



## SEASONS

Transcripts edited from the last few hundred hours of recordings:

*Maria*

Forty-one is too young to die. I was never trained to be a soldier. Trained to survive, yes, but not to kill or be killed.

That's the wrong way to start. Let me start this way.

As near as I can reckon, it's mid-noviembre, AC 238. I am Maria Rubera, chief xenologist for the second Confederacion expedition to Sanchrist IV. I am currently standing guard in the mouth of a cave while my five comrades try to sleep. I am armed with a stone axe and flint spear and a pile of rocks for throwing. A cold rain is misting down, and I am wearing only a stiff kilt and vest of wet rank fur. I am cold to the very heart but we dare not risk a fire. The Plathys have too acute a sense of smell.

I am subvocalizing, recording this into my artificial bicuspid, one of which each of us has; the only post-Stone Age artifacts in this cave. It may survive even if, as is probable, I do not. Or it may not survive. The Plathys have a way of eating animals head first, crunching up skull and brain while the decapitated body writhes at their feet or staggers around, which to them is high humor. Innocent humor but ghastly. I almost came to love them. Which is not to say I understand them.

Let me try to make this document as complete as possible. It gives me something to do. I trust you have a machine that can filter out the sound of my teeth chattering. For a while I could do the Zen trick to keep my teeth still. But I'm too cold now. And too certain of death, and afraid.

My specialty is xenology but I do have a doctorate in historical anthropology, which is essentially the study of dead cultures through the writings of dead anthropologists. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, old style, there were dozens of isolated cultures still existing without metals or writing or even, in some cases, agriculture or social organization beyond the family. None of them survived more than a couple of generations beyond their contact with civilization, but civilization by then could afford the luxury of science, and so there are fairly complete records. The records are fascinating not only for the information about the primitives, but also for what they reveal of the investigating cultures' unconscious prejudices. My own specialties were the Maori and Eskimo tribes, and (by necessary association) the European and American cultures that investigated and more or less benignly destroyed them.

I will try not to stray from the point. That training is what led to my



appointment as leader of this band of cold, half-naked, probably doomed, pseudo-primitive scientists. We do not repeat the errors of our forebears. We come to the primitives on equal terms, now, so as not to contaminate their habit patterns by superior example. No more than is necessary. Most of us do not bite the heads off living animals or exchange greetings by the tasting of excrement.

Saying that and thinking of it goads me to go down the hill again. We designated a latrine rock a few hundred meters away, in sight of the cave entrance but with no obvious path leading here, to throw them off our scent at least temporarily. I will not talk while going there. They also have acute hearing.

Back. Going too often and with too little result. Diet mostly raw meat in small amounts. Only warm place on my body is the hot and itching anus. No proper hygiene in the Stone Age. Just find a smooth rock. I can feel my digestive tract flourishing with worms and bugs. No evidence yet, though, nor blood. Carlos Fleming started passing blood, and two days later something burst and he died in a rush of it. We covered his body with stones. Ground too frozen for grave-digging. He was probably uncovered and eaten.

It can't be the diet. On Earth I paid high prices for raw meat and fish and never suffered except in the wallet. I'm afraid it may be a virus. We all are, and we indulge in discreet copromancy, the divining of future events through the inspection of stools. If there is blood your future will be short. Perhaps it was stress. We are under unusual stress. But I stray.

It was specifically my study of Eskimos that impressed the assigning committee. Eskimos were small bands of hearty folk who lived in the polar regions of North America. Like the Plathys, they were anagricultural carnivores, preying on herds of large animals, sometimes fishing. The Plathys have no need for the Eskimos' fishing skills, since the sea teems with life edible and stupid. But they prefer red meat and the crunch of bone, the chewy liver and long suck of intestinal contents, the warm mush of brains. They are likable but not fastidious. And not predictable, we learned to our grief.

Like the Eskimos, the Plathys relish the cold and become rather dull and listless during the warm season. Sanchrist IV has no axial tilt, thus no "seasons" in the Terran sense, but its orbit is highly elongated, so more than two thirds of its year (three and a half Terran years) is spent in cold. We identified six discrete seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter, dead winter, and thaw. The placid sea gets ice skim in mid-fall.

If you are less than totally ignorant of science, you know that Sanchrist IV is one of the very few planets with not only earthlike conditions but with life forms that mimic our own patterns of DNA. There are various theories



explaining this coincidence, which cannot be coincidence, but you can find them elsewhere. What this meant in terms of our conduct as xenologists was that we could function with minimal ecological impact, living off the fat of the land—and the blood and flesh and marrow, which did require a certain amount of desensitization training. (Less for me than for some of the others, as I've said, since I've always had an atavistic leaning toward dishes like steak tartare and sushi.)

Satellite observation has located 119 bands, or families, of Plathys, and there is no sign of other humanoid life on the planet. All of them live on islands in a southern subtropical sea—at least it would be subtropical on Earth—a shallow sea that freezes solid in dead winter and can be walked over from late fall to early thaw. During the warm months, on those occasions when they actually stir their bones to go someplace, they pole rafts from island to island. During low tide, they can wade most of the way.

We set up our base in the tropics, well beyond their normal range, and hiked south during the late summer. We made contact with a few individuals and small packs during our month-long trek but didn't join a family until we reached the southern mountains.

The Plathys aren't too interesting during the warm months, except for the short mating season. Mostly they loll around, conserving energy, living off the meat killed during the thaw, which they smoke and store in covered holes. When the meat gets too old, or starts running out, they do bestir themselves to fish, which takes little enough energy. The tides are rather high in summer and fall, and all they have to do is stake down nets in the right spots during high tide. The tide recedes and leaves behind flopping silver bounty. They grumble and joke about the taste of it, though.

They accepted our presence without question, placidly sharing their food and shelter as they would with any wayfaring member of another native family. They couldn't have mistaken us for natives, though. The smallest adult Plathy weighs twice as much as our largest. They stand about two and a half meters high and span about a meter and a half across the shoulders. Their heads are more conical than square, with huge powerful jaws: a mouth that runs almost ear to ear. Their eyes are set low, and they have mucous-membrane slits in place of external ears and noses. They are covered with sparse silky fur, which coarsens into thick hair on their heads, shoulders, armpits, and groins (and on the males' backs). The females have four teats defining the corners of a rectangular slab of lactiferous fatty tissue. The openings we thought were their vaginas are almost dorsal, with the cloacal openings toward the front. The male genitals are completely ventral, normally hidden under a mat of hair. (This took a bit of snooping. In all but the hottest



times and mating season, both genders wear a "modest" kilt of skin.)

We had been observing them about three weeks when the females went into estrus—every mature female, all the same day. Their sexuality was prodigious.

Everybody shed their kilts and went into a week-long unrelenting spasm of sexual activity. There is nothing like it among any of the sentient cultures—or animal species!—that I have studied. To call it an orgy would be misleading and, I think, demeaning to the Plathys. The phenomenon was more like a tropism, in plants, than any animal or human instinct. They quite simply did not do anything else for six days.

The adults in our family numbered eighty-two males and nineteen females (the terrible reason for the disparity would become clear in a later season), so the females were engaged all the time, even while they slept. While one male copulated, two or three others would be waiting their turn, prancing impatiently, masturbating, sometimes indulging in homosexual coupling. ("Indulging" is the wrong word. There was no sense that they took pleasure in any sexual activity; it was more like the temporary relief of a terrible pressure that quickly built up again.) They attempted coupling with children and with the humans of my expedition. Fortunately, for all their huge strength they are rather slow and, for all the pressure of their "desire," easily deflected. A kick in the knee was enough to send them stumping off toward someone else.

No Plathys ate during the six days. They slept more and more toward the end of the period, the males sometimes falling asleep in the middle of copulation. (Conversely, we saw several instances of involuntary erection and ejaculation while sleeping.) When it was finally over, everyone sat around dazed for a while, and then the females retired to the storage holes and came back with armloads of dried and smoked meat and fish. Each one ate a mountain of food and fell into a coma.

There are interesting synchronies involved. At other times of the year, this long period of vulnerability would mean extinction of the family or of the whole species, since they evidently all copulate at the same time. But the large predators from the north do not swim down at that time of year. And when the litters were dropped, about 500 days later, it would be not long after the time of easiest food gathering, as herds of small animals migrated north for warmth.

Of course we never had a chance to dissect a Plathy. It would have been fascinating to investigate the internal makeup that impels the bizarre sexual behavior. External observation gives some hint as to the strangeness. The vulva is a small opening, a little over a centimeter in extent, that stays sealed closed except when the female is in estrus. The penis, normally an almost



invisible nub, becomes a prehensile purple worm about twentycentimeters long. No external testicles; there must be an internal reservoir (quite large) for seminal fluid.

The anatomical particulars of pregnancy and birth are even more strange. The females become almost immobilized, gaining perhaps fifty percent in weight. When it comes time to give birth, the female makes an actual skeletal accommodation, evidently similar to the way a snake unhinges its jaw when ingesting large prey. It is obviously quite painful. The vulva (or whatever new name applies to that opening) is not involved; instead, a slit opens along the entire perineal area, nearly half a meter long, exposing a milky white membrane. The female claws the membrane open and expels the litter in a series of shuddering contractions. Then she pushes her pelvic bones back into shape with a painful grinding sound. She remains immobile and insensate for several days, nursing. The males bring females food and clean them during this period.

None of the data from the first expedition had prepared us for this. They had come during dead winter and stayed one (terran) year, so they missed the entire birth cycle. They had noted that there were evidently strong taboos against discussing sexual matters and birth. I think "taboo" is the wrong word. It's not as if there were guilt or shame associated with the processes. Rather, they appear to enter a different state of consciousness when the females are in heat and giving birth, a state that seems to blank out their verbal intelligence. They can no more discuss their sexuality than you or I could sit and chat about how our pancreas was doing.

There was an amusing, and revealing, episode after we had been with the family for several months. I had been getting along well with Tybru, a female elder with unusual linguistic ability. She was perplexed at what one of the children had told her.

The Plathys have no concept of privacy; they wander in and out of each other's *maffas* (the yurtlike tents of hide they use as shelter) at any time of the day or night, on random whim. It was inevitable that sooner or later they would observe humans having sex. The child had described what she'd seen fairly accurately. I had tried to explain human sexuality to Tybru earlier, as a way to get her to talk about that aspect of her own life. She would smile and nod diagonally through the whole thing, an infuriating gesture they normally use only with children prattling nonsense.

This time I was going to be blunt. I opened the *maffa* flap so there was plenty of light, then shed my kilt and got up on a table. I lay down on my back and tried to explain with simple words and gestures what went where and who did what to whom, and what might or might not happen nine months later.



She was more inclined to take me seriously this time. (The child who had witnessed copulation was four, pubescent, and thus too old to have fantasies.) After I explained she explored me herself, which was not pleasant, since her four-fingered hand was larger than a human foot, quite filthy, and equipped with deadly nails.

She admitted that all she really understood was the breasts. She could remember some weeks of nursing after the blackout period the female language calls "(big) pain-in-hips." (Their phrase for the other blackout period is literally "pain-in-the-ass.") She asked, logically enough, whether I could find a male and demonstrate.

Actually, I'm an objective enough person to have gone along with it, if I could have found a man able and willing to rise to the occasion. If it had been near the end of our stay, I probably would have done it. But leadership is a ticklish thing, even when you're leading a dozen highly educated, professionally detached people, and we still had three years to go.

I explained that the most-elder doesn't do this with the men she's in charge of, and Tybru accepted that. They don't have much of a handle on discipline, but they do understand polity and social form. She said she would ask the other human females.

Perhaps it should have been me who did the asking, but I didn't suggest it. I was glad to get off the hook, and also curious as to my people's reactions.

