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(illustrating "Baby")

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Bureau of Imaginary Zoology

Back in our early days, the B. of I. Z. was one of *F&SF*'s best-liked special features. Our xenobiologically-minded authors poured in reports on astonishing alien beings; and readers still cherish the memory of such fascinating creatures as Theodore Sturgeon's often-reprinted *hurkle*. Now, after a long gap in such reports, Rog Phillips introduces us to the *vegy*—as detailedly studied a non-animal entity as has turned up in *s.f.* in some time. And you'll be happy to learn that, unlike its predecessors in the B. of I. Z., the *vegy* will appear again. This story is planned as a sort of (if you will pardon me) opening *veg* in a whole series of tales of the strange symbiosis of Man and *Vegetation*, many of which you'll be reading here in the future.

Love Me, Love My —

by ROG PHILLIPS

"CONGRATULATIONS, MY BOY," Sims said. "You are getting a transfer to tau Ceti III, and I don't mind telling you we have our eye on you as Directorate material, twenty or thirty years from now."

Lin Braquet tried to conceal his dismay. "But I don't want—" he blurted. "I like it here on Venus." He made a belated attempt at psychology. "I want to stay under you, Mr. Sims."

The president of Interstellar Chemical (Venus branch) frowned. "See here, Braquet," he said. "You know our setup, our

tradition. You're an I.C.-sponsored man. We gave you your education, we brought you here. We've spent a terrific sum of money on you already."

"But why can't I remain here?" Lin said.

"Our men have to keep moving up the ladder, my boy," Sims said heartily. "Others are getting their doctorates, ready to climb. More of them than we really need or want, of course. We have to sponsor forty percent more than we need to allow for deaths and failures. Other companies do the same.

There is no room here or in any other company for those who won't climb."

"But—" Lin began.

"You know the facts of life as well as I do," Sims said, growing impatient. "You can refuse to take the transfer, of course. If you do you're out. We already have a man slated for your present job. Then what do you do? No company will even consider the failures from another company for career jobs. The only thing that would be open to you is the ranks of unskilled labor. I can't understand why you even hesitate. Do you have a problem?"

"Yes," Lin said weakly.

"What is it?"

"A . . . a girl," Lin said.

Sims laughed. "Well good lord marry her and take her with you. I.C. will pay her fare too, and of course you get the automatic differential in pay. Congratulations again." Sims stopped smiling. "There's more?" he asked.

Lin nodded. "She has a vegy."

"She has a mother and father too, doesn't she?" Sims said. "And maybe brothers and sisters? When a girl marries she leaves all that behind. The facts of life."

"She won't leave her vegy behind," Lin said. "She and Winnie grew up together."

"Bad," Sims said, scowling. "She's an only child? I thought so. Unhealthy to permit a child to cling to a childhood attachment

that way. Well, she'll have to give it up. I.C. certainly won't throw twenty thousand galactic dollars away on passage for a vegy."

"I didn't think it would," Lin said hopelessly.

"Especially to tau Ceti III. Good atmosphere there. No vegies needed, though I suppose plenty are there. Take along a seed and grow another. Interesting experience, especially when they get to be two years old and go through the change."

"I'll see if I can convince her," Lin said hopelessly, turning toward the door.

"Do that," Sims said briskly. "And Braquet!"

"Yes?" Lin said, turning back.

"If she won't, put her down as a case of arrested emotional development and forget her. Believe me, it wouldn't be worth it to wreck your life and career for a girl who refuses to give up a vegy."

"Yes sir," Lin said.

The girl in the travel agency came to the counter with a smile. "Yes?" she said.

"I'm going to tau Ceti III," Lin explained. "I was wondering if there's some way I could take a vegy with me?"

"Only by paying full fare plus five hundred galactic dollars a pound freight charges on its pot. I'm sorry. In fact, the star lines discourage vegy travel because it creates a problem in atmosphere

balance on the ship. Every ship carries a full complement of vegies to balance the human passengers already, trained to be working members of the crew."

"But isn't there *any* way?" Lin said desperately. "I can't raise twenty thousand galactic dollars, and on the easy payment plan it would . . ."

