

THE MAGAZINE OF
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HUNTER, COME HOME

a new novelet by

RICHARD McKENNA

author of **THE SAND PEBBLES**

FRITZ LEIBER

HARRY HARRISON



Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Introduction to Richard McKenna's HUNTER, COME HOME

Some years ago the Staff of The Magazine received one of those shocks—rare and pleasurable—which comes from finding a treasure among the unsolicited MSS pouring in like the lavas which restlessly roll—the treasure in this case being entitled CASEY AGONISTES (F&SF, Sept., 1958), by Richard McKenna. Before your present editor saw the story in print he met Mac himself at the Milford (Pa.) Science Fiction Writers Conference—an experience fortunately often repeated, there and elsewhere. Richard McKenna is an Old Navy and an Old China Hand, a raconteur extraordinary, with eyebrows (red) bigger than most moustachioes, a gentleman, a scholar, and the husband of the gentle Eva. He writes briefly of himself now: “Born 9 May 1913 in Mountain Home, Idaho. Enlisted Navy 1931. First ten years in China. Retired as MMC in 1953 and came to Chapel Hill to attend UNC. Graduated 1956 with B.A. in Eng. Lit. Married day after I finished my last exam and began postgraduate work on how to live with female of species. Began writing 1957. This story written 1958, much worked on since. Have just finished China novel, THE SAND PEBBLES, for Harper’s.” The “China novel” has subsequently (a) won the Harper’s Prize, (b) been selected for serialization in The Saturday Evening Post, (c) chosen by the Book of the Month Club, and (d) purchased for the movies! Coincidental note: While serving aboard the Asiatic transport USS Gold Star, McKenna first had his attention seriously drawn to literature by the late Commander Cecil Faine, father of Djinn Faine (DAUGHTER OF EVE, F&SF; June, 1962)

. . . Mr. McKenna here gives us a story of epic quality—a conflict of cultures comparable to that of Athens and Sparta, a struggle between men and men and between men and a life-form previously unknown to men, a struggle between one man and his own culture; and of one woman who—but we

*have said enough. "Home is the sailor/ Home from the sea/
And the hunter home from the hill," wrote Robert Louis
Stevenson, in his own epitaph. It is not always Death, how-
ever, which beareth away the victory.*

HUNTER, COME HOME

By Richard McKenna

ON THAT PLANET THE DAMNED trees were immortal, the new guys said in disgust, so there was no wood for campfires and they had to burn pyrolene doused on raw stem fragments. Roy Craig crouched over the fire tending a bubbling venison stew and caught himself wishing they might still use the electric galley inside their flyer. But the new guys were all red dots and they wanted flame in the open and of course they were right.

Four of them sat across the fire from Craig, talking loudly and loading explosive pellets. They wore blue field denims and had roached hair and a red dot tattooed on their foreheads. Bork Wilde, the new field chief, stood watching them. He was tall and bold featured, with roached black hair, and he had two red dots on his forehead. Craig's reddish hair was

unroached and except for freckles his forehead was blank, because he had never taken the Mordin manhood test. For all his gangling young six-foot body, he felt like a boy among men. As the only blanky in a crew of red dots, he caught all the menial jobs now. It was not pleasant.

They were a six-man ringwalling crew and they were camped beside their flyer, a gray, high sided cargo job, a safe two miles downslope from a big ringwall. All around them the bare, fluted, silvery stems speared and branched fifty feet overhead and gave a watery cast to the twilight. Normally the stems and twigs would be covered with two-lobed phytozoon leaves of all sizes and color patterns. The men and their fire had excited the leaves and they had detached themselves, to hover in a pulsating rainbow cloud high

enough to catch the sun above the silver tracery of the upper branches. They piped and twittered and shed a spicy perfume. Certain daring ones dipped low above the men. One of the pellet loaders, a little rat faced man named Cobb, hurled a flaming chunk up through them.

"Shut up, you flitterbugs!" he roared. "Let a man hear himself think!"

"Can you really think, Cobbo?" Whelan asked.

"If I think I think, then I'm thinking, ain't I?"

The men laughed. The red and white fibrous root tangle underfoot was slowly withdrawing, underground and to the sides, leaving bare soil around the fire. The new guys thought it was to escape the fire, but Craig remembered the roots had always done that when the old ringwall crew used to camp without fire. By morning the whole area around the flyer would be bare soil. A brown, many-legged crawler an inch long pushed out of the exposed soil and scuttled after the retreating roots. Craig smiled at it and stirred the stew. A small green and red phyto leaf dropped from the cloud and settled on his knobby wrist. He let it nuzzle at him. Its thin, velvety wings waved slowly. A much thickened midrib made it a kind of body with no head or visible appendages. Craig turned his wrist over and wondered idly why the

phyto did not fall off. It was a pretty little thing.

A pattered green and gold phyto with wings as large as dinnerplates settled on Wilde's shoulder. Wilde snatched it and tore its wings with thick fingers. It whimpered and fluttered. Craig winced.

"Stop it!" he said involuntarily and then, apologetically, "It can't hurt you, Mr. Wilde. It was just curious."

"Who pulled your trigger, Blanky?" Wilde asked lazily. "I wish these damned bloodsucking butterflies *could* know what I'm doing here."

He turned and kicked one of the weak, turgor-rigid stems and brought it crumpling down across the flyer. He threw the torn phyto after it and laughed, showing big horse teeth. Craig bit his lip.

"Chow's ready," he said. "Come and get it."

After cleanup it got dark, with only one moon in the sky, and the phytos furled their wings and went to sleep on the upper branches. The fire died away. The men rolled up in blankets and snored. Craig sat there. He saw Sidis come and stand looking out the doorway of the lighted main cabin. Sidis was the Belconti ecologist who had been boss of the old ringwall crew. He was along on this first trip with the new men only to break Wilde in as crew chief. He insisted on eating and sleeping inside the flyer, to the scorn of the

Planet Mordin red dots. His forehead was blank as Craig's, but that was little comfort. Sidis was from Planet Belconti, where they had different customs.

For Mordinmen, courage was the supreme good. They were descendants of a lost Earth-colony that had lapsed to a stone age technology and fought its way back to gunpowder in ceaseless war against the fearsome Great Russel dinotheres who were the dominant life-form on Planet Mordin before men came and for a long time after. For many generations young candidates for manhood went forth in a sworn band to kill a Great Russel with spears and arrows. When rifles came, they hunted him singly. The survivors wore the red dot of manhood and fathered the next generation. Then the civilized planets rediscovered Mordin. Knowledge flowed in. Population exploded. Suddenly there were not enough Great Russels left alive to meet the need. Craig's family had not been able to buy him a Great Russel hunt and he could not become a man.

I'll have my chance yet, Craig thought dourly.

Ten years before Craig's birth the Mordin Hunt Council found the phyto planet unclaimed and set out to convert it to one great dinothere hunting range. The Earth-type Mordin biota could neither eat nor displace the alien

phytos. Mordin contracted with Belconti biologists to exterminate the native life, Mordin laborers served under Belconti biotechs. All were blankies; no red dots would serve under the effete Belcontis, many of whom were women. Using the killer plant *Thanasis*, the Belcontis cleared two large islands and restocked them with a Mordin biota. One they named Base Island and made their headquarters. On the other they installed a Great Russel dinothere. He flourished.

When I was little, they told me I'd kill my Great Russel on this planet, Craig thought. He clasped his arms around his knees. There was still only the one Great Russel on the whole planet.

Because for thirty years the continents refused to die. The phytos encysted *Thanasis* areas, adapted, recovered ground. Belconti genesmiths designed ever more deadly strains of *Thanasis*, pushing it to the safe upper limit of its recombination index. After decades of dubious battle *Thanasis* began clearly losing ground. The Belcontis said the attempt must be given up. But the phyto planet had become the symbol of future hope to curb present social unrest on Mordin. The Hunt Council would not give up the fight. Mordin red dots were sent to study biotechnics on Belconti. Then they came to the phyto planet to do the job themselves.

Craig was already there, finishing out a two-year labor contract. Working with other blankies under a Belconti boss, he had almost forgotten the pain of withheld manhood. He had extended his contract for two more years. Then, a month ago, the red dots had come in the Mordin relief ship, to relieve both Belconti biotechs and the Mordin field crews. The Belcontis would go home on their own relief ship in about a year. Craig was left the only blanky on the planet, except for the Belcontis, and they didn't count.

I'm already alone, he thought. He bowed his head on his knees and wished he could sleep. Someone touched his shoulder. He looked up to see Sidis beside him.

"Come inside, will you, Roy?" Sidis whispered. "I want to talk to you."

Craig sat down across from Sidis at the long table in the main cabin. Sidis was a slender, dark man with the gentle Belconti manners and a wry smile.

"I'm worried what you'll do these next two years," he said. "I don't like the way they order you around, that nasty little Cobb in particular. Why do you take it?"

"I have to because I'm a blanky."

"You can't help that. If it's one of your laws, it's not a fair law."

"It's fair because it's natural," Criag said. "I don't like not being a man, but that's just how it is."

"You are a man. You're twenty-four years old."

"I'm not a man until I feel like one," Craig said. "I can't feel like one until I kill my Great Russel."

"I'm afraid you'd still feel out of place," Sidis said. "I've watched you for two years and I think you have a certain quality your own planet has no use for. So I have a proposition." He glanced at the door, then back to Craig. "Declare yourself a Belconti citizen, Roy. We'll all sponsor you. I know Mil Ames will find you a job on the staff. You can go home to Belcontis with us."

"Great Russel!" Craig said. "I couldn't never do that, Mr. Sidis."

