

William Barton

DOWN IN THE DARK

Yesterday, August 4, 2057, was my fifty-third birthday. I don't think anyone noticed. No one said anything. Maybe birthdays don't count anymore.

I sat in the half-track's cockpit, wearing my pressure suit, gloves off, helmet thrown back, steering by memory, as if caught in a dream. Four months. Four more months and I would've gone home, home to Lisa, whose letters said she was still waiting for me after all these years. But then the world came to an end, and all that ended along with it.

Sometimes, when I'm asleep, I still see the ending itself, see the newsreels transmitted after the fact from Moonbase. Just a nickel-iron asteroid twenty-three kilometers across, that's all. Knew about it for more than a year, they said, keeping it secret so there'd be no panic, making their plans in secret, carrying them off the same way.

Big rock like that, you'd think they'd've known about it for decades, but that long elliptical orbit, taking it out past Neptune... no number. No name on it but ours.

See those six bright flashes? Six thirty-year-old thermonuclear bombs going off, blowing the damned thing to bits. Now see the pretty pieces? Notice how they entrain and continue on their way? Twelve of them hit the Earth, one right after another, during the course of a long and interesting day.

I imagined people, imagined my old friends, seeing those secret nuclear flashes in the deep night sky, going, What the hell... ?

The biggest one hit the South Pole, coming in almost level, and damn if you couldn't see the West Antarctic ice sheet lift right off, breaking to a trillion glittery bits as it flew into orbit.

The last one came down dead square in the middle of North America, not far from Kansas City. Not far from my house. I kept imagining, hoping anyway, that Lisa was asleep just then. But she was probably out in the backyard with all our old friends, maybe watching with my binoculars as...

I had the cabin lights off, surrounded by the dull red glow of a few necessary dials, the bluer glow of a half dozen small plasma screens, so I could see outside, watch bits of landscape jump into the headlights' wash, low hummocks of waxy ice, pinkish snow the color of the stuff that sometimes grows down in the bowl of a dirty toilet.

Following old ruts outside, my own tracks, driven over and over again.

The saddleback came up, ground leveling out, forming a very shallow caldera. I pulled over to my familiar place, pink snow mashed flat, glazed yellow from environmental heating, parked where I'd parked a hundred times already, killed the headlights, dimmed the panel lights as much as they'd go without full powerdown, waited for my eyes to catch up.

The world came out of its own background gloom, like a ghost ship coasting from a fog, landscape tumbling down away from me, dull purplish hills and blue half-mountains, rolling away in the mist like the Adirondacks in springtime, rolling all the way to the shores of the Waxsea. More mist out there, then pale, glassy red nothing disappearing long before it got to where the horizon should've been.

From the heights of the Aerhurst Range, pressure ridge complex puckering the midline of Terra Noursae, maybe seven clicks from where Huygens set down, just a few weeks before I was born, you get one of the best views in the solar system. Maybe why I stop for it every time.

Overhead, the sky was bright now, though it was near the middle of an eight-day night. Maybe my eyes are learning to adapt quicker, quicker with each passing day. Maybe I'm at home here now.

Sure as hell can't be home anywhere else.

Everyone says the sky is orange here, even more orange than the sky on Venus, but it isn't. Hell, I've been to Venus. I know what that sky looks like. Not at all the same.

Sometimes, I try to imagine what the sky must look like from my old backyard. Sometimes, I imagine it just the way it was when I last saw it, not so many years ago. Other times I get a quick image of all those meters of ejecta that must be... well. Those times I let it go.

From overhead, Earth's sky looks dull gray-brown, lit up here and there, day and night, by a tawny red-orange glow. Moonbase newsreels say there's no free oxygen down there anymore, so the glow must be lava. Something like that.

Far above, hundreds of meters up, a flat snowdrift sailed along, potato chip waxflakes tumbling end over end in slow motion, twinkling, shiny, bouncing off each other, drift keeping its shape the way a terrestrial cloud keeps its shape in the wind. I clutched the Stirlings and brought the rpms as far down as the safeties would let me. Cut the cabin blower and listened to what the hull mikes were hearing.

There.

First, the dry-as-dust creaking of the landscape, stretching gently to and fro under Saturn's tidal strain. Then the dull, faraway moan of the wind. Not like an Earthly wind, wind blowing around the eaves of your house, groaning like a ghost through the branches of dead trees. Deeper here, almost subsonic, a wind that'd never been alive.

Finally... like dry, dead leaves, fallen leaves blowing along the gutter on a cold, gray fall morning, the sound of snow, drifting through the sky.

Saturn was barely visible behind the haze, nearly full, like a huge, featureless yellow moon, striated and edgeless. When it's daytime up here, if you know how to look, you can see the rings from their backscatter, like diamonds in the sky, arcing round the sooty smudge of Saturn's night-side shadow. Not now. Just that yellow disk, sitting up there, looking like an eyeless face.

I was out on Phoebe just once, fixing broken hardware. One-fifty degrees inclination to the ecliptic. Christ. It was a hell of a sight, even from thirteen million clicks out. Maybe, someday...

Running late. I powered up the halftrack's systems and got going. With the headlights on, Titan was just a murky moonscape under a vaguely orange indigo sky.

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Down by the Waxsea, down where the atmospheric pressure can hit two thousand millibars, the sky is opaque, Sun, Saturn, stars, and pale, iridescent blue Rhea, all lost. It's not really orange, even here. Brown might be a better word.

I pulled out of a gray defile that'd grown narrower since the last time I'd been here, engaging the pillow tires manually to break through a little ridge of waxy snow, methane and ethane not really frozen, but caught up in a sticky mess of organic polymers, pulled around a smoky pool of colorless liquid nitrogen that'd be gone in days.

Ahead of me, on a sloping surface that'd long ago lost its volatile regolith components, Workpoint 31 was looking older than before, the dome habitat baggy in places, bubble airlock drooping a bit. The weather station looked fine though, antennae sticking up just the way I remembered, anemometer turning slowly. I pulled up to the power transformer, extending my electrical probe, docking and parking in one smooth move, cutting the engines, lights, everything that could be cut.

There was a spacesuited figure standing beside a snowmobile with the battery compartment yawning open, motionless, turned toward me. Looking closely, I could see a pale face, barely visible. No radio hail or anything. Fine by me. I got the rest of my suit on, closed myself into the half-track's too-small airlock, and thumbed the depress valve actuator. There was a soft woof as the air went out through the burner, igniting, flaring away with a brief blue flash that lit up the lock's teacup-sized porthole.

It seemed dark outside as I walked toward the snowmobile, the sky not quite... lowering. Haze coming down and... a silver golfball seemed to materialize out of the air, drifting down a shallow glidepath, coming between me and the waiting figure. The workpoint's structures were reflected upside-down in its surface.

Slow. Slow. Almost as if it were decelerating as it approached the ground. Maybe so. The air gets thicker fast down here. It hit the ground and exploded into a brief crater-shape, complete with central peak.

Ploink.

There was a quick, rippling mirror on the snow, then nothing.

The radio voice, a soft woman's voice, said, "Starting to rain. We'd better get inside."

As we struggled out of our suits, the habitat seemed incredibly cluttered. People had been bringing junk here and leaving it for years. Just leaving it. I don't know. Maybe, someday, it would've been thrown out. Now? No.

The inner surface of the pressure envelope, arching blue plastic overhead, was lumping here and there, slowly, more raindrops coming down. In just a little while, if the intensity of the storm increased, it would look like slick blue pudding, gently aboil.

The woman, who was dumpy, androgynous in her longjohns, but had a pretty oval face, dark green eyes, short, straight, straw-colored hair, held out her hand. "Christie Meitner."

I took the hand, feeling the small warmth of her fingers briefly in mine. "Hoxha Maxwell." Funny, there's less than a hundred people on Titan. You'd think after four years I'd know them all.

She said, "Hoe-jah?" Not smiling, just curious. Something nervous about her, too. Like she was afraid of me or something.

I spelled it for her. "Named after some two-bit Albanian dictator by socialist parents who thought Marxism might get back on its feet someday." 2004? Getting to be a long time ago, these days. I smiled, and said, "Rubbish bin of history, and all that."

She looked away for a moment, then gestured toward the habitat's kitchen module, much of it buried under piles of unrecognizable hardware. "I was about to have dinner. You, ah... afterward, if the rain's let up, I guess we could go down to the instrument platform and get started."

Rain never lasts long here. I shook my head. "I've been going almost thirty hours straight. If I don't get some sleep, I'll break everything I touch."

Looking at me, she seemed to swallow. "Don't you, ah, sleep in the 'track?'"

"Batteries won't charge if the systems don't stay powered down for at least six hours." You know that. What's the problem here?

There was something like despair in her eyes.

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Asleep, she breathed with her mouth hanging open, making a hollow sound that wasn't quite a snore. Slow, soft inhale. Long pause. Quicker exhale, louder, almost like a word.

She'd put me in her bunk, the habitat's only bunk, had then curled up on the floor, snuggled in a spare bunkliner somebody'd left behind, who knows when. The liner on the bunk was her own, permeated with her scent. Nothing perfumy about it, nothing feminine. Just a people smell.

I felt like my eyes were ready to fall out, but I was too exhausted to sleep, too exhausted to do anything but lie there, looking down at her, lit by dim instrument light. When she'd put out the habitat lights, it'd seemed pitch dark, but after a while, this blue glow, that red one, a little green over there...

Almost like daylight to me now.

Abruptly, I remembered a night when I'd watched Lisa sleeping naked beside me, streaming gold hair splayed out on the sheets, head thrown back to show the long, soft curve of her neck, mulberry-bright eyes closed, moving back and forth beneath paper-thin lids.

Dreaming.

What were you dreaming, back then, back when we were so young?

I forgot to ask.

Now I'll never know.

Nights like these, I wish I'd never gone to space. But space was the only way an engineering technician could get rich, move us to a lifestyle where we could have that family.

"A million dollars a year," I'd argued, trying to break through her tears. "A million dollars!"