The girl was shaking her head quite firmly. She gave Lin a smile of sympathy and turned to the man standing a few feet down the counter. "Yes?" she said.

Lin hesitated, hating to give up.

"Any word on the starship *Astra*?" The man smiled wolfishly at the girl. He was slightly shorter than Lin, powerfully built, dark hair and complexion.

"I think so," the girl said, turning to a bulletin board. "Yes, it left Earth yesterday on schedule and will berth here in two weeks."

Lin turned away and walked dispiritedly toward the tube to the parking lot. He was unaware that the shrewd eyes of the man followed him, and that the moment he was out of sight the man excused himself and followed.

"It's perfectly simple!" Lin said, his voice dripping infinite patience tried beyond mortal endurance. "On tau Ceti III you won't *need* a vegy. The company will pay passage for me and my wife—if I have a wife. But it *won't pay* passage for Winnie. Do you know

how much it would cost? Twenty thousand galactic dollars! More than I'll make in two years!"

"It's perfectly simple!" Leah said, matching Lin's tone of infinite patience. "Where I go, Winnie goes—"

"And I'm sick of Winnie," Lin groaned. "Every time I try to kiss you a big yellow eye on the end of a stalk gets in the way." He glared at the only one of the vegy's eyes that was looking at him, and the eye glared back with yellow defiance. Winnie's other three eyes dropped with injured dignity at the ends of their ten-inch-long, pencil-thin stalks.

"If you love me—as you *claim* to—" Leah went on as though she had not been interrupted, "your love will *find* a way."

"If you love me," Lin countered, "you'll give up this—this childhood attachment for a vegy and leave Winnie here with your parents."

"Childhood attachment!" Leah shouted, rising to her full five feet one half inches of auburn-haired fury. "Next you'll be saying I'm a case of arrested development!"

"I didn't say that," Lin said stiffly. He took a deep breath and exploded, "Good lord! You'd think I was marrying Winnie!"

"Ha!" Winnie's four bright-blue voice areas vibrated. "You couldn't pollinate a geranium."

Leah blushed and said sternly, "Winnie, don't say things like that."

A sniffing sound came from Winnie's vibration areas. Three of the eyestalks began to droop, the eyes limp with devotion to Leah and self-pity, while the fourth eye stared accusingly at Lin.

"Oh, my poor Winnie," Leah said, putting her arms around the four-footed vegy's pear-shaped green torso. Turning her head to Lin she said, "You've made Winnie ill. You should be ashamed!"

"Nuts," Lin said disgustedly. "You don't love me, you only love that . . . that *vegetable*!"

"And you don't love me!" Leah said, beginning to cry. "If you did you'd find some way to take Winnie with us. You're selfish, stupid, impossible, a beast, cruel . . ."

And so, in due time, Lin and Leah were married. But not until Lin had met Gregor Samsen for the second time. . . .

Lin had gone directly from his meeting with Gregor Samsen to Leah's and proudly announced, "I've done it! Winnie is going with us!" To all questions about the details he had said, "Just leave it all to me. There's nothing to worry about."

Winnie had been doubtful, but Leah had been so happy that Winnie's doubts had fallen on deaf ears right up to, and for a short while after the day of the wedding. But at last Winnie got through to Leah, and Leah pinned Lin down.

"It's perfectly simple," Lin said. "I thought there had to be a way, and there is. The ship has its complement of vegies, and Winnie could just walk on board with us and mix with them and never be discovered, except for one thing."

"Sure," Winnie vibrated. "I don't know a thing about ships and the first thing I was told to do I would be found out."

"No," Lin said. "That isn't it. The ship's vegies are branded with the ship emblem."

"Branded?" Winnie ran to her pot and sank down on it, clinging with all four hands to its rim. "I refuse to be branded. I refuse to go. I knew it would be something like this. Leah can get the marriage annulled. It's not too late."

"You won't really be branded," Lin said. "That's where this steward comes in. The minute we get to the stateroom he comes in and paints the ship insignia on you so it looks just like it was burnt on. Actually you wouldn't even need it painted on, except that someone might see you, and even that is unlikely, because you will be hiding in one of the little lifeboats the whole three weeks."