The couple who volunteered were the last ones I would have predicted. Both of them were shy, almost diffident, with the rest of us. Good field workers but not the sort of people you would let your hair down with. I suppose they had better "anthropological perspective" on their own behavior than the rest of us.

At any rate, they retired to the *maffa* that was nominally Tybru's, and she let out the ululation that means "All free females come here." I wondered whether our couple could actually perform in a cramped little yurt filled with sweaty giants asking questions in a weird language.

All the females did crowd into the tent, and after a couple of minutes a strange sound began to emanate from them. At first it puzzled me, but then I recognized it as laughter! I had heard individual Plathys laugh, a sort of inhaled croak—but nineteen of them at once was an unearthly din.

The couple was in there a long time, but I never did find out whether the demonstration was actually consummated. They came out of the *maffa* beet-red and staring at the ground, the laughter behind them not abating. I never talked to either of them about it, and whenever I asked Tybru or the others, all I got was choked laughter. I think we invented the dirty joke. (In exchange, I'm sure that Plathy sexuality will eventually see service in the ribald



metaphor of every human culture.)

But let me go back to the beginning.

We came to Sanchrist IV armed with a small vocabulary and a great deal of misinformation. I don't mean to denigrate my colleagues' skill or application. But the Garcia expedition just came at the wrong time and didn't stay long enough.

Most of their experience with the Plathys was during deep winter, which is their most lively and civilized season. They spend their indoor time creating the complex sculptures that so impressed the art world ten years ago and performing improvisational music and dance that is delightful in its alien grace. Outdoors, they indulge in complicated games and athletic exhibitions. The larders are full, the time of birthing and nursing is well over, and the family exudes happiness, well into the thaw. We experienced this euphoria ourselves. I can't blame Garcia's people for their enthusiastic report.

We still don't know what happened. Or why it happened. Perhaps if these data survive, the next researchers . . . Trouble.

### *Gabriel*

I was having a strange dream of food—real food, cooked—when suddenly there was Maria, tugging on my arm, keeping me away from the table. She was whispering "Gab, wake up!" and so I did, cold and aching and hungry.

"What's—" She put her hand on my mouth, lightly. "There's one outside. Mylab, I think." He had just turned three this winter, and been given his name. We crept together back to the mouth of the cave and both jumped when my ankle gave a loud pop.

It was Mylab, all right; the fur around one earhole was almost white against the blond. I was glad it wasn't an adult. He was only about a head taller than me. Stronger, though, and well fed.

We watched from the cave's darkness as he investigated the latrine rocs., sniffing and licking, circling.

"Maybe he's a scout for a hunting party," I whispered. "Hunting us."

"Too young, I think." She passed me a stone axe. "Hope we don't have to kill him."

"Should we wake the others?"

"Not yet. Make us easier to scent." As if on cue, the Plathy walked directly away from the rock and stood, hands on hips, sniffing the air. His head wagged back and forth slowly, as if he were triangulating. He shuffled in a half-circle and stood looking in our direction.

"Stay still."



"He can't see us in the shadow."

"Maybe not." Their eyesight was more acute than ours, but they didn't have good night vision.

Behind us, someone woke up and sneezed. Mylab gave a little start and then began loping toward the cave.

"Damn it," Maria whispered. She stood up and huddled into the side of the cave entrance. "You get over there." I stationed myself opposite her, somewhat better hidden because of a projecting lip of rock.

Mylab slowed down a few meters from the cave entrance and walked warily forward, sniffing and blinking. Maria crouched, gripping her spear with both hands, for thrusting.

It was over in a couple of seconds, but my memory of it goes in slow motion: he saw Maria, or sensed her, and lumbered straight for her, claws out, growling. She thrust twice into his chest while I stepped forward and delivered a two-handed blow to the top of his head.

That axe would have cracked a human head from crown to jaw. Instead, it glanced off his thick skull and hit his shoulder, then spun out of my grip.

Shaking his head, he stepped around and swung a long arm at me. I was just out of range, staggering back; one claw opened up my cheek and the tip of my nose. Blood was spouting from two wounds in his chest. He stepped forward to finish me off and Maria plunged the spear into the back of his neck. The flint blade burst out under his chin in a spray of blood.

He stood staggering between us for a moment, trying to reach the spear shaft behind him. Two stones flew up from the rear of the cave; one missed, but the other hit his cheek with a loud crack. He turned and stumbled away down the slope, the spear bouncing grotesquely behind him.

The other four joined us at the cave entrance. Brenda, our doctor, looked at my wound and regretted her lack of equipment. So did I.

"Have to go after him," Derek said. "Kill him."

Maria shook her head. "He's still dangerous. Wait a few minutes; then we can follow the blood trail."

"He's dead," Brenda said. "His body just doesn't know it yet."

"Maybe so," Maria said, her shoulders slumping sadly. "Anyhow, we can't stay here. Hate to move during daylight, but we don't have any choice."

"We're not the only ones who can follow a blood trail," Herb said. He had a talent for stating the obvious.

We gathered up our few weapons, the water bladders, and the food sack, to which we had just added five small batlike creatures, mostly fur and bone. None of us looked forward to being hungry enough to eat them.

The trail was easy to follow, several bright red spatters per meter. He had





gone about three hundred meters before collapsing.

We found him lying behind a rock in a widening pool of blood, the spear sticking straight up. When I pulled it out he made a terrible gurgling sound. Brenda made sure he was dead.

Maria looked very upset, biting her lip, I think to keep tears away. She is a strange woman. Hard and soft. She treats the Plathys by the book but obviously has a sentimental streak toward them. I sort of like them too, but don't think I'd want to take one home with me.

Brenda's upset too, retching now. My fault; I should have offered to do the knife. But she didn't ask.

I'd better take point position. Stop recording now. Concentrate on not getting surprised.

Back to the beginning. Quite hot when we were set down on the tropical mainland. It was the middle of the night and we worked quickly, with no lights (what I'd give for night glasses now), to set up our domed base.

In a way it's a misnomer to call it a "base," since we left it the next night, not to return for three and a half years. We thought. It was really just a staging area and a place where we would wait for pickup after our mission was ended. We really didn't foresee having to run back to it to hide from the Plathys.

It was halfheartedly camouflaged, looking like a dome of rock in the middle of a jungle terrain that featured no other domes of rock. To our knowledge at the time, no Plathy ever ventured that far north, so even that gesture toward noninterference was a matter of form rather than of actual caution. Now we know that some Plathys do go that far, on their rite-of-passage wanderings. So it's a good thing we didn't simply set up a force field.

I think the closest terrestrial match to the biome there would be the jungles of the Amazon basin. Plus volcanoes, for a little extra heat and interest. Sort of a steam bath with a whiff of sulfur dioxide added to the rich smell of decaying vegetable matter. In the clearings, riots of extravagant flowers, most of which gave off the aroma of rotting meat.

For the first leg of our journey, we had modern energy weapons hidden inside conventional-looking spears and axes. It would have been more sporting to face the Mesozoic fauna with primitive weapons, but of course we had no interest in that sort of adventure. We often did run into creatures resembling the *Deinonychus* (Lower Cretaceous period)—about the size of a human but fast, and all claws and teeth. They travel in packs, evidently preying on the large placid herbivores. We never saw fewer than six in a group, and once were cornered by a pack of twenty. We had to kill all of them, our beams silently slashing them into steaming chunks of meat. None paid any attention to what was happening to his comrades but just kept



advancing, bent low to the ground, claws out, teeth bared, roaring. Their meat tasted like chicken, but very tough.

It took us nine days to reach the coast, following a river. (Did I mention that days here are twenty-eight hours long? Our circadian rhythms had been adjusted accordingly, but there are other physiological factors. Mostly having to do with fatigue.) We found a conspicuous rock formation and buried our modern weapons a hundred meters to the north of it. Then we buried their power sources another hundred paces north. We kept one crazer for group defense, to be discarded before we reached the first island, but otherwise all we had was flint and stone and bicuspid with amazing memories.

We had built several boats with these tools during our training on Selva, but of course it was rather different here. The long day, and no comfortable cot to retire to at night. No tent to keep out the flying insects, no clean soft clothes in the morning, no this, no that. Terrible heat and a pervasive moldy smell that kept us all sniffing in spite of the antiallergenic drugs that our modified endocrine systems fed us. We did manage to get a fire going, which gave us security and roast fish and greatly simplified the boat-building. We felled two large trees and used fire to hollow them out, making outrigger canoes similar to the ones the Maori used to populate the sparse South Pacific. We weren't able to raise sails, though, since the Plathys don't have that technology. They wouldn't have helped much, anyway; summer was usually dead calm. We didn't look forward to rowing 250 kilometers in the subtropical heat. But we would do it systematically.

Herb was good at pottery, so I exempted him from boat-building in exchange for the fascinating job of crafting and firing dozens of water jugs. That was going to be our main survival problem, since it was not likely to rain during the couple of weeks we'd be at sea. Food was no problem; we could spear fish and probably birds (though eating a raw bird was not an experiment even I could look forward to) and also had a supply of smoked dinosaur.

I designed the boats so that either one would be big enough to carry all twelve of us, in case of trouble. As a further safeguard, we took a shakedown cruise, a night and a day of paddling and staying anchored near shore. We took our last fresh-water bath, topped off the jugs, loaded our gear, and cast off at sundown.

The idea had been to row all night, with ten minutes' rest each hour, and keep going for a couple of hours after sunup, for as long as we could reliably gauge our direction from the angle of the sun. Then anchor (the sea was nowhere more than ten or twelve meters deep) and hide from the sun all day under woven shades, fishing and sleeping and engaging in elevated discourse.

Start paddling again when the sun was low enough to tell us where north



was. It did go that way for several days, until the weather changed.

It was just a thin haze, but it was enough to stop us dead. We had no navigational instruments, relying on the dim triangle of stars that marked the south celestial pole. No stars, no progress.

This was when I found out that I had chosen my party well. When the sky cleared two nights later, there was no talk of turning back, though everyone was capable of counting the water jugs and doing long division. A few more days becalmed and we would be in real danger of dying from dehydration, unable to make landfall in either direction.

I figured we had been making about 25 kilometers per night. We rowed harder and cut the break time down to five minutes, and kept rowing an extra hour or so after dawn, taking a chance on dead reckoning.

Daytime became a period of grim silence. People who were not sleeping spent the time fishing the way I had taught them, Eskimo style (though those folks did it through a hole in the ice): arm cocked, spear raised, staring at one point slightly under the surface; when a fish approaches a handspan above that point, let fly the spear. No Eskimo ever applied greater concentration to the task; none of them was ever fishing for water as well as food. Over the course of days we learned which kinds of fish had flesh that could be sucked for moisture, and which had to be avoided for the salty blood that suffused their tissues.

We rationed water fairly severely, doling it out in measures that would allow us to lose one night out of three to haze. As it turned out, that never happened again, and when we sighted land, finally, there was water enough for another four days of short rations. We stifled the impulse to drink it all in celebration; we still had to find a stream.

I'd memorized maps and satellite photos, but terrain looks much different seen horizontally. It took several hours of hugging the shore before I could figure out where we were; fortunately, the landmark was a broad shallow river.

Before we threw away the crazer and its power source, we used it to light a torch. When the Plathys traveled, they carried hot coals from the previous night's fire, insulated in ash inside a basket of tough fiber. We would do the same, rather than spend an hour each day resolutely sawing two pieces of dry wood together. We beached the canoes and hauled them a couple of hundred meters inland, to a stand of bushes where they could be reasonably well camouflaged. Perhaps not much chance they would still be there after a full year, but it was better than simply abandoning them.

We walked inland far enough for there to be no trace of salt in the muddy river water, and cavorted in it like schoolchildren. Then Brenda and I built a



fire while the others stalked out in search of food.