How long?

It's a twelve year contract, Lisa. Think. Think what it'll be like to have twelve million dollars... And I won't be gone the whole time. I mean, a year on the Moon, a couple of years on Mars maybe. I'll be home from time to time.

Home to help you buy our new life, set things up. And when it's all over... instead, I signed on for four years out by Saturn. Four years of triple pay. And by the time I got here, somebody, somewhere, already knew what was coming.

Hell.

We could've died together, standing out in the backyard, holding hands, watching the end of the world fall on us from a star-spangled midnight sky.

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It was still night the next day, of course, Christie reluctantly feeding me a breakfast of weak tea and algae muffins. No jelly, no butter, startling me when she pressed the teabags flat and hung them up to dry.

Of course. When it's gone, there'll be no more tea. I doubt there's butter and jelly any closer than Mars. I liked Mars, with its red sky and pale blue clouds. Part of the base where I was stationed, Oudemans 4, with its fine view of Ius Chasma, was under a clear dome. There was a little garden where some people were trying to grow oregano and poppies. I used to take my breakfast out there, sit and drink my instant coffee, nibble on my Pop Tarts and dream.

How many cups of weak tea can you get from a single teabag?

After breakfast, we suited up and got into the halftrack, squeezing through the airlock one at a time, undocking, then lurching off along the terminal escarpment to where some old eutectic collapse had made a jumbled, sloping path down to the seashore.

Other than answering the few questions I could think of, techie stuff about her equipment problems, Christie was silent, looking away from me, troubled. Christ. Everyone I know is troubled. As we watched the murky landscape, foggy with nitrogen mist at two bar, roll by, I said, "How long you been here?" I've met people who came in with the first expedition nine years ago, mostly scientists like Christie Meitner, who've been out in the field most of that time. Some of 'em are a little boggy in the head.

Not looking at me, she said, "Three months. Before that I was on Delta Platform."

Delta Platform, on the other side of Titan, where the Waxsea is an endless, landless, featureless expanse of red-tinted silver-gray. "How long on Titan?"

She turned and looked at me with a slightly resentful look. Some people don't want to... think about it anymore. "A year. I came in with Oberth's last run."

Oberth's last run. She was still on her way home from Saturn, halfway between Earth and Mars when it happened, which is why humanity's under-two-thousand survivors still have an interplanetary vessel. Last time I was back at Alanhold Base, I heard Oberth, damaged when she'd had to aerobrake through an ash-clogged stratosphere, was repaired, was on her way to rescue the Venus Orbital Station personnel.

Two thousand. Two thousand out of all those billions. Jesus.

But all I feel is that one damned death.

Used to be three fusion shuttles keeping our so-called "space-faring civilization" up and running, running supplies to a few hundred on Mars, a couple of dozen each at Venus, Callisto, Mercury Base, and the Fore Trojans. The four score and ten out here on Titan. Now there's just the one.

Ziolkovskii was caught in LEO, docked to the space station for repair and refit. I can't imagine why the hell people thought she'd be all right, why the station would come through in one piece. Ziolkovskii's crew got real nervous when they saw what was happening. Got their ship undocked and under way. But.

They were transmitting to Moonbase the whole time, which made for one hell of a newsreel. All the big impacts were on the other side of the Earth from where the ship and station were at the time, but long before they rounded the planetary limb, you could see rocks rising into her forward trajectory.

Commander Boltano kept transmitting, kept talking calmly, deep, slow voice like nothing unusual was going on, panning his hand-held camera out the command-module's docking window, as the rocks got bigger and bigger, until there was nothing else in sight. His voice cut off with a grunt and the camera view made a sudden, rapid excursion, just before the picture turned to static.

Goddard, still a few days out, making all those wonderful timelapse videos of the impact sequence, exploded as she tried to aerobrake. I guess by the time Oberth got home a couple of months later, things had settled out a bit.

We got to the seashore, running down a long detritus slope, and pulled up to the research platform, which looked a little bit like those old-style unmanned landers, some of them going all the way back to the 1970s, you find scattered around the surface of Mars.

Beyond it, the flat, empty surface of the Waxsea stretched away like an infinite table, until it was lost in low, dark red mist. Behind us, the delicately folded face of the Terra Noursae terminal escarpment towered like cornflower blue curtains, mostly exposed water ice, the beach we stood on cracked icebits strung through with ropes of peach-colored polymer and black strands of asphalt.

Down by the mean datum, Titan's sky really is orange, dull orange even at night, with only invisible Saturn's glory for light, and it seems awfully far away overhead.

Christie was looking at me, face no more than shadowed eyes seen through her suit's visor. "Can we get started? I'd like to get back to work."

"Sure."

Funny thing. There were old snowmobile batteries scattered like a perimeter fence around the instrument package, seated in the beach "sand," tilting at angles like so many silent sentinels. As she showed me what was wrong, she kept looking away, looking out at the beach beyond.

I got to work on her problems, easily fixed, mostly shorted out capacitors and the like, carefully packing each ruined component in my toolkit as I replaced it. We used to throw these things away, but... well, maybe somebody can figure out how to fix solid states, one way or another. We sure as hell aren't going to make new ones out here. Not for a long time, even if...

Moonbase keeps talking about component fabrication, but it's just pissing in the wind. Watching that newsreel, my buddy Jimmy Thornton, who'd come in on the same flight as me, was scheduled to go home with me, commented there must be plenty of good hardware sitting in collapsed, half-melted warehouses on Earth.

Sure. Maybe we could repurpose a Venus lander and get it back to LEO. Figure out where to land, get what we needed, get back up.

Later that night, Jimmy cut himself with a utility knife, not leaving a note behind.

Maybe he figured I wouldn't miss him.

Maybe he figured I'd be along shortly.

Christie watched me work for a while, maybe not trusting that I knew what was what. Scientist types are like that. After a while, she wandered off, and, as I worked, I could see her spacesuit drifting about the beach, white against the colored background of Titanscape, out beyond the ring of abandoned hardware sentinels.

Something else we need to rescue. Ruined batteries are easy enough to fix, especially when you've got plenty of chemicals just lying around.

Finished, I buttoned up, turned, and watched her for a bit.

She had her back angled toward me, walking around the perimeter, half turned away, watching the ground. Every now and again she'd take a quick step outward, seeming to dance like a child, then stand and watch.

Going nuts already, Dr. Meitner?

Well, maybe so. Most of the scientists have just continued doing their jobs, gathering data, doing interpretations, just like... well. Techies keep doing theirs because if they don't, we all die right now.

She was standing with her back fully toward me, hands on hips, looking out to sea. There was a hazy layer of mist out there, Waxsea a little bit like Lake Michigan seen from Chicago's Loop on a cold November morning.

I walked toward her in the gloom, wondering which way our shadows would fall, if we'd had shadows. Just beyond her, I thought I saw something, a bit of yellow smudged on the waxy icecrust. Moving? A ripple caused by a thermocline in the dense air? Hard to tell. It... she took a quick step forward, stepping right into the puddle of yellow, which vanished like a mirage.

Off to one side, out of her suit-limited peripheral vision perhaps, there was another smudge, red, tinged with a bit of blue. As I watched, it started rippling slowly, moving in the direction of the hardware platform and parked half-track, aiming for a point midway between the two nearest batteries. When I stepped toward it, the thing edged away, following a long curve.

I heard a muffled gasp in my earphones.

Christie rushed past me, bounding toward it in a standard low-gee kangaroo hop. The ripple of red was still for a second, then, just as she got to it, seemed to dissolve into the sand.

"What the hell's going on here? What is that stuff?"

She turned to face me, skin around her eyes pale behind the suit's faceplate, hands behind her back like a naughty child caught in the act.

I stood still, transfixed by the terror in her eyes. Lot of people going crazy these days. No one should be surprised. "Are you all right?"

She nodded inside the suit, eyes going up and down. "Sure. Sure, I... they're..." Her eyes darted away from mine, scanning the landscape behind me for a second, but I was afraid to turn and look. "They're a kind of... a complex waxy polymer construct. They form at the interface between the Waxsea and Terra Noursae, apparently. Just on the beach, though I've found a few beneath the seacrust." She suddenly stopped talking, squeezing her eyes shut hard for a moment, looking away from me when she opened them again.

"What makes them move?"

"Our waste heat." Pause, darting eyes, then, "I've made some cold-soak instrumentation that shows they normally flow along tidal stress cracks in the beach."

Wandering goo. "Why were you..." All I could do was gesture. Hiding them from me? How could I ask that and still seem... reasonable?

There was a long pause, filled with my heartbeat and the soft groan of a distant wind, then she said, "I'm... not ready to publish yet."

I tried to stop myself from speaking, but failed. "Publish? Christie, there aren't any... I mean... uh."

Eyes blazing, she snapped, "Shut up! "

I felt cold sweat form briefly inside my suit. "Sure. Sorry, I... um. Sure." Inside the half-track, all the way back to Workpoint 31, she was silent, as if I'd ceased to exist.

j

Coming in along the south approach to Alanhold Base, you arrive at Bonestell Cosmodrome about twelve clicks out. This is where the first piloted landing set down, 20 April 2048, though when the second expedition arrived two years later, they tracted the components of the new base some distance away. Good idea, what with the contamination, the explosion risk, and all.

I skirted the edge of the ragged cryofoam disk that kept launches and landings from slowly digging the base's crater deeper and deeper in the ice, not intending to stop, glancing at the activity out of one side window from time to time.

TL-1, the original lander, almost always down for repair these days, was hidden in its hangar, yellow light glowing through the plastic, casting the gray shadows of workers like puppet-show phantasms. TL-2 was on its meilerwagen being towed to our only launch gantry.

None of it's necessary, of course. When these things break down, we can use the little ships the way they were designed to

be used, wingless lifting bodies setting down feather-light on stubby landing legs, lifting off again in a bowl of blue fire.

Great idea, indigenous propellant nuclear thermal rockets. Wonder how long they'll last? No longer than our last shipment of radionuclides. Then what? No answer.