"Hiding!" Winnie buzzed, geysering slightly. Groping for a glycerine-impregnated wiping pad to clean off the sand sludge, the vegy vibrated in bitter tones, "A common stowaway, having to sneak on board, having to hide, being discovered and tossed off the ship

on some deserted asteroid, while you ride in comfort. How will you sneak my pot into my hiding place? I won't stand for its being packed away somewhere in the ship's hold while I'm lurking in my shame."

"It's not going," Lin said.

"My pot?" Winnie geysered all over again, a few drops splattering the ceiling. "I see what you're up to now, Lin Braquet. You're trying to kill me. You know a vegy always goes to the soil from which it sprouted to sleep."

"Calm down," Lin said. "You know very well your ancestors on Ripley didn't have pots. And there are plenty of traveling vegies that sleep in a different pot house every night. It would cost seventy-five hundred galactic dollars to ship your pot. Besides, it would be a dead giveaway to ship your pot and not have a ticket for you."

"I WILL NOT GIVE UP MY POT!" Winnie screamed so loudly the four blue vibration areas vibrated visibly.

The starship *Astra* materialized out of the driving, ammonia-saturated rain of a typical Venusian storm, its immense bulk wavering from refraction of the rain that washed against the outside surface of the spaceport observation promenade.

Winnie clung to Leah's hand for courage and watched the hulking symbol of Doom slowly settle out

on the field, so gigantic that the rain that fell on it cascaded off its rim in a waterfall curtain that hid the underneath parts of the ship.

Then came the nightmare of the Last Mile, slow jostling movement of the mass of intermixed humans and vegies toward the spaceport subways, huddling in the crowded subway trains, being packed into elevators that shot up into the ship, seeing the first ship vegy and glimpsing the ship insignia branded on it, and envying its *belonging* as it went about its business of polishing handrails.

The central lounge was where everyone had to go to present tickets and be directed to state-rooms. In the center of the central lounge was a roped-off area where several dozen vegies were playing cards, chess, and reading. Each had the brand on its side.

Every few feet around the roped-off area was a metal stand with a printed form under glass which read:

"The vegy is the only intelligent species of a large family of ambulant vegetable types native to Ripley, the second planet in the Polaris System. Movement is produced by change of pressure inside thousands of microscopically fine spiral fibers resulting in change of spring tension of these fibers, the change in pressure being produced by an ionic current from fine tube networks similar to nerves in animals. The vegy grows from a seed."

For its first two years its roots remain in the soil while its body and appendages reach full growth. Then, all within a thirty-day period, the lower half of its trunk expands to three times its previous size, and slowly turns inward and upward, drawing the root section with it until all the fine roots are inside the hollow inner cavity. During this change the four lower limbs turn downward so that they can serve as legs.

"A hollow tube an inch in diameter runs from the peak of the vegy down into the root hollow, and the vegy 'feeds' by entering fresh sand, dirt, and water into this tube, forming a thick muddy mixture that fills the root hollow, providing mineral nourishment for the vegetable organism. During the sleep period some of this 'stomach' content is evacuated through the lower opening. On waking, the vegy is 'hungry,' and immediately refills the cavity with fresh soil and water.

"The vegy utilizes light as its primary source of energy, converting carbon dioxide and water into oxygen and sugars through a process of photosynthesis carried on by chlorophine, the green pigment that gives the vegy its distinctive color. The oxygen returns to the atmosphere. The sugars enter into the 'muscular' process, where they are broken down into various alcohols. As a result, the more a vegy moves about, the more carbon

dioxide it requires and the more oxygen it releases as a waste product. This ideally makes it man's counterpart in the balanced aquarium life on shipboard and on the many planets whose unsuited atmospheres make a sealed-off existence necessary.

"The vegy generally lives well over forty years, but in the end loses its power of movement due to the deterioration of its 'muscle' fibers into wood fiber. When that happens it is unable to replenish its 'stomach' content, and dies.

"The vegy has forty-eight well defined brain centers but no centralized center similar to the human brain. Notwithstanding this, the vegy is equal to the human in intelligence, creativity, and personality, and is perhaps superior to man in having an integrated consciousness that is unaffected by the destruction of any one of its many 'brains.' It is also superior to man in that whole future populations of vegies can be transported as seeds.

