

THE STARS IN SHROUD

GREGORY BENFORD



Deeper Than the Darkness

aka The Stars in Shroud

By

Gregory Benford

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DEEPER THAN THE DARKNESS

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To Joan—

remember?

PART I

The Hand upon them.

Strangled shout.

It was about an hour into morning shift. I was planning out my day. I had to arrange the routing work I could do using the screen, so that it didn't conflict with the eating routine, the kids' use of the screen for school hours, and the best times to go for a walk in the tubes.

The kids were pouting, for some reason, and I was having trouble concentrating on the alterations that had been made in the production schemes since yesterday. If you don't get the changes down pat in the morning you'll be sending new goods to depot's that don't handle that product anymore, and the losses can eat up your day's management commission before the complaint feedback reaches you.

I'd just about gotten it down when time came for the kids' first lecture, and I had to give up the screen. I settled down in the dining booth to review my notes but it wasn't ten minutes before the kids started whining.

"*Dad-Ay*, why do we have to watch this old stuff?" Romana said, jerking her chin up with a regal look. "None of the other cubes in this block even *carry* Schoolchannel anymore."

"Uh," said Chark, "and it's *boring*. Everybody knows you can't learn fast without tapping. We're going to turn out to be rennies."

"Rennies?"

"Renegades," Angela said from the kitchen cloister. "It's new slang. You should watch the entertainment channel more." The words were normal but her tone had an edge on it. She'd tried the manual breakfast this morning and it hadn't worked out, but *indocing*—or was that outdated term still around?—was one of our flash points. She stood in the doorway and looked at me with her mouth tightened.

"Don't you think it's about time you started to listen to what other people think, Ling? Finally?"

"No." I looked away and started underlining some parts of my notes. Chark dialed the 3D volume down and the room fell silent. I wasn't going to get away with a light dismissal.

"*Dad-Ay...*"

"If you'd just read some of the articles we gave you," Chark began in a measured, reasonable tone "and talked to a counselor at the center, you'd understand why we need tapping now. You were out there yourself, Dad, so..."

"Yes," I said sharply. "I was out there. And none of you were. You believe anything the Assembly says is good for the common defense, but don't expect me..."

I stopped. It wasn't going to do any good. I wouldn't tell them the guts of what happened out there—that was buried away in a file somewhere with red Secret stickers all over it, and until the stickers came off I couldn't say anything.

Angela broke her rigid silence, and I could tell that what she was going to say had been held back for a long time. "Why do you tell them such things? They'll respect you even less if you try to pretermit there's some big mystery about what you did out there. You were just a shuttle captain, a pickup man on a convoy to get the survivors off *Regeln* after the *Quarn* hit it. And you didn't even get many of them either."

"Something happened. Something really happened."

The children had become quiet, the way they do when they sense that the grownups have forgotten they're around, and maybe a fight was going to start. Angela and I both noticed it at the same time.

“All right. We’ll talk about it later,” I said. The kids went back to their lecture, grumbling to each other, and Angela walked into the bedroom, probably to pout. It was one more nick in a marriage that was already eroding.

We would talk later, and there would be accusations and complaints and I couldn’t explain.

But it happened. It caught me in a wave of hard color, a menace subtle and faceless, and the way it threw me up on this barren spiritual shore. To wait, and while waiting to die. It happened during the quick run into the Regeln system to drop and grab whatever was left before the Quarn returned.

The crew didn’t take it well. Fleet took us off a routine run and outfitted the ships with enough extras to put the convoy on the lowest rung of warship class. But men take time to adjust. Most of them were still nervous and edgy about the changes that had been made. They were suddenly *orak* warrior status. They didn’t like it—neither did I—but there was nothing to be done. It was an emergency.

I had us roar out of port at full bore, giving the ships that hot gun-metal smell, and that kept them busy for a while. But maintenance is maintenance and soon they found the time to tie themselves into knots, wringing out self-doubts with fidgeting fingers. In a few days the results began to come up through the confessional rings: anxieties, exclusion feelings, loss of phase.

“I told Fleet we’d have this,” I said to Tonji, my Exec. “These men can’t take a sudden change of status and role.” I let go of the clipboard that held the daily report and watched it strike the table top with a slow-motion clatter in low gee.

Tonji blinked his simian eyes languidly. “I think they’re overreacting to the danger involved. None of us signed for something like this. Give them time.”

“Time? Where am I going to get it? We’re only weeks out of Regeln now. This is a large group spread over a convoy. We’ll have to reach them quickly.”

He unconsciously stiffened his lips, a gesture he probably associated with being tough-minded. “It will take effort, it’s true. But I suppose you realize there isn’t any choice.”

Was that a hint of defiance in his voice, mingled with his habitual condescension? I paused, let it go. “More Sabal, then. Require all senior officers to attend as well.”

“You’re sure that’s enough, sir?”

“Of course I’m not sure! I haven’t got all the answers in my pocket. This convoy hasn’t had anything but shuttle jobs for years.”

“But we’ve been reassigned...”

“Slapping a sticker on a ship doesn’t change the men inside. The crews don’t know what to do. There isn’t any confidence in the group, because everyone can sense the uncertainty. Nobody knows what’s waiting for us on Regeln. A crewman wouldn’t be human if he didn’t worry about it.”

I looked across the small cabin at my kensdai altar. I knew I was losing control of myself too often and not directing the conversation the way I wanted. I focused on the solid, dark finish of the wood that framed the altar, feeling myself merge with the familiarity of it. Focus down, let the center flow outward.

Tonji flicked an appraising glance at me. “The Quarn were stopped on Regeln. That’s why we’re going.”

“They’ll be back. The colony there beat them off, but took a lot of losses. It’s now been twenty-four days since the Quarn left. You’ve heard the signals from the surface—they’re the only ones we got after their satellite link was destroyed. The correct code grouping is there, but the signal strength is down and transmission faded. Whoever sent them was working in bad conditions, or didn’t understand the gear, or both.”

“Fleet doesn’t think it’s a trap?” Tonji’s features, Mongol-yellow in the diffused light of my cabin, took on a cool, sly look.

“They don’t know. I don’t either. But we need information on Quarn tactics and equipment. They’re a race of hermits, individuals, but somehow they cooperate against us. We want to get an idea how.”

“The earlier incidents...”

“They were just that—incidents. Raids. Fleet never could unravel enough coherent information out of the surviving tapes, and there were no survivors.

“But this time the colonists stood off a concentrated attack.”

“Yes. Perhaps there are good records on Regeln.”

Tonji nodded, smiling, and left after proper ceremonies. I was sure he knew everything I’d told him, but he’d seemed to want to draw the details out of me, to savor them.

For the better the mission, the gaudier the reports, then all the faster would rise the fortunes of M. Tonji. A war—the first in over a century, and the first in deepspace—has the effect of opening the staircases to the top. It relieves a young officer of the necessity of worming his way through the belly of the hierarchy.

I reached out, dialed a starchart of Regeln’s neighbors, studied.

The Quarn had been an insect buzzing just beyond the range of hearing for decades now. Occasional glancing contacts, rumors, stories. Then war.

