersigned them, but his signature was completely illegible. Charmaine finished witnessing the contracts and scurried out to get the veil.

Omiko came in with the Shinto priest. Molly and Bets were right behind her, wearing frilly lavender dresses and large lavender bows in their hair. Molly was carrying a basket of cherry-blossom petals.

"We're going to be in your wedding," Bets said. "Molly's the flower girl, and I get to be your maid of honor."

"Isn't that sweet?" Stewart said, patting Molly on the head. Chris saw with satisfaction that he was mashing her lavender hair bows. "Someday we'll have two sweet little girls just like these two."

"Over my dead body," Chris said.

"Here's your bouquet," Charmaine said. She had changed back into her strapless red dress. She shoved a bouquet of white silk flowers and ribbons into Chris's hands. "It's really a pastie," she said, putting the veil on Chris's head, "so I stuck it on one of Mr. Okeefenokee's flashlights."

"The call's coming through," Charmaine's lawyer said from the hall.

"I want to talk to Hutchins first," Chris said.

"I really don't see why that's necessary," Stewart said. "He's already agreed to marry you."

"I'm not going through with this unless I have a chance to talk to him."

"It's almost four o'clock. We've got to do this in the next half hour."

"Fine," Chris said, taking off her veil. "Tell Molly and Bets they can have the apartment. I'll move in with Charmaine and Omiko."

"And lose the apartment!" Stewart said, looking aghast. "I mean, go ahead and talk to him if you have to, but make it quick. If we don't finish this up within the next fifteen minutes, we'll have to wait for satellite relay."

Charmaine's lawyer said, "It'll be a minute or so," and went into the living room and shut the door. Chris locked it and then went over to the screen. It brightened and Hutchins's image appeared in front of the screen. He was wearing the clothes he'd left the apartment in, and he looked tired and drawn.

"Are you all right?" Chris said.

"Yeah," he said, frowning. "They started interrogating Okee as soon as we got here, but they're not getting anywhere. He's clammed up completely." He rubbed his hand across his forehead tiredly.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Chris said. "Marry me, I mean. It's nothing but a real-estate deal."

"It'll make Stewart happy."

"Yeah," Chris said ruefully. "And Mr. Okeefenokee. He kept saying we were going to get married tonight, and here we are."

"Yeah," Hutchins said thoughtfully. "How come they were able to put this wedding together so fast? I thought Sony marriage contracts were

really complicated."

"I don't know. Charmaine's lawyer was the one who came up with the idea."

"Charmaine's lawyer, huh? Maybe Okee's smarter than we thought."

"We really can't wait any longer," Stewart said, opening the door. "We've got to start the ceremony."

He came over to the screen and pressed the *transmit* button. Hutchins's image disappeared, and Charmaine's lawyer held each page of the contract up to the screen by the corners for a full thirty seconds. Stewart pushed another button, and a flat-screen image of Hutchins appeared. He and two men in uniform signed and then held up the copies of the pages the same way.

"Gee, this is so exciting," Charmaine said. She put the veil over Chris's head again and then dashed into the bathroom to get a box of Kleenex, which she passed out to Omiko, the old man in the baseball cap, and Mr. Nagisha's cousin.

"I heard she had to get married," Bets said to the old man in a stage whisper.

Molly said, "Would you please get out of the way?" and began throwing cherry-blossom petals on everyone.

Charmaine's lawyer said, "Okay," and Hutchins's holographic image appeared in front of the screen. He was still holding the copies of the contract.

"Join hands," the Shinto priest said. Hutchins transferred the contracts to his left hand and held out his right. Chris put her hand carefully where the image of his hand was. He closed his hand around her fingers but she couldn't feel anything.

The priest made a speech in Japanese and then said, "Christine Arthur, do you understand the terms of the contract?"

"I do," Chris said.

"Peter Hutchins, do you under—"

"I do," he said.

"This contract has been duly signed and witnessed. I declare it legally binding."

"Good," Hutchins said. "Now do I get to kiss the bride?" He bent over her.

