

In the Great Central Library of Deneb University



Moa Blue, Chief Assistant Librarian, snuffles his way back to the Historical Specialties carousel. His snuffling is partly constitutional—Moa is an amphibian—and partly directed at his current customers, two impossibly cheerful young Comenor. They are asking for a selection of Human fact/fiction from the early days of the Federation, “to get the ambience.” A selection! In Moa’s days as a student, you did the selecting yourself. The hard way. Now these two want to pick his brains.

Well, he can satisfy them. There’ve been a lot of similar requests this term—probably some ambitious instructor offering an “enriched” course. Moa sneezes definitively and punches up a readout.

When he comes back to the front, the young Comeno couple are leaning their upper arms on the counter, a sign of seriousness. Each also has an upper arm entwined with the other’s, a likely sign of mating intent. Moa Blue’s stern reptilian face softens; he has a tender spot for romance, if the truth be known. And also a soft spot for Comenor, who are known to like actual reading and learning alien psychology. In a student body full of engineering types briskly scanning tapes full of numbers, it’s pleasant to encounter students who like the touch and feel of old books, and who know that the real problems lie in living hearts and brains.

“As you doubtless know,” he tells them, “there’s been a long Human vogue for what they call fact/fiction. That is, taking a crucial event or epoch with all its known details, and reconstructing it as a dramatic story. They claim it makes

history more easily memorable; I daresay they're right. In any event, it gives you quite a hoard to choose from."

"That's why we need your help," smiles the taller Comeno, in richly accented Galactic. "We took one look at the inventory and got lost, even with the summaries."

"And you shall have help. Here's a nice little one I picked for you to start with. It's from way back before Humans had much FTL capability, and were just starting to explore the fringes of that great Rift that separates you from the Federation. In fact, I've chosen a group set in the Rift locale, both because you know it, and because it's about the same time-period as that well-known story about the explosion-front from the Murdered Star passing the planet Damiem, which you were probably assigned in class—but it's on the very opposite side of the Federation, so you'll get some interesting anomalies and contrasts. You *have* encountered Damiem and the Stars Tears business, haven't you? *Brightness* something, it's called."

"*Brightness Falls From the Air*—oh, yes, it was offered as an example of Human behavior toward other races. In fact, it started our interest in Humans. But it's so localized—something in a totally different sector is just what we need. Does this one have the Moom shipping lines, for instance?"

"No. You must realize that in pre-FTL days all cultural diffusion took place incredibly slowly. And this was well after the Ziellor and you were using it routinely."

"My goodness, you certainly have to know a lot of technological history!" says the smaller Comeno admiringly.

Moa smiles, a toothy effect that would have been intimidating in a different context. "Sometimes I think I should take every course in the syllabus, to serve our clients properly!... Now, I can't issue more than this one at a time, but it'll give you plenty to think over; it's from quite an unusual point of view."

"But is it all true?" the little Comeno asks anxiously.

“That’s the remarkable part—the story is almost entirely taken from actual tapes dictated by the little Human herself. All that is extrapolated is a group of highly predictable subjective responses corroborated by other sources. And it involves one of the Humans’ most extraordinary First Contacts, all in the alien’s own words... The Eadron are well known now, of course—you may have come across the quarantine regs.”

“I have,” says the tall Comeno. “So this explains that, too! Well you *have* found a star for us, Myr Blue. We thank you more than I can say.”

“Oh, yes!” chimes in his friend.

“And when you return I’ll have one almost as good, and then there’ll be a real treat for finale.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” And with a resounding ceremonial tail-clap, they hurry toward the door, carefully clasping the ancient text.

First Tale

The Only Neat Thing to Do

Heroes of space! Explorers of the starfields!

Reader, here is your problem:

Given one kid, yellow-head, snub-nose-freckles, green-eyes-that-stare-at-you-level, rich-brat, girl-type fifteen-year-old. And all she's dreamed of, since she was old enough to push a hologram button, is heroes of First Contacts, explorers of far stars, the great names of Humanity's budding Star Age. She can name you the crew of every Discovery Mission; she can sketch you a pretty accurate map of Federation space and number the Frontier Bases; she can tell you who first contacted every one of the fifty-odd races known; and she knows by heart the last words of Han Lu Han, when, himself no more than sixteen, he ran through alien flame-weapons to drag his captain and pilot to safety, on Lyrae 91-Beta. She does a little math, too; it's easy for her. And she haunts the spaceport and makes friends with everybody who'll talk to her, and begs rides, and knows the controls of fourteen models of craft. She's a late bloomer, which means that the nubbins on her little chest could almost pass for a boy's; and love, great Love, to her is just something pointless that adults do, despite her physical instruction. But she can get into her junior space-suit in seventy seconds flat, including safety hooks.

So you take this girl, this Coati Cass—her full name is Coatillia Canada Cass, but everyone calls her Coati—And you give her a sturdy little space-coupe for her sixteenth birthday.

Now, here is your problem:

Does she use it to jaunt around the star-crowded home sector, visiting her classmates and her family's friends, as her mother expects, and sometimes showing off by running a vortex beacon or two, as her father fears?

Does she? Really?

Or—does she head straight for the nearest ship-fitters and blow most of her credit balance loading extra fuel tanks and long-range sensors onto the coupe, fuel it to the nozzles, and then—before the family's accountant can raise questions—hightail for the nearest Federation

Frontier, which is the Great North Rift beyond FedBase 900, where you can look right out at unknown space and stars?

That wasn't much of a problem, was it?

The Exec of FedBase 900 watches the yellow head bobbing down his main view corridor.

"We ought to signal her folks c-skip collect," he mutters. "I gather they're rich enough to stand it."

"On what basis?" his deputy inquires.

They both watch the little straight-backed figure marching away. A tall Patrol captain passes in the throng; they see the girl spin to stare at him, not with womanly appreciation but with the open-eyed unself-conscious adoration of a kid. Then she turns back to the dazzling splendor of the view beyond the port. The end of the Rift is just visible from this side of the asteroid Base 900 is dug into.

"On the basis that I have a hunch that that infant is trouble looking for a place to happen," Exec says mournfully. "On the basis that I don't believe her story, I guess. Oh, her ident's all in order, I've no doubt she owns that ship and knows how to run it, and knows the regs; and it's her right to get cleared for where she wants to go—by a couple of days. But I cannot believe her parents consented to her tooting out here just to take a look at unknown stars... On the basis that if they did, they're certifiable imbeciles. If she were my daughter..."

His voice trails off. He knows he's overreacting emotionally; he has no adequate excuse for signaling her folks.

"They must have agreed," his deputy says soothingly. "Look at those extra fuel tanks and long-range mechs they gave her."

(Coati hadn't actually lied. She'd told him that her parents raised no objection to her coming out here—true, since they'd never dreamt of it—and added artlessly, "See the extra fuel tanks they put on my ship so I'll be sure to get home from long trips? Oh, sir, I'm calling her the *CC-One* will that sound too much like something official?")

Exec closes the subject with a pessimistic grunt, and they turn back into his office, where the Patrol captain is waiting. FedBase 900's best depot supply team is long overdue, and it is time to declare them officially missing and initiate and organize a search.

Coati Cass continues on through the surface sections of the base to the fueling port. She had to stop here to get clearance and the holocharts of the Frontier area, and she can top off her tanks. If it wasn't for those charts, she might have risked going straight on out, for fear they'd stop her. But now that she's cleared, she's enjoying her first glimpse of a glamorous Far FedBase—so long as it doesn't delay her start for her goal, her true goal, so long dreamed of: free, unexplored space and unknown, unnamed stars.

Far Bases *are* glamorous; the Federation had learned the hard way that they must be pleasant, sanity-promoting duty. So, the farther out a Base is, and the longer the tours, the more lavishly it is set up and maintained. Base 900 is built mostly inside a big, long-orbit airless rock, yet it has gardens and pools that would be the envy of a world's richest citizen. Coati sees displays for the tiny theater advertising first-run shows and music, all free to station personnel; and she passes half a dozen different exotic little places to eat. Inside the rock, the maps show sports and dance shells, spacious private quarters, and kilometers upon kilometers of winding corridors, all nicely planted and decorated, because it has been found that stress is greatly reduced if there are plenty of alternative, private routes for people to travel to their daily duties.

Building a Far Base is a full-scale Federation job. But it conserves the Federation's one irreplaceable resource—her people. Here at FedBase 900 the people are largely Human, since the other four space-faring races are concentrated to the Federation's south and east. This far north, Coati has glimpsed only one alien couple, both Swain; their greenish armor is familiar to her from the spaceport back home. She won't find really exotic aliens here.

But what, and who, lives out there on the fringes of the Rift—not to speak of its unknown farther shores? Coati pauses to take a last look before she turns in to Fuels and Supply. From this port she can really see the Rift, like a strange, irregular black cloud lying along the northern zenith.

The Rift isn't completely lightless, of course. It is merely an area that holds comparatively few stars. The scientists regard it as no great mystery; a standing wave or turbulence in the density-texture, a stray chunk of the same gradients that create the Galactic arms with their intervening gaps. Many other such rifts are seen in uninhabited reaches

of the starfield. This one just happens to form a useful northern border for the irregular globe of Federation space.

Explorers have penetrated it here and there, enough to know that the usual distribution of star-systems appears to begin again on the farther side. A few probable planetary systems have been spotted out there; and once or twice what might be alien transmissions have been picked up at extreme range. But nothing and no one has come at them from the far side, and meanwhile the Federation of Fifty Races, expanding slowly to the south and east, has enough on its platter without hunting out new contacts. Thus the Rift has been left almost undisturbed. It is the near presence of the Rift that made it possible for Coati to get to a real Frontier so fast, from her centrally located home star and her planet of Cayman's Port.

Coati gives it all one last ardent look and ducks into the suiting-up corridor, where her small suit hangs among the real Spacers'. From here she issues onto a deck over the asteroid surface and finds *CC-One* dwarfed by a new neighbor; a big Patrol cruiser has come in. She makes her routine shell inspection with disciplined care, despite her excitement, and presently signals for the tug to slide her over to the fueling stations. Here she will also get oxy, water, and food—standard rations only. She's saved enough credits for a good supply if she avoids all luxuries.

At Fuels she's outside again, personally checking every tank. The Fuels chief, a big rosy woman whose high color glows through her faceplate, grins at the kid's eagerness. A junior fuelsman is doing the actual work, kidding Coati about her array of spares.

"You going to cross the Rift?"

"Maybe next trip... Someday for sure." She grins back.

A news announcement breaks in. It's a pleasant voice, telling them that DRS number 914 B-and-K is officially declared missing, and a phase one search will start. All space personnel are to keep watch for a standard supply tug, easily identifiable by its train of tanks, last seen in the vicinity of Ace's Landing.

"No, correction, negative on Ace's Landing. Last depot established was on a planet at seventeen-fifty north, fifteen-thirty west, RD eighteen." The voice repeats. "That's in Far Quadrant Nine B-Z, out of commo range. They were proceeding to a new system at thirty-twenty north, forty-two-twenty-eight West, RD three D.

“All ships within possible range of this course will maintain a listening watch for one minim on the hour. Anything heard warrants return to Base range. Meanwhile a recon ship will be dispatched to follow their route from Ace’s Landing.” The announcer repeats all coordinates; Coati, finding no tablet handy, inscribes the system they’re headed to on the inside of her bare arm with her stylus.

“If they were beyond commo range, how did they report?” she asks the Fuels chief.

“By message pipe. Like a teeny-weeny spaceship. They can make up to three c-skip jumps. When you work beyond range, you send back a pipe after every stop. There’ll soon be a commo relay set up for that quadrant, is my guess.”

“Depot Resupply nine fourteen BK,” says the fuelsman. “That’s Boney and Ko. The two boys who—who’re—who aren’t—I mean, they don’t have all their rivets, right?”

“There’s nothing wrong with Boney and Ko!” The Fuels chief’s flush heightens. “They may not have the smarts of some people, but the things they do, they do one hundred percent perfect. And one of them, or both, maybe, have uncanny ability with holocharting. If you go through the charts of quadrants they’ve worked, you’ll see how many BK corrections there are. That work will save lives! And they haven’t a gram of meanness or pride between them, they do it all on supply pay, for loyalty to the Fed.” She’s running down, glancing at Coati to see if her message carried. “That’s why Exec took them off the purely routine runs and let them go set up new depots up north... The Rand twins have the nearby refill runs now, they can take the boredom because of their music.”

“Sorry,” the fuelsman says. “I didn’t know. They never say a word.”

“Yeah, they don’t talk.” The chief grins. “There, kid, I guess you’re about topped up, unless you want to carry some in your ditty bag. Now, how about the food?”

When Coati gets back inside Base and goes to Charts for her final briefing, she sees what the Fuels chief meant. On all the holocharts that cover the fringes of 900’s sector, feature after feature shows corrections marked with a tiny glowing “BK.” She can almost follow the long, looping journeys of that pair—what was it? Boney and Ko?—by the areas of richer detail in the charts. Dust-clouds, gee-anomalies, asteroid swarms, extra primaries in multiple systems, all modestly BK’s. The

basic charts are composites of the work of early explorers—somebody called Ponz has scrawled in twenty or thirty star-systems with his big signature (BK have corrected six of them), and there’s an “L,” and a lot of “YBC” and more that Coati can’t decipher. She’d love to know their names and adventures.

“Who’s ‘SS’?” she asks Charts.

