

Whipping Star

Frank Herbert
1969

A BuSab agent must begin by learning the linguistic modes and action limits (usually self-imposed) of the societies he treats. The agent seeks data on the functional relationships which derive from our common universe and which arise from interdependencies. Such interdependencies are the frequent first victims of word-illusions. Societies based on ignorance of original interdependencies come sooner or later to stalemate. Too long frozen, such societies die.

-BuSab Manual

Furuneo was his name. Alichino Furuneo. He reminded, himself of this as he rode into the city to make the long-distance call. It was wise to firm up the ego before such a call. He was sixty-seven years old and could remember many cases where people had lost their identity in the sniggertrance of communication between star systems. More than the cost and the mind-crawling sensation of dealing with a Taprisiot transmitter, this uncertainty factor tended to keep down the number of calls. But Furuneo didn't feel he could trust anyone else with this call to Jorj X. McKie, Saboteur Extraordinary.

It was 8:08 A.M. local at Furuneo's position on the planet called Cordiality of the Sfich system.

"This is going to be very difficult, I suspect," he muttered, speaking at (but not to) the two enforcers he had brought along to guard his privacy.

They didn't even nod, realizing no reply was expected.

It was still cool from the night wind which blew across the snow plains of the Billy Mountains down to the sea. They had driven here into Division City from Furuneo's mountain fortress, riding in an ordinary groundcar, not attempting to hide or disguise their association with the Bureau of Sabotage, but not seeking to attract attention, either. Many sentients had reason to resent the Bureau.

Furuneo had ordered the car left outside the city's Pedestrian Central, and they had come the rest of the way on foot like ordinary citizens.

Ten minutes ago they had entered the reception room of this building. It was a Taprisiot breeding center, one of only about twenty known to exist in the universe, quite an honor for a minor planet like Cordiality.

The reception room was no more than fifteen meters wide, perhaps thirty-five long. It had tan walls with pitted marks in them as though they had been soft once and someone had thrown a small ball at them according to some random whim. Along the right side across from where Furuneo stood with his enforcers was a high bench. It occupied three-fourths of the long wall. Multi-faceted rotating lights above it cast patterned shadows onto the face of the bench and

the Taprisiot standing atop it.

Taprisiots came in odd shapes like sawed-off lengths of burned conifers, with stub limbs jutting every which way, needlelike speech appendages fluttering even when they remained silent. This one's skidfeet beat a nervous rhythm on the surface where it stood.

For the third time since entering, Furuneo asked, "Are you the transmitter?"

No answer.

Taprisiots were like that. No sense getting angry. It did no good. Furuneo allowed himself to be annoyed, though. Damned Taprisiots!

One of the enforcers behind Furuneo cleared his throat.

Damn this delay! Furuneo thought.

The whole Bureau had been in a state of jitters ever since the max-alert message on the Abnethe case. This call he was preparing to make might be their first real break. He sensed the fragile urgency of it. It could be the most important call he had ever made. And directly to McKie, at that.

The sun, barely over the Billy Mountains, spread an orange fan of light around him from the windowed doorway through which they had entered.

"Looks like it's gonna be a long wait for this Tappy," one of his enforcers muttered.

Furuneo nodded curtly. He had learned several degrees of patience in sixty-seven years, especially on his way up the ladder to his present position as planetary agent for the Bureau. There was only one thing to do here: wait it out quietly. Taprisiots took their own time for whatever mysterious reasons. There was no other store, though, where he could buy the service he needed now. Without a Taprisiot transmitter, you didn't make real-time calls across interstellar space.

Strange, this Taprisiot talent -- used by so many sentients without understanding. The sensational press abounded with theories on how it was accomplished. For all anyone knew, one of the theories could be right. Perhaps Taprisiots did make these calls in a way akin to the data linkage among PanSpechi creche mates -- not that this was understood, either.

It was Furuneo's belief that Taprisiots distorted space in a way similar to that of a Caleban jumpdoor, sliding between the dimensions. If that was really what Caleban jumpdoors did. Most experts denied this theory, pointing out that it would require energies equivalent to those produced by fair-sized stars.

Whatever Taprisiots did to make a call, one thing was certain: It involved the human pineal gland or its equivalent among other sentients.

The Taprisiot on the high bench began moving from side to side.

"Maybe we're getting through to it," Furuneo said.