How? Security didn’t bother to tell lowly convoy captains—probably only a few hundred men anywhere knew. But there had been a cautiously-worded bulletin about negotiations in the Quarn home worlds, just before the war. The Council had tried to establish communal rapport with some segment of Quarn society. It had worked before, with the Phalanx and Angras.

Among the intellectual circles I knew—such as they were—it was holy dogma. Sense community was the glue that held a culture together. Given time and correct phase it could bind even alien societies. In two cases it already had.

And it wove a universe for us. A world of soft dissonances muted into harmonies, tranquil hues of waterprints fading together.

To it the Quarn were a violet slash of strangeness. Hermit-like, they offered little and accepted less. Privacy extended to everything for them; we still had no clear idea of their physical appearance. Their meetings with us had been conducted with only a few individual negotiators.

Into this the Council had moved. Perhaps a taboo was ignored, a trifle overlooked. The mistake was too great for the Quarn to pass; they came punching and jabbing into the edge of the human community. Regeln was one of their first targets.

“First Sabal call.” Tonji’s voice came over the inboard. “You asked me to remind you, sir.”

It was ironic that Tonji, with all his ancestors citizens of Old Nippon, should be calling a Sabal game to be led by me, a half-breed Caucasian—and I was sure it wasn’t totally lost on him. My mother was a Polynesian and my father a truly rare specimen: one of the last pure Americans, born of the descendents of the few who had survived the Riot War. That placed me far down in the caste lot, even below Australians.

When I was a teenager it was still socially permissible to call us *ofkaipan*, a term roughly analogous to *nigger* in the early days of the American Republic. But since then had come the Edicts of Harmony. I imagine the Edicts are still ignored in the off-islands, but with my professional status it would be a grave breach of protocol if the word ever reached my ears. I’d seen it often enough mouthed wordlessly by an orderlyman who’d just received punishment, or an officer who couldn’t forget the color of my skin. But never aloud.

I sighed and got up, almost wishing there were another of us aboard, so I wouldn’t have moments of complete loneliness like this. But we were rare in Fleet, and almost extinct on Earth itself.

I uncased my formal Sabal robes and admired their delicate sheen a moment before putting the

on. The subtle reds and violets caught the eye and played tricks with vision. They were the usual lin free polyester that shed no fine particles into the ship's air, but everything possible had been done to give them texture and depth beyond the ordinary uniform. They were part of the show, just like the bals and chants.

During the dressing I made the ritual passes as my hands chanced to pass diagonally across my body, to induce emotions of wholeness, peace. The vague fears I had let slip into my thoughts would be in the minds of the crew as well.

The murmur in our assemblyroom slackened as I appeared; I greeted them, took my place in the hexagon of men and began the abdominal exercises, sitting erect. I breathed deeply, slowly, and made hand passes. At the top of the last arc the power was with me and, breathing out, I came *down* in focus, outward-feeling, *kodakani*.

I slowed the juggling of the gamebals, sensing the mood of the hexagon. The bals and beads caught the light in their counter cadences, glancing tones of red and blue off the walls as they tumbled. The familiar dance calmed us and we moved our legs to counter-position, for meditation.

My sing-chant faded slowly in the softened acoustics of the room. I began the Game.

First draw was across the figure, a crewman fidgeting with his Sabal leaves. He chose a passage from the Quest and presented it as overture. It was a complex beginning—the Courier was endowed with subtleties of character and mission. Play moved on. The outline of our problem was inked in before the others as they read their own quotations from the leaves into the Game structure.

For the Royal Courier rode down from the hills, and being he of thirst, hunger and weariness, he sought aid in the town. Such was his Mission that the opinion he gained here of the inhabitants of the village, their customs, honesty and justice (not only to the Courier, but to themselves), would be relayed to the Royal Presence as well. And thence, it is said, to Heaven. Having such items to barter he went from house to house. ...

After most entries were made, the problem maze established had dark undertones of fear and dread. As expected.

I repeated the ritual of beads. And rippling them slowly through my fingers, I began the second portion of Sabal: proposal of solution. Again the draw danced among the players.

So: You are one of two players. There are only two choices for you to make, say red and black. The other player is hidden, and only his decisions are reported to you.

If both of you pick red, you gain a point each. If both are black, a point is lost. But if you choose red and your opponent votes black, he wins *two* points, and you lose two.

He who cooperates in spirit, he who senses the Total wins.

Sabal is infinitely more complex, but contains the same elements. The problem set by the men was dark with subtle streams of anguish, insecurity.

But now the play was returning to me. I watched the solution as it formed around the hexagon. Rejoiced in harmony of spirit. Indicated slight displeasure when divergent modes were attempted. Rebuked personal gain. And drew closer to my men.

“Free yourself from all bonds,” I chanted, “and bring to rest the ten thousand things. The way is near, but we seek it afar.”

The mood caught slowly at first and uncertainty was dominant, but with the rhythm of repetition compromise was struck. Anxiety began to submerge. Conflicting images in the Game weakened.

I caught the uprush of spirit at its peak, chanting joyfully of completion as I brought the play to rest. Imposed the dream-like flicker of gamebal and bead, gradually toning the opticals until we were clothed in darkness. Then stillness.

The fire burning, the iron kettle singing on the hearth, a pine bough brushing the roof, water dripping. The hexagon broke and we left, moving in concert.

The Game on our flagship was among the best, but it was not enough for the entire mission. I ordered Sabal as often as possible on all ships, and hoped it would keep us in correct phase. I didn't have time to attend all Games, because we were getting closer to drop and all details weren't working out.

In the hour preceding the Jump I made certain that I was seen in every portion of the ship, moving confidently among the men. The number of ships lost in the Jump is small, but rising dangerously and everyone knew it.

I ended up on the center bridge to watch the process, even though it was virtually automatic. The specialists and crewmen moved quickly in the dull red light that simulated nightfall—Jump came in 2200—and fifteen minutes before the computers were set to drop us through, I gave the traditional order to proceed. It was purely a formalism, but in theory the synchronization could be halted even at the last instant. But if it was, the requirements of calculating time alone would delay the Jump for weeks. The machines were the key.

And Justly so. Converting a ship into tachyons in a nanosecond of real-space time is an inconceivably complex process. Men invented it, but they could never control it without the impersonal, faultless coordination of microelectronics.

In theory it was simple. The earnest, careful men who moved around me on the center bridge were preparing the convoy to flip over into *faster* than light. In the same way that a fundamental symmetry provided that the proton had a twin particle with opposite charge, helicity, and so on—the anti-proton—there was a possible state for each particle, called the tachyon.

Just as the speed of light, c , is an upper limit to all velocities in our universe, in the tachyon universe it is a lower limit. To us, a particle with zero kinetic energy sits still; it has no velocity. A tachyon with no energy is on the other side of the coin—it moves with infinite velocity. As its energy increases it *slows*, relative to us, until at infinite energy it travels with velocity c .

As long as man remained in his half of the universe, he could not exceed c . This was a fundamental limitation, as irrevocable as the special principle of relativity.

So he must leave it. By converting a particle into its tachyon state, allowing it to move with nearly infinite velocity and then shifting it back to real space, one effectively produces faster than light travel. The study of the famous tachyon cross section problem—*how* do you make it convert, and then get it back—occupied the best minds of humanity for more than thirty years. It also birthed the incredible complexity of microelectronics, because only with components that operated literally on the scale of atomic dimensions could you produce the coherent, complexly modulated electronmagnetic waves that could regulate the tachyon's Jump cross section.