"Why couldn't you? Do you want to go through life as Mordin blanky? Would you ever get a wife?"

"Maybe. Some woman the red dots passed over. She'd hate me, for her bad luck."

"And you call that fair?"

"It's fair because it's natural. It's natural for a woman to want an all-the-way man instead of a boy that just grew up."

"Not for Belconti women. How about it, Roy?"

Craig clasped his hands between his knees. He lowered his head and shook it slowly.

"No. No. I couldn't. My place is, here, fighting for a time when no kid has to grow up cheated, like I been." He raised his head.

"Besides, no Mordinman ever runs away from a fight."

Sidis smiled. "This fight is already lost."

"Not the way Mr. Wilde talks. In the labs at Base Camp they're going to use a trans-something, I hear."

"Translocator in the gene matrix," Sidis said. His face shadowed. "I guarantee they won't do it while Mil Ames runs the labs. After we go, they'll probably kill themselves in a year." He looked sharply at Craig. "I hadn't meant to tell you that, but it's one reason I hope you'll leave with us."

"How kill ourselves?"

"With an outlaw free-system."

Craig shook his head. Sidis looked thoughtful.

"Look, you know how the phyto stems are all rooted together underground like one huge plant," he said. "*Thanasis* pumps self-duplicating enzyme systems into them, trying to predigest the whole continent. In the labs we design those free-systems. They can digest a man, too, and that's what you get inoculated against each time we design a new one. We also design a specific control virus able to kill off each new strain of *Thanasis*. Well, then." He steepled his fingers. "With translocation, *Thanasis* can redesign its own free-systems in the field, you might say. It could come up with something impossible to immunize, something no control virus we know

how to make could handle. Then it would kill us and rule the planet itself."

"That's what happened on Planet Froy, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's what you risk. And you can't win. So come to Belconti with us."

Craig stood up. "I almost wish you didn't tell me that, about the danger," he said. "Now I can't think about leaving."

Sidis leaned back and spread his fingers on the table. "Talk to Midori Blake before you say no for sure," he said. "I know she's fond of you, Roy. I thought you rather liked her."

"I do like to be around her," Craig said. "I liked it when you used to go there, 'stead of camping in the field. I wish we did now."

"I'll try to persuade Wilde. Think it over, will you?"

"I can't think," Craig said. "I don't know what I feel." He turned to the door. "I'm going out and walk and try to think."

"Goodnight, Roy." Sidis reached for a book.

The second moon was just rising. Craig walked through a jungle of ghostly silver stems. Phytos clinging to them piped sleepily, disturbed by his passage. I'm too ignorant to be a Belconti, he thought. He was nearing the ring-wall. Stems grew more thickly, became harder, fused at last into a sloping, ninety-foot dam. Craig

climbed halfway up and stopped. It was foolhardy to go higher without a protective suit. *Thanasis* was on the other side. Its free-systems diffused hundreds of feet, even in still air. The phyto stems were all rooted together like one big plant and *Thanasis* ate into it like a sickness. The stems formed ringwalls around stands of *Thanasis*, to stop its spread and force it to poison itself. Craig climbed a few feet higher.

Sure I'm big enough to whip Cobb, he thought. Whip any of them, except Mr. Wilde. But he knew that in a quarrel his knees would turn to water and his voice squeak off to nothing, because they were men and he was not.

"Just the same, I'm not a coward," he said aloud.

He climbed to the top. *Thanasis* stretched off in a sea of blackness beneath the moons. Just below he could see the outline of narrow, pointed leaves furred with stinging hairs and beaded with poison meant to be rainwashed into the roots of downslope prey. The ringwall impounded the poisoned water. This stand of *Thanasis* was drowning in it and it was desperate. He saw the tendrils groping the flinty ringwall surface, hungry to release free-systems into enemy tissue and follow after to suck and absorb. They felt his warmth and waved feebly at him. This below him was the woody, climbing form. They said

even waist-high shrubs could eat a man in a week.

I'm not afraid, Craig thought. He sat down and took off his boots and let his bare feet dangle above the *Thanasis*. Midori Blake and all the Belcontis would think this was crazy. They didn't understand about courage—all they had was brains. He liked them anyway, Midori most of all. He thought about her as he gazed off across the dark *Thanasis*. The whole continent would have to be like that, first. Then they'd kill off *Thanasis* with a control virus and plant grass and real trees and bring birds and animals and it would all be like Base and Russel Islands were now. Sidis was wrong. That trans-stuff would do it. He'd stay and help and earn the rest of the money he needed. He felt better, with his mind made up. Then he felt a gentle tug at his left ankle.

Fierce, sudden pain stabbed his ankle. He jerked his leg up. The tendril broke and came with it, still squirming and stinging. Craig whistled and swore as he scraped it off with a boot heel, careful not to let it touch his hands. Then he pulled on his right boot and hurried back to camp for treatment.

He carried his left boot, because he knew how fast his ankle would swell. He reached camp with his left leg one screaming ache. Sidis was still up. He neutralized the poison, gave Craig a sedative and made him turn into

one of the bunks inside the flyer. He did not ask questions. He looked down at Craig with his wry smile.

"You Mordinmen," he said, and shook his head.

The Belcontis were always saying that.

In the morning Cobb sneered and Wilde was furious.

"If you're shooting for a week on the sick list, aim again," Wilde said. "I'll give you two days."

"He needs two weeks," Sidis said. "I'll do his work."

"I'll work," Craig said. "It don't hurt so much I can't work."

"Take today off," Wilde said, mollified.

"I'll work today," Craig said. "I'm all right."

It was a tortured day under the hot yellow sun, with his foot wrapped in sacks and stabbing pain up his spine with every step. Craig drove his power auger deep into basal ringwall tissue and the aromatic, red-purple sap gushed out and soaked his feet. Then he pushed in the explosive pellet, shouldered his rig and paced off the next position. Over and over he did it, like a machine, not stopping to eat his lunch, ignoring the phytos that clung to his neck and hands. He meant to finish his arc before the others, if it killed him. But when he finished and had time to think about it, his foot felt better than it had all day.

He snapped a red cloth to his auger shaft and waved it high and the flyer slanted down to pick him up. Sidis was at the controls.

"You're the first to finish," he said. "I don't see why you're even alive. Go and lie down now."

"I'll take the controls," Craig said. "I feel good."

"I guess you're proving something," Sidis smiled. "All right."

He gave Craig the controls and went aft. Driving the flyer was one of the menial jobs that Craig liked. He liked being alone in the little control cabin, with its two seats and windows all around. He lifted to a thousand feet and glanced along the ringwall, curving out of sight in both directions. The pent sea of *Thanasis* was dark green by daylight. The phyto area outside the ringwall gleamed silvery, with an overplay of shifting colors, and it was very beautiful. Far and high in the north he saw a colored cloud among the fleecy ones. It was a mass of migratory phytos drifting in the wind. It was beautiful too.

"They're very fast at transferring substance to grow or repair the ringwalls," he heard Sidis telling Wilde back in the main cabin. "You'll notice the biomass down-slope is less dense. When you release that poisoned water from inside the ringwall you get a shock effect and *Thanasis* follows up fast. But a new ringwall always forms."

"Next time through I'll blow fifty-mile arcs," Wilde said.

Craig slanted down to pick up Jordan. He was a stocky, sandy-haired man about Craig's age. He scrambled aboard grinning.

"Beat us again, hey, Craig?" he said. "That took guts, boy! You're all right!"

"I got two years practise on you guys," Craig said.

The praise made him feel good. It was the first time Jordan had called him by name instead of "Blanky." He lifted the flyer again. Jordan sat down in the spare seat.

"How's the foot?" he asked.

"Pretty good. I might get my boot on, unlaced," Craig said.

"Don't try. I'll take camp chores tonight," Jordan said. "You rest that foot, Craig."

"There's Whelan signaling," Craig said.

He felt himself blushing with pleasure as he slanted down to pick up Whelan. Jordan went aft. When Rice and Cobb had been picked up, Craig hovered the flyer at two miles and Wilde pulsed off the explosive. Twenty miles of living ringwall tissue fountained in dust and flame. Phytos rising in terrified, chromatic clouds marked the rolling shock wave. Behind it the silvery plain darkened with the sheet flow of poisoned water.

"Hah! Go it, *Thanasis!*" Wilde shouted. "I swear to bullets, that's a pretty sight down there!" He sighed. "Well, that makes it a

day, men. Sidis, where's a good place to camp?"

"We're only an hour from Burton Island," Sidis said. "I used to stop at the taxonomy station there every night, when we worked this area."

"Probably why you never got anywhere, too," Wilde said. "But I want a look at that island. The Huntsman's got plans for it."

He shouted orders up to Craig. Craig lifted to ten miles and headed southeast at full throttle. A purplish sea rolled above the silvery horizon. Far on the sea rim beaded islands climbed to view. It had been a good day, Craig thought. Jordan seemed to want to be friends. And now at long last he was going to see Midori Blake again.

He grounded the flyer on slagged earth near the familiar gray stone buildings on the eastern headland. The men got out and George and Helen Toyama, smiling and gray-haired in lab smocks, came to welcome them. Craig's left boot was tight and it hurt, but he could wear it unlaced. Helen told him Midori was painting in the gorge. He limped down the gorge path, past Midori's small house and the Toyama home on the cliff edge at left. Midori and the Toyamas were the only people on Burton Island. The island was a phyto research sanctuary and it had never been touched by *Thana-*

sis. It was the only place other than Base Camp where humans lived permanently.