He composed his features, suppressed his feelings of unease. This was, after

all, a Taprisiot breeding center. Xenobiologists said Taprisiot reproduction was all quite tame, but Xenos didn't know everything. Look at the mess they'd made of analyzing the PanSpechi Con-Sentiency.

"Putcha, putcha, putcha," the Taprisiot on the bench said, squeaking its speech needles.

"Something wrong?" one of the enforcers asked.

"How the devil do I know?" Furuneo snapped. He faced the Taprisiot, said, "Are you the transmitter?"

"Putcha, putcha, putcha," the Taprisiot said. "This is a remark which I will now translate in the only way that may make sense to ones like yourselves of Sol/Earth ancestry. What I said was, 'I question your sincerity.' "

"You gotta justify your sincerity to a damn Taprisiot?" one of the enforcers asked. "Seems to me . . ."

"Nobody asked you!" Furuneo cut him off. Any probing attack by a Taprisiot was likely a greeting. Didn't the fool know this?

Furuneo separated himself from the enforcers, crossed to a position below the bench. "I wish to make a call to Saboteur Extraordinary Jorj X. McKie," he said. "Your robogreeter recognized and identified me and took my creditchit. Are you the transmitter?" "Where is this Jorj X. McKie?" the Taprisiot asked.

"If I knew, I'd be off to him in person through a jumpdoor," Furuneo said. "This is an important call. Are you the transmitter?"

"Date, time, and place," the Taprisiot said.

Furuneo sighed and relaxed. He glanced back at the enforcers, motioned them to take up stations at the room's two doors, waited while they obeyed. Wouldn't do to have this call overheard. He turned then, gave the required local coordinates.

"You will sit on floor," the Taprisiot said.

"Thank the immortals for that," Furuneo muttered. He'd once made a call where the transmitter had led him to a mountainside in wind and driving rain and made him stretch out, head lower than feet, before opening the overspace contact. It had had something to do with "refining the embedment," whatever that meant. He'd reported the incident to the Bureau's data center, where they hoped one day to solve the Taprisiot secret, but the call had cost him several weeks with an upper respiratory infection.

Furuneo sat.

Damn! The floor was cold!

Furuneo was a tall man, two meters in bare feet, eighty-four standard kilos. His hair was black with a dusting of grey at the ears. He had a thick nose and wide mouth with an oddly straight lower lip. He favored his left hip as he sat. A disgruntled citizen had broken it during one of his early tours with the Bureau. The injury defied all the medics who had told him, "It won't bother you a bit after it's healed."

"Close eyes," the Taprisiot squeaked.

Furuneo obeyed, tried to squirm into a more comfortable position on the cold, hard floor, gave it up.

"Think of contact," the Taprisiot ordered.

Furuneo thought of Jorj X. McKie, building the image in his mind -- squat little man, angry red hair, face like a disgruntled frog.

Contact began with tendrils of cloying awareness. Furuneo became in his own mind a red flow sung to the tune of a silver lyre. His body went remote. Awareness rotated above a strange landscape. The sky was an infinite circle with its horizon slowly turning. He sensed the stars engulfed in loneliness.

"What the ten million devils!"

The thought exploded across Furuneo. There was no evading it. He recognized it at once. Contactees frequently resented the call. They couldn't reject it, no matter what they were doing at the time, but they could make the caller feel their displeasure.

"It never fails! It never fails!"

McKie would be jerked to full inner awareness now, his pineal gland ignited by the long-distance contact.

Furuneo settled himself to wait out the curses. When they had subsided sufficiently, he identified himself, said, "I regret any inconvenience I may have caused, but the maxalert failed to say where you could be located. You must know I would not have called unless it were important."

A more or less standard opening.

"How the hell do I know whether your call's important?" McKie demanded. "Stop babbling and get on with it!"

This was an unusual extension of anger even for the volatile McKie. "Did I interrupt something important?" Furuneo ventured.

"I was just standing here in a telicourt getting a divorce!" McKie said. "Can't you imagine what a great time everyone here's having, watching me mubble-dubble to myself in a sniggertrance? Get to the business!"

"A Caleban Beachball washed ashore last night below Division City here on Cordiality," Furuneo said. "In view of all the deaths and insanity and the max-alert message from the Bureau, I thought I'd better call you at once. It's still your case, isn't it?"

"Is this your idea of a joke?" McKie demanded.

In lieu of red tape, Furuneo cautioned himself, thinking of the Bureau maxim. It was a private thought, but McKie no doubt was catching the mood of it.