I smiled to myself in the red glow. *That* had been a triumph. It occurred some decades after the establishment of Old Nippon's hegemony, and made possible almost instant communication with the first Alpha Centauri colony. Particles can be used to produce electronmagnetic waves, and waves carry signals.

But not men. It was one thing to greatly enlarge the Jump cross section of a single particle, and quite another to do it for the unimaginable number of atoms that make up a man, or a ship.

It was Okawa who found the answer, and I had always wondered why the Jump drive did not bear his name. Perhaps he was born of impure strains. Okawa reasoned by analogy, and the analogy he used was the laser.

In the laser the problem is simply to produce a coherent state—to make all the excited atoms in the solid emit a photon at the same time. The same problem appeared in the faster than light drive. If *all* the particles in the ship did not flip into their tachyon state at the same time, they would all have vastly varying velocities, and the ship would tear itself apart. Okawa's achievement was finding a technique for placing all a ship's atoms in "excited real tachyon states." In the excited state the

tachyon cross sections were large. But as well, they could be triggered at the same time, so that a Jumped together, coherently.

I looked at the fixed, competent faces around me in the bridge. It was a little more than one minute to Jump. The strain showed, even though some tried to hide it. The process wasn't perfect and they knew it.

Nothing was said about it at the Fleet level, but microelectronic equipment had been deteriorating slowly for years. The techniques were gradually being lost, craftsmanship grew rare and half-measures were used. It was part of the slow nibbling decline our society had suffered for the last half century. It was almost expected.

But these men bet their lives on the Jump rig, and they knew it might fail.

The silvery chimes rang down thin, padded corridors, sounding the approach of Jump. I could feel the men in the decks around me, lying in near darkness on tatami mats, waiting.

There was a slightly audible count, a tense moment and I closed my eyes at the last instant.

A bright arc flashed beyond my eyelids, showing the blood vessels, and I heard the dark, whispering sound of the void. A pit opened beneath me, the falling sensation began.

Then the fluorescents hummed again and everything was normal, tension relieved, men smiling.

I looked out the forward screen and saw the shimmering halo of gas that shrouded the star Regeln. At our present velocity we would be through it in a day and falling down the potential well directly toward the sun. There wasn't much time.

We had to come in fast, cutting the rim of plasma around Regeln's star to mask our approach. If we dropped in with that white-hot disk at our backs we would have a good margin over any detection system that was looking for us.

Regeln is like any life-supporting world: endlessly varied, monotonously dull, spiced with contrast wherever you look, indescribable. It harbors belts of jungle, crinkling gray swaths of mountain, convoluted snake-rivers and frigid blue wastes. The hazy air carries the hum of insects, the padding of ambling vegetarians, the smooth click of teeth meeting. And winds that deafen, oceans that laugh, tranquility beside violence. It is like any world that is worth the time of man.

But its crust contains fewer heavy elements than are necessary for the easy construction of a Jump station or docking base. So it fell under the control of the colonization-only faction of Fleet. They had moved in quickly with xenobiologists to perform the routine miracles that made the atmosphere breathable.

Wildlife was some problem, but during the twenty-odd years the atmosphere was being treated the continent was cleared of the more malignant varieties. There was a four-meter scorpion which could run like a deer, among other things. I saw it in an Earthside zoo, and shuddered.

Drop time caught us with only the rudiments of a defense network. There simply wasn't time to train the men, and we were constantly missing relevant equipment. I wished for better point-to-point surveillance gear a hundred separate times as we slipped into the Regeln system.

But no Quarn ships were visible, no missiles rose to meet us. Tonji wanted to get out of the sky as soon as physically possible, even though it would've been expensive in reaction mass. I vetoed it and threw us into a monocycle "orange slice" orbit for a look before we went down, but there turned out to be nothing to see after all.

Our base was buttoned up. No vehicles moved on the roads, not even expendable drones for surveillance. I had prints of the base defenses, even the periscope holes, but when we checked them there was no sign that they were open. Scattered bluish clouds slid over the farmhouses and fields of grain but nothing moved on the surface.

There wasn't time to think, send down probes, play a game of cat and mouse. I had a drop pod massing out to the system perimeter, where random radiation from the star wouldn't mask the torch.

an incoming Quarn ship, but I couldn't rely on it completely. "Skimmers ready, sir," Tonji said.

"Good. Order all three down immediately." The skimmers were fast, and can usually maneuver around manual surface-air defenses.

They landed easily, formed a regulation triangle defense in the valley where the colony's HQ was buried under a low, crusty hill, and reported back. When their skins had cooled to the minimum safe point they popped out their hovercraft and moved off, checking the covered entrances. No signals were coming out of the hill. There were no flash marks nearby, no sign of the use of any weapons.

A pilot landed near the main entrance, shucked his radiation gear for speed and tried the manual alarms mounted for emergency purposes near the vault door. Nothing.

I got all this over TV, along with a running account of additional data from the other ships spread out in orbit around Regeln. The pilot on the ground asked for further instructions. From the sound of his voice I could tell the order he wanted was to pull out, and fast, but he didn't expect to get it.

And I couldn't give it. You don't walk away from a colony that's in trouble, even if it does look like an obvious trap.

"Tell him to use his sappers," I said. "Get the others over there too, but keep watching the other entrances from orbit. It's going to take a while to kick in the door, but we've got to look inside."

Tonji nodded and started to code. "Tell him I'm coming down too." He looked at me, surprised for the first time since I had known him.

I rang Matsuda over inboard and placed him in temporary command of the convoy in orbit. "Tonji is coming with me. If the Quarn show, give us an hour to get up here. If we don't make it, mass out. Don't hang around. These ships are worth more than we are."

I looked at Tonji and he smiled.

The shuttle down was slow but gentle, since it was designed for pushing soft flatlanders back and forth from orbit. I didn't have time to enjoy the ride because I was listening to the efforts of the ground crew to blow the hatch off the entrance. Regeln's sky flitted past, a creamy blend of reds and blues like a lunatic tropical drink, and then we were down.

The pilot of the hovercraft that took me out to the site was Jumpy, but we made it faster than we would've thought possible. I was out the hatch before they got chocks under the wheels and the lieutenant in charge came toward me at double-time.

"Had to drill and tap, sir," he said quickly, saluting. "We're ready to blow it."

I gave the nod and we ducked behind a gentle rise at the base of the hill, a hundred meters away from the portal. Everything was dead still for a moment and I thought for the first time that the ground beneath me was alien, a new planet. In the rush I'd accepted it as though it were Earth.

The concussion was as sharp as a bone snapping and debris showered everywhere. In a moment we were moving up with the main body of men, before the dirt had cleared. The portal was only partially opened, a testament to the shelter's designer, but we could get through.

Three runners went in with lights and were back in minutes.

"Deserted for the first few corridor levels," one of them said. "We need more men inside to keep the communications link."

Tonji led the next party. Most of the crewmen were inside before word came back that they had found somebody. I went in then with three guards and some large arc lamps. None of the lighting in the corridors of the shelter was working—the bulbs were smashed.