The gorge was Midori's special place. She painted it over and over, never satisfied. Craig knew it well, the quartz ledge, the cascading waterfall and pool, the phytos dancing in sunlight that the silvery stem forest changed to the quality of strong moonlight. Midori said it was the peculiar light that she could never capture. Craig liked watching her paint, most of all when she forgot him and sang to herself. She was clean and apart and beautiful and it was just good to be in the same world with her. Through the splash of the waterfall and the phyto piping Craig heard her singing before he came upon her, standing before her easel beside a quartz boulder. She heard him and turned and smiled warmly.

"Roy! I'm so glad to see you!" she said. "I was afraid you'd gone home after all."

She was small and dainty under her gray dress, with large black eyes and delicate features. Her dark hair snugged boyishly close to her head. Her voice had a natural, birdlike quality and she moved and gestured with the quick grace of a singing bird. Craig grinned happily.

"For a while I almost wished I did," he said. "Now I'm glad again I didn't." He limped toward her.

"Your foot!" she said. "Come over here and sit down." She tugged him to a seat on the boulder. "What happened?"

"Touch of *Thanasis*. It's nothing much."

"Take off your boot! You don't want pressure on it!"

She helped him take the boot off and ran cool fingertips over the red, swollen ankle. Then she sat beside him.

"I know it hurts you. How did it happen?"

"I was kind of unhappy," he said. "I went and sat on a ring-wall and let my bare feet hang over."

"Foolish Roy. Why were you unhappy?"

"Oh . . . things." Several brilliant phytos settled on his bare ankle. He let them stay. "We got to sleep in the field now, 'stead of coming here. The new guys are all red dots. I'm just a nothing again and—"

"You mean they think they're better than you?"

"They are better, and that's what hurts. Killing a Great Russel is a kind of spirit thing, Midori." He scuffed his right foot. "I'll see the day when this planet has enough Great Russels so no kid has to grow up cheated."

"The phytos are not going to die," she said softly. "It's very clear now. We're defeated."

"You Belcontis are. Mordinmen never give up."

"*Thanasis* is defeated. Will you shoot phytos with rifles?"

"Please don't joke about rifles. We're going to use trans-something on *Thanasis*."

"Translocation? Oh, no!" She raised her fingers to her lips. "It can't be controlled for field use," she said. "They wouldn't dare!"

"Mordinmen dare anything," he said proudly. "These guys all studied on Belconti, they know how. That's another thing. . . ."

He scuffed his foot again. Phytos were on both their heads and shoulders now and all over his bared ankle. They twittered faintly.

"What, Roy?"

"They make me feel ignorant. Here I been ringwalling for two years, and they already know more about phytos than I do. I want you to tell me something about phytos that I can use to make the guys notice me. Like, can phytos feel?"

She held her hand to her cheek, silent for a moment.

"Phytos are strange and wonderful and I love them," she said softly. "They're mixed plant and animal. Life never split itself apart on this planet."

The flying phytozoons, she explained, functioned as leaves for the vegetative stems. But the stems, too, had internal temperature control. The continental network of great conduit roots moved fluids anywhere in any quantity

with valved peristalsis. A stem plus attached phytos made a kind of organism.

"But any phyto, Roy, can live with any stem, and they're forever shifting. Everything is part of everything," she said. "Our job here on Burton Island is to classify the phytos, and we just can't do it! They vary continuously along every dimension we choose, physical or chemical, and *kind* simply has no meaning." She sighed. "That's the most wonderful thing I know about them. Will that help you?"

"I don't get all that. That's what I mean, I'm ignorant," he said. "Tell me some one simple thing I can use to make the guys take notice of me."

"All right, tell them this," she said. "Phyto color patterns are plastid systems that synthesize different molecules. The way they can recombine parts to form new organisms, without waiting for evolution, gives them a humanly inconceivable biochemical range. Whatever new poison or free-system we design for *Thanasis*, somewhere by sheer chance they hit on a counter-substance. The knowledge spreads faster each time. That's why *Thanasis* is defeated."

"No! Don't keep saying that, Midori!" Craig protested. "This here translocation, now—"

"Not even that!" Her voice was sharp. "The phytos have unlimited translocation and any num-

ber of sexes. Collectively, I don't doubt they're the mightiest biochemical lab in the galaxy. They form a kind of biochemical intelligence, almost a mind, and it's learning faster than we are." She shook his arm with both her small hands. "Yes, tell them, make them understand," she said. "Human intelligence is defeated here. Now you will try human ferocity. . . . oh, Roy. . . ."

"Say it," he said bitterly. "You Belcontis think all Mordinmen are stupid. You sound almost like you want us to lose."

She turned away and began cleaning her brushes. It was nearly dark and the phytos were going to rest on the stems overhead. Craig sat miserably silent, remembering the feel of her hands on his arm. Then she spoke. Her voice was soft again.

"I don't know. If you wanted homes and farms here . . . but you want only the ritual deaths of man and dinother. . . ."

"Maybe people's souls get put together different ways on different planets," Craig said. "I know there's a piece missing out of mine. I know what it is." He put his hand lightly on her shoulder. "Some holidays I fly down to Russel Island just to look at the Great Russel there, and then I know. I wish I could take you to see him. He'd make you understand."

"I understand. I just don't agree."

She swished and splashed brushes, but she didn't pull her shoulder away from his hand. Craig thought about what she had said.

"Why is it you never see a dead phyto? Why is it there ain't enough dead wood on a whole continent to make one camp fire?" he asked. "What eats 'em? What keeps 'em down?"

She laughed and turned back to him, making his arm slide across her shoulders. He barely let it touch her.

"They eat themselves internally. We call it resorption," she said. "They can grow themselves again in another place and form, as a ringwall, for instance. Roy, this planet has never known death or decay. Everything is resorbed and reconstituted. We try to kill it and it suffers but its—yes, its *mind*—can't form the idea of death. There's no way to *think* death biochemically."

"Oh bullets, Midori! Phytos can't think," he said. "I wonder, can they even feel?"

"Yes, they feel!" She rose to her feet, throwing off his arm. "Their piping is a cry of pain," she said. "Papa Toyama can remember when the planet was almost silent. Since he's been here, twenty years, their temperature has risen twelve degrees, their metabolic rate and speed of neural impulse doubled, chronaxy halved—"

Craig stood up too and raised

his hands. "Hold your fire, Midori," he pleaded. "You know I don't know all them words. You're mad at me." It was too dark to see her face plainly.

"I think I'm just afraid," she said. "I'm afraid of what we've been doing that we don't know about."

"The piping always makes me feel sad, kind of," Craig said. "I never would hurt a phyto. But Great Russel, when you think about whole continents hurting and crying, day and night for years—you scare me too, Midori."

She began packing her painting kit. Craig pulled on his boot. It laced up easily, without any pain.

"We'll go to my house. I'll make our supper," she said.

They had used to do that sometimes. Those were the best times. He took the kit and walked beside her, hardly limping at all. They started up the cliff path.

"Why did you stay on past your contract, if the work makes you sad?" she asked suddenly.

"Two more years and I'll have enough saved to buy me a Great Russel hunt back on Mordin," he said. "I guess you think that's a pretty silly reason."

"Not at all. I thought you might have an even sillier reason."

He fumbled for a remark, not understanding her sudden chill. Then Jordan's voice bawled from above.

"Craig! Ho Craig!"

"Craig aye!"

"Come a-running!" Jordan yelled. "Bork's raising hell cause you ain't loading pellets. I saved chow for you."

The rest of the field period was much better. Jordan took his turn on camp chores and joked Rice and Whelan into doing the same. Only Wilde and Cobb still called Craig "Blanky." Craig felt good about things. Jordan sat beside him in the control cabin as Craig brought the flyer home to Base Island. Russel Island loomed blue to the south and the Main Continent coast range toothed the eastern sea rim.

"Home again. Beer and the range, eh, Craig?" Jordan said. "We'll get in some hunting, maybe."

"Hope so," Craig said.

Base Island looked good. It was four thousand square miles of savanna and rolling hills with stands of young oak and beech. It teemed with game animals and birds transplanted from Mordin. On its northern tip buildings and fields made the rectilinear pattern of man. Sunlight gleamed on square miles of *Thanasis* greenhouses behind their ionic stockades. Base Island was a promise of the planet's future, when *Thanasis* would have killed off the phytos and been killed in its turn and the wholesome life of Planet Mordin

replaced them both. Base Island was home.

They were the first ringwalling team to come in. Wilde reported twelve hundred miles of ringwall destroyed, fifty percent better than the old Belconti average. Barim, the Chief Huntsman, congratulated them. He was a burly, deep-voiced man with roached gray hair and four red dots on his forehead. It was the first time Craig had ever shaken hands with a man who had killed four Great Russels. Barim rewarded the crew with a week on food hunting detail. Jordan teamed up with Craig. Craig shot twenty deer and twelve pigs and scores of game birds. His bag was better than Cobb's. Jordan joked at Cobb about it, and it made the sparrowy little man very angry.

The new men had brought a roaring, jovial atmosphere to Base Camp that Craig rather liked. He picked up camp gossip. Barim had ordered immediate production of translocator pollen. Mildred Ames, the Belconti Chief Biologist, had refused. But the labs were Mordin property. Barim ordered his own men to work on it. Miss Ames raised shrill hell. Barim barred all Belcontis from the labs. Miss Ames counter-attacked, rapier against bludgeon, and got her staff back into the labs. They were to observe only, for science and the record. It had been very lively, Craig gathered.

Jealous, scared we'll show 'em up, the Mordin lab men laughed. And so we will, by the bones of Great Russel!