Briefly, I thought of the talk Jimmy and I'd had about converting TL-1 to run off one of the base's fusion cores. Could be done, I guess. TL-1 won't last much longer anyway.

I'd ridden the landers three times in three years. Getting here in the first place. Going out to service hardware on Phoebe. Making emergency repairs at Ringplane Station.

Christ, that was beautiful. Like being a fly on a wall thirty thousand kilometers high, looking straight down to yellow Saturn's hazy cloudtops, feeling giddy at the thought of somehow falling.

Guess I expected one last flight, climbing up out of Titan's orange soup clouds into a sky true blue indigo, then black and spangled with stars, docking with Oberth, then going on home.

j

Back at Alanhold, I parked my halftrack in the base's unpressurized garage, corrugated arch sort of like a Quonset hut open on both ends, docked to a charging mast, and got out. I always take a quick look up when I roll out through the airlock door, because you can see the last bits of your depress fire boiling around under the ceiling, like a misty, glowing blue cloud.

Out one end of the garage, I could see somebody'd strung a brand new UN flag on the base's pole, woven plastic fabric rolling gently in the breeze. Every now and again, it'd stretch out a bit so you could see the white lines of the map. Maybe they should reconsider the flag? Sooner or later, we'll run out of them.

There was a sparse snow falling, big, shiny white flakes like Ruffles potato chips, tumbling, shrinking visibly as they fell straight down. I don't think any of them reached the ground intact. We put a lot of waste heat into this environment, whether we like it or not.

I turned away, remembering a picnic I'd had with my parents. Just some city park, summer, blue sky with a few wisps of pale white cloud, kids running around, screaming and yelling. Us on a blanket. Ruffles potato chips. Sealtest French Onion dip with so much MSG it made me sleepy afterward. A&W root beer.

Dad was killed in an autohighway pileup back in the twenties. Made the national news, he and thirty or so other poor bastards ground up in the wreckage, media exposure forcing Congress to cancel the project.

Mom... I don't know. She and Lisa never really got along, so...

I went in through the base airlock.

j

After changing in my cubbyhole, not even enough room to stand fully upright, I went to the cafeteria, passing silent people in the hallways, stepping to my right, turning to face inward each time, men's and women's faces passing centimeters from mine, always with eyes downcast. Nobody in here, tables empty, dusty, chairs jumbled every which way, no one bothering to push them in any more.

I went to the freezer and got a couple of tacos, bemusedly wondering what life would be like when they ran out, now that Taco Hell is no more, picked out a pouch of cherry Hi-C while they were nuking, took my mess and went next door to the day room. More people here, TV on, playing a disk of the latest newsreel.

The screen was showing a gently curved planetary limb, layer of bluish haze hanging in an arc over featureless gray ash clouds. As I watched, light played in the clouds, first one dull spark, then others, propagating around it, then nothing.

Lightning.

I sat down next to Ron Smithfield, slouched in a chair with his legs splayed out on the floor's worn green carpet-tile. Green like grass. Green, the psych manuals said, so we'd feel comforted, when we were far, far from home.

He said, "You missed Durrell. Have to wait for the replay."

On the screen, the limb view was gone, nothing now but the gray clouds, growing steadily closer. There was a line of text, yellow-green letters, deceleration values crawling across the bottom of the image. "What'd the bastard have to say for himself this time?"

Rodrigo Durrell had been Secretary of Space in the second Jolson administration. He and the Undersecretary for Outer System Exploration, a Ms. Rhinehart, had managed an "inspection tour" of Moonbase, complete with their families, just before the asteroid intercept mission was launched.

Ms. Rhinehart, I understood, had a five-year-old daughter. Wonder what it feels like to be the only five-year-old girl in the universe?

Wonder if President Jolson knew? Did she stay on the job out of bravery or ignorance? Did she and her teenaged children huddle together in the White House, or in that old shelter in Virginia, waiting for it to happen? For a while, Moonbase kept trying to raise the National Command Post in Colorado. Nothing. Maybe Cheyenne Mountain took an impact.

Ron sighed. "Mercury Base personnel are dead."

The image on the screen was starting to grow dark now as the ash clouds got close. You could see a bit of pink where the plasma bowshock was starting to form around the probe's aeroshell. "I thought they had another few weeks of air left."

He nodded. "Apparently, once they understood Oberth couldn't come get them for another five months, they took a vote. Had the base doctor give them shots of surgical anesthetic. He radioed in their decision, then injected himself."

"Mmh." Nothing you can say about something like that. The image on the screen broke up into jags of colored static, quickly replaced by a colorbar pattern.

"Durrell says they're going to bring us all home in order, Venus, then the Trojan habitats, then Callisto. Then Mars, then us."

Home. I imagined myself on the dead Moon, sitting out the rest of my life looking up at dead Earth. "I guess we're last in case Oberth breaks down."

Ron nodded. There was a man on the screen now, some scientist type, talking, but I got up and left the room, not

wanting to hear his excuses. Last time, he said it might take a year before a manned landing would be feasible, get a crew down there so we could see what the hell we've got left to work with.

That figure, I imagine, will be revised upward. Then revised upward again.

Nothing to do but go to the showers, then get myself to bed, get a good night's sleep so I could resume work in the morning. I took a towel and shampoo lozenge from the dispenser, got out of my coveralls and hung them on a peg, got under a nozzle in the far corner of the room, hot water sluicing over the back of my neck, cascading over my shoulders, running down my spine like warm, wet hands, making me shiver.

One thing we'll never run out of, here on Titan: hot water. Plenty of ice. Plenty of fuel for the fusion reactors.

A shadowy figure came in, carrying its own towel and lozenge, got out of its coverall and hung it on the hook next to mine, came walking across the room toward me.

"Hoxha," she said. Standing still, looking up at me with her big, dark eyes. Maybe waiting for me to make room for her under my nozzle?

I stood flatfooted, looking down at her, taking in a thousand naked-woman details. "Hello, Jennah."

She looked up for another few seconds, then her eyes fell. She turned on the nozzle next to mine, cloud of steam rising, making the mist even denser. The floor seemed sticky under my feet, whoever had tub-and-tile duty shirking the job.

I turned to watch her, slim, pretty woman with long, curly black hair turning slowly around under a fine needle spray, maybe showing off for me, maybe not, water streaming over her shoulders, jetting provocatively from her nipples, running down her belly, splattering between her legs.

After a while, she looked up at me again, stretching her arms over her head, arching her back, flashing the red dot of a stropoeic implant. "You used to be interested, Hoxha."

Sure. Used to interest me a lot. Lisa and I talked about this, agreed that four years was just too long, that we'd tell all when it was over and done with, tell all and forgive whatever there was to forgive.

I shrugged. "Sorry."

She looked at me for another few seconds, then nodded, looking away, turned off her shower and walked away.

I stood in the mist for a little while longer, thinking about the failure of my interest in... well. Went to my room and went to sleep. Didn't want to dream, but I dreamed anyway.

j

In the morning, tired after a night's sleep fractured by fragmentary images of things that didn't exist anymore, I stopped by Tony Gualteri's cubby on the way down to the halftrack hangar. Tony was a geochemist who'd been on TL-1 the day it set down on Titan, had been out here ever since, slowly turning into the small, wiry old bald guy I'd first met almost four years ago.

When I told him about the colored wax things I'd seen floating along the beach surface out by Workpoint 31, he looked puzzled and scratched a chin made black by dense beard stubble.

All sorts of crazy things on Titan, he said. Anything's possible.

I stood expectantly, waiting. Well?

He'd shrugged. It's her project. None of my business. Then he turned back to the screen of his little computer, doing whatever it is geochemists do with their data.

Do, even when...

My own day's work was up the coast, so I had a fine drive along the terminal escarpment, going to where one of the remote automated resource stations had inexplicably gone silent. Probably no surprise waiting for me there. Things fall apart. I'm here to fix them.

By the time I got there, the weather was lifting and the Sun was starting to rise, long streamers of golden light fingering through the orange-brown sky, diffuse smudge of red-gold smearing up through the mist hiding the Waxsea horizon.

It'd stay that way for a long time, Sun taking hours to clear the mist and disappear in the sky, becoming no more than a diffuse bright region, turning its part of the sky to shades of orange peel, layered like mother-of-pearl.

The station was on the rim of the escarpment, weather instruments spinning and nodding away, like nothing was wrong, sensors on cables hanging down the cliffside all the way to the beach, far below. I stood looking over the edge for a few minutes, imagining I could see strange colors shining in the sand, but... right. Imagination. Too far to see anything. Anything at all.

Problem turned out to be simple but aggravating: Something had shorted out a sensor head hanging off the end of one of the cables, sending a power spike back up the line that made the data recorder shut itself down as a safety measure. Then it couldn't come back up, because something was still wrong down at the sensor.

Easy enough to reset the computer, but it took me four hours to reel in the cable. Somehow, some kind of black, tarry stuff had gotten inside the instrument, gotten into electronics, and then acted as a very nice conductor, the exact definition of a short circuit. Took about a second to clean it out, saving a bit of sample in a bottle for whoever might be interested, and that was that.

j

Back inside the halftrack, I sat in the driver's seat, looking out over the wide, silver-red expanse of the Waxsea, toward the dark mist of the horizon, smelling the faint odors of Titan that'd made it through the lock-purge event, accompanying me inside.

They aren't bad smells. Not bad smells at all. Certainly not the organic rot odors some old writers had imagined, imagination hardly colored by rational thought. Just a faint, crisp smell like white campstove gas, uncontaminated by oxygenation compounds. I remember my grandfather talking about the pleasant smell of the gas pump, back when he was a boy, back before they loaded the fuels with ether and alcohol. That and an occasional whiff of creosote, Titan smelling like an old-fashioned telephone pole, weeping black tar in the hot summer sun.

Thinking about black tar, feeling heavy lidded, the Titanscape seemed to expand in my eyes, filling them up, driving away

the insides of the halftrack. Like I was outside. Like I could walk around outside, feel the wind in my hair, icy silver golfball raindrops ploinking on my skin, the flutter of waxy snowflakes like butterflies in my face.