Men were clustered at one end of the corridor on the second level, their voices echoing nervously off the glazed concrete.

"You've got something, Mr. Tonji?" I said. He turned away from the open door, where he had been talking to a man whose uniform was covered with dirt. He looked uncertain.

"I think so, sir. According to the maps we have of the base, this door leads to a large auditorium."

But a few meters inside—well, look.”

~~I stepped through the door and halted. A number of steps beyond, the cushioned walkway ended and a block of *something*—dirt, mostly, with fragments of furniture, wall partitions, unidentifiable rubble—rose to the ceiling.~~

I looked at Tonji, questioning.

“A ramp downward starts about there. The whole auditorium is filled with this—we checked the lower floors, but the doors off adjacent corridors won’t open.”

“How did it get here?”

“The levels around the auditorium have been stripped bare and most of the wall structure torn out straight down to the bedrock and clay the base was built on. Somebody carted a lot of dirt away and dumped it in here.” He glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes.

“What’s that?” I pointed at a black oval depression sunk back into the gray mass of dirt, about two meters off the floor.

“A hole. Evidently a tunnel. It was covered with an office rug until Nahran noticed it.” He gestured back at the man in the dirty uniform.

“So he went inside. What’s there?”

Tonji pinched his lip with a well-manicured thumb and forefinger. “A man. He’s pretty far back, Nahran says. That’s all I can get out of Nahran, though—he’s dazed. The man inside is hysterical. I don’t think we can drag him out through that hole; it’s too narrow.”

“That’s all? One man?”

“There might be a lot of people inside there. We’ve heard noises out of several of these holes. I think this thing that fills the auditorium is honeycombed with tunnels. We’ve seen the entrance of several more from the balcony above.”

I checked the time. “Let’s go.”

Tonji turned and started back through the door. “No, Mr. Tonji. This way.”

For a second he didn’t believe it, and then the glassy impersonal look fell over his face. “We’re both going to crawl in there, sir?”

“That’s right. It’s the only way I can find out enough to make a decision.”

He nodded and we spent a few minutes arranging details, setting timetables. I tried to talk with Nahran while I changed into a tight pullover work suit. He couldn’t tell me very much. He seemed reticent and slightly dazed. Something had shocked him.

“Follow immediately after me, Mr. Tonji.” We both carefully emptied our pockets, because the passage was obviously too narrow to admit anything jutting out. Tonji carried the light. I climbed up onto the slight ledge in front of the dark oval and looked across the slate gray face of the thing. It was huge.

Men were crowding in the doorway of the thing. I waved with false heartiness and began working my legs into the hole. I went straight down into a nightmare.

My thighs and shoulders braked me as the force of gravity slowly pulled me down the shaft. I held my arms above my head and close together, because there wasn’t much room to keep them at my sides.

After a moment my feet touched, scraped, and then settled on something solid. I felt around with my boots and for a moment thought it was a dead end. But there was another hole in the side, off at an angle. I slowly twisted until I could sink into it up to my knees.

I looked up. It wasn’t more than three meters over my standing height to the top of the shaft, but it seemed to have taken a long time to get this far. I could see Tonji slowly settling down behind me, towing a light above his head.

I wriggled into the narrow side channel, grunting and already beginning to hate the smell

packed dirt and garbage. In a moment I was stretched flat on my back, working my way forward by digging in my heels and pushing with my palms against the walls.

The ceiling of the tunnel brushed against my face in the utter blackness. I felt the oppressive weight of the packed dirt crushing down on me. My own breath was trapped in front of my face and I could hear only my own gasps, amplified.

“Tonji?” I heard a muffled shout in reply. A trace of light illuminated the tunnel in front of me and I noticed a large rock was embedded in the side. The auditorium was probably filled with a skeleton of stone that supported the packed soil.

I came to a larger space and was able to turn around and enter the next hole head first. The entrance way was wide, but it quickly narrowed and I felt mud squeeze between my fingers. The walls pressed down. Some of the clay had turned to mud.

A chill seeped up my legs and arms as I inched forward. I twisted my shoulder blades and pulled with my fingers. The going was easier because the passage tilted slightly downward, but the ooze sucked at me.

I wondered how a man could have gotten in here, or out. With every lunge forward my chest scraped against the sides, rubbing the skin raw and squeezing my breath out. It seemed just possible that I could get through.

Tonji shouted and I answered. The reply was muffled against the wall and I wondered if he had heard. I could feel the irregular bumps in the wall with my hands, and I used them to measure how far I had come.

Progress was measured in centimeters, then even less. My forearms were beginning to stiffen with the effort.

A finger touched the wall, found nothing. I felt cautiously and discovered a sudden widening in the tunnel. At the same instant there was a scraping sound in the night ahead of me, the sound of something being dragged across a floor. It was moving away.

I got a good grip on the opening, pushed and was through it. I rolled to the side and kept close to the wall. Flickers of light from Tonji showed a small, rectangular room, but there was no one in it. A row of darkened holes were sunk into the opposite wall.

Tonji wriggled through the passage, breathing heavily in the cold air. The light he carried was almost blinding, even though it was on low beam.

I found I could get to my knees without bumping my head. I stretched out my cramped legs and rubbed them to start circulation.

“Nothing here,” he said in a whisper. “Maybe. Throw the beam on those holes.” He played the light across the opposite wall. “Aeeeeeee!”

The shrill scream filled the surrounding area and I caught sight of a head of filthy hair that wrenched further back into the uppermost hole.

I started toward him on hands and knees and stopped almost immediately. The floor below the holes was strewn with excrement and trash. Tonji swallowed and looked sick.

After a moment I moved forward and my boot rattled an empty food tin. I could barely see the man far back in his hole.

“Come out. What’s wrong?” The man pressed himself further back as I picked my way toward him. He whimpered, cried, hid his face from the light.

“He won’t answer,” Tonji said.

“I suppose not.” I stopped and looked at some of the other holes. The rock on this side of the room was intolerable. I hadn’t noticed it in the tunnel because there was a cool draft blowing out of one of the holes in the wall. It kept the air in the room circulating away from the tunnel we’d used.

“Flash the light up there,” I said. A human hand hung out of one of the holes. Cloth and sticks had

been stuffed into the opening to try to keep in the smell.

~~There were other holes like it. Some others were packed with food, most of it partially eaten. "Can we go back?"~~ Tonji asked.

I ignored him and moved closer to one of the openings with a larger mouth. It sucked the dank air around me down into a black hole. In the empty silence I could hear the faint echoes of wailing and sobbing from further inside. They mingled together in a dull hum of despair.

"Bring the light," I said.

"I think it's getting colder in here, sir." He hesitated a moment and then duck-walked closer.

The man was still moaning to himself in his hole. I clenched my jaw muscles in involuntary revulsion and with an effort of will reached out and touched him. He cringed away, burrowing down and sobbing with fear.

There was part of a sleeve left on his arm—the light blue doth of the Fleet. I looked back at the tunnel we'd just used and estimated the difficulty of pulling a struggling man through it.

"We're not going to get any more out of this," I said.

The cold was clinging to my limbs again, but Tonji was sweating. He looked about the hole nervously, as if expecting attack. The silence was oppressive, but I seemed to hear more clearly now the convulsive sobbing from further inside the mound.