Craig saw Miss Ames several times around the labs. She was a tall, slender woman and now she looked pinch-mouthed and unhappy. She made Sidis a lab observer. He would not ringwall any more. Craig thought about what Midori had told him. He particularly liked that notion of resorption and waited for his chance to spring it at the mess table. It came one morning at breakfast. Wilde's crew shared a table with lab men in the raftered, stone-floored mess hall. It was always a clamor of voices and rattling mess gear. Craig sat between Cobb and Jordan and across from a squat, bald headed lab man named Joe Breen. Joe brought up the subject of ringwalls. Craig saw his chance.

"Them ringwalls, how they make 'em," he said. "They eat themselves and grow themselves again. It's called resorption."

"They're resorbing sons of guns, ain't they?" Joe said. "How do you like the way they mate?"

Wilde shouted from the head of the table. "That way's not for me!"

"What do they mean?"

Craig whispered it to Jordan. Cobb heard him.

"Blanky wants to know the facts of life," Cobb said loudly. "Who'll tell him?"

"Who but old Papa Bork?"

Wilde shouted. "Here's what they do, Blanky. When a flutterbug gets that funny feeling it rounds up from one to a dozen others. They clump on a stem and get resorbed into one of them pinkish swellings you're all the time seeing. After a while it splits and a mess of crawlers falls out. Get it?"

They were all grinning. Craig blushed and shook his head.

"They crawl off and plant themselves and each one grows into a phytogenous stem," Jordan said. "For a year it buds off new phytos like mad. Then it turns into a vegetative stem."

"Hell, I seen plenty crawlers," Craig said. "I just didn't know they were seeds."

"Know how to tell the boy crawlers from the girl crawlers, Blanky?" Cobb asked. Joe Breen laughed.

"Lay off, Cobb," Jordan said. "You don't tell their sex, you count it," he told Craig. "They got one pair of legs for each parent."

"Hey, you know, that's good!" Wilde said. "Maybe a dozen sexes, each one tearing a piece off all the others in one operation. That's good, all right!"

"Once in a lifetime, it better be good," Joe said. "But Great Russel, talk about polyploidy and multihybrids—wish we could breed *Thanasis* that way."

"I'll breed my own way," Wilde said. "Just you give me the chance."

"These Belconti women think Mordinmen are crude," Joe said. "You'll just have to save it up for Mordin."

"There's a pretty little target lives alone on Burton Island," Wilde said.

"Yeah! Blanky knows her," Cobb said. "Can she be had, Blanky?"

"No!" Craig clamped his big hand around his coffee cup. "She's funny, quiet, keeps to herself a lot," he said. "But she's decent and good."

"Maybe Blanky never tried," Cobb said. He winked at Joe. "Sometimes all you have to do is ask them quiet ones."

"I'm the guy that'll ask, give me the chance!" Wilde shouted.

"Old Bork'll come at her with them two red dots a-shining and she'll fall back into loading position slick as gun oil," Joe said.

"Yeah, and he'll find out old One-dot Cobb done nipped in there ahead of him!" Cobb whooped.

The work horn blared. The men stood up in a clatter of scraping feet and chairs.

"You go on brewhouse duty until Monday," Wilde told Craig. "Then we start a new field job."

Craig wished they were back in the field already. He felt a sudden dislike of Base Camp.

The new job was dusting translocator pollen over the many

North Continent areas where, seen from the air, silver streaking into dark green signaled phyto infiltration of old-strain *Thanasis*. The flowerless killers were wind pollinated, with the sexes on separate plants. Old ringwall scars made an overlapping pattern across half the continent, more often than not covered by silvery, iridescent stands of pure phyto growth where *Thanasis* had once ravaged. Wilde charted new ringwalls to be blown the next time out. It was hot, sweaty work in the black protective suits and helmets. They stayed contaminated and ate canned rations and forgot about campfires. After two weeks their pollen cargo was used up and they landed at Burton Island. They spent half a day decontaminating. As soon as he could, Craig broke away and hurried down the gorge path.

He found Midori by the pool. She had been bathing. Her yellow print dress molded damply to her rounded figure and her hair still dripped. What if I'd come a few minutes earlier, Craig could not help thinking. He remembered Cobb's raucous voice: sometimes all you have to do is ask them quiet ones. He shook his head. No. No.

"Hello, Midori," he said.

Small phytos, patterned curiously in gold and scarlet and green, clung to her bare arms and shoulders. She was glad to see him. She smiled sadly when he

told her about spreading translocator pollen. A phyto settled on Craig's shoulder and he tried to change the subject.

"What makes 'em do that?" he asked. "The guys think they suck blood, but they never leave no mark on me."

"They take fluid samples, but so tiny you can't feel it."

He shook the phyto off his hand. "Do they really?"

"Tiny, tiny samples. They're curious about us."

"Just tasting of us, huh?" He frowned. "If they can eat us, how come us and pigs and dinotheres can't eat them?"

"Foolish Roy! They don't *eat* us!" She stamped a bare foot. "They want to understand us, but the only symbols they have are atoms and groups and radicals and so on." She laughed. "Sometimes I wonder what they do think of us. Maybe they think we're giant seeds. Maybe they think we're each a single, terribly complicated molecule." She brushed her lips against a small scarlet and silver phyto on her wrist and it shifted to her cheek. "This is just their way of trying to live with us," she said.

"Just the same, it's what we call eating."

"They eat only water and sunshine. They can't conceive of life that preys on life." She stamped her foot again. "Eating! Oh, Roy! It's more like a kiss!"

Craig wished he were a phyto, to touch her smooth arms and shoulders and her firm cheek. He inhaled deeply.

"I know a better kind of kiss," he said.

"Do you, Roy?" She dropped her eyes.

"Yes, I do," he said unsteadily. Needles prickled his sweating hands that felt as big as baskets. "Midori, I . . . someday I . . ."

"Yes, Roy?"

"Ho the camp!" roared a voice from up the path.

It was Wilde, striding along, grinning with his horse teeth.

"Pop Toyama's throwing us a party, come along," he said. He looked closely at Midori and whistled. "Hey there, pretty little Midori, you look good enough to eat," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Wilde." The small voice was cold.

On the way up the path Wilde told Midori, "I learned the *Tanko* dance on Belconti. I told Pop if he'd play, you and I'd dance it for him, after we eat."

"I don't feel at all like dancing," Midori said.

Wilde and Cobb flanked Midori at the dinner table and vied in paying rough court to her afterward in the small sitting room. Craig talked to Helen Toyama in a corner. She was a plump, placid woman and she pretended not to hear the rough hunting stories Jordan, Rice and Whelan were

telling each other. Papa Toyama kept on his feet, pouring the hot wine. He looked thin and old and fragile. Craig kept his eye on Midori. Wilde was getting red faced and loud and he wouldn't keep his hands off Midori. He gulped bowl after bowl of wine. Suddenly he stood up.

"Hey, a toast!" he shouted. "On your feet, men! Guns up for pretty little Midori!"

They stood and drank. Wilde broke his bowl with his hands. He put one fragment in his pocket and handed another to Midori. She shook her head, refusing it. Wilde grinned.

"We'll see a lot of you folks, soon," he said. "Meant to tell you. Barim's moving you in to Base Camp. Our lab men will fly over next week to pick out what they can use of your gear."

Papa Toyama's lined, gentle face paled. "We have always understood that Burton Island would remain a sanctuary for the study of phytos," he said.

"It was never a Mordin understanding, Pop."

Toyama looked helplessly from Midori to Helen. "How much time have we to close out our projects?" he asked.

Wilde shrugged. "Say a month, if you need that long."

"We do, and more." Anger touched the old man's voice. "Why can't we at least stay here until the Belconti relief ship comes?"

"This has been our home for twenty years," Helen said softly.

"I'll ask the Huntsman to give you all the time he can," Wilde said more gently. "But as soon as he pulls a harvest of pure-line translocator seed out of the forcing chambers, he wants to seed this island. We figure to get a maximum effect in virgin territory."

Papa Toyama blinked and nodded. "More wine?" he asked, looking around the room.

When Wilde and Midori danced, Papa Toyama's music sounded strange to Craig. It sounded sad as the piping of phytos.

These translocator hybrids were sure deathific, the lab men chorled. Their free-systems had high thermal stability; that would get around the sneaky phyto trick of running a fever. Their recombination index was fantastic. There would be a time lag in gross effect, of course. Phyto infiltration of old-strain *Thanasis* areas was still accelerating. Belconti bastards should've started translocation years ago, the lab men grumbled. Scared, making their jobs last, wanted this planet for themselves. But wait. Just wait.

Craig and Jordan became good friends. One afternoon Craig sat waiting for Jordan at a table in the cavernous, smoky beer hall. On the rifle range an hour earlier he had fired three perfect Great Rus-

sel patterns and beaten Jordan by ten points. Barim had chanced by, slapped Craig's shoulder, and called him "stout rifle." Craig glowed at the memory. He saw Jordan coming with the payoff beer, threading between crowded, noisy tables and the fire pit where the pig carcass turned. Round face beaming, Jordan set four bottles on the rough plank table.

"Drink up, hunter!" he said. "Boy, today you earned it!"

Craig grinned back at him and took a long drink. "My brain was ice," he said. "It wasn't like me doing it."

Jordan drank and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "That's how it takes you when it's for real," he said. "You turn into one big rifle."

"What's it like, Jordan? What's it really like, then?"