Game was fairly plentiful near the river, but we were not yet skilled hunters. There was no way to move quietly through the grass, which was shoulder-high and stiff. So the hunters who had the best luck were the ones who tiptoed up the bank of the stream. They came back with five good-sized snakes, which we skinned and cleaned and roasted on sticks. After two weeks of raw fish, the sizzling fatty meat was delicious, though for most of us it went through the gut like a dropped rock.

We made pallets of soft grass, and most of us slept well, though I didn't. Combination of worry and indigestion. I was awake enough to notice that various couples took advantage of the relative privacy of the riverbank, which made me feel vaguely jealous and deprived. I toyed with the idea of asking somebody, but instead waited for somebody to ask me, and wound up listening to contented snores half the night.

A personal note, to be edited out if this tooth survives for publication. Gabriel. All of us women had been studying his naked body for the past two weeks, quite remarkable in proportion and endowment, and I suppose the younger women had been even more imaginative than me in theorizing about it. So I was a little dismayed when he went off to the riverbank with a male, his Selvan crony Marcus. I didn't know at the time that their generation on Selva is very casual about such things, and at any rate I should have been anthropologist enough to be objective about it. But I have my own cultural biases, too, and (perhaps more to the point) so do the Terran males in the party. As a scientist, I can appreciate the fact that homosexuality is common and natural and only attitudes about it change. That attitude is not currently very enlightened on Earth; I resolved to warn them the next day to be discreet. (Neither of them is exclusively homosexual, as it turned out; they both left their pallets with women later in the night, Gabriel at least twice.)

We had rolled two large and fairly dry logs over the fire before bedding down, orienting them so as to take advantage of the slight breeze, and the fire burned brightly all night without attention. That probably saved our lives. When we broke camp in the morning and headed south, we found hundreds of tracks just downwind, the footpads of large catlike creatures. What an idiot I had been, not to post guards! Everyone else was sheepish at not having thought of it themselves. The numb routine and hard labor of the past two weeks had dulled us; now we were properly galvanized by fear. We realized that for all our survival training, we still had the instincts of city folk, and those instincts could kill us all.

This island is roughly circular, about a hundred kilometers in diameter, with a central crater lake. We would follow this river to the lake and then go



counterclockwise to the third stream and follow it to the southern shore. Then we would hop down an archipelago of small islands, another 80 kilometers, to the large island that was our final destination.

The scrub of the coastal lowland soon gave way to tangled forest, dominated by trees like Earth's banyan—a large central trunk with dozens or hundreds of subsidiary trunks holding up an extensive canopy of branches. It was impossible to tell where one tree's territory ended and another's began, but some of the largest must have commanded one or two ares of ground. Their bark was ashen white, relieved by splotches of rainbow lichen. No direct sunlight reached the ground through their dense foliage; only a few spindly bushes with pale yellow leaves pushed out of the rotting humus. Hard for anything to sneak up on us at ground level, but we could hear creatures moving overhead. I wondered whether the branches were strong enough to support the animals that had watched us the night before, and felt unseen cats' eyes everywhere.

We stopped to eat in a weird clearing. Something had killed one of the huge trees; its rotting stump dominated the clearing, and the remnants of its smaller trunks stood around like ghostly guardians, most of them dead but some of them starting to sprout green. I supposed one would eventually take over the space. After feasting on cold snake, we practiced spear-throwing, using the punky old stump as a target. I was the least competent, both in range and accuracy, which had also been the case on Selva. As a girl I'd shown no talent for athletics beyond jacks and playing doctor.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Three cat-beasts leaped down from the forest canopy behind us and bounded in for the kill. I thrust out my spear and got one in the shoulder, the force of the impact knocking me over. Brenda killed it with a well-aimed throw. The other two checked their advance and circled warily. They dodged thrown spears; I shouted for everyone to hold their fire.

Brenda and I retrieved our weapons and, along with Gabriel and Martin, closed in on the beasts, moving them away from where the thrown spears lay. In a few seconds the twelve of us had them encircled, and I suddenly remembered the old English expression "having a tiger by the tail." The beasts were only about half the size of a human, but all muscle and teeth. They growled and snapped at us, heads wagging, saliva drooling.

I shouted "Now, Gab!"—he was the best shot—and he flung his spear at the closer one. It sank deep in the animal's side and it fell over, mewling and pawing the air. The other beast saw its chance and leaped straight at Gab, who instinctively ducked under it. It bounded off his back and sprang for the safety of the trees. Six or seven spears showered after it, but missed.

Gabriel had four puncture wounds under each shoulder blade from the cat's



claws. Brenda washed them out thoroughly but decided against improvising a dressing out of leaf and vine. Just stay clean, always good advice.

We skinned and gutted the two cats and laboriously sliced their flesh into long thin strips for jerky. The old stump made a good smoky fire for the purpose. As darkness fell, we built another bright fire next to it.

I set up a guard schedule, with teams of three each standing three-hour shifts while the rest slept, but none of us slept too soundly. Over the crackle of the fires I was sure I could hear things moving restlessly in the woods. If they were there, though, they weren't bold enough to attack. During my watch a couple of dog-sized animals with large eyes came to the periphery of the clearing, to feast on the cat-beasts' entrails. We threw sticks at them but they just looked at us, and left after they had eaten their fill.

If my estimate of our progress was correct, we had about 30 kilometers of deep woods to go, until the topography opened up into rolling hills of grassland. Everyone agreed that we should try to make it in one push. There was no guarantee we could find another clearing, and nobody wanted to spend a night under the canopy. So at first light, we bundled the jerky up inside a stiff catskin and headed south.

As we moved along the river the nature of the trees changed, the banyans eventually being replaced by a variety of smaller trees—damn! Two of them!

### *Brenda*

I wasn't paying close attention, still grieving over Mylab—actually, grieving for myself, for having committed murder. I've had patients die under my care, but the feeling isn't even remotely similar. His eyes, when I drew the flint across his throat—they went bright with pain and then immediately dull.

We'd been walking for about an hour after leaving the cave, picking our way down the north slope of the mountain, when Maria, in the lead, suddenly squatted down and made a silent gesture. We all crouched and moved forward.

Ahead of us on the trail, two adult Plathys sat together with their backs to us, talking quietly while they ate. They were armed with spear and broadaxe and knives. I doubted that the six of us could take even one of them in a face-to-face combat.

Maria stared, probably considering ambush, and then motioned for us to go back up the trail. I kept looking over my shoulder, every small scuff and scrape terribly amplified in my mind, expecting at any moment to see the two huge brutes charging after us. But their eating noise must have masked the sound of our retreat.



We crept back a couple of hundred meters to a fork in the trail and cautiously made our way down a roughly parallel track, going as fast as silence would allow. The light breeze was coming from behind us; we wanted to be past the Plathys—downwind of them—before they finished eating. We passed close enough to hear their talking, but didn't see them.

After about a kilometer the trail disappeared. We had to pick our way down a steep defile and couldn't help making noise, dislodging pebbles that often cascaded into small rattling avalanches. We were only a few meters from the bottom of the cliff when the two Plathys appeared above us. They discussed the situation loudly for a few moments—using the hunting language, which none of us had been allowed to learn—and then set aside their weapons in favor of rocks.

When I saw what they were doing I slid right to the bottom, willing to take a few abrasions rather than present too tempting a target. Most of the others did the same. Herb took a glancing blow to the head and fell backward, landing roughly. I ran over to him, afraid he was unconscious. Gab beat me to him and hauled him roughly to his feet; he was dazed but awake. We each took an arm and staggered away as fast as we could, zigzagging as Gab muttered "go left" and "right," so as to present a more difficult target. I sustained one hard blow to the left buttock, which knocked me down. It was going to make sitting uncomfortable, but we wouldn't have to worry about that for a while.

We were lucky the Plathys hadn't brought rope, as a larger hunting party in the mountains would have done. They are rather clumsy rock climbers (though with their long arms they can run up a steep slope very fast). One of them started down after us, but after a nearly fatal slip he scrambled back up.

We pressed our advantage, such as it was. To pursue us they would have to make a detour of a couple of kilometers, and at any rate we could go downhill faster than they could. It seemed likely that they would instead go back to their main group to report our whereabouts, and then all of them try to catch us in the veldt. On level ground they could easily run us down, once they caught our scent.

Maria, xenologist to the end, remarked how lucky we were that they had never developed the idea of signal drums. It is strange, since they use such a variety of percussion instruments in their music and dancing.

Such music and dancing. They seemed so human.

Our only chance for survival was to try to confuse them by splitting up. Maria breathlessly outlined a plan as we hurried down the slope. When we reached the valley we would get a bearing on the stream we'd followed here, then go six different ways, rendezvousing at the stream's outlet to the sea three



days later; at nightfall, whoever was there would cross to the next island. Even at high tide it should be possible to wade most of the way.

I suggested we make it three pairs rather than six loners, but Maria pointed out that two of us really didn't stand a much better chance against an armed Plathy than one; in either case, the only way we could kill them would be by stealth. Murder. I told her I didn't think I would be able to do it, and she nodded. Probably thinking that she would have said the same thing a few days ago.

We stopped for a few minutes to rest on a plateau overlooking the veldt, where Maria pointed out the paths she wanted each of us to take. Herb and Derek would go the most direct route, more or less north, but twining in and out of each other's path so as to throw off the scent. Gab, being the fastest, would run halfway around the mountain, then make a broad arc north. She would go straight northeast for about half the distance and then cut back; Martin would do the opposite. I was to head due west, straight for the stream, and follow it down, in and out of the water. All of us were to "leave scent" at the places where our paths diverged the most from straight north.

A compass would have been nice. At night we'd be okay if it didn't cloud up again, but during the day we'd just have to follow our direction bump through the tall grass. I was glad I had an easy path.

Not all that easy. The three water bladders went to the ones who would be farthest from the stream, of course. So I had to go a good half day without water. Assuming I didn't get lost. We divided the food and scrambled down in six different directions.

### *Maria*

Where was I? Coming here, we got around the crater lake without incident, but the descent to the shore was more difficult than I had anticipated. It was not terribly steep, but the dense undergrowth of vines and bushes impeded our progress. After two days we emerged on the shore, covered with scratches and bruises. At least we'd encountered no large fauna.

(By this time I had a great deal of sympathy for the lazybones minority on the Planning Committee who'd contended that we were being overly cautious in putting the base so far from the Plathy island. They'd recommended we put it on this island, with only 80 kilometers of shallow sea separating us from our destination. I'd voted, along with the majority, for the northern mainland, partly out of a boneheaded desire for adventure.)

What we faced was a chain of six small islands and countless sandbars, in a puddle of a sea that rarely was more than a meter deep. We knew from





Garcia's experience that a boat would be useless. With vine and driftwood we lashed together a raft to carry our weapons and provisions, filled the water jugs, and splashed south.

It was tiring. The sand underfoot was firm, but sloshing through the shallow water was like walking with heavy weights attached to your ankles. We had to make good progress, though; the only island we were sure had fresh water was 40 kilometers south, halfway.

We made a good 25 kilometers the first day, dragging our weary bones up onto an island that actually had trees. Marcus and Gab went off in search of water, finding none, while the rest of us gathered driftwood for a fire or tried lackadaisically to fish. Nanci speared a gruesome thing that no one would touch, including her, and nobody else caught anything. Susan and Brenda dug up a couple of dozen shellfish, though, which obediently popped open when roasted. They tasted like abalone with sulfur sauce.

As we were settling in for the night, we met our first Plathy. She walked silently up to the fire, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to happen upon a dozen creatures from another planet. She was young, only a little larger than me (now, of course, we know she was on her Walk North). When I stood up and tried to say "Welcome, sister" in the female language, she screamed and ran. We heard her splashing away for some time, headed for the next county.

The next day was harder, though we didn't have as far to go. Some geological gremlin had raked channels across our path, new features since Garcia's mission, and several times we had to swim as much as 200 meters before slogging again. (Thank the gods for Gab, who would gamely paddle out toward the horizon in search of solid ground, and for Marcus, who could swim strongly enough one-handed to tow the raft.)