"Reproduction is accomplished by cross-pollination when a vegy is in flower. During cross-pollination two vegies engage in a slow, ritualistic dance, which is always the same and entirely instinctive, and beyond conscious control or interference. This dance is exceedingly beautiful to watch.

"Vegies were first discovered by the Polaris Expedition in A.D. 2348. Less than a century after

being discovered, vegies had replaced all other oxygen-conversion devices. For short periods and by exercising strenuously one vegy can supply the oxygen requirements of three humans.

"You will find the book, *HISTORY OF THE VEGIES*, in your stateroom microfilm library, as well as over fifty novels written by vegies that are recognized classics."

Winnie read this with a feeling of pride that only served to accentuate the humiliation of being about to become a stowaway. A few moments later Lin and Leah finished getting their tickets and accommodations straightened out.

Winnie did not like the steward that led them to the stateroom. His pointed chin, sharp prominent nose and narrow head made his face wedge-shaped under his uniform cap. His eyes were narrow-set and knowing.

In the stateroom the steward busied himself until Leah's parents and the family vegies had said their tearful farewells and departed.

Then he said, "I'm Antone Brush. You have the rest of the money? We must work fast!"

A throbbing, pulsing life flowed through the floor and walls of the stateroom, having nothing to do with vibration or sound, for silence blanketed everything and seemed to snatch up every spoken word and smother it. The pulsing life force was more an aura, a living

ghost of the immense distances the ship had traveled and would yet travel, the throb of empty airless spaces between stars where there was no up or down, overlaid with the flow of the cosmos in its rush from the infinite gulf of the past to the infinite darkness of the future.

Winnie held still while the steward, Antone Brush, fixed the stencil in place with scotch tape and worked the fast drying pigment through its design.

"I think I am going to die," Winnie groaned.

"Nonsense," Antone said.

"My muscles feel as though they were turning to wood fiber," Winnie said unhappily.

"So you've been reading the bulletin in the lounge," Antone said cheerfully. "I pick up a few diseases myself every time I read the health columns." He winked broadly at Leah and ripped off the stencil, revealing the insignia. He dusted it carefully with a powder puff to dull its glistening newness.

The loudspeaker in the wall said: "We will be taking off in three minutes. There will be no sensation other than a slight increase in weight as we rise through the atmosphere. If this is your first spaceflight there are tranquilizer pills in your bathroom medicine cabinet. If you become ill press the red button beside the door to the outside corridor and a nurse will come immediately."

"Is there time to get off the ship?" Winnie asked.

"Not a chance," Antone said cheerfully. "The hatches are closed."

Leah sniffed loudly, close to tears. Lin took her in his arms. Winnie glared at Lin. Antone smiled cheerfully.

"We'd better get you to the life-ship you'll hide in," Antone said. "In ten minutes they'll be making the rounds to see if everyone's happy, and they'd better not find you here when they come in, Winnie." He opened the stateroom door and looked out. "Hurry!" he hissed.*

The four of them scurried along the low-ceilinged corridor to a hatchway with a red sign over it saying LIFEBOATS. They went through the hatch into another long corridor, and suddenly felt a slight increase in weight. It seemed impossible to believe that they were in a ship that was rising through a violent storm toward outer space.

They came to a wide corridor that curved in the distance. Every hundred and fifty feet was a hatch opening with a number over it. Antone stopped at the one num-

*Hissing a word which contains no sibilants is a characteristic of the regional dialect of equatorial Proximans. Clearly Mr. Phillips wishes to indicate that Antone Brush came from this region, notorious for its petty criminals; but to judge from the number of non-sibilant phrases regularly hissed in stories by other authors, there seems to be a quite undue proportion of equatorial Proximans among us.

—A. B.

bered 16, looked both ways to make sure no one was in sight, then hissed, "Inside! Quick!"

They didn't seem to enter a boat. Antone explained this by telling them the lifeboat was encased in its ejection cradle, and that a control stud inside the boat would close it and throw it free from the starship.