"Well?" McKie demanded.

Was McKie deliberately trying to unnerve him? Furuneo wondered. How could the Bureau's prime function -- to slow the processes of government -- remain operative on an internal matter such as this call? Agents were duty bound to encourage anger in government because it exposed the unstable, temperamental types, the ones who lacked the necessary personal control and ability to think under psychic stress, but why carry this duty over to a call from a fellow agent?

Some of these thoughts obviously bled through the Taprisiot transmitter because McKie reflected them, enveloping Furuneo in a mental sneer.

"You lotsa time unthink yourself," McKie said.

Furuneo shuddered, recovered his sense of self. Ahhh, that had been close. He'd almost lost his ego! Only the veiled warning in McKie's words had alerted him, allowing recovery. Furuneo began casting about in his mind for another interpretation of McKie's reaction. Interrupting the divorce could not account for it. If the stories were true, the ugly little agent had been married fifty or more times.

"Are you still interested in the Beachball?" Furuneo ventured.

"Is there a Caleban in it?"

"Presumably."

"You haven't investigated?" McKie's mental tone said Furuneo had been entrusted with a most crucial operation and had failed because of inherent stupidity.

Now fully alert to some unspoken danger, Furuneo said, "I acted as my orders instructed."

"Orders!" McKie sneered.

"I'm supposed to be angry, eh?" Furuneo asked.

"I'll be there as fast as I can get service -- within eight standard hours at the most," McKie said. "Your orders, meanwhile, are to keep that Beachball under constant observation. The observers must be hopped up on angeret. It's their only protection."

"Constant observation," Furuneo said.

"If a Caleban emerges, you're to detain it by any means possible."

"A Caleban . . . detain it?"

"Engage it in conversation, request its cooperation, anything," McKie said. His mental emphasis added that it was odd a Bureau agent should have to ask about throwing a monkey wrench into someone's activities.

"Eight hours," Furuneo said.

"And don't forget the angeret."

A Bureau is a life form and the Bureaucrat one of its cells. This analogy teaches us which are the more important cells, which in greatest peril, which most easily replaced, and how easy it is to be mediocre.

-Later Writings of Bildoon IV

McKie, on the honeymoon planet of Tutalsee, took an hour to complete his divorce, then returned to the float-home they had moored beside an island of love flowers. Even the nepenthe of Tutalsee had failed him, McKie thought. This marriage had been wasted effort. His ex hadn't known enough about Mliss Abnethe despite their reported former association. But that had been on another world.

This wife had been his fifty-fourth, somewhat lighter of skin than any of the others and more than a bit of a shrew. It had not been her first marriage, and she had shown early suspicions of McKie's secondary motives.

Reflection made McKie feel guilty. He put such feelings aside savagely. There was no time for nicety. Too much was at stake. Stupid female!

She had already vacated the float-home, and McKie could sense the living entity's resentment. He had shattered the idyll which the float-home had been conditioned to create. The float-home would return to its former affability once he was gone. They were gentle creatures, susceptible to sentient irritation.

McKie packed, leaving his toolkit aside. He examined it: a selection of stims, plastipicks, explosives in various denominations, raygens, multigoggles, penetrates, a wad of uniflesh, solvos, miniputer, Taprisiot life monitor, holoscan blanks, rupters, comparators . . . all in order. The toolkit was a fitted wallet which he concealed in an inner pocket of his nondescript jacket.

He packed a few changes of clothing in a single bag, consigned the rest of his possessions to BuSab storage, left them for pickup in a sealpack which he stored on a couple of chairdogs. They appeared to share the float-home's resentment. They remained immobile even when he patted them affectionately.

Ah, well. . . .

He still felt guilty.

McKie sighed, took out his S'eye key. This jump was going to cost the Bureau megacredits. Cordiality lay halfway across their universe.

Jumpdoors still seemed to be working, but it disturbed McKie that he must make this journey by a means which was dependent upon a Caleban. Eerie situation. S'eye jumpdoors had become so common that most sentients accepted them without

question. McKie had shared this common acceptance before the max-alert. Now he wondered at himself. Casual acceptance demonstrated how easily rational thought could be directed by wishful thinking. This was a common susceptibility of all sentients. The Caleban jumpdoor had been fully accepted by the Confederated Sentients for some ninety standard years. But in that time, only eighty-three Calebans were known to have identified themselves.

McKie flipped the key in his hand, caught it deftly.