It was dark by the time we got to the water hole island, and we had lost our coals to an inopportune wave. We were cold and terminally wrinkled, but so parched from sucking salt water that we staggered around like maniacs, even laughing like maniacs, searching blindly for the artesian well that Garcia's records said was there. Finally Joanna found it, stumbling in headfirst and coming up choking and laughing. We all gorged ourselves, wallowing. In my case the relief was more than mouth and throat and stomach. At sundown I'd squatted in the shallows and squeezed out piss dark with stringy blood. That scared me. But the fresh water evidently cleared it up.

There were no more surprises the next two days of island-hopping, except the pleasant one of finding another water source. We couldn't find any wood dry enough to start a fire with, but it didn't get all that cold at night.

Late afternoon of the second day we slogged into the swamp that was the



northern edge of the Plathy island. The dominant form of life was a kind of bilious spotted serpent that would swim heavily away as we approached. We were out of food but didn't go after them. Before nightfall the swamp had given way to rather damp forest, but we found dry dead wood suspended in the branches and spun up a bright fire. We dug up a kind of tuber that Garcia's group had identified as edible and roasted them. Then tried to sleep in spite of the noises in the darkness. At first light we moved out fast, knowing that in 30 or so kilometers the forest would give way to open grassland.

The change from forest to veldt was abrupt. We were so happy to be out of the shadow of it—funny that in my present situation I feel exactly the opposite; I feel exposed, and hurry toward the concealment of the thick underbrush and close-spaced heavy trunks. I feel so visible, so vulnerable. And I probably won't find water until I get there. I'm going to turn off this tooth for a few minutes and try not to scream.

All right. Let me see. On our way to the Plathys, we walked across the veldt for two days. Food was plentiful; the *zamri* are like rabbits, but slow. For some reason they like to cluster around the *ecivrel* bush, a thorny malodorous plant, and all we would have to do to bag several of them was form a loose circle around the bush and move in, clubbing them as they tried to escape. I would like to find one now. Their blood is sweet.

There's a Plathy song: *Sim garlish a sim garlish farla tob—!ka. Soo pan du mairly garlish ezda tob—!ka. Oe vairly tern se garlish mizga mer—!ka. Garlish—!ka. Tern se garlish—!ka.*

Translating it into my own language doesn't work well:

*Sacar sangre y sacar sangre para vivir—si. En sangre damos muerte y sacamos vida—si. Alabamos la sangre de vida que usted nos da—si. Sangre—si. Sangre de vida—si.*

Serb, who's a linguist, did a more accurate rendering in English:

*Take blood and take blood for living—yes. In blood we give death and take living—yes. We worship the blood of life you give us yes. Blood—yes. Blood of life—yes!*

But there is really no translation. Except in the love of sweet blood.

I've become too much like them. My human instinct is to keep running and, when I can't run, to hide. But a strong Plathy feeling is to stand in a clearing and shout for them. Let them come for me; let me die in a terrible ecstasy of



tearing flesh and cracking bone. Let them suck my soft guts so I can live in them

God. I have to stop. You'll think I'm crazy. Maybe I'm getting there. Why won't it rain?

*Gabriel*

Turned on the tooth while I sit by the water and rest. Maria wants us to record as much as we can, in case. Just in case.

Why the hell did I sign up for this? I was going to switch out of xenology and work for an advanced degree in business. But she came on campus recruiting, with all those exotic Earth women. They're just like women anywhere, big surprise. Except her. She is truly weird. Listen to this, tooth: I want her. She is such a mystery. Maybe if we live through this I'll get up the courage to ask. Plumb her, so to speak; make her open up to me, so to speak; get to the bottom of her, so to speak. A nice bottom for a woman of her advanced years.

How can I think of sex at a time like this? With a woman twice my age. If somebody on a followup expedition finds this tooth in a fossilized pile of Plathy shit, please excuse my digression. If I live to have the tooth extracted and played back, I don't think it will make much difference to my professional reputation. I'll be writing poetry and clerking for my father's export firm.

I ran around the mountain. Collapsed once and slept for I don't know how long. Got up and ran to the river. Drank too much. Here I sit, too bloated to move. If a Plathy finds me I won't be a fun meal.

I was really getting to like them, before they turned on us. They. seemed like such vegetables until it started to get cold. Then it was as if they had turned into a different species. With hindsight, it's no big surprise that they should change again. Or that they should be capable of such terrible violence. We were lulled by their tenderness toward each other and their friendliness toward us, and the subtle alien grace of their dancing and music and sculpture. We should have been cautious, having witnessed the two other changes: the overnight transformation into completely sexual creatures and the slower evolution from lumpish primitives to charming creators, when the snow started to fall.

The change was obvious after the first heavy snowfall, which left about half a meter of the stuff on the ground. The Plathys started singing and laughing spontaneously. They rolled up their *maffas* and stored them in a cave and began playing in the snow—or at least it seemed like play, they were so carefree and childlike about it. Actually, they were building a city of snow.



The individual buildings, *lacules*, were uniform domes built up from blocks of snow. Maria called them igloos, after a similar primitive structure on Earth, and the name stuck. Even some of the Plathys used it.

There were twenty-nine domes arranged in a circle, eventually connected by tunnels as the snow deepened. The inside of the circle was kept clear, the snow being constantly shoveled into the spaces between the domes. The net result was a high circular wall that kept the wind out. Later we learned it would also keep people *in*.

They had a fire going most of the time in the middle of the circle, which served as a center for their daytime activities: music, dance, tumbling, athletic competition, and storytelling (which seemed to be a kind of fanciful history combined with moral instruction). Even with the sun up, the temperature rarely got above freezing, but the Plathys thrived in the cold. They would sit for hours on the ice, watching the performances, wearing only their kilts. We wore leggings and boots, jackets, and hats. The Plathys would only dress up if they had to go out at night (which they often did, for reasons they couldn't or wouldn't explain to us), when the temperature dropped to forty or fifty below.

I went out at night a couple of times, but I didn't go far. Too easy to get lost. If it was clear you could see the ring of igloos ghostly in the starlight, but if there was any weather you couldn't see your own hand in front of your face.

The igloos were surprisingly warm, though the only source of heat was one or two small oil lamps, plus metabolism. That metabolism also permeated everything with the weird smell of Plathy sweat, which resembled rotten bananas. Our own dome got pretty high with the aroma of unwashed humans; Plathys would rarely visit for more than a minute or two.

Seems odd to me that the Plathys didn't continue some of their activities, like music and storytelling, during the long nights. Some of them did routine housekeeping chores, mending and straightening, while others concentrated on sculpture. The sculptors seemed to go into a kind of trance, scraping patiently away at their rock or wood with teeth and claws. I never saw one use a tool, though they did carve and whittle when making everyday objects. I once watched an elder through the whole process. He sorted through a pile of rocks and logs until he found a rock he liked. Then he sat back and studied it from every angle, staring for more than an hour before beginning. Then he closed his eyes and started gnawing and scratching. I don't think he opened his eyes until he was done working. When I asked him if he had opened his eyes, he said, "Of course not."

Over the course of six nights he must have spent about sixty hours on the stone. When he finished, it was a delicate lacy abstraction. The other Plathys came by, one at a time, to compliment him on it—the older ones offering



gentle criticism—and after everyone had seen it, he threw it outside for the children to play with. I retrieved it and kept it, which he thought was funny. It had served its purpose, as he had served his purpose for it: finding its soul (its "face inside") and releasing it.

I shouldn't talk about sculpture; that's Herb's area of expertise. The assignment Maria gave me was to memorize the patterns of the athletic competitions. (I was an athlete in school, twice winning the Hombre de Hierro award for my district.) There's not much to say about it, though. How high can you jump, how fast can you run, how far can you spit. That was an interesting one. They can spit with great force. Another interesting one was wood-eating. Two contestants are given similar pieces of wood—kindling, a few centimeters wide by half a meter long—and they crunch away until one has consumed the whole thing. Since the other doesn't have to continue eating afterward, it's hard to say which one is the actual winner. (When I first saw the contest, I thought they must derive some pleasure from eating wood. When I asked one about it, though, he said it tastes terrible and hurts at both ends. I can imagine.)

Another painful sport is hitting. It's unlike boxing in that there's no aggression, no real sense of a fight. One contestant hits the other on the head or body with a club. Then he (or she) hands the club to the opponent, who returns the blow precisely. The contest goes on until one of them drops, which can take several hours.

You ask them why they do this and most of them will not understand—"why" is a really difficult concept for Plathys; they have no word for it—but when you do get a response it's on the order of "This is part of life." Which is uninformative but not so alien. Why do humans lift heavy weights or run till they drop or beat each other senseless in a ring?

Oh my God. Here comes one.

### *Maria*

Finally, water. I wish there were some way to play back this tooth and edit it. I must have raved for some time, before I fell unconscious a few kilometers from here. I woke up with a curious *zamri* licking my face. I broke its neck and tore open its throat and drank deeply. That gave me the strength to get here. I drank my fill and then moved one thousand steps downstream, through the cold water, where I now sit concealed behind a bush, picking morsels from the *zamri's* carcass. When I get back to Earth I think I'll become a vegetarian.

This is very close to the place where we met our first cooperative Plathy.



There were three of them, young; two ran away when they spotted us, but the third clapped a greeting, and when we clapped back he cautiously joined us. We talked for an hour or so, the other two watching from behind trees.

They were from the Tumlil family, providentially; the family that had hosted Garcia's expedition. This male was too young to actually remember the humans, but he had heard stories about them. He explained about the Walk North. In their third or fourth year, every Plathy goes off on his own, going far enough north to get to where "things are different." He brings back something odd. The elders then rule on how powerful the oddness of the thing is, and according to that power, the youngster is assigned his preliminary rank in the tribe.

(They know that this can eventually make the difference between life and death. The higher up you start, the more likely you are to wind up an elder. Those who aren't elders are allowed to die when they can no longer provide for themselves; elders are fed and protected indefinitely.)

Most of them travel as far as the crater lake island, but a few go all the way to the northern mainland. That was the ambition of the one we were talking to. I interrogated him as to his preparations for a boat, food, and water, and he said a boat would be nice but not necessary, and the sea was full of food and water. He figured he could swim it in three hands of days, twelve. Unless he was chaffing me, they can evidently sleep floating and drink salt water. That will complicate our escape, if they keep pursuing.

I take it that the three of them were cheating a bit by banding together. He repeatedly stressed that they would be going their separate ways as soon as they got to the archipelago. I hope they stayed together the whole way. I'd hate to face that forest alone. Maybe I'll have to, though.

Before he left he gave us directions to his family, but we'd decided to at least start out with a different one from Garcia's, in the interests of objectivity and to see how much information traveled from family to family. Little or none, it turned out. Our Camchai family knew about the Tumlils, since they shared the same area of veldt during the late summer, but none of the Tumlils had mentioned that ten hairless dwarfs had spent one winter with them.

After two days of relatively easy travel, we found the Camchais in their late-summer habitat, the almost treeless grassland at the foot of the southern mountains. Duplicating the experience of Garcia's group, we found ourselves unexcitedly welcomed into the tribe: we were shown where the food was, and various Plathys scrounged up the framework and hides to cobble together a *maffa* for us. Then we joined the family in their typical summertime activity, sitting around.

After a few weeks of trying to cajole information out of them, we witnessed



the sudden explosion of sexual activity described earlier. Then they rested some more, five or six days, and began to pull up stakes.

Their supply of stored food was getting low and there was no easy hunting left in that part of the veldt, so they had to move around the mountains to the seashore and a wretched diet of fish.