I motioned quickly to Tonji and we pressed ourselves into the tunnel. I made as rapid progress as I could with him scrambling close at my heels.

The dead weight squeezed us with rigid jaws. I tried to notice markings on the sides that would measure how far we had come, but I began to get confused.

It took me a moment to realize the air was definitely getting worse. It clung to my throat and I couldn't get enough. My chest was caught in the tunnel's vise and my lungs would never fill.

Between wriggings to squirm up the slight grade, I stopped to listen for sounds from the men at the entrance. Nothing. The long tunnel pressed at me and I gave myself over to an endless series of pushing and turning, rhythmically moving forward against the steady hand of gravity and the scraping of the walls.

Tonji's beam sent dim traces of light along the walls. I noticed how smooth they were. How many people had worn them down? How many were in here? And, God, *why*?

The tunnel began to narrow; I got through one opening by expelling all my breath and pushing hard with my heels. Coming in hadn't seemed this hard.

There was an open space that temporarily eased the pressure, and then ahead I saw walls narrowing again. I pushed and turned, scrabbling on the slick dirt with all my strength. A flicker of light reflected over my shoulder and I could see the passage closing even further.

Impossible. A massive hand was squeezing the life out of me and my mind clutched frantically for an escape. The air was positively foul. I felt ahead and grunted with the effort. The walls closed even more. I knew I couldn't get through.

My hand touched something, but I was too numbed with the cold to tell what it was.

"Light," I managed to whisper. I heard Tonji turning, breathing rapidly, and in a moment the beam got brighter.

It was a man's foot.

I recoiled; for a moment I couldn't think and my mind was a flood of horror. "Back," I gasped. "We can't go this way."

"This... way... we came in."

"No." Suddenly the air was too thick to take any longer. I started to slide backward.

"Go on!" He hit my boots with a free hand. "Back up, Mr. Tonji."

I waited and the dirt pressed at me, closing in everywhere. It was only mud. What if it collapsed?

Tonji was silent and after a moment I felt him move back. I had been holding my breath ever since I took my hand, felt that human foot, and I let it out as I scrambled back down the tunnel. The man hadn't been there long, but it was enough. The air was heavy with it.

I noticed I was sweating now, despite the chill. Had we taken the right hole when we left the man back there? We could be working our way further into the mound, not out of it.

How long could I take the air? I could tell Tonji was on the edge already. Did we miss a turn coming out and go down the wrong way? It was hard to imagine in the closeness of the tunnel.

My ribs were rubbed raw and they stung whenever I moved. The weight closed on me from every direction. I pulled backward slowly, trying to collect my thoughts. I moved automatically.

After a few moments my left hand reached out and touched nothing. I stopped, but Tonji went on as if in a stupor. I listened to his moving away, blinking incomprehendingly at the hole to my left, and tried to think.

“Wait! This is it!”

We had both missed the turn, somehow. The air had dulled our minds until we noticed nothing without conscious effort.

I turned and worked myself into the opening. Tonji was returning and the direct glare of the beam was almost painful. He moaned something but I couldn't understand.

The passage gradually widened and I caught glimmerings of light ahead. In a moment I was standing in the vertical shaft and a man was dropping a line down to me. My hands slipped on several times as they pulled me up.

For a few minutes I sat by the entrance, numb with fatigue. The men crowded around us and looked at them as if they were strangers. After a while I picked out a lieutenant.

“Get—Jobstranikan down here.” Jobstranikan had psychotherapy training, and this was clearly his job. Orders were given and men scattered. After a moment I got up and changed back into full uniform. A runner was waiting outside the door, his nose wrinkling at the stench I had ceased to notice.

“Sir, reports from lower levels say there are more like this. There appear to be people in them too. The coordination center was untouched, and it's five levels down. I think they've got some of the tapes ready to run.”

I turned to Tonji. “Try to get that man out of there. Do it any way you can, but don't waste time. I'll be in the center.”

The walk through the next two levels was like a trip through hell. The stink of human waste was overpowering, even though the ventilation system was working at full capacity. Arc lights we had brought down threw distorted crescents of faint blue and white along walls smeared with blood, food, and excrement.

Echoes of high, gibbering wails, haunted the lower floors, coming from the hiding places. They had burrowed far back into the walls in spots but most of the tunnel mouths were in monstrous, huge mounds like the one above. They weren't hiding from us alone; their warrens were surrounded by piles of refuse. They had been in there for weeks.

Jobstranikan caught up with us just before we worked our way to the center.

“It's difficult, sir,” he said. “It's like the legends—the country of madness, possessed by devils and monsters.”

“What's happened to them?”

“Everything. At first I thought they had a complete fear of anything that they could sense—light, movement, noise. But that's misleading. They screech at each other incoherently. They won't let us touch them and they cry, scream, and fight if we try.”

“Has Tonji been able to get any of them out?”

“Only by knocking them unconscious. One of his men was bitten badly when they tried to drag the man out. Getting anyone out of this mess is going to be a major job.”

There was a guard outside the center. Broken bits of furniture and electronics gear were strewn down the corridor, but inside the center itself everything was in order.

“The hatch was sealed electronically and coded, sir,” the officer inside explained. “We brought down the tracers and opened it. Somebody must have seen what was happening and made certain no one could get in here before we arrived.”

I walked over to the main display board. Technicians were taping the readouts we would need from the center’s computer bank, working with feverish haste. I motioned Danker back to duty and turned to the officer.

“Have you got any preliminary results? Is there an oral log that covers the Quarn attack?”

“No oral yet. We do have a radar scan.” He fitted a roll into the projector attachment of the display board. “I’ve cut it to begin with the first incursion into this system.”

He dimmed the lights in this section to the center and the green background grid of a radar scan leaped into focus. The relative locations of the other planets in the Regeln system were shown—heavy lumps of cold rock, for the most part—and a small Quarn dot was visible on the perimeter of the screen, glowing a soft red.

“They took their time getting here, apparently.” The projection rate increased. More dots joined the first to form a wedge-shaped pattern. A blue line detached itself from the center of the screen and moved outward, shrinking to a point—a defensive move from Regeln.

“All available missiles seem to have been fired. The Quarn took a few hits, but they could outmaneuver most of them. I’m afraid we launched too soon and by the time our seekers were within range their fuel reserves weren’t up to a long string of dodges.”

The red dots moved quickly, erratically, in a pantomime dance with the blue defenders. The distance between them was never short enough to permit a probable kill with a nuclear charge, and eventually the blue dots fell behind and were lost. They winked out when their reaction mass was exhausted.

“Except for the atmospheric ships, that finished their defenses. This colony wasn’t built to carry on a war. But something strange happened.”

The Quarn ships drifted toward center screen at an almost leisurely pace. A small missile flared out, went into orbit around Regeln and disappeared.

“That was the satellite link. They got that and then...”

“And then left,” I finished. The red dots were backing off. They gradually picked up velocity, regrouped and in a few minutes slipped off the grid. The screen went black.

“That is all we have. This clipping covered about eight days, but we can’t be sure anybody was watching the last part of it because the recording mechanism was automatic. It stopped when it ran out of film. This room may have been sealed any time after they launched their missiles.”