Why had the Calebans refused to part with their gift unless everyone agreed to call it a "S'eye"? What was so important about a name?

I should be on my way, McKie told himself. Still he delayed.

Eighty-three Calebans.

The max-alert had been explicit in its demand for secrecy and its outline of the problem: Calebans had been disappearing one by one. Disappearing -- if that was what the Caleban manifestation could be called. And each disappearance had been accompanied by a massive wave of sentient deaths and insanity.

No question why the problem had been dumped in BuSab's lap instead of onto some police agency. Government fought back wherever it could: Powerful men hoped to discredit BuSab. McKie found his own share of disturbance in wondering about the hidden possibilities in the selection of himself as the sentient to tackle this.

Who hates me? he wondered as he used his personally tuned key in the jumpdoor. The answer was that many people hated him. Millions of people.

The jumpdoor began to hum with its aura of terrifying energies. The door's vortal tube snapped open. McKie tensed himself for the syrupy resistance to jumpdoor passage, stepped through the tube. It was like swimming in air become molasses -- perfectly normal-appearing air. But molasses.

McKie found himself in a rather ordinary office: the usual humdrum whirldesk, alert-flicker light patterns cascading from the ceiling, a view out one transparent wall onto a mountainside. In the distance the rooftops of Division City lay beneath dull gray clouds, with a luminous silver sea beyond. McKie's implanted brainclock told him it was late afternoon, the eighteenth hour of a twenty-six-hour day. This was Cordiality, a world 200,000 light-years from Tutalsee's planetary ocean.

Behind him, the jumpdoor's vortal tube snapped closed with a crackling sound like the discharge of electricity. A faint ozone smell permeated the air.

The room's standard-model chairdogs had been well trained to comfort their masters, McKie noted. One of them nudged him behind the knees until he dropped his bag and took a reluctant seat. The chairdog began massaging his back. Obviously it had been instructed to make him comfortable while someone was summoned.

McKie tuned himself to the faint sounds of normality around him. Footsteps of a sentient could be heard in an outer passage. A Wreave by the sound of it: that peculiar dragging of the heel on a favored foot. There was a dim conversation somewhere, and McKie could make out a few Lingua-galach words,

but it sounded like a multilingual conversation.

He began fidgeting, which set the chairdog into a burst of rippling movements to soothe him. Enforced idleness nagged at him. Where was Furuneo? McKie chided himself. Furuneo probably had many planetary duties as BuSab agent here. And he couldn't know the full urgency of their problem. This might be one of the planets where BuSab was spread thin. The gods of immortality knew the Bureau could always find work.

McKie began reflecting on his role in the affairs of sentiency. Once, long centuries past, con-sentients with a psychological compulsion to "do good" had captured the government. Unaware of the writhing complexities, the mingled guilts and self-punishments, beneath their compulsion, they had eliminated virtually all delays and red tape from government. The great machine with its blundering power over sentient life had slipped into high gear, had moved faster and faster. Laws had been conceived and passed in the same hour. Appropriations had flashed into being and were spent in a fortnight. New bureaus for the most improbable purposes had leaped into existence and proliferated like some insane fungus.

Government had become a great destructive wheel without a governor, whirling with such frantic speed that it spread chaos wherever it touched.

In desperation, a handful of sentients had conceived the Sabotage Corps to slow that wheel. There had been bloodshed and other degrees of violence, but the wheel had been slowed. In time, the Corps had become a Bureau, and the Bureau was whatever it was today -- an organization headed into its own corridors of entropy, a group of sentients who preferred subtle diversion to violence . . . but were prepared for violence when the need arose.

A door slid back on McKie's right. His chairdog became still. Furuneo entered, brushing a hand through the band of grey hair at his left ear. His wide mouth was held in a straight line, a suggestion of sourness about it.

"You're early," he said, patting a chairdog into place across from McKie and seating himself.

"Is this place safe?" McKie asked. He glanced at the wall where the S'eye had disgorged him. The jumpdoor was gone.

"I've moved the door back downstairs through its own tube," Furuneo said. "This place is as private as I can make it." He sat back, waiting for McKie to explain.

"That Beachball still down there?" McKie nodded toward the transparent wall and the distant sea.

"My men have orders to call me if it makes any move," Furuneo said. "It was washed ashore just like I said, embedded itself in a rock outcropping, and hasn't moved since."

"Embedded itself?"

"That's how it seems."

"No sign of anything in it?"

