

The Color of Neanderthal Eyes

James Tiptree, Jr.

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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It's my fault, all of it, and Kamir is dead.

But something must be done.

Now it is afterwards and I am recording this on shipboard so that you will understand. Much of this belongs in a Second Contact Report. Much more does not. But I am too torn-up and tired to make a formal report. I am simply talking out what happened so you will see that something must be done.

???

It started while I was lazily cruising along just outside an island coral reef, on the beautiful sea-world unimaginationally christened "Wet." I see it now: turquoise sea and creamy small breakers, and across the green bay the snowy expanse of sand, backed by the feathery plumes of that papyrus-like plant I learned to call *cenya*. The sun has started down, so I start my motor and go along the reef, looking for a pass. I find one, and cautiously zigzag through; my little new-rubber dinghy is too precious to risk hitting that sharp coral. Once through, I stop and turn, watching. Something has been following me all afternoon. I don't want to spend the night alone on a strange beach without checking out the creature.

Will it follow me in here?

I am, so far as I know, alone on Wet. And I'm tired. I'd been on a very strenuous year-long tour as Sensitive on an Extended Contact party six lights away. It's hard work, building up an FW—First Verbal Vocabulary—and the aliens I was dealing with had complicated, irritable, niggling minds. The niggling made for an accurate vocabulary, but it was tiring for the lone telepath on the team. And it was a high-gee planet, which made for more fatigue. I had earned my post-tour leave. When we passed near Wet, I opted to be put down in a lander for weeks of restful solitude.

Wet has been visited only once before, by a loner named Pforzheimer, who stayed only long enough to claim a First Contact. His notes in the Ephemeris say that there are humanoid natives, confined to the one small continent, or large island, on the other side of the planet from me. Besides that, what land there is consists of zillions of small islands and islets, mostly atolls, long looping chains of them everywhere, archipelagos forming necklaces around friendly seas.

Wet seems to be in an interglacial period with the ocean at maximal height, and only a tiny ice cap on the south pole. And its sun is yellow, like Sol but smaller, so that even here near the equator the noon heat is merely pleasant. A tropical paradise in this season. There is even a magnetic field; my compass works. I left the lander at my base camp due south, and have come exploring this pretty chain of islets.

Ah!

In the pass I am watching there bobs up a round head, rather like a seal's, but glinting a fiery pink in the sunlight. The creature is following me into the bay.

What to do? Is it a predator? If so, it has had plenty of chances to make for me while I was diving, but did nothing. More important, is it a marine animal or an amphibian? Much of Wet's wildlife seems to be amphibious, their lives and bodies undecided between sea and land—a natural development here. If my follower stays in the sea, well and good; but if it comes ashore, I won't have a reposeful night.

As I look, the head swivels, apparently spots me, and submerges again. A ripple in the water shows it coming on in. I float quietly, undecided. Perhaps it is merely curious. That might imply high intelligence. But what persistence! It has been around me, now near, now farther off, since noon. What should I do?

Then something happens! A swirl in the water behind the creature, and a glimpse of something white. I have a notion what it is—one of the giant white crabs I have seen (and avoided) on the reefs. Our passage must have attracted it.

At this moment the creature accelerates to a very respectable speed and heads straight toward me. The swirl of the crab accelerates, too. I receive a mental flash of excitement, mixed with a trace of fear. Clearly the creature is racing to get away from the crab; but why toward me? Does it feel I am somehow a refuge?

I check my impulse to start my motor and take myself out of the path; I feel responsible for my follower's plight.

I shilly-shally until there is a commotion in the water alongside. The alien creature has arrived right by me. Then two pale green arms shoot out of the water and grasp the dinghy, and, so suddenly I have no time to react, the creature boosts itself up and tumbles into the bow of the boat—with a startlingly Human laugh!

Can it be Human? No—a humanoid, I see as I get a better look at its waving feet. Long membranous flippers are folding themselves around its toes, and the fingers are webbed. But the form is Human—quite beautifully so, I notice. And the creature is sending out a wave of excited pleasure.

I have evidently encountered the hominid inhabitants of Wet.

My first reaction is—damn it all. I'm in no condition to exercise my special talents, to do a Contact routine. But somehow the laugh beguiles me. I don't need to do more than a minimal scan to grasp that my visitor is in no way hostile.

But there's no time for more—a big white pincer-crab claw has lashed across the boat and is coming at the alien. I fumble for my harpoon.

Before I can find it, the situation is solved. Still laughing, the alien expertly grasps the claw and whips out a shell knife from its belt—yes, it is wearing a belt and loincloth—and runs the knife down the claw, severing its "thumb," or lower pincer. The thumb drops to the bottom of the boat, the now-harmless claw batters about a bit, and a second, smaller claw comes aboard. The process of de-thumbng is repeated. For a moment both ex-pincers are battering and waving, and then the great crab, seeming to grasp its trouble, gives up and slides back into the sea.

The alien, grinning, bends and retrieves the thumbs, shaking its flaming red hair back from its face. With its knife, it scoops the meat out of their shells and leans aft. It is offering one claw-meat to me! I take it, puzzled. It is like a big white banana.

The alien pops the other piece into its mouth and bites, nodding and smiling at me. Good! Cautiously, I taste it without swallowing. It is delicious—but alien food like this can contain an infinity of hazards. The crab's flesh could be laced with something lethal to me—as simple as arsenic—to which the locals are immune.

Regretfully, I lay the luscious white meat down on a thwart and gear my mind up to communicate the thought, "Thank you. It is very good. But we are very different. I come from another world."

To my inexpressible surprise and relief the alien, its deep blue eyes fixed on mine, sends back, "I know, I know." So they are natural telepaths! How rare, how wonderful!

And more is coming: "Other one came from sky a long time past." A foggy picture of what must have been Pforzheimer forms in my head, evidently a passed-on image. "Are you like that?"

Mind-questions are hard to ask. The alien does it by superimposing a figure I see is me, and flashing back and forth fast to the Pforzheimer image with an eager feel. "Yes," I send. "We come from the same world."

The alien eats more crabmeat, considering this.

Then comes another, more complex question I don't get. Foggy flashing images of Pforzheimer opening and shutting his mouth, blurry pictures of what might be planets of different sizes and colors... "many worlds..." I am roused to make the effort to probe for the alien's verbal speech, and try a guess.

"You say, the other-one-like-me said there are many worlds, many peoples?"

Enthusiastic assent. I've hit it.

And from then on, we converse in an irreproducible mix of verbal and transmitted speech, unmatched for fluency and ease. I report it here as close as purely spoken speech can come.

"Yes, that's true," I tell the alien. "There are many races. Some stay on their worlds, others travel much—like me."

The alien smiles broadly, the blue eyes in what I realize is a very beautiful face bright with pleasure. He snuggles down into a comfortable position in the bow, reaching for my rejected crab claw.

"Show me! Show me all!"

He is evidently prepared for a long session of entertainment. But the sunset is casting great golden rays across the sky* tinting the flocks of little island-born cumuli and generating lavender shadows on the blue-green sea. I must prepare for the night.

"Too many to show all. Too many to know all. I will show you one, others later. The night comes."

"Yes, I know how you do in the night. You take this"—he slaps the boat with the knife—"onto land, and sleep. I have watched you two days." There is a smile of mischief in his blue eyes.

What? But I only spotted him this noon. However, I recall some vague impressions of sentience nearby that had caused me momentary disquiet. So that's what they were—emanations of my new acquaintance, watching!

"Good. Here is one other world." I send a nice detailed view of the fiery planet of the Comenor, with a few of its highly intelligent natives hopping about or resting alertly, tri-pedal, on their large, kangaroo-like tails. The Comenor had been one of the races I trained on.

"Ah! And they think, they speak? Do they make music?" The alien raises its voice in a provocative little chant.

"Yes... yes... let me remember—" I try to render one of the Comenor's pastoral airs.

"Hmm..."

As he sits there reflecting, with the golden light playing on his flaming hair, I realize I may be mistaken. I have been calling him "he" because of his breastless body, flat belly, and slim hips, and perhaps also because he is apparently alone in the open sea. But that face could belong to a beautiful woman. And he is *not* Human; there is a strange fold running down the throat, and the pupils of his eyes are hourglass-shaped. Nor is he even mammalian; no nipples mar the pale green curves of his pectoral muscles, although he has a small navel. Perhaps "he" is female, or epicene, perhaps it is the custom of his race for females to wander far alone. Whatever, my new friend is enchanting to look at; even his accoutrements of knife, belt and loincloth are charmingly carved and decorated.

"Wonderful," he says at length. "And you have seen this and more?"

"Yes."

"I would like to do so."

"It might be possible, someday. Maybe. But now I must go ashore." I send him an image of himself getting out of the boat so I can drive the bow up the beach.

"Yes, I know." Again the hint of mischief in the smile. He pops the remains of the crab claw in his belt,

and in one graceful flash is overboard. As he sails past I glimpse that strange fold on his neck opening to show a feathery purple lining. Gills! So he is truly aquatic. No wonder I didn't see him until he decided to show.

I start the motor and examine the beach. As often here, a small stream meanders to the bay in its center, marked by clumps of the tall, plummy papyrus-like plants. I'll have fresh water to top off my canteens.

I choose the larger expanse of beach and head for its center, where I'll have maximum warning if anything approaches. I've searched inland on several atolls, and so far found no sign of any predators—indeed, of anything larger than a kind of hopping mouse and a wealth of attractive semi-birds. But I'd prefer not to have even hop-mice investigate me in the night.

I rush the dinghy up a smooth place, jump out, and drag it beyond the tideline. There are low, frequent tides in this part of Wet, generated by a trio of little moons that sail across the sky three times a night, revolving around each other. Like everything else here, they are attractive—one is sulfur-yellow, another rusty pink, the third a blue-white.

The alien offers to help me with the boat. I warn him about punctures and letting the air out. He steps back, warily.

"Thank you."

When I detach the motor and batteries, he comes to examine them.

"More wonders. How does this work?"

"Later, later." I am puffing with exertion as I take out all my gear and turn the boat over to make a bed, hopefully out of reach of the little nocturnal crabs and lizards on these beaches. The alien watches everything closely, nodding to himself. When I have dried the dinghy's bottom and laid out my sleep shelter, he sits down on the sand alongside.

"Now you will—" Quick images of me relieving myself among the papyrus and returning to sit on the boat and eat.

I laugh; the pictures are deft cartoons, emphasizing our mutual differences and also the—I fear—growing plumpness around my belt.

"Yes. And I fill my canteens. The beach last night had no fresh water."

"Good. I, too, will eat." He opens his belt pouch and extracts the crabmeat, together with two neatly cleaned little reef fish. Raw fish must be a staple here.

When I return, he is still delicately eating. I offer him water but it is refused. "You don't need fresh water after such a long time in the salt sea?"

"Oh, no." I reflect that their bodies must have solved the problem of osmosis, which dehydrates seagoing Humans. Perhaps that beautiful pale greenish, velvety-looking skin is in fact some sort of osmotic organ.

I settle down with my food-bars, enjoying the unmistakable sense of companionship that emanates from the alien. We are both examining each other between bites, and I find that his smile is contagious; I am grinning, too. Extraordinary! Especially after my last aliens.

Now I can see more signs of his—or her—aquatic origins. A rudimentary, charmingly tinted dorsal fin shows at the back of his neck, running down his spine to surface again just above its end. There is a frilly little fin on the outside of each wrist. All these fishlike trappings fold away neatly when not in use. The flipper-fins on his feet fold over the toes so as to appear merely decoration. And his hair isn't true hair, I see, but more like the very thin tendrils of a rosy anemone; a sensory organ, perhaps. Am I seeing a member of a race that has evolved directly from fishes? I think so; these appendages look more like evolutionary remnants than new developments to my untrained eye. He is on his way out of, rather than back to, the sea. But could he be cold-blooded? No; when our bodies had brushed together, I had felt solid warmth under the thick, cool integument.

But perhaps he is not "on his way" at all; on this world, his adaptations seem perfect. There is every reason to retain his aquatic features, and none at all to lose them. I think I am seeing a culminant form,

which will not change much, at least from natural pressures.

He for his part is looking me over with care.

"You do not swim well," he concludes, extending one foot and flicking the flippers open.

"No, but we have these." I reach under the dinghy and pull out my swim-fins to show him. He laughs appreciatively, and I reflect that my race, like seals, *is* returning to the sea—by prosthesis.

"My world has much dry land," I explain. "My race grew up from land animals who never went to sea." What am I doing, assuming a grasp of evolution theory on the part of one whose mind may not be much more than a fish's? Yet he seems to understand.

"Wonders." He smiles.

Next he is fascinated by my teeth. I show him all I can, and he in turn displays the ridges of hard white cartilage I had taken for teeth.

And so we pass the evening, chatting like amiable strangers, while the golden sun turns red and sinks, silhouetting the fronds of the papyrus. We exchange names late, as is customary with telepaths. His is Kamir. He has a little trouble with mine, Tom Jared. His people, he tells me, are three days' travel away, to the east. Why is he alone? That one is difficult; I can only guess that he means he is exploring for pleasure. "It is the custom."

Somehow I cannot bring myself to take up the question of sex, even though I know he is curious, too; once or twice I catch a tendril of his thought lingering around my swim trunks.

But through all our talk, I am amazed by what can only be called its courtesy. Its civility. Never do I strike a hostile or "primitive" reaction. It is a little like being questioned by a bright, well-brought-up child. Innocence, curiosity, those are neotenic—childlike—traits. Neotenia has been a feature of Human development. Kamir's race is neotenic, too. But beyond that, he is indefinably but unmistakably *civilized*. Whatever may turn out to be his technological level, I am communing with a civilized mind.

It grows darker, and a myriad unknown stars come out. I grow sleepy, despite the interest of the occasion. Kamir notices it.

"Now you desire sleep."

"Yes."

"Good. We sleep." And he pulls up the back flap of his loincloth to make a pad for his head and simply lies back peacefully. I wriggle round in my sleep shelter and do the same.

"Good night, sleep well, Kamir."

"Sleep well, 'Om Jhared." Then suddenly he adds a question I sense as deadly serious: "Will more like you come?"

I am glad to be able to reassure him. "No, unless you ask. Oh, maybe once a small party to record your world, if you do not object."

"Why should we?"

And so we both relax, the alien on his warm white sand, me on my galactic dinghy, and the little crabs and lizards and other creatures of the night come out and sing or fiddle or chirrup their immemorial chorus. I remember thinking as I drift *off* that they are a good warning system; only when all is still do they sing.

???

When I waken in full sunlight, all is calm and still. Too still; the sea is like glass. I check my barometer. Yes, it has started downward.

Kamir is nowhere in sight. I feel a sense of loss. What, has he abandoned interest in me to return to his watery world? I hope not.

And—good!—in a moment or two there's a splash out on the reef. Kamir surfaces. He comes quickly back to shore, towing something. When I go to meet him, I see that it is a silky purse-net, full of flapping fish.

Too preoccupied to greet me, he hurries up the beach and kneels over his catch, his beautiful face

tense. He begins quickly decapitating them, finishing the last one before cleaning any. Then he sits back, sighing relievedly.

"Their pain and confusion are hard to bear," he tells me. Then, smiling, "Morning greetings, 'Omjhared!"

"Greetings." I know what he means. I once made the error of going too near a meat-killing place; it had taken me a fortnight to recover.

"I wish we could eat some other way. We all do," Kamir tells me, working on the fish. "But plants are not enough."

I agree, looking over his net. An elegant little artifact, clearly handmade. His is not a machine culture. "I think there is a storm coming."

"Oh yes." He touches his shining hair. "My head is full of it."

"When?"

"This evening for sure." He looks me over again, curiously. "What will you do in the storm, 'Om Jared?"