What the hell was it about that stuff in the sensor head?

I really haven't learned enough about Titan despite my years here. Too busy being Mr. Fixit. Scientists not caring what I knew or didn't know.

Jannah. Jannah tried to talk to me sometimes, times when we were finished with what we had in common, lying cramped together in her bunk or mine. Tried to talk to me about her specialty, some branch of meteorology, studies on the high-pressure atmospheres of gas giants.

Can't get there from here, she'd said. No trips to Jupiter, to Saturn. Not in my lifetime. Maybe, someday, a bit of work high in the skies of Uranus or Neptune? Maybe in a generation? Too damned late for me, she'd said. Titan. Titan is all there'll ever be for me.

Prophetic words?

In all innocence, I guess.

And, talking, she made it sound like nothing more than numbers, reducing a beauty that had the power to mist my eyes into something like math homework. *Cubus plus sext rebus aequalis vigentum.*

Once, staggering under the workload of a powered exoskeleton, I'd looked off the top of Ishtar's Veil, high in the Maxwell Montes of Venus, and seen a colored glory, swirling with the ripples of a Kirlian aura, stood transfixed by it. No numbers there. No numbers at all.

I'd shut Jannah up with renewed kisses, overwhelming her with the demands of innumerate flesh. After a while, she gave up telling me about the arithmetic of her dreams.

In time, I fell asleep, hoping to dream about Jannah, at least. Dream about the things we'd done together, the simple fun we'd had in those little rooms. Maybe, if I dreamed that dream, I'd awaken in the night to find myself flooded with renewed desire. Maybe in the morning, I'd turn this thing around and drive on back to base. Drive back, look Jannah up and... what the hell would they do if I took some extra time off? Fire me?

Instead, sleeping, I dreamed about Christie Meitner, dumpy in her longjohns, barely human in her pressure suit. Christie Meitner and her fields of color. Christie Meitner hopping like a maniac, hopping on puddles of melted crayon stuff, driving the colors away.

I woke up in the morning, looked for a bit at my refrigerated sample, and then set sail for Workpoint 31, calling base to let them know I was sidetracked, that I'd call them again later with a revised schedule.

It's not far out of the way, I thought. A few hours, that's all.

j

She wasn't at the habitat, blue dome looking baggier than ever, rather seedy by daylight, and didn't respond to my radio hail. Well. Snowmobile's gone, at any rate. Since there was plenty of juice in the batteries, I turned and drove on, following the tracks down to the edge of the escarpment, heading for the rubble fall and her instrumentation site.

For some reason, I stopped a few hundred meters shy of the turn and got out, listening to the soft woof of the vent burner, wondering if she'd see the cloud of blue flame as it dissipated, rising above the cliff's edge.

I walked down that way, waxy surface crackling under my boots, steam rising around me once I got off the beaten track and started disturbing virgin regolith, finally stopping right on the verge, looking out into open space. The beach, silver sugar crystals woven with orange and black thread. The silver-red sea. The red-orange-brown haze farther on. The sky, orange and brown with red clouds and dark, faraway snow, descending blue bands of rain like shadows in the mist.

A soft voice inside whispered, Alien world. Truly alien. Moon, Venus, Mars, all just dead rock, whether under black sky, yellow, or pink. This place, though... I shivered slightly, though it was hot in my suit, sweat trickling down my ribs, under my arms, trickling down 'til absorbent undergarments wicked it up, fed it to the suit systems, turning it back into drinking water.

Below, stark and alien in the middle of the beach, Christie's instrument cluster was unnaturally motionless, powered down, I realized. Christie herself was a tiny, spacesuited white doll figure perched precariously atop the weather station access platform.

Batteries. The dead batteries were gone too. Ah. Over there, piled at the foot of the eutectic fall, where she'd also parked the snowmobile. Maybe she was planning on hauling them back to camp for someone to take away. Good idea. Nice of her to...

Beyond her on the beach, right down by the edge of the sea, was a writhing spill of color. Blue. Green. Red. A broad stripe of olive drab, like a foundation between the others, making it almost look like... well, no. Only to me. Christie's down by the beach. What was she seeing?

The colors were moving slowly, like swirls of oil in a lavalite.

I released my suit's whip antenna and turned up the transmitter gain, intending... the colors suddenly started to jitter and Christie seemed to crouch, as if coiled by tension. Like she was... expecting something? Jesus. Imagination run riot.

I said, "Christie?" There was a background hum in my earphones, feedback from the halftrack communication system.

The colors jumped like water splashing away from a thrown rock, but Christie didn't look up, seemed wholly focused on what she was seeing.

"Christie? Can you hear me?" Could she possibly have her suit radio turned off? Stupid. Fatally stupid in this place.

And the colors? They broke up into jags and zigzags as I spoke.

Waste heat. Radio waves are a form of heat. Just another sort of electromagnetic radiation, pumping energy into the environment.

Christie stood up straight, looking at her chaotic colors, putting one hand to her helmet, as if trying to scratch her head. She looked down, bending slightly at the waist so she could check to see her suit controls. What? Checking to make sure everything that could be turned off was?

"Christie!" The colors pulverized into hundreds of tiny globules, which started winking out rapidly, one by one, then in groups.

Christie suddenly stiffened and spun in place, looking up, first at the clathrate collapse, then scanning along the top of the cliff. I was just a speck up here, but starkly alien against the sky, and she saw me in seconds.

Long moment of motionlessness, a quick glance back to where the colors had been, as if reassuring herself they were gone, then she waved to me. It took a minute or so before she remembered to turn on the radio.

j

By the time I'd gotten the halftrack down to the bottom of the fall, wondering whether I ought to inject any words into the silence, failing to make any decision, Christie'd turned the instrument station back on, its weather station spinning and nodding, my comm system picking up its signal, data relayed to Workpoint 31, then on back through the microwave link to Alanhold.

How much energy is there in a microwave beam?

Plenty, I guess. Human science is playing merry hell with the Titanian... oh, hell. Ecosystem's not the right word, is it? Not in this dead place. Well. Our science wasn't making nearly the mess here Mother Nature'd made of Earth.

When we're gone, Titan will get over it.

Interesting to imagine a solar system empty but for our pitiful few ruins.

I helped her load all the dead batteries into the halftrack's unpressurized cargo bin, then followed her home in the snowmobile's wake, watching its misty rooster tail gradually grow smaller as she drew ahead.

By the time I got into the habitat, she was already stripped to her longjohns, bending over the open refrigerator door, rooting around among a meager pile of microwave delights. Holding the red plastic sack of a Quaker meatball sub in one hand, she half turned, face curiously blank, and said, "You want anything? I got, uh..." She twisted, looking back into the fridge.

All sorts of goodies.

God damn it.

I said, "Christie, we need to talk about what you just did. I mean, turning off your radio...?"

She turned her back to me, putting the sub away, slowly closing the refrigerator door, slowly straightening up, facing the wall. Finally, a whisper, "What did you see, Hoxha? How long were you..."

How odd. What did I see? While I was thinking, she turned and looked at me, startling me with the depth of fear in her eyes. What the hell could I possibly have seen, that I... "I'm not sure. You were watching... colors on the beach, over by the sea shore."

A bit of relief.

"You know, it's funny," I said, watching carefully. "Those colors almost looked like they were... I don't know. Making a picture. Swirls. Like abstract art."

The fear spiked.

She said, "Did you... mention what happened last time to... anyone?"

I told her about Gualteri, watching her swallow before she spoke again.

"What did he say?"

I shrugged. "Said it was none of his business. Said you'd let us know when you were ready to... puh-publish." Publish! Jesus.

Audible sigh, eyes rolling back a bit. Then she looked up at me, stepping closer, and said, "That's right, Hoxha. My business. Um. I'd like you to promise me you won't..."

"Christie, I want to know why you turned the radio off. Now." People willing to violate safety regs for their own purposes could kill us all. And you know that, Dr. Christine Meitner, Ph.D.

The look in her eyes became almost desperate. "Hoxha, I'll give you anything you want to keep your mouth shut."

Laughter made me stutter again. "You're offering me a bribe? What the hell did you have in mind, your Swiss bank account?" Scientist like this would get a pretty penny for a trip out here. A lot more than some miserable little engineering tech. "You think there's anything left of the fucking Alps?"

That made her flinch for just a second, not quite getting through. Me, I suddenly saw Geneva in flames as the sky burned blue-white with tektite rain.

She looked away, breathing with her mouth open, swaying slightly. When she turned back, I was shocked to see tears in her eyes. She said, "Christ, Hoxha. Please. I'll give you anything you want! Just name it!"

Then she took the zipper ring of her longjohns and pulled it open, open all the way down the front, showing me big, flabby breasts, roll of soft fat around her belly, ratty tuft of reddish-brown pubic hair peeking through the vee at the bottom. Standing there then, looking at me, eyes pleading.

And I felt my breath catch in my throat, caught by a bolt of unfamiliar feeling.

I put up my hand, palm toward her and, very softly, said, "Christie. Just tell me what's going on, okay?"

She looked down then, face clouded over. Slowly zipped up her longjohns, and I almost didn't catch what she said next.

It was, "I think the melted-crayon things are alive."

j

I held my laughter, looking at her, mouth hanging open.

It's all a lifetime ago, for all of us.

I remember when I was a little boy, seven years old, I guess, sitting with my grandfather, who must have been in his early sixties then, watching reports from the Discovery lander, setting down on Europa, releasing its probe, drilling down and down through pale red ice, down to a sunless sea.

Remember my grandfather telling me how, when he was seven, it'd been Sputnik on the TV, dirigible star terrifying on the edge that atom-menaced night, his grandfather a man born when the Wright Brothers flew, man who remembered being a little boy when Bleriot made his fabulous channel crossing.