"Not that we can see. The Ball does appear to be a bit . . . banged up. There are some pitting and a few external scars. What's this all about?"

"No doubt you've heard of Mliss Abnethe?"

"Who hasn't?"

"She recently spent some of her quintillions to hire a Caleban. "

"Hire a . . ." Furuneo shook his head. "I didn't know it could be done."

"Neither did anyone else."

"I read the max-alert," Furuneo said. "Abnethe's connection with the case wasn't explained."

"She's a bit kinky about floggings, you know," McKie said.

"I thought she was treated for that."

"Yeah, but it didn't eliminate the root of her problem. It just fixed her so she couldn't stand the sight of a sentient suffering. "

"So?"

"Her solution, naturally, was to hire a Caleban."

"As a victim!" Furuneo said.

Furuneo was beginning to understand, McKie saw. Someone had once said the problem with Calebans was that they presented no patterns you could recognize. This was true, of course. If you could imagine an actuality, a being whose presence could not be denied but who left your senses dangling every time you tried to look at it -- then you could imagine a Caleban.

"They're shuttered windows opening onto eternity," as the poet Masarard put it.

In the first Caleban days, McKie had attended every Bureau lecture and briefing about them. He tried to recall one of those sessions now, prompted by a nagging sensation that it had contained something of value to his present problem. It had been something about "communications difficulties within an aura of affliction." The precise content eluded him. Odd, he thought. It was as though the Calebans' crumbled projection created an effect on sentient memory akin to their effect on sentient vision.

Here lay the true source of sentient uneasiness about Calebans. Their artifacts were real -- the S'eye jumpdoors, the Beachballs in which they were reputed to live -- but no one had ever really seen a Caleban.

Furuneo, watching the fat little gnome of an agent sit there thinking, recalled the snide story about McKie, that he had been in BuSab since the day before he was born.

"She's hired a whipping boy, eh?" Furuneo asked.

"That's about it."

"The max-alert spoke of deaths, insanity. . . ."

"Are all your people dosed with angeret?" McKie asked.

"I got the message, McKie."

"Good. Anger seems to afford some protection."

"What exactly is going on?"

"Calebans have been . . . vanishing," McKie said. "Every time one of them goes, there are quite a few deaths and . . . other unpleasant effects -- physical and mental crippling, insanity. . . ."

Furuneo nodded in the direction of the sea, leaving his question unspoken.

McKie shrugged. "We'll have to go take a look. The hell of it is, up until your call there seemed to be only one Caleban left in the universe, the one Abnethe hired."

"How're you going to handle this?"

"That's a beautiful question," McKie said.

"Abnethe's Caleban," Furuneo said. "It have anything to say by way of explanation?"

"Haven't been able to interview it," McKie said. "We don't know where she's hidden herself -- or it."

"Don't know. . . ." Furuneo blinked. "Cordiality's pretty much of a backwater."

"That's what I've been thinking. You said this Beachball was a little the worse for wear?"

"That's odd, isn't it?"

"Another oddity among many."

"They say a Caleban doesn't get very far from its Ball," Furuneo said. "And they like to park 'em near water."

"How much of an attempt did you make to communicate with it?"

"The usual. How'd you find out about Abnethe hiring a Caleban?"

"She bragged to a friend who bragged to a friend who . . . And one of the other Calebans dropped a hint before disappearing."

"Any doubt the disappearances and the rest of it are tied together?"

"Let's go knock on this thing's door and find out," McKie said.

Language is a kind of code dependent upon the life rhythms of the species which originated the language. Unless you learn those rhythms, the code remains mostly unintelligible.

-BuSab Manual

McKie's immediate ex-wife had adopted an early attitude of resentment toward BuSab. "They use you!" she had protested.

He had thought about that for a few minutes, wondering if it might be the reason he found it so easy to use others. She was right, of course.

McKie thought about her words now as he and Furuneo sped by groundcar toward the Cordiality coast. The question in McKie's mind was, How are they using me this time? Setting aside the possibility that he had been offered up as a sacrifice, there were still many possibilities in reserve. Was it his legal training they needed? Or had they been prompted by his unorthodox approach to interspecies relationships? Obviously they entertained some hope for a special sort of official sabotage -- but what sort? Why had his instructions been so incomplete?

"You will seek out and contact the Caleban which has been hired by Madame Mliss Abnethe, or find any other Caleban available for sentient contact, and you will take appropriate action."

Appropriate action?

McKie shook his head.