“Oh, he was a rich old boy, a Last War vet, who tried to take a shortcut he remembered and jumped himself out of fuel way out there. He was stuck about forty-five Standard days before anybody could get to him, and after he calmed down, he and his pals kept themselves busy with a little charting. Not bad, too, for a static VP. See how the Sss all center around this point? That’s where he sat. If you go near there, remember the error is probably on the radius. But you aren’t thinking of heading out *that* far, are you, kid?”

“Oh, well,” Coati temporizes. She’s wondering if Charts would report her to the Exec. “Someday, maybe. I just like to have the charts to, you know, dream over.”

Charts chuckles sympathetically and starts adding up her charges. “Lots of daydreaming you got here, girl.”

“Yeah.” To distract him she asks, “Who’s ‘Ponz’?”

“Before my time. He disappeared somewhere after messaging that he’d found a real terraform planet way out that way.” Charts points to the northwest edge, where there’s a string of GO-type stars. “Could be a number of good planets there. The farthest one out is where the Lost Colony was. And that you stay strictly away from, by the way, if you ever get that far. Thirty-five-twelve N. That’s thirty minutes twelve seconds north, thirty-forty west. We omit the degrees; out here they’re constants: eighty-nine degrees north by seventy west. Radial distance—that’s from Base Nine hundred, they all are—thirty-two Bkm. Some sort of contagion wiped them out just after I came. We’ve posted warning satellites... All right, now you have to declare your destination. You’re entitled to free charts there, the rest you pay for.”

“Where do you recommend? For my first trip?”

“For your first trip... I recommend you take the one beacon route we have, up to Ace’s Landing. That’s two beacons, three jumps. It’s a neat place, hut, fresh-water lake, the works. Nobody lives there, but we have a rock-hound who takes all his long leaves there, with a couple of pals.

You can take out your scopes and have a spree, everything you're looking at is unexplored. And it's just about in commo range if you hit it lucky."

"How can places be out of commo range? I keep hearing that."

"It's the Rift. Relativistic effects out here where the density changes. Oh, you can pick up the frequency, but the noise, the garble factor, is hopeless. Some people claim even electronic gear acts up as you really get into the Rift itself."

"How much do they charge to stay at the hut?"

"Nothing, if you bring your own chow and bag. Air and water's perfect."

"I might want to make an excursion farther on to look at something I've spotted in the scope."

"Green. We'll adjust the chart fee when you get back. But if you run around, watch out for this vortex situation here." Charts pokes his stylus into the holo, north of Ace's Landing. "Nobody's sure yet whether it's a bunch of little ones or a great big whopper of a gee-pit. And remember the holos don't fit together too well—" He edges a second chart into the first display; several stars are badly doubled.

"Right. And I'll keep my eyes open and run a listening watch for that lost ship, BK's."

"You do that..." He tallies up an amount that has her credit balance scraping bottom. "I sure hope they turn up soon. It's not like them to go jazzing off somewhere... Green, here you are."

She tenders her voucher chip. "It's go." She grins. "Barely."

Still suited, lugging her pouch of chart cassettes, Coati takes a last look through the great view-wall of the main corridor. She has a decision to make. Two decisions, really, but this one isn't fun—she has to send something to her parents, and without giving herself away to anybody who checks commo. Her parents must be signaling all over home sector by now. She winces mentally, then has an idea: Her sister on a planet near Cayman's has married enough credits to accept any number of collect 'skips, and it would be logical—Yes.

Commo is two doors down.

"You don't need to worry," she tells a lady named Pauna. "My brother-in-law is the planet banker. You can check him in that great big

ephemeris there. Javelo, Hunter Javelo.”

Cautiously, Pauna does so. What she finds on Port-of-Princes reassures her enough to accept this odd girl’s message. Intermittently sucking her stylus, Coati writes:

*Dearest Sis,
Surprise! I’m out at FedBase 900. It’s wonderful. Will
look around a bit and head home, stopping by you. Tell
folks all okay, ship goes like dream, and million thanks.
Love, Coati.*

There! That ought to do it without alerting anybody. By the time her father messages FedBase 900, if he does, she’ll be long gone.

And now, she tells herself, heading out to the port, now for the big one. Where exactly should she go?

Well, she can always take Charts’ advice and have a good time on Ace’s Landing, scanning the skies and planning her next trip. She’s become just a little impressed by the hugeness of space and the chill of the unknown. Suppose she gets caught in an uncharted gravity vortex? She’s only been in one, and it was small, and a good pilot was flying. (That was one of the flights she didn’t tell her folks about.) And there’s always next time.

On the other hand, she’s *here* now, all set. And her folks could raise trouble next time she sets out. Isn’t it better to do all she can while she can do it?

Well, like what, for instance?

Her ears had pricked up at Charts’ remark about those GO-type suns. And one of them was where the poor lost team was headed for, she has the coordinates on her wrist. What if she found them! Or—what if she found a fine terraform planet, and got to name it!

The balance of decision, which had never really leveled, tilts decisively toward a vision of yellow suns—as Coati all but runs into the ramp edge leading out.

A last flicker of caution reminds her that, whatever her goal, her first outward leg must be the beacon route to Ace’s. At the first beacon turn she’ll have time to think it over and really make up her mind.

She finds that *CC-One* has been skidded out of Fuels and onto the edge of the standard-thrust takeoff area. She hikes out and climbs in, unaware that she's broadcasting a happy hum. This is *it!* She's really, really, at last, on her way!

Strapping in, preparing to lift, she takes out a ration snack and bites it open. She was too broke to eat at Base. Setting course and getting into drive will give her time to digest it; she has a superstitious dislike of going into cold-sleep with a full tummy. Absolutely nothing is supposed to go on during cold-sleep, and she's been used to it since she was a baby, but the thought of that foreign lump of food in there always bothers her. What puts it in stasis before it's part of her? What if it decided to throw itself up?

So she munches as she sets the holochart data in her computer, leaving FedBase 900 far below. She's delightedly aware that the realest part of her life is about to begin. Amid the radiance of unfamiliar stars, the dark Rift in her front view-ports, she completes the course to Beacon 900-One, AL, and listens to the big c-skip converters, the heart of her ship, start the cooling-down process. The c-skip drive unit must be supercooled to near absolute zero to work the half-understood miracle by which reciprocal gravity fields will be perturbed, and *CC-One* and herself translated to the target at relativistic speed.

As the first clicks and clanks of cooling resound through the shell, she hangs up her suit, opens her small-size sleep-chest, gets in, and injects herself. Her feelings as she pulls the lid down are those of a child of antique Earth as it falls asleep to awake on Christmas morning. Thank the All for cold-sleep, she thinks drowsily. It gave us the stars. Imagine those first brave explorers who had to live and age, to stay awake through all the days, the months, the years...

She awakens in what at first glance appears to be about the same starfield, but when she's closed the chest, rubbing her behind where the antisleep injections hit, she sees that the Rift looks different.

It's larger, and—why, it's all around the ship! Tendrils of dark almost close behind her. She's in one of the fringy star-clumps that stick out into the Rift. And the starfield looks dull, apart from a few blazing suns—of course, there aren't any nearby stars! Or rather, there are a few very near, and then an emptiness where all the middle-distance suns should be. Only the far, faint star-tapestry lies beyond.

The ship is full of noise; as she comes fully awake, she understands that the beacon signal and her mass-proximity indicator are both tweeting and blasting away. She tunes them down, locates the beacon, and puts the ship into a slow orbit around it. This beacon, like FedBase, is set on a big asteroid, which gives her just enough gees to stabilize.

Very well. If she's going to Ace's Landing, she'll just set in the coordinates for Beacon 900-Two, AL, and go back to sleep. But if she's going to look at those yellow suns, she must get out her charts and work up a safe two- or three-leg course to one of them.

She can't simply set in their coordinates and fly straight there, even if there were no bodies actually in the way, because the 'skip drive is built to turn off and wake her if she threatens to get too deep in a strong gravity field or encounters an asteroid swarm or some other space hazard. So she has to work out corridors that pass really far away from any strong bodies or known problems.

Decide... But face it, hadn't she already decided when she stabilized here? She doesn't need that much time to punch in Beacon Two... Yes. She *has* to go somewhere really wild. A hut on Ace's Landing is just not what she came out here for. Those unknown yellow suns *are*... and maybe she could do something useful, like finding the missing men; there's an off chance. The neat thing to do might be to go by small steps. Ace's Landing first—but the *really* neat course is to take advantage of all she's learned and not to risk being forbidden to come back, green, go!

She's been busy all this while, threading cassettes and getting them lined up for those GO suns. As Charts had warned her, edges don't fit well. She's working at forcing two holos into a cheap frame made for one, when her mass-proximity tweeter goes off.

She glances up, ready to duck or deflect a sky-rock. Amazed, she sees something unmistakably artificial ahead. A ship? It grows larger—but not large enough, not at the rate it's coming. It'll pass her clean. Whatever can it be? Visions of the mythical tiny ship full of tiny aliens jump to her mind.

It's so small—why, she could pick it up! Without really thinking, she spins *CC-One's* attitude and comes parallel, alongside the object. She's good at tricky little accelerations. The thing seems to put on speed as she idles up. Touched by chase fever, she mutters, "Oh, no you don't!" and extrudes the rather inadequate manipulator-arm.

As she does so, she realizes what it is. But she's too excited to think; she plucks it neatly out of space and, after a bit of trying, twists it into her cargo-lock, shuts the port behind it, and refills with air.

She's caught herself a message pipe! Bound from the gods know where to FedBase. It was changing course at Beacon One, like herself, hence moving slowly. Has she committed an official wrong? Is there some penalty for interfering with official comms?

Well, she's put her spoon in the soup, she might as well drink it. It'll take a while for the pipe to warm to touchability. So she goes on working her charts, intending merely to take a peak at the message and then send the little thing on its way. Surely such a small pause won't harm anything—pipes are used because the sender's out of range, not because they're fast.

She hasn't a doubt she can start it going again. She's seen it's covered with instructions. Like all Federation space-gear, it's fixed to be usable by amateurs in an emergency.

Impatiently, she completes a chart and goes to fish the thing out of the port while it's still so cold she has to put on gloves. When she undoes its little hatch, a cloud of golden motes drifts out, distracting her so that she brushes her bare wrist against the metal when she reaches for the cassette inside. Ouch!

She glances at her arm, hoping she hasn't given herself a nasty cold-bum. Nothing to be seen but an odd dusty scratch. No redness. But she can feel the nerves twitch deep in her forearm. Funny! She brushes at it and takes out the cassette with more care. It's standard record, she soon has it threaded in her voder.

The voice that speaks is so thick and blurry that she backs up and restarts, to hear better.

"Supply and Recon Team number nine fourteen BK reporting," she makes out. Excitedly she recognizes the designation. Why, that's the missing ship! This *is* important. She should relay it to Base at once. But surely it won't hurt to listen to the rest?

The voice is saying that a new depot has been established at thirty-two north, forty-two-twenty-eight west, RD twenty-seven. That's one of the yellow suns' planets; and the coordinates Coati has on her wrist. "Ninety-five percent terraform." The voice has cleared a little.

It goes on to say that they will work back to FedBase, stopping to check a highly terraform planet they've spotted at eighteen-ten north, twenty-eight-thirty west, RD twenty-seven, in the same group of suns. "But—uh..." The voice stops, then resumes.

"Some things happened at thirty-twenty. There're people there. I guess we have to report a, uh, First Contact. They—"

A second voice interrupts abruptly.

"We did just like the manual! The manual for First Contacts."

"Yeah," resumes the first voice. "It worked fine. They were really friendly. They even had a few words from Galactic, and the signals. But they—"

"The wreck. The wreck! Tell them," says the other voice.

"Oh. Well, yeah. There's a wreck there, an old RB. Real old. You can't see the rescue flag, it has big stuff growing on it. We think it's Ponz. So maybe it's his First Contact." The voice sounds unmistakably downcast. "Boss can decide... Anyway, they have some kind of treatment they give you, like a pill to make you smart. It takes two days, you sleep a lot. Then they let you out and you can understand everything. I mean—everything! It was—we never had anything like that before. Everybody talking and understanding everybody! See how we can talk now? But it's funny... Anyway, they helped us find a place with a level site and we fixed up a fuel dump really nice. We—"

"What they looked like!" the other voice butts in. "Never mind us. Tell about them, what they looked like and how they did."

"Oh, sure. Well. Big white bodies with fur all over. And six legs, they mostly walk on the back four, the top two are like arms. They have like long bodies, long white cats, big; when they rear up to look, they're over our heads. And they have..." Here the voice stammers, as if finding it hard to speak. "They have like two, uh, private parts. Two sets, I mean. Some of them. And their faces"—the voice runs on, relieved—"their faces are *fierce*. Some teeth! When they came and looked in first, we were pretty nervous. And big eyes, sort of like mixed-up people and animals. Cats. But they acted friendly, they gave back the signals, so we came out. That was when they grabbed us and pushed their heads onto ours. Then they let us go, and acted like something was wrong. I heard one say, 'Ponz,' and like 'Lashley' or 'Leslie.' "

“Leslie was with Ponz, I told you,” says the second.

“Yeah. So then they grabbed us again and held on, that was when they gave the treatment. I think something went into me, I can still hear like a voice. Ko says him, too... Oh, and there were young ones and some others running around on an island, they said they’re not like them until they get the treatment. ‘Drons’ they called the young ones. And afterwards they’re ‘Ee-ah-drons.’ The ones we talked to. It’s sort of confusing. Like the Ee-ah are people, too. But you don’t see them.” His voice—it must be Boney—runs down. “Is that all?” Coati hears him ask aside.

“Yeah, I guess so,” the other voice—Ko—replies. “We better get started, we got one more stop... and I don’t feel so good anymore. I wish we was home.”