"Take my stuff farther up on land and wait it out. What will you do?"

"Well, of course, we go down into the deep water where all is calm and wait it out, as you say. Very boring... But today I think I will stay with you. I haven't seen a storm on top since I was a child. Would you like me to be with you? I can help carry your things." His head cocks to the side as he looks up, shy, coy, absolutely charming. I can no longer stand this convention of "he."

"Kamir—"

"Yes?"

"Kamir, in my race there are two types of people, because of our way of reproduction—" I begin a clumsy exposition of gender and sex. What's the matter with me? I never have trouble with this part of Contact, never thought about it before.

I am halfway through when Kamir bursts out laughing. "Yes... yes... We also have two. And...?" Another of those killing smiles.

"And which are you?"

"Do you ask?"

"Yes."

"I thought it was plain. Perhaps because I am so ugly it is not."

"Ugly? But you are very beautiful, Kamir."

The lovely face turns on me, the incredible deep blue eyes wide. "Do you *mean* that, 'Om Jared?" A hand comes timidly to clasp my forearm.

"I mean it. *Yes.*"

Very softly Kamir says, "I thought never to hear those words." Then, whispering, "I am an egg-bearer. What you call a female."

And her—her!—red head goes down on my forearm, hiding her face.

I can only stammer, "Ah, Kamir, I wish we were not of different races!—"

"I too," she breathes.

It is incredible, whether a chance match of pheromones across the light-years, whatever, I am trembling. I look down her graceful back, with its lacy frill proclaiming her alienness, and it does not seem alien at all. My mermaid.

But I am in mortal danger, I must straighten up and fly right.

"Kamir, I do not think you should stay with me through the storm."

"Why not?"

"It—there might be dangers—" It is impossible to lie to a telepath.

"If you can endure them, so can I! Ah, why do we speak nonsense? For some reason you are afraid

of my nearness."

"Yes," I say miserably. What can I tell her convincingly? Of the iron Rule Number One in ET contacts? Of the follies that Humans, men and women alike, succumb to? Of the fact which I have just realized, that I have been a very lonely man? Why else, I ask myself, should I be so smitten by a purely chance resemblance to Human beauty?

"Look," she says, lifting her head to the sky. "The storm is coming much faster... I don't think I will have time to swim to a really safe place. If my presence disturbs you, I will stay far, very far away. When we have moved your things."

Little mischief, is she lying? My senses tell me so. But when I, too, look up, I see that the sky has taken on a curious yellowish tint, though no clouds show yet. The sea is so flat it looks oily, and the air is ominously still and hot. She is right, whatever is coming is moving fast. And these seas *are* shallow, it may be a long way to a deep place. In any event, it is time to secure my possessions.

"Very well," I say with profound unwisdom. "Then if you want to help me, we will move my boat and the rest up into the dunes behind the beach."

She smiles radiantly, and we go to it.

But it is a slow process; she exclaims with interest and curiosity over all my things, wet suit, waterproof recorder, pump, repair kit, camera, lights, charging device, scuba gear, first-aid kit, my lighter—I find she knows fire, which her people accomplish by twirling hardwood sticks—and all, down to the binoculars, which charm her, and the harpoons, which turn her very sober.

"You kill much."

"Only for food, like you. Or to save my life."

"But this is so big."

"Well, I might be attacked by something big, like the crab. You killed it, you know. Without claws it will die of starvation."

"Oh, no! It will eat algae. And the claws will grow again. We use them like that to pull building supplies." Image of a big crab with a harness hooked on its carapace, hauling a laden travois. "When they get dangerous, we chase them back to sea."

"Ah."

Some perverse honesty compels me to show her my waterproof laser, which I carry in my swim trunks.

"This is for use if I am attacked on land." I demonstrate on a nearby shell. She runs to examine the burn.

"It would do this to flesh?"

"Yes."

"Why, when I came in your boat, you might have done this to me?"

Blue, blue eyes gaze at me, horrified.

"Not unless you attacked me so viciously that my life was in danger."

"Oh, but could you *not feel* the warmth?" She flutters her hand from herself to me and back. I think. Yes—from the first moment, I could. Damn it.

"Well! You are strange." Shaking her head, she resumes lugging a battery up the dune. She is very strong, I notice.

We have found a splendid hollow in the high dunes in which to ride out the storm. Somehow nothing more is said about her staying far, far away.

Finally, we stake my big tarpaulin over the heap of belongings and bring up the boat. I rope it upside down to three stout plant roots. The scrub "trees" growing here resemble giant beach gorse and have great hold-fast roots.

By now, the air is so humid and strange that our voices seem to reverberate on the still beach. And we can see a level line of white cloud rising up at us from the horizon, growing against the upper wind.

Under it is a tinge of darkness, the first sight of the squall-line. And in the far distance beyond towers pale cumulus. It looks like a whole frontal system coming on us. Will the weather change?

"You may grow cold here, Kamir."

"Oh, I am used to that."

"You could put on my wetsuit." (What, and leave me naked? I am mad.)

"No, when we cover our skins, we grow too thirsty."

Aha, I was right about the osmotic protection in the skin. Perfect adaptation.

"Well, if it turns cold, we can always make a fire. Let's gather some of these heavy stalks and stems."

When all is ready, we sit on the dune-top, swinging our legs and eating our respective provisions, watching the squall line rise until it divides the visible world. On our side all is still and sunny and hot; we are caught in an eerie stasis. A kind of water animal I haven't seen before paddles about in the bay, followed by a line of small ones.

"Jurros," Kamir observes. "They are very tame. Only the big fish bother them."

I wonder about those "big fish." Are they shark-like? But in response to my query Kamir only laughs.

"Oh, you pop them on the nose. They run away."

Well, I have heard people say that about white sharks. I resolve to watch out for any "big fish."

The storm is closer and closer, but still nothing stirs around us. Half the sky is shuttered with black roiling cloud, yet here it is impossibly bright and calm. The barometer must be falling through the deck, it is suddenly a little hard to breathe. I check it; yes, it's at the lowest point I've seen it. This is going to be ferocious.

We watch quietly, gripped by the drama of the scene. The water-animal has now disappeared.

Just as it seems that nothing will ever happen, a shudder runs through the world. Still in total calm, the sea wrinkles itself like the skin of a great beast. A tiny puff of cool wind lifts our hair. And a few big drops of rain, or perhaps hailstones, plop into the surface of the water and onto the beach.

And then, with a rush and a bellow, the storm hits.

In a moment the flat water has reared itself into a thousand billows two meters high, running unbroken from shore to shore. The breeze becomes a blast of wind against us. In the last rays of sunlight, a million specks of diamond flash from the waves into darkness. And then the sun is eclipsed by cloud, the world is twilight-dark.

Eerily, the papyrus plants all bend over with a whipping sound before we feel the wind that bent them. And then it hits, and the boat bangs up and down as if it will tear from the earth.

We scramble back from the dune-top and get under cover of the boat, holding it down over our heads. Then the sky opens, and tons of water dump on us, drumming intolerably on the boat. I am sure it is hail that will tear the boat, but when I stick out a hand, it is not. The world is in uproar around us.

Kamir is going excitedly "Whoop! Whee!"—I can barely hear her over the storm, but I can see her eyes flashing blue fire and her little back fin standing straight up.

"This is not boring?" I yell.

"No!" Laughing, grinning with excitement.

"But—" I begin and am drowned out by a *crack!* of lightning, and thunder like a gigantic bolt of tearing silk. Then the cracks and flashes and roars and rumbles are all about us. The strikes seem to be hitting the beach and the dunes. I see Kamir's fin suddenly clamp itself into her back, and her laughter changes to a squeal. I realize she hasn't seen, or has forgotten, the lightning part of a storm. She hangs on to my arm, quaking as each bolt hits. And then, somehow, she is in my arm, her face pressed against my chest, while I hang on to the boat for dear life with the other arm.

"It won't hit us, the boat will stop it," I howl at her.

Water is coursing down the sides of the hollow we are in. Down below, the beach has disappeared under a wilderness of sinister yellow-gray breakers that are striking and tearing against the dunes, and throwing spray to mingle with the rain on us.

But by degrees, the wind changes from a wild whirl to a steady blow, driving the rain across us, and I am able to release my aching arm and rope the boat more securely.

That was, I think, my last chance to escape.

But I do not take it. That arm joins the other around the slender quivering Kamir, and she clamps her whole body against me. For warmth.

Her back is cold. I rub it to warm her, cannot resist fingering the pretty little fin, which makes her giggle. I rub, stroke, but the coolness seems to be in her skin. It feels thick, a pale green velour over soft curves. I try to concentrate on its interest, its prevention of dehydration. Yes, I see there are tiny pores, but how they function is beyond me. I am stroking rhythmically now, unable to keep from enjoying the exquisite forms of her back and flanks.

And oh! Warmth comes, but not the warmth I wanted. Her shivers have turned into unmistakable, sinuous wiggles under my hand. She is whispering something, her free hand feeling for my swim trunks. And, gods! Her silken loincloth seems to have come undone... Tom Jared, what are you doing? Stop now, you fool. This is no girl, but a grown alien—a god-lost *fish*!

There is no stopping. I have only time to glimpse what seems to be an organ on the front of her lower belly, a solid mounded track running up to her navel, like a newly-healed scar. My body has taken me over, relieved me of the cold swim trunks, and is longing to press into her.

Only, where? Her crotch is as smooth as an armpit. I can only lay myself alongside the "scar" and squeeze our bodies together. "Yes," she says, "Oh yes." There is a feeling of clasping.

From there on I don't know exactly what happens. It isn't Human, but exciting beyond words, and finally, somehow, fulfilling. And at its height, a tremendous lightning bolt hits the beach...

Much later, I come back to consciousness. The rain is still drumming on our shelter, but the wind has abated somewhat, and the waves aren't quite so fierce. More water has drained into our hollow; we are lying in a puddle.

Kamir is sprawl, half under me and wholly wet. For a moment I fear I have hurt her. But she is only deeply asleep.

And I—I have broken Rule One, and the sky will fall on me. And I do not care.

"Kamir? Kamir?"

Answering smile, long, slow, and beautiful. Lazily the big eyes open their sea-blue pools.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

"Umm..." Sleepy, obviously as fulfilled as I. Her lips move.

"What?"

"Never..."

"Never what?"

"I thought—never would I know—Oh, you have been sent from the skies to rescue me."

Wild bells of warning—new ones—ring in my head. Does she assume I will stay here with her? Oh gods—I bitterly reproach my offending body, my weakness. But looking at her lying there, the mere thought of leaving gives me a pang. Can it be that I truly love this little alien? Oh gods! How wise are the Federation regs!

"Let me get you out of this water."

"Why? It's comfortable..." As if daring greatly, she puts her hands up to my cheeks, the dainty wrist frills quivering.

"Tell me, 'Om Jhared: Do I still seem beautiful to you?"

"Yes... Oh, *yes*! But why do you ask? Don't you know you *are* beautiful?"

"But I am ugly, everybody knows that. My people say I am so ugly it is good when I leave!"

"No!" I protest. "But to me, and to the eyes of all my people, you would be considered wonderfully lovely."

"Ahhh..." She gives me an adoring look and a smile and next moment is fast asleep again, like a child.

My mermaid.

There seems nothing better to do. I follow suit.

? ? ?

We wake in darkness. The wind has died, and the three little moons are rising, showing a sky of racing cloud fragments.

"Hungry!" exclaims Kamir, grinning.

"I too."

And we rise from our puddle and go up to sit on the dune top, now scoured almost flat by the gale. Below us the beach is emerging from the waves. It is chilly; a fire seems good, so I bring up the dry stuff we had collected and soon have a comfortable little blaze.

She is fascinated by my lighter. Soon she has satisfied herself that it uses the principle of friction, too, like her people—but what is it *made of*? What is this stuff, "metal"? Rock, coral, and shell are the hardest substances she knows.

So the evening starts, unexpectedly, with a lecture on metallurgy. Oh, if I could only find deposits of something, iron, copper, silver, tin! I rack my memory, can only remember something about manganese globules on the seafloor—or is it magnesium? There must be some metal available to these people, if only I could tell them what to look for. I dream of precipitating them into an Iron Age before—before I go. I wince.

As to my plastic gear, I can only describe to her a gross oversimplification of petrochemicals and polymers. She shakes her head worriedly.

"So much! You have so much... But do you have music?"

I fish in my recorder pack and come up with a lovely piece by Borgnini.

"Listen. This reminds me of you." Which it does, especially the flute solos.

She cocks her head at the first notes. Then, seeing me lie back, she flops down with her head on my stomach to listen. I am diverted by the shining red silk of her pseudo-hair.

"Oh!" she exclaims once or twice. "Ah!" I think she likes it.

When the piece has drawn to its ravishing finale, she turns to me with glowing eyes. "Oh, you have beautiful music! I never—we never heard such sounds. But no voices?"

"Not in this one. They are what we call musical instruments."

"We must make some," she says determinedly. "You will show us how. Now, more!" She leans back again.

"I haven't much in this little box. But here is another from my homeland." I give her Brahms's Quintet for Clarinet in E.

And so the evening passes... I am impossibly happy.

Before retiring, we drag the boat up to the top to sleep on, and spread out her loincloth to dry. It's more complex than it looks, with four small pockets. The fishnet goes in one. I concentrate on this to avoid looking at her body.

"You shall wear this now," she says shyly, patting the cloth.

"Me? Oh no."

"Yes. It is right."

"Why, what does the loincloth mean?"

"Well, first they mean that we are ripe. All my age-group are wearing cloths now. When all are ready, they go out to sea, to explore and to meet each other. When"—I think she says—"when a couple forms, they exchange clothes and return so, to let everybody know they are together. Of course I went out alone, this way where nobody will come, because I knew nobody would want me. I expected nothing. And I found you! Oh—"

In an exuberance of love, she pounces on me, and before I can protest, rolls me off the boat and around in the sand, nuzzling and kissing me. Strong little mermaid!

I catch her and roll her back and we play like puppies.

When we are both gasping with laughter, naked and sandy, we fall into each other's arms and let nature have her will. Blissfully, there are no insects here. We fall asleep once more, enmeshed in love.

Only, just as I am drifting off, I catch her whisper.

"Om Jhared?"

"Yes?"

"You will, won't you?"

"Will what?"

"Care for them. You will?"

"Them? What?" I force myself awake.

"Our babies."

Oh, gods.

"Kamir," I say gently, "I hope this will not make you sad, but there won't be any babies. Our physical beings, our bodies are too different."

She frowns. "You don't think there will be babies?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Well," she says, with a return of her old mischief, "I think differently!" And she lays one hand on her abdomen, smiling, and lies back.

So do I, but not restfully. It has occurred to me that some Terran mammals, like rabbits, will give birth parthenogenetically if stimulated by saline water. What if, gods, what if she is right, and some monster is born?

"Om Jhared?"

"Yes?"

"Even if there are no babies, as you say, you will at least stay until I die?"

Oh, no—does she mean, spend my life with her? Gods, what have I done? "Oh my dear, do not talk of dying. Not now."

"Yes," she says musingly, "maybe you are right. But I think of it."

And I can feel a dark shadow on her mind.

"But why think of it? Please don't, my dear."

"Why? Because it comes so soon. Do you not know? This is my last season in the world now."

"Oh, Kamir. What's wrong? What's wrong?" I am bending over her, afraid of I know not what. "Tell me!"

"Why, because we love. Because I love with you. Is it not so with you?"

"Kamir, I don't know what you're saying. What is wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. When you love, you die. The woman dies. The man lives, to feed the babies. Is it not so?"

"No! No! In my race, the females live long, whether or not they love. Longer than the men, often. Do you mean you expect to die because we made love?"