“None of this explains what happened here. The Quarn didn’t touch Regeln, but this shelter is full of lunatics. Something made the Quarn stop their attack and leave.” I looked around at the banks and consoles. I could feel a tightness forming somewhere. That old feeling of Tightness, certainty of position, was slipping away.

“Get every record you can, in duplicate tapes if possible,” I ordered, trying to shrug off the mood. The officer saluted and I went back into the corridors with a guard detail. I made a note to get respiration packs down here as soon as possible, and meanwhile held my breath as long as I could between gasps.

The route we took back was different, but no less horrible. Here there were bodies lying among the wreckage, most of them in advanced stages of decay. Two of my guards gagged in the close, putr-

atmosphere of the corridors. We kept moving as quickly as we could, avoiding the half-open door from which came the faint shrill gibbering of madmen. Most of the bodies we saw had been stabbed, clubbed and left to die. A large proportion were women. In any contest of strength they wouldn't last long, and they hadn't received any special consideration.

When we reached the perimeter Tonji had established, the air improved. Men were moving along the corridors in teams, spraying the walls with a soapy solution.

"The water and drainage systems are still working, so I decided to use them," Tonji said. He seemed to have recovered from the tunnel. "Wherever we can we're sealing off the places where they lived, and merely hope we can keep the halls clean."

Jobstranikan came around a nearby corner portal we'd blasted through only a short while before. "Any new ideas?"

"Not as yet, I fear." He shook his head and the long Mongolian locks tangled together on the back of his neck. He wore it in traditional semi-tribal fashion, like most of my officers. It was dull black, the manner of the soldiers of the Khan and the Patriarch, and braided at the tail with bright leather thongs. The style was as old as the great central plains of Asia.

"I can make no sense of it. They fought among themselves at first, I think, for the bodies we've found are at least weeks old. Since then they've stayed back in those holes they made for themselves eating the food supplies they'd gotten earlier. But they don't want to leave. Every one I've seen wants to burrow into the smallest volume possible and stay there. We've found them in cupboards, jammed into ventilation shafts, even..."

"Signal for me?" I asked the crewman in charge. We'd reached a temporary communications link. He handed me a receiver and I pulled the hushpiece over my head. If this was what I thought it was, I didn't want anyone to know before I told them.

It was Matsuda. "Our drone is registering approaching extra-solar ships. Preliminary trajectory puts them into the Regeln orbit."

I let out a long breath. In a way I'd almost been expecting it. "What's their Doppler shift?"

There was a pause, then: "It's not enough for them to be braking from a star jump. The spectroscope says they're on full torch, however. They couldn't have been accelerating very long."

"In other words, this is the same group that hit—or didn't hit—Regeln the first time. How long can we have on the surface?"

"Sir, readout says you can stay down there about five hours and not incur more than five percent risk to the convoy. Can you get them out if I give you that much?"

"We'll see," I said, and went back to Tonji.

It was impossible. With all shuttles and skimmers we saved a little over three thousand, only a fraction of the colony's population. Most of the interior of the shelter was never reached.

As it was, we boosted late and a Quarn interceptor almost caught us. A yellow fusion burst licked at us as we pulled away, so we never saw what the rest of the Quarn did to Regeln, and I don't suppose anyone else will either because it's in the middle of their territory now.

After a few unsuccessful attempts I decided to stop trying to communicate with the lunatics who had scattered among the ships. Jobstranikan wanted to try treatment on some of them, but the medics were having a hell of a time just patching up their injuries, and infections and treating malnutrition.

The Quarn didn't try to follow us out of the system. I thought this strange, and so did Tonji.

"It doesn't make sense," he said. "We don't know a lot about their drive systems, but they might have a good chance of catching us. It would certainly be worth a try. If you've set a trap, why spring it halfheartedly?"

"Maybe it's not that kind of trap," I said.

Tonji frowned. "Do you mean they might be waiting for us further along trajectory? We're already out of detection range of any Quarn ships, and the Jump is coming up. They'll never trace us through that."

"No, nothing. It was just a thought." Not a well-defined one, at that. Still, something was bothering him. It wasn't lessened any when Tonji reported the results from Intelligence.

"The computer analysis of the colony's radar scan is finished," he began. "Regardless of what happened to the colony itself, the machines have a low opinion of Quarn tactics. Regard."

He flicked on a screen above my desk and the pattern of red and blue points on a green grid began to repeat itself. "Notice this stage, shortly after initial contact."

The blue dots danced and played as they moved in, performing an intricate pattern of opposing and coalescing steps. The red Quarn ships back-pedaled and moved uncertainly.

"The Quarn had ballistic superiority and more maneuverability. But notice how they avoided the Regeln missiles."

The red points dodged back, moving in crescents that narrowly avoided the feints and slashes of blue. The crescent formed, fell back. Again. And again. The Quarn were using the same tactic, relying on their superior power to carry them beyond Regeln attack at the cusp-point. I'm not a tactician, but I could see it was wasteful of energy and time.

"They continued this until the interceptors ran out of reaction mass. If they'd been pitted against equals the engagement wouldn't have lasted two minutes."

I clicked off the screen. "What does it mean?"

Tonji poked the air with a finger. "It means we've got them. Over the last year they've had the luck to hit border planets that weren't first-line military emplacements. We haven't had a look at their techniques because they didn't let anyone get away. But these tactics are schoolbook examples! If this is the best they can do, we'll wipe them out when our fleets move in."

He was overenthusiastic, but he was right. Our defenses were solidly based on the fleet-principle with interlocking layers of tactical directorates, hundred-ships armadas and echelons of command. It was very much like the surface aquatic navies of Earth history. On these terms, the Quarn were disasterously inferior.

The news should have quieted the unease I felt, but instead it grew. I began to notice outbreaks of rudeness among the crew, signs of worry on the faces of the officers, disruption of spirit. The tedium of caring for the colonists could certainly account for some of it—they refused to be calmed and had to be restrained from destroying their room furniture. They were using it to construct the same sort of rat holes we'd found them in.

But that wasn't all. Crewmen began missing meals, staying in their cabins and not talking to anyone else. The ship took on a quiet, tense mood. I ordered resumption of the Games at once.

We almost got through it.

There was divisive talking and nervousness instead of the steady calm of self-contemplation before the Sabal began, but the opening rituals damped and smoothed it. I thought I detected relaxation running like a wave through the hexagon. Muscles unstiffened, consciousness cleared and we drew together.

It is usual in the Game to choose a theme which begins with a statement of the virtue of the community, test it, and then return to initial configuration, the position of rest. I anticipated trouble but not enough to make a change of game plot necessary. The plot ran smoothly at first, until we came to first resolution point.

One of the lower deckmen, who had been in the shelter caverns from the first entry, was called to the chance of the Game to make the decision. He hesitated, looked guiltily at his card and beads, and made a choice that profited himself at the expense of the other players.

Everything came to a stop.

~~I could feel the group teetering on edge. The men were straining for sense of harmony and trying to decide how to play when their turn came. A bad play isn't unknown to Sabal, but now it could be dangerous.~~

I repeated the confirmation ritual, hoping it would calm them—and myself—but the next play was a choice of withdrawal. No gain for the individual, but the group did not profit, and the net effect was bad. Fear began to slip from member to member down the hexagon.

