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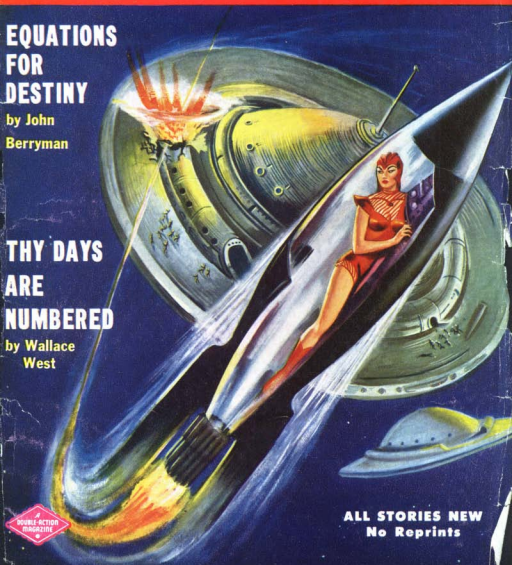
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EQUATIONS FOR DESTINY

by John
Berryman

THY DAYS ARE NUMBERED

by Wallace
West



A
DOUBLE-ACTION
MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW
No Reprints

FUTURE

SCIENCE FICTION

Robert W.
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Editor

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Forgive Us Our Debts

by Lester del Rey

A lesser culture can be murdered by the more advanced without war, without violence, without exploitation, without even the intent to harm . . .

FANE FELT the force of the *kral* fields slowing the ship before the sleep was out of his eyes, and the soft purring hiss of power that was only barely tapped, usually. It had been three generations since the fields had been used, except in the ritual tests.

"Clossse," the great integrating reactors hissed. "Closse."

In another day they would reach the planet they had selected, and the long Cruise might be over. Fifty generations, if the legends were right—eleven branchings—fifteen hundred of those mysteriously arbitrary divisions called years...and now they had found a world that might have been made for them.

Lissa still lay snoring faintly on the bunk, her red hair sprawled out over her pale shoulders, beautiful even in her sleep. Fane's eyes lingered a moment over the curves the thin sheet

revealed. Perhaps, when this was over, and they had landed, he might ally himself with Lissa. He'd thought about it before—though, as a rule, only when another girl shared his cabin.

He shook her awake, grinning at the anger that always swept over her features at waking. This time, though, the sounds of surging power brought her out of the depths more readily. She half-opened her eyes. "What day?"

"Wednesday," he answered.

Lissa hated Wednesdays, when gravity was set for half over normal, and the air pressure and humidity were raised. There had been no way of knowing what the world at Cruise-end might be like, and each day had been different.

But she made no comment now; instead, she reached for the *kofe* and wafers he had heated and wriggled

rapidly into her kirtle and officer's halter. She giggled suddenly, and he realized he'd been standing with one arm in his tunic and the other hanging for the last few minutes. He pulled it on, just as the panel buzzed.

"Captain's meeting in fifteen minutes," the speaker announced. "Compulsory, not optional. Acknowledge."

Lissa pressed his button, and they went out into the hall, toward the nearest bank of teleportis. The *Kraling* still had the mono-relay setup—one of the many disadvantages of a ship two branchings old and long outmoded—and they had to wait while other previous jumps were cleared. Then the light blinked, and they were in the Captain's observatory.

The star they were nearing was bright enough by now to need shields over it, and the tank had four planets showing around it—two huge ones, and two of habitable size. Even as they watched, another, smallest of all, came into existence, far to the side. Observers were checking, but locating planets was always a slow business.

They were nearing the second observed planet from the star, about a hundred million miles out. Fane set the tank for maximum magnification, and gasped faintly. There are clouds in the atmosphere, thick over much of the planet. Below, the markings showed what must be continents and seas. Fane had never seen a planet, but study of detailed reports about several hundred that the Cruise along this branch-line passed had made him generally familiar with them. This was unusually rich in evidence of air and water. He reached the key and dialed the tank for details.

Estimated pressure, fifteen pounds at the surface; gravity about normal; nitrogen and oxygen four to one, traces of carbon-dioxide; average temperature midway between equator and poles about right for comfort; estimated rotation around star one year; rotation on axis about twenty-four hours—generally an almost ideal

world. There was an extreme tilt of the axis from the plane of rotation about the sun—which might make for a highly variable climate, but not beyond tolerable limits. And certain phenomena indicated that there was vegetation based on chlorophyll already on the planet!