"Why, yes. We all do. Only I feared I would live forever, alone."

"Good gods... But I am sure you won't have a baby, Kamir. We are too different. Like a—a crab and a fish, they can't have young together."

"And you are the crab?" She laughs playfully. "But no, perhaps you are right. We won't think of it. This is our happy time."

She snuggles down closer in the hammocky boat. "Sleep well, dear 'Om Jhared. Sleep well."

"Sleep well, my darling."

I lie sleepless, incredulous.

What horrible wrong have I committed in my selfish lust? Even if I call it "love," it led me terribly

astray.

The little beach-life is tuning up its night song, but I am in no mood to appreciate it. A million unanswered questions are revolving in my head like rolls of barbed wire. What is this murderous process she believes will kill her? There must be a way to stop it. It can't be biological, the species wouldn't survive. Perhaps the people in the village make some lethal potion or charm they give the women. I could stop her taking it. Maybe they acquiesce in their deaths, by stopping eating, or something of that sort. I could stop that, too. There must be a way—I *must* stop it.

Eventually fatigue takes me and I lose consciousness, to dream of a terrifying great crab taking Kamir.

? ? ?

The morning is washed clean and clear, the barometer is high. Kamir gets up and announces she will go to the reef for fresh fish. I get out my scuba gear and prepare to go with her; I don't want us to be parted.

She is still nude, and as she stands, stretching luxuriously in the morning sun, I make myself inspect her.

She is a radiant figure, palest of green-whites in the golden sun, with that mop of fiery "hair." A faint flush suffuses her cheeks and lips and touches her body here and there. There is no other hair-like stuff on her; she is as smooth as a marble statue. Only, on her lower abdomen, there is this vertical thick welt I had glimpsed, like an old cicatrice. I see it is composed of two long lips, tightly appressed. Evidently their opening discloses the softness I had found. Closed, it is only a keloid-like ridge.

I find I, too, am being inspected. After a moment she comes close and touches me. Involuntarily I react, and she draws back, laughing and shaking her head.

"So different!" she says. Then, "Show me a picture of your women."

But I find I can barely summon up an adequate image of a Human female, so much has this little mermaid obsessed me. When I do, it seems, well, messy and strange.

"Hmm," she says. "So all are ugly, like me!"

"What is this 'ugly'?" I am becoming exasperated. "What about you is supposed to be ugly?"

"Why, I am so "thin and bony, all over." She puffs out her cheeks and with her hands sketches over herself the outlines of a very fat woman. "I should be like this! Then you live long enough to help. Oh, but I see you don't want me to say that. Let's go to the sea."

So we run down the dunes and splash out until I have to stop to put on my gear. It all amuses her vastly. When I submerge, she circles me, swift as a fish, with her flared-out gills. I have trouble making her take my needs seriously; she tries to slip my mask off for a kiss, and I have to surface and explain that if she wishes to keep her lover, she must allow him to breathe. She sobers quickly, catching my serious feeling-tone, and after that we have no more trouble.

It is enchanting, down below, watching her herd little reef fish into her net. And I, too, sorrow when we come out and have to kill them.

I have an idea.

"Kamir, have you ever looked at yourself?"

"Oh yes. Mayrua keeps a polished shell. And sometimes, in very still water."

"Look." And I root out my little mirror. "Now you will see beauty."

She loves it, turning it to catch me, too. But she cannot resist trying to make a "fat" face.

I try to convince her, tracing my fingers over her delicate features. But she only hugs me.

"I may keep this? No one has seen anything like it."

"Certainly."

That reminds me. While she is tucking away the mirror, I try to ask her what her people call themselves. It's the same old situation, they are only "the people," or "us." Her particular settlement is "the Souls of Ema," after some legendary father, and a neighboring group is the "Souls of Aeyor," for a woman who made an extraordinary trip.

"But we must have a name for you. You don't want to let outsiders name you something like 'Homo Wettensis'?" (Or, gods forbid, Homo Pforzheimerana.)

"Homo Wettensis?" she mimics, giggling. "Why?"

So I have to explain about her world being called "Wet." That sends her off into paroxysms of laughter. But then she sobers. "Mnerrin."

"What?"

"An old word that means 'wet,' or 'the wet ones.' Would that not do?"

"Why yes, if your people agree. *Mnerrin* is quite fine."

"Oh, they won't mind. Very well; your Mnerrin asks, what shall we do today?"

"Well, would you like to explore inland? Or shall we look for some islands you haven't visited? I thought we might go in my boat, it will just take two."

She clasps her hands like a delighted child. "I'd love that!

Yes, there are islands there"—she points north—"that haven't been seen for lifetimes."

"Let's go see!"

So we launch and repack the boat, and set off. She is much pleased with our speed, only once or twice she puts her hands over her ears as if the motor's hum bothers her.

"How fast does it go?"

I show her, but she soon covers her ears and cries, "Slow, slower, please—I can't see anything!" I realize that she has been mostly peering down into the water, while my eyes are on the sea and sky.

"Look, there is a big fish."

I see a moving shadow of enormous size, perhaps three meters. And before I can protest, Kamir throws a last morsel of fish overboard. The shadow surfaces—a big tan shape with round eyes. As it spots the fish, a long beaked bill breaks the water and clamps down. I get a glimpse of big, sharp cartilaginous ridges inside.

"That thing could take your arm off!"

"Well, if you let it, maybe. But look!"

To my horror, she rolls overboard. I see a flurry and a swirl and the thing hurriedly departs.

Kamir jumps and flips back in, laughing. "See? I just popped it on the nose, I told you."

"Don't ever do that again, my crazy little darling. It frightens me for you."

She rolls over and cuddles between my legs, still laughing. "Well, your driving this boat frightens me for you! But there is our first island."

The new island turns out spectacular, an old volcanic cone with strange tunnels running into the sea, from former lava tubes. So Kamir must be shown my instant camera, and exclaims over the tininess of the images. She wants to sleep there, but I detect enough signs of possible activity to make me discourage this, and toward evening we push on.

The next island proves to be full of the bird-like creatures. I pick one up—they are perfectly tame—and fancy I can trace signs of its evolutionary course from fish, too.

Next day there are two islands covered with a multitude of flowers, and the day after that, one whose river and bay teem with bright-colored, harmless sea snakes. And some days later comes a highlight; some river fish are clambering out of water and up in the undergrowth in pursuit of butterflies. And the next day an oddly barren island; and the next day, and the next...

I am guiltily aware that I should be making a record of all this. But when I get out my recorder and start, Kamir is so amused at my solemn tone of voice that we get little work done. My only concession to practicality is to keep a route map of our travel; so far it has been due north, so that my little base camp and the lander—about which I refuse to think—are still straight south.

We junket on and on over the turquoise sea, sometimes stopping to dive at barely-submerged coral reefs that would tear the bottom off a larger boat. And when the spirit moves us, we make love, sometimes in a fit of passion, sometimes gentle as children.

It is the happiest time of my life.

Only, one day I notice that where Kamir's stomach had been elegantly flat, it now seems to have taken on a womanly curve. I put it down to the extraordinary number of little butterfish she eats, and forget it... or try to. The weather is halcyon beautiful. A few times we see storms in the distance, but they do not come near.

One very clear night we are camped on a beach like the one on which we met, with a small estuary and its group of papyrus-cenya in the center. Kamir finishes the handsome wristband she has been making for me from the tail of her loincloth, using for needle a splinter sliced from a cenya stem. (Regretfully, she has had to admit that we couldn't comfortably exchange clothes.) In lieu of my trunks I give her my identity bracelet; it won't do on her wrist because of the fin, but it goes nicely on her slim ankle.

When she sees the lettering, and I spell out my name, she frowns.

"I think this is something for Maoul," she says.

"Who is Maoul?"

"An old man, very wise. He made some of those land pictures you call 'maps.' These are something like that."

"Yes," I say, surprised. Bright little mermaid!

"And now"—she stretches out with her head on my lap, and hands me the binoculars—"you will tell me more, please, about those stars."

It is a topic we have just broached. I lament my star charts, left back in the lander; it is a perfect night for viewing, the moons are down for the hour, and the heavens are a riotous sight. I do the best I can; she is very keen and remembers well. Later we drift off to sleep, entangled in the binocular strap, with images of dark nebulae floating in our heads...

—And then I am suddenly awake. What's happening? All is still; too still, that's what waked me. All the night creatures are silent.

Something is on the beach.

I listen hard and catch a faint splashing. Correction, something is coming out of the sea, over by the river outlet where papyrus-cenya hide the view. The moons are just rising. I sense Kamir is awake and listening, too.

Can it be a giant crab?

But as I form the thought, the last thing I expected in this world happens—a light shines out.

It's not a torch, but a bright greenish glow. Then it begins to blink, rhythmically. Signals?

"Ahhh," says Kamir. "Wait one moment, my love. I go."

"Kamir, wait—"

But she is up and racing down the beach, toward the cenyas.

I wait tensely, straining my ears. Aha—a faint colloquy; of course, I remember, I'll hear little, these people are telepaths. Anger rises; who or what dares to intrude on us? Who can it be? I realize I know so little about Kamir; could this be a father? A lover? A pang of raw jealousy grips me, the thought that it might be another woman never enters my besotted mind. And I've forgotten, or never believed, Kamir's story of being unmarried. Can this be a *husband*, hunting her?

And then abruptly, without my hearing footsteps, they are beside me, two forms blocking out the moonrise. The stranger is taller and much stouter than Kamir.

"Om Jhared? This is Agna, my egg-mate."

What is she telling me? I get the image of a large object, which crumbles or splits to reveal—no, not objects: babies. An image of a woman holding two of them.

"Your *brother*?"

"Yes, yes!"

Vast relief for me. I remember my manners.

"Greetings, Agna." But wait—has he come to charge me with violating his sister? Gods! No, he returns my greeting cordially, adding, "For three days I track Kamir. Now I find her here with you."

"Yes," says Kamir. "Agna, great happiness has come to me. 'Om Jhared is my mate."

"No!" says Agna, looking at me in astonishment. "But Kamir is so—so—"

I get an image of the unsaid word and push it away. So Kamir was being truthful about her "ugliness."

"In my eyes," I say firmly, "and in the eyes of my people if they could see her, Kamir is a very beautiful woman. Her appearance is so lovely that I was attracted to her at once. I only hope that I am not too ugly, as you call it, in your eyes."

"Never!" exclaims Kamir loyally, and adds with more realism, "He is so strange altogether that 'ugly' has no meaning. Oh, Agna, couldn't you tell? You followed a trail of happiness."

"Yes." Agna nods. "I was puzzled. Well, little sister, the sun of the seas seems to have smiled on you. Just when we gave up hope that you would develop, a mate comes from the skies!" He chuckles. "But I have come to bring you home. And 'Om Jhared, too, of course, if he will. The season of storms seems to have come unusually early this year. We should make the Long Swim now. And one has come from the Souls of Aeyor with very bad news."

"What news? What has happened? Aeyor is the campment near us," she reminds me.

"Later, later. You will have many questions, and I was not there when he came. Right now I need a bit of rest, and tomorrow early we will start."

"Oh, you are a tease, my solemn brother!" Kamir chides.

I am rather relieved that some Mnerrin are "solemn"; my little mermaid's unfailing merriment in the face of danger doesn't strike me as a survival trait. And I notice again what had felt with Kamir, the sense of this person's profound civility. And he must be very tired; he apparently has been swimming for three days straight.

"You have eaten?" I inquire.

"Oh yes."

"Then let us go back to sleep, night traveler!" Kamir laughs, flopping down on our boat bed.

"Right."

Agna's preparations are as simple as Kamir's were; he untucks the tail of his finely-decorated loincloth, sits down, and spreads it on the sand to protect his face and, saying, "Sleep well, little sister. Sleep well, 'Om Jhared," he lies back, face to the skies.

"Sleep well, Agna," we say.

I close my eyes against the bright, tricolored moonlight, and hold her close in silence. So our halcyon time has abruptly come to an end. I sigh, sad beyond measure. And what is this Long Swim Agna spoke of? It must be the seasonal migration Kamir had told me of; apparently the Mnerrin spend the stormy months at another island far to the south. I will, of course, go with them, somehow. Tomorrow I must calculate my batteries; perhaps I will have to return to the lander for recharge on the way...

My last thought, as sleep takes me, is the inflexible value they seem to place on what they call personal beauty. It is almost tangible to them—yet Agna was willing to accept my relative viewpoint. Civilized!...

The nightly chorus is tuning up again, the three little moons ride high. What will the morrow bring? No—the day after; Agna estimated we were about two days' travel away in a straight line... Out of the darkness comes a sleepy chuckle: Agna is laughing in his sleep. Kamir answers with an unconscious grunt, and I go to sleep.

???

The trip is dreamlike. Again I am struck by Mnerrin simplicity: next morning, after a quick breakfast and a pause to help me set a compass heading, Agna simply wades into the water and starts swimming. Through the pass, he turns due east, while Kamir and I pack up my gear and launch the boat.

It takes us a surprisingly long time to catch him up—those pale flashing arms really cover the distance,

and he swims in a knife-straight line. Kamir has shown me how her red "hair" works as a direction-finder in the sea. Still it seems strange to find a lone swimmer heading so confidently with no land in sight. I wish I could take him on board, but the dinghy only holds two.

We match our pace to his and settle down, sleepy in the balmy air. Kamir, too, is saddened by the end of our happy days. But presently she is restless.

"Om Jhared?"

"What is it, darling?"

"If you would not be too alone, I want to swim for a time with Agna. I need exercise, and I'd like to see more in the sea."

"I'll miss you, my darling. But if you want to, go."

So she tumbles overboard, and after that we go through regular exchanges, with Agna taking a rest now and then. As we follow Kamir, I think of how my little mermaid must have been before we met—a small person swimming alone in the wide seas. She had seen the fires of the lander's retro-rockets, she'd told me, and come to investigate. Fearless little mermaid!

Agna proves to be pleasant company, with an inquiring and thoughtful mind. Like his sister, he has red "hair" and blue eyes, though his crest is darker and his eyes lighter than hers. His features would have been handsome had they not been so larded with fat.

Following my theory of the ultimately utilitarian base for standards of beauty, I ask him if the plumpness they value so has any purpose.

"Does it serve to warm you in cold water?"

"Oh, perhaps. But certainly it means long life."

"Long life? How do you mean?"

"For the female, after bearing young. And for the male, too. It helps with the feeding time. See me; I have just finished feeding five young, so I am thin. But I could not have fed my babies so well, had I been this thin at the start."

Complexities. I realize I have spent my time enjoying myself with Kamir instead of collecting data. Yet somehow I am unwilling to pursue the matter now, and am grateful when he says, reflectively: "Yes, I see what you mean. We have never thought of it like that—interesting! And thus you must have a different system, in which fat plays no part?"

"Yes, we do, although I'm not sure of the details of yours. But we regard fat as unhealthy. For us, *fat* seems to threaten short life."

His eyes sparkle with interest.

"So! How fascinating. Yes, a good theory! But look, there is our dinner. Kamir!"

Without pausing, she shouts back over her shoulder, "I see it! Do you think I am asleep?"

"A reef, thick with *emalu*" Agna explains to me. "A pity we cannot bring some back for the people, it is delicious."

"We could pile it in the boat," I suggest, hoping that "emalu" is not, say, a stinging jellyfish.

"No; it wouldn't keep," Agna says regretfully, and dives overboard.

Kamir, too, has submerged.

They come up with handfuls of a golden, anemone-like fuzz, which they devour like Human children into cotton candy. *Emalu* is, it seems, a fabulous treat. I get out my food-bars.