Stewart hit the *hang-up* button, and Hutchins's image disappeared. "Good. I'm glad that's over," he said happily. He turned to Charmaine's lawyer. "Now we can take these down to Mr. Nagisha."

"In a minute," the lawyer said. He turned to Charmaine. "I'll be back in a few minutes, and then I want to talk to you." She followed him and Stewart out onto the landing.

Chris was still watching the screen. "Ahem," the old man in the baseball cap said, and Chris turned around, but he was talking to Bets. "I've been watching you for several days. I'm directing a new movie and I'd like to cast you in it."

"You don't want her," Molly said. "Thyee dyeth her hair."

"I do not," Bets said, putting a defensive hand up to her curls. "My blond hair is natural, which is more than I can say for your lisp."

"My lisp is not phony!" Molly shouted, and grabbed a handful of yellow curls.

"I want both of you," he said, separating them. "You're perfect for the parts. I've got the contracts in my office downtown."

"I want my name first on the credits," Bets said.

"I want star billing above the title," Molly said.

He herded them out. They nearly collided with Charmaine.

"'Scuse me," Charmaine said. "What was that all about?"

"That was Spielberg," Chris said. "He just offered Molly and Bets the lead in his new movie."

"Who? The old guy on the stairs? You're kidding. You'd think he'd know better after living here a whole week." She looked at Chris. "Are you all right?"

"No," Chris said.

"I've got an idea. Why don't we all go down to Luigi's for the early show? Kind of a wedding breakfast."

"Chris has got to stay here until the buyer-beware clause expires," Stewart said.

"What do you think she's gonna do?" Charmaine said. "Jump off Sony and parachute down to earth?"

"Chris has come dangerously close to losing her apartment once today. I don't want anything to interfere with that annulment clause. The safest

thing is for her to spend the next twenty-four hours in her apartment."

"Okay, we'll bring the wedding breakfast here. I'll call Luigi and have him deliver some teriyaki ham and eggs and have Omiko bring the girls over and ..."

"Can I speak to you?" Charmaine's lawyer said, taking hold of her hand and practically yanking her out of the living room.

"I'm not going to let you jeopardize your apartment a second time," Stewart said. He went over to the couch. "I think the best thing for us to do is get married immediately. I've asked the lawyer to draw up the marriage contracts. Where did this Hutchins sleep? In Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh's room?"

"No," Chris said. "He slept in here. Mr. Okeefenokee didn't understand the concept of 'room.' He thought it meant any space that happened to be available. Hutchins slept up there."

Stewart looked up at the sleep restraint. "In that? Where did you sleep?"

"On the couch."

"I can't believe you let him sleep up there with you not five feet away from him."

"Neither can I," Chris said. She got her nightshift and robe from the end of the couch. "You can sleep in Mr. Okeefenokee's room."

"No!" Charmaine said from the doorway. Her lawyer was with her. They were holding hands. "I mean, 'scuse me, but gee, Mr. Okeefenokee bought all that stuff for you, and it's a shame to let it go to waste."

"What stuff?" Stewart said.

"If you want to be able to testify that Chris didn't leave her apartment for the whole twenty-four hours," Charmaine's lawyer said, "you should be the one to sleep out here. Chris can sleep in the bedroom. That way she can't leave without your knowing it."

"I thought you said this plan was foolproof," Stewart said anxiously.

"It is," Charmaine's lawyer said, grinning.

"Good night," Chris said, and went into Mr. Okee-fenokee's room, still carrying the bridal bouquet, and shut the door.

Charmaine immediately slid the shoji screen open a few inches. "'Scuse me," she said. "Can I come in? I got something to show you." She sidled through the door, shut it behind her, and flashed her hand at Chris. "It's a

diamond. We're engaged."

Chris laid the bouquet on the nightstand and started moving boxes off the bed. "I thought you said you weren't going to marry him because he thought marriage was a real-estate deal."

"That was before—" She stopped. "Well, I mean, I think it was pretty romantic the way he got you and Hutchins together."

"We're not exactly together," she said. "Hutchins is in Houston and I'm locked in my room."

"Yeah, but Mr. Fenokee's going to ..." She stopped again.

Chris looked up. "Mr. Fenokee's going to what?"