Lissa shuddered ecstatically. "Ours, Fane—all ours! After all the generations, we are chosen. Discoveries, novelty, thrills, excitement—a whole world to bend to our desires—space unlimited to spread out for our children!"

"And a base," he added, more soberly. He caught a glimpse of his chiseled features, lean, tall body, and dark complexion beside her flame and ivory in the tank's plastic. For a moment, he felt some of her desires race through him, but he shook them back. "A place where we can build again—rear cities and increase, study and perfect ourselves. No more being little creatures in tiny worlds of metal, unnatural to the universe."

She made a mouth at him, but the warning bell cut it off. He started for the teleport, but Lissa dragged him back. "Fane, before you go—are you with us?"

He looked at her in surprise. "With you?"

"Do you want Cruise-end here? Will you vote for it? Even if your father wants to go on, along with the other old men who think because they were born in space their grandchildren should be born the same? Fane, are you on our side?"

It hadn't entered his mind to doubt, though he had heard talk among his father's friends that giving up the ships for a planet was like leaving a small, comfortable bed for a big room full of needles. He looked at the globe in the tank again. "I'm with you!"



His father was already seated at the

head of the table where captains of the fifteen ships, their allies, or their companions with them, waited. Fane settled beside Lissa, conscious of the envious eyes on him. His father nodded, and picked up the ceremonial scrolls.

"It is customary," Commander Bran began, "when approaching a place where branching may be made—"

Lusato, of the *Volanyi* cut in quickly. "Branching? Are we to set down, build new ships for our surplus population, and then split off into two parties—to go off on the Cruise? No! By God and by Atom, we stay here. I've seen the world in the tank; it's Cruise-end!"

Bran turned to him, a faint smile on his face. "I was about to say that, in this case, the customary reading of our history seems unimportant, since you are all impatient to decide. Any objections?"

They stirred, and nodded quick agreement. Most of the history was half-legendary, anyway. A short-lived cult of fanatics had killed the custodians and destroyed most of the records after the second branching. They knew they had been sent from some world to find and colonize another solar system, and to report back—sent out in a ship so crude that it seemed impossible it had made the voyage at all—one that had taken eighty years to travel six-light-years. It had found no hospitable planet, and gone on, until finally the pressure of population and exhaustion of supplies had forced it down on a barren world. There, somehow, more ships had been built, and the expedition had split, each half going off independently, to cover more space. Since then, there had been ten other such branchings—and incalculable progress. Now the ships made better than three-quarters light speed, powered by engines that took energy directly from space, and reacting through the *kral* fields directly on space for their drive. They could take any matter—even the massive stuff

from a dark star—to build whatever they liked.

Bran smiled again. "Very well. We have a decision; the world below can, perhaps, be Cruise-end. Or any of these worlds can lead to another branching—since most of our young men feel cramped by the necessary restrictions on having children in our space. But I feel I should point out that we have already achieved all that we could have done, had we found a planet long ago—and more. We represent inconceivable progress, meaningless figures of population, and innumerable cultures, if we assume even half of the branching parties have survived. We are not subject to the whim of a planet, but make our own conditions. And the world to which we are to report—it is lost, hopelessly. Why behave like grown men looking for a womb into which to retreat?"

Lissa looked at Fane, and he felt himself rising to his feet. Bran nodded for him to speak.

"We want Cruise-end," he said slowly, trying to find his reasons. "We've done well here—nobody questions that. But men belong on planets, father—where a billion people may work together, and where real progress can be made. You tell us we've gone far—but how far must the original world have gone? Suppose they come looking for us—and find us a bunch of primitives, living in what they consider hovels? Will we be happy in space then? By now they may have the very planets on which they live moving throughout space. They may travel faster than light—we know it is possible! They—"

"You want new adventures, unlike the old?" his father asked.

"Very well," Fane said; "we want new adventures. Is that wrong?"

Lissa jumped up beside him. "Vote!"