The trek was organized and led by Kalyym, who by virtue of being the youngest elder was considered chief for such practical matters. She was one of the few Plathys we met who wore ornaments; hers was a necklace of dinosaur teeth she'd brought back from her Walk North, the teeth of a large carnivore. She claimed to have killed it, but everyone knew that was a lie, and respected her for being capable of lying past puberty.

It was significantly cooler on the other side of the mountains, with a chilly south wind in the evening warning that fall had begun and frost was near. The Plathys still lazed through midday, but in the mornings and evenings they fished with some energy and prepared for the stampede. They stockpiled driftwood and salt and sat around the fire chipping extra flints, complaining about eating fish and looking forward to bounty.

We spent several months in this transitional state, until one morning a lookout shouted a happy cry and the whole family went down to the shore with clubs. Each adult took about three meters of shoreline, the children standing behind them with knives.

We could hear them before we could see them—the *tolliw*s, rabbit-sized mammals that chirped like birds. They sounded like what I imagine a distant cloud of locusts sounded like, in old times. The Plathys laughed excitedly.

Then they were visible, one whirring mass from horizon to horizon, like an island-sized mat of wriggling wet fur. Mammals schooling like fish. They spilled on to dry land and staggered into the line of waiting Plathys.

At first there was more enthusiasm than result. Everybody had to pick up his first *tolliw* and bite off its head and extol its gustatory virtues to the others, in as gruesome a display of bad table manners as you could find anywhere in the ConfederaciOn. Then, after a few too-energetic smashings, they settled into a productive routine: with the little animals milling around their ankles in an almost continuous stream, the adult would choose a large and healthy-looking one and club it with a backhand swipe that lofted the stunned animal in an arc, back to where the child waited with the knife. The child would slit the animal's throat and set it on a large hide to bleed, and then wait happily for the next one. When the carcass had bled itself nearly dry, the child would give it a squeeze and transfer it to a stack on the sand, eventually working in a smooth assembly-line fashion. The purpose of the systematic bleeding was to build up on the hide layers of coagulated blood that, when dry, would be cut



up into squares and used for snacks.

Large predators were scattered here and there through the swimming herd, fawn-colored animals resembling terrestrial kangaroos, but with fingerlong fangs overhanging the lower jaw. Most of them successfully evaded the Plathys, but occasionally one would be surrounded and clubbed to death amid jubilant screeching and singing.

This went on for what seemed to be a little less than two hours, during which time the oldest elders busied themselves filling a long trench with wood and collecting wet seaweed. When the last stragglers of the school crawled out of the water and followed the others down the beach, there were sixty pyramidal stacks of furry bodies, each stack nearly as tall as a Plathy, ranged down the beach. We could hear the family west of us laughing and clubbing away.

(The statistics of the process bothered me. They seemed to have killed about one out of a hundred of the beasts and then sent the remainder on down the beach, where the next family would presumably do the same, and so on. There were more than a hundred families, we knew. Why didn't they run out of *tollivs*? For once, Tybru gave me a straightforward answer: they take turns. Only sixteen families "gather" the creatures during each migration, alternating in a rotating order that had been fixed since the dawn of time. The other families took advantage of the migrations of other animals; she was looking forward to two years hence, when it would be their turn for the *jukha* slaughter. They were the tastiest, and kept well.

By this time it was getting dark. I had been helping the elders set up the long trench of bonfires; now we lit them, and with the evening chill coming in over the sea I was grateful for the snapping flames.

Tybru demonstrated the butchering process so we could lend a hand. Selected internal organs went into hides of brine for pickling; then the skin was torn off and the yellow layer of fat that clung to it was scraped into clay jars for reducing to oil. More fat was flensed from the body, and then the meat was cut off in thin strips, which were draped over green sticks for smoking. Alas, they had no way to preserve the brains, so most of the Plathys crunched and sucked all night while they worked.

We weren't strong enough or experienced enough to keep up with even the children, but we gamely butchered through the night, trying not to cut ourselves on the slippery flint razors, working in the light of guttering torches. The seaweed produced an acrid halogen-smelling smoke that Tybru claimed was good for the lungs. Maybe because of its preservative effect.

The sun came up on a scene out of Hieronymus Bosch: smoke swirling over bloody sands littered with bones and heaps of entrails, Plathys and people





blood-smeared and haggard with fatigue. We splashed into the icy water and scrubbed off dried blood with handfuls of sand, then stood in the stinging smoke trying to thaw out.

It was time to pack up and go. Already the rich smell of fresh blood was underlaid with a whiff of rot; insects were buzzing, and hardshell scavengers were scuttling up onto the beach. When the sun got high the place would become unlivable, even by Plathy standards.

We rolled up the smoked meat and blood squares into the raw scraped hides, which would later be pegged out and dried in the sun, and followed a trail up into the mountains. We set up our *maffas* on a plateau about a thousand meters up and waited placidly for the snow.

Someone coming.

*Derek*

I can no longer view them as other than dangerous animals. They mimic humanity—no, what I mean is that *we* interpret in human terms the things they do. The animal things they do. Maria, I'm sorry. I can't be a scientist about this, not any more. Not after what I just saw.

Herb and I were supposed to crisscross, going northeast a thousand steps, then northwest a thousand, and so forth. That was supposed to confuse them. They caught Herb.

I heard the scream. Maybe half a kilometer away. I should have run, knowing there was nothing I could do, but Herb and I've been close since school. Undergraduate. Were close. And there he

Two of them had run him down in a small clearing, killed him and taken off his head. They were, one of them was . . . I can't.

I hid in the underbrush. All I had was a club there was nothing I could do. One of them was eating his, his private parts. The other was scooping him out, curious, dissecting him. I ran away. It's a wonder they didn't

Oh shit. Here they come.

*Gabriel*

I think my wrist is broken. Maybe just sprained. But I killed the son of a bitch. He came around a bend in the river and I was on him with the spear. Element of surprise. I got him two good ones in the thorax before he grabbed me—where are their goddamned vital organs? A human would've dropped dead. He grabbed me by the wrist and slammed me to the ground. I rolled away, retrieved the spear, and impaled him as he jumped on me. He made a



lot of noise and finally decided to die, after scraping my arm pretty well. For some reason he wasn't armed. Thank God. He was Embrek, the one who taught me how to fish. We got along so well. What the hell happened?

It was the first time it rained instead of snowing. All the music and everything stopped. They moped around all day and wouldn't talk. When it got dark they went wild.

They burst into our igloo, four of them, and started ripping off our clothes. Nanci, Susan, and Marcus resisted and were killed right there. One bite each. The rest of us were stripped and led or carried out into the cold, into the center of the compound. The cheerful fire was black mud now, starting to glaze with ice.

All the family except the oldest elders were there, standing around like zombies. No one spoke; no one took notice of anybody else. We all stood naked in the darkness. Kalyym eventually brought out a single oil candle, so we could be mocked by its flickering warm light.

The nature of the rite became clear after a couple of hours. It was a winnowing process. If you lost consciousness the Plathys would gather around you and try to poke and kick you awake. If you stood up they would go back to ignoring you. If you stayed down, you would die. After a certain number of pokes and kicks, Kalyym or some other elder would tear open the thorax in a single rip. Even worse than the blood was the sudden rush of steam into the cold air. Like life escaping the body.

Then they would feed.

We knew we wouldn't last the night. But the slippery walls were impossible to scale, and the largest Plathys stood guard at every entrance to the ring of igloos.

After some whispered discussion, we agreed we had to do the obvious: rush the Plathy who stood guard in front of our own igloo. The ones who survived would rush in, quickly gather weapons and clothing, and try to make it out the back entrance before the Plathys could react. Then run for the caves.

We were lucky. We rushed the guard from six different directions. Crouching to slash at Derek, he turned his back to me, and I leaped, striking him between the shoulders with both feet. He sprawled face down in the mud, and didn't get up. We scrambled into the igloo and I stood guard with a spear while the others gathered up things. A couple of Plathys stuck their heads in the entrance and snarled, but they evidently didn't want to risk the spear.

We weren't immediately followed, and for the first hour or so we made good time. Then it started to rain again, which slowed us down to a crawl. With no stars, we had to rely on Maria's sense of direction, which is pretty good. We found the caves just at dawn, and got a few hours' sleep before



Mylab found us and we had to kill him.

How long is this phase going to last? If it goes as long as the summer or winter phases, they're sure to track us down. We may be safe inside the dome, if we can get that far—Noise ... Maria!

*Maria*

I might as well say it. It might be of some interest. None of us is going to live anyhow. I'm beyond embarrassment, beyond dignity. Nothing to be embarrassed about anyhow, not really.

The thing that was splashing up the stream turned out to be Gabriel. I ran out of hiding and grabbed him, hugged him; we were both a little hysterical about it. Anyhow he got hard and we took care of it, and then we went back to my hiding place and took care of it again. It was the first happy thing that's happened to me in a long time. Now I'm watching him sleep and fighting the impulse to wake him up to try for thirds. One more time before we die.

It's a strange state, feeling like a girl again, all tickled and excited inside, and at the same time feeling doomed. Like a patient with a terminal disease, high on medicine and mortality. There's no way we can outrun them. They'll sniff us down and tear us apart, maybe today, maybe tomorrow. They'll get us. Oh, wake up, Gab.

Be rational. This ferocity is just another change of state. They don't know what they're doing. Like the sex and birth phases. Tomorrow they may go back to being bovine sweet things. Or artisans again. Or maybe they'll discover the wheel for a week. What a weird, fucked-up bunch of ...

There must be some survival value in it. Certainly it serves to cull the weakest members out. And killing most of the females before puberty compensates for the size of the litters—or could the size of the litters be a response to the scarcity of females? Lamarckism either way. Can't think straight.

At any rate it certainly can't be instinctive behavior in regard to us, since we aren't part of their normal environment. Maybe we've unknowingly triggered aberrant behavior. Stress response. Olfactory catalyst. Violent displacement activity. Who knows? Maybe whoever reads this tooth will be able to make some sense of it. You will excuse me for the time being. I have to wake him up.

*Brenda*

Maria and Gab were waiting for me when I got to the mouth of the river.



Gab has a badly sprained wrist; I splinted and bound it. His grip is still good, and fortunately he's left-handed. Maria's okay physically, just a little weak, but I wonder about her psychological state. Almost euphoric, which hardly seems appropriate.

We waited an extra half day, but the others are either dead or lost. They can catch up with us at the dome. We have axe, spear, and two knives. Gab turned one of the knives into a spear for me. Two water bladders. We filled the bladders, drank to saturation, and waded out into the sea.

The water seems icy cold, probably more than ten degrees colder than when we walked through it before. Numb from the waist down after a few minutes. When the water is shallow or you get to walk along a sandbar, sensation returns, deep stinging pain. It was a good thing we'd found that second water island; only 10 kilometers of wading and limping along the wet sand.

We'd rolled up our furs and shouldered them, so they were fairly dry. Couldn't risk a fire (and probably couldn't have found enough dry stuff to make one), so we just huddled together for warmth. We whispered, mapping out our strategy, such as it was, and kept an eye out to the south. Though if we'd been followed by even one Plathy we'd be pretty helpless.

Thirty kilometers to the next water hole. We decided to stay here for a couple of days, eating the sulfurous oysters and regaining strength. It would have to be a fast push, going all the way on less than five liters of water.

In fact we stayed four days. Gab came down with bad diarrhea, and we couldn't push on until his body could hold fluid. It was just as well. We were all bone-tired and stressed to the limit.

The first night we just collapsed in a hamster pile and slept like the dead. The next day we gathered enough soft dry grass to make a kind of mattress, and spread our furs into a piecemeal blanket. We still huddled for warmth and reassurance, and after a certain amount of nonverbal discussion, Gab unleashed his singular talent on both of us impartially.