The plays came rapidly now. Some men tried to reinforce the message and cast configurations that benefited the group. They were swamped, one by one, and the Game began to fall apart.

I used the chant. Tranquility, detachment, the words rose and fell. Interpenetrating. Interconverting. The mosquito bit the bar of iron.

My own cast held them for a while out of respect for my position, but in a quick string of plays its advantage was nibbled away.

Then the flood came. A dozen casts went by, all having loss of phase. The theme was not gain, but a pulling away from the group, and that was what made the failure so serious. Withdrawal strikes the social structure itself.

I seized control of the Game, breaking off a subplot that was dragging us deeper. I drew a moral one I'd learned years before and hoped to never use. It slurred over the resolution of the Game and emphasized the quality of the testing, without questioning whether the test had been met. It was an obvious loss, but it was all I could do.

The hexagon broke and the men burst into conversation, nearly panic-stricken. They moved out of the room, jostling and shoving, and broke up as they reached the halls. A few glanced quickly at me and then looked away. In a moment the only sound was the hissing of the air system and the distant, quick tapping of boots on deck.

Tonji remained. He looked puzzled. "What do you think it means?" I said.

"Probably just that the mission was too much for us. Well be all right after landfall."

"I don't think so. Our Games worked well before; but this one shattered before it was half finished. That's too much of a change."

"What, then?"

"It's something to do with this mission. Something... What percentage of the crew have regular contact with the Regeln survivors?"

"With the way the nursemaid shifts are set up now, about sixty percent. Every man who is replaceable for more than an hour on his job has to help feed and clean them, or assist the psych team who are working on the problem."

"So even though we're off Regeln, most of the men continue to see them."

"Yes, but it's unavoidable. Our orders were to bring back as many as we could, and we are."

"Of course." I waved my hand irritably. "But the Game failed tonight because of those survivors. I'm sure of that. The strain of putting this set of crews into war-status duty isn't small, but we've allowed for it in our planning. It doesn't explain this."

Tonji gave me a stiff look. "Then what does?"

"I don't know." I was irritated at the question, because I *did* know—in a vague, foreboding sense—and his question uncovered my own fear.

"The Sabal Game has something to do with it. That and the way our ships—hell, our whole society—has to be run. We emphasize cooperation and phase. We teach that a man's happiness depends on the well-being of the group, and the two are inseparable. Even in our contacts with alien races, unlike the Quarn, we spread that philosophy. We try to draw closer to beings who are fundamentally different from us."

“That’s the way any advanced society must be structured. Anything else is suicide on the racial scale.”

“Sure, sure. But the Quarn apparently don’t fit that mold. They’ve got something different. They work almost completely alone and live in cities only, I suppose, because of economic reasons. Most of what we know about them is guesswork because they don’t like contact with others, even members of their own race. We’ve had to dig out our own data bit by bit.”

Tonji spread his hands. “That’s the reason for this mission. The Regeln survivors may be able to tell us something about the Quarn. We need an idea of how they think.”

“From what we’ve seen of them, I don’t think they’ll be any help. The survivors have gone too far over the edge, and already they’re threatening the convoy.”

“Threatening? With what?”

“Disruption, mutiny—something. All I can say is that when this Sabal started, the crew was in bad condition, but they could be reached. They still communicated.

“During the Game, though, the tension *increased*. We didn’t witness here the exposure of what the men were thinking. Their fears were augmented, piled on top of each Other. I could feel it running through the subplots they made a part of the Game. There’s something we do—and the Game is just a way of concentrating it—that increases the unbalance we picked up from the Regeln survivors.”

“But in the Game we duplicate our society, our way of living. If *that* amplifies the unbalance...”

“Exactly,” I said despairingly. “Exactly.”

I slept on it that night, hoping something would unravel the knot of worry while I slept. Over a lonely breakfast in my cabin I reviewed the conversation and tried to see where my logic was leading.

A sense of dread caught my stomach and twisted it, turning to lead the meal of rice and sea culture broth. How can a man step outside himself and guess the reactions of aliens utterly unlike him? I was trying to find the key to the riddle of Regeln with all the elements in full view.

Something formed. I let my senses out through the ship, feeling the usual rhythms of life, reaching for the... other. An alien element was there. I knew, with a new certainty, what it was.

I picked up my tea cup and focused on my kensdai altar. The deep mahogany gave me confidence. Power and resolution flowed outward from my body center. I balanced the cup lightly in my hand.

And it slammed it down. Jump was coming. I had to stop it.

I had forgotten that Tonji was to be bridge officer during the Jump. He was making routine checks in the somber green light of morning watch. Men moved expertly around him, with a quiet murmur.

“Great greetings of Morn, sir,” he said. “We have come to the point for your permission to Jump. Then it was already late, far later than I’d thought. I looked at him steadily.

“Permission denied, Mr. Tonji. Ready a subspace transmission.” I could feel a hush fall on the bridge.

“May I ask what the transmission will say, sir?”

“It’s a request to divert this convoy. I want the expedition put into decontamination status until this is understood.”

Tonji didn’t move. “There are only a few moments until Jump, sir.”

“It’s an order, Mr. Tonji.”

“Perhaps if you would explain the reasoning, sir?”

I glanced at the morning board. It showed a huge sick report, accompanied by requests of more crewmen to remain in quarters. All divisions were undermanned.

It fitted. In a few days we wouldn’t be able to operate at all.

“Look,” I said impatiently. “The Quarn did something to our people. Perhaps something smuggled in by an agent. I don’t know exactly how, but those colonists have been given the worst trauma anybody has ever seen.”

“An agent? One of our own people?”

“It’s been done before, by idealists and thugs alike. But the important point is that when we picked up Quarn ships on our screens they weren’t trying any maneuvers to throw off detectors or give false images. It was a classic ballistic problem they presented to us, and all we had to do was leave Regeln early enough to outmass them. They *wanted* us to escape.”

“But look at their maneuvers on that first run against Regeln, the one that ran our people underground. That’s all the evidence we need. They’re children when it comes to military tactics. The second approach was simple, yes, but it was probably all they could do.”

“I don’t think so, not if the Quarn are half as intelligent as the rest of our data tells us. So the first attack *did* drive the colonists under—fine. It got all the Regeln population in one place, inside the shelter where whatever techniques the Quarn knew could go to work. What looked like an error was faint.

“Think. A knowledge of sophisticated tactics is a rather specialized cultural adaptation. For all we know, it may not be very useful in the kind of interstellar war we’ve just gotten into. The fact that the Quarn don’t have it doesn’t mean they’re inferior. Quite the opposite, probably. Regeln was a trap.”

“If it was, we escaped,” Tonji said sharply.

“No, Mr. Tonji, we didn’t. We’re just serving as a convenient transport for what the Quarn want to get into the home worlds—the Regeln survivors.”

“But *why*?”

“You know the analogy we use in the Game. Mankind is now, at last, an organism. Interdependent. We’re forced to rely on each other because of the complexities of civilization.” My own voice sounded strange to me. It was tired and a note of despair had crept in.

“Of course,” Tonji said impatiently. “Go on.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that once you admit society is like an organism, you admit the possibility of contagious diseases?”