"Why'd they choose you for this gig?" Furuneo asked.

"They know how to use me," McKie said.

The groundcar, driven by an enforcer, negotiated a sharp turn, and a vista of rocky shore opened before them. Something glittered in the distance among black lava palisades, and McKie noted two aircraft hovering above the rocks.

"That it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What's the local time?"

"About two and a half hours to sunset," Furuneo said, correctly interpreting McKie's concern. "Will the angeret protect us if there's a Caleban in that thing and it decides to . . . disappear?"

"I sincerely hope so," McKie said. "Why didn't you bring us by aircar?"

"People here on Cordiality are used to seeing me in a groundcar unless I'm on official business and require speed."

"You mean nobody knows about this thing yet?"

"Just the coastwatchers for this stretch, and they're on my payroll."

"You run a pretty tight operation here," McKie said. "Aren't you afraid of getting too efficient?"

"I do my best," Furuneo said. He tapped the driver's shoulder.

The groundcar pulled to a stop at a turnaround which looked down onto a reach of rocky islands and a low lava shelf where the Caleban Beachball had come to rest. "You know, I keep wondering if we really know what those Beachballs are."

"They're homes," McKie grunted.

"So everybody says."

Furuneo got out. A cold wind set his hip aching. "We walk from here," he said.

There were times during the climb down the narrow path to the lava shelf when McKie felt thankful he had been fitted with a gravity web beneath his skin. If he fell, it would limit his rate of descent to a non-injurious speed. But there was nothing it could do about any beating he might receive in the surf at the base of the palisades, and if offered no protection at all against the chill wind and the driving spray.

He wished he'd worn a heatsuit.

"It's colder than I expected," Furuneo said, limping out onto the lava shelf. He waved to the aircars. One dipped its wings, maintaining its place in a slow, circling track above the Beachball.

Furuneo struck out across the shelf and McKie followed, jumped across a tidal pool, blinked and bent his head against a gust of windborne spray. The pounding of the surf on the rocks was loud here. They had to raise their voices to make themselves understood.

"You see?" Furuneo shouted. "Looks like it's been banged around a bit."

"Those things are supposed to be indestructible," McKie said.

The Beachball was some six meters in diameter. It sat solidly on the shelf, about half a meter of its bottom surface hidden by a depression in the rock, as though it had melted out a resting place.

McKie led the way up to the lee of the Ball, passing Furuneo in the last few meters. He stood there, hands in pockets, shivering. The round surface of the Ball failed to cut off the cold wind.

"It's bigger than I expected," he said as Furuneo stopped beside him.

"First one you've ever seen close up?"

"Yeah."

McKie passed his gaze across the thing. Knobs and indentations marked the opaque metallic surface. It seemed to him the surface variations carried some pattern. Sensors, perhaps? Controls of some kind? Directly in front of him there was what appeared to be a crackled mark, perhaps from a collision. It lay just below the surface, presenting no roughness to McKie's exploring hand.

What if they're wrong about these things?" Furuneo asked.

"Mmmm?"

"What if they aren't Caleban homes?"

"Don't know. Do you recall the drill?"

"You find a 'nipped extrusion' and you knock on it. We tried that. There's one just around to your left."

McKie worked his way around in that direction, getting drenched by a wind-driven spray in the process. He reached up, still shivering from the cold, knocked at the indicated extrusion.

Nothing happened.

Every briefing I ever attended says there's a door in these things somewhere," McKie grumbled.

"But they don't say the door opens every time you knock," Furuneo said.

McKie continued working his way around the Ball, found another nipped extrusion, knocked.

Nothing.

"We tried that one, too," Furuneo said.

"I feel like a damn fool," McKie said.

"Maybe there's nobody home."

"Remote control?" McKie asked.

"Or abandoned -- a derelict."

McKie pointed to a thin green line about a meter long on the Ball's windward surface. "What's that?"

Furuneo hunched his shoulders against spray and wind, stared at the line. "Don't recall seeing it."

"I wish we knew a lot more about these damn things," McKie grumbled.

"Maybe we aren't knocking loud enough," Furuneo said.

McKie pursed his lips in thought. Presently he took out his toolkit, extracted a lump of low-grade explosive. "Go back on the other side," he said.

"You sure you ought to try that?" Furuneo asked.

"No."

"Well --" Furuneo shrugged, retreated around the Ball.

McKie applied a strip of the explosive along the green line, attached a time-thread, joined Furuneo.