And it is fabulous, dining there on the sea with a pair of merpeople. At the moment, no land at all is yet in sight. I somehow hadn't realized, when Agna spoke of a two-day journey, that he meant two days and a night of simply swimming and sleeping on the open sea. Well, I'll be comfortable in the boat, and the weather seems settled. How will they do? I'm aware that there are a million questions I should be asking. But somehow it is difficult, conversing with two heads bobbing about on the ocean. The truth is, I'm unwilling to break the spell.

Their dinner over, Agna starts off again, and they swim till darkness. Agna calls for a conference and

pulls out his light, which proves to be a small bundle of a lichen-like plant.

"Fish come to this," he explains to me. "I have to keep it in a dark pocket or I'd get no sleep! Tell me, little sister, do you wish to continue? I could lead with this light. But we have made good distance; I can feel home strongly. And there is a reef just ahead where we could have fresh breakfast."

"I feel it, too," says Kamir, who has been swimming with him. "I think we should stay here. I didn't get enough sleep last night, thanks to you." She laughs.

"Very well." Agna repockets his light and swims to a tactful distance. "Good night, little sister. Good night, "Omjhared."

"Good night," we call as Kamir climbs on board to join me.

We stretch out in the little boat and let the wavelets rock us to love and sleep.

But toward morning, Kamir nudges me awake. It's bright moonlight.

"Dear 'Om Jhared—I want to go in the sea now. To have a last sleep in the sea. Do you mind?"

"Yes, I mind. But go ahead, darling. Only don't go too far away."

"I won't. Oh, my sweet darling, my mate-from-the-stars!" And with a hug and a kiss she has gone into the deep water. I shudder with unknown fear. But she simply says good night again and turns over, gills open, to sleep in the sea. I see Agna's dark head floating, only a few yards away. Evidently there is no current here. I relax and try for sleep but it does not come. The image of my little mermaid slipping away from me into darkness haunts my mind. I watch her until the moons go down and I can no longer see.

? ? ?

Next morning we awaken still together, and the Mnerrin dive for their morning meal. Studying the horizon, I see, straight ahead, the kind of long, low cloud that means land. But the Mnerrin are scarcely interested; their senses had long told them it was there.

We set *off* as before. It is again dreamlike, but hour by hour the cloud grows higher, closer, until my binoculars show the island beneath, where the dream must end. Or change. But what a wonderful way to travel, I reflect, watching the two pairs of arms flash rhythmically. Living, sleeping, eating, *at home* in the sea. For all their Humanness, they are also aquatic animals...

And I catch them mind-speaking each other as they go.

"See, Agna—new fish over there. Yellow, red, black tail... Will you remember it? I have at least twenty new ones to report."

"Yes... There must be a reef ahead," comes Agna's thought.

I am almost in a trance state when suddenly the unmistakable sound of voices singing comes across the water. We are arriving. I turn to my glasses and make out that we are coming to a large river estuary, surrounded by a low green swamp of delta, through which thread numerous streamlets. Behind the delta is the shore proper, a low bank running up to a plateau on which I can glimpse land vegetation, trees. And beyond that in turn rises a central mountain, green to its summit. A large island.

As we come closer I see that the swampy delta is full of small huts. And a column of smoke is rising from before a larger hut in the center. Most of the small ones appear in need of repairs, I see, as if no longer in use.

But most important, I see the people.

They are all on the beach, it seems, strolling or chatting in groups. One sizable group is lying down. And children are playing around them, seemingly all of one age. Babies, too, lie about doing Human-baby things, or are held in arms. All eyes are focused upon us; even through the glasses I can catch the gleams of blue. And I feel the feathery touch of mind-search.

I decide Kamir should arrive in style, so I bring her in the boat and put her up front with a paddle. As soon as we get closer I will hoist the motor and paddle her in.

The bay in front of the delta is quite narrow. Agna arrives at the reef and waves me to follow him through one of the many passes. Kamir is waving her paddle excitedly.

The mind-search and mind-greetings have become overwhelming. My mind-speech has much

improved, so I send a formal greeting to the people, who respond in a babble. Evidently they have no formal spokesman.

"Whom shall I speak to, Kamir?"

"Oh, call to Maoul. That tall old man, there."

Agna is already wading ashore in Maoul's direction; we follow him in. And from there on, the afternoon is a genteel pandemonium.

Maoul greets us cordially, having received Agna's news. But everyone on the beach must receive it, too, and share it with others, and everyone must meet me and congratulate Kamir—with varying degrees of incredulity—and Agna disappears to go to his mate, who is one of the invalids lying down.

Finally he returns to direct us to his hut, and I make a fool of myself splashing through the swamp carrying my stuff, until someone points out that one walks in the little hard-bottomed rivulets, one of which, I now see, runs by every hut. By the time we get the boat and the gear up to Agna's terrain, after demonstrating everything to the crowd, dark is falling. And Maoul, it appears, has laid on a feast of celebration. They have caught a large fish to roast in cenia leaves, with various delectable fruits.

"Whoee!" Kamir laughs, plumping down on the boat after our last load. "That was fierce! Oh, 'Om Jhared, how I wish we were back alone with our islands!"

For me, too, the afternoon has been a melee of pale plump genial gentlemen in loincloths, eager children, ethereal invalids opening huge blue eyes at my strangenesses, and endless repetition by mind and speech.

"Me too." I hug her. "But what is the bad news Maoul started to explain? I got carried off to be shown to the ladies. What's the matter with the women, by the way? They're so thin. Emaciated. Have you had an epidemic?"

"Oh, no!" Kamir laughs. "It's just the birthings. Well, Maoul said that one came, wounded, from the Souls of Aeyor, the next encampment, to say that they had been set upon by terrible gold-skinned people, who tried to kill—yes, actually *murder*—all of them. Some have escaped by going in the sea—the gold-skinned ones do not swim, it seems—but the rest were killed. Isn't that terrible? What could such people be, how can it *happen*!"

I am shocked into sobriety. Oh gods, my paradise planet isn't all paradise, it contains others who are killers. Homo Ferox. Unless by chance this is an invasion of Black Worlders or other moral barbarians with high technology, out to conquer an attractive world?

But no, Kamir tells me. They are people of this world, only with strange tools to hurt and kill. And they have only the crudest mind-speech, and do not go in the water, as she'd said. The man who swam here—two days, with a bad spear cut in his side—said they had come from somewhere far, far to the west. "Where legends say we also came from," Kamir adds.

That would be the small continent Pforzheimer had seen, I figure. Perhaps it is still spawning out new races of Homo Wettensis, as a part of Old Terra once did. A dreadful parallel jumps to my mind; I push it aside resolutely.

"Kamir, I have seen such things on other worlds. I must talk with Maoul tonight. If this is what I think, you are in danger here. These goldskins will not stop with one encampment."

"Oh, no... Yes, you must speak with Maoul. And why don't you talk with Elia?"

"Who's Elia?"

"The man who swam here. He is lying in the big hut, ill with his wound. Maybe you can help him. Oh, 'Om Jhared, I showed your beautiful bracelet"—she points to her ankle—"to Maoul. He said they were pictures of sounds, and we should learn them and make one for everybody. *And* make a picture of important things, too. I didn't understand it all but he was very excited."

Fantastic. So I will end by having these people transcribe their speech into Galactic! I must see more of Maoul. Is he a lone genius, or is this the level of their intellects? Meanwhile, it's a good idea to talk with this Elia.

I do talk to Elia, and am not made happy. These goldskins appear to be journeying from island to island, attacking everything they meet. They cross the sea by large, ugly war canoes. And they have lost their flock, or herd of some kind of land animal, so that they're hungry.

"How did you learn all this?" I ask Elia. "I hid two days, watching and listening, until I was able to travel," he answers. "Man-from-the-skies, I thank you for your medicines. The people here have been very kind, they even made a song in my honor. But the relief from pain is better still!"

"And I think that will end the infection," I tell him, putting away the universal antibiotic the spacers give us.

The feast that night is held in front of the hut in which Elia lies, where I had seen the cookfire; it is the only bit of hard ground in the swampy delta. All is very informal—we simply sit about on tussocks of grass, and the children pass us succulent-looking morsels of fish, beside which my food-bars seem very bleak. The invalid women, at whom I will not look closely, are helped to small portions of a soup made by their mates from the fish drippings. And I get my first good look at Mnerrin teenagers, who, like the children, seem to be all nearly the same age. Aside from the overweight, they are charming, most with rufous crests, plus a few blonds and brunettes, and all with the blue, blue eyes. As I sit there, the majority of the people are looking curiously at me between bites, and the impression made by those eyes is very striking. From dark to pale, from aquamarine to lapis lazuli to sapphire to crystal blue, all, all are as blue as if they carried a bit of the shining sea within their heads—as perhaps they do.

I think of a race whose eye color we will never know, and it motivates me to tackle Maoul. But first I must settle one question.

"Maoul, how does it happen that you are eating this large fish? Kamir gave me the idea that you do not kill, except the brainless little butterflyfish, and even those reluctantly?"

He becomes grave. "It was perhaps very wrong of us, 'Om Jhared," he admits. "But this fellow here was also eating our butterflyfish. And he began tearing our nets. All over the reef. He harassed us until Pamir hit him too hard on the snout. We call him *omnar*—and legend has it that omnars are very good to eat. And so it's proving!" He laughs—that universal Mnerrin laugh that seems to express the purest of happiness.

"Well, that makes my task easier. For I must explain that you have encountered another omnar—a land omnar, who will not stop with your nets, but will kill and perhaps eat everything, including you."

"You mean... the goldskins?" he asks dubiously.

"Yes, I do. The point is this. You and your people are very different from the great majority of races. In my life of traveling and learning of travels, I have never encountered a race who so hated killing. You have not even the words for what is the daily occupation of many peoples—war, aggression, fighting, invasion, attack. Here, let me show you." And I sent out horrible images, to him and the other men who were leaning to hear. I saw their faces change.

"How unspeakable!" Maoul exclaims with loathing. The others joined him. "Why do you show us such things?"

"Because you are in danger. I, too, hate what I have just shown, and so do most of my race. I thought I had come to the happiest world in the Galaxy when I found you. But now we must face the fact that you are not alone, that there is another people here, cruel and aggressive, who have found you. And they won't stop until they have attacked you and taken over your nesting site here."

"But there is plenty of room in the world. Why should they come here?"

"Yes. But people like that do not see it so. They want *all*. And maybe they want slaves—people to carry their burdens when they travel on land, or to paddle their canoes in the sea. Or they may want you who go in the sea to catch fish for them."

Maoul laughs. "If they make us go in the sea, we will leave."

"Not if they hold your children. Oh, they have terrible ways of forcing you to do their will."

"Hmm... You seem to know much about this." Maoul eyes me with a trace of dubiety.

"Yes, unfortunately. I told you, you are the only people I have met in a lifetime of traveling who are

free of aggression."

Maoul ponders. "Well, it seems we must leave here and find another nesting place. But our women still live, yet are too weak to travel."

"Would you just give up your home to these intruders?"

"What else can we do?"

"You can fight. I can show you how. It means changing your way of life for a time, but that has been changed anyway.

Wherever you flee to, these predatory goldskins will find you again."

"How can we—what did you call it—fight?"

"What did they attack with? Spears—which are long sharp staves—or perhaps arrows shot from a bow? Like this?" I mimic shooting.

He shakes his head. "The, ah, spears, I think. And—" He lowers his eyes as if to shut out some vision too sickening to look at. "They came also with *fire*, Elia says." Maoul's voice drops to a whisper. "They burned huts—some with babies still in them."

"Oh gods. My friend, I am so sorry this evil thing has come to you. I believed I had found a world of peace, the most beautiful thing in the universe."

"What is *peace*?"

"What you have. How you live. No fighting. No killing. Harmony... When I leave, I'm going to petition the Federation to save you, to exterminate these gold-skinned aggressors."

"Oh no. That would be evil. This is their world, too."

"But they are destroying this world... Maoul, when these goldskins come, you people will be like helpless infants before them. And they will come before you depart—they might be on us tonight, and you don't even have watchers out. Will you let me train the men in some self-defense so they may at least protect their women and children? And will you let me organize a watch? We have a word for such a leader and trainer of armed men: a 'general.' Will you let me be your general for this purpose alone?"

Maoul's blue eyes bore into mine, I can feel his mind searching me. And tendrils of mind-search come from the other men. I open to them, show them all I am. They must be right about this, sure of their choice.

"Very well, 'Om Jhared," Maoul says after a busy silence. "You have convinced me that we do face some trouble." The others nod. "We will call a council and you will show them such images as you showed me, and be our general."

"Gladly," I say, wondering at the same time what I have let myself in for. To transform a profoundly pacific people into a defense force in a few days? Obviously it can't be done.

But anything would be better than their present helplessness. I must try.

Maoul is pointing to my wrist. "Now there is another matter." He smiles. "Kamir."

She has been beside us, listening intently.

"We see you have, against all hope, found a mate," Maoul continues. "Our congratulations." He puts an arm around her, kisses her cheek. She smiles radiantly—my little mermaid bride.

"And you, 'Om Jhared, strangely are the father; father-from-the-skies. But Agna says you know nothing of caring for young babies."

"I did not think there could be young. We are so different—"

Maoul is laughing wholeheartedly. He places both hands along Kamir's belly so I can see. And I can no longer delude myself—it is the belly of a pregnant woman.

"Oh gods! Have I done something evil?"

"I helped you," says Kamir smugly.

"No," says Maoul, suddenly grave. "How can babies be evil? They are the consummation we all long for. But how will you care for them? What will you *do*? I fear Kamir will not be much help."

Agna speaks up from where he had been sitting beside an invalid woman. "I have been thinking of

this, Maoul. They can of course have my hut and birthing-place—I will replace its roof, tomorrow. And I will help him feed them until we start on the Long Swim. Then maybe Donnia here—" He turns to a plump young Mnerrin who has been standing by us, his attention divided between Agna and me. "Donnia is also our egg-fellow," he tells me, meaning, brother to himself and Kamir.

"Yes," says Donnia. "Brother and sister, I will help. My mate—" he bows his head briefly "—has already gone. And you can see that I am far from drained."

"His babies did not live," Kamir whispers to me.

"Your sorrow is my sorrow," I say formally. "I—we thank you deeply for your help. As I said, I had not believed that two such different people could have young. And I don't know what may come; the results may be bad. But surely we need your help."

"Good, then it is settled," says Maoul. "Tell us, 'Om Jhared, why did you come to our world?"

"To rest," I tell them. "I was very tired after a long task, and your world looked so beautiful."

"And now you have another task," the old man smiled.

"Two tasks," I remind him. "Tomorrow I start teaching you how to defend yourselves against these goldskins. For tonight I will just say this: Remember, the eruption of these people is going to change all your lives, for a time at least. And you are going to have to prepare yourselves to hurt, to harm, to kill, other human beings, who seek to kill you. Think on that."

Looking and searching about, I see that my speech evoked mainly puzzlement. Gods, what have I undertaken? I must plan...

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At Maoul's council next day, I see that the children and many of the teenagers are absent. Maoul says that he thought such plans were not for children.

"To the contrary, it is important that they learn. They will have parts to play, and this problem may be with them all their lives." So they are brought, down to the smallest, who stare at me with huge blue eyes, so much like plump little Human kids, despite their straight-up small fins.

I start by repeating what I had told Maoul, and showing them images of war and of the goldskin's probable attack. They respond, as I'd expected, with horror and the suggestion that they at once go someplace else. I try to convince them that mere flight is useless, that the goldskins will pursue them, and that they may well attack before they are prepared to move.

"You would be simply laying this upon your children, and upon your children's children, if you fail to solve it now."

The mention of children turns their minds. These people are amazingly tied to their young—all of them, even the young boys, place great value upon babies, I find. Perhaps because, I have noticed, they have relatively few compared with the other hominid races I know. I make a mental note to find out if the goldskin people are faster breeders.