“Quite frankly, I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“The survivors. They’re enough of a test sample to set it off, apparently. An average crew member spends several hours a day with them, and the continual exposure is enough.”

“Why aren’t you affected, then? And the men who aren’t on the sick list—why don’t they have it?”

“Minor variations in personality. And there’s something else. I checked. Some of them are from the off-islands, like me. We’re different. We didn’t grow up with the Game. We learned it later on the mainlands. Maybe that weakens its effect.”

He shook his head. “Yes, this tiling the colonists have is different, but...”

“It claws at the mind. It’s irrational. We’re the product of our ancestors, Mr. Tonji, and these ancestors knew terrors we cannot comprehend. Remember, this is a new psychosis we’ve found on Regeln, a combination. Fear of light, heat, heights, open spaces. That last one, agoraphobia, seemed strongest. The Quarn have worked on a first-class horror for us, and this convoy is set as the carrier.”

“A carrier for a mental disease?” Tonji said contemptuously.

“Yes. But a disorder we’ve never seen before. An amalgam of the fundamental terrors of man. A collective society has the strength of a rope, because each strand pulls the same way. But it has weaknesses too, *for the same reason*.”

The men were watching us, keeping very still. I could hear the thin beeping of monitoring units. Tonji’s skin had a slight greenish cast and his eyes looked back at me impersonally with a cold blackness.

“We’re carrying it with us, Tonji. The survivors are striking the same resonant mode with us that the Quarn found in them. The Quarn hit at us through our weaknesses. They’re hermits, and they see us more clearly than we see ourselves. Our interdependence, the Game and all of it, communicates the

disease.”

I noticed that my hand was tightening convulsively on the console at my side. Tonji stood motionless. “Stop the Jump, Mr. Tonji, and the transmission.”

He motioned to an assistant and the Jump was canceled. He stood motionless for a moment looking at me. Then he took a quick backward step, came to attention and saluted. When he spoke the words were measured carefully and accompanied by that same blank stare.

“Sir, it is my duty to inform you that I must file Duty Officer’s Report when your dispatch is transmitted. I invoke Article Twenty-seven.”

I froze.

Article Twenty-seven provides that the duty officer may send a counter-argument to the Commander’s dispatch when it is transmitted. When he feels the Commander is no longer able to conduct his duties.

“You’re wrong, Mr. Tonji,” I said slowly. “Taking these survivors—and by now, most of the crew—into a major port will cause more damage than you or I can imagine.”

“I have been observing you, sir. I don’t think you’re capable of making a rational decision about this thing.”

“Man, think! What other explanation can there be for what’s happening to this ship? You’ve seen those tapes. Do you think the scraps of information on them are worth the risk of delivery? Do you think *anyone* can get even a coherent sentence out of those lunatics we’re carrying?”

He shook his head mutely.

I looked across the dark void between us. He was a man of the East, and I represented the dead and dying. In the histories they wrote, the ideals my ancestors held were called a temporary abnormality, a passing alternative to the communal, the group-centered culture.

Perhaps they were right. But we had met something new out here, and I knew they wouldn’t understand it. Perhaps the Americans would have, or the Europeans. But they were gone.

I should have anticipated that the lost phase we all felt would take different forms. Tonji chose ambition above duty, above the ship.

If Fleet upheld him there would be promotions, even though he had used Article Twenty-seven. And I stood here, bound by rules and precedents. If I made a move to silence Tonji it would count against my case with Fleet. We were on a rigid protocol now that the Article was used, and nothing could do would stop it.

“Mr. Tonji! You realize, don’t you, that one of us will be finished when this is over?”

He turned and looked at me, and for a moment a flash of anticipation crossed his face. He must have hated me for a long time.

“Yes, I’ve thought of that. And I think I know which one of us it will be.”

He didn’t finish the sentence aloud. He mouthed it, so only I could see his lips move. “*ofkaipan.*”

He was right. Fleet wanted to talk to anyone who’d had battle contact with the Quarn, and they weren’t ready to wait for a convoy commander with suspicions and a theory. And Tonji, a Mongolian, had political contacts.

We lingered in real-space for a week, waiting for the decision, and then jumped. The trial was short. “Haven’t you gone out for your walk yet?” Angela said.

The sound startled me, even though I’d been blocking out the noise of the kids and the viewscreen. She stood in the door of our bedroom a few feet away, the lines of tension still set in the pale yellow cast of her face. I was beginning to think they would never smooth out again. She had been pretty, once.

“I guess I forgot it. Want to go with me?”

She nodded and I got up from the cramped breakfast nook, stacking the papers I still hadn't reviewed. I cut the corridor lights before we stepped outside our apartment door and we linked hands automatically. I put my right palm on the wall and we inched forward. The terror caught at me, but I fought it down.

"Honestly, I don't see why you're so set against tapping for the children." Her voice was hollow in the darkness. It reflected off the glazed concrete that was close and sheltering. "With all of us at war, any aid to increase education is a godsend. Without it they just fall further and further behind the playmates."

"What playmates? Children don't play anymore. Games take space." We rounded a corner and stumbled on someone who was doubled up on the floor clutching at himself in spasms. From the sound of his breathing I guessed he'd had an attack and couldn't go any further. We edged around him.

"Well, not the same way we did. But they have their games, new ones. You've got to accept the world as it is."

"Accept this crowding? Accept the fear that crushes you whenever you step outside? Accept the fact that a third of the population can't work and we who can—even with our guts twisted up inside—must support them?"

Her hand tightened convulsively on mine. "You know that can't be helped! We're in a... stage of evolution of society. Withdrawal is necessary to achieve greater phase, later."

"And meanwhile the Quarn take one system after another. They've cut us off from most of our raw materials already and we can't muster the men to stop them. Maybe if we're lucky they'll cut us off from our own lies before all this is over."

"Now *that* is completely unreasonable," she said icily. "It ties in with all your other ideas, like not letting Romana and Chark have tapping."

"Not letting the government tinker around in their minds, you mean, with one of their schemes for increasing the war effort. Let Chark have a brain tap so all he cares about is torch chamber design, safe and will never be happy when he's not doing it. That's right, I won't. Our kids will need every bit of mental balance they have to stay alive as a defeated race, and I don't intend to rob them of it."

We passed by some of the lower-level apartments hastily thrown up by the government for the more severe cases. Whimpering came from the little holes where things that had been human beings were curled up into tight balls, desperately trying to shut out the light, the sounds, all of the awful enormity of sheer open space.

Angela descended into her glacial silence, maintaining only a fingertip touch with me to retain her orientation. The walks didn't seem to do either of us any good any longer, so I suppose there is a limit to their therapeutic value. I had gone about as far as I could go, as one of the original cases, and one small apartment was the largest volume my senses could stand.

Even then, the world wasn't real to me. It was filled with a thousand devious terrors—the accidentally thrown light switch, an unsuspected window in an unfamiliar wall.

Out on the edge of our pitifully shrinking empire, the Fleet played at war with the only toys it knew—guns, ships, beams—while their enemy (and what was he like, to be so wise?) fought with the only ultimate weapons between races: their weaknesses.

I did not feel at home on the Earth any longer. My life lay in dark halls, jammed with people I could understand but whose fears I hated because they were mine as well.

I would welcome the Quarn, when they came. I had been alone a long time.

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