“Me too. Funny, we felt so great. Well, DRS nine fourteen BK signing off... I guess this is the longest report we ever sent, huh? Oh, we have some corrections to send. Stand by.”

After a long drone of coordinate corrections, the record ends.

Coati sits pensive, trying to sort out the account. It’s clear that a new race has been contacted, and they seem friendly. Yet something about it affects her negatively—she has no desire to rush off and meet the big white six-legs and be given the “smart treatment.” Boney and Ko were supposed to be a little—innocent. Maybe they were fooled in some way, taken advantage of? But she can’t think why, or what. It’s beyond her...

The other thing that’s clear is that this should go to Base, fastest. Wasn’t there a ship going to follow Boney and Ko’s route? Which would take them to the cat-planet, that’s at—she consults her wrist—yes, thirty-twenty north, et cetera. Oh, dear, must she go back? Turn back, abort her trip, to deliver this? Why had she been so smart, pulling in other people’s business?

But wait—maybe she’s still in comms range. In fact—why, if it’s urgent, she could speed it by calling Base and reading the message, thus bypassing the last leg. Then surely they wouldn’t crack her for interfering!

She powers up the transponder and starts calling FedBase 900. Finally a voice responds, barely discernible through the noise. She fiddles with the suppressors, gets it a bit clearer.

“FedBase Nine hundred, this is *CC-One* at AL Beacon One. Do you read me? I have intercepted a message pipe from Supply Ship DRS nine fourteen BK, the missing ship. Boney and Ko.” She repeats. “Do you read that?”

“Affirmative, *CC-One*. Message from nine fourteen B-and-K intercepted. What is the message?”

“It’s too long to read. But listen—important. They are on their way to a planet at—wait a minim—” She rolls the record back and gets the coordinates. “And before that they stayed at that planet thirty-twenty north, you have the specs. There are people there! It’s a First Contact, I think. But listen, they say something’s funny. I don’t think you should go there until you get the whole message. I’m sending it right on.”

“*CC-One*, I lost part of that. Is planet at thirty-twenty north a First Contact?”

Garble is breaking up Commo’s voice. Coati shouts as clearly as she can, “Yes! Affirmative! But don’t, repeat do—not—go—there—until you get B-and-K’s original message. I—will—send—pipe—at once. Did you get that?”

“Repeating... Do not proceed to planet thirty-twenty north forty-two-twenty-eight west until BK message received. Pipe coming soonest. Green, *CC-One*?”

“Go. If I can’t make the pipe work I’ll bring it. *CC-One* signing off.” She finishes in a swirl of loud static and turns her attention to getting the pipe back on its way.

But before she takes the cassette out of the voder, she rechecks the designation of the planet BK are headed for. Eighteen-ten north, twenty-eight-thirty west, RD twenty-seven. That’s closer than the First Contact planet; that’s right, they said they’d stop there on their way home. She copies the first coordinates off her work-pad and replaces those on her wrist with the new ones. If she wants to help look for Boney and Ko, she could go straight there—but of course she hasn’t really made up her mind. As she rolls back her sleeve, she notices that her arm still feels odd, but she can’t see any trace of a cold-bum. She rubs the arm a couple of times and it goes away.

“Getting goosey from excitement,” she mutters. She has a childish habit of talking aloud to herself when she’s alone. She figures it’s

because she was alone so much as a child, happily playing with her space toys and 'grams.

Putting the message pipe back on course proves to be absurdly simple. She blows it clean of the yellow powdery stuff, reinserts the cassette, and ejects it beside the viewports. Fascinated, she watches the little ship spin slowly, orienting to its homing frequency broadcast from Base 900. Then, as if satisfied, it begins to glide away, faster and faster. Sure enough, as well as she can judge, it's headed down the last leg from Beacon One to Far Base. Neat! She's never heard of pipes before; there must be all kinds of marvelous Frontier gadgets that'll be new to her.

She has a guilty twinge as she sees it go. Isn't it her duty to go nearer back to Base and read the whole thing? Could the men be in some kind of trouble where every minim counts? But they sounded green, only maybe a little tired. And she understands it's their routine to send a pipe after every stop. If some of those corrections are important, she could never read them straight, her voice would give out. Better they have Boney's own report.

She turns back to figuring out her course and finds she was fibbing; she has indeed made up her mind. She'll just go to the planet BK were headed for and see if she can find them there. Maybe they got too sick to move on, maybe they found another alien race they got involved with. Maybe their ship's in trouble... Any number of reasons they could be late, and she *might* be helpful. And now she knows enough about the pipes to know that they can't be sent from a planet's surface. Only from above atmosphere. So if Boney and Ko can't lift, they can't message for help—by pipe, at least.

She's half talking this line of reasoning out to herself as she works on the holocharts. Defining and marking in a brand-new course for the computer is far more work than she'd realized; the school problems she had done must have been chosen for easy natural corridors. "Oh, gods... I've got to erase again, there's an asteroid path there. Help! I'll never get off this beacon at this rate—explorers must have spent half their time mapping!"

As she mutters, she becomes aware of something like an odd little echo in the ship. She looks around; the cabin is tightly packed with shiny cases of supplies. "Got my acoustics all buggered up," she mutters. That must be it. But there seem to be a peculiar delay; for example, she hears

the word “Help!” so tiny clear that she actually spends a few minutes searching the nearby racks. Could a talking animal pet or something have got in at Far Base? Oh, the poor creature. Unless she can somehow get it in cold-sleep it’ll die.

But nothing more happens, and she decides it’s just the new acoustical reflections. And at last she achieves a good, safe three-leg course to that system at eighteen-ten north. She’s pretty sure an expert could pick out a shorter, elegant, two-leg line, but she doesn’t want to risk being waked up by some unforeseen obstacle. So she picks routes lined by well-corrected red dwarfs and other barely visible sky-features. These charts are living history, she thinks. Not like the anonymous holos back home, where everything is checked a hundred times a year, and they only give you trip-strips. In those charts she can read the actual hands of the old explorers. That man Ponz, for instance, he must have spent a lot of time working around the route to the yellow suns, before he landed on thirty-twenty and crashed and died... But she’s dawdling now. She stacks the marked cassettes in order in her computer take-up and clicks the first one in. To the unknown, at last!

She readies her sleep-chest and hops in. As she relaxes, she notices she still has a strange sensation of being accompanied by something or someone. “Maybe because I’m sort of one of the company of space, now,” she tells herself romantically, and visualizes a future chart with a small “CC” correction. Hah! She laughs aloud, drowsily, in the darkness, feeling great. An almost physical rosy glow envelops her as she sinks to dreamless stasis.

She can take off thus unconscious amid pathless space with no real fear of getting lost and being unable to return, because of a marvelously simple little gadget carried by all jump-ships—a time-lapse recorder in the vessel’s tail, which clicks on unceasingly, recording the star-scene behind. It’s accelerated by motion in the field, and slows to resting state when the field is static. So, whenever the pilot wishes to retrace his route, he has only to take out the appropriate cassette and put it up front in his guidance computer. The computer will hunt until it duplicates the starfield sequences of the outward path, thus bringing the ship infallibly, if somewhat slowly, back along the course it came.

She wakes and jumps out to see a really new star-scene—a great sprawl of radiant golden suns against a very dark arm of Rift. The closest

star of the group, she finds, is eighteen-ten north, just as she's calculated! The drive has cut off at the margin of its near gravity field; it will be a long thrust-drive in.

Excitement like a sunrise is flooding her. She's made it! Her first solo jump!

And with the mental joy is still that physical glow, so strong it puzzles her for a minim. Physical, definitely; it's kind of like the buzz of self-stimulation, but without the sticky-sickly feeling that usually gives her. Their phys. ed. teacher, who'd showed them how to relieve sex tension, said that the negative quality would go away, but Coati hasn't bothered with all that very much. Now she thinks that this shows that sheer excitement can activate sex, as the teacher said. "Ah, go away," she mutters impatiently. She's got to start thrust-drive and run on in to where the planets could be.

As soon as she's started, she turns to the scope to check. Planets—yes! One—two—four—and there it is! Blue green and white even at this distance! Boney and Ko had said it tested highly terraform. It looks it all right, thinks Coati, who had seen only holos of antique Earth. She wonders briefly what the missing nonterraform part could be; irregularities of climate, absence of some major life-forms? It doesn't matter—anything over 75 percent means livable without protective gear, air and water present and good. She'll be able to get out and explore in the greatest comfort—on a world! But are Boney and Ko already there?

When she gets into orbital distance from the planet, she must run a standard search pattern around it. All Federation ships have radar-responsive gear to help locate them. But her little ship doesn't have a real Federation search-scope. She'll have to use her eyes and fly much too narrow a course. This could be tedious; she sighs.

She finds herself crossing her legs and wiggling and scratching herself idly. Really, this sex overflow is too much! The mental part is fairly calm, though, almost like real happiness. Nice. Only distracting... And, as she leans back to start waiting out the run in, she feels again that sense of *presence* in the ship. Company, companionship. Is she going a little nutters? "Calm down," she tells herself firmly.

A minim of dead silence... into which a tiny, tiny voice says distinctly: "Hello... hello? Please don't be frightened. Hello?"

It's coming from somewhere behind and above her.

Coati whirls, peers up and around, everywhere, seeing nothing new.

“Wh-where are you?” she demands. “Who are you, in here?”

“I am a very small being. You saved my life. Please don’t be frightened of me. Hello?”

“Hello,” Coati replies slowly, peering around hard. Still she sees nothing. And the voice is still behind her when she turns. She doesn’t feel frightened at all, just intensely excited and curious.

“What do you mean, I saved your life?”

“I was clinging to the outside of that artifact you call a message. I would have died soon.”

“Well, good.” But now Coati a bit frightened. When the voice spoke, she definitely detected movement in her own larynx and tongue—as if she’s speaking the words herself. Gods—she *is* going nutters, she’s hallucinating! “I’m talking to myself!”

“No, no,” the voice—her voice—reassures her. “You are correct—I am using your speech apparatus. Please forgive me, I have none of my own that you could hear.”

Coati digests this dubiously. If this is an hallucination, it’s really complex. She’s never done anything like this before. Could it be real, some kind of alien telekinesis?

“But where are you? Why don’t you come out and show yourself?”

“I can’t. I will explain. Please promise me you won’t be frightened. I have damaged nothing and I will leave any time you desire.”

Coati suddenly gets an idea and eyes the computer sharply. In fantasy shows she’s seen holos about alien minds taking over computers. So far as she knows, it’s never happened in reality. But maybe—

“Are you in my computer?”

“Your computer?” Incredibly, the voice gives what might almost be a giggle. “In a way, yes. I told you I am very, very small. I am in, in empty places, in your head.” Quickly, it adds, “You aren’t frightened, please? I can go out any time. But then we can’t speak.”

“In my head!” Coati exclaims. For some reason she, too, feels like laughing, she knows she should be making some more serious response, but all she can think of is that this is why her sinuses feel stuffy. “How did you get in my head?”

“When you rescued me. I was incapable of thought. We have a primitive tropism to enter a body and make our way to the head. When I came to myself, I was here. You see, on my home, we live in the brains of our host-animals. In fact, we are their brains.”

“You went through my body? Oh—from that place on my arm?”

“Yes, I must have done. I have only vague, primitive memories. You see, we are really so small. We live in what I think you call intermolecular, maybe interatomic spaces. Our passage doesn’t injure anything. To me, your body is as open and porous as your landscape is to you. I didn’t realize there was so much large-scale solidity around until I saw it through your eyes! Then when you went cold, I came to myself and learned my way around, and deciphered the speech centers. I had a long, long, time. It was... lonely. I didn’t know if you would ever awaken...”

“Yeah...” Coati thinks this over. She’s pretty sure she couldn’t imagine all this. It must be *real*. But all she can think of to say is, “You’re using my eyes, too?”

“I’ve tapped into the optic nerve, at the second juncture. *Very* delicately, I assure you. And to your auditory channels. It’s one of the first things we do, a primitive program. And we make the host feel happy, to keep from frightening. You do feel happy, don’t you?”

“Happy?... Hey, are *you* doing that? Listen, if that’s you, you’re overdoing it! I don’t want to feel quite so ‘happy,’ as you call it. Can you turn it down?”

“You don’t? Oh, I *am* sorry. Please wait—my movements are slow.”

Coati waits, thinking so furiously about everything at once that her mind is a chaos. Presently there comes a marked decrease in the distracting physical glow. More than all the rest, this serves to convince her of the reality of her new inhabitant.

“Can you read my mind?” she asks slowly.

“Only when you form words,” her own voice replies. “Subvocalizing, I think you call it. I used all that long cold time tracing out your vocabulary and language. We have a primitive drive to communication. Perhaps all life-forms have.”

‘Acquiring a whole language from a static, sleeping brain is quite a feat,’ says Coati thoughtfully. She is beginning to feel a distinct

difference in her voice when the alien is using it; it seems higher, tighter—and she hears herself using words that she knows only from reading, not habitual use.

“Yes. Luckily I had so much time. But I was so dismayed and depressed when it seemed you’d never awaken. All that work would be for nothing. I am so happy to find you alive! Not just for the work, but for—for life... Oh, and I have had one chance to practice with your species before. But your brain is quite different.”

However flustered and overwhelmed by the novelty of all this, Coati isn’t stupid. The words about “home” and “hosts” are making a connection with Boney and Ko’s report.

“Did the two men who sent that message you were riding on visit your home planet? They were two Humans—that’s what I am—in a ship bigger than this.”