I then outline my plan.

"When the goldskins attack us here, they will have learned from their last attack that you will seek to escape to the sea. So they will make sure to seize the beaches quickly, maybe even sending a separate party around the shore. If you attempt to flee that way, they will catch you easily. But tell me, that river"—I point to the line of papyrus plants marking the main stream to the estuary—"does it have a deep channel in the center all the way to the sea? Yes? Good. Then instead of going to the beach, you will make for the river. The problem is to defend yourselves and the women and children until you can all get there. One way is for the men to form a circle, with shields and spears on the outside, in which the children and weak ones can shelter. The goldskins will think you are making a final stand, and indeed, you can hold them off until all are assembled. But then you head for the river here, all in a group. That way you will fare much better than if you break and run individually; those who try that would be easily run down and killed." I show them an image.

The idea appeals to them, perhaps because of its symmetry.

"But the circle is no good unless we have shields and spears, and also warning of the goldskins'

approach. So the first things we must do are make weapons, and set out a guard. The seasoned wood in these unused huts will do for spears. Every man shall make his own—I will show you how—and his shield. I have a spear-proof cloth, my tarpaulin, which we can cut up for shield covers. For the watch, I need volunteers among the boys with the best mind-hearing, four for the shore and four for the beach. And an older boy who will supervise them."

So I proceed to organize a watch, and a weapons sergeant. When I ask for something that would make a tremendous noise, they produce conch shells for the watchers to blow. And then I ask for a volunteer or two to go down the coast and keep watch on the goldskins' encampment at the lost village of the Souls of Aeyor.

A man named Falca speaks up. "It is my misfortune that I cannot mind-speak well. But I hear well. So I will go and watch and listen. And maybe my young friend Kimra, who swims so fast, will come with me to bring word back if need be?"

Kimra, a relatively slender lad, jumps up with shining eyes. "Oh yes, Falca! Let us start now!"

I see that my message has been far more keenly received by the younger Mnerrin. So their pacifism is not some innate predisposition, but a matter of culture, of training. What carefully-wrought beauty I am destroying!

But I push the thought aside and proceed to set out our first watch shift, telling their sergeant to be sure to check on them at random, unpredictable times. And then I tear out suitable wood from a storm-wrecked hut, and give a demonstration of spear making. Strong knives are the bottleneck; their shell knives are too frail. I ransack my gear for extra knives and end by using my laser to prepare a supply of rough staves. As the first spears shape up in the hands of my future "warriors," I find another problem: I must dissuade them from weakening the spears by making handsome slim places for hand-holds, and wasting time on ornament and polish.

"I see that being a general is complicated," Maoul observes with a smile.

"Oh, it's an old, sad story... But I have never met a people who were so far from war. I greatly fear for you."

That night about third moon I waken in Kamir's embrace and go as stealthily as I can to surprise our lookouts. I find, as I expected, two of them fast asleep. I rouse them roughly and give them a lecture on the sacredness of guard duty. The younger boy is nearly crying, but I ignore it—with difficulty. His eyes are so much like Kamir's. During the early morning I get the sergeant of the watch to repeat the same trick on the next shift.

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Next day I vary the menu by arranging a drill. I get all the boys and girls to impersonate goldskins, and have them come down the coast onto the lookouts, who respond enthusiastically with horrific conch-blasts. The men come out of their huts and uncertainly form a loose circle near the riverside, into which the women, carrying babies, feebly come, and the smaller children. I see that some of my least-promising "warriors" will have to be spared to help the women take shelter and sort them out.

My remaining corps of potential fighters, while overweight, looks more promising. Like many fat men, they are light on their feet and supple, and like all Mnerrin, very strong. I explain how we will use the shields, held alternately high and low, and briefly impersonate a goldskin—whom I have as yet never seen—in coming at them. They tremble and make way, and I harangue them like a drill sergeant on the need to hold their places and protect the children behind. After I have harassed them into tightening to a respectable defense, we practice moving all together to the river and forming a corridor to protect the women and children going in the water. The idea of *protection* is, I find, the best spur.

Then we turn to shield making; a wicker frame covered with a piece of my best tarp held on with spacer's glue makes a pretty spear-proof defense, even if—which I can't find out—the goldskins have metal spear points. Against mere fire-hardened wood it is impressive, and gives my warriors confidence. They are not cowardly, but merely totally unused to the idea of war itself, of hurting and being hurt.

This becomes clear when we go on to practice actual combat. I sacrifice one of my two canvas ditty

bags, stuff it with sand and moss, and hang it up to give them a target to thrust at. It is very hard to get them even to pierce the "skin." When I tell them to hit me, to make me fall down, their blows are mere taps. In desperation I pretend to fall; my assailant looks horrified, though I jump up and congratulate him.

But then comes assistance of a dreadful kind.

Young Kimra, who had been spying on the goldskins with Falca, comes swimming in one afternoon, broadcasting for attention. We gather round him as he wades ashore.

"The goldmen are definitely preparing for something," he tells us. "They have been holding conferences. Falca told me to tell you that. And—" he pauses. "We have seen several of the men they took prisoner. The golds have cut off their crests. Shaved them bald." He sends us the images.

"Now they can never escape," Maoul groans. But that did not seem to be all; Kimra is looking at the ground and biting his lip.

"What more?" I ask.

"And—I cannot say it. The children..."

"Yes, what about the children? What have they done to them?"

"They—they are *eating* them!"

"Oh, no!"

"Yes." The boy's lips tremble. "Yes... One night we swam in close—and saw. A child's body was hung up by their fire, hung up like, like *meat*!"

Maoul looks at me. "Is this possible?"

"I fear it is. You see, they do not regard you as people. And they lost their flock of some kind of animals."

"This must be stopped!"

Around us I can hear the report being whispered from man to man.

"We must go there!" Maoul declares.

"No," I tell him. "You could not equal them in fighting. You would only be killed. And then they would come here for your children."

"Can you stop it, 'Om Jhared?"

I have been thinking hard. "I can try. Tell me, is there an island nearby which is on the route of your Long Swim?"

"Yes. The Island of the Green Coral. It is small, but with good food."

"Then here is what we can do: there is one time when their camp will be little defended. That is when they start to come here. Find me a good swimmer, a boy too light to fight well. I will take him in my boat at top speed down to their camp. When the men leave to come here, I will go ashore with my fire-weapon and free the children and any other captives they have, including the mutilated men. Your boy can lead them all to the Island of Green Coral to wait for you. I will return here at speed and be with you when they attack."

"Can that be done? Let us question Elia closely on the distances by water and land."

"Spoken like a general."

As we go up to Elia's hut, I see a man attacking the canvas dummy with his spear. He runs it right through. The horrible news has wrought a change.

Elia tells us that the plan is feasible. To get here by land, the goldskins must go around a range of foothills; it might take them as much as two days.

As we come away, the sergeant of the watch comes to tell us that his boys have sensed minds nearby in the dawn. But the trace faded soon.

"That will be their spies," I tell Maoul. "They will go back and report on this village, how many we are, and the lay of the land. Thank fate they didn't see our weapons; they will think we are just like the village they crushed."

So I must wait at least two days before trying my rescue raid. Young Kimra goes back to watch with

Falca.

We spend the days improving our drill and solving last-minute problems. Such as, what if the goldskins attack the circle with fire? Torches? I set out big containers of water, with a delegate to keep them filled. But the prospect of torches is too daunting. In desperation, I give the fire-control sergeant my can of extinguisher and explain its use. But in future they will have to depend on water alone.

And I confer with Mavru, their quasi-official Healer, to set up the way to treat spear wounds—packing them with the water-moss, which seems, like a similar Terra sphagnum, able to suppress infection. We set up a first-aid station by the river.

Strangely enough, in those last hours of peace, I get to know the Mnerrin better than ever before. I stroll the beach, watching their recreations. Among the more expected sights—boys and girls playing ball—I find a man surrounded by onlookers. He is drawing circles and triangles in the sand and, with a knotted string, explaining what he calls "Relations." This seems to be their art of geometry and mathematics. I am startled to find diagrams that imply knowledge of the Pythagorean theorems. So these people are not just simple Polynesian-like paradise-dwellers! No, this beach is more like the Athenian agora, where men in simple lengths of cloth discussed the eternal verities.

"We plan to make a permanent structure of stone at storm season home," one man told me. "And we are going to use Relations to make it beautiful."

I find that one of their carefully preserved possessions is a big shell straightedge, marked off in equidistant intervals. They have a standard of measure! The man who carries it across his back has found a friend who has promised to take it over in case he is wounded in the coming fighting with the gold-skins.

Nor has Maoul forgotten his discovery of the Galactic alphabet on Kamir's bracelet. He has been talking it over with others. They get me to teach them the whole alphabet and begin discussing whether more letters are needed to "picture" Mnerrin phonemes. The agora, indeed!

For my part, I take time to teach the Relations enthusiasts about our system of written numbers. Typically, they grasp it at once, and start transcribing them onto their shell measure. They are especially interested in the concept of zero.

"With this, we can do many things!" exclaims Kerana, the Relations explainer. I wonder by how many centuries—or decades—I have speeded their mental evolution. I wonder about their minds; this is no case of an isolated genius, but of a group with high, though unexploited, mental capability. And they seem not to be in danger of the fallacy that brought Plato and Aristotle's deductive logic low, the fallacy of refusing experiment. No; they test out every step of their Relational logic.

I tell them the story of Aristotle's deduction that women must have fewer teeth than men, while refusing to count his wife's teeth. They laugh. I sigh, and wonder if I should expose them to Bacon's scientific method. I try.

But time is growing short. I have scoured the land that lies behind the beach, and on the last day discover a flint-like rock. I bring it to two men who have been doing shell knives.

"Look. I think you can chip this into blades which will be stronger than shell. Let me show you." Inexpertly, I flake out an edge. They assent with pleasure to trying.

Maoul has produced a youth named Manya to accompany me on the rescue party. On the last night I pack a few rations and emergency supplies into the boat, and we leave it secured to the beach, to start at dawn.

That last night with Kamir she is untypically thoughtful. I think that the reality of all this has just come through to her, preoccupied as she is with her monstrously growing pregnancy. She has been lying lazily on the beach by day, sunning her vast belly, and smiling to herself, only distantly interested in my warlike activities. She is still enchantingly beautiful in a different way; my little mermaid has turned into a nature goddess.

"Darling, take this." I extract from my gear my last resort, a tiny close-action personal laser. "Defend yourself with it if I do not return in time. But remember, sweetheart, you must wait until your attacker is

very close, almost within arm's length."

"I will kill for our babies," she says calmly. "And you are right to go to save those children. We Mnerrin, as you call us, do not have many. All are precious." She hugs me again, then pushes me away.

It is very hard to leave her.

But Manya and I get into the dinghy, and shortly the little craft is leaping through the green waters at its great top speed. In a couple of hours we are within sight of the other settlement's bay, a journey which had cost the wounded Elia two painful days. The birthing huts here are different, somewhat larger, and supported by a center pole. Falca and Kimra are still on the reef, invisible until we catch their mind-call.

We stop out of sight, where we will wait for the goldskins to leave, and hold conference.

Falca says he expects them to leave very soon. "And see, they are loading three canoes. I think it is as you said, they are sending a party by sea to cut off escape on the beaches."

"How many are there in all?"

"About ninety, counting thirty-six in the canoes."

"It is bad odds for our people. But I have a very powerful weapon which will kill many. I shall be busy!"

"Kimra told you about the children?"

"Yes. That is why I'm here." I tell him my plan. Falca sighs.

"That is a great relief. Last night... they killed another. It was all we could do not to rush ashore and assail them. Stranger, you are a good man. Kimra and I were going to try alone, but we had no place to send them. The mutilated men cannot guide."

"Manya here will take care of that. Meanwhile, you and Kimra are no longer needed here. You might as well start swimming home. But be wary that those canoes do not overtake you in the water."

"Good. I go. The children are in that large hut with two entrances, and so are the other captives. They are tied with ropes."

"I can take care of that." I show him my shark knife. "Fair travel, friend." He nods, and without more ado he and Kimra take off in long, flat dives.

And then we wait. It becomes clear that the goldskins' start will not be made till next morning; they are preparing for a feast. I make the mistake of giving my binoculars to Manya, and he sees the fresh-killed body of a child hung up by the fire. He chokes with fury, then weeps quietly. I take the glasses and try to soothe him as best I can.

"Oh, if only I had those long-range weapons you told us about! No—I would go to them, I will kill them with my bare hands. I would *kill!* I will kill!... We will return in time, won't we?"

"Yes, but you won't be with me, Manya. You will be leading the children and the mutilated men to safety on that island."

He heaves a sigh. "Yes, I forgot. But if there is a goldskin left ashore, I will kill him with my bare hands."

"Don't be rash, Manya. Those men are practiced fighters. One of them could destroy you. I will attend to the killing."

"Then I will kill their children!"

He seems to hear himself then, and looks shocked. But he continues in a grim voice, "Their children will grow into such as they. They have devoured our babies. Yes, I will kill them."

I, too, am shocked. What have I created? Or no, it was not me, but the circumstances, the irruption of the goldskins. The sight of one's children being butchered like animals is not to be reacted to in a civilized way. He is not to be blamed.

But what about me? I contemplate cold-blooded genocide. No, not cold-blooded; these Mnerrin are in a sense my children. My ideal of Human life... Grimly, I realize that I have fallen into every psychic trap that spacers are warned of. I love these people.

So be it. When I return, I will pull every lever, press every button known to me to obtain official

intervention, to save this planet for the Mnerrin. It's just possible, especially if one or two of my friends are still in their offices...

Twilight has come. We eat and settle for the night, thinking our different thoughts. This is, in fact, one of the few times I have had pause from my duties to reflect. Manya's slight form beside me in the boat reminds me of Kamir. What of her? What of my babies, if incredibly they are born whole and viable? Can I stay here with them? Could I endure this tranquil life, as a non-sea animal? I don't know...

In any event, the need to get off-planet and do something for the Mnerrin will dominate my life for a while. After that, we'll see.

The fact is that my conviction that our mating would be infertile has been so strong that I still do not believe I am about to father little half aliens, if all goes well. I have never fathered others. What is this' recurrent question: how will you feed them, how *are* they fed, without mother's milk, by non-mammals? I had vaguely supposed that they would eat fish, like the adults. Evidently there is something that I, helped by Agna and Donnia, are going to have to do. And Kamir—I shudder at the mounting evidence that somehow this birthing will mean her death. Surely those were older women, there in the village. Not my bright, vital little mermaiden! No... no... These concerns are for after the coming battle...

Finally I sleep, and the balmy night goes by.

We rouse to dawnlight, at once aware that the camp is in motion. I check the glasses. Yes, goldskins are loading the canoes, preparing to cast off. We had better conceal ourselves.

We paddle in among some rocks that have tumbled to the sea, forming one arm of the bay shore. There we eat and watch.

This settlement is similar to the one I know in that it is in a delta around an estuary. Evidently these marshy places are proper sites for birthing and rearing the newborn. And there must be a limited number of them. By driving the Mnerrin from them, the goldskins could make it impossible for the Mnerrin to breed. Idly, I wonder why the deltas are so favorable. Perhaps tiny babies are taught to swim in the little streamlets, before their gills are strong enough for the open sea? And I am still not clear as to what role fresh water versus salt plays in their lives. Really, it is shameful how I have simply *lived*, without collecting any respectable body of data!

At this moment Manya nudges me, and we hear the *chunk, chunk* sound of paddles. A long low dark canoe, gaudily bedizened, comes in sight. Six paddlers to a side. We crouch low.