He pointed to a double row of ten dirt-filled pots. "In 'Abandon Ship' ten of the ship's vegies come to this boat. You can take your pick, Winnie, or sleep in a different one almost every night."

Winnie groaned.

"Keep out of sight if you hear anyone coming," Antone warned. "You can hide back in the fuel compartments. Don't worry about lack of carbon dioxide. The boat's designed to give good circulation everywhere. If anyone comes in, Winnie, *keep hidden*. Those yellow eyes of yours are iridescent enough to be noticeable in the dark, you know."

"Stay with me, Leah," Winnie moaned, two yellow eyes appealing to her limpidly.

Antone shook his head. "She has to be with her husband or they will start looking for her—at least for the next twenty-four hours."

"You'll be all right, Winnie darling," Leah said uncertainly, letting herself be drawn toward the hatchway by Lin.

Winnie turned one of her remaining eyes on Lin, coldly, and

grated, "Cheapskate!" The fourth eye fixed Antone Brush suspiciously, and Winnie vibrated, "And you, Antone Brush, are nothing but a cheap grafted. A crook, that's what you are."

"Winnie!" Leah said reproachfully.

Then Winnie was alone with the deadened silence, the sterile geometric emptiness of the lifeship, and the ten pots, none of them more than just a pot. . . .

"Forget about Winnie and let's go to sleep," Lin groaned.

"Poor Winnie," Leah said in the darkness and the silence. "I—I almost wish I'd never . . ."

Lin said nothing, but was tempted to echo her wish aloud. He opened his eyes and groped in his mind for something to divert Leah's thoughts into restful channels.

"You know," he said brightly, "that was interesting, what I read in the microfilm newspaper while you were taking your bath."

He left the conversational gambit dangling in the darkness, and finally, hesitantly, Leah said, "What was that?"

He shifted over onto his side and raised up on his elbow. "Did you know," he said, "that this ship has twenty million dollars worth of large unset diamonds and sixty millions in galactic currency on board? The diamond shipment is for tau Ceti III, so the local gov-

ernment can issue its own currency. All local currencies are based on the diamond standard, you know, because anything else costs more to transport than its value." Lin warmed up to his subject. "Why, do you know—"

"I'm going to go see how Winnie is," Leah said abruptly. She sat up and put on the bed lamp.

"Winnie's all right!" Lin said crossly. "We can't risk having someone see us go sneaking into that lifeship and asking questions."

"I'm going to see how Winnie is," Leah said firmly. "You can stay here, if you like."

She started to take off her pajamas, glanced at Lin, and with firmly compressed lips collected her clothing and went into the bathroom, closing the door.

Lin stared at the closed door, then, with a deep sigh, got out of bed and dressed. He was waiting when Leah emerged from the bathroom.

Out in the deserted corridor he took her hand. It was cold and unfriendly, but he kept it.

"We must be well out into space by now," he whispered. "Notice how our weight is just about normal? The newspaper said that we are scheduled to go into hyper-drive at nine o'clock. That's about eight hours from now. . . ."

He gave up. Leah's face was etched in lines of worry for Winnie. It was impossible to divert her thoughts.

They reached the hatchway with the sign LIFEBOATS. Lin looked both ways, then quickly opened it and helped Leah through. When he was through it he peeked back, then suddenly stiffened.

"What is it?" Leah whispered, feeling his tension.

"Shhh," he whispered.

Leah leaned over his shoulder. Down the corridor they had just come she saw a man. A stranger. Even as she saw him he stopped before a door and placed his ear against it. She wasn't sure, but she thought it was the door to their stateroom.

"That man," Lin whispered. "How did he get on board?"

"Who is he?" Leah whispered.

Lin pulled back quickly. Leah had a glimpse of the man straightening and starting toward where they were, before Lin had edged her away. Carefully Lin closed the door. Taking Leah's hand, he hurried swiftly along the corridor. "Hurry!" he hissed.

"Who was he?" Leah asked, hurrying beside him.

Lin was frowning. He said, "Gregor Samsen. He's the one who got in touch with me and fixed things so Winnie could come with us. But I thought . . ."

"What?" Leah said.