“Oh, yes! I was one of those who took turns being with them! And I was visiting one of them when they left...” The voice seems to check itself. “Your brain is really very different.”

“Thanks,” says Coati inanely. “I’ve heard those two men—those two Humans—weren’t regarded as exactly bright.”

“ ‘Bright’? Ah, yes... We performed some repairs, but we couldn’t do much.”

Coati’s chaotic thoughts coalesce. What she’s sitting here chatting with is an alien—an *alien* who is possibly deadly, very likely dangerous, who has invaded her head.

“You’re a *brain parasite!*” she cries loudly. “You’re an intelligent brain parasite, using my eyes to see with and my ears to hear with, and talking through my mouth as if I were a zombie—and for all I know you’re taking over my whole brain!”

“Oh, please! P-please!” She hears her own voice tremble. “I can leave at any moment—is that what you wish? And I damage nothing—nothing at all. I use very little energy. In fact, I have cleared away some debris in your main blood supply tube, so there is more than ample for us both. I only need a few components from time to time. But I can withdraw right now. It would be a slow process, because I’ve become more deeply enmeshed and my mentor isn’t here to direct me. But if that’s what you

want, I shall start at once, leaving just as I came... Maybe—n-now that I'm refreshed, I could survive longer, clinging to your ship."

The pathos affects Coati; the timbre of the voice calls up the image of a tiny, sad, frightened creature shivering in the cold prison of space.

"We'll decide about that later," she says somewhat gruffly. "Meanwhile, I have your word of honor you aren't messing up my brain?"

"Indeed not," her own voice whispers back indignantly. "It is a beautiful brain."

"But what do you want? Where are you trying to go?"

"Now I want only to go home. I thought, if I could reach some central Human place, we could find someone who would carry me back to my home planet Nolian, and my proper host."

"But why did you leave Boney and Ko and go with that message pipe in the first place?"

"Oh—I had then no idea how *big* the empty spaces are, I thought it would be like a long trip out-of-body at home. Brrr-rr! There's so much I don't know. Can you tell that I am a quite young being? I have not at all finished my instructions. My mentors tell me I am foolish, or foolhardy. I—I wanted adventure!" The little voice sounds suddenly quite strong and positive. "I still do, but I see I must be better prepared."

"Hmm. Hey, can you tell I'm young, too? I guess that makes two of us. I guess I'm out here looking for adventure, too."

"You do understand!"

"Yeah." Coati grins, sighs. "Well, I can carry you back to FedBase, and I'm sure they'll be sending parties to your planet soon. It's a First Contact for us, you know; that's what we call meeting a new non-Human race. We know about fifty so far, but no one just like you. So I'm certain people will be going."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you so much."

Coati feels a surge of physical pleasure, an urge—

"Hey! You're doing *that* again! Stop it."

"Oh, I am sorry." The glow fades. "It's a primitive response to gratitude. To give pleasure. You see, our normal hosts are quite mindless, they can be thanked only by physical sensation."

“I see.” Pondering this, Coati sees something else, too.

“I suppose you could make them feel pain, too, to punish them, if they did something you didn’t like?”

“I suppose so... But we don’t like pain, it chums up the delicate brain. That’s some of the lessons I haven’t had yet. I only had to once, when my host was playing too near a dangerous cliff. And then I soothed it with pleasure right after it moved back. We use it only in emergencies, if the host threatens to harm itself, rare things like that... Or, wait, I remember, if the host gets into what you call a *fight*... You can see it’s complicated.”

“I see,” Coati repeats. Uneasily, she realizes that this young alien passenger might have more control over her than was exactly neat. But it seems to be so well meaning, to have no intent at all to harm her. She relaxes, unable to suppress a twinge of wonder whether her easy emotional acceptance of its presence in—whew! her *brain*—might not be a feeling partly engineered by the alien. Maybe the *really* neat thing to do would be to ask her passenger to withdraw, right now. Could she fix some comfortable place for it to stay outside her? Maybe she’ll do that, when they get a bit closer to FedBase.

Meanwhile, what about her plan for visiting the planet Boney and Ko were headed for? If she could pick up a trace of them, it would be a real help to FedBase. And wouldn’t it be a shame to come all this way out without taking a look?

That argument with herself is soon over. And her young appetite is making itself felt. She picks out a ration snack and starts to set the drive course for the planets, explaining between munches what she plans to do before return to FedBase. Her passenger raises no objection to this delay.

“I am so grateful, so grateful you would think to deliver me,” her voice says with some difficulty around the cheese bites.

As Coati opens the cold-keeper, a flash of gold attracts her attention. It’s more of that gold dust, clinging to the chilly surface. She bats it away, and some floats to her face.

“By the way, what is this stuff? It came in the message pipe, with you. Can you see it? Hey, it’s on my legs, too.” She extends one.

“Yes,” her “different” voice replies. “They are seeds.”

She's getting used to this weird dialogue with herself. It reminds her of a show she saw, where a ventriloquist animated a dummy. I'm a ventriloquist's dummy, she chuckles to herself. Only I'm the ventriloquist, too.

"What kind of seeds, of what?" she asks aloud.

"Ours." There's a sound, or feeling, like a sigh, as if a troubling thought had passed. Then her voice says more briskly, "Wait, I forgot. I should release a chemical to keep them off you. They are attracted to—to the pheromones of life."

"I didn't know I knew those words," Coati tells her invisible companion. "I guess you were really into my vocabulary while I slept."

"Oh, yes. I labored."

A moment later Coati feels a slight flush prickling her skin. Is this the "chemical"? Before she can feel alarmed, it passes. And she sees that the floating dust, or seeds, have fallen away from her as if repelled by a charge.

"Good-o." She eats a bit more, finishing the course set. "That reminds me, what do you call your race? And you, you must have a name. We should get better acquainted!" She laughs for two; all sense of trouble has gone.

"I am of the Eea, or Eeadron. Personally I'm called Syllobene."

"Hello, Syllobene! I'm Coati Cass. Coati."

"Hello, Coati Cass Coati."

"No, I meant, just Coati. Cass is my family name."

"Ah, 'family.' We wondered about that, with the other Humans."

"Sure, I'll be glad to explain. But later—" Coati cuts herself off. "I mean, there'll be plenty of time to explain everything, while we slowly approach the planet orbiting that star. And I think I'm entitled to your story first, Syllobene, since I'm providing the body. Don't you agree that's fair?"

"Oh, yes. I must take care not to be selfish, when you do so much."

Somehow this speech, for the first time, conveys to Coati that her passenger really is a young, almost childish being. The big words it had found in her mind had kept misleading her. But now Syllobene sounds so much like herself reminding herself of her manners. She chuckles again,

benignly. Could it be that they are two kids—even two females—together, out looking for adventure in the starfields? And it's nice to have this unexpected companion; much as Coati loves to read and view, she's beginning to get the idea that a lot of space voyaging consists of lonely sitting and waiting, when you aren't in cold-sleep. Of course, she guiltily reminds herself, she could be checking the charts to see if all the coordinates of the relatively few stars out here are straight. But Boney and Ko have undoubtedly done all that—after all, this was their second trip to this sun; on the first one they merely spotted planets. And learning about an alien race is surely important.

She leans back comfortably, and asks, “Now, what about your planet? What does it look like? And your hosts—how does that work? How did such a system ever evolve in the first place? Hey, I know—can you make me see an image, a vision of your home?”

“Alas, no. Such a feat is beyond my powers. Making speech is the utmost I can do.”

“Well, tell me about it all.”

“I will. But first I must say, we have no such—no such material equipment, no such *technology* as you have. What techniques we have are of the mind. I am filled with amazement at all you do. Your race has achieved marvels! I saw a distant world when I looked through your device—a world! And you speak of visiting it as casually as we would go to a lake or a tree farm. A wonder!”

“Yes, we have a lot of technology. So do some other races, like the Swain and the Moom. But I want *yours*, Syllobene! To start with, what's this business of Eea and Eeadron?”

“Ah. Yes, of course. Well, I personally, just myself, am an Eea. But when I am in my proper host, which is a Dron, I am an Eeadron. An Eea by itself is almost nothing. It can do nothing but wait, depending on its primitive tropisms, until a host comes by. It is very rare for Eea to become detached as you found me—except when we are visiting another Eeadron for news or instruction. And then we leave much of ourselves in place, in our personal Dron, to which we return. I, being young, was able to detach myself almost completely to go with the Humans as one of their visitors.”

“Oh—were there other Eeas inside Boney and Ko when they took off?”

“Yes—one each, at least.”

“What would you call that—Eeahumans?” Coati laughs.

But her companion does not seem to join in. “They were very old,” she hears herself mutter softly. And then something that sounds like, “No idea of the length of the trip...”

“So you came away when they messaged. Whew—wild act! Oh, Syllobene, I’m so glad I intercepted it and saved you.”

“I, too, dear Coati Cass.”

“But now we’ve got to get serious about this crazy system of yours. Are you the only people on your planet that have their brains in separate bodies? Oh, wait. I just realized we should record all this, we’ll never be able to go over it twice. Hold while I put in a new cassette.”

She gets set up and bethinks herself to make it sound professional with an introduction.

“This is Coati Cass recording, on board the *CC-One*, approaching unnamed planet at—” She gives all the coordinates, the standard date and time, and the fact that Boney and Ko were last reported to be headed toward this planet.

“Before that, they landed on a planet at thirty-twenty north and reported a First Contact with life-forms there. Their report is in a message forwarded to Base before I came here. Now it seems that when they left that planet, some of the life-forms came with them, specifically two at least of the almost invisible Eea, in their heads. And some seeds, and another Eea, a very young one, who came along, she says, for the adventure. This young Eea moved to the message pipe, not realizing how long the trip would be, and was almost dead when I opened the pipe. She—I call it she because we haven’t got sexes, if any, straightened out yet—she moved over to me when I opened the pipe, and is right now residing in my head, where she can see and hear through my senses, and speak with my voice. I am interviewing her about her planet, Nolian. Now, remember all the voice you hear will be mine—but I myself am the one asking the questions. I think you will be soon able to tell when Syllobene—that’s her name—is speaking with my voice; it’s higher and sort of constricted, and she uses words I didn’t know I knew. She learned all that while I was in cold-sleep coming here. Now, Syllobene, would you please repeat what you’ve told me so far, about the Eea and the Eeadron?”

Coati has learned to relax a little while her own voice goes on, and she hears Syllobene start with a nice little preface: “Greetings to my Human hearers!” and go on to recite the Eea-Eeadron system.

“Now,” says Coati, “I was just asking whether the Eea are the only life-forms on their planet to have their brains in separate animals, so to speak.”

“Oh, no,” says her Syllobene voice, “it is general in our, ah, animal world. In fact we are still amazed that there is another way. But always in other animals the two are very closely attached. For instance, in the Enquaalons, the En is born with the Quaalon, mates when it mates, gives birth when it does, and dies when it dies. The same for all the En—that is what we call the brain-animal, except for ourselves, the Eea. Only the Eea are so separate from the Dron, and do not die when their Dron dies... But we have seen aged Endalamines—that is the nearest animal to the Eeadron—holding their heads against newborn Dalamines, as though the En was striving to pass to a new body, while the seed-Ens proper to that newborn hovered about in frustration. We think in some cases they succeed.”

“So you Eea can pass to a new body when yours is old! Does that make you immortal?”

“Ah, no, Eea too age and die. But very slowly. They may use many Dron in a lifetime.”

“I see. But tell about your society, your government, and how you get whatever you eat, and so on. Are there rich and poor, or servants and master Eeadron?”

“No, if I understand those words. But we have farms—” And so by random stages and probings, Coati pieces together a picture of the green-and-golden planet that Syllobene calls Nolian, with its sun, Anella, all ruled over by the big white Eeadron, who have no wars and only the most rudimentary monetary system. The climate is so benign that housing is largely decorative, except for shelter from the nightly mists and drizzles. It seems a paradise. Their ferocious teeth, which had so alarmed Boney and Ko, derive from a forgotten, presumably carnivorous past; they now eat plant products and fruits. (Here Coati recollects that certain herbivorous primates of antique Earth also had fierce-looking canines.)

As to material technology, the Eeadron have the wheel, which they use for transporting farm crops and what few building materials they employ. And long ago they learned to control fire, which they regard almost as a toy except for some use in cooking. Their big interest now appears to be the development of a written code for their language; they picked up the idea from Ponz and Leslie. It's a source of great pleasure and excitement, although some of the older Eea, who serve as the racial memory, grumble a bit at this innovation.

Midway through this account, Coati has an idea, and when Syllobene runs down she bursts out, "Listen! Oh—this is Coati speaking—you said you cleaned out my arteries, my blood tubes. And you cure other hosts. Would you—I mean, your race—be interested in being healers to other races like mine, who can't heal themselves? We call such healers *doctors*. But our doctors can't get inside and really fix what's wrong, without cutting the sick person up. Why, you could travel all over the Federation, visiting sick people and curing them—or, wait, you could set up a big clinic, and people, Humans and others, would come from everywhere to have the Eea go into them and fix their blood vessels, or their kidneys, or whatever was wrong. Oh, hey—and they'd *pay* you—you're going to need Federation credits—and everybody would love you! You'd be the most famous, valuable race in the Federation!"

"Oh, oh—" replies the Syllobene voice, sounding breathless, "I don't know your exclamations! We would say:" She gives an untranslatable trill of excitement. "How amazing, if I understand you—"

"Well, we can talk about that later. Now, you learned about Humans from what you call visiting, in the brains of Boney or Ko, is that right?"