Charmaine fiddled with her ring. "Well, gee, I mean, he's got that space program, right? Maybe he can talk the NASA people into sending Hutchins back up here. Or maybe you could go down there."

"I don't think so," Chris said sadly. "Stewart'll see to that. Anyway, Sony's got a thirty-day travel-permission law, and the marriage expires in"—she looked at her watch—"about twenty-three hours."

"Gee, that's right. I better go. I promised Omiko I'd be there for the wedding number. Gee, I almost forgot my pastie." She picked it up, untaped it from its makeshift handle, and laid the flashlight back on the nightstand. She pointed at the boxes on the bed. "Why don't you wear that black lace nightie instead of that shift thing?" She flounced out. Chris shut the door and locked it.

She put on her nightshift and her robe and moved the stack of boxes off the bed. "I've just had a great idea, Chris," Stewart called through the door. "I was lying there looking at the hammock, and it suddenly occurred to me that Ohghhifoehnnahigrheeh was right. That is available space. Since we're going to rent this place anyway, we won't need those high ceilings. We can turn this into two apartments. I'm going to go downstairs right now and talk to Mr. Nagisha about it."

She could hear him slide the door to the apartment shut, lock it, and start down the stairs. I hope he trips over the old man in the baseball cap and falls the whole flight, she thought, and then remembered that the old man had gone off with Molly and Bets.

She turned off the light and got into bed. There was something hard under her pillow. It's probably one of Omiko's tassels, she thought, and turned the light back on. It was her subvocalizer.

"Oh," she said, and held it to her heart.

"Mr. Nagisha thinks it's a great idea," Stewart said through the door. "He's going to do it to all the apartments in the building. Good night, darling."

She sat up against the headboard, put the subvocalizer on, and fastened the receiver in her ear. It probably doesn't work except at short distances, she thought. She turned off the light.

It was completely-dark in the room. There was a narrow line of light under the shoji screen, but it only seemed to intensify the darkness.

(Pete,) she whispered without making any noise. (Are you there?)

(I'm here,) he said, so close he could have been sitting beside her. (Where are you?)

(In Mr. Okeefenokee's room. My subvocalizer was under his pillow.)

(Where's Stewart?)

(In the living room on the couch. He wants to make sure I don't do anything to jeopardize the annulment clause.)

(Is everything okay?) Hutchins said. (You're not going to be evicted?)

(No.)

(Well, that's good. At least you don't have to sleep out on the stairs with Leopold and Loeb.)

(Molly and Bets aren't here. They got a part in Spielberg's movie.)

He didn't answer for a while. (There isn't any justice, is there?) he said finally.

(No.) Chris said. (I wish you were here.)

(So do I. Chris, look, they've got us locked up tight here until the negotiations are over. I tried to talk Okee into telling NASA I had to come back up to Sony to get the space program, but he said, "No. Be alone on hahnahmoon." Well, we're sure as hell alone.)

(Is he still refusing to talk?)

(No, he's been talking a blue streak ever since we got on the shuttle. And I have a sinking feeling I know why the Eahrohhs came. I don't think it was to negotiate a space program or anything else. I think they just like space travel. Okee had that lump of a nose of his pressed to the port the whole way down, and he told the NASA linguistics team the exciting story of our takeoff and landing twice. He also regaled them with a description of how Omiko orbits her colonies and danced "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" for them. Spielberg blew his big chance. Okee's a lot better than Molly and

Bets. He told the linguistics team about you, too. He said you reminded him of his wife.)

(I know,) she said, and wished she had a Kleenex.

(He said I reminded him of himself. No, what he actually said was that I was like him. He then said the reason he'd wanted us to get married was because he knew we liked each other, which shoots our "one word, one meaning" theory all to hell.)

(But if that's true, maybe he understands the word "space," too, and there really is a space program.)

(Maybe.) There was silence for a minute. (He told the linguistics team he'd have a demonstration of the space program for them in twenty-four hours. They asked him what he needed for this demonstration, and he said a room with high ceilings. So they stuck us in an old shuttle hangar with a guard and a couple of army cots, and he went right to sleep on one of the cots.)