There was no life under the icy crust of Europa, just a slushy sea of organics, scalding bubbles of water around lifeless

black smokers. My grandfather died a few months before the first men got to Mars and proved there was no life there either, probably never had been, just as his grandfather died not long before Apollo touched down on the Moon.

I figured I'd probably die just before men got to the nearest star, living on in some little boy's memory. Shows how wrong you can be.

And now here I stood on Titan's lifeless chemical wonderland, facing a woman who'd gone mad, suffocating in a delirium of loss and denial.

Christie didn't argue with me, anger growing in her eyes, displacing the fear, masking her with the familiar scientist ego I'd seen on so many self-important faces, so often before. Sometimes they say, "Well, you're just a tech," and turn away. More often than not, I guess.

Christie led me outside to the halftrack and made me drive her back down to the beach. We parked the vehicle well clear of the instrument station and she told me to stand on top of the cargo bin. "You stay here and watch. Otherwise we'll make too much waste heat and..."

On the run then, no more words for me.

Over by the instrument station, she took a pair of utility tongs and fiddled with something I could see sticking out of the beach regolith. Squint... yes. The top of a small dewar bottle. When she uncorked it, a hazy mist jetted, like smoke from a genie's bottle, rolling briefly, beachscape beyond made oily looking by the vapor.

"What's that stuff?"

She was panting on the radio link, out of breath, voice loud in my ears as she pulled the bottle from the ice. "Distilled from beach infiltrates. It's... what they eat."

She had it clear now and was scurrying toward the rimy area where cracked-ice beach became Waxsea surface.

"What're you..."

"Shut up. Watch."

She suddenly dumped the bottle, just a splash of clear liquid that quickly curdled and grew dark, billow of greasy fog momentarily disfiguring the air, then scuttled back toward me, dropping off the tongs and empty bottle as she passed by the station.

And it didn't take long for the colors to bloom.

Before she got to my side, blobs of red and yellow, pink, green, blue, were surfacing by the edge of the beach. Surfacing and then sliding inward, making the beginnings of a ragged vortex around the chemical spill. Around and down, dropping under the surface, not quite disappearing, surfacing again.

The smoking puddle of goo started to shrink.

And Christie, standing beside me now, said, "You see? You see?"

I said, "I don't know what I'm seeing. I..." I jumped down off the halftrack, bounding slowly in the low-gee, heading across the beach.

Christie said, "Stop! Stop it, you'll..."

I stopped well short of the slowly writhing conflagration of colors, marveling at how they stayed distinct from one another. You'd think when the blue one touches the yellow, there'd be a bit of green along the interface. Nothing. Not even a line. Not even an illusion of green, made by my Earth-grown eyes.

They looked sort of like cartoon amoebas, amoebas as a child imagines them before he's looked through a microscope for the first time and realized "pseudopod" means exactly what it says.

And it really did look like they were eating the goo.

Suddenly, the blue blob nearest where I stood became motionless. Grew a brief speckle of orange dots that seemed to lift above its surface for just a moment, then it was gone, vanished into the beach ice.

All in the twinkling of an eye, too quick for me to know exactly what I'd seen.

The others followed it into nothingness within a second or so, leaving the smoking goo behind, an evaporating puddle less than half its original size.

I think I stood staring, empty-headed, for about thirty seconds, before trying to imagine ways you could account for this without invoking the magic word life. "Christie?"

Nothing. But I could hear her rasping breath, made immediate by the radio link, though she could have been kilometers away. "Christie..." I turned around.

She was standing right behind me, less than two meters away, eyes enormous through the murky faceplate of her spacesuit. She was holding my ice axe, taken from its mount on the outside of the halftrack, clutched in both hands, diagonal across her chest.

I stood as still as I could, looking into her eyes, trying to fathom... Finally, I swallowed, and said, "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," she said. Then she let the axe fall, holding it in one hand, head raising a few icechips from the beach. "Long enough, but... I couldn't do it."

She turned and started to walk away, back toward the halftrack.

j

The ride back to the habitat was eerie, full of that shocky feeling you get right after a serious injury, when the world seems remote and impossible. I couldn't imagine what would've happened if she'd tried to hit me with the axe.

Like something out of one of those damned stupid old movies.

The one about the first expedition to Mars, movie made almost a hundred years ago. The one where the repair crew is out on the hull when the "meteor storm" comes. There's a bullet-like flicker. The inside of this guy's helmet lights up, showing a stunned face, twisting in agony, then the light goes out and he's dead, faceplate fogged over black.

Just like that.

Our suit pressure's kept just a few millibars over Titan ambient by helium ballast. Maybe if she cut my suit, there'd be a spark and... I pictured myself running for the halftrack, spouting twists of slow blue flame.

She said, "I guess..."

Nothing. Outside, the sky was dull brown and streaked with gold, as well-lit as Titan's sky ever gets. Somewhere up there, Saturn's crescent was growing smaller, deepening shadow cast over her rings. You could tell where the sun was, a small, sparkly patch in the sky, like a bit of pyrite fog.

I said, "I keep trying to think of ways it could just be some fancy chemical reaction. I mean, organic chemistry..."

She snickered, making my skin crawl.

Back in the habitat, out of our suits, sitting at the table in our baggy underwear, we ate Caravan Humpburgers so old the meat tasted like filter paper, the buns stiff and plasticky, and mushy french fries that must've been thawed and refrozen at least once in their history.

Too much silence. Christie sat reading the ads on the back of a Humpburger package. Something about a contest where if you saved your wrappers and got four matching Humpy the Camels, you could win a "science vacation" to Moonbase.

I pulled the thing out from under her fingers and looked at the fine print. The trip date had been seven weeks before the impact. Christ. I said, "Maybe whoever won this is still alive."

Or maybe, knowing what was about to happen, they just sent him home to die.

Christie was staring at me, eyes big and unreadable.

"You going to tell me about the crayon things now?"

Silence, then she slowly shook her head.

I found myself thinking about the way she'd looked a couple of hours ago, offering her virtue to me like... hell. Like a character in one of those silly romance vids Lisa was always watching when we... nothing in my head now but Christie with her suit liner zipped open, titties hanging out, eyes begging me to...

I felt my face relax in a brief smile.

Her eyes narrowed. "Who you going to tell?"

"Nobody. I guess I was... reconsidering your offer." My own snicker sounded nervous.

Christie's face darkened and her eyes fell, clouding over with anger. Then she said, "I... I'm not stereopoeic."

Not... I suddenly realized the magnitude of her bribe, what it might've cost her to make the offer.

And then I was picturing us together, crammed into the little bunk, maybe sprawled on the habitat floor, having cleared away junk to make a big enough space.

Felt my breathing grow ever so slightly shallow?

Really?

No way to tell.

I said, "Sorry. I was just trying to... lighten things up. You know. I mean... when I saw you with that axe..."

She nodded slowly. "Are you really not going to tell?"

I shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

Eyes hooded. Keeping something to herself.

"You going to tell me?"

Long, shadowy look. Making up her mind about what kind of lie she might want to tell. The silence drew out, then there was that same little headshake.

I said, "Okay," then turned away and started getting into my suit, while she sat and watched. Every time I looked, there was something in her face, like she wanted to spill whatever it was.

Every time she saw me look, her face would shut like a door.

Once my suit was on and pressurized, I went out through the lock and was on my way.

j

I tried thinking about it rationally, all the long drive back, but I couldn't. All that kept coming into my head was, What difference can it make now? and, Why does she care?

Care enough to pick up an axe and consider splitting a doomed man's head.

There are fewer than two thousand people left alive in the entire universe. We are all going to die, sooner or later, when the tech starts to fail, when our numbers fall, the spare parts run out... when we all go mad and run screaming, bare-ass naked, for the airlocks.

I pictured myself depressing the halftrack, rolling out the lock door, rising to my feet in godawful cold, taking a deep breath of ghastly air and... hell. Can't even imagine what it might be like.

Like sitting in the electric chair, heart in your throat, senses magically alert, waiting for the click of the switch, the brief hum of the wires and... and then what?

We don't know.

Funny. Just a day ago, just yesterday, I thought I knew. Thought I wouldn't mind when the time came that I... yeah. Like Jimmy Thornton and his utility knife. Just like that.

I thought about getting myself a big bowl of nice warm water, sitting down on my bunk, all alone with the bowl between my legs, putting my hands and the knife under water, making those nice, painless cuts, watching the red clouds form.

Probably be a little bit like falling asleep, hm?

Jimmy looked asleep when they found him. Didn't even spill the water when he went under.

I crested the last hill before the base, Bonestell Cosmodrome coming over the horizon, and parked the halftrack on a broad, flat ledge at the head of the approach defile, wondering why the hell my skin had begun to crawl.

TL-2 was on the launch pad now, tipped upright, fully fueled, her meilerwagen towed away. On Earth, a rocket like this is always surrounded by a falling mist of condensation. Here, where heating elements are used to keep the fuel from gelling, there's a narrow, rippling plume, mostly thermal distortion, going straight up.

Today, it only went up a few hundred meters, then was chopped off by wind shear.

As I watched, the engines lit, bubble of blue glow swelling between the landing jacks, TL-2's dark cone shape lifting slowly. There was a sudden, snarled blossom of red-orange fire spilling across the plastic as superheated hydrogen started combining with atmospheric components, nitrogen, miscellaneous organics, HCN a major combustion byproduct.

The flame was a long, beautiful tongue of blue-white-yellow-red, swirling like a whirlwind as it climbed against the orange-brown sky, passing through first one layer of diaphanous blue cloud, then another, then disappearing, becoming diffuse light, then nothing.

She was on her way to Enceladus, I knew, where we'd found a few million liters of helium trapped in an old ice-9 cell, the precious gas one of the few things we couldn't make or mine on Titan.

As I put the halfrack in gear, heading on home, I thought about what it would be like to try to live for the rest of my life on the Moon, Earth's moon, the only real Moon, dead old Earth hanging like an ember in the sky.

Maybe we're making a mistake.

Maybe they should all come here.