"Yes. But if I had not had the experience of visiting my mentor and a few other Eeadron, I would not have known how to enter and live there without causing damage. You see, the brains of the Dron are just unformed matter; one can go anywhere and eat anything without ill effect in the host's brain. In fact, it is up to the Eea to form them... And, I almost forgot, my mentor was old; and was one of those who had known the living Humans, Ponz and Leslie. The two who landed violently and died. They were beyond our powers to cure them, but we could abolish their pain. I believe they mated before they died, but no seeds came. My mentor told me how your brains are, with everything developed and functioning. We are still amazed."

“Why do you visit other Eeadron?”

“To learn many facts about some subject in a short time. We send out tendrils—I think you have a word, for your fungus plants—mycelium. Very frail threads and knots, permeating the other brain—I believe that is what I look like in your brain now—and by making a shadow-pattern in a certain way, we acquire all sorts of information, like history, or the form of the landscapes, and keep it intact when we withdraw.”

“Look, couldn’t you learn all about Humans and the Federation by doing that in my head?”

“Oh, I would not dare. Your speech centers alone frightened me with their complexity. I proceeded with infinite care. It was lucky I had so much time while you slept. I wouldn’t dare try anything more delicate and extensive and emotion-connected.”

“Well, thanks for your consideration...” Coati doesn’t want to stall the interview there, so she asks at random, “Do you have any social problems? Troubles or dilemmas which concern your whole race?”

This seems to puzzle the Eea. “Well, if I understand you, I don’t think so. Oh, there is a heated disagreement among two groups of Eeadron as to how much interest we should take in aliens, but that has been going on ever since Ponz. A panel of senior councillors—is that the word for old wise ones?—are judging it.”

“And will the factions abide by their judgment?”

“Oh, naturally. It will be wiped from memory.”

“Whew!”

“And ,.. and there is the problem of a shortage of fruit trees. But that is being solved. Oh—I believe I know one social problem, as you put it. Since the Eea are becoming personally so long-lived, there is arising a reluctance to mate and start young. Mating is very, ah, disruptive, especially to the Dron body. So people like to go along as they are. The elders have learned how to suppress the mating urge. For example, I and my siblings were the only young born during one whole season. There are still plenty of seeds about, you saw them, but they are becoming just wasted. Wasted... I think I perceive something applicable in your verbal sayings, about nature.”

“Huh? Oh—‘Nature’s notorious wastefulness,’ right?”

“Yes. But our seeds are very long-lived. Very. And that golden coat, which is what you see, is impervious to most everything. So maybe all will be well.”

Her informant seems to want to say no more on this topic, so Coati seizes the pause to say, “Look, our throat—*my* throat—is about to close up or break into flames. Water!” She seizes the flask and drinks. “I always thought that business of getting a sore throat from talking too much was a joke. It isn’t. Can’t you *do* something, Doctor Syllobene?”

“I can only block off some of the inflamed channels, and help time do its work. I could abolish the pain, but if we used it, it would quickly grow much worse.”

“You sound like a doctor already,” Coati grumbles hoarsely. “Well, we’ll just cut this off here—oh, I wish I had one of those message pipes! Ouch... Then we’ll have some refreshments—I got some honey, thank the gods—and take a nap. Cold-sleep doesn’t rest us, you know. Could you take a sleep, too, Syllobene?”

“Excellent idea.” That hurts.

“Look, couldn’t you learn just to nod my head like this for ‘yes’ or like this for ‘no’?”

Nothing happens for a moment, then Coati feels her head nod gently as if elfin fingers were brushing her chin and brow, yes.

“Fantastic,” she rasps. “Ouch.”

She flicks off the recorder, takes a last look through the scope at the blue-green-white planet—still far, far ahead—sets an alarm, and curls up comfortably in the pilot couch.

“Sleep well, Syllobene,” she whispers painfully. The answer is breathed back, “You, too, dear Coati Cass.”

Excitement wakes her before the alarm. The planet is just coming into good bare-eye view. But when she starts to speak to Syllobene, she finds she has no voice at all. She hunts up the med-aid kit and takes out some throat lozenges.

“Syllobene,” she whispers. “Hello?”

“Wha—er, what? Hello?” Syllobene discovers whispering.

“We’ve lost our voice. That happens sometimes. It’ll wear off. But if it’s still like this when we get on the planet, you’ll *have* to do something so we can record. You can, can’t you?”

“Yes, I believe so. But you must understand it will make it worse later.”

“Green.”

“What?”

“Green... means I understand, too. Listen, I’m sorry about your turn to ask questions. That’ll be later. For now we’ll just shut up.”

“I wait.”

“Go.”

“What?”

“Oh, green, go—that means, understood and we will proceed on that course.” Coati can scarcely force out the words. “Ah, informal speech... most difficult...”

“Syl, this is killing me. We shut up *now*, green?”

A painful giggle. “Go.”

Some hot tea from the snack pack proves soothing. Meanwhile, the enforced silence gives Coati a chance to think things over, for the first time. She is, of course, entranced by the novelty of it all and seriously stirred by the idea that Syllobene’s race could provide the most astounding, hitherto inconceivable type of medical help to the others. If they want to. And if a terrible crowd jam doesn’t ensue. But that’s for the big minds to wrestle out.

And, like the kid she is, she relishes the sensation she fancies her return will provoke—with a real live new alien carried in her head! But gods, they won’t be able to *see* Syllobene—suppose they jump to the obvious conclusion that Coati’s gone nutters and hustle her off to the hospital? She and Syl better talk that over before they get home; Syllobene has to be able to think of some way to prove she exists.

Funny how firmly she’s taken to thinking of Syllobene as “she,” Coati muses. Is that just sheer projection? Or—after all, they’re in pretty intimate contact—is this some deep instinctive perception, like one of Syl’s “primitive tropisms”? Whatever, when they get it unscrambled, it’ll be a bit of a shock if Syl’s a young “he”... or, gods forbid, an “it” or a “them.” What was that Boney had said about the Dron, that some of them had two sets of “private parts”? That’d be his modest term for sex organs; he must have meant they were like hermaphrodites. Whew. Well, that still doesn’t necessarily mean anything about the Eea.

When they can talk, she must get things straightened out. And until then, not get too romantically fixated on the idea that they're two girls together.

All this brings her to a sobering sense of how little she really knows about the entity she's letting stay in her head—in her very brain. If indeed Syl was serious about being able to leave... With this sobriety comes, or rather, surfaces, a slight, undefined sense of *trouble*. She's had it all along, she realizes. A peculiar feeling that there's more. That all isn't quite being told her. Funny, she doesn't suspect Syl herself of some bad intent, of being secretly evil. No. Syllobene is *good*, as good as she can be; all Coati's radar and perceptions seem to assure her of that. But nevertheless this feeling persists—it's coming clearer as she concentrates—that something was making the alien a little sad and wary now and then—that something troubling to Syl had been touched on but not explored.

The lords know, she and Syl had literally talked all they could, Syl had answered every question until their voice gave out. But Coati's sense of incompleteness lingers. Let's see, when had it been strongest?... Around that business of the seeds in the message pipe, for one. Maybe every time they touched on seeds. Well, seeds were being wasted. That meant *dying*. And a seed is a living thing; an encysted, complete beginning of a new life. Not just a gamete, like pollen, say. Maybe they're like embryos, or even living babies, to Syllobene. The thought of hundreds of doomed babies surely wouldn't be a very cheerful one for Coati herself.

Could that be it? That Syl didn't want to go into the sadness? Seems plausible. Or, wait—what about Syl herself? By any chance did she want to mate, and now she can't—or, *had* she—and that's the mystery of where those seeds in the message pipe had come from? Whew! Is Syl old enough, is she sexually mature? Somehow Coati doesn't think so, but again, she knows so little—not even that Syl's a she.

As she ruminates, her eyes have been on the front viewports, where the planet is rapidly growing bigger and bigger. She must put her wonderments aside, with the mental note to question Syl at the first opportunity. In a few minutes it'll be time to kill the torches and go on antigrav for the maneuvers that will bring her into a close-orbit search pattern. She will have to fly a lot of extra orbits, doing the best she can

by eye and with her narrow little civilian radarscope. It'll be tedious; not for the first time, she deplures the unsuitability of a little sports coupe for serious exploration work.

The planet still looks remarkably like holos of Terra. It has two big ice caps, but only three large landmasses set in blue ocean. It looks cold, too. Cloud-cover is thin, wispy cirrus. And for many degrees south of the northern ice, the land is a flat gray green, featureless except for an intricate shallow lake system, which changes from silver to black as her angle of reflection changes. Like some exotic silken fabric, Coati thinks. The technical name for such a plain is tundra, or maybe muskeg.

No straight lines or curves, no dams, no signs of artificial works, appear. The place appears devoid of intelligent life.

Hullo, what's this ahead? A twinkling light is rounding the shadowed curve of the planet, far enough out to catch the sun. That's reflected light; the thing is tumbling slowly. Coati slows and turns to the scope. Big sausage tanks! Such tanks must belong to a DRS, a depot resupply ship. Boney and Ko must have left them in orbit before they landed. And they wouldn't omit to pick them up when they left; that means the men are here. Oh, good. That'll give her the enthusiasm to sit out a long, boring search.

She tunes up every sensor on *CC-One* and starts the pattern while she's still, really, too far out. This is going to be a long chore, unless some really wild luck strikes.

And luck does strike! On her second figure-eight orbit, she sees an immense blackened swath just south of the northern ice cap. A bum. Can it have been caused by lightning or vulcanism? Or even a natural meteorite?

No... on the next pass she can see a central line of scorch, growing as it leads north, with a perceptible zigzag such as no incoming natural object could make. She clicks on the recorder and whisperingly reports the bum and the tanks in orbit.

On the third pass she's sure. There's a gleam at the north end of the bum-scar.

"Oh, the poor men! They must have been sick, they had to correct course with rockets... Syl! Syllobene! Are you awake?"

“Uh—hello?” her voice mumbles. Funny to hear herself sounding sleepy.

“Look, you have to do something to our throat so I can report; I think I’ve found the men.”

“Oh. Yes. Wait... I fear I need nourishment...”

“Go right ahead. Be my guest.”

For an instant Coati pictures Syl sipping blood, like a vampire; but no, Syl is too small. It’ll be more like the little being snagging a red-blood corpuscle or two as they rush by. Weird. Coati doesn’t feel the least bit nervous about this. Syl had said she’s increased the blood flow overall. And in fact Coati herself feels great, very alert and well. They *would* make wonderful healers, she thinks.

The gleam at the end of the bum is definitely a ship; the scope shows her a big Federation supply tug. Her calls on Fed frequencies bring no response. She kills the search pattern and prepares to land on antigrav. The plain beside the strange ship looks good. But maybe there was another reason for their use of torches, she thinks; those two men were superexperienced planetary pilots. Maybe this place has weird mascons or something that had to be corrected for. She’d better keep alert and be ready to torch if she finds her course going unsteady.

When she calls the supply ship again, her voice is back and her throat suddenly feels great.

“Hey, thanks, Syl.”

“Coati, why are we landing?”

“The Humans you left are down somewhere on the planet. They were never heard of after you left them, they’re officially missing. That means, everybody search. Now I’ve found their ship, but they don’t answer. I have to land and find out what’s happened to them. So you’ll get to see a strange planet.”

The news doesn’t seem to cheer her little passenger, who only repeats, “We must land?”

“Oh, yes. Among other things, they may need help.”

“Help...” Syllobene’s voice repeats, with an odd, almost bitter inflection.

But Coati is too busy to brood over this. “What condition were they in when you left them, Syl?”

“Ohhh...” Her throat sighs. “I do not know your race well enough to tell what is normal. They were speaking of going to cold-sleep when I withdrew and left them. I was trying to hurry because I understood that the message device would soon be sent out. As I said, it’s a slow process. As soon as I was dependent on my Eea senses, the men were too large to perceive—for example, I could no longer discern the sound waves of their voices.”

Coati thinks this over as she gentles the ship down through thick atmosphere. Her ablation-shielding isn’t all that good.

“Syl, you have just as much technology in your way as we do. Imagine going back and forth from the molecular to the molar scales!”

“Yes. It *is* a big learning. Very frightening the first time, when we’re taught to visit.”

“You said there were other Eea in Boney and Ko?”

“Yes... but I couldn’t establish good contact, and they controlled everything. That’s why I slipped away, when I understood about the message device.”

Coati grins. “I can understand that, Syl. But you took an awful chance.”

She feels the elfin hands nod her head emphatically. “You are my savior.”

“Oh, well. I didn’t know it. But if I had known it, I would have got you off there, Syllobene. I *couldn’t* have let you die in space.”

A feeling of indefinable warmth and real happiness glows within her. Coati understands. There is genuine friendship between her and her tiny alien passenger.

The recorder has been clicking away as they talked. But of course it won’t show her feelings. Pity.

“Just for the record,” she says formally, “I have, uh, subjective reasons to believe that this alien has sincere feelings of friendship for me. I mean for me, not just as a convenience. I think that’s important. I feel the same toward Syl.”

It’s time to set *CC-One* down. With all care, Coati jockeys her little ship in above the big supply tug and comes down neatly beside it. Nothing untoward shows up. That must mean that Boney and/or Ko were really in wobbly condition when they came in.

The atmosphere tests out green, but still she suits up for her first trip out. As her ports open she gets her first good look at the DRS.

“Their ramp’s down,” she tells the ’corder. “And, hey, the port’s ajar! Not good. I’m going in... Hello! Hello in there!... Oh!”

Her voice breaks off. Sounds of footsteps, squeak of ports being pulled.