The younger men picked it up. Bran shrugged, and nodded, counting the hands. It was nine to six to make

this Cruise-end. Bran noted it down on the scrolls, and rose. "That's all, captains—except that you can still change your minds. Look at your ships when you return, and imagine life on the planet. Then wonder if it may not already be inhabited, since it is so well adapted for life. Because—it is!"

He turned and went out. Lissa caught Fane's arm, and bent to his ear, to whisper, but he jerked back, making her wait, pouting, until the others had gone. "You needn't worry, Fane! I'm not trying to ally with you—not after what you called a speech. All I wanted to say was that it's already beginning! Just think, a primitive race to overcome. We'll live, Fane—really live! We'll be heroes, fighting, conquering..."

SOMETHING hit the ship, jerking it as if space had dropped out from under it. The air swooped past them, roaring down the corridor, until the slap of air-seals went on. From overhead, the scream of a siren sounded, and the speakers snapped on.

"Captains to stations! Ships are under attack! All officers at stations! Locators..."

Fane jerked past Lissa and hit the studs of the teleport savagely, to come out in the *Kraling's* observation-control room. He snapped orders, after a single glance at the tank, but saw that the screens had already dropped. The generators took up a heavier hum under the load.

Outside the ships, space seemed to swarm with tiny specks. The sister ships of the *Kraling* seemed monstrous hulks beside them, huge doughnuts with lumps instead of holes in their middles, lumbering along at a crawl as they continued to slow toward the planet below. The little specks darted here and there, leaving trails of fire behind them. They twisted and turned impossibly.

Fane focussed on one. It was obviously a one-man vessel, open except for a narrow frame. The pointed nose

with the power and control section led back across the swelling frame to a tail that belched added flame whenever the vessel turned—obviously a steering mechanism. He puzzled back in his memory for the drive being used, and finally came up with it—the distorter that buckled space slightly. It could serve as a shield as strong as metal walls, yet it was so instable that only a small vessel was possible. Even then, it kept breaking down and reforming, making the fiery trail of electrons around and behind it—built from the collapsing of space in the distorted field.

One came down against the *Kraling*, and the big ship lurched, while a gout of roaring flame danced off into space behind it, where its field had touched that of the ship.

Then Fane swore in sudden amazement. Inside it was a woman—as human as Lissa, though her face was set in a mask of concentration and hate as she tried to hold her field steady and bora back for another strike.

Men were running in answer to his orders, space-suited and heading for the outer guns along the rim of the *Kraling*. He saw the same maneuver going on at the *Spendar*, where fat old captain Monol was probably letting Lissa run things. The other ships were all following suit, now.

Two of the little ships suddenly came into the field of the guns, and imploded. Where they had been, all metal ceased to be, and the unprotected figures of the male and female drivers of the little ships suddenly puffed up and died in open space.

Fane felt sick. He had heard the legends of battles with other races, but these present were human—or nearly so. And their cause was hopeless. They were gallant enough—they still came roaring in for the battle, though they could do no harm to the big ships now, and were sitting ducks—whatever ducks were—for the gunners. The fools! If they had no better than space distortion, the *Kraling*

alone could blast the atmosphere off their planet, or set the inner core into atomic explosions that would rip it to shreds!

Suddenly he countermanded his orders to the gunners and went running toward the port, pulling on his space-suit. "Give me a gig, invisible," he ordered over his helmet phone.



The small gig used for picking up specimens of rock—or with luck, for examining planets they might find—was waiting, just sinking into invisibility as he reached it. He tossed open the tiny port, and leaped to the controls. There were only two of the little ships left, and he had no time for caution. He ripped upward at full acceleration, jerked the gig toward the nearest, and opened the big cargo hatch. The little ship was swinging for a return at the *Kraling* as he matched course and surrounded it.

The cargo-hatch swung shut, and he adjusted his controls, damping out the space distortion as quickly as air could run into the hold. The girl driver let out a frightened screech, and fainted as she seemed to be exposed to empty space.

He went back to the hold, cutting off the power-consuming invisibility, and found her sprawling across the cushions of her tiny machine, but unharmed. So close, she looked even more human. The ghastly make-up on her face came off with a few quick dabs, revealing normal enough skin. He bent and jerked the brief costume off her, just as she came to.

The absence of clothes made no difference to her, but his presence was a shock second only to her expected death. She drew back, muttering strange words in a moaning monotone. Like her body, there was nothing inhuman about her voice or her reactions.