That was interesting. Something Maria said indicated that Gab was new to her. I'd thought that nothing—male, female, or Plathy—was safe around him. Maybe Maria's strength intimidated him, or her age. Or being the authority figure. That must be why she was in such a strange mood when I caught up with them. Anyhow, I'm glad for her.

Gab entertained us with poetry and songs in three languages. It's odd that all three of us know English. Maria had to learn it for her study of the Eskimos, and I did a residency in Massachusetts. Gab picked it up just for the hell of it, along with a couple of other Earth languages, besides Spanish and Pan-Swahili, and all three Selvan dialects. He's quite a boy. Maria was the only one who could speak Plathy better than he. They tried duets on the blood



songs and shit songs, but it doesn't sound too convincing. The consonants *!ka* and *!ko* you just can't do unless you have teeth like beartraps.

The stress triggered my period a week early. When we fled the igloo I hadn't had time to gather up my moss pads and leather strap contraption, so I just sort of dripped all over the island. It obviously upset Gab, but I'm not going to waddle around with a handful of grass for his precious male sensibilities. (His rather gruesome sickness didn't do much for *my* sensibilities, either, doctor or no.)

We spent the last day in futile basket weaving, trying to craft something that would hold water for more than a few minutes. We all knew that it could be done, but it couldn't be done by us, not with the grass on the island. Maria did manage to cobble together a bucket out of her kilt by working a framework of sticks around it. That will double our amount of water, but she'll have to cradle it with both arms.

Thirty kilometers. I hope we make it.

### *Maria*

We were almost dead from thirst and exposure by the time we got to the water hole island. We had long since lost track of our progress, since the vegetation on the islands was radically different from summer's, and some of the shorelines had changed. We just hoped each large island would be the one, and finally one was.

Alongside the water hole we found the fresh remains of a fire. At first that gave us a little hope, since it was possible that the rest of our team had leapfrogged us while Gab was convalescing. But then we found the dropping place, and the excrement was Plathy. Three or four of them, by the looks of it. A day or so ahead of us.

We didn't know what to do. Were they hunters searching us out, or a group on their Walk North? If the latter, it would probably be smartest to stay here for a couple of days; let them get way ahead. If they were hunters, though, they might still be on the island, and it would be smarter for us to move on.

Gab didn't think they were hunters, since they would've over-taken us earlier and made lunchmeat out of us. I wasn't sure. There were at least three logical paths through the archipelago; they might have taken one of the others. Since they could drink salt water, they didn't have to go out of their way to get to the island we first stopped at.

None of us felt up to pushing on. The going would be easier, but it would still be at least ten hours of sloshing through cold water on small rations. So we compromised.



In case there were hunters on the island, we made camp on the southern tip (the wind was from the north) in a small clearing almost completely surrounded by thick brambles. If we had to stand and fight, there was really only one direction they could approach us from. We didn't risk a fire and sent only one person out at a time for water or shellfish. One stayed awake while the other two slept.

Our precautions wouldn't amount to much if there actually were three or four of them and they all came after us. But they might be split up, and both Gab and I had proved they could be killed, at least one at a time.

We spent two uneventful days regaining our strength. About midday on the third, Gab went out for water and came back with Derek.

He was half dead from exposure and hunger. We fed him tiny bits of shellfish in water, and after a day of intermittent sleeping and raving, he came around enough to talk.

He'd seen two Plathys in the process of eating Herb. They ran after him, but he plunged blindly into brambles (his arms and lower legs were covered with festering scratches), and they evidently didn't follow him very far. He'd found the river and run out to sea in a blind panic. Got to the first water island and lay there for days. He couldn't remember whether he'd eaten.

Then he heard Plathys, or thought he did, and took off north as fast as he could manage. He didn't remember getting here. Gab found him unconscious at the water's edge.

So now the plan is to wait here two or three more days, until Derek feels strong enough for the next push.

Hardest part still ahead. Even if we don't run into Plathys. What if the boats are gone?

### *Gabriel*

We didn't see any further sign of the Plathys. After four days Derek was ready to go. For a full day we drank all the water we could hold, and then at sundown set out.

There was only one place so deep we had to swim. I tried to carry Maria's water basket, sidestroking, but it didn't work. So the last 20 or 25 kilometers we were racing against the dwindling supply of water in the two bladders.

At first light there was still no sight of land, and we had to proceed by dead reckoning. (The Plathys evidently don't have this problem; they're somehow sensitive to the planet's magnetic field, like some Selvan migrating birds.) We saved a few spoonfuls of water to drink when we finally sighted land.

We went along in silence for an hour or so, and then Derek had a



brainstorm. We were scanning the horizon from only a meter or so above sea level; if someone stood on my shoulders, he could see twice as far. Derek was the tallest. I ducked under and hoisted him up. He could stay balanced only for a second, but it did work; he saw a green smudge off to the left. We adjusted our course and slogged on with new energy. When all of us could see the smudge, we celebrated with a last sip of water.

Of course the stream that would be our guide uphill was nowhere to be seen. We stumbled ashore and did manage to lick enough moisture from foliage to partly allay our terrible thirst, though the bitter flavor soured my stomach.

We marked the spot with a large X in the sand and split into pairs, Brenda and I going one direction and Maria and Derek going the other, each with a water bladder to fill when one pair found the river. We agreed to turn back after no more than ten thousand steps. If neither pair found the river within 10 kilometers of our starting place, we'd just work our way uphill toward the crater lake. It would be slower going than following the stream's course, but we could probably manage it, licking leaves and splitting some kinds of stalks for water. And we'd be less likely to run into an ambush, if there were hunters waiting ahead. I wasn't looking forward to it, though. Coming down had been enough trouble.

We were lucky. In a sense. Brenda and I stumbled on the stream less than two kilometers from where we started. We drank deeply and jogged back to catch up with Maria and Derek.

We made an overnight camp some distance from the stream and foraged for food. There were no fish in the shallows, and none of the sulfurous oysters. There were small crabs, but they were hard to catch and had only a pinch of meat. We wound up digging tubers, which were not very palatable raw but would sustain us until we got to the lake, where fish were plentiful.

It might have been a little safer to travel by night, but we remembered how the brambles had flayed us before, and decided to take the chance. It was a mistake.

As we had hoped, progress was a lot faster and easier going up than it had been coming down. Less slipping. It was obvious that Plathys had preceded us, though, from footprints and freshly broken vegetation, so we climbed as quietly as possible.

Not quietly enough, perhaps, or maybe our luck just ran out. Damn it, we lost Derek. He had to be the one in front.

*Maria*



We couldn't see the sun because of the forest canopy, but it was obvious from the reddening of the light that we would soon have to decide whether to make camp or push on through the darkness. Gab and I were discussing this, whispering, when the Plathy attacked.

Derek was in front. The spear hit him in the center of the chest and passed almost completely through his body. I think it killed him instantly. The Plathy, a lone young female, came charging down the stream bed toward us, roaring. She tripped and fell almost at our feet. Probably stunned. Gab and I killed her with spear and axe. After she was dead, Gab hacked off her head and threw it into the bush.

We waited for the rest of them, but she evidently had been alone. Gab had a hard time controlling his grief.

When it got dark we pushed on. The stream was slightly phosphorescent, but we relied mainly on feeling our way. A kind of fungus on the forest floor always grew in pairs, and glowed dull red, like pairs of sullen eyes watching us.

We made more noise than we had during the daytime, but there was probably little risk. Plathys sleep like dead things, and in this kind of terrain they don't post guard at night, since none of the predators here is big enough to bother them. Big enough to give us trouble, though. Three times we moved to the middle of the stream, when we thought we heard something stalking us.

The slope began to level off before it got light, and by dawn we were moving through the marshy grassland that bordered the crater lake.

We had unbelievable luck with the lake fish. Hundreds of large females lay almost immobile in the shallows. They were full of delicious roe. We gorged ourselves and then cut strips of flesh to dry in the sun. Not as effective as smoking, but we couldn't risk a fire.

We decided it would be safest to sleep separately, in case someone had picked up our trail. Like Gab, I found a tree to drape myself in. Brenda just found a patch of sunlight, arranged her furs on the wet ground, and collapsed. I thought I was too jangled to sleep, after Derek, but in fact I barely had time to find a reasonably secure set of branches before my body turned itself off.

Our survival reflexes have improved. A few hours later—it was not quite noon—I woke up suddenly in response to a slight vibration. One of the cat creatures was creeping toward me along another branch.

I didn't want to throw the spear, of course. So I took the offensive, crawling closer to the beast. He snarled and backed up warily. When I was a couple of spear lengths from him I started poking toward his face. Eventually I forced him onto too small a limb, and he crashed to the ground. He lay there a moment, then heaved himself up, growled at the world, and limped away. I





went back to my branch and slept a few more hours unmolested.

Gab woke me up with the bad news that Brenda was gone. There was no sign of violence at the spot where she'd settled down, though, and we eventually found her hiding in a tree as we had. She'd heard a noise.

We gathered up our dried fish—that it hadn't been disturbed was encouraging—and killed a few fresh ones to carry along for dinner. Then we moved with some haste down along the river we had followed up so long ago. If all goes well we will be able to duplicate in reverse the earlier sequence: rest tonight on this side of the banyan forest, then push through to the large clearing; spend the night there, and at first light press on to the sea.

### *Gabriel*

The sea. I was never so glad to see water.

The first boat we found was beyond use, burned in two, but the water jugs nearby were unharmed, curiously enough. It's possible some immature Plathys had come upon it and not recognized that it was a boat, just a hollow log that had burned partway through. So they may have innocently used it for fuel.

The other boat, farther away from the river, was untouched. If anything, it might be in better shape now than when we left it, since it has been propped up on two logs, hollow side down. It was dryer and harder, and apparently had no insect damage.

Unfortunately, it was too heavy for three people to lift; it had been something of a struggle for all twelve of us. We went back upstream a couple of kilometers to where Maria remembered having seen a stand of saplings. Stripped of branches, they looked like they would make good rollers. We each took an armload. It was dark by the time we got back to the boat.

It might have been prudent to try to launch it in the darkness, and paddle out to comparative safety. But there hadn't been any sign of Plathys on this side of the island, and we were exhausted. I stood first watch, and had to trudge around in circles to stay awake. A couple of times I heard something out in the grass, but it never came close. Maria and Brenda heard it on their shifts, but it left before dawn.

At first light we started rolling the boat. A good three hours of hard labor, since when the saplings got into sand they forgot how to be wheels. We dragged it the last hundred meters, one boncracking centimeter after another. Once it was floating free, we anchored it and sat in the shallow water for a long time, poleaxed by fatigue. It was amazing how much warmer the water was here, just a hundred or so kilometers north of the Plathy island: volcanic activity, coupled with distance from the continental shelf drop-off.



We dragged ourselves back to the place we'd slept and found that all our food was gone. Animals; the weapons were still there. Rather than start off with no reserve food, we spent the rest of the morning hunting. A dozen large snakes and seven small animals like *zamri*, but with six legs. We risked a fire to smoke them, which perhaps was not wise. One person guarded the fire while the other two loaded all the jars and then arranged a makeshift vessel in the stern, pegging the largest fur out in a cup shape.

Finally we loaded all the food and weapons aboard and swung up over the side (the outriggers kept us from losing too much water from the stern). We paddled almost hysterically for an hour or so, and then, with the island just a whisper of dark on the horizon, anchored to sleep until the guide stars came out.

### *Brenda*

It was smart of Maria to pick a beefy young athlete as one of her graduate assistants. I don't think that she and I would have stood a chance alone, pushing this heavy old log 250 kilometers. We're all pretty tough and stringy after months of playing caveman, but the forced march has drained us. Last night I paddled more and more feebly until, just before dawn, I simply passed out. It's a good thing Gab was in the rear position. He heard me slump over and grabbed the paddle as it floated by. When the sun got too high to continue, he massaged the knots out of my arms and shoulders, and when I fell asleep again he was doing the same for Maria.