"Nobody can ever say." Jordan looked upward into the smoke. "You don't eat for two days, they take you through the hunt ceremonies, you get to feeling light headed and funny, like you don't have a name or a family any more. Then. . . ." His nostrils flared and he clenched his fists. "Then . . . well, for me . . . there was Great Russel coming at me, getting bigger and bigger . . . filling the whole world . . . just him and me in the world." Jordan's face paled and he closed his eyes. "That's the moment! Oh, oh oh, that's the moment!" He sighed,

then looked solemnly at Craig. "I fired the pattern like it was somebody else, the way you just said. Three sided and I *felt* it hit wide, but I picked it up with a spare."

Craig's heart thudded. He leaned forward. "Were you scared then, even the least little bit?"

"You ain't scared then, because you're Great Russel himself." Jordan leaned forward too, whispering. 'you feel your own shots hit you, Craig, and you know you can't never be scared again. It's like a holy dance you and Great Russel been practicing for a million years. After that, somewhere inside you, you never stop doing that dance until you die." Jordan sighed again, leaned back and reached for his bottle.

"I dream about it lots," Craig said. His hands were shaking. "I wake up scared and sweating. Well, anyway, I mailed my application to the Hunt College by the ship you came here on."

"You'll gun through, Craig. Did you hear the Huntsman call you 'stout rifle'?"

"Yeah, like from a long way off." Craig grinned happily.

"Move your fat rump, Jordan," a jovial voice shouted.

It was Joe Breen, the bald, squat lab man. He had six bottles clasped in his hairy arms. Sidis came behind him. Joe put down his bottles.

"This is Sidis, my Belconti seeing eye," he said.

"We know Sidis, he's an old ringwaller himself," Jordan said. "Hi, Sidis. You're getting fat."

"Hello, Jordan, Roy," Sidis said. "Don't see you around much."

He and Joe sat down. Joe uncapped bottles.

"We're in the field most all the time now," Craig said.

"You'll be out more, soon as we pull the pure-line translocater seed," Joe said. "We almost got it. Sidis has kittens every day."

"You grow 'em, we'll plant 'em, eh Craig?" Jordan said. "Sidis, why don't you get off Joe's neck and come ringwalling again?"

"Too much to learn here in the labs," Sidis said. "We're all going to make our reputations out of this, if Joe and his pals don't kill us before we can publish."

"Damn the labs; give me the field. Right, Craig?"

"Right. It's clean and good out with the phytos," Craig said. "This resorption they got, it does away with things being dirty and rotten and dead—"

"Well, arrow my guts!" Joe thumped down his bottle. "Beer must make you poetical, Blanky," he snorted. "What you really mean is, they eat their own dead and their own dung. Now make a poem out of that!"

Craig felt the familiar helpless anger. "With them everything is alive all the time without stopping," he said. "All you can say they eat is water and sunshine."

"They eat water and fart helium," Joe said. "I been reading some old reports. Some old-timer name of Toyama thought they could catalyze hydrogen fusion."

"They do. That's established," Sidis said. "They can grow at night and underground and in the winter. When you stop to think about it, they're pretty wonderful."

"Damn if you ain't a poet too," Joe said. "All you Belcontis are poets."

"We're not, but I wish we had more poets," Sidis said. "Roy, you haven't forgotten what I told you once?"

"I ain't a poet," Craig said. "I can't rhyme nothing."

"Craig's all right. Barim called him 'stout rifle' on the range this afternoon," Jordan said. He wanted to change the subject. "Joe, that old guy Toyama, he's still here. Out on Burton Island. We got orders to move him in to Base Camp on our next field trip."

"Great Russel, he must've been here twenty years!" Joe said. "How's he ever stood it?"

"Got his wife along," Jordan said. "Craig here is going on three years. He's standing it."

"He's turning into a damned poet," Joe said. "Blanky, you better go home for sure on the next relief ship, while you're still a kind of a man."

Craig found Midori alone in her house. It looked bare. Her paint-

ings lay strapped together beside crates of books and clothing. She smiled at him, but she looked tired and sad.

"It's hard, Roy. I don't want to leave here," she said. "I can't bear to think of what you're going to do to this island."

"I never think about what we do, except that it just has to be," he said. "Can I help you pack?"

"I'm finished. We've worked for days, packing. And now Barim won't give us transportation for our cases of specimens." She looked ready to cry. "Papa Toyama's heart is broken," she said.

Craig bit his lip. "Heck, we can carry fifty tons," he said. "We got the room. Why don't I ask Mr. Wilde to take 'em anyway?"

She grasped his arm and looked up at him. "Would you, Roy? I . . . don't want to ask him a favor. The cases are stacked outside the lab building."

Craig found his chance after supper at the Toyamas. Wilde left off paying court to Midori and carried his wine bowl outside. Craig followed and asked him. Wilde was looking up at the sky. Both moons rode high in a clear field of stars.

"What's in the cases, did you say?" Wilde asked.

"Specimens, slides and stuff. It's kind of like art to 'em."

"All ours now. I'm supposed to destroy it," Wilde said. "Oh, hell! All right, if you want to strong-

back the stuff aboard." He chuckled. "I about got Midori talked into taking one last walk down to that pool of hers. I'll tell her you're loading the cases." He nudged Craig. "Might help, huh?"

When he had the eighty-odd cases stowed and lashed, Craig lifted the flyer to a hundred feet to test his trim. Through his side window he saw Wilde and Midori come out of the Toyama house and disappear together down the gorge path. Wilde had his arm across her shoulders. Craig grounded and went back, but he could not rejoin the party. For an hour he paced outside in dull, aching anger. Then his crewmates came out, arguing noisily.

"Ho Craig! Where been, boy?" Jordan slapped his shoulder. "I just bet Cobb you could outgun him tomorrow, like you did me. We'll stick old Cobbo for the beer, eh, boy?"

"Like hell," Cobb said.

"Like shooting birds in a cage," Jordan said. "Come along, Craig. Get some sleep. You got to be right tomorrow."

"I ain't sleepy," Craig said.

"Bet old Bork's shooting himself a cage bird about now," Cobb said.

They all laughed except Craig.

On the trip to Base Camp next morning Craig, at the controls, heard Wilde singing hunt songs and making jokes back in the main cabin. He seemed to be still drunk.

With high good humor he even helped his crew deliver the baggage to Belconti quarters. Craig had no chance to speak to Midori. He was not sure he wanted a chance. That afternoon Cobb outgunned Craig badly. Jordan tried to console him, but Craig drank himself sodden. He woke the next morning to Jordan's insistent shaking.

"Wake up, damn it! We're going out again, right away!" Jordan said. "Don't let Bork catch you sleeping late. Something went wrong for him last night over in Belconti quarters, and he's mad as a split snake."

Still dizzy and sick four hours later, and wearing his black pro suit, Craig grounded the flyer again at Burton Island. They had a cargo of pure-line translocater seed. The men got out. Wilde wore a black frown.

"Jordan and Blanky, you seed that gorge path all the way to the waterfall," he ordered.

"I thought we picked high, sunny places," Jordan objected. "It's shady down there."

"Seed it, I told you!" Wilde bared his horse teeth. "Come on, Rice, Cobb, Whelan! Get going around these buildings!"

When they had finished the seeding, Jordan and Craig rested briefly on the quartz boulder near the pool. For the first time, Craig let himself look around. Phytos danced piping above their heads.

The stems marching up the steep slopes transmuted the golden sun glare to a strong, silvery moonlight. It sparkled on the quartz ledge and the cascading water.

"Say, it's pretty down here," Jordan said. "Kind of twangs your string, don't it? It'll make a nice hunting camp someday."

"Let's go up," Craig said. "They'll be waiting."

Lifting out of the field at sunset, Craig looked down at the deserted station from his side window. Midori's house looked small and forlorn and accusing.

At Base Camp six men died of a mutant free-system before the immunizer could be synthesized. An escaped control virus wiped out a translocator seed crop and Wilde's men got an unscheduled rest after months of driving work. The once roaring, jovial atmosphere of Base Camp had turned glum. The lab men muttered about Belconti sabotage. They drank a great deal, not happily.

On his first free day Craig checked out a sports flyer, found Midori in the Belconti quarters, and asked her to go riding. She came, wearing a white blouse and pearls and a blue and yellow flare skirt. She seemed sad, her small face half dreaming and her eyes unfocused. Craig forgot about being angry with her and wanted to cheer her. When he was a mile up and heading south, he tried.

"You look pretty in that dress, like a phyto," he said.

She smiled faintly. "My poor phytos. How I miss them," she said. "Where are we going, Roy?"

"Russel Island, down ahead there. I want you to see Great Russel."

"I want to see him," she said. A moment later she cried out and grasped his arm. "Look at that color in the sky! Over to the right!"

It was a patch of softly twinkling, shifting colors far off and high in the otherwise cloudless sky.

"Migratory phytos," he said. "We see 'em all the time."

"I know. Let's go up close. Please, Roy."

He arrowed the flyer toward the green-golden cloud. It resolved into millions of phytos, each with its opalescent hydrogen sac inflated and drifting northwest in the trade wind.

"They stain the air with beauty!" Midori cried. Her face was vividly awake and her eyes sparkled. "Go clear inside, please, Roy!"

She used to look like that when she was painting in the gorge, Craig remembered. It was the way he liked her best. He matched wind speed inside the cloud and at once lost all sense of motion. Vividly colored phytos obscured land, sea and sky. Craig felt lost and dizzy. He moved closer to Midori. She slid open her window to

let in the piping and the spicy perfume.

"It's so beautiful I can't bear it," she said. "They have no eyes, Roy. We must know for them how beautiful they are."

She began piping and trilling in her clear voice. A phyto patterned in scarlet and green and silver dropped to her outstretched hand and she sang to it. It deflated its balloon and quivered velvety wings. Craig shifted uneasily.

"It acts almost like it knows you," he said.

"It knows I love it."