"He gave me to understand—not by so many words, of course—that he made his living fixing things up so people could smuggle their vegies on board without hav-

ing to pay full price. But I assumed he stayed on Venus all the time. And why would he be listening at our door at this time of the night?"

They reached the turn into the lifeship corridor and looked back. The door they had come through was starting to open. Lin jerked Leah and got around the corner quickly.

"He's coming in here!" he said. "We've got to hide."

"Where?" Leah said. "With Winnie?"

"I don't think so. Let's duck in here." It was the hatchway to lifeboat 14.

They crouched back in the gloom. A moment later they saw Gregor Samsen pass. They crept forward and peeked out.

Gregor had paused before the opening to lifeboat 16, and was standing in an attitude of listening. Finally he took cautious steps to the opening and went in, moving very slowly.

He was gone less than a minute, then came out and started toward Lin and Leah. They ducked back, as he passed. Then they peeked out and saw him turn the corner, going back the way he had come.

"OK," Lin whispered. They left their hiding place and went to the number 16 lifeboat.

Leah hurried in, whispering, "Winnie!" She brought up short and Lin almost ran over her.

Winnie sat on one of the pots, eyestalks drooping and arms straight out from the pear-shaped torso, unmistakably fast asleep.

Lin chuckled. "That's the vegy that couldn't live without its original pot," he said.

Lin and Leah stole back softly the way they had come. In the stateroom once again, Leah started for the bathroom to undress. Lin said, "I'm hungry," and she came back.

They called room service and in a few minutes sandwiches and moka rode out of the service tube onto the wall table.

"I wish I knew what Samsen was doing," Lin said.

"Why didn't you ask him?" Leah said.

"I don't know," Lin said slowly. "The way he listened at our door . . . I wonder if he's outside listening right now?"

"Lin," Leah said. "How much did you pay him and Antone?"

"Fifty galactic dollars each," Lin said.

"Is that all?" Leah frowned at him, puzzled. "How could they make any money at that rate?"

Lin shrugged and said, "That's their business. I would have paid a couple of thousand—all I had to spare. Maybe they smuggle several vegies aboard each trip. Maybe Gregor Samsen has several stewards on each ship working with him."

"But he's on board," Leah pointed out.

"I can't understand that," Lin said.

Leah looked at him and said, "What if Winnie is the only vegy they have stowed away?"

Lin shook his head. "They couldn't make enough for it to be worth while that way." He frowned and added, "Unless . . . But that's absurd."

"Unless what?" Leah said.

"It would only worry you unnecessarily," Lin said. He saw at once he had made a mistake and gave in, knowing what it meant. "OK. Suppose someone wanted to leave this ship for some reason. A lifeboat would be a coffin without a vegy to provide oxygen, but the ship's vegies aren't stationed in the lifeboats and I doubt if one of them could be forced to enter one against its will, even with a gun, because a dozen bullets wouldn't hurt one much and they're strong as a man. But if that someone could be sure of a vegy already being on one particular lifeboat . . ."

Leah jumped up from the table. "That's it!" she said. "Oh my poor Winnie! Lin, we've got to hide Winnie somewhere else. Right now. Where no one can find her."

"Sit down," a voice sounded from the closet doorway.

Lin and Leah turned. Antone Brush was standing in the closet doorway, a gun pointed at them, his lips pulled back from firm

white teeth in a wedge-shaped smile. He stepped into the room.

"Sit down!" he snarled at Leah. Slowly she returned to her seat.

"We hadn't counted on your suspecting anything," Antone said. "Gregor saw you from the corner of his eye when he went by number fourteen lifeboat, and called me from one of the hall phones so I could hide in here and see how much you suspected."

"Suspected of what?" Lin said.

"You'd find out soon enough," Antone said. "The diamonds. You guessed the reason we wanted a vegy in one of the lifeboats. But if you hadn't known Gregor was on board you would have kept your mouths shut and figured the guy that stole the diamonds just happened to take number sixteen lifeboat. And even if you'd spilled everything, they couldn't prove anything on us except making a little graft smuggling a vegy." His lips pulled back wolfishly. "Now we're going to wait. Only one thing can save you. If Gregor gets caught stealing the diamonds. If that happens we can't use a murder rap. If he gets the diamonds and makes it to the lifeboat with them, the minute he touches the button that throws the lifeboat out into space a general alarm will sound through the ship. And that's the signal for you to get it. Understand? So just sit still."