It passes by, about fifty meters away, followed by another, and another. And then no more. Cautiously, we nose out of the rocks to where we can see the camp. It is so still that we can hear voices. After we have waited about two hours, we hear a different sound, a kind of chanting. It takes on a marching tempo. And then we see a band of about fifty men tramping up out of the swampland, chanting and blowing on pipes. They gain solid ground and set off down the coast. My heart has sunk—fifty and thirty-six, more than two to one against the Mnerrin. My laser will have to do good work.

But now we have other work in hand.

We still avoid starting the motor, but paddle in to their beach. We beach the dingy and start at a crouching run toward the big hut Falca had pointed out. Women must be all about us in the camp, but we see none—until suddenly we come on a party of them right outside the hut. They have knives in their hands.

I notice only that they are brightly gilt, their hides like goldfish, and could be called handsome if your taste runs to eighty-kilo bodies.

Manya behind me is making an extraordinary noise through his clenched teeth.

I make a sweeping pass with the laser, and they go down like tenpins without making a sound, their throats burned through. Behind them the door to the hut is ajar. Had they been going in to murder another child?

Mind-cries are coming from the hut. I send strongly, "Friends come!" and Manya joins me. We step over the golden corpses and go in to a pitiful sight.

The hut is full of rails and posts, and everywhere are tied children, ranging from toddlers to teenagers.

Some grown men, shaved bald, are tied up at one end. The hut stinks.

"Cut them loose, quickly." I have brought a spare knife for Manya.

"Hungry, hungry," comes the mind-cry, especially from the smaller ones, as we free them.

"You will have food soon," we send. But how? I shudder to think what meat we will find beside the cookfires. Still, surely they have already fed on it. And would their dead friends object to giving their flesh to save the living?

A spear clatters in at the other door, a woman dives back.

"You finish freeing them, I'll attend to the village," I tell Manya. "Can you guard the outer door?" I ask a bald man, who is rubbing his limbs.

"Yes."

I go out and start through the village like a dervish, burning everything that moves. From one hut I am greeted by a spear. Inside, a man obviously sick or wounded is clinging to the center post. Beyond him crouch two women and children. Mercy is not in me that day; when I leave the hut, nothing lives behind me.

At intervals I check back to the big hut, where Manya is leading the children out. They stare at the goldskin corpses. The mutilated men look nervously about. Their heads are covered with pink fuzz.

I have found a pot of meat stew simmering at a hearth, and basket bowls. I put it before the kids without looking too closely.

"Can you catch reef-fish, after what they have done to you?" I ask the men.

"Oh yes, if we can find our nets."

As luck would have it, a pile of their filmy nets, loincloths, and other belongings has been thrown beside another hut.

"Good. Now, when you have eaten enough, you and the children will follow Manya here to an island—I think you know it—beside the path of the Long Swim. The people from my settlement will pick you up as they go by."

"They haven't left yet?"

"No." And then I have to respond to the overwhelming mind-question coming at me from everyone, even as they begin to gulp food: "Who are you?"

"A friend from the skies, Tom Jared. I have been living with your people since I met a girl named Kamir and mated with her. Now, these goldskins are going to attack our village. I must return quickly and help them fight. I can carry only one. Is there a man here who can strike and kill? Kill gold-skins? Our people need defenders." I send an image of a goldskin leaping at a Mnerrin.

To my surprise, amid the blank looks I had expected from most of the men, a younger one steps smartly forward. "I think I can do what you call fight, O friend from the skies. I have thought much during our captivity. Now I can kill. But I need things to strike with. Here!"

He bends down to the row of corpses and takes a strong-looking knife from a dead woman's hand.

"And now a long one—"

"We call those spears. Maybe we will find some in this big hut."

And indeed we find a cache of spears. But they are mostly slim, decorated things for rituals and dancing. Again to my surprise, my new recruit sorts out some that are sturdy and useful. This lad is an untypical mutation, in theory, maybe, a dangerous one. Right now I wish I had a hundred of him.

"Good. Now we go. I have fish in the boat, you can eat on the way. And you others had best be on your way with Manya, lest some goldskins catch you again."

I bid good-bye to them as they eagerly follow Manya to the water's edge. The men have found some rope, and start tying the smaller children on towlines to their belts. Always this care for the young! I cut short their curiosity about my boat.

"Later. No time, now."

The warlike lad's name is Sintana. His eyes shine as I direct him to help me tow the dinghy to deep

water and hop in. When I start the motor and start skimming along the reef, he is visibly ecstatic.

"Now, I don't know whether we will overtake the canoes before they reach my village or not. So we must proceed with care whenever we cannot see a long way ahead. I want you to watch and listen with all your power for those canoes. I will have much watching to do to avoid hitting coral heads this close to shore. If you see or suspect a canoe, raise your arm like this and be ready for a quick stop, right? If you are *sure* that all is clear ahead, go like this."

Enthusiastic assent from Sintana. I gun up the motor to full speed, and we rip along at top speed toward my village. I want to keep close to the reef to avoid being sighted by the canoes ahead, but the danger from isolated coral rocks strings my nerves tight. Luckily, there is enough wave action to show where most of them lie. Avoiding one at the last minute, I nearly spill us. Sintana looks round questioningly, and after that I see him hang on.

He is radiating pleasurable excitement like a child, but looking him over, I see he has plenty of muscle to go with his combative spirit. A gods-sent ally.

It's getting dark. Each time as we round a shallow point, Sintana waves me on. Those canoes have really covered ground. I'm not afraid of their hearing my motor over their paddling splash—and even if they did, they would not know what it was. But where are they?

We approach the last point before our bay. Suddenly Sintana's hand goes up and we jolt to a stop.

"I think I hear minds from around the point. Maybe quite close."

"They could be holed up, waiting for the men on land to arrive. No more talking now."

At lowest speed we nose around the point. Presently we can see most of the bay, but no canoes.

"They're hiding right on the other side of these rocks," Sintana whispers. I listen, and fancy I can catch a crude mind-murmur.

"Can you paddle quietly?"

"I think so."

"Fine. Let's try to get a look."

We paddle the dinghy silently forward, about an arm's length from the rocks. Sintana's hand shoots up and I stop. Eyes glowing with excitement, he whispers, "I can see the bows of two canoes, in a cove in the rocks. I don't know where the third is."

"Sintana, get down low in the boat. I am going around fast and fire my weapon at them. But we will be within spear-throw. Make sure they do not hit you. And *do not throw your spear*, you will need it later," I add, knowing what the excitement could do to such a boy.

"And your part is to keep watch for that third canoe. Got it?" , "Yes." He is reluctantly crouching down.

"Get farther down. The air will be full of spears, and I must fire over you. Can you *stay* down?"

"Yes."

"All right. Hang on, here we go!"

I slam the lever to high, and we round the point in a great roostertail of spray. In the cove behind the point are two canoes full of goldskins—good, I had feared some might have gone ashore. I fire as soon as I'm in range, zigzagging as I come at them. Screams, barely audible over the motor and spray. I roar in as close as I dare, and then twist the dinghy into a hair-raising U-turn, firing all the time. Spray splashes over the canoes, but I can see goldmen struggling up, lifting their spears. I turn again and make another pass, managing to laser every standing man.

But Sintana is in my way.

"Get down!"

"The third canoe! Look out, look out!" he yells.

I glance back and see the third canoe, come out of nowhere, rushing straight at me. I turn and fire. Luckily, from dead ahead, the spearmen are blocking each other. But they are also shielding each other from my fire. I whip around fast and slice in close to the gunwale, doing slaughter—and then I'm out of

the little cove, heading for the reef. Luckily, moons are up.

But that's as far as we go. The feel of the dinghy warns me—I see two spear shafts sticking from the pontoons. Oh gods. I turn toward the beach, weaving between the rocks at the start of the reef, and just make shallow water as our craft collapses around us. No one is in pursuit.

Sintana and I jump out. I wrestle the motor from the sagging folds and hand it to him while I rescue the batteries. Thus laden, we struggle ashore, towing the half-submerged dinghy. Sintana, I'm glad to see, still has his spear. A cool boy.

At that moment a fearful hooting hits our ears from the delta beyond. The watchers have sighted goldskins and are blowing their conches.

I hate to leave my wrecked dinghy to the attentions of any survivors from the canoes—it is my only link to the lander—but there's no time to do more than throw a couple of armfuls of brush over it. We start for the village at a run.

As we near it, I see splashing in the shallows. A Mnerrin family has forgotten the drill and is heading straight for the sea. Ahead of me two goldskins, shining in the moonlight, race after them, spears lifted. They throw before I can get the range; the man of the fleeing group goes down into the water. The children stop, trying to pull him up, but the goldmen are upon them, I manage to pick one off, but the other is too close to the children.

He whips out something silvery—it's a rope, he is tying them up. He starts out of the surf, dragging them behind him, screaming.

We pound after him, Sintana in the lead. I see his spear-flash, and the goldman goes down. By the gods, my Mnerrin has killed! We cut the children loose and tell them to follow us.

"No, Father Pava is out there!"

"He'll be all right. Come." I know that if Pamir has survived the spear, he will be safer under water than on shore.

We run on.

Most of the goldskins are still coming down the bank onto the delta. I can see the main hut now, see that my Mnerrin have actually formed a protective circle. Women and children are still being thrust in.

I identify us by mind-call.

"Quick, there is time to start for the river *now!*"

"But Pava's family are not here."

"He ran to the sea and got caught. I have his children. Here," I tell them, "get in behind these men."

The leading goldskins are upon us. I fire, pick them off. Others are circling, trying to get between us and the sea.

"They are after the children! Quick, to the river! All together, go!"

The circle starts off at a wobbly trot, the men in the rear having a hard time to shepherd the children and fend off goldskins, who are now arriving in force. I fire, fire until no more are in range, wishing that I were within the circle firing out—too many times I have had to hold fire to avoid hitting Mnerrin. And then another shining rank of goldmen is upon us.

The next hour is collapsed in my mind into a montage of firing, running, firing, running. The goldskins catch up with the Mnerrin circle before they reach the river, and there is wild spear-jabbing, hand-to-hand combat. Children's shrieks fill the air.

At last they reach the river and form a corridor as I had taught them. Children rush down it, women hobble after, babies in arms, and fling themselves into the deep channel, followed by the men. Goldskins rove the banks, searching futilely for some shallow place where they can get at their prey. I lurk behind, picking them off as I can. I do not think many of them are clearly aware of me. Finally when they pause at the beach, I have a clear shot at a mass of them, and wreak scorching havoc. Sintana is busy chasing stragglers.

There is a moment's lull. I stand up to look—and am jolted by a blow. A spear shaft in my shoulder.

But moments later I am aware that Sintana is by me, having dispatched my attacker.

"Pull this out of me, Sintana."

He does so, surprisingly gentle. I watch the ripples that mean Mnerrin are reaching the sea, gritting my teeth.

"Is there much blood?"

"Some."

"Pack that moss in the hole." I cut off a length of rope and make a sling for my arm. Fortunately the spear doesn't seem to have hit anything vital.

"Where are the rest of the goldmen?"

"I don't think there are any more standing," he says with quiet pride. I can see in the moonlight that he is bloodied all over and has a different spear.

"You have been busy. Are you wounded?"

"In the leg. A little."

We go through the moss-packing routine. He has a fat shaft broken off in the big muscle of his thigh.

"That will hurt worse later. How do you like war?"

He grins and sighs together. "I think—too much!"

"Yes, it is like that... Now, if you can walk, we must find my light and check all the wounded goldskins."

"And kill them?" He makes an eager motion with his spear.

"Yes. All except two whom we will tie up for questioning."

Then I feel free to do what I'd been desperately longing for. I send out a focused mind-call to the Mnerrin hiding in the water.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes." A head surfaces just inshore of the reef.

"I think it is all safe now. But wait until dawn to come ashore. And—*is Kamir safe?*"

What must be her head surfaces, too, and I receive a sending of such love and longing that I can scarcely resist going to her. "Till daybreak, darling. Now I have work to do."

"Always work!" Her laugh, my mermaid's laugh, rings out over the water, piercing me with sweet memories. I sigh, and turn back to the job.

Sintana and I go first to the pile of goldskins I created on the beach, and then start searching systematically through the marsh for gleams of gold. Their shining skins are a great liability.

"In future we will not be able to assume all is over so soon. They will learn to take us more seriously, and arrange a second wave of attackers to come in just as the Mnerrin think all is safe."

We also come upon three Mnerrin dead and two wounded, men whom I don't know well, and three children who have been stabbed. To my amazement, a dark figure is there, bending over a child. I hold my fire just in time, as the mind-signal comes.

"Mavru! What are you doing here?"

"I swam upriver and waited," he replies. "I thought I might be more needed here."

"And you are. Wonderful. Mavru, meet my young friend from the lost village. He has worked hard in your defense."

The two Mnerrin greet warmly. I go in search of my medical supplies to help Mavru, and we resume our search of the marsh.

Long before we are through, Sintana is weary of killing the wounded. His battle fever has ebbed; only when a "corpse" surprises him by striking at him does it return briefly. This, I think, is a good lesson for him.

We save out two captives who seem in fairly good shape, and tie them up far apart so they can't communicate. As I'd been told, they seem to have no mind-speech except a sort of alarm call, and a

threat-sending, a hostile glare.

When the moons go down we rest and eat. Mavru joins us.

"Their bodies are different from ours," he says. "I think I will cut up one or two and find where the vital centers are. Do you think that's a good plan, 'Om Jhared?"

I agree, and warn him about the dangers of handling cadavers. "You must wash your hands scrupulously. I, too, would like to see."

Sintana meanwhile has been questioning the nearest prisoner. He has picked up a few words of their tongue, which sounds barbarous in contrast to the Mnerrin's.

"I asked him why they ate children," he reports. "He only shrugged and said, because they were hungry. So I asked him why they did not catch fish. He seems not to understand. I think anything connected with water is entirely strange to them. I remember there was a great fuss about who was going to go in the canoes."

"And that reminds me," I tell him. "We must go and try to salvage those canoes and fix up my boat."

"Why do we want those ugly canoes?"

"First, to keep them out of the hands of any more goldskins who come here. And, most important, I think our people can use them on the Long Swim. They could transport the wounded; some will take a long time to heal. And babies could go in them, too."

"Oh, good idea. Hey, it's like you said, my leg hurts more."

"I'm sorry. But we have a job to do."

We check the other prisoner, who glares at us mutely, and hike down the beach to where the dinghy lies. It's untouched, thank the gods, and the repair kit, like all my supplies, is fastened inside. The spacer's gooey stuff really works well, but will take an hour to dry.

We leave it and climb over the headland to where two canoes float aimlessly in the little cove. A moon is rising again; I can see the glitter of bodies inside. The third canoe is only a prow sticking up. Its former contents are floating about.

"We have to go through the check again," I tell Sintana. "And then we have to fish those corpses out so they won't foul the sea. We can put them on the rocks up here, maybe the crabs will eat them."

Sintana shudders. "Parts, anyway... I didn't know, when I volunteered to fight, that it included cleaning up the battlefield!"

"It includes whatever it includes," I tell him grimly. But I am suddenly dead tired, and my shoulder is on fire. I have been running on pure adrenaline. Do we really have to do this task? And my boat will take strength to pump up... The first pink light of dawn is in the sky.

"I have a better plan," Sintana says. "Your people here have been idling in the sea all night." He goes back up on the headland, and I hear him send out a mind-call.

To my astonishment, three heads pop out of the water below us almost at once.

"No need to shout," comes a young voice. "We followed to see what you were up to. Hello, 'Om Jhared, I'm Pelya! What do you need?"

We tell them, and soon, to my great pleasure, three sets of strong young arms are hauling dead goldskins ashore and up the rocks. The goldmen are short and compact, heavy-boned.

"How many of you in the sea are wounded?" I ask Pelya.