"Love? Something so different?" He frowned. "That ain't how I mean love."

She looked up. "How do you understand love?"

"Well, you want to protect people you love, fight for 'em, do things for 'em." He was blushing. "What could you do for a phyto?"

"Stop trying to exterminate them," she said softly.

"Don't start that again. I don't like to think about it either. But I know it just has to be."

"It will never be," she said. "I know. Look at all the different color patterns out there. Papa Toyama remembers when phytos were almost all green. They developed the new pigments and patterns to make counter-substances against *Thanasis*." She lowered her voice. "Think of it, Roy. All the colors and patterns are new ideas in this planet's

strange, inconceivably powerful biochemical mind. This cloud is a message, from one part of it to another part of it. Doesn't it frighten you?"

"You scare me." He moved slightly away from her. "I didn't know they been changing like that."

"Who stays here long enough to notice? Who cares enough to look and see?" Her lips trembled. "But just think of the agony and the changings, through all the long years men have been trying to kill this planet. What if something . . . somehow . . . suddenly *understands*?"

Craig's neck-hair bristled. He moved further away. He felt weird and alone, without time or place or motion in that piping, perfumed phyto cloud-world. He couldn't face Midori's eyes.

"Damn it, this planet belongs to Great Russel!" he said harshly. "We'll win yet! At least they'll never take back Base or Russel Islands. Their seeds can't walk on water."

She kept her eyes on his, judging or pleading or questioning, he could not tell. He could not bear them. He dropped his own eyes.

"Shake that thing off your hand!" he ordered. "Close your window. I'm getting out of here!"

Half an hour later Craig hovered the flyer over the wholesome green grass and honest oak trees of

Russel Island. He found Great Russel and held him in the magniviewer and they watched him catch and kill a buffalo. Midori gasped.

"Ten feet high at the shoulder. Four tons, and light on his feet as a cat," Craig said proudly. "That long, reddish hair is like wire. Them bluish bare spots are like armor plate."

"Aren't his great teeth enough to kill the cattle he eats?" she asked. "What enemies can he have, to need those terrible horns and claws?"

"His own kind. And us. Our boys will hunt him here, here on this planet, and become men. Our men will hunt him here, to heal their souls."

"You love him, don't you? Did you know you were a poet?" She could not take her eyes off the screen. "He is beautiful, fierce and terrible, not what women call beauty."

"He's the planet-shaker, he is! It takes four perfect shots to bring him down," Craig said. "He jumps and roars like the world ending—oh, Midori, I'll have my day!"

"But you might be killed."

"The finest kind of death. In our lost colony days our old fathers fought him with bow and arrow," Craig said. "Even now, sometimes, we form a sworn band and fight him to the death with spears and arrows."

"I've read of sworn bands. I

suppose you can't help how you feel."

"I don't want to help it! A sworn band is the greatest honor that can come to a man," he said. "But thanks for trying to understand."

"I want to understand. I want to, Roy. Is it that you can't believe in your own courage until you face Great Russel?"

"That's just what women can't ever understand." He faced the question in her eyes. "Girls can't help turning into women, but a man has to make himself," he said. "It's like I don't have my man's courage until I get it from Great Russel. There's chants and stuff with salt and fire . . . afterwards the boy eats pieces of the heart and . . . I shouldn't talk about that. You'll laugh."

"I feel more like crying." She kept her strange eyes on his. "There are different kinds of courage, Roy. You have more courage than you know. You must find your true courage in your own heart, not in Great Russel's."

"I can't." He looked away from her eyes. "I'm nothing inside me, until I face Great Russel."

"Take me home, Roy. I'm afraid I'm going to cry." She dropped her face to her folded hands. "I don't have much courage," she said.

They flew to Base Camp in silence. When Craig helped her down from the flyer, she was really crying. She bowed her head mo-

mentarily against his chest and the spicy phyto smell rose from her hair.

"Goodbye, Roy," she said.

He could barely hear her. Then she turned and ran.

Craig did not see her again. Wilde's crew spent all its time in the field, blowing ringwalls and planting translocater seed. Craig was glad to be away. The atmosphere of Base Camp had turned from glum to morose. Everywhere across North Continent new phyto growth in silver, green and scarlet spotted the dark green *Thanasis* areas. Other ringwall crews reported the same of South and Main Continents. Wilde's temper became savage; Cobb cursed bitterly at trifles; even happy-go-lucky Jordan stopped joking. Half asleep one night in field camp, Craig heard Wilde shouting incredulous questions at the communicator inside the flyer. He came out cursing to rouse the camp.

"Phytos are on Base Island! Stems popping up everywhere!"

"Great Russel in the sky!" Jordan jerked full awake. "How come?"

"Belconti bastards planted 'em, that's how!" Wilde said. "Barim's got 'em all arrested under camp law."

Cobb began cursing in a steady, monotonous voice.

"That . . . cracks . . . the gun-flint!" Jordan said.

"We'll kill 'em by hand," Wilde said grimly. "We'll sow the rest of our seed broadcast and go in to help."

Craig felt numb and unbelieving. Shortly after noon he grounded the flyer at Base Camp, in the foul area beyond the emergency rocket launching frame. Wilde cleaned up at once and went to see Barim, while his crew decontaminated the flyer. When they came through the irradiation tunnel in clean denims, Wilde was waiting.

"Blanky, come with me!" he barked.

Craig followed him into the gray stone building at the field edge. Wilde pushed him roughly through a door, said "Here he is, Huntsman," and closed the door again.

Rifles, bows and arrows decorated the stone walls. The burly Chief Huntsman, cold eyed under his roached gray hair and the four red dots, sat facing the door from behind a wooden desk. He motioned Craig to sit down in one of the row of wooden chairs along the inner wall. Craig sat stiffly in the one nearest the door. His mouth was dry.

"Roy Craig, you are on your trial for life and honor under camp law," Barim said sternly. "Swear now to speak truth in the blood of Great Russel."

"I swear to speak truth in the blood of Great Russel."

Craig's voice sounded false to him. He began to sweat.

"What would you say of someone who deliberately betrayed our project to destroy the phytos?" Barim asked.

"He would be guilty of hunt treason, sir. An outlaw."

"Very well." Barim clasped his hands and leaned forward, his gray eyes hard on Craig's eyes. "What did you tell Bork Wilde was in those cases you flew from Burton Island to Base Island?"

Craig's stomach knotted. "Slides, specimens, science stuff, sir."

Barim questioned him closely about the cases. Craig tried desperately to speak truth without naming Midori. Barim forced her name from him, then questioned him on her attitudes. A terrible fear grew in Roy Craig. He kept his eyes on Barim's eyes and spoke a tortured kind of truth, but he would not attaint Midori. Finally Barim broke their locked gazes and slapped his desk.

"Are you in *love* with Midori Blake, boy?" he roared.

Craig dropped his glance. "I don't know, sir," he said. He thought miserably: how do you know when you're in love? "Well . . . I like to be around her . . . I never thought . . . I know we're good friends." He gulped. "I don't think so, sir," he said finally.

"Phyto seeds are loose on Base

Island," Barim said. "Who planted them?"

"They can walk and plant themselves, sir." Craig's mouth was dry as powder. He avoided Barim's glance.

"Would Midori Blake be morally capable of bringing them here and releasing them?"

Craig's face twisted. "Morally . . . I'm not clear on the word, sir. . . ." Sweat dripped on his hands.

"I mean, would she have the guts to want to do it and to do it?"

Ice clamped Craig's heart. He looked Barim in the eye. "No, sir!" he said. "I won't never believe that about Midori!"

Barim smiled grimly and slapped his desk again. "Wilde!" he shouted. "Bring them in!"

Midori, in white blouse and black skirt, came in first. Her face was pale but composed, and she smiled faintly at Craig. Mildred Ames followed, slender and thin faced in white, then Wilde, scowling blackly. Wilde sat between Craig and Miss Ames, Midori on the end.

"Miss Blake, young Craig has clearly been your dupe, as you insist he has," Barim said. "Your confession ends your trial except for sentencing. Once more I beg of you to say why you have done this."

"You would not understand," Midori said. "Be content with what you know."

Her voice was low but firm. Craig felt sick with dismay.

"I can understand without condoning," Barim said. "For your own sake, I must know your motive. You may be insane."

"You know I'm sane. You know that."

"Yes," Barim's wide shoulders sagged. "Invent a motive, then." He seemed almost to plead. "Say you hate Mordin. Say you hate me."

"I hate no one. I'm sorry for you all."

"I'll give you a reason!" Miss Ames jumped to her feet, thin face flaming. "Your reckless, irresponsible use of translocation endangers us all! Accept defeat and go home!"

She helped Barim recover his composure. He smiled.

"Please sit down, Miss Ames," he said calmly. "In three months your relief ship will come to take you to safety. But we neither accept defeat nor fear death. We will require no tears of anyone."

Miss Ames sat down, her whole posture shouting defiance. Barim swung his eyes back to Midori. His face turned to iron.

"Miss Blake, you are guilty of hunt treason. You have betrayed your own kind in a fight with an alien life form," he said. "Unless you admit to some recognizably *human* motive, I must conclude that you abjure your own humanity."

Midori said nothing. Crag stole a glance at her. She sat erect but undefiant, small feet together, small hands folded in her lap. Barim slapped his desk and stood up.

"Very well. Under camp law I sentence you, Midori Blake, to outlawry from your kind. You are a woman and not of Mordin; therefore I will remit the full severity. You will be set down, lacking everything made with hands, on Russel Island. There you may still be nourished by the roots and berries of the Earth-type life you have wilfully betrayed. If you survive until the Belconti relief ship comes, you will be sent home on it." He burned his glance at her. "Have you anything to say before I cause your sentence to be executed?"