Perhaps we should have delayed our launch long enough to weave a sunshield. It isn't all that hot but it must have some dehydrating effect. And it would be easier to sleep. But Martin was the only one who could weave very well, and he

Oh my God. My God, we left him for dead and I haven't even thought about him since, since we met up at the river mouth. Now we've left him behind with no boat. He could have been just a day or an hour behind us, and if he was we've murdered him.

### *Maria*

Brenda suddenly burst into tears and started going on about Martin. I gave him up before we left the Plathy island. His route was a mirror image of mine and he was a much faster runner. They must have caught him.

I pointed out to Brenda that if Martin did make it to the coast of the crater lake island, he could probably survive indefinitely with his primitive skills,



since it would be fairly easy for one man alone to stay away from the Plathys who occasionally passed through there. Surely he would be intelligent enough to stamp out a regular marking in the sand, easily visible from the satellite. Then the next expedition could rescue him. That fantasy calmed her down a bit. Now she's sleeping.

I'm starting to think we might make it. We have water enough for twenty days and food for half that time, even if we don't catch any fish. Admittedly it's harder to keep a straight course when the guiding stars are behind you, but it shouldn't take us twice as long as the trip south, especially if there are no clouds.

Once we get to the mainland and retrieve the modern weapons, the trek back to the base will be simple. And the year waiting inside the dome will be sybaritic luxury. Real food. Chairs. No bugs. Books. Wonder if I can still read?

### *Gabriel*

Seven days of uneventful routine. On the eighth day I woke up in the afternoon and took a spear up to the bow to stare at the water. I stood up to piss overboard, which sometimes attracts fish, and saw a Plathy swimming straight toward us.

He stopped and treaded water about eight meters away, staring at me and the spear. I called out to him but he didn't answer. Just stared for several minutes in what seemed to be a calculating way. Then he turned his back and swam on, powerful strokes that gave him more speed than we could ever muster.

Could he tip us over? Probably not, with nothing to stand on. Once in the water, though, we'd be no match for one of them. My brain started to run away with fear, after a week of the luxury and novelty of not being afraid. He could approach underwater and pull us overboard one by one. He could grab an outrigger while we were sleeping and rock us out. He could for God's sake bite *a hole* in the boat!

When the women woke up I told them, and we made the obvious decision to maintain a rotating watch. I wondered privately how much good it would do. *I* suspected that a Plathycould hold his breath for a long time; if he approached underwater we might not be able to see him until he was right by the boat. Or one might overtake us in darkness. I didn't give voice to any of these specific fears. Neither of them lacks imagination, and they didn't need my scenarios to add to their own private apprehensions.

How much farther? I suspect we'll be making better time from now on.



## *Maria*

I began to have a recurrent dream that we'd somehow got turned around, and were paddling furiously back to the waiting Plathys. This daymare even began invading my waking hours, especially toward dawn, when I was in that vulnerable, suggestible mental state that extreme fatigue and undirected anxiety can bring on.

So when in the first light I saw land, the emotion I felt was speechless apprehension. We'd been paddling eleven days. We *must* have gotten turned around; we couldn't have covered the distance in that time. I stared at it for half a minute before Brenda mumbled something about it being too early to take a break.

Then Gab also saw the faint green line on the horizon, and we chattered on about it for a while, drifting. As it got lighter we could see the purple cones of distant volcanoes, which put my subconscious to rest.

The volcanoes simplified navigation, since I could remember what their relative positions had been on the way out. It looked as if we were going to land 10 or 15 kilometers west of the mouth of the river that led to the base. The question was whether to alter our course off to the right, so as to land closer to the river, or go straight in and walk along the beach. We were safer on the water but terminally tired of paddling, so we opted for the short approach.

It was little more than an hour before the canoe landed with a solid crunch. We jumped out and immediately fell down. No land legs. I could stand up, but the ground seemed to teeter. For some reason it was a lot worse than it had been on the outward trip. There had been a little more wave action this time, which could account for that. It might also account for the good time we made: some sort of seasonal current.

Using the spears as canes, we practiced walking for a while.

When we could stagger pretty well unsupported, we gathered our stuff and started down the beach as quickly as possible. It would be a good idea to find the weapons and dig them up before dark.

Eventually we were making pretty good progress (though when we stopped the ground would still rock back and forth). The musty jungle actually smelled good, reassuring. We ate the last of the smoked snake while hungrily discussing the culinary miracles waiting for us at the base. There was enough food there to last twelve people for more than a year, a precaution against disaster.

We reached the mouth of the river before midday. But when we paced off



from the rock to where the weapons were supposed to be buried, we got a nasty surprise: someone had already dug them up. Humus had filled the hole, but there was a definite depression there, and the ground was soft.

Dejected and frightened, we paced on to the next site, and it had also been dug up—but we found three of the exhumed fuel cells lying in the brush. The Plathys wouldn't know how to install them, of course. Even if, as now seemed likely, they had been watching us when we first buried them, they wouldn't have been able to find the hidden studs that had to be pushed simultaneously to open the camouflaged weapons. Even if they somehow got one open, they wouldn't know how to screw in the fuel cell and unsafe it.

We went back to the first site on the off-chance that they might have discarded the weapons, too, since ours weren't superior, in conventional capabilities, to what they would normally carry. That turned out to be a smart move: we found a club and a spear snarled in the undergrowth, still in good working order. (They'd been crafted of Bruuchian ironwood, and so were impervious to moisture and mold.)

We armed the two and confirmed that they worked. There were probably others hidden more deeply in the brush, but we were too tired to continue the search. We'd been pushing for most of a day, burning adrenaline. The two weapons would be enough to protect us while we slept.

### *Gabriel*

Brenda woke me up delightfully. I was having an interesting dream, and then it wasn't a dream.

I had the last guard shift before dawn. Scouting the perimeter of our site for firewood, I almost stumbled over a slow lizard, about a meter long, and fat. Skinned and cleaned him and had him roasting on a spit by the time the women woke up.

After breakfast, we spent a good two hours searching the area around the weapons pit, spiraling out systematically, but didn't find anything further. Well, it was good luck we even had the two weapons. We were considerably better with spear, knife, and club than we had been when we landed, but probably not good enough for an extended trek through the mainland. Packs of hungry carnivores, even if no Plathys waited in ambush.

Combing the other site did find us two more fuel cells, which should be plenty. Each one is good for more than an hour of continuous firing when new, and none of them was half used up. We could even *afford* to use the weapons to light fires.

So we started off in pretty high spirits. By noon we weren't quite so



springy. One long sleep isn't enough to turn night creatures into day creatures, and though walking is easier than paddling, our leg muscles were weak from disuse. There was a bare rock island in the middle of the broad river; we waded out to it and made camp. That consisted of laying down our furs and collapsing.

Brenda usually takes the first watch, but she couldn't keep her eyes open, so I did odds-and-evens with Maria, and lost. And so I was the one to see the first Plathy.

I was gathering driftwood for the, night's fire. I'd been concentrating my watch on the nearer bank, the one we'd come from. No telling how long the Plathy had been looking at me, standing quietly on the other side.

Our side was relatively open; compact stands of bamboolike grass every 20 or 30 meters, with only low bushes in between. The other bank was dense jungle, which was why we avoided it. The Plathy was making no special effort to conceal himself but was hard to see in the dappled shade. I continued picking up wood, studying him out of the corner of my eye.

He was an adult male, carrying a spear. That was bad. If he had been a child he might have been on his Walk North, accidentally stumbling on us. An adult had no reason to be here except us, and he wouldn't be here alone.

I didn't recognize him. If he wasn't from the Camchai family, that probably meant they had enlisted the aid of other families, so we might be up against any number. But I couldn't be sure; even in social situations I often got individuals mixed up. Maria was good at telling them apart. I took an armload of wood back to the camp and quietly woke her up and explained what was happening. She walked over to the other side of the island, casually picking up sticks, and took a look. But he was gone.

We had a whispered conference and decided to stay on the island. They would have a hard time rushing us; the river bottom was too muddy for running. And their spears couldn't reach us from either bank.

She's taken over the watch now. Enough talking. Try to sleep.

### *Brenda*

What a terrible night. Nobody woke me for my afternoon watch turn, so I slept almost until dark. Maria said she hadn't awakened me because she was too nervous to sleep anyhow, and explained about Gab seeing the Plathy.

When the sun went down we lit the fire, and Gab joined us. We decided to double the watch—two on, one off, one person with a crazer watching each bank. Maria curled up by the fire and tried to sleep.

They hit us about an hour before midnight, coming from Gab's side, the



near bank. He called out and I ran over.

Spears falling out of the darkness. We had the fire behind us, and so were pretty good targets. Crazers don't make much light; we had to fan them and hope we hit someone. All the time running back and forth sideways, trying to spoil their aim. Maria woke up and I gave her the club crazer, then retired to the other side of the island, under Gab's orders: watch for an "envelopment." But they weren't that sophisticated.

No way to tell how many we killed. The spears came less and less frequently, and then there were rocks, and then nothing. When dawn came, pieces of four or five sliced-up Plathy bodies lay on the shore, any number having been washed downstream.

I wish I could feel guilty about it. Two weeks ago, I would have. Instead, I have to admit to a kind of manic glee. We beat them. They snuck up on us and we beat them.

*Maria*

We burned both crazers down to quarter charge. A little more than half charge on the two backup cells. But I don't expect any more attacks like last night. They aren't dumb.

So much for the First Commandment. We've demonstrated high technology. Some of them must have survived, to go back and tell others about the magic. But we had no choice.

From now on we'll have to assume we're being followed, of course, and be triply careful about ambush setups. That won't be a real problem until the last day or two, traveling with thick jungle on both sides of the river. Why did we have to be so cautious in siting the dome?

Well, it may turn out that we'll be glad it's where it is. What if they follow us all the way there? If they try to encircle the clearing and wait us out, the jungle will get them; we won't have to do a thing. Plathy skills work fine down on their friendly island, but up where the dome is situated a hunting party armed with clubs and spears wouldn't last a week. Free lunch for the fauna.

We have to push on fast. Islands like this one will be common while the river is wide and slow. We'll be fairly safe. When the jungle closes in on both sides, though, the river will become a narrow twisting cataract. No island protection but its noise might confound Plathy hearing, make it harder for them to ambush us.

At any rate, this is the plan: each day on the plain, cover as much ground as possible, consistent with getting a few hours of sleep each night. Rest up just



south of the jungle and then make a forced march, two days to the dome.

Maybe this haste is unnecessary. If the Plathys were their normal, rather sensible selves, they'd cut their losses and go home. But now we have no idea of what's normal. They may harry us until we kill them all. That would be good for the race, leaving it relatively uncontaminated culturally. Bad for us. A few more engagements like last night and we won't have enough power in the crazers to make it through the jungle. Might as well stand by the river and sing blood songs to the hungry lizards.

### *Gabriel*

Five days of no contact, but I can't shake the feeling we're being watched. Have been watched all the way. Now an afternoon and night of rest on this last island, and Maria wants us to push all the way to the dome.

Physically, I suppose we can do it. The terrain isn't difficult, since a game trail parallels the water all the way up. But the game that made the trail are formidable. They gave us plenty of trouble when there were twelve of us. And theoretically no Plathys.

(I wonder about that now, though. Surely someone was watching us back when we buried the weapons. How long had they been following us? They claimed that they never go to the mainland, except for a few brave Walkers, and of course they always tell the truth. About what they remember, anyhow.)

I haven't recorded anything for a long time. Waiting for my state of mind to improve. After the night of the attack I ran out of hope. Things haven't improved but I'm talking to myself to stay awake for the rest of this watch. I think Brenda's doing the same thing. Sitting on the other side of the island staring at the water, mumbling. I should go remind her to pay attention. But I can cover both banks from this side.