Driving under a featureless brown sky, surrounded by a blue-misty landscape of red-orange-gold, I tried thinking about Christie's little beasties again, but failed.

j

I wound up hiding in my room, staring at the bulkhead for a while, then turning on the miniterm, watching with alarm as the screen sparkled, choking with colored static for a moment before the menu system came up.

What will happen when the electronics go?

Will we all die then? Or try lashing up homemade replacements, try flying without guidance, try... there was a space program before there were real computers. Men on the Moon, that sort of thing. That technology might have gotten us out here. Maybe not.

Nothing in the base library I hadn't seen a hundred times already, other than those last dozen episodes of *Quel Horreur*, the French-language sitcom that'd been all the rage right before the end. JPL wasted one of its last uplinks on that and... well, they knew. They must've known. What were they thinking?

Can't imagine.

I'd watched about thirty seconds of the first one, happy laugh-track, pale blue skies, white clouds, green trees, River Seine and Tour Eiffel.

Stayed in my room so I wouldn't have to deal with Jennah, who kept on looking at me as I stopped by the mess to pick up my dinner. Went to my room and then couldn't stop thinking about her, about the last time we'd... which led to thinking about Christie with her longjohns hanging open, offering herself up to a fate worse than death, then on to Lisa, sprawled in our marriage bed.

They say you can't really remember pain, remembering only the fact of it, not the precise way it felt. Maybe the same thing's true of happiness.

I hung like a ghost beneath the ceiling of a room that no longer existed, looking down on a naked woman whose touch, taste, feel, laughter I was already losing, grappling with the loss, struggling to reclaim the few bits and pieces I had left.

Sometimes I wonder why I ever left Earth. Maybe we could've been happy without the money. Maybe.

Regret, they say, is the most expensive thing in the world, but it's a lie. Regret is free; you get to have as much regret as you want. And then, when you're done wanting regret, you find it's yours to keep forever.

At some point while I was staring at the base library menu system, the remembered image of Lisa turned to the much fresher image of Jennah, damp and eager in my arms, then, somehow, to Christie, huge eyes beseeching.

j

The next day, I went on out to Workpoint 17, a drilling platform on the backside of Aerhurst ridge from Alanhold, sitting at the top of a long slope, giving a vista like nothing on Earth, or any other place I'd been, long, flat, fading into the mist dozens of kilometers away, like the greatest ski run you could ever imagine.

When I first got here, the sight of these vistas, wonderful and strange, made me think about all the places I'd been already, made me think about the red canyons of Mars, the rugged orange mountains of Venus, the soft black lava plains of the Moon.

Made me remember my first sight of Earth from space, stark, incredible, white-frosted blue seen from the other side of the sky.

I remembered standing atop the terminal scarp of Terra Noursae, looking out over the Waxsea's unimaginable wasteland, and wondering if I shouldn't tell Lisa I was never coming home, that I'd keep on giving her the money, all the money, but she'd have to find another man to help her spend it, another man with whom to have those children we'd discussed.

Christ, they were talking about the moons of Uranus back then! And me, I started thinking about what it'd be like to stand on a cliff ten kilometers high. Started thinking about the geysers of Triton, dim blue Neptune hanging in the black sky overhead...

It still had the power to make my insides cramp with desire.

Workpoint 17 was manned by two Russian women who'd been brought out from the Fore Trojans about two years back, a pair of stocky, blunt-faced, red-headed petroleum geologists from Kazakhstan, looking like twin sisters, maybe in their forties, maybe a lot older, who'd been knocking around the solar system for something like fifteen years.

They'd always been cut-ups, kind of fun to be around, always ribbing each other, ribald stuff half in English, half not, kidding about who was going to have me first and who'd have to take sloppy seconds, though I always figured them for lesbians.

It was inside their habitat, with its stark, vinegary smell, watching one of them getting out of her suit, broad rump poking up, seam of her longjohns starting to pull apart where the stitching would soon give way, that I made some vulgar remark or another.

Irena, I think it was, looked at Larisa, owl-eyed with surprise, then back at me, making a wan smile.

"Uh. Sorry."

Irena stood up, facing me now, spacesuit still cluttered around her ankles, and, very gently I thought, said, "Don't be. We've been worried about you."

Later, I sat in one of my parking places, high atop Aerhurst, on a crag of pure white ice projecting from where the beaten track crosses the low shoulder of a slumping, rounded peak, lights out, engines off, all but powered down, staring out the window.

In the distance, over the lowlands, was a torrential rainstorm, vast, flat, blue-gray cloud hanging under a darkened sky. The rainfall beneath it was like a pointillist fog, freckled with dots too little to see, somehow there nonetheless, an edgeless pillar of silver-blue blotting out the landscape beyond.

Atmospheric cooling.

Somewhere above the clouds, I knew Saturn was all but gone, turned to black, blotting out the sun. I looked up, trying to make out the shadow's edges, make out the ringplane backscatter, but the turbulence was too great today.

Maybe some other time.

Just what I'd thought of saying to Irena and Larisa, anticipating an offer that never came. Still, it was nice to think of them worrying about me. As though I still mattered to anyone at all.

The comm light on the dashboard began to wink, an eye-catching sequence of red-blue-amber-green, one color following the other at quarter-second intervals, colors merging into a brief, bright sparkle. I reached out and touched a button with the tip of my finger, spoke my call sign, and listened.

Christie's voice came out of a rustle of static: "Can you schedule me for a maintenance visit?"

Something about that voice, odd, nervous, reluctant, eager. Or maybe it was just my imagination. How much can you read into a voice turned to whispers by radio interference?

"What's wrong?"

Long pause.

"I'm not sure. Maybe the same as before, only worse."

Nothing much had been wrong before. A few toasted chips; nothing serious, nothing that couldn't have waited if I hadn't been... I scrolled my schedule, thinking about Christie, about her colored waxworks beasties, about...

I said, "I'm on a routine maintenance run through the automated geophone chain this side of the ridgeline. I can divert to your workpoint between numbers three and four."

"When?"

Urgency?

Nothing's urgent anymore.

I said, "Thirty-one hours."

Much longer pause. "Oh."

The disappointment was stark, bursting right through the static.

She said, "I guess that'll be okay."

"See you then."

I punched the button and sat back to watch the rainstorm build as the sky grew slowly darker above it, taking on the rich colors of mud.

What can have happened? What can she be wanting? Something to do with the melted-crayon things? Certainly not anything to do with me. My thoughts strayed again to her zipped-open longjohns, making me smile at myself. I'd never been one for a one-track mind. Not in this lifetime.

But funny things happen when life's reduced to terminal stress.

She was waiting, suited up outside, standing by the powerplant, when I rolled up to the workpoint, scrunching into the airlock, cycling on through. I've seldom been inside a halftrack while someone else is coming aboard; the hollow thumping of knees and feet on metal and plastic, the odd lurchings, were all very unnatural.

The inner hatch popped open, filling the cabin with a faint alcohol and ammonia tang, quickly suppressed when Christie opened her helmet, folded it back, pushed aside by human gastrointestinal smells.

I remembered an old story where that'd been the smell of Titan, because its author was thinking of methane and swamp gas, barnyard smells and all.

Silly.

They put butyl mercaptan in natural gas so you'll smell a leak.

Her face had a damp, suffocated look, as if being in the spacesuit made her claustrophobic. "Let's go," she said.

I unclutched the tracks and set off, lurch of the cabin throwing her against my shoulder, felt her brace herself, keeping what distance she could, not much in this little space. How much of what I'm feeling is fossil emotion, old subroutines frozen in my head?

I don't know what I want because I'm afraid, is that it?

I said, "Christie? When are you going to tell me what's going on?"

When I turned my head to look, her face was no more than a hand's breadth away, but facing forward, eyes not blinking as she watched familiar Titanscape come and go. Overhead, from down in the bottom lands, the eclipsed sky was the color of a fresh bruise, blue and gray, dull purple, tinted with vague streamers of magenta.

Then she turned her head toward me, eyes on mine. That brought her close enough we were breathing on each other. You know how that goes. You get in each other's facial space and there's tension there, because the next move is that forward craning, that...

She looked away again, not outside, just at the inner surface of the wall, at a circuit breaker panel mounted about eye level. "Did you tell anyone else?"

I shrugged. "Nothing to tell, I guess."

No answer. Tension in the arch of her neck. I wanted to reach out and touch her, tell her some nonsense about how it'd

be all right. Then, with my arm around her, with her space invaded... there's something about the vulnerability of fear, about there being some terrible thing wrong.

She said, "Pull up here. Let's get out."

We'd come to the cliffs by the beach, but were still some distance from the familiar way down, rolling one at a time out the lock, then following my earlier tracks to the place where I'd spied on her before. They'd been joined by numerous other footprints now, hundreds coming and going.

All hers, I guess.

There was a thin wisp of black smoke rising above the instrument package, like an elongated drop of india ink in clear water, rolling with the convection currents, just beginning to dissipate.

And, all around it on the beach, were swipes and smears of color, shades and shapes moving round and round, all so very slowly. As I watched, a dark blue one came close, stretching out a long, narrow pseudopod. It came within a few centimeters of one support leg, hesitated for a moment, then touched.

The pseudopod shriveled, shrinking quickly back toward the main body, which seemed to roll over, turning to a lighter shade of blue, then sinking into the beach, gone in an instant.

There was another black curl in the air, rising above the instrument package, drifting slowly away as it dissipated. I thought of the sample I'd taken of that earlier instrument contamination, presumably still in the halftrack refrigerator where I'd left it.

Little beasties investigating the alien machine. Innocent little beasties getting themselves killed.

Is curiosity just a tropism?

Moths to the flame.

I said, "I guess that makes your case, hm?"

I don't know what I expected next, but she said, "Turn off your radio now."

"Um..."

She turned and put her hand on my arm. I couldn't feel it through the suit material, but those big eyes, begging... I switched it off and waited. She just turned away, quickly stepping to the edge of the cliff, dangerously close given the fragility of this chemical ice, and pulsed the carrier wave power setting of her suit's comm system, one, two, three, off.