The four red dots blazed against the sudden pallor of the Huntsman's forehead. Something snapped in Craig. He leaped up, shouting into the hush.

"You can't do it, sir! She's little and weak! She doesn't know our ways—"

"Down! Shut up, you whimpering fool!" Wilde slapped and wrestled Craig to his seat again. "Silence!" Barim thundered. Wilde sat down, breathing hard. The room was hushed again.

"I understand your ways too well," Midori said. "Spare me your mercy. Put me down on Burton Island."

"Midori, no!" Miss Ames turned to her. "You'll starve. *Thanasis* will kill you!"

"You can't understand either, Mildred," Midori said. "Mr. Barim, will you grant my request?"

Barim leaned forward, resting on his hands. "It is so ordered," he said huskily. "Midori Blake, almost you make me know again the taste of fear." He straightened and turned to Wilde, his voice suddenly flat and impersonal. "Carry out the sentence, Wilde."

Wilde stood up and pulled Craig to his feet. "Get the crew to the flyer. Wear pro suits," he ordered. "Run, boy."

Craig stumbled out into the twilight.

Craig drove the flyer northwest from Base Camp at full throttle, overtaking the sun, making it day again. Silence ached in the main cabin behind him. He leaned away from it, as if to push the flyer forward with his muscles. He was refusing to think at all. He knew it had to be and still he could not bear it. After an anguished forever he grounded the flyer roughly beside the deserted buildings on Burton Island. They got out, the men in black pro suits, Midori still in blouse and skirt. She stood apart quietly and looked toward her little house on the cliff edge. *Thanasis* thrust up dark green and knee high along all the paths.

"Break out ringwall kits. Blow all the buildings," Wilde ordered. "Blanky, you come with me."

At Midori's house Wilde ordered Craig to sink explosive pellets every three feet along the foundations. A single pellet would have been enough. Craig found his voice.

"The Huntsman didn't say do this, Mr. Wilde. Can't we at least leave her this house?"

"She won't need it. *Thanasis* will kill her before morning."

"Let her have it to die in, then. She loved this little house."

Wilde grinned without mirth, baring his big horse teeth.

"She's *outlaw*, Blanky. You know the law: nothing made with hands."

Craig bowed his head, teeth clamped. Wilde whistled tunelessly as Craig set the pellets. They returned to the flyer and Jordan reported the other buildings ready to blow. His round, jolly face was grim. Midori had not moved. Craig wanted to speak to her, say good-bye. He knew if he tried he would find no words but a howl. Her strange little smile seemed already to remove her to another world a million light-years from Roy Craig and his kind. Cobb looked at Midori. His rat face was eager.

"We'll detonate from the air," Wilde said. "The blast will kill anyone standing here."

"We're supposed to take off all her clothes first," Cobb said. "You

know the law, Bork: nothing made with hands."

"That's right," Wilde said.

Midori took off her blouse. She looked straight at Wilde. Red mist clouded Craig's vision.

"Load the kits," Wilde said abruptly. "Into the flyer, all hands! *Jump*, you dogs!"

From his side window by the controls Craig saw Midori start down the gorge path. She walked as carelessly relaxed as if she were going down to paint. *Thanasis* brushed her bare legs and he thought he saw the angry red spring out. Craig felt the pain in his own skin. He lifted the flyer with a lurching roar and he did not look out when Wilde blew up the buildings.

Away from the sun, southwest toward Base Camp, wrapped in his own thought-vacant hell, Roy Craig raced to meet the night.

With flame, chemicals and grub hoes, the Mordinmen fought their losing battle for Base Island. Craig worked himself groggy with fatigue, to keep from thinking. The phyto stems radiated underground with incredible growth energy. They thrust up redoubly each new day like hydra heads. Newly budded phytos the size of thumbnails tinted the air of Base Island in gaily dancing swirls. Once Craig saw Joe Breen, the squat lab man, cursing and hopping like a frog while he slashed at dancing

phytos with an axe. It seemed to express the situation.

Barim made his grim decisions to move camp to Russel Island and seed the home island with *Thanasis*. Craig was helping erect the new camp when he collapsed. He awoke in bed in a small, bare infirmary room at Base Camp. The Mordin doctor took blood samples and questioned him. Craig admitted to joint pains and nausea for several days past.

"I been half crazy, sir," he defended himself. "I didn't know I was sick."

"I've got twenty more do know it," the doctor grunted.

He went out, frowning. Craig slept, to flee in dream-terror from a woman's eyes. He half woke at intervals for medication and clinical tests, to sleep again and face repeatedly a Great Russel dinothere. It looked at him with a woman's inscrutable eyes. He roused into the morning of the second day to find another bed squeezed into the small room, by the window. Papa Toyama was in it. He smiled at Craig.

"Good morning, Roy," he said. "I would be happier to meet you in another place."

Many were down and at least ten had died, he told Craig. The Belconti staff was back in the labs, working frantically to identify agent and vector. Craig felt hollow and his head ached. He did not much care. Dimly he saw

Miss Ames in a white lab smock come around the foot of his bed to stand between him and Papa Toyama. She took the old man's hand.

"George, old friend, we've found it," she said.

"You do not smile, Mildred."

"I don't smile. All night I've been running a phase analysis of diffraction patterns," she said. "It's what we've feared—a spread of two full Ris units."

"So. Planet Froy again." Papa Toyama's voice was calm. "I would like to be with Helen again, for the little time we have."

"Surely," Miss Ames said. "I'll see to it."

Quick, heavy footsteps sounded outside. A voice broke in.

"Ah. Here you are, Miss Ames."

Barim, in leather hunting clothes, bulked in the door. Miss Ames turned to face him across Craig's bed.

"I'm told you found the virus," Barim said.

"Yes." Miss Ames smiled thinly.

"Well, what counter-measures? Twelve are dead. What can I do?"

"You might shoot at it with a rifle. It is a *Thanasis* free-system that has gotten two degrees of temporal freedom. Does that mean anything to you?"

His heavy jaw set like a trap. "No, but your manner does. It's the plague, isn't it?"

She nodded. "No suit can screen it. No cure is possible. We are all infected."

Barim chewed his lip and looked at her in silence. "For your sake now, I wish we'd never come here," he said at last. "I'll put our emergency rocket in orbit to broadcast a warning message. That will save your relief ship, when it comes, and Belconti can warn the sector." A half-smile softened his bluff, grim features. "Why don't you rub my nose in it? Say you told me so?"

"Need I?" Her chin came up. "I pity you Mordinmen. You must all die now without dignity, crying out for water and your mothers. How you will loathe that!"

"Does that console you?" Barim still smiled. "Not so, Miss Ames. All night I thought it might come to this. Even now men are forging arrow points. We'll form a sworn band and all die fighting Great Russel." His voice deepened and his eyes blazed. "We'll stagger who can, crawl who must, carry our helpless, and all die fighting like men!"

"Like savages! No! No!" Her hands flew up in shocked protest. "Forgive me for taunting you, Mr. Barim. I need your help, all of your men and transport, truly I do. Some of us may live, if we fight hard enough."

"How?" He growled it. "I thought on Planet Froy—"

"Our people on Planet Froy had only human resources. But here, I'm certain that somewhere already the phytos have synthe-

sized the plague immunizer that seems forever impossible to human science." Her voice shook. "Please help us, Mr. Barim. If we can find it, isolate enough to learn its structure—"

"No." He cut her off bluntly. "Too long a gamble. One doesn't run squealing away from death, Miss Ames. My way is decent and sure."

Her chin came up and her voice sharpened. "How dare you condemn your own men unconsulted? They might prefer a fight for life."

"Hah! You don't know them!" Barim bent to shake Craig's shoulder with rough affection. "You, lad," he said. "You'll get up and walk with a sworn band, won't you?"

"No," Craig said.

He struggled off the pillow, propped shakily on his arms. Miss Ames smiled and patted his cheek.

"You'll stay and help us fight to live, won't you?" she said.

"No," Craig said.

"Think what you say, lad!" Barim said tautly. "Great Russel can die of plague, too. We owe him a clean death."

Craig sat bolt upright. He stared straight ahead.

"I foul the blood of Great Russel," he said slowly and clearly. "I foul it with dung. I foul it with carrion. I foul—"

Barim's fist knocked Craig to

the pillow and split his lip. The Huntsman's face paled under his tan.

"You're mad, boy!" he whispered. "Not even in madness may you say those words!"

Craig struggled up again. "You're the crazy ones, not me," he said. He tongued his lip and blood dripped on his tin pajama coat. "I'll die an outlaw, that's how I'll die," he said. "An outlaw, on Burton Island." He met Barim's unbelieving eyes. "I foul the blood—"

"Silence!" Barim shouted. "Outlawry it is. I'll send a party for you, stranger."

He whirled and stamped out. Miss Ames followed him.

"You Mordinmen," she said, shaking her head.

Craig sat on the edge of his bed and pulled his sweat soaked pajamas straight. The room blurred and swam around him. Papa Toyama's smile was like a light.

"I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed. Please forgive us, Papa Toyama," Craig said. "All we know is to kill and kill and kill."

"We all do what we must," the old man said. "Death cancels all debts. It will be good to rest."

"Not my debts. I'll never rest again," Craig said. "All of a sudden I know—Great Russel, *how* I know!—I know I loved Midori Blake."

"She was a strange girl. Helen and I thought she loved you, in

the old days on our island." Papa Toyama bowed his head. "But our lives are only chips in a waterfall. Goodbye, Roy."