Presently, there came a dull thump that was almost drowned by the surf.

McKie felt an abrupt inner silence, found himself wondering, What if the Caleban gets angry and springs a weapon we've never heard of? He darted around to the windward side.

An oval hole had appeared above the green line as though a plug had been sucked into the Ball.

"Guess you pushed the right button," Furuneo said.

McKie suppressed a feeling of irritation which he knew to be mostly angeret effect, said, "Yeah. Give me a leg up." Furuneo, he noted, was controlling the drug reaction almost perfectly.

With Furuneo's help McKie clambered into the open port, stared inside. Dull purple light greeted him, a suggestion of movement within the dimness.

"See anything?" Furuneo called.

"Don't know." McKie scrambled inside, dropped to a carpeted floor. He crouched, studied his surroundings in the purple glow. His teeth clattered from the cold. The room around him apparently occupied the entire center of the Ball -- low ceiling, flickering rainbows against the inner surface on his left, a giant soup-spoon shape jutting into the room directly across from him, tiny spools, handles, and knobs against the wall on his right.

The sense of movement originated in the spoon bowl.

Abruptly, McKie realized he was in the presence of a Caleban.

"What do you see?" Furuneo called.

Without taking his gaze from the spoon, McKie turned his head slightly. "There's a Caleban in here."

"Shall I come in?"

"No. Tell your men and sit tight."

"Right."

McKie returned his full attention to the bowl of the spoon. His throat felt dry. He'd never before been alone in the presence of a Caleban. This was a

position usually reserved for scientific investigators armed with esoteric instruments.

"I'm . . . ah, Jorj X. McKie, Bureau of Sabotage," he said.

There was a stirring at the spoon, an effect of radiated meaning immediately behind the movement: "I make your acquaintance."

McKie found himself recalling Masarard's poetic description in Conversation With a Caleban.

"Who can say how a Caleban speaks?" Masarard had written. "Their words come at you like the coruscating of a nine-ribbon Sojeu barber pole. The insensitive way such words radiate. I say the Caleban speaks. When words are sent, is that not speech? Send me your words, Caleban, and I will tell the universe of your wisdom. "

Having experienced the Caleban's words, McKie decided Masarard was a pretentious ass. The Caleban radiated. Its communication registered in the sentient mind as sound, but the ears denied they had heard anything. It was the same order of effect that Calebans had on the eyes. You felt you were seeing something, but the visual centers refused to agree.

"I hope my . . . ah, I didn't disturb you," McKie said.

"I possess no referent for disturb," the Caleban said. "You bring a companion?"

"My companion's outside," McKie said. No referent for disturb?

"Invite your companion," the Caleban said.

McKie hesitated, then, "Furuneo! C'mon in."

The planetary agent joined him, crouched at McKie's left in the purple gloom. "Damn, that's cold out there," Furuneo said.

"Low temperature and much moisture," the Caleban agreed. McKie, having turned to watch Furuneo enter, saw a closure appear from the solid wall beside the open port. Wind, spray, and surf were shut off.

The temperature in the Ball began to rise.

"It's going to get hot," McKie said.

"What?"

"Hot. Remember the briefings? Calebans like their air hot and dry." He could already feel his damp clothing begin to turn clammy against his skin.

"That's right," Furuneo said. "What's going on?"

"We've been invited in," McKie said. "We didn't disturb him because he has no referent for disturb." He turned back to the spoon shape.

"Where is he?"

"In that spoon thing."

"Yeah . . . I, uh -- yeah. "

"You may address me as Fanny Mae," the Caleban said. "I can reproduce my kind and answer the equivalents for female. "

"Fanny Mae," McKie said with what he knew to be stupid vacuity. How can you look at the damn thing? Where is its face? "My companion is Alichino Furuneo, planetary agent on Cordiality for the Bureau of Sabotage." Fanny Mae? Damn!

"I make your acquaintance," the Caleban said. "Permit an inquiry into the purpose for your visit."

Furuneo scratched his right ear. "How're we hearing it?" He shook his head. "I can understand it, but. . . ."

"Never mind!" McKie said. And he warned himself: Gently now. How do you question one of these things? The insubstantial Caleban presence, the twisting away his mind accepted the thing's words -- it all combined with the angeret in producing irritation.

"I . . . my orders," McKie said. "I seek a Caleban employed by Mliss Abnethe."

"I receive your questions," the Caleban said.

Receive my questions?