All very much like in a movie.

Down on the beach, the waxthings froze in place, a conscious freezing, just the way a spider will freeze the instant it realizes you're looking. That sudden crouch, alien eyes pointing your way, spider brain filled with unknowable thoughts.

I remembered the way one of these things had grown a speckle of orange dots before and recalled a science film I'd seen as a kid, high speed photography of slime molds in action. Eerie. Not more so than this.

Suddenly, between one frame and the next, the beach was empty.

In all those old movies, old stories, they get the feeling of this moment terribly wrong, don't they? I reached for my comm controls, but Christie, catching my movement from the corner of one eye, raised a restraining hand.

Wait.

I...

Down on the beach, a flat, ragged-edged plain of blue formed. Time for a few heartbeats, then a sharp-edged stripe of pink slid across the side of the plain nearest our vantage point.

Then a conical shape slid into view from the other side, visibly falling toward the pink.

Falling.

Just before it hit, there was a reddish-orange swirl under the blunt side of the cone. It slowed to a stop, popping out little landing legs, flame gouting on the surface, then winking out.

Little blue and green dots appeared, embedded in the pink, drawing in toward the motionless cone. As they drew close, one by one, they would turn black and vanish. After a while, you could see they'd learned to keep their distance, hovering around the edge of the picture.

My mouth was dry as I switched on my radio and whispered, "How the hell do they know what our sense of perspective is like?"

Whispered, as though someone might be listening. Some thing.

Her voice was hardly more than a breath, blowing through my earphones: "They're not really two dimensional creatures."

It's not Flatland. They're not waxy paintings on the surface of the ground.

Fire blossomed under the cone and it lifted off, climbing out of the picture, and all the remaining blue dots turned black before vanishing.

After a while, more of them crept from the edge of the picture, creeping through the pink toward the place where the cone had been. At first, the leaders turned black and died, but only for a little while. In time, they finished their investigations, then went sliding on their way.

The blue plain with its empty pink strip vanished suddenly, and the beach was empty again.

I turned to her and said, "Why'd you show me this?"

Seen through the faceplate, she was nothing but eyes. Big blue eyes. Serious. Frightened. "I won't make this decision by myself. I'm not..." Long hesitation. "You know."

Yeah. Not God. That's how that one goes.

j

Back at the habitat, after a long, silent ride, we sat together in our longjohns, made tea and drank it, made small talk that went nowhere, circling round and round, as if something had changed, or nothing.

We're dead men here, I'd thought on the way back, watching a snowdrift blow across the beaten path before the halftrack, slowing down as if to stop, then suddenly lifting off in the wind like a flock of birds making for the sky, clearing the way for us.

Fewer than two thousand survivors...

In the old stories, old movies, that would've been more than enough, two thousand hot, eager Adams and Eves, getting

about their delving and spanning, wandering the freshly butchered landscape, pausing by the shores of an infinite, empty sea, being fruitful, multiplying until they'd covered the Earth again.

This star system no longer contains an inhabitable planet.

Bits of memory, snatches of Moonbase newsreel. When Oberth gets home with the crew of the Venus orbital station, who hadn't had to commit suicide, she'll be bringing a stockpile of hardened probes intended for research on the surface of Venus.

Hardened probes, and, of course, one of the piloted Venus landers.

Then we'll know for sure. Then we'll...

Couldn't stop myself from imagining, ever so briefly, myself on that first damned crew, riding the Venus lander down through howling brown muck, down to a soft landing in my own backyard.

I've been on Venus. I'm qualified for Venus EVA ops. I...

Read a science article when I was a kid that described the Chicxulub impact at the KT Boundary as being "like taking a blowtorch to western North America."

The image in my head was a double exposure, the image of collapsed and burned-out cities, like something from an atomic war fantasy, superimposed over the reality of a cooling lava ejecta blanket.

Just wisps of smoke.

That's all that's left of her.

Christie, face pushed down in the steam from her teacup, was looking at me strangely. God knows what my expression must have been like. Did you have anyone, Christie Meitner, or was it only strangers that died? Billions and billions of strangers.

She said, "I guess we'd better talk about it now." Unsaid, Whether we want to or not.

I nodded, not knowing what I wanted, looking into a face that wasn't all that expressive. A face not so different from my own. I tried to remember what I looked like, call up the man in the mirror, but there was only fog, no way to know what she was looking at now with those big, hollow eyes.

She said, "It's so simple, Hoxha: They're alive, and this is their world. If we stay here, even just the few score of us, Titan's environment will slowly change, until this is no longer an inhabitable world for them."

And then?

Right.

"Does it make a difference now that we know they're intelligent?"

She shook her head. "If we work together to keep it secret, to keep the others from stumbling over this, once we go away, back to Moonbase..."

I said, "The Earth's not going to recover and we can't survive forever at Moonbase. The Saturn system's our best bet, otherwise we're spread too thin. Even Mars..."

She said, "The odds are against us, no matter what."

I nodded.

"So we come here, obliterate the Titanians, and then die out anyway, erasing their future as well as ours."

Does this mean anything? What's my next line? I know: Christie, this is proof positive life is common in the universe. Right. Idiot. I remember the way she'd looked, face so pale, eyes so big, standing behind me with the ice axe, willing herself to kill. How many Titanians would've exploded and burned under the beach had my blood been spilled?

I said, "So that's what all this is about? Some good old-fashioned eco..." Right. Like the idiots who protested Cassini's launch all those years ago, while not doing a damned thing about the world's hundred thousand hydrogen bombs.

Pick your targets. Some are easier than others.

She seemed tired. "It's not just that. If it was just about them being living things, intelligent living things, you wouldn't be sitting here now."

"Dead and buried?" I smiled. "That would've been hard for you to explain."

"I wasn't thinking clearly. I was panicked that you'd..."

"What, then? Why am I still here?"

Long, long stare, still trying to fathom if there was a human being behind my face, someone just like her. She said, "Day before yesterday, I found evidence that their life process involves some kind of directed nucleosynthesis."

You could see the relief in her face. There. I've said it. And...

Nucleosynthesis?

Talking about details is what we're doing.

In those old stories, old movies, the details are always important, imaginary science chatted up by happy, competent characters until God springs from the machine and utters his funny-elf punchline.

Now?

Not important.

Not anymore.

And yet...

I said, "That could tip the scales in our favor. We come here, we learn to exploit them, we survive as a species."

Her face fell.

I don't think she expected me to see it that easily.

Probably there was a scenario in there in which the pedantic teacher explains things to the gaping mechanic in the simplest possible terms. That's the story way, isn't it?

She sat back in her chair and sighed. "I don't know what we should do. Do you?"

People love to pretend they make rational decisions. It's called excuse-seeking behavior. Christie and I sat facing one another for a long time, tension making it seem we were about to speak, but we never did. You want to be the first one to start offering up excuses? No, not me. How about you? If it was important enough to reach for that axe, surely...

I wasn't thinking clearly.

Right.

So we talked about the evidence, which she explained to me in the simplest possible terms, until I was able to pick up the thread and begin spooling it into my own knowledge base, understanding it in my own terms. Understanding. That's an important part of making excuses for what you do, isn't it?

Or what you fail to do.

Think about the possibilities, Christie.

Think about the technology we could build here. Think of the resource base. And the Titanians? Is it important what happens to them?

In the end, we slept, I curled up on the floor, Christie huddled in her bed, back toward me, curled in on herself, head down in the vague shadows between her body and the wall. I lay awake for a while, trying to think about the whole damned business, trying to convince myself, God damn it, that it mattered.

When I awoke, however many hours later, Christie was on the floor beside me, asleep, not touching me, head on one corner of the folded-up blanket I was using for a pillow.

Lisa never did that. Lisa always had to touch me while we slept together, sometimes huddling against my back, other times insisting that I curl myself around her like a protective shell. I remember when we were very young and new to each other, how I used to wake up sometimes to find her breathing right in my face.

Breathing in each other's breath, I used to call it. As intimate a thing as I could possibly imagine.

So, awakening, breakfasted, we got in the halftrack and went back down to Waxsea beach, where the fairy tales of science were waiting after all.

j

I don't know what made me stop the halftrack up on the terminal scarp. Maybe just some... sense of impending something. Maybe just a longing for the view. Christie stared at me for a second or two when I told her to get out, Stirlings vibrating the frame below us, idling down in the track trucks. Then she nodded, folded her helmet over her face, pressurized the suit, wrinkly off-white skin suddenly growing stiff and shiny, obliterating her shape.

When the depress valve had woofed, when I could see her out the cockpit window, I had a sudden memory of an old TV commercial from the retrofad going on when I was in grammar school. Pillsbury Doughboy.

Doughboy. Funny. Wonder if those long-dead copywriters imagined him with a tin-plate helmet and bayoneted Enfield, marching upright and stalwart into the machinegun fire of No Man's Land.

I think she was relieved when I joined her on the surface, no way to tell through the suit visor, just those same eyes, with their same expression, a pasted-on affect of surprise, fear, resentment. But she followed me to the edge of the cliff, where we stopped, and I let her get behind me, image of the ice axe fresh enough, hardly mattering.

And, of course, there was the cliff. One hard shove and I'd float on down to... I don't know. Gravity here's low enough I might survive the fall, given that two bar atmosphere, but... would my suit?

I imagined myself exploding like a bomb.

Overhead, the sky stretched away toward the absent horizon like a buckled red blanket, crumpled clouds of coarse wool, dented here, there, everywhere with purple-shadowed hollows, little holes into nothingness.

Down on the silvery beach, the instrument platform was ringed by motionless blobs, each ring a single color, blue, green, red, violet, working their way outward from the hardware.

Christie grunted, "Never saw that before." Radio made it seem like she was inside my suit, pressed up against my back, chin on my shoulder, speaking into my ear.

If you looked closely, you could see the blobs were connected by thin strands, monochrome along the rings, blended between. Slowly, one of the blobs extended a pseudopod toward the platform. That's right. In a minute, it'll blacken and curl, shriveling in on itself until the parent blob goes belly up and sinks out of sight. Will the ring close up then, each soldier in that row taking one easy step, forward into an empty space, like Greeks in a phalanx?