Jordan, in a black pro suit, came shortly after. His face was bitter with contempt. He jerked his thumb at the door.

"On your feet, stranger! Get going!" he snapped.

In pajamas and barefooted, Craig followed him. From somewhere in the infirmary he heard a voice screaming. It sounded like Cobb. They walked across the landing field. Everything seemed under water. Men were rigging to fuel the emergency rocket. Craig sat apart from the others in the flyer. Cobb was missing. Wilde was flushed and shivering and his eyes glared with fever. Jordan took the controls. No one spoke. Craig dozed through colored dream-scrapes while the flyer outran the sun. He woke when it grounded in early dawn on Burton Island.

He climbed down and stood swaying beside the flyer. *Thanasis* straggled across the rubble heaps and bulked waist high in the dim light along the paths. Phytos stirred on their stems and piped sleepily in the damp air. Craig's eyes searched for something, a memory, a presence, a completion and rest, he did not know what. He felt it very near him. Wilde came behind him, shoving. Craig moved away.

"Stranger!" Wilde called.

Craig turned. He looked into the fever glaring eyes above the grinning horse teeth. The teeth gaped.

"I foul the blood of Midori Blake. I foul it with dung. I—"

Strength from nowhere exploded into the bone and muscle of Roy Craig. He sprang and felt the teeth break under his knuckles. Wilde fell. The others scrambled down from the flyer.

"Blood right! Blood right!" Craig shouted.

"Blood right!" Wilde echoed.

Jordan held back Rice and Whelan. Strength flamed along Craig's nerves. Wilde rose, spitting blood, swinging big fists. Craig closed to meet him, berserk in fury. The world wheeled and tilted, shot with flashing colors, gasping with grunts and curses, but rock-steady in the center of things Wilde pressed the fight and Craig hurled it back on him. He felt the blows without pain, felt his ribs splinter, felt the good shock of his own blows all the way to his ankles. Bruising falls on the rough slag, feet stamping, arms grappling, hands tearing, breath sobbing, both men on knees clubbing with fists and forearms. The scene cleared and Craig saw through one eye Wilde crumpled and inert before him. He rose unsteadily. He felt weightless and clean inside.

"Blood right, stranger," Jordan said, grim faced and waiting.

"Let it go," Craig said.

He turned down the gorge path, ignoring his chest pains, crashing through the rank *Thanasis*. *Home! going home! going home!* a bell tolled in his head. He did not look back.

Thanasis grew more sparsely in the shaded gorge. Craig heard the waterfall and old memories cascaded upon him. He rounded to view of it and his knees buckled and he knelt beside the boulder. She was very near him. He felt an overpowering sense of her presence. She was this place.

Dawn light shafted strongly into the gorge. It sparkled on the quartz ledge and made reflecting rainbows in the spray above the pool. Phytos lifted from ghost-silver stems to dance their own rainbow in the air. Something rose in Craig's throat and choked him. Tears blurred his good eye.

"Midori," he said. "Midori."

The feeling overwhelmed him. His heart was bursting. He could find no words. He raised his arms and battered face to the sky and cried out incoherently. Then a blackness swept away his intolerable pain.

Titanic stirrings. Windy rushings. Sharp violences swarming.

Fittings-together in darkness. A trillion times a trillion times a trillion patient searchings. Filtering broken lights, silver, green, golden, scarlet.

Bluntings. Smoothings, Transforming into otherness.

Flickering awareness, planet-vast and atom-tiny, no focus between. The proto-sensorium of a god yearning to know himself. Endless, patient agony in search of being.

Form and color unfolding in middle focus. Flashings of terrible joy and love unspeakable. It looked. Listened. Felt. Smelled. Tasted.

Crystalline polar wastes. Wine of sweet. Gold-glint of sun on blue water. Perfumed wind caress. Thorn of bitter. Rain patter. Silver-green sweep of hill. Storm roar and shaking. Sharp of salt. Sleeping mountains. Surf beat. Star patterns dusted on blackness. Clear of sour. Cool moons of night.

It knew and loved.

Ragged line of men gaunt under beard stubble. Green plain. High golden sun. Roar. Shaggy redness bounding. Bow twangs. Whispering arrow lights. Deep-chested shouts of men. Lances thrusting. Bodies ripped. Thrown. Horn-impaled, beating with fists. Great shape kneeling. Threshing. Streaming blood. Deep man-shouts dwindling to a silence.

It knew and sorrowed.

The woman bathing. Sunlight hair streaming. Grace beyond bearing. Beauty that was pain.

It shook terribly with love.

Rested readiness, whole and unblemished forever. The man

newly-minted. Bursting excitement. HOME! coming HOME! coming HOME!

It woke into its world.

It was like waking up fresh and rested on the fine morning of a day when something glorious was going to happen. He was sitting up in a cavity at the base of a huge phyto stem. He brushed away papery shreds and saw the pool and heard the waterfall. With a glad cry, Midori came running. He stood up whole and strong to greet her.

"Midori! Midori, when you die . . . ?" He wanted to know a million things, but one came first. "Can I ever lose you again, now?"

"Never again."

She was smiling radiantly. They were both naked. He was not excited and not ashamed.

"We didn't die, Roy," she said.

"We're just made new."

"The plague killed everybody."

"I know. But we didn't die."

"Tell me."

He listened like a child, believing without understanding. Somewhere in its infinite life-spectrum the planetary life had matched up a band for humans. "As if we were single giant molecules and it discovered our structural formula," she said. "That's how it thinks." They had been resorbed into the planetary biomass, cleansed of *Thanasis*, and reconstituted whole and without blemish. "We're im-

mune to *Thanasis* now," she said. "We're made new, Roy."

The sunken red *Thanasis* scar was gone from his ankle. All of his other old scars were gone. He held her hands and looked on her beauty and believed her.

"We tried so long and hard to kill it," he said.

"It couldn't know that. To it death and decay are only vital changings," she said, smiling wonderfully. "This life never split apart, Roy. In wholeness there is nothing but love."

"Love is making a wholeness," he said. "I know about love now."

He told her about his visions.

"I had them too. We were diffused into the planetary consciousness."

"Do we still eat and drink and sleep . . . and all?"

She laughed. "Foolish Roy! Of course we do!" She pulled at his hands. "Come. I'll show you."

Hand in hand they ran to the pool. The gravel hurt his feet. Beside the pool stems had fused ring-wall fashion into a series of connecting rooms like hollow cones. He followed Midori through them. They were clean and dry and silvery with shadows. Outside again she pointed out brownish swellings on various stems. She tore one open, the covering like thin paper, to reveal pearly, plum-sized nodules closely packed in a cavity. She bit one nodule in two and held the other half to his lips.

"Try," she said.

He ate it. It was cool and crisp, with a delightful, unfamiliar flavor. He ate several more, looking at her in wonder.

"There are hundreds of these vesicles," she said. "No two of them ever taste the same. They're grown just for us."

He looked at her and around at the beauty of the gorge in strong, transmuted sunlight and he could not bear it. He closed his eyes and turned away from her.

"I can't. I can't, Midori," he said. "I ain't good enough for this."

"You are, Roy."

"You loved it before. But all I wanted was to kill it," he said. "Now it's done this for me." The feeling flooded him agonizingly. "I want to love it back and I can't. Not now. Not after. I just *can't*, Midori!"

"Roy. Listen to me." She was in front of him again, but he would not open his eyes. "This life emerged with infinite potentialities. It mastered its environment using only the tiniest part of them," she said. "It never split up, to fight itself and evolve that way. So it lay dreaming. It might have dreamed forever."

"Only we came, you mean? With *Thanasis*?"

"Yes. We forced it to changes, genetic recombination, rises in temperatures and process speeds. Whatever happened at one point

could be duplicated everywhere, because it is all one. One year to it is like millions of years of Earthly evolution. It raised itself to a new level of awareness."

He felt her hand on his arm. He would not open his eyes.

"Listen to me, Roy! We *wakened* it. It knows us and loves us for that."

"Loves us for *Thanasis*!"

"It loves *Thanasis*, too. It conquered *Thanasis* with love."

'And me. Tamed. A pet. A parasite. I *can't*, Midori!"

"Oh no! Roy, *please* understand! It thinks us now, biochemically. Like each littlest phyto, we are thoughts in that strange mind. I think we focus its awareness, somehow, serve it as a symbol system, a form-giver. . . ." She lowered her voice. He could feel her warmth and nearness. "We are its thoughts that also think themselves, the first it has ever had," she whispered. "It is a great and holy mystery, Roy. Only through us can it know its own beauty and wonder. It loves and needs us." She pressed against him. "Roy, *look* at me!"

He opened his eyes. She smiled pleadingly. He ran his hands down the smooth curve of her back and she shivered. He clasped her powerfully. It was all right.

"I can love it back, now," he said. "Through you, I love it."

"I give you back its love," she whispered into his shoulder.

Afterward, arms linked, dazed with their love, they walked down to the sea. They stood on sparkling sand and cool water splashed at their ankles.

"Roy, have you thought? We'll never be ill, never grow old. Never have to die."

He pressed his face into her hair. "Never is a long time."

"If we tire, we can be resorbed and diffuse through the planetary consciousness again. But that's not death."

"Our children can serve."

"And their children."

"It could do this for anybody

now, couldn't it?" he asked her quietly.

"Yes. For any old or ill human who might come here," she said. "They could have youth and strength again forever."

"Yes." He looked up at the blue, arching sky. "But there's a rocket up there with a warning message, to scare them away. I wish. I wish they could know. . . ."

"That they are their own plague."

He patted her head to rest again on his shoulder.

"Someday they'll learn," he said.