"Three. And Pava's mate got a spear through her arm. She was very weak, you know. She died soon after we got to the bar."

"Oh, I am sorry."

"Yes... But you did so much. We boys have been thinking. We will have to train ourselves to do this thing, to do fighting. War. Some of the older men think it is all over, but we don't agree... But 'Om Jhared, just *why* do the goldskins attack us?"

"I don't really know, except that it is their nature."

But later, when we have pumped up the dinghy and are leading the procession of canoes back to the

village, I tell them what I fear.

"I'm afraid that what I have seen on other worlds may be happening here. Somewhere far to the west there may be a great many goldskins, so that beaches and food are in short supply. They would be fighting over them, and the losers may pack up and come east, looking for new homes. If that's true, it means there will be more coming, and more after that, without end. I think they have more babies than you, so the pressure will go on and on. I hope to the gods this isn't true, that this was just a wandering band, but as I said, I have seen this thing before. That is why I am going to appeal to the power of the Federation to help you. But that will take a long time. Meanwhile, you are wise to try to help yourselves... We can question the prisoners, and it might be good to send a couple of scouts back along their trail to see what we can find out."

"I see," says Pelya, and the other boys agree. For once they do not laugh.

Nor do I. In the growing light I can see the Mnerrin coming ashore. There is old Maoul, there is Agna, and Donnia, helping Kamir. I can already sense tendrils of contact, carrying gratitude to me. I hope there are not to be speeches, I am dead. And all too keenly I realize that I have now broken all the Federation's Rules of Contact. I have interfered massively with the Mnerrin's life-ways, and I have taken a decisive part in a war... So be it.

???

"Wake up, 'Om Jhared! Kamir is giving birth!"

It is Agna's voice. I come to, groggily.

We are in Agna's birthing hut. Kamir is lying beside me on the crude bed, which is covered with moss and hay. She is on her side, curled around her vast belly, her hands pushing at it as though trying to push it away from her. Agna is beside her, doing something. I hear Kamir whimper.

Gently, Agna takes her hands and pats them.

"Here," he says to me. "Hold."

I take the hands. Kamir's eyes open and meet mine. With effort, she smiles. "Don't be afraid, darling. This is normal."

Normal? I am looking for some sort of opening, some birth canal through which the babies will emerge. There is no sign of anything like that. Instead, Agna's hands seem to be working on the "scar" or line I had seen, running around her abdomen. He is kneading it, carefully pulling it apart. I see that the scarlike line is starting to separate, like long, threadlike lips.

"In a moment now," he tells Kamir. "You can push."

Kamir puts her hands with mine up on her great belly. It is hot, hot. Then she pushes at it again.

Suddenly, with a dreadful caving-in feeling, her whole belly, containing the fetuses, starts to *separate* from the rest of her body! It tips forward, away from her, as the scarlike "lips" open. Agna is furiously working at this line, pushing his hands under her. She whimpers again. I see that the lips are actually a deep separation line, circling her whole belly, from ribs to pelvis. Oh gods, what is happening here?

Slowly, deliberately, yet too fast for me to follow, the fetal mass tips forward farther, revealing a deep cleavage. It tips, separates farther yet, and then rolls over, away from her, onto what had been the outside of her belly. Agna steadies it. Kamir gives a series of loud sighs, and then rolls away from it, onto her back.

"Whew! That feels better."

But I have a horrifying look at the shell of her body left after the fetal mass tore loose. From diaphragm to hips it is *empty*, covered by a rapidly thickening gel membrane. Through it I can see, under her ribs, a dark mass pulsing: her heart. Below that, by her spine, I can see the great cords of nerve and blood vessel running along her backbone, inside her empty flanks, to her hips and pelvis. Nothing more.

Agna is looking, too, as the membrane becomes opaque.

"See? Almost no fat at all. My poor little sister will not live long."

"Why?" But the answer is before me. Stomach, intestines, digestive organs, all are gone, taken away

with the fetus-bearing mass of her belly. She has no means of taking in food. A fast-sealing tube end that must be her esophagus is visible near her heart. I can only hope that her kidneys are left, so she won't die of thirst.

I am squeezing her hands so tightly I must be hurting her. I relax them and make myself kiss her face, despite the ghastly display of her body. She strokes my hair with trembling hands.

"I'm fine. See to the babies."

The babies? Dimly I am realizing that this is no catastrophe, but a natural process of parturition. Or rather, it is a catastrophic process, deadly to the mother. But the babies are alive, the fetuses; through the gel of the torn-away side I can glimpse aqueous forms moving vaguely. Clearly they are too young for independent life. A great placenta lies on them, with coils running to each fetus—there are three. And there must be some sort of secondary heart with them, there is the throb of circulation.

Indeed, this mass that has torn itself loose from Kamir is almost a primitive animal in its own right, with organs it has stolen from Kamir.

To me it is a monster, which has mutilated and killed my mermaid, my girl.

But Kamir is gazing at it with fond eyes. Her babies.

I make myself look at it. It is a globular mass about half a meter in diameter, lying on what had been the outside of Kamir's abdomen. All the part that had been inside Kamir is covered with this gel membrane, now fast thickening to opacity. Agna is bent over it, inspecting and feeling it all with tender hands. He points out a circular ring, or tube, set in the "top."

"That is where we feed the babies."

Oh gods; it is the remains of Kamir's esophagus, leading to her stolen stomach. I begin to shake with delayed horror, scarcely noticing that Donnia has come in, and is offering to me, of all things, a great bowl of butterfish, cut in pieces. When I see it, I am revolted at his apparent callousness.

"Fathers first," says Agna. He and Donnia each take some and begin to chew.

Then I am even more revolted by the understanding of what they are doing. They are taking food for the fetuses, substituting for their mother's missing mouth. Preparing it for digestion by her stomach, somewhere inside that monstrous package. Grimly I force myself to take some and begin to chew. A vaguely consoling thought comes to me: many Terran birds feed their new-hatched chicks like this.

Weakly, Kamir demands some, too. Now that her huge pregnancy has gone, I can see how thin the rest of her has become. Her limbs are no longer slender, but bone-thin, and her beautiful face has been fined to where it seems all great dark blue eyes. But how short a time ago it was that we played and tussled with each other on our magic isles! What a terrible thing I have wrought on my little mermaid, what evil I have done! Yet she seems strangely content, her eyes are luminous with joy when she gazes on the dreadful lump that contains our babies. Mysterious are the ways of instinct! Something in her makes her accept happily the shortness of her life for its irrational reward.

Agna is speaking to me. "Empty your mouth into this, new-father." He grasps the tube opening on the monster and pulls it free. I realize, for Kamir's sake, I must.

It would have been appalling were it not that the fetus-monster has an oddly attractive smell. Organic, but very sweet and clean. A lure to feed it, I think. Well, it works.

After I have fed it in this strange fashion, Agna and Donnia follow suit, and last, Kamir. "Are there three?" she asks.

"Yes," says Agna. "Lucky you did not make more. It will be a job to feed these, they also have no fat."

"I wonder what they will look like," Kamir says dreamily. She is sinking into sleep. Yet she turns to me and hugs me, with a momentary return of her old strength.

"Oh, my darling strange one, I am so happy! Never did I think I would have babies to watch over. Never! And you came from the skies and gave them to me." She kisses me again.

"But—" As I look at her exquisite young face, my heart feels as though it will burst then and there. How can she be so truly happy? Wait; is it conceivable she doesn't know her fate?

"I hope I will live to see them. I must. I *will*." She sinks back, blue eyes brave with resolve. She knows, all right.

Agonized, I watch her drift smiling into sleep. Donnia is nudging me, holding out the bowl of fish. I turn to my detested duty. I am very tired.

? ? ?

I wake to morning light.

Kamir is beside me. The monstrous baby-package is still there.

"Hello, my darling. How you slept! Do you know you fell asleep in the middle of feeding our babies? Fighting must be very tiring."

"Yes."

"I did some!" she tells me. "A goldskin came at me, and I burned him with the little weapon you gave me! But he was so strong. And falling down, he kicked me where the babies were. I was afraid he'd injured them. Then Agna came and helped me run away, to the men. And oh, I was so glad when you came back."

"I was too."

"Agna and Donnia have gone for more fish. See how the babies are stirring? That means they're hungry."

I see signs of movement within on the fetus-package. Gods, what appetites!

"Tell me, darling. How long will they stay like that?"

"Oh, twenty, thirty, forty days, it varies. I think ours will come out sooner, because they were with me so long. That's why I think I can live to see them."

Twenty days? Is that the span of our time?

"Don't talk about dying. If you die, the sun of my life will go out."

"Oh, don't *you* say that, although it is beautiful. If things were the other way round, it's how I would feel, too. When you were so long in coming, I feared the sun of my life had gone out."

And we have more private things to say, until Kamir pushes me away, with "Friends come!"—

"I think it is that fierce boy, what's his name—Sintana. And old Maoul."

There is a knock on the hut wall. Even I can pick up Sintana's mind.

"Greetings, all."

They come in and sit on Agna's log. I see that Maoul is actually carrying a spear.

I congratulate him *again* on having got the Mnerrin to form their circle.

"It *was* a task," he admits. "I only wish Pava had heeded."

"People panic and forget. He thought the way looked clear—he forgot that goldskins can run faster than a man with children."

"Listen, 'Om Jhared," Sintana interrupts. "We have got some news out of our captives. They say there are no more goldskins on this island, or nearby, but there are many many more very far to the west. That sounds like your theory."

"Yes. I was never more sorry to be right. Did you ask why they eat your children?"

"Yes. They say they had a group of somethings, and they ate them. But they died, from drowning I think. Animals about so high." He put a hand about a meter from the ground. "And I think they have come on others like us and taken their children, too."

"A flock or herd of meat animals... This is common on other worlds. It seems clear they don't regard you as people, but as a sort of food animal. They might get the idea of taking a group of you captive and eating the young."

Maoul's face is a mask of fury, but he says nothing.

"We're not people because we don't fight, is that it?" Sintana asks.

"Something like that. Did you ask about their own children?"

"No, but he saw one of our women die and seemed to understand. He said their women do not die like that."

"Hmm... A real mutation. That fits, too. A higher birthrate."

"Mutation?" asks Maoul.

"A word we use when some of a group of beings become quite different. It usually starts with one or a very few, and the new form spreads because their offspring survive better."

"This sounds interesting," Maoul says. "I wish we had time to talk of it now."

I laugh. "You are learning bad ways, friend. In the old days you would have gone ahead and discussed some topic no matter what practical matters called you."

He laughs, too, somewhat sadly. "I feel I have aged ten years since day before yesterday. But what must we do with these goldskins now? Kill them, as Sintana says?"

I'm glad he's said it. "Yes, I'm afraid so. You can't take them on the Long Swim, and if you let them go, they will certainly make their way back to the main goldskin group and lead others here. That way they gain chieftaincy... If you are revolted by killing them, would you rather I did it?"

"No," says Sintana.

"I am revolted," says Maoul. "But I will do it. It is right."

"Then will you let me give you one last lecture about this?"

"Speak on. Your last lectures saved our lives."

"I'm very glad. You know I feel one with you. Your pain is mine, too. Listen: *It is very hard to kill helpless men—or women—in cold blood.* And they will be talking, pleading, promising anything, to save their lives. They will promise not to bring others, to stay and wait for you, to work for you. They may claim they are not like the other goldskins, but that the others made them attack you. They may claim they can guide you to somewhere, that they have secret weapons. They may fall down and clutch your ankles and beg for mercy. They may tell you that they have young children to care for—anything! They may swear they never ate of the children's meat. Remember, to them, a promise made to an enemy need not be kept, lies told to an enemy or an inferior do not count. They will be talking and acting solely to save their worthless lives. What you must keep in front of your minds is that they have eaten your children and got caught trying to kill more. Then strike! Close your ears completely, and strike! And beforehand, send away any softhearted one who might be fooled."

The two men think this over for a moment.

"It seems very difficult," says Maoul. "What if we took them by surprise, while they are sleeping?"

"No, that is not the best way. And *you* would be surprised at how quickly they woke up and read your intent—because this is what they themselves would do. No; you should be brave and tell them, and ask them if they have some supernatural entity they pray to. Tell them to do so now."

"I have heard of such a thing," says Maoul.

"If you need more, remember that it is as necessary to kill them as to stamp out sparks of fire nearing your hut. Do you think your resolve will hold?"

Maoul sighs, straightens up; Sintana takes a deep breath.

"Thank you for warning us, 'Om Jhared. I think we can do this thing."

"Good. It will be harder for you, Maoul. Sintana has already had a taste of it. But to you, maybe this saying from my land will help. We have had wars and fighting, too much, as I told you. And one of our wise men said, 'They who live by the sword must die by the sword.' You have met Homo Ferox, who lives by the spear. That was their choice. Now they must die by it."

"Yes," Maoul nods gravely. "I see."

Kamir has been listening wide-eyed. "How many evil things you know, dear 'Om Jhared." she says. "Oh, Agna and Donnia come."

Then Maoul shakes his head, as if to chase out dreadful thoughts, and says in his normal tones, "But I have also come to tell you that we must leave soon for the Long Swim. Only two of the women yet live,

and the star we call the Wind Bringer has appeared. The season of storms will be on us if we don't go soon. So we will be leaving you, man from the skies. What will you do? Will you come with us?"

"I was expecting this," I tell him. "I know you are late. I don't dare come with you, the call from my ship may come at any time now. When it does, I must go with all speed back to the island where I left my camp and the little sky-ship that will take me up to them. I can take Kamir and the babies. But someone will have to come with me to take over the babies when I leave. Of course, I will give him the boat and anything else I have that would be useful to you."

Agna and Donnia, who have come in with baskets of butterfish, join us in time to hear all this. Conscientious fathers, they are already chewing. Donnia speaks up.

"I can go with him, Maoul."

"And I," says Sintana unexpectedly. "Every day I am with him I learn. But I can't make a swim alone, like this." He taps his still nearly bald head.

"I wish I could stay with you, 'Om Jhared and little sister," says Agna. "But I must go to relieve the friends who are caring for my five little ones."

"I shall be delighted at your company, companion-of-battles."

"Well then, that is settled," says Maoul, rising. "You will await your signal, while we leave, I think, on the second morning."

"Are you taking the canoes?" I ask as they leave.

"We're thinking about that. Right now I have this evil job to do," says Maoul, and they depart.

We go back to feeding the baby-monster. Just as I have contributed my mouthful to the sweet-smelling sac, Agna pushes past me.

"Hold a moment, let me look."

Gently he rocks the baby-sac until he can see beneath. I notice a bluish-black discoloration at the bottom, where the membrane joins with what had been Kamir's skin.

"How long has this color been here?" he demands.

No one knows. Kamir has struggled up to look. "What is it, Agna? What's wrong?"

"Trouble." He tips the big bundle up so we can all see the bottom on which it has been resting. The evil-looking purplish color is heavy there, with yellowed streaks in it. "I think that is about where the goldskin struck you."

"Yes," says Kamir. "Oh, I feared he had harmed them! We must get Mavru."

"I go!" says Donnia, and ducks outside. We can hear him break into a splashing trot in the stream.

When Mavru comes and sees, he looks grave.

"One of the babies is, I fear, dead. I must cut it away lest the trouble spread to others. 'Om Jhared, I need the sharpest possible knife. May I borrow yours?"

"Yes. And I'll clean it as thoroughly as I can first." My shark knife takes a keen edge and will stand heat.

Mavru calls for an armful of moss and washes his hands thoroughly in the stream outside. Then he produces a packet of long, slender thorns. "I have dipped these in your cleaning solution," he tells me. "They are for sewing."