"Oh, my poor Winnie," Leah moaned, almost fainting.

"How long do we have to wait?" Lin asked.

Antone shrugged. "Maybe half an hour. It has to be soon. The *Astra* goes faster every second. In two more hours it will be too late for Gregor to hope to use the lifeboat's chemical fuel to slow down enough to land at the hideaway. These things have to be timed just right."

"What happens to . . . to Winnie?" Lin asked, his face very white.

"What do you care?" Antone said. "At the hideout we've got a chef that makes good vegy minestrone." He threw back his head and laughed.

And in that moment Lin leaped.

He caught Antone completely by surprise, but in a few seconds he realized he didn't stand a chance. His fingers brushed the gun as Antone jerked it out of reach. Belatedly Lin tried to shift his objective and get in a stunning blow, perhaps to the chin. But the chin wasn't there and he sensed a knee driving at his midsection an instant before pain exploded there and he couldn't breathe.

Then something hot grazed his right cheek. The world spun around him. Blindly he threshed out with his arms, and felt them wrap around something. He held on, knowing that if he lost his hold he would never have another chance at anything.

"You can kill me," he shouted,

"but leave Winnie alone. Leave Winnie alone! *Leave Winnie alone!*"

"I didn't know you cared, dear," a smug voice sounded.

Lin opened his eyes, startled. An instant before, he had been sinking into a gulf of blackness and screaming.

No, the darkness had been there a long time, but he had just been screaming, "*Leave Winnie alone!*"

And now . . .

He was in a bed. A woman in nurse's uniform was bending over him with a hypodermic syringe, about to plunge it into his bared arm. Next to her was a man who was obviously a doctor. He was in a hospital room.

At the foot of the bed was Leah, her eyes round and large with worry. Beside her was Winnie, three large yellow eyes looking at him, mocking him. It had been Winnie's voice he had heard.

He blushed and snarled, "Shut up and get back in that lifeboat before someone—"

"They already know," Winnie vibrated. "*All is Lost!*" There was mockery—and a new tenderness in the vegy's voice.

"Hush, Winnie," Leah said. She came around the bed hesitantly toward Lin. "Are you all right now?" she asked.

"What happened?" Lin said. "Did Gregor get away with the diamonds?"

"Unfortunately, yes," the doctor spoke up. "However, thanks to your vegetable friend here, it will be his undoing. They expect to pick him up shortly, but he will probably already be dead from the lack of that waste product of all vegies, oxygen."

"But you were on that lifeboat asleep!" Lin said, staring at Winnie.

"Asleep?" Winnie said indignantly. "Do you think I could sleep on a strange pot that *easy*?"

"But we saw you!" Lin said.

"I was pretending," Winnie said. "I heard you coming, and I wasn't going to give you the satisfaction of knowing I couldn't sleep."

"Oh," Lin said, suppressing a grin. "And I suppose you saw Gregor peek in on you and instantly knew what was going on."

"Of course," Winnie said. "And I followed you back to your state-room and stopped that stupid steward from assassinating you."

"Did Winnie really do that?" Lin asked, looking at Leah.

Leah nodded, tears in her eyes, her hands fluttering toward Lin.

"Meanwhile," the doctor said, "the other crook had stolen the shipment of diamonds and was escaping in the lifeboat, thinking that your vegy was hiding on it." He chuckled. "There's an automatic reward system that will pay you Winnie's passage three times over, when this is all straightened out. You have nothing to worry

about any more. We've been hearing the whole picture while you were unconscious."

"Him?" Winnie vibrated in a shout. "Who did all the work? Me! That's who." The vegy turned all four eyes on Lin, glaring. "And another thing, *Mister Braquet*, if enough money is left out of the reward after paying my passage,

I want my pot shipped on the very next ship, including every grain of dirt in it. Understand?"

Lin glared back at Winnie, then looked up at Leah, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He reached up and took Leah's hand in his.

Then he said, softly, "Yes, Winnie, I understand."