“Oh, my. What a mess. There were gloves on the ramp—and the inside looks like they didn’t clean anything up for a long time. I see food dishes and cassettes and a suit—wait, two suits—in a heap on the deck, as if they’d just jumped out of them. Oh, dear, this looks like trouble... I think somebody threw up here... There’s a lot of those goldy seeds around everywhere, too.”

She prowls the cabin, reporting as she checks the sleep-chests and any place a man-sized body could be. Nothing. And the big cargo-hold is empty too, except for a carton of supplies bound somewhere.

She comes outside, saying, “I think I should try to find them. The ground here is soft, like peat, with low vegetation or whatever, and I can see trampled places. There’s one big place that looks like a trail leading”—she checks her bearings—“leading north, of all things. The atmosphere is highly Human-compatible, lots of oxy. I have my helmet off. So I’m going to try to follow their trail. But just in case I get into trouble, I think I better send this record off first. It has all about Syl’s planet on it. Lords, I wish I could send it from the surface. I guess I’ll have to lift above atmosphere. I’m taking some of their message pipes over to my ship. So here goes. It’s the only neat way to do.”

She sighs, clicks off, and gets back into her ship.

Preparing to lift off, she says, “You’re very quiet, Syllobene. Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes. But I am—I am afraid.”

“Afraid of what? Walking around on a strange planet? Listen, I do have a hand weapon in case we run into big wild vicious beasts. But I don’t think there’s anything like that around here. Nothing for a carnivore to eat.”

“No... I am not afraid of the planet. I fear... what you will find.”

Coati is maneuvering her ship up for a fast single orbit and return. “What do you mean, Syl?” she asks a trifle absently.

“Coati, my friend”—it sounds weird to hear her name in her own voice—“I wish to wait until you search. Perhaps I am wrong. I hope so.”

“Well-11, green, if you must.” Coati is preoccupied with opening a message pipe. “Oh, bother, there’s some of those little yellow dust-seeds in here. How do I clear them out? I don’t want to kill them—you say they can live in space, like you—but I don’t think they should get loose in FedBase, do you?”

“No! No!”

“Look, I’m sorry about your seeds. I just want to make them get out of this pipe. How do I do that?”

“Heat. High heat.”

“Huh... Oh, I know.” She clicks the recorder on and tells it what she’s doing. “I’m going to put it in my food heater, and run it to one twenty C. That won’t hurt the cassette... All right, I’m taking it out with tongs. By the gods, there’s a couple of those seeds coming out of the ’corder as it gets near heat. All out, you. I will now end this record as I remove the cassette to send. *CC-One* signing off, before returning to planet to search for B-and-K.”

“Good thing we did that,” she tells Syl as she closes the pipe and puts it in the lock to be blown out. “Here goes the air. And there goes the pipe! I hope the Base frequency reaches this far... Yes, it does. Neat, how the little thing knows where to go. Bye-bye, you... Funny, I’m getting a feeling like we’re a long, long way from anywhere. Being a space adventurer can be a trifle spooky.” She noses the ship over into landing mode, thinking, I’m going down to hike over a strange planet looking for two people who, face it, may be very dead...

“Syllobene?”

“Yes?”

“I’m really glad I have you for a friend here. Hey, maybe there’s another thing your people could do, I mean, for credits: going with lonely space people on long trips!”

“Ah...”

“I was just joking... Or was I?”

Soon they are back on the planet, beside the abandoned DRS. Coati puts on planetary weather gear and tramping shoes. It’s sunny but bleak, outside. She packs a week’s rations and some water, although the ground

is spongy wet. Then she clips the recorder to her shoulder and carefully loads it with a fresh cassette.

A long time later, after Coati has been officially declared missing, the same fresh cassette, its shine somewhat dimmed, is in the hands of the deputy to the Exec of FedBase 900. It is about to be listened to by a group of people in the Exec's conference room.

Weeks before, the message that Coati had lifted off-planet to send had arrived at FedBase. The staff has heard all about Syllobene and the Eea, and the Eeadron, and the Drons and all the other features of Syllobene's planet, Nolian, and her short trip with Boney and Ko; they have left Coati and her brain-passenger about to go back down to the unnamed planet on which sits Boney and Ko's empty ship.

One of the group of listeners now is not of FedBase.

When that first message had come in, the Exec had signaled the Cass family, and Coati's father is now in the room. He looks haggard; he has worn out his vocabulary of anger—particularly when he found that no rescue mission was being planned.

“Very convenient for you, Commander,” he had sneered. “Letting a teenage girl do your dirty work. I say it's your responsibility to look for your own missing men, and to go get my daughter out of there and free her from that damn brain parasite. You should never have let her go way out there in the first place! If you think I'm not going to report this—”

“How do you suggest I could have stopped her, Myr Cass? She injected herself of her own free will into an ongoing search, without consulting anyone. If anyone is to blame for her being out here, it's you. It was your responsibility to have some control over your daughter's travels in that ship you gave her. Meanwhile my responsibility is to my people, and I'm not justified in risking another ship pursuing a Federation citizen on her voluntary travels.”

“But that cursed alien in her—”

“Yes. To be blunt about it, Myr Cass, your daughter is already infected, if that's the word, and she has given us evidence of the great mobility and potential for contagion of these small beings. We have probably already lost the men who first visited them. Now' I suggest we quiet down and listen to what your daughter has to say. It may be that your concerns are baseless.”

Grumbly, Cass senior subsides.

“This message pipe has been heated, too,” says the deputy. “The plastic shows it. From which we can infer that she was *compos mentis* and probably in her own ship when she sent it.”

The recording starts with a few miscellaneous bangs and squeaks.

“I’ve decided to take another look at BK’s ship before I start,” Coati’s voice says. “Maybe they left a message or something.”

The ’corder clicks off and on again.

“I’ve been hunting around in here,” says Coati. “No message I can see. There’s a holocam focused on the cabin, but it’s been turned off. Hey, I bet the Feds like to keep an eye on things, for cases like this. I’ll root around by the shell.”

Clicks—off, on.

“I’ve spotted what I think is another holocam up in the bow, I heard it click... How can I get at it? Oh, wait, maybe from outside.” Off—on. “Yo-ho! I got it. It’s in time-lapse mode; I think it caught the terrain around the ship. We’ll just take it over to my ship and run it.”

Click, off.

Exec shifts uneasily. “I believe she’s discovered the planetary recorder. I’m not sure the two men knew it was there.”

“That must be the additional small cassette in this pipe,” the deputy says.

The recorder has come on. “It’s really small,” Coati is saying. “Hey, it’s full of your seeds, Syllobene. Those things must like cassettes. I’m threading it—here we go. “Oh, my, oh, my—Syllobene!”

“This is my home,” says Coati in what they have come to recognize as the voice of the alien speaking through Coati’s throat. “Oh, my beautiful home!... But what a marvel, how do you—”

“Later,” Coati cuts herself off. “Later we’ll look at it all you want. Right now we have to run it ahead to where it shows this planet and maybe the two men we’re looking for.”

“Yes—Oh, that was my mentor—”

“Oh, gods, I’d love to look. But I’m speeding up now.” Sounds of fast clicking, incoherent small sounds from Coati’s Syllobene-voice.

“See, now they’ve taken off. It’ll be stars for a long time, nothing but the starfield.” Furious clicks. “Gods, I hope it doesn’t run out.”

“No fear,” says the deputy. “These things are activated by rapid action in the Field. When the action is as slow as a passing starfield, it reverts to its resting rate of about a frame an hour—maybe a frame a day, I forget. Only a passing rock or whatnot will speed them up briefly.”

“Here we are,” says Coati’s voice. “I see that great string of GO suns... Yes, they seem to be heading in to the planet now, I’d need a scope to tell—ah! It’s getting bigger. That’s it all right... Closer, closer... they’re going into orbit. But Syl, look at that frame wobble. I tell you, whoever’s flying is not all right... Oo-oops—that could be changing pilots, or maybe switching over to the rockets. Oh, dear... yes, they’re coming in like a load of gravel, I’m glad I know they made it... Smoke now, nothing but smoke. Their torches have hit. Down—I see flames. This must be action-activated; there’ll be a pause now, but we can’t tell how long. I know this doesn’t mean much to you, Syl, wait till the smoke clears—ah! Look, there’s the landscape we saw around the ship, right?”

The alien voice makes a small murmur.

“Action again—that’s the edge of the ramp. Here comes one of the men—now the other—which is which? I’ll call the tall thin one Boney. Oh, dear gods, they’re staggering. See, they dropped those gloves. And look, the vegetation around the ship outside the bum is all untrampled. This is their first exit, of course—Oh, the Boney one fell down! Could the cold-sleep have done that, have they come out too soon? I don’t think so, I think they’re sick. Look, there’s a funny place on Ko’s face, over the nose, he keeps scratching. They’re not stopping to look around, or anything. This isn’t good, Syl... Now they’re both down on their hands and knees, in the bum. Oh, I wish I could help them. Look, do you see that goldy cloud, like your spores, by the ramp?”

A pause, with small “ohs” and murmurs.

“They’re up now, I hope they’re not burned—why, they’re running, or trying to run! Away from the ship. Toward that trampled place we saw, only it isn’t trampled now. Oh. Boney is—and Ko—they’re *stripping!* What are they trying to do, take a bath? But there’s no—Oh! Oh, wait, *what?* Oh, no! Oh! Oh, dear gods, I don’t like this much. I thought all Spacers operated under the Code, I didn’t know recon teams did sex!”

“They don’t,” growls Exec, startling everybody.

General stirrings in the room as Coati's voice goes on haltingly, "Well, this is weird... I don't much want to look at it, it's not happy-looking like our demo teams back at school. Huh... I don't think they know what to do, exactly... their faces look crazy, why, one of them has his mouth open like he was yelling or screaming. They look terrible... Whoever's listening to this, I'm sorry, I hope I'm not saying anything bad. But this is weird, it's like *ugly*... They have to stop soon, I hope. Oh, *no*—" Her voice is shaking, on the verge of some kind of outcry.

"Oh, oh, oh—" But it's the other voice that begins sobbing frankly now. The record blurs in a confusion of, "Syl! What's the matter? What's wrong?" and, "Oh, I was afraid, oh, I'm afraid, oh, Coati, it's terrible—"

"Yeah, it's ugly. That's not the way Humans really mate, Syl."

"No," says Syl's tones, "I don't mean that, I mean we—oh, oh—" and she's sobbing again.

"Listen, Syl!" Coati gulps back alien tears, cuts her off. "I think you know something you aren't telling me! You tell me what's frightening you this instant, or I'll—I'll bash my own brains so hard it'll shake you loose. See?"

There's the sound of a hard slap on flesh and then a sudden sharp outcry.

"Hey—what—*You hurt me*, Syl. I th-thought you never—"

"Oh, I'm sorry," the alien voice moans. "I p-panicked when you said you would harm yourself—"

"Or harm *you*, huh? Look, I can stand a lot of pain if I have to. You tell me right now what's got into those men. Look, they've collapsed again. *Tell me!*"

"It—it's the young ones."

"The young what?"

"The young Eea—from s-seeds in th-the ship."

"But you said there were grown-up Eea in each of the men. Didn't they keep the seeds off, like you did for me?"

"They—Oh, Coati, I told you, they were very old. They must have died, and the seeds went in the men. I saw them getting feeble. That's when I got frightened and I-left. Before the Humans went in cold-sleep... Oh, Coati, it's so horrible—I feel so bad—"

“Hush up now, Syl, and let me understand. What could seeds do?”

“Seeds hatch, when they’re in—they hatched into young ones. With no mentors, no one to train them. They’re like wild animals. They grow. They eat—they eat anything. And then in the cold-sleep some of them must have matured. No teachers, no one to teach them discipline. Oh, the others should have known the seeds and spores would seek hosts, they should have seen those visitors who went with them were too old. B-but nobody knew how long, how far... When I began to understand how long a time it was going to be, I knew something bad would happen. And I c-couldn’t *do* anything, they wouldn’t listen to me. So I-I ran away...” The alien is convulsing Coati with sobs.

“Well-11.. Long sigh from Coati. “Oh, dear gods, the poor men. You mean the young ones just ate their brains out?”

“Y-yes, I fear so. As if they were Dron. Worse, because no teachers.”

“And that sex stuff—that was the mature ones making them do it?”

“Yes! Oh, yes! Like wild animals. We’re taught strictly to control it, we’re shown. It takes much training to be fully Eea. Even I am not fully trained... Oh, I wish I’d died there in space, instead of seeing this—”

“Oh, no. Brace up, Syl. It’s not your fault. Nobody who isn’t used to space could grasp how long the distances are. They probably thought it would be like a long trip in your country... Oh, look—the men have gotten up. Gods, they’re holding each other up, their legs keep going out of control. Motor centers gone, maybe. They’re going—they went up that path north, only it wasn’t a path then. They’re making the path, trampling... That’s where we go, Syl, unless this shows them coming back. It’ll have to be soon, we’re almost at where the camera stopped. I wish I knew how long ago this was. The sun looks kind of different, and the colors of the vegetation, but that could be the camera. I’m going to speed up. Syl, stop crying, honey, it’s *not your fault.*”

Rapid clicking from the record.

“Nothing, nothing,” Coati’s voice says. “Still nothing. I doubt they came back. Nothing—Wait, what’s that? Oh, my goodness, it’s the wake—it’s our ship landing. Well! I don’t think I want to see us, do you? Let’s go.”

Click.

In the Executive office, the deputy stops the recorder for a moment.

“Is all that clear to everyone?”

Grunts of assent answer him.