He turns to the fetal package and carefully turns it over to show the discolored side. This had been the outside of Kamir's belly; it looks eerie to see her navel there. Mavru is studying the stains, figuring where to make his cuts, as carefully as any surgeon of a technological culture. There are no magical passes, no shamanism.

When he is ready, he slices into the mass with delicacy and boldness, beyond the farthest stain of blue, and continues around to the side, folding back the skin.- The characteristic sweet odor of the babies fills the hut, but it is mixed with the sickening smell of infection.

Kamir winces in sympathy as he cuts, but says nothing.

The exposed mass of flesh and organs looks a healthy pink. I can see a tiny pink foot through the

membrane enclosing it. Mavru gropes deep into the sac with both hands now. I find myself feeling queasy, and quickly turn my head away. When I look back, Mavru has pulled out a nasty-looking length of stained purple and yellow gut. He drops it into the waste moss and reaches in again. Exposed now is a discolored fetal sac. He palps it carefully, and mutters, "Dead." He sighs, and with one quick gesture pulls and flips the fetus out and onto the moss, its umbilical cord tight.

Mavru pays no more attention to it, but goes into the wound with his knife, cutting the cord far in, and cutting away all infected tissue. Very little of the dark purple blood flows. I notice he is careful not to contaminate the knife by cutting into infection. He seems to know the anatomy of the fetal sac well.

When he has finished, the hollow he has made where the dead baby was is clean-looking, with only the ends of a few thorn-sewn vessels sticking out. Mavru inspects it with care, then bends down and sniffs thoroughly. Satisfied, he asks me, "A dusting of your wonderful powder now?"

"I think so, yes."

He takes the antibiotic flask out of his loincloth and dusts sparingly. Then he takes up clean moss and carefully packs the wound, pulling the skin back as far as it will go and fixing it with thorns.

No advanced surgeon could have done better with the tools at hand.

At last he turns away from his completed task and, with the point of his knife, slits the discolored membrane off the discarded dead fetus.

I gasp.

Lying there on the moss is what appears to be a Human baby boy, an infant almost ready to be born. There can be no doubt that I have fathered this child; it is no parthenogenetic alien, but Human in every way that I can see. My son. My almost-son... What about the other two?

Kamir is staring, too. "Oh, what that goldskin did," she mutters through clenched teeth. "Oh, my little stranger baby! How beautiful! He is—was—just like you, dear 'Om Jhared. What about the others? Are they all right?"

"I believe so," says Mavru. "I think we caught this in time. And they are like us, by the way; Mnerrin, if that is to be our name. I had a good look at both their feet and they have our fins, as this poor little lad had not." He touches the dead baby's Human toes.

"Are they to be girls or men?" Kamir asks.

"Oh, I couldn't tell. But one is decidedly larger."

I have pulled myself together. "Healer Mavru, all our thanks. Now tell me: on most worlds, it is customary to pay healers, or give them a present. What may we do for you? Of course I will send you my good knife when I go, but there must be something else."

He starts to wave me away, but checks. "Well, if you are serious, would it be improper to ask that you give me this dead baby to study? I want to compare it with our own. And it might help me if ever I have to deal with more Humans."

"Gladly," I say. "And you will, of course, bury him with a little marker or whatever is appropriate?"

"Yes. With a marker saying it is the first Human child born of Mnerrin."

"But—" says Kamir. "Oh, but..." Then she seems to reconsider. "I guess it's all right, Father Mavru. Only..."

"I know," says Mavru compassionately. "I know. I thank you very much. And this will solve what might be a problem for you."

It would indeed. I had been thinking that.

When he goes out, taking the baby, Agna and Donnia hurry in to resume the feeding. I hold Kamir quietly for a while to comfort her—and myself.

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That evening Agna and I take a few minutes off to go down and join the conclave on the beach. The Mnerrin habitually gather here to watch the sunset and chat. Agna leads me around to the five men and their children who have been caring for his young. The babies are all appealing plump little Mnerrin, three

girls and two boys, one of whom can already swim strongly, as Agna demonstrates.

Old Maoul is here, too, earnestly debating something with several men.

"They are deciding whether to take the canoes," Agna tells me. "I think we will. Normally the babies swim, fastened to their father, but that of course slows us down. If they were in a canoe, we could travel faster. The two wounded men and Elia could go in them, too. But some of the older men are afraid that this will change our way of life too much."

"I can understand that... Hello, Sintana. How goes it?"

The young man has a worried look. "Om Jhared, do you know any way to keep those canoes from tipping so easily? That is one of the objections to taking them. I thought that if they had a down-thrusting wood piece below, it would stabilize them, but I don't see how to do that."

Inventive boy. "That's what we call a keel. It would indeed stabilize the canoes, but it would also hit rocks, if it was long enough to do good. But there is another way, which we call outriggers." I smooth off a spot of sand and draw him a picture.

"I see. But there isn't time to build these, 'Om Jhared."

"Well, can you produce two long logs each and some rope? I'll show you a quick and dirty version." I make another sketch, showing a canoe with a log loosely lashed on each side. "The idea is that the logs must be loose enough to float when the canoe is loaded. It will slow down the paddling a bit, but you will be surprised at how hard it is to tip... Want to try it?"

"Absolutely! I knew I could count on you, 'Om Jhared!"

I reflect that it is best I leave before my meager store of information runs out. Meanwhile Agna is looking wistfully at a group still deep in their study of Relations.

"I used to love that," he says. "But now I am so rusty."

"My case too," I tell him. "Tell me, what are those men playing at? It looks like a game I know."

"Oh, it's an old game we all love. Legend has it that the other man who came from the skies taught it to our forefathers. Do you really recognize it?"

"Yes, I think it is a game called 'chess,' only the pieces are carved a little differently."

"Yes, 'chess,' you say? We call it 'Shez'! It must be the same. So some legends are true!"

But I have something else on my mind.

"Agna, Donnia says that you know the straight-line direction to the island where I left my sky-ship. Can you show me? Then I can set my instrument here. It would be much quicker than retracing my steps."

"Yes, I do. Don't you recall, when we first started home with Kamir, you showed me where you'd come from? Let us go in the water, I'll give you the line."

We swim out, and Agna submerges for a few minutes. When he comes up, he has one arm pointed west-southwest. I set my compass pointer.

"You must have thrown something in the sea there," says Agna disapprovingly. "I could sense alien stuff in the current."

"Yes, I fear my ship must have sprayed exhaust when I landed. And it will again when I take off. I'm sorry—I hope it will dissipate soon."

"Oh, it's almost gone," Agna concedes.

"The island is such a small, flat one, Agna. Do you think this line will really carry me to it? At least, near enough to see it?"

"Yes," he says firmly. "If I were swimming, I'd say, seven days."

"Good enough." Then something inside me lurches, as if a curtain were rent. "No, *bad!*" I blurt. "*Agna, I don't want to leave!*"

He looks at me with affection. "I know. I, too, will miss you. But speak to Maoul of this. I am not sure you know your own mind."

"Yes. I will," I say, near to weeping.

When we get ashore, I confide my feelings to Maoul.

"I know, I know," he tells me. "You are sending sadness all about. But tell me: if you go, you *can* return, can't you?"

"Yes."

"While if you stay here, if you refuse this sky-ship, no other may come for you, right?"

"True."

"And if you go, you may be able to help us against the goldskins? And in other ways, Mavru says?"

"I can try. I can always do something, even if only to send you weapons and supplies."

"You could not do that if you stay here."

"No... Oh, I see what you mean. If I truly love you and want to help you, I should go... And I should take the course which is not irrevocable, which again means I should go."

"That is my thought."

I sigh deeply. "Then it is my thought, too. Thank you, Father Maoul... But oh, I shall miss this world so."

He, too, sighs. "It has been for you a happy time, out of your real life, which we cannot imagine. But for us this is real life, with all its good and evil."

I see what he means, and bow my head. To me, this is still a dreamworld, though the people are real. I have not been truly into life here, as I would have to be if I stayed. As I would have to be if I come back to stay. Dreams must end.

"You are wise."

He shrugs this off. I see Agna looking at me anxiously. It is time to go back and feed.

And just then, in the midst of everything, I hear a loud, familiar sound from the hut. Everyone looks up.

"What is that?"

"A beep from my transponder. That is, a signal that the ship which will carry me away has come into your sun's system. I now have only a few days to get back to that island. If they have to wait, they will charge me money, and I can only pay for two days."

"Pay?" asks Maoul.

"A system of portable value we use for returning the favors of people we may never meet again."

"Legend says," Maoul tells me, "that the one who came here before tried to explain something of this. To us it sounded unharmonious."

"Unharmonious" is a term they use for, roughly, *uncivilized* and perhaps inhumane. It amuses me to hear our great economic system so brusquely—if perhaps justly—dismissed.

I bid Maoul good night and return with Agna to the hut.

That night Kamir faints for the first time.

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The last day passes quietly. I cannot bring myself to start until the Mnerrin leave.

I watch them making up sea-proof packets of their scant possessions and, one by one, placing them in the canoes. They consist primarily of a few small looms and supplies of thread, a musical instrument someone has been working on, some pots, several large pieces of cloth. I reflect on how little of their rich life would remain for archaeology if anything happens to the Mnerrin themselves.

When it comes to the spears and shields, the canoe-paddlers object. "There will be no room left for the babies and the wounded men." In the end a few are taken.

I watch a burial party taking the body of the last woman up into the hills. In the past I have avoided looking at such scenes, though I knew they went on. But now I wonder how soon I may have to undertake such a grim trip myself.

Kamir is all over her fainting fit and says she is looking forward to traveling again. I marvel at how she

can do with no food except the clear broths we make for her. She drinks more water than before; perhaps it has some richness in it. I would give an arm for an intravenous feeding rig. There will be one on that big ship. I have wasted hours trying to figure how I could get it to her.

The last night there is much singing. Kamir asks to be taken to the beach. I pick her up, almost weeping to find how light she is. She who only weeks ago had been my strong little mermaid, rolling me in the sand... Now she scarcely weighs as much as the canteens I bring with us.

On the beach I pack moss around her poor knobby knees and hips, and prop her up where she can greet all. The Mnerrin are kind to her, particularly Sintana and his friends, who rally her about "fighting like a man."

The singing rises around us, sweet and true. Kamir joins in, surprisingly strongly. I hold my face up to the moons and wish I could howl like a hound. Dreamworld or not, I love these people, love Kamir. Even love my dead son, and the other two... Of that last night I shall say no more.

The next morning there is a surprise—one of the rare fogs has closed in. It makes no difference to the Mnerrin's plans. The canoes are loaded; I see the fathers of toddlers tying them to the thwarts. The first shift of paddlers is in place.

And then they simply walk into the sea. Many turn to wave at us and for the last time I get the impact of so many blue, blue eyes. Then they are gone under sea and into the fog, leaving only the dark shapes of the canoes.

The paddlers dig in rhythmically, and the canoes, too, fade and vanish into the white wall.

It is very lonely on the beach.

But it is time for us to go, too. Donnia and Sintana carry the boat to the beach and return for the sac of babies. I am astonished to see how they have grown in the last days; the skin now seems almost too small for the full-size infants within. I carry Kamir down and arrange her in the stern beside me. The babies, and a big pot of fish, go in front, where she can touch them. It has been arranged to stop every hour for feeding, since I can do little while driving the boat, and Kamir is so weak.

Then the two Mnerrin wade out into the bay. I follow, expecting them to want Agna's heading once they are past the reef. Instead, they simply submerge briefly and start off, straight on target. Wonderful instrument, those guide-hairs! Even Sintana's fuzz seems long enough to give him some help.

Then we set off behind them, much as we had arrived, except that different arms are flashing ahead. And Kamir lies dying at my side. We settle into the dreamlike trance of travel over the blue sea, and the mists gradually clear.

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And that's about it.

On the third day there is a tear in the babies' envelope and the whole skin looks dry and different. Kamir is excited; her eyes glow, she seems to be keeping herself alive on sheer will. But she can't speak. "I will see them!" she whispers to me.

On the fourth morning it is difficult to feed. Donnia says that the babies must come out. He grasps the edges of the torn skin and pushes it down. It peels away; a shriveled placenta comes with it. As we tear it loose, the two babies roll out on the moss. One is exposed, I see it breathing, but the other is still in its fetal covering. I cut it free quickly, and the baby takes a great gulp of air and begins to cry—the immemorial infant squall. It is a Mnerrin baby, and so is the other, a girl and a boy.

Kamir tries to crawl toward them, her eyes burning hungrily. "Wait, darling," I tell her. We swab the babies off, and put them in her arms.

"They're perfect," Donnia says.

But after a moment her head falls to one side. She has fainted, I hope, and take her in my arms. She breathes for a minute or two; that is all. She is dead in my arms, with the babies in hers.

Gently we take them from her and feed them. To me they seem sturdy little things, but Donnia says they are thin. "We have work to do."

There is an island nearby, a pretty one with a mountain. We take Kamir's body there, up above the

dunes, with a headstone on which I inscribe words too emotion-laden to repeat here.

And we continue...

After a time it becomes clear that my batteries will more than hold out, so I suggest that both men get in the boat. Thus burdened, our progress becomes something of a wallow,

but still much faster than swimming. On the way, I teach Donnia and Sintana to drive it.

And so we arrive, on the morning of the seventh day, at the small island I had left a lifetime ago. The little space-lander is just as I left it, my camp is untouched. As though on signal, my transponder beeps again that evening, signifying that the ship is taking up an orbit above us. I signal her and arrange a rendezvous at dawn my time.

Then I busy myself with a quick check and turn to giving away everything I can possibly spare. The lander's big batteries will recharge the boat and the laser; I estimate their battery lives at years with a little care. My best knife I send to Mavru via Donnia, along with the big medikit. The laser is for Sintana and the little one for Maoul. Everything else—blankets, lenses, a small microscope, emergency cook pans and all—I heap on them.

"Use your judgment. Something nice for Agna—and this waterproof drawing pad and stylus for the older man who does Relations. God, I wish there were more."

"It is ample," says Sintana. His eyes are on the lander, I sense that both are anxious to see it go up.

But there isn't room for them to stay on the island, with the exhaust. So I bid them farewell and send them out in the boat. They seem reluctant to have me leave. As they motor out I catch a last gleam of blue.

Waiting to lift, I allow myself to think of what has haunted me, ever since the goldskins' coming:

On ancient Terra there was once another race of Humans. They were big-brained and, some think, unaesthetically formed. They flourished for a time, leaving few signs in the stone records except their bones and a grave lined with flowers. We call them Neanderthals.

And then came Cro-Magnon, our direct ancestors, and after that Neanderthal was seen no more.

What happened no one knows, whether some interbred, or whether they were wiped out in one of our first acts of genocide. (We left no living close relatives.) What thoughts Neanderthal thought, what intellectual discoveries he made, no one will ever know. They were strong; the fact that they disappeared at Cro-Magnon's advance must have been partly a matter of temperament. Perhaps they were noncombative.

Have I been seeing the start of just such a tragedy? I have no illusions about the Mnerrins' ability to defend themselves against Homo Ferox. Their wonderful artifacts of song and thought reside in their minds, their art of Relations is literally written on the sands. If they go under, no one will ever know that here men were following the thinking of Pythagoras, in a wholly different technological contest. But they do not need the technology, except now, for self-defense.

No. No one would ever know—any more than we will ever know the color of the eyes that looked out from under Neanderthal's shaggy mane. Perhaps they were clear, and filled with compassion and the growing light of reason. We cannot know. We have, I fear, killed them. And I fear, I greatly fear, that those lost eyes were a brilliant blue.

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Now I have made my record. To you who hear it, I beg, allow yourselves to imagine how it was. To be moved. To help! Surely the Federation could spare one small party to sort this out, to transport the goldskins to another planet. To save what can never be replaced of peace and beauty, of mind.