Then she was at him, clawing and scratching. He clipped her quickly on

the jaw, and carried her to the control room, where he set the gig back toward the *Kraling*. "Kill the space-warp drives and put in a small kral field, with invisibility," he told the men. "And take this to my cabin."

HE WENT at a full run to the control room, switching into the Commander's line. "Dad, there isn't anything non-human about my captive!"

Bran's voice was tired and weary. "I know—I had a tracer on you. This world must have been found by another branch and settled. It isn't our right to invade—we'll have to go on."

But there was a satisfaction to his final words, Fane noticed. He started to protest, when another voice came on, that of Lissa. "Captain Lissa—Monoi had a heart attack, Commander Bran, we voted! That still stands! If they've sunk this far, or never gotten beyond the space distorter, they don't rate a world. We protest."

Once a vote was made, it took unanimous assent to change it. Bran's sigh indicated his failing hopes. "Very well. What now, Fane?"

"I'm going to follow the other ship—call off any attack on him. I'm taking an invisibility suit, and I'll rifle their records, somehow—enough to find whether it is a colony, and what they're like. They may have other weapons—sometimes a culture produces a single device out of keeping with the pattern—and that can be something completely outside our defensive knowledge. Your permission?"

"Granted."



Fane was gone again at a run, while excitement stirred in him. Lissa had been too high-handed—but she was right. He hated the killing, and yet something stirred in him. With a whole world before them, and a generation of making it wholly theirs,

life would have zest that it could never have on the ship.

He spotted the retreating single tiny ship, and caught up with it easily, following it down. Others were patrolling below. They obviously had no test for invisibility.



Another ridiculous battle was going on when he returned, but he paid no attention to it.

He dropped onto the *Kraling*, throwing out a bundle, and began a report before he reached the control room, coupling in through his suit phone. "They have a dozen languages, father—but one of them is the same as the language of the old records! They pronounce it oddly, but on one island they seem to be trying to revive it—they call it English! I found some newspapers in it. I'm sending them over."

He cut off before the excited babble of the other ships could reach him. The fracas outside was dying down now, as the ships retreated before the power of the larger vessels. Fane took a look at the tank, nodded to his lieutenant, and went back to his cabin.

It seemed incredible; no culture could drop that far. He had found no clue as to the Branch that had settled this world, nor as to the time they had been there. But the population indicated it must have been many generations before.

Even to his unpracticed eye, there were people here who were mere property—owned by others, a few who lived in what must seem to them luxury. The papers confirmed it, reporting on the "slave" rebellion just put down in connection with this "invasion from space." There were indications that some sections had slaves and some did not, but he couldn't be sure. Most of the mess he had found in the records and the current papers meant nothing to him—except that

science was little more than witchcraft, and that human dignity seemed to be something talked about a great deal, with no understanding.

Any Branch that had so far lost their culture had no right to a planet!

"The captive is being washed and disinfected for possible disease," he was told, but he only half heard it. He muttered an order for her to be sent when it was finished and went into his cabin.

IT BECAME more incredible as he studied the duplicate records and papers he had kept for himself. Terms that were meaningless began to have meaning—and ugly ones. Money became a symbol for one man to own more than another, irrespective of right and contribution to humanity. Nation became a term that meant disunity and hatred. They fought savagely against this "invasion"—and no wonder! They'd been fighting for thirty years before among themselves, with only a prohibition against atomics and nucleonics—because those ruined the wealth and the wealthy.

One nation, he saw, was trying to get the practice of slavery banned—and to begin exploiting the planets they had discovered again. For a time, it looked like sanity—and probably was, for them. But it was a sanity which included mob hysteria, persecution of minorities—apparently smaller groups who disagreed or were somehow different—and incredibly inefficient controls. And they talked about a "Dark Age" a few centuries before!

He threw it aside in disgust, and went to look at the control room. When he came back, Lissa and the captive were in the cabin; Lissa was experimenting with a tiny nerve-stimulator that sent the girl jerking and jumping, screaming faintly.

He jerked it from Lissa's hands. "Bitch!"

She grinned easily. "All right, Fane. I won't destroy your little plaything; I'll even let you have others, when

we've captured these. But don't forget—I have my rights, too."