She could hear something besides what he was saying, a low whooshing noise that rose to a dull roar and then subsided. (I can hear Mr. Okeefenokee snoring,) she said, and wiped her eyes on the hem of the sheet.

(Chris, listen, if there isn't a space program, Okee's not going to be the only one who's in trouble. I didn't exactly have official clearance to go undercover, and they're going to want somebody they can blame this on. I don't know when I'll be able to get back up there to get you.)

(I know,) she said, sniffing. Charmaine had left her box of Kleenex on the nightstand. She reached for the flashlight. Her hand groped in emptiness where the night-stand was supposed to be. "Hutchins!" she said out loud. "The nightstand's missing." She squinted into the darkness. She could faintly make out the walls of her room. "Air. Okeefenokee's boxes are gone, too."

(No, they're not,) Hutchins said, and she could hear the rumble of Okee's snoring under his words. (They're here. Did the nightstand have a box of Kleenex on it?)

"Are you all right, darling?" Stewart said through the door. "I heard you call out."

"I'm fine," Chris said. "I was dreaming. Good night."

"Why don't you come out and sleep on the—" Stewart said. His words cut off so abruptly she was afraid he had opened the door, but when she turned her head in that direction, she couldn't see any light, not even the

line of light that had been under her door.

(Are you still there, Chris?) Hutchins said.

(Yes,) she said, careful not to speak out loud since Stewart might be trying to unlock the door. I hope Molly took all her keys with her, she thought, and wondered if she should get out of bed and go wedge a chair against the door or something, but she was afraid she wouldn't be able to find her way back to the bed. If the bed was still there, (Pete, what's going on?)

(I don't know,) he said. (This shuttle hangar is now full of Okee's stuff. The microwaves, the trampoline, even the Christmas tree in the baby buggy.)

Chris squinted into the darkness, waiting for her eyes to adjust, but after a long minute she still couldn't see anything.

(He didn't understand when you tried to tell him there wasn't any space in your apartment,) he said slowly (and he didn't understand the words "far away" and "close." And how come? Not because he couldn't understand the words, but because the concept didn't make any sense. Chris, I think he's got a space program, after all.) It was suddenly not as black in the room. She looked anxiously toward the shoji screen, afraid that Stewart had gotten it open, but the light wasn't coming from that direction. It seemed to be coming from the back wall where the trampoline had been, only she couldn't make out the wall.

(It's not the kind of space program NASA thought they were getting, but so what? I think they'll be happy with this,) he said, sounding excited. (I couldn't figure out how he was going to get all this stuff home in that little ship of theirs, and the answer is, he wasn't. He was going to send it Federal Express. I'll bet he already took the piano home, and that's why we couldn't find it.)

The line of light was under the side walls where the stacks of boxes had been. They were much farther away than they should have been.

(Pete!) Chris said, getting onto her knees on the bed as if she were on a life raft.

(If Okee can send souvenirs home to Eahrohhsani, we've got interstellar trade. Not to mention what this means to Sony. So what if we can only transport freight?)

Now a thin line of pinkish-orange light was under the wall where the shoji screen should be. It wasn't there. (Pete,) she said (I don't think it's limited to transporting freight.)

(I wonder what the high ceilings have to do with this. We can build space colonies on earth and then put them in orbit with—)

His voice cut off. (Just a minute,) Hutchins said after a pause. (The lights went out. I can't see.)

(There's a flashlight on the nightstand,) Chris said.

(I can't find the nightstand. It was right here.) His voice sounded suddenly different, farther away, and she couldn't hear Mr. Okeefenokee's snoring under it. (Chris, I think it's disappeared. It's black as pitch in here. Is the nightstand there?)

(I don't know. Just a minute.) She got up on her knees, waved her hand over where the nightstand was supposed to be, and cracked her knuckles against the corner of it.

"Ouch," she said, nursing her hand. (Yes, it's back.) "Damn!" Hutchins said. "No, it's not. It's here. I just ran into it."

"But . . .," Chris said, and then stopped and peered into the darkness. She crawled to the foot of the bed so that the orange-pink light was behind the nightstand and she could make out shapes. "Pete," she said, "take off your subvocalizer." She unfastened the receiver from her ear and closed her hand over it.