Christie said, "I wonder why they do it?"

Inviting certain death in the pursuit of knowledge?

Good question.

The pseudopod slowed as it came close, flattening, widening, forming a sort of two-dimensional cup on its end, a cup that drifted slowly back and forth, arcing along the surface, a few centimeters out. After a moment, beads of yellow began forming at the cup's focus, detaching, speeding back up the pseudopod to the parent blob. From there, they replicated, spreading around the ring, then outward.

I said, "Think they know we're here?"

The first blob withdrew its pseudopod, while the next one in line extended an identical... instrument? Is that the right word? Examining the next section of the platform's heat shield.

Christie said, "I don't know. Their radio sensitivity's not that great. I always have to turn the carrier wave full blast to get their attention."

I turned away, stepping back the way we'd come. "I guess we should just go on down and..."

Not sure what I was going to suggest. Christie gasped and put out a hand, gripping my forearm hard enough that my suit was compressed, forcing the liner up against my skin, feeling like cold, damp plastic, making me shiver slightly.

When I looked back, down on the beach, the rings had broken up, blobs perfectly spherical now, appearing and disappearing in the cracked ice, like colored ping-pong balls bobbing in a tub of water. Bobbing in unison.

One, two, three...

They exploded like so many silver raindrops, reaching out for one another, merging, spreading like a cartoon tide, until the beach below was a solid silver mirror filling the space between the cliff, the sea, the instrument package, reflecting a slightly hazy image of the red sky above, complete with streamers of golden light coming through little rents and tears, picking out the drifting snowbanks like dustmotes on a lazy summer afternoon.

Somewhere overhead, I saw, there was a tiny fragment of rainbow floating in the sky.

The image in the mirror grew dark, dimming slowly, as though night were falling, though the real sky hung above us unchanged, streamers of light tarnishing, red becoming orange then brown, bruise blue, then indigo, almost black.

Almost, for freckles of silver remained.

Freckles of silver in a peculiarly familiar pattern, bits of light clustered here and there, gathering to a diagonal band across the middle and...

Christie's gasp made me imagine warmth in my ear as she recognized it a fraction of a second before I did. Well, of course. She'd seen the real thing a lot more recently than I had.

The stars dimmed, Milky Way becoming just a dusty, dusky suggestion of itself.

Christie's voice: "How? How could they see..."

A bright silver light popped up in the center of the starfield, circled by dimmer lights, some brighter than others, most white, some colored, this one blue, that one red.

Tiny bright beads began flying from the blue light, swinging by orange Jupiter, heading for yellow Saturn, some stopping there, others flying on, disappearing from the scene.

In a row across the bottom of the image, bottom being the side facing us, flat, near-schematic representations of spacecraft appeared, matching each tiny bead as it flew. Little Pioneer. The Voyagers. Cassini and Huygens...

Voice no more than a hushed whisper, Christie said, "I wonder how long they knew? Why they waited so long and... why me?"

If they knew about Pioneer, then they knew about us when my father was a little boy, my grandfather a young man, reveling in the deeds of space, imagining himself in the future, still young, strong, alive, and happy.

Down on the beach, the solar system faded, leaving the hint of starfields behind; then, like a light winking on, blue Earth appeared, oceans covered by rifted clouds, continents picked out in shades of ocher, hard to recognize, circled by a little gray Moon.

I could feel Christie's hand tighten on my shoulder, knowing what was coming.

There. The asteroid. The brilliant violet light of the hydrogen bombs. The spreading of the fragments. The impacts. The red glow of magma. The spreading brown clouds.

I wondered briefly if they'd had something to do with the rock coming our way. No. That's just an old story thing, pale imagination left in my head when I was a child.

One of those damned things we teach our children because we don't know what's real. Don't know and don't care.

Somewhere in my head, a badly fueled story generator supplied images of what would come next. Down on the beach, the image of a tentacled alien would form. Something not human, but within the reach of terrestrial evolution, would stretch out a suckered paw, inviting.

Take me to your leader.

What was I remembering?

"The Gentle Vultures"?

Maybe so.

Down on the beach, the end of the world faded, replaced by a white disk, wrinkled in concentric rings. It tipped around, as if in 3D motion, showing us complex mechanisms, considerable mechanical detail, obvious control systems.

I said, "Fresnel lenses."

Christie said, "They could see through the clouds with that, if they could build it for real. See the sun, the larger planets, the brighter stars, as patches of heat in their sky. But..."

The infrared telescope was replaced by an image of Titan, recognizable by the topography of Terra Noursae, Titan stripped of its clouds. The image rotated, showing the Waxsea hemisphere, Waxsea bearing interconnected concentric rings, some gigantic version of the array we'd first come upon here.

Christie said, "Long baseline interferometer. With enough computation..."

If they could build it.

Nucleosynthesis?

I said, "How do you distinguish between a life process and a technology?"

Christie said, "Oh," sounding surprised.

Imagination builds nothing. Not even the knowledge of how to build. Not unless you can somehow project it into the real world.

Down on the beach, another image formed, a fantastically detailed portrait of the cosmodrome, showing the two landers upright on their pads. On the ridge above, tiny blue Titanians waited at a safe distance, ominous, like Indians looming above the ambush, foolish cavalry waiting in the defile.

A blue sphere rolled down, making for the little ships. I waited for them to be spun down, like tenpins before the ball.

It rolled to a stop, not far from the ships. Tiny, spacesuited humans connected a blue thread to the ball, to the ships. The ball shrank away to nothing. The ships took off, unrolling red flame as they climbed through an orange overcast and were gone.

Behind them, the base and cosmodrome disappeared, one component at a time, leaving an empty landscape behind.

Christie sighed in my headphones.

Just one more all-too-familiar fairy tale, that's all.

Below, the silver screen cleared again, reforming as faint stars against velvet dark, surmounted by a slow-moving orrery of the solar system. Beads of light moved from Saturn to blue Earth-brown, I thought. They should've made it brown.

The sky stood empty. Christie said, "I guess..."

I whispered, "Sending us home to die then?"

Another bead appeared, crossing from Earth to Saturn, then going home again. Then again. Then again. More beads, this time from Saturn to Neptune. After a while, the voyages began a three-way trip, Saturn, Neptune, Earth.

What's at Neptune?

Triton, of course.

I remembered how much I'd always wanted to go there, almost willing to abandon Lisa just so I could see diaphanous geysers rising against a deep blue world, out on the edge of the infinite.

Christie seemed somehow hollow, as if she were speaking from the depths of a dream. "They send us home to the

Moon. Help us to survive with trade and... I..." She stopped.

What are you thinking about, Christie? That you might see the atmospheres of the gas giants after all? Is that it?

She said, "We could never mine tritium from the atmosphere of Jupiter, where it's free for the taking. Not in that radiation environment. Not anytime soon."

Tritium. Out of the depths of the past, I suddenly remember the Daedalus designs, so long forgotten.

She said, "Even out here at Saturn, there's a deep gravity well to contend with. And the collision danger from equatorial ringplane debris spiraling in. Neptune..."

Low-density gas giant with all the tritium we might want. And a big icemoon for the Titanians to...

A myriad of bright sparks suddenly emerged from the Earth, moving not toward another planet, but receding into the background sky, sky whose stars grew bright again, while the fleet of sparks grew smaller and smaller, until it merged with an unremarkable pattern of stars.

Christie muttered, "Something in Pavo, I think. I was never very good with the lesser constellations."

Delta Pavonis?

Is there a planet there? A planet just like the one we lost?

I said, "You think their technology's that good?"

She looked up at me, still nothing more than big eyes looking out through scratched, foggy plastic. "Maybe not. Not out here in the ice and cold. But put together with ours..."

Maybe so.

I said, "I guess the decision wasn't ours to make after all."

j

I awoke in the middle of the night, opening my eyes on darkness defiled by blue light from the instrument panels, perched on the edge of the bunk, curled inward, shadow of my head, shadow of tousled hair cast on the habitat wall. Christie was bunched into the space between my body and the wall, curled in on herself, the two of us damp and soft against one another, sharing some soft old blanket.

Somewhere outside, a new day is dawning.

Some time during that day we'll have to make our decision, get in the halftrack, go on back to base and...

What will happen?

Oh, nonsense. The fantasy we've just been through was no better than one more iteration of White Man's Burden.

The decision's been made. Not by us.

All we have to do is carry out our part, speak our lines according to the script.

Lights. Camera. Action.

Fade to black.

If I held still, paid attention, I could feel Christie's back against my chest, moving slowly in and out as she breathed, pausing briefly before reversing direction. Asleep, I guess. I tried hard to remember what Lisa'd felt like sleeping against me.

Faded and gone, like just about everything else.

I listened for the soft sound of breath coming and going through what I imagined would be an open mouth, hollow breathing like the ghost of a snore, but the sounds of Titan coming through the habitat wall blotted it out. Sighing wind close by. A large wind farther away, moaning in the hills. Tidal creak of the deep crustal ice coming to us through the floor.

Christie seemed to sigh in her sleep, pressing back against me ever so slightly, like something from a dream.

I remembered the lights merging with the stars and found myself dreaming of a new world, of standing on a hillside under a crimson sunset, alien sun in the sky, sun with prominences and corona plain against the sky, something from a remembered astronomical illustration. Something from a children's book.

As in all children's books, there's a woman under my arm, standing close against me, standing close.

Below us, below the hillside, was a rim of dark forest, trees like feathery palms swaying in a tropical breeze, beyond it, a golden sea, stretching out flat to the end of the world.

Us?

Or just a dream?

Christie stirred suddenly, turned half toward me, nuzzling her head against my shoulder, and murmured, "Maybe things will... work out after all."

After all that.

It was a moment before I realized what she meant.

Another moment before I felt the burden lift out of my heart, ghosts hurrying away to their graves, one more golden tomorrow awakening from a dream.