He looked at her slowly, and for the first time, he really saw her. She'd fit, down there; she'd fit beautifully. Here, her future was clear enough—she'd try to become Commander by every trick she could—and the tardy, reluctant Psychometrists would decide that she must be given a mind-quieting, and a job of no importance; they'd hold off until the last moment, but the welfare of the Branch came before everything else.

He picked her up by one arm and a leg and threw her out into the hallway, where she went off, chuckling at what she thought lay behind his action.

The captive stared at him doubtfully. "*Bitch!* You speak English!"

Her accent was barbarous, but he could understand it.

"Of course. You're from that Island—"

"Slave there, yes. But I was going to be freed—I'm from Nioway, and we don't have slaves. We can speak English, most of us—once it was our language, too."

It was the most progressive of the savage communities there, covering one whole continent. He nodded, and she glowered at him. "England was going to free all its slaves—until you came along, and we had to be used for war. England and Nioway are making a treating. Now—"

She slumped down onto the floor and began crying. With a sudden impulse, he pulled her up beside him, and tried to comfort her. One person didn't matter out of the billions that would be eliminated when they took the planet, and such savages hardly merited any consideration. Yet she seemed as normal and human as he was—there was nothing savage about her. The culture she came from was atrocious, but it seemed that the people in it could be simply normal humans in a crazy world. Now she was afraid, sick, and miserable, willing to find comfort even from a captor.

On that, he thought grimly, she'd probably had experience.

HIS FATHER'S voice awoke him. The Commander had come there in person. Sandra, the girl, darted back to the corner of the room, her face turning scarlet for some reason, but the Commander barely noticed her.

"They aren't a branch," Bran said wearily. "The planet is Earth—the world we all came from. This is the mother that sent us out—we've circled and come home. We have a map of the system from before, and we've charted the planets. This—this is what happens to a race on a planet. Every five hundred years, they change direction—they recognize it as being due to something about sunspots, but they still obey the planetary law. They reached a peak, once, and sent us out, like an egg producing life. They might do it again, for all I know—but..."

Fane shook his head, and the knowledge was something that had been nagging his mind. "Then—they sent us out, father, expecting us to come back with new frontiers for them. I've seen some of the records, though I didn't understand. And we didn't come back—there are no new frontiers. This is the only planet suitable for men." He shook his head. "They gave us life—and now we're bringing them death."

The older man shrugged. "I tried to have the decision changed, but Lissa refuses. The others—except you—have agreed, and I might even change your mind. But it doesn't matter; the psychodynamicists have worked out enough on the basis of the records to predict that. If we retreat now, they'll still know we could have taken them with a power they can't even dream of. And they'll give up, sick at their own little progress, to go back down the road to full savagery, or to die. Whenever one of their little backwaters of the Dark Ages has been found by the more advanced, its culture has

died. This time, they will all be savages beside us."

He turned on his heel to leave. Then he stopped.

"In spite of the Covenant, Fane, thirteen of us are leaving—we have seen enough of life on a planet. We know that man was born there, but that he evolved beyond it once he reached space. Those who remain behind or drop back to the old level are wasted. The future of man belongs to the universe, not to mythical Course-endings. You can come—or you can stay with Lissa."

Fane stared about, trying to avoid his father's eyes. "I'll stay!"

He sat miserably, thinking it over, and this time Sandra tried to comfort him. But he wanted none of it. One ship alone could ruin a planet—and it seemed that none would be needed to ruin this mother world which had borne offspring she could not follow.



Sudden, savage attack began again, and this time the ships were larger—two-man affairs, with one man fighting to control the instable field while the other used the full power of its waste to strike again and again at the interstellar vessels. Fane swore, and went into the control-room.

Some of the ships from Earth were dropping from their own failures. But they had courage.

Thirteen of the ships above began moving slowly away—their fields were lowered to keep from upsetting the instable drives of the tiny ships from Earth, and there were no guns firing from them. Bran and the other twelve captains were keeping their word.

"Fane!" Lissa's voice came over the communicator. "Fane, my darling, I knew you'd stick. Give them hell!"

Her ship was spouting guns, and dropping off the little craft, like a hot plate destroying drops of water.