"In a minute," he said. "Okee had a box of flashlights right next to the Christmas tree." His voice sounded suddenly softer, as if he had turned away.

She unclasped the subvocalizer with her free hand and took it off. "Take off your subvocalizer and say something." She put it under her pillow and leaned across the bed, feeling carefully for the nightstand.

"Now I can't find the damned boxes," he said. "Damn it, I hit my toe *again*."

Chris turned on the flashlight. Hutchins had on jeans and no shirt, and he was standing beside the bed, holding his bare foot in one hand. "How did you get here?" he said blankly.

"That's what I should be asking you. This is my room." She shone the flashlight around at the walls. The line of pinkish-orange light was getting wider, as if a curtain were slowly going up. "Sort of." She smiled at him. "Stewart wanted me to stay in my room, but I don't think this is what he had in mind."

Hutchins put his foot down and looked blankly behind him at the wall. "Where's Okee?"

"I don't know. I have a feeling he could be just about anywhere he wants. But I would imagine he's in the shuttle hangar with all his boxes and the Christmas tree and the trampoline. And half of NASA when they realize we're gone. You don't suppose they'll think he disintegrated us or something?"

He limped over to the bed and sat down beside her.

"He said he'd have a space program for them in twenty-four hours. They won't string him up before then, and I have a feeling that at the end of twenty-four hours we'll be able to tell them where we've been ourselves."

"Which is where?" she said.

He looked around at the walls. The band of light was nearly a foot wide now. It looked more pink than orange. Chris switched off the flashlight and put it on the night-stand.

"Damned if I know," he said. "That old faker! He understood every word we said. He knew exactly what kind of space program NASA wanted. And all that stuff about honeymoons and closings and not understanding what kind of roll Bets wanted. 'Time alone. Talk, Neck.' I could just ...," he said, smashing his fist against his open hand. He stopped and looked at Chris. "I could kiss him on the top of his lipstick-smear head," he said. "I thought I was never going to see you again. I figured by the time I made it back up to Sony, you'd have married your prospective buyer."

"I couldn't marry Stewart," Chris said, taking hold of his hand. "I'm already married."

" 'Put on subvocalizer. You and Hutchins get married. Hahnahmoon.' " Hutchins said, shaking his head. "I'll bet he set up this whole thing with Charmaine's lawyer, the marriage, the honeymoon, everything."

He stood up and went over to the wall where the shoji screen had been. When he put out his hand to touch it, the band seemed to spread suddenly in all directions, suffusing the room in pink light.

"The honeymoon!" Chris said, getting up on her knees. "I think I know where we are. And you're wrong. He doesn't understand *every* word we say."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I'll bet you anything those trees are cherry trees, and that we're on a *hana* moon." A forest of blossoming trees stretched around them in all directions. She could almost smell the cherry blossoms. "It's beautiful here," she said. "It is," he said, but he wasn't looking at the trees. "And I have the feeling nobody's going to come in to evict us or use the bathroom

or do a tap-dance routine." He walked over to the bed. "Spielberg didn't really give Molly and Bets a part in his movie, did he?"

Chris sat back on her heels. "You were right about Spielberg coming up to Sony incognito. You know the old man who lives above Charmaine?"

He pulled her up onto her knees. "In the baseball cap and sneakers? He's not Spielberg," he said. "He's just some chip cam director who thinks he can bring back slasher movies. He wanted to hire Okee to star in a low-budget remake of *Alien*. When I told him I didn't think Okee was available, he asked me if I thought people would believe in a pair of four-year-olds who were vicious murderers." He put his arms around her. "I said I hoped it was one of those movies where the murderers get what they deserve in the end. I like movies like that, where everybody gets what they deserve."

"So do I," Chris said. Hutchins was even closer than he had been on the bullet. Chris could definitely smell the cherry blossoms. "What's going to happen to Molly and Bets?"

"I don't know," he said, and leaned down to kiss her. "The old guy got this spooky smile on his face and mumbled something about tap shoes."

The End