Besides, if they're going to hit us, I wish they'd hit us here. Clear fields of fire all around. Of course they won't; they learn from their mistakes, Maria says.

I'm being paranoiac. They're gone. The being-watched feeling, I don't know. Ever since Derek got it I've been a—I've been . . . loose in the head. Trying to control this—this panic. They look to me for strength, even Maria does, but all I have is muscle, jaw muscle to keep the screams in. When that one swam by us headed for the mainland I knew we were deep in shit.

Derek had religion. We argued long nights about that. What would he be doing now, praying? *"Nuestro Señor que vines en el cielo, alabado sea to nombre. . . ."* Good spear repellent. I miss him so.

Nobody will ever find this tooth with its feeble beep transmitter. When they





come back and find the dome empty, that will be the end of it. Not enough budget for a search through obviously hostile territory. Not enough resources on this planet for anybody to want to exploit it, so no new money to find our teeth. We'll pass into Plathy legend and be forgotten, or distorted beyond recognition.

A good thing for them. If there was anything of use here, we'd be like the Eskimo anthropologists Maria talks about, recording the ways of a race doomed by the fact of recording. So maybe the Plathys will have another million years of untroubled evolution. Maybe they'll learn table manners.

I'm afraid of them but can't be mad at them. Even after Derek. They are what they are and we should have been more careful. Maybe I'm becoming a real xenologist, at this late date. Derek would say I'm trying to compose myself into a state of grace. Before dying.

It infuriated me that he always had answers. All I ever had was questions.

So two days' push and we're safe inside the dome. Food and cube and books and spears bounce off. Maybe I've read too much, written too much; the pattern seems inescapable. We're at death's door. Capital Death's Door. If we make it to the dome we'll break the rules.

*Calmate.* Calm. Maybe I'm projecting, making patterns. Here there's only real things: cause, effect, randomness, entropy—your death is like the falling of a leaf, Derek said; like the leaf falling, it's a small tragedy, but necessary. If everything lived forever the universe would fill up in short order.

Mustn't blather. Reality, not philosophy. We rest so we can be alert. If we're alert enough we'll beat the jungle. Beat the Plathys that aren't there. It's all in my head. For the next two days take the head out of the circuit. Only reflex. Smell, listen, watch: react. React fast enough, you live.

Only I keep thinking about Derek. He never knew what hit him.

### *Brenda*

Gab asked me to watch both banks for a while so he could give love to Maria before it got dark. Hard to watch both banks when I want to watch him. Men look so vulnerable from this angle, bouncing; a new perspective for me. I've never been an audience except for watching on the cube. It's different.

Admit I'm jealous of her. She's fifteen years older than I and shows it. But he wants her for his last one. That was obvious in his tone of voice. At some level I think he's as scared as I am.

If he thinks this is his last one he doesn't know much about women. Maria will let me wake him up when our shift is over.

If I can wait that long. I've watched him sleeping; he has the refractory



period of a twelve-year-old. To be exact, I know from observation that he can do it twice and still get an erection in his sleep. No privacy under our circumstances.

Funny friendly sound, don't hear it like that while you're doing it—what was that? Something move?

Just a lizard, I guess. Nothing now. We've been seeing them the last two days on the jungle side, around dusk and in the firelight. They don't come in the water. What's going to happen tomorrow night, no island, no fire? Don't want to die that way, jumped by a pack of dinosaurs. Nor have my head bitten off by a sentient primitive. I was going to be a grandmother and sit on the porch and tell doctor stories and die with no fuss.

Why won't they attack? I know they're out there, waiting. If they would only come now, I could die that way. I remember the feeling, fifty or a hundred of them against the three of us and our two crazers. Not a fair fight, perhaps, but God it did feel good, holding our own, epinephrine from head to toe. This waiting and worrying. Light the fire.

Stack the wet wood around to dry. Gives me something to do while they're finishing up. Being quiet for the sake of my sensibilities, or theirs. Just heavier breathing and a faster rhythm of liquid sounds. I've followed that unspoken code, too; we haven't been all three together since the water hole. She's had him seven times since, to my four. To my knowledge. Why am I keeping score? They were made for each other. Iron man, iron woman.

I was in love once or twice and know, this is something else. Not just sex; I've been that way before, too. Hysteria is part of it, but not in the old-fashioned womanish sense, the womb taking over. This is a certainty-of-death hysteria, to coin a category. It's different from just fear. It's like, it's like—I don't know. As if you had never tasted water before, or seen colors, and suddenly here is a cold spring or a rainbow. Minus the joy. Just something primal and unlike anything before. Does that make sense? We've been in danger God knows constantly for how long? Not the same. There was always hope. Now we're two days away from total sanctuary and for some reason I know we won't make it.

I remember from psych class a lesson about people who seemed to know they were going to die. Not sick people; soldiers, adventurers, whose sudden violent death seemed to resonate backward in time—they told their friends that somehow they felt that this was it, and by God it was. You can call it coincidence or invoke pragmatic causality—they were nervous and therefore careless and therefore died—but here and now I think there's more to it. Once I'm safe inside the dome I'll publish a retraction. Right now I feel my death as strongly as I feel the need for that man inside of me.



## *Maria*

Somehow we lived through that one.

We'd been in the jungle for perhaps twelve hours, dusk approaching, when a lizard pack hit us, or two packs, from in front and behind. The trail is scarcely two meters wide, which saved us. The carcasses piled up and impeded their charge. We must have killed forty of them, man-sized or slightly smaller. Not a type we'd seen on the way down.

Were they intelligent enough to coordinate their charge, or is it some kind of instinctive attack pattern? Scary either way. Used up a lot of energy. If it happens a few more times . . . it happens. No use thinking about it.

At least the action seems to have been good for morale. Both of them have been radiating depression and fear since we started out this morning. Reinforcing each other's premonitions of doom. I shouldn't have let her go to him at watch change, or I should have admonished her to fuck, don't talk. It was too much like saying goodbye. I got that feeling from Gab too, last night, but I tried to reassure him. Words.

By my reckoning we have fourteen to eighteen hours to go, depending on how much ground we can cover without light. Decided against torches, of course. The Plathys don't normally hunt at night, but they sure as hell attacked us in the dark.

Natural impulse is to climb a tree and wait for dawn. That would be suicidal. The jungle canopy is thick and supports its own very active ecology. We can't take to the water because the current's too swift, even if we wanted to chance the snakes.

We'll stay within touching distance, Gab in front because he has the best hearing. Brenda hears better than me, so she should bring up the rear, but I think she'll be better off in the middle, feeling protected. Besides, I want to have one of the weapons.

## *Gabriel*

Never another night like that. I wound up firing at every sound, jumpy. But a few times there actually was something waiting in front of us, once something that wasn't a lizard. Big shaggy animal that stood up on its hind legs and reared over us, all teeth and claws and a dick the size of my arm. He was too dumb to know he was dead, and actually kept scrabbling toward us after I cut him off at the knees. If we'd gone a few steps farther before I fired he would have gotten at least me, maybe all of us. The crazer light was almost



bright in the pitch blackness, a lurid strobe. I used up the last of one fuel cell and had to reload by touch.

At least we don't have to worry about the Plathys. Nothing remotely edible could make it through a night like that without energy weapons.

When I mentioned that to Maria, she said not to be too sure. They were tracking us on the jungle side before. Not the same, though. This jungle makes that one look like a park.

Dead tired but moving fast. We're looking for a pink granite outcropping. Fifty paces upstream from it there's a minor trail to the right; the dome clearing is about half a kilometer in. Can't be more than a few hours away.

*Brenda*

There it is! The rock! Hard to...talk running...

*Maria*

Slow down! Careful! That's better. Not a sound now.

*Gabriel*

Oh, no. Shit, no.

*Brenda*

They . . . burned it?

*Gabriel*

Spears

*Maria*

Take his weapon! Get to cover! Here!

*Brenda*

I—oh!

*Maria*



So . . . so this is how it ends. Gab died about ten minutes ago, in the first moment of the attack. A spear in the back of his head. Brenda was hit then too, a spear that went in her shoulder and came out her back. She lived for several minutes, though, and acquitted herself well when the Plathys charged. I think we killed them all, thirty-seven by my count. If there are any left in the jungle they are staying there for the time being.

They must have piled wood up around the dome and kept a bonfire going until the force field overloaded and collapsed. It wasn't engineered for that kind of punishment, I suppose. Obviously.

Little of use left in the ruins. Rations destroyed, fuel cells popped by the heat. There's a toolbox not badly harmed. Nothing around to repair with it, though. Maybe if I dug I could find some rations merely overcooked. But I don't want to stay around to search. Doubt that I'll live long enough to have another meal, anyhow.

My fault. Eleven good people dead, and how many innocent savages, because I wasn't prudent. With that first abrupt life change, the frenzied breeding, I should have ordered us to tiptoe away. Another decade of satellite surveillance and we would have learned which times were safe to come in for close-up study. Now everything is a shambles.

Racial vanity is part of it, I guess, or my vanity. Thinking we could come naked into a heavily armed Stone Age culture and survive by our superior intelligence and advanced perspective. It worked before. But this place is not Obelobel.

I guess all I can do now is be sure a record survives. These teeth might not make it through a Plathy or lizard digestive system. I'll . . . I'll use the pliers from the tool kit. Leave the teeth here in the ruins. Buried enough so the Plathys can't find them easily. One hell of a prize to bring back from your Walk North.

I have only about a tenth charge left. Brenda used up all of the other before she died. Not enough to get out of the jungle, not even if it were all daylight. One woman alone doesn't have a bloody fucking chance on this world. I'll try the river. Maybe I can find a log that will float me down to the savannah. Then hike to the coast. If I can make it to the beach maybe I can stay alive there for a while. Sleep with one eye open. I don't know. Look for me there. But don't bother to look for too long. The pliers.

Sorry, Brenda... .

Sorry ... Gab. Sweet Gab. Still warm.

Now mine. One jerk. Some blood, some pain. *Tem se garlish. !ka.*



To: Ahmadou Masire, Coordinator  
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100 Bolivar 243 488 739 Selva

From: Federico Santesteban, Publicity Director Office of Resources  
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Terra

Dr. Masire:

I hope you will find the enclosed transcript of some use. Your assistant, Sra. Videla, mentioned the possibility of a documentary cube show to generate interest in the hunting trips to Sanchrist IV. Seems to me that if you inject some romance into this you have a natural story: sacrifice, tragedy, brave kids battling against impossible odds.

We could save you some production costs by getting a few Plathys shipped to your studio via our xenological division on Perrin's World. They have a hundred or so there and keep their stock stable by cloning. You'll have to have somebody put together a grant proposal demonstrating that they'll be put to legitimate scholarly use. Garcia Belaunde at your Instituto Xenologico is a tame one, as you probably know. Have him talk to Leon Jawara at the PW Xenological Exchange Commission. He'll make sure you get the beasts at the right part of their life cycle. Otherwise they'd eat all of your actors.

I tried to pull some strings, but I'm afraid there's no way we can get you permission to take a crew onto the Plathy island itself. That's a xenological preserve now, isolated by a force field, the few remaining Plathys constantly monitored by flying bugs. You can shoot on the mainland, if your actors are as crazy as your hunters, or use the crater lake island. There are a few feral Plathys roaming there, though, so take precautions, no matter what the season. Use a restraining field if that's within your budget; otherwise, regrettably, the smartest thing would be to kill them on sight. Their behavior patterns become erratic if they're separated from family for more than a year.

The search party that followed up on Dr. Rubera's expedition could only find five of the tooth transmitters. There was no trace of Maria Rubera, or any other human remains.

A sad story but I think a useful one for your purposes. Gives your expeditions a dramatic historical context.

Let me know if I can be of further service. And by all means send us a copy of the cube, if you decide to go into production.

Your servant, Federico Santesteban