“I think this casts a new light on the potentials of Coati’s little friend’s race,” the medical officer says. “I suggest that we all keep a sharp eye open for anything that looks like grains of yellow powder, in case the young woman’s heat treatment did not completely clean out this pipe. Or the preceding one. Her initial precautions were very wise.”

’ Before he’s finished speaking, Exec had turned on stronger lights. There is a subdued shuffling as people look themselves over, brushing at imaginary golden spots.

“Gods, if a pipeful of that stuff had got loose in here, and nobody warned!” Xenology mutters. “Hmm... Boney and Ko.”

“Yes.” Exec understands Xenology’s shorthand. “If we get any indication that their ship lifted off, we have some hard decisions to make. I gather the seeds can affix themselves to the *outside* of space vessels, too. Well, we’d best continue and see what our problem is.”

“Right.” The deputy douses the top light, restarts the ’corder.

“We are now proceeding north on the trail left by Boney and Ko,” says Coati’s voice. “We’ve come about five kiloms. The trail is very plain, because the vegetation, or whatever this is, is very delicate and frail. I don’t think it’s built to have animals walk over it or graze. But the trail isn’t all that fresh because there’re little tips of new growth. We haven’t seen any animals or birds, only plantlike things and an occasional insect going by fast, like a bullet. It’s a pretty cold, quiet, weird place. The ground is almost level, but I think we’re headed roughly for one of those lakes we saw from above.

“Syllobene is so shook up by what happened to the men that she won’t talk much. I keep trying to tell her it’s not her fault. One thing she said shows you—she said the grown-up Eea must have assumed that we could make ourselves immune to the seeds, just as they can, since we’re so *complete*. They can’t get used to the idea of whole, single animals born that way. And the ship, we had so many wild, powerful things. It never occurred to them that the men would be as vulnerable as Drons... Syl, do you hear what I’m telling my people? Nobody’s going to think for a minim that you’re at fault. Please brace up, honey, it’s awfully lonesome here on this primordial tundra or whatever it is.”

“After you saved my life,” murmurs the Syllobene voice sadly.

“Oh-h-h! Listen, hey—Syl, you saved my life, too, for the lords’ sake. Don’t you realize?”

“I? How?”

“By being on that message pipe, dopus. It was full of seeds, remember? If you hadn’t been there, at the risk of your life, if you hadn’t been there to keep them off me, I’d have gone just like Boney and Ko. They’d have eaten my brains out. *Now* will you cheer up? You’ve personally saved my life, too. Hey, Syl, how about that? Hello!”

“Hello...Oh, dear Coati Cass—”

“That’s my Syl. Listen, I’ve about had the hiking for today; these boots aren’t the greatest. I see a little hummock ahead, maybe it’s drier. I’ll tramp down a flat place and lay out my bag and screen—I don’t want one of those bullet-bugs to hit me. I don’t think this sun is going to set, either; it must be summer up here, with a big axial tilt.” She chuckles. “I’ve heard of the lands of the midnight sun! Now I’ve seen one. This is Coati Cass, en route to I don’t know where, signing off.”

“Your daughter is a remarkable young woman, Myr Cass,” Exec says thoughtfully. Cass grunts. Looking more carefully at him, Exec sees his eyes are wet.

The record continues with a few words by Coati on awakening. Apparently she—they—had slept undisturbed.

“Green, on we go. Now, Syl, I hope you feel better. Think of me, having to lug a Weeping Willie—that means a sad lump of a person—all over the face of this godlost planet. Hey, don’t you know any songs? I’d really like that.”

“Songs?”

“Oh, for the gods’ sake. Well, explaining and demonstrating will give me something to do. But I don’t think our audience needs it.”

Click.

In an instant her voice is back again, sounding tired. “We’ve been walking eighteen hours total,” she says. “My pedometer says we’re sixty-one kiloms from the ship. The trail is still visible. We’re nearing an arm of one of the glaciers that extend south from the ice cap. I can see a line of low clouds—yes, with rainbows in them!—like a miniature weather front. The men seem to have been making straight towards it.

Syl says the seeds have a primitive tropism to cold. That they can live a very, very long time if it's cold enough. I don't think anybody should come near this planet for a very, *very* long time. All right, onward."

Click, off. Click, on.

"The glacier edge and a snowbank are right ahead. I think I see them—I mean, their bodies... There's a cold wind from under the glacier, it smells bad."

Click... Click.

"We found them. It's pretty bad." The voice sounds drained. "I did what I could. They're like frozen, they crawled under the edge of the ice, it stands off the ground and makes a cave there, with deep green light cracks. Nothing had been at them that I could tell, but they both have big, nasty-looking holes above their noses, where the sinuses are.

"I don't know their last names, so I just scratched 'Boney and Ko, brave Spacers for the Federation, FedBase Nine hundred' on a slaty piece.

"Oh—they left a message, on the same sort of rock. It says, 'Danger. We are Infetked. Fatel,' all misspelled, like a kid. I guess the... things... kept eating their brains out.

"And there are seeds all over around here, like gold dust on the snow. They rise up in a cloud when a shadow falls on them. Syllobene says these are new seeds and spores that the young Eea formed, they mated when the men did and the seeds grew while the men walked here. Anyway, those holes in their faces are where the new seeds spouted out in a big clump or stream.

"I got out my glass and looked at a group of seeds. That gold color is their coat or sheath. Syl says it is just about impermeable from outside. There's a big difference in the seeds, too—some are much, much larger and solid-looking, others are more like empty husks. Syl says the big ones beat out the others, when competing for a host, and the earliest big one takes all." A sigh.

"Let's see, have I said everything? Oh, maybe I should add that I don't think those holes were bad enough to cause the men's deaths. It must have been what went on inside. I didn't see any other wounds, except scratches and bruises from falling down, I think. They... they were holding each other by the hand. I fixed them up, but I didn't change that.

“Now I guess that’s all. I don’t want to sleep here, I’m going to get as far back toward the ships as I can tonight. It may not be night, I told you the sun doesn’t set, but it makes some pretty reddish-glow colors. Syl is so sad she’ll hardly talk at all... Signing off now, unless something drastic happens.”

The deputy clicked the ‘corder off.

“Is that all?” someone asks.

“Oh, no. I merely wanted to know if everyone is satisfied that they’re hearing clearly so far. Did everyone get enough on the men’s conditions, or would Doc like me to run back over that?”

“Not at present, thanks,” says Medical. “I would assume that the action of forming a large number of embryos requires extra energy, and consequently, during the men’s last walk, their parasites were consuming nutrients—brain tissue and blood—at an ever-increasing rate. As to the exact cause of death, it could be a combination of trauma, hypothermia, malnutrition, and loss of blood, or perhaps the parasites attacked brain structures essential to life. We won’t know until we can—I guess we won’t know, period.”

“Anyone else?” says the deputy in his “briefing session” manner.

Coati’s father makes an ambiguous throat-clearing noise but says nothing. No one else speaks, despite the sense of large unuttered questions growing in the room.

“Oh, get on with it, Fred,” Exec says.

“Right.”

“We’re back at the ship resting up,” says Coati’s voice. “Syl, you’ve been very quiet for a long time. Are you all right? Are you still shook from seeing what the young ones did?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Well, push it aside, honey. If I can, you can. Try.”

“Yes...”

“You don’t sound like you’re trying. Listen, I can’t carry a melancholy, dismal person *in my head* all the way back to FedBase. I’ll go nutters, even in cold-sleep. Don’t you think you could cheer up a little? Wasn’t it fun when we tried singing?... After all, the men all happened a long time back, it’s all over. There’s nothing you can do.”

In the room at Far Base, Coati's father recognizes a piece of his own advice to his daughter in long-ago days, and blinks back a tear.

"And we've done something useful—actually invaluable, because only you and I are safe on this planet. Right? So maybe we've saved the lives of whoever might have come to look."

"Umm..."

"She's right," says Exec.

"Of course, it's only Human lives, but it was the Human men made you sad, wasn't it, Syl. So really it's all even. And those two had a really nice time on your planet first. Hey, think how good you'll feel when you get home. Would it make you feel better if I showed you the scenes from Nolian when we get going?"

"Yes... Oh, I don't know."

"Syl, you're hopeless. Or is something else bothering you? I'm getting hunches... Anyway, we've done everything we can here, I'm taking *CC-One* up. I collected Boney and Ko's last charting cassettes, I'll put them in a pipe with this, and with the little cassette from the bow camera. I don't think they have left anything else of v-value. I closed the door and wrote a sign on the port to stay out. If you at the Fed want to salvage that ship, you're going to have to go in with flamers. Or get an Eea to go in with you. Personally I'd think it wasn't worth the danger, some seeds could be on the outside, and get left wherever you went with it. Hey, something I've been thinking—I wonder if possibly this could be the plague that wiped out the Lost Colony? Seeds drifting in from space. This whole great group of suns could be dangerous. Oh, lords. What a blow... Hey, that's something that Syl and I could check someday! Syl, after you get home and have a nice rest-up, how would you like to come with me on another trip? If they'd let me—I'm sure they would, because we'd be their only seed-proof scouts! Only, my poor folks. That reminds me, my father may have messaged Far Base, it'd be great if somebody could message him and Mother collect that all's well and I'm coming back. Thanks a million. My address at Cayman's Port and all is on record there. Syl, there's another thing we could do—how'd you like to meet my folks? You could learn all about families, and go back and be a big mentor on Nolian. They'd love to meet you, I know... I guess. Green, I'm taking the ship up now."

Click. Click.

“We’re up, and I’m setting in course for the first leg back to Far Base. Whew, these yellow suns are really beautiful. But Syl is still in a funk. It *can’t* be because of what we saw on the planet. I keep feeling sure there’s something you aren’t telling me, Syl. What is it?”

“Oh, no, I—”

“Syl! Listen, you’re thinking with *my* brain, and I can *sense* something! Like every time I suggested something we could do, I got drenched in some kind of sadness. And there’s a feeling like a big thing tickling when you won’t talk. You’ve got to tell me, Syl. What it?”

“I... Oh, I am so ashamed!”

“See, there *is* something you’re hiding! Ashamed of what? Go on, Syl, tell me or I’ll—I’ll bash us both. *Tell me!*”

“Ashamed,” repeats the small voice. “I’m afraid, I’m afraid. My training... Maybe I’m not so completely developed as I thought. I don’t know how to stop—Ohhh,” Coati’s voice wails, “I wish my mentor was here!”

“Huh?”

“I have this feeling. Oh, dear Coati Cass, it is increasing, I can’t suppress it!”

“What?... Don’t tell me you’re about to have some kind of primitive fit? Did that mating business—?”

“No. Well, maybe, yes. Oh, I *can’t*—”

“Syl, you must.”

“No. All will be well. I will recollect all my training and recover myself.”

“Syl, this sounds terrible... But, face it, you’re all alone—we’re all alone. You can’t mate, if that’s what’s coming over you.”

“I know. But—”

“Then that’s it. The sooner we get going, the sooner we’ll be at FedBase and you can start home. I was going to take a nice nap first, but if you’ve got troubles, maybe I better just go right into the chest. Couldn’t you try to sleep, too? You might wake up feeling better.”

“Oh, no! Oh, no! Not the cold! It stimulates us.”

“Yes, I forgot. But look, I can’t live through all those light-years awake!”

“No—not the cold-sleep!”

“Syl. Myr Syllobene. Maybe you better confess the whole thing *right now*. Just what are you afraid of?”

“But I’m not sure—”

“You’re sure enough to be glooming for days. Now you tell Coati exactly what you’re afraid of. Take a deep breath—here, I’ll do it for you—and start. Now!”

“Perhaps I must,” the alien voice says, small but newly resolute. “I don’t remember if I told you: If the mating cycle overtakes us when an Eea is alone, we can still... reproduce. By—I know your word—spores. Just like seeds, only they are all identical with the parent. And the Eea grows them and gives birth like seeds, as you s-saw. Then the Eea comes back to itself.” Syl’s words are coming in a rush now, as from relief at speaking out. “It’s very rare, because of course we are taught to stop it when the feeling begins. I—I never had it before. I’m supposed to seek out my mentor at once, to be instructed how to stop it, or the mentor will visit the young one and make it stop. But my mentor is far away! I keep hoping this is not really the feeling that begins all that, but it won’t go away, it’s getting stronger. Oh, Coati, my friend, I am so afraid—so fearful—” The voice trails off in great sobs.

The Coati-voice says, slowly, “Oh, whew. You mean, you’re afraid you’re going to be grabbed by this mating thing and make spores in my head? And they’ll bore a hole?”

“Y-yes.” The alien is in obvious misery.

“Wait a minute. Will it make you go crazy and stop being you, like a Human who gets intoxicated? Oh, you couldn’t know about that. But you’ll act like those untrained young ones? I mean, what will you do?”

“I may—eat blindly. Oh-h-h... Don’t leave me alone in your cold-sleep!”

“Well. Well. I have to think.”

Click—the deputy has halted the machine.

“I thought we should take a minim to appreciate this young woman’s dilemma, and the dilemma of the alien.” The xenobiologist sighs. “This urge, or cycle, is evidently not so very rare, since instructions are given to the young to combat it. Instructions which unfortunately depend on the mentor being available. But it doesn’t appear to be a normal part or

stage of maturing—more like an accidental episode. I suggest that here it was precipitated by the experience with the two Humans infected by untrained young. That awakened what the Eea seem to regard as part of their primitive system.”

“How fast can they get back to that Eea planet, ah, Nolian?” someone asks.

“Not fast enough, I gather,” Exec says. “Even if she took the heroic measure of traveling without cold-sleep.”