The tiny craft suddenly came

swooping down at him, as if detecting indecisiveness. He watched the harmless display of fire they set up from his screens impassively, and reluctantly ordered out a few gunners to chase them back. In the tank, one of the ten ships moving away hesitated. *It's fine to watch such a nice clean sport*, Fane thought bitterly.

Beside him, Sandra had crept up and was watching with a white face.

SLOWLY, his hand descended on the controls. The little ships darted down again, and a shout came up from the engine pit speaker. "Captain Fane, strengthen your screen—it's too low! We're being pitted a little here."

"Something wrong," he shouted back hoarsely. "Do you detect new radiation?"

"No!"

"Neither do I—but we're losing screen power! All hands—evacuate ship!"

He waited tensely, watching the counter on the teleport click off each use as the men obeyed. A thousand drills had made it automatic. And beside him, another counter indicated steadily dwindling power in the field around, though the generators still howled.

Somewhere below, power was running into huge batteries of accumulators, shunted across the control panel, and building up and up, far beyond overload. Fane grinned tensely. "Lissa!" he called. "I'm under some new attack. Can you cover me?"

She swung her ship toward him, stretching out her shield to the maximum, and drawing closer to make them meet. The tiny swarm of ships came at them savagely now. "Fane—what is it? Why—?"

The ships were almost touching now—and the accumulators were far beyond overload. Something like a small sun leaped suddenly from the *Kraling* toward her ship, and the shield vanished.

Fane heard her instinctive order to abandon ship, and knew that it was equipped with simultaneous teleports that would clear it in three seconds. Her call had been made without time to realize what had happened, but now she knew, and a burst of profanity poured from the speaker as she jerked her unmanned ship back under emergency manual and tried to re-establish control.

She might make it—if she could hold, she could call back the men. He had no illusions as to what would happen to him then—the overload's discharge had burned out every bit of power in the ship, and he was already falling toward Earth, with the little ships picking bits of him off every second.

Something flashed in the tank, and he saw the third ship lashing out with the maximum power of its beams. Lissa's ship seemed to fall apart under them.

IT WAS NO speaker that brought Lissa's words a second later. She stood behind him in the teleport booth, stepping slowly forward, with a hand-blaster held toward him. Her face was insane, and she strangled over the words. Obviously, she hadn't seen where the beams originated, and blamed him.

Sandra struck her down with a flying leap against her knees. Behind her, suddenly, the erect, proud form of Bran stood. He bent over, seized Lissa around the waist, and tossed her into the teleport, punching out a code rapidly.

"They'll take care of her in Psycho," he said quietly. "Good work, Sandra."

His fingers reached out for the teleport controls, and locked them, while Fane slowly realized that the third ship to drop back had been his father's. He grinned slowly, nodding, and the older man echoed his chuckle.

"We're not so much different, after all, son—we both thought of the

same trick. You've still got the gig, complete with invisibility? Good. Let's leave your ship, along with mine and Lissa's, for those tiny bits of courage out there to break into shreds before they reach atmosphere. I think they'll be convinced by now that we put on a big fight, but that we couldn't match them for power—and they'll go home feeling victorious until they begin wondering if we were only the advance guard. That should cure their little fights, and get them moving toward some real progress."

Fane led the way to the gig, while Sandra pointed out Nioway to him. Suddenly he started to turn back, but Bran shook his head. "I brought enough jewels and other trinkets, Fane. We can be rich enough for what we'll need to do—if this girl you've found can keep quiet."

Fane grinned, and translated. Sandra nodded emphatically, and the older man chuckled again.

They'd lost their rightful domain, lost it almost at the moment they'd realized what was truly theirs, what they had become—star-man. Once man conquered space, planets were no longer for him; he belonged out there among the stars, to expand and take all the multiple courses of progress. Well... the others would know, sooner or later; the big ships would probably stop for a Branching at this system's outer planet, but they were forever beyond Fane's reach. He was through with space.

"We'll pay our debts," he said. "We came home unknowingly, and our coming almost wrecked it."

Home. A young man on an old world. But his son, or grandson at the latest, would go forth, perhaps on another ship seeking frontiers that didn't exist. Earth could produce one other child, at least. And what he and the other immigrants knew must never be told; Earth's children must find this truth for themselves.

He pulled Sandra closer, and headed toward Nioway.