“She’s got to get rid of that thing!” Coati’s father bursts out. “Cut into her own head and pull it out if she has to! Can’t somebody get to her and operate?”

He is met by the silence of negation. The moments they are hearing passed, for good or ill, long back.

“The alien said it could leave,” the deputy observes. “We will see if that solution occurs to them.” He clicks on.

As if echoing him, Coati’s voice comes in. “I asked Syl if she could pull out, and park somewhere comfortable until the fit passed. But she says—tell them, Syl.”

“I have been trying to withdraw for some time. Early on, I could have done so easily. But now the strands of my physical being have been penetrating so very deeply into Coati’s brain, into the molecular and—is ‘atomic’ the word?—structure. So I have attempted to cut loose from portions of myself, but whenever I succeed in freeing one part, I find that the part I freed before has rejoined. I—I have not had much instruction in this technique, not since I was much smaller. I seem to have grown greatly while with Coati. Nothing I try works. Oh, oh, if only another Eea was here to help! I would do anything, I’d cut myself in half—”

“It’s a gods-cursed cancer,” Coati’s father growls. He perceives no empathetic young alien, but only the threat to his child.

“But dear Coati Cass, I cannot. And there is no mistake now, the primitive part of myself that contains this dreadful urge is growing, growing, although I am fighting it as well as I can. I fear it will soon overwhelm me. Is there not something you can do?”

“Not for you, Syl. How could I? But tell me—after it’s all passed, and you’ve, well, eaten my brains out, will you come back to yourself and be all right?”

“Oh—I could never be all right, knowing I had murdered you! Killed my friend! My life would be a horrible thing. Even if my people accepted me, I could not. I mean this, Coati Cass.”

“Hmm. Well. Let me think.” The record clicks, off-on. Coati’s voice comes back. “Well, the position is, if we carry out our plan to go back to FedBase, I’ll be a zombie, or dead, when I get there, and you’ll be miserable. And the ship’ll be full of spores. I wouldn’t be able to land it, but somebody’d probably manage to intercept us. And the people who opened it would get infected with your spores, and by the time things got cleared up a lot of Humans would have died, and maybe nobody would feel like taking you back to your planet. Ugh.”

The alien voice echoes her.

“On the other hand, if we cut straight for Nolian, even at the best, you’d have made spores and they’d have chewed up my brains, and it’d be impossible for me to bring the ship down and let you out. So you’d be locked up with a dead Human and a lot of spores, flying on to gods know where, forever. Unless somebody intercepted us, in which case the other scenario would take over... Syl, I don’t see any out. What I do see is that this ship will soon be a flying time bomb, just waiting for some non-Eea life to get near it.”

“Yes. That is well put, Coati-my-friend,” the small voice says sadly. “Oh!”

“What?”

“I felt a strong urge to—to hurt you. I barely stopped it. Oh, Coati! Help! I don’t want to become a wild beast!”

“Syl, honey... It’s not your fault. I wonder, shouldn’t we sort of say our good-byes while we can?”

“I see... I see.”

“Syllobene, my dear, whatever happens, remember we were great friends, and had adventures together, and saved each other’s lives. And if you do something bad to me, remember I know it isn’t really you, it’s just an accident because we’re so different. I... I’ve never had a friend I loved more, Syl. So good-bye, and remember it all with joy if you can.”

A sound of sobbing. “G-good-bye, dear Coati Cass. I am sad with all my being that it is through me that badness has come. Being friends with you has lifted my life to lightness I never dreamed of. If I survive, I will

tell my people how good and true Humans are. But I don't think I will have that chance. One way or another, I will end my life with yours, Coati Cass. Above all I do not wish to bring more trouble on Humans."

"Syl..." Coati says thoughtfully. "If you mean that about going together, there's a way. Do you mean it?"

"Y-yes. Yes."

"The thing is, in addition to what happens to us, our ship will be a menace to anybody, Human or whatever, who gets at it. It's sort of our duty not to do a thing like that, you know? And I really don't want to go on as a zombie. And I see that beautiful yellow sun out there, the sun we saw all those days and nights down on the planet... like it's waiting for us.... Syl?"

"Coati, I understand you."

"Of course, there're a lot of things I wanted to do, you d-did, too—maybe this is the b-big one—"

The record lapses to a fuzzy sound.

"Something has been erased," the deputy says.

It comes back in a minim or two with Coati's voice saying, "—didn't need to hear all that. The point is, we've decided. So—ow! Oh-h-h-ow! What?"

"Coati!" The small voice seems to be screaming. "Coati, I'm losing—I'm losing myself! Something wants to hurt you, to stop you—to make you go in cold-sleep—I'm fighting it—Oh, forgive me, forgive me—"

"OW! Hey, I forgive you, but—Oh, Wait, hold it, baby, I just have to set our course, and then I'll hop right into the chest. I *have* to set the computer; try to understand." Undecipherable noise from the alien. Then, to everyone's surprise, the unmistakable sound of a young Human voice humming fills the room.

"I know that tune," the computer chief says suddenly. "It's old—wait—yes. It's 'Into the Heart of the Sun.' She's trying to tell us what she's doing without alerting that maniacal parasite."

"We better listen closely," the deputy observes superfluously. A moment later the humming gives place to a softly sung bar of words—yes, it's "Into the Heart of the Sun." It ends in a sharp yelp. "Hey, Syl, try not to, *please*—"

"I try! I try!"

“We’ll get into cold-sleep just as soon as I possibly can. Don’t hurt me, you doppelganger, or I’ll make a mistake and you’ll end up as fried spores—Owwwww! For an amateur, you’re a little d-devil, Syl.” The voice seems to be trying to conceal the wail of real agony. Exec is reminded of the wounded Patrolmen he tended as a young med-aid long ago, during the Last War.

“I just have to regoogolate the fribiliser that keeps us from penetrating high gee-fields,” says Coati. “You wouldn’t want *that* to happen, would you?”

Her own throat growls at her. “Hurry.”

“That’s an old nonsense phrase,” Computer speaks up. “ ‘Googolating the fribiliser’—she’s trying to tell us she’s killing the automatic drive-override. Oh, good girl.”

“And now I *must* send this message pipe off. It’s in your interests, Syl, it shows you doing all those useful things. And I have to heat it first—oh, ow—please let me, Syl, please try to let m-me—”

Sounds that might be a heat oven, roughly handled, punctuated by yelps from Coati. Her father is gripping his chair arms so hard they creak.

“Yes, I know that big yellow sun ahead is getting pretty hot and bright. Don’t let it worry you. If we go close by it, we’ll save a whole leg of our trip. It’s the only neat way to do. Han Lu Han, anybody there? Here, I’ll pull the bow blinds.

“And now the cassettes from Boney and Ko go in the pipe—*ow!* —and where’s that little one from their bow camera? Syl, try to tell your primitive self you’re just slowing me down with those jabs. Please, please—Ah, here it is. And out come the spores, I mean, the seeds that were in there, that pipe is *hot!*

“And now it’s time to say good-bye, put this in the pipe, and climb into the chest. I really hope the pipe’s frequency can pull it through these gees. On second thought, maybe I’d like to see where we’re going while it lasts. As long as I can stand the pain, I think I’ll stay out and watch.”

Loud sounds of the cassette being handled.

“Good-bye, all. To my folks... Oh, I do love you, Dad and Mum. Maybe somebody at FedBase can explain—*ow!!* Oh... Oh... I can’t... Hey, Syl, is there anybody you want to say good-bye to? Your mentor?”

A confused vocalization, then, faintly, “Yes...”

“Remember Syl. She’s the real stuff, she’s doing this for Humans. For an alien race. She could have stopped me, believe it. Bye, all.”

A crash, and the record goes to silence.

“Han Lu Han,” says the xenobiologist quietly into the silence. “He was that boy on the Lyra mission. ‘It’s the only really neat thing to do.’ He said that before he took the rescue-run that killed him.”

Exec clears his throat. “Myr Cass, we will send a reconnaissance mission to check the area. But I fear there is no reason to believe, or hope, that Myr Coati failed in her plan to eliminate the contagious menace of herself, her passenger, and the ship, by flying into a sun. By the end of the message she was close enough to feel its heat, and it was doubtless the effect of its gravity which delayed this message pipe so much longer than the preceding one, which was sent only a few days earlier. She had moreover carefully undone the precautions which prevent a ship on automatic drive from colliding with a star. Myr Cass, when confronted by a terrifying and painful dilemma capable of causing great harm to others, your daughter took the brave and honorable course, and we must be grateful to her.”

Silence, as all contemplate the sudden ending of a bright young life. Two bright young lives.

“But you said she was alive and well when the message was sent.” Coati’s father makes a last, confused protest.

“Sir, I said that she was compos mentis and probably in her ship,” the deputy reminds him.

“Thank the gods her mother didn’t come here...”

“You can pinpoint the star she was headed for?” Exec asks Charts.

“Oh, yes. The BK coordinates are good.”

“Then if nobody, has a different idea, I suggest that it be appropriately named in the new ephemeris.”

“Coati’s Star,” says Commo. People are rising to leave.

“And Syllobene,” a quiet voice says. “Have we forgotten already?”

“Myr Cass, I think you may perhaps prefer to be alone for a moment,” Exec tells him. “Any time you wish to see me, I’ll be at your service in my office.”

“Thank you.”

Exec leads his deputy out and opts for a quiet lunch in their private small dining room. Added to the list of things that were on his mind before he entered the conference chamber to hear Coati’s message are now the problem of when and how to contact the Eea, how to determine the degree of danger from their seeds, or spores, in space near the promising GO suns, the Lost Colony question, whether to quarantine the area, and whether there is any chance of any seeds in FedBase itself from the earlier messages. Also, a sample of the chemical that Syllobene had immunized Coati with would seem to be a rather high priority.

But behind all these practical thoughts, an image floats in his mind’s eye, accompanied by the sound of a light young voice humming. It’s the image in silhouette of two children, one Human, the other not, advancing steadfastly, hand in hand, toward an inferno of alien solar fire.

At the Library



Moa Blue smiles as he sees the two young Comenor approaching; the old text is carefully wrapped in a broidered packing.

“Well? Did you like it? And did it meet your needs?” Moa inquires.

“Fascinating!” the Comeno girl breathes. “And we had no idea so young a Human female could, could, well—”

“Pull off such an exploit!” Her friend finishes for her. Their interlocked upper arms tighten tenderly. “But so sad, at the end.”

“And did they really name the star after her?”

“They did. I should have emphasized, whatever is given as fact in these dramatized accounts really *is* fact. You’ll run across a similar naming in my third tale—all true.” Moa unwraps the documents and sets them carefully aside before he produces another, slightly thicker one.

“Now here’s your next. Also set in the fringes of the Rift, but quite, quite different. Purely Human interaction, and much more of the dialogue had to be extrapolated from interviews with the participants. It was written up quickly because one—no, two—of the actors achieved considerable celebrity later. You do know what their Gridworld was?”

Two Comeno brows wrinkle. “Ah... the planet where their entertainment broadcasts originated?” the little female ventures. ‘

“Right you are. And more, almost a culture of its own. Its name became an adjective for things showy, sensational,

slightly meretricious, perhaps. The grid covered the whole Federation and really helped hold it together, by means of shared language, gossip, celebrities, jokes, scandals—we haven't anything quite like it... yet. At the date of this story, FTL communication was virtually unknown, and FTL transport was used only for emergency; it wasn't the same system we now use at all. Of course it's hard to set exact dates on these things, in relation, say, to the Damiem story taking place hundreds of light-years away, because you must remember that Humans for a time borrowed or rented some technology from other races like the Swain, or from the Dhaldiggern, before they so tragically blew themselves up. At any rate, you'll find here some unusual Human motivations—rather like one of their old grid-shows. And you'll get your first taste of the Black Worlders.”

“Oh, yes, we've been curious about those. Our texts just say bland things like ‘In those times the Humans from the so-called Black Worlds gave trouble,’ but what does that tell you?”

“Exactly. Oh, and another thing, if I recall my Comeno biology—you might have to ask a Human specialist exactly why the hero's choice was so emotionally wrenching. The interviewers and writers, in their haste, have been a bit chauvinistic and perhaps not made things clear enough for races with other reproductive arrangements.”

The taller Comeno says reflectively, “Professor Imgrenno has already given us a little tutoring on Human reproductive responses. I expect he'd help us. The main thing seems to be the intensity.”

“Poor things,” the little female puts in. “I *know* it's chauvinistic of me, but I always feel so sorry for the two-gender races... Oh, I do hope I don't offend your species mores, Myr Blue? Terribly rude of me.”

“Not at all, not at all,” says Moa genially. “True, my race is bipolar, but we spend ninety percent of our time in neuter mode, in which all the passions of coupling, tripling, or what

you will, seem quite remote and feverish. You couldn't possibly give offense."

The red-furred girl sends him what even Moa can recognize as a melting smile, and her future mate pats her upper hand. "Great are the wonders of the All," she murmurs.

A rumbling noise is coming from their other side, where a big Moom student is impatiently awaiting his turn. The rumble is his multiplex gullet working in displeasure. The Comeno boy hastens to transfer the rainproof wrapper to the new text, nodding civilly to the Moom—who as usual makes no reply. Moa and the Comeno couple exchange amused glances; Moom bad manners are known all over the Galaxy and tolerated only because they so rarely mingle with others—and are such eminently reliable drive-ship engineers.

"I do hope this one lives up to your hopes," Moa tells them. "Remember, if it seems a little specialized on their love and mating habits—the third one is my special selection for you."

They thank him above the Moom's renewed rumblings and depart, eagerly hugging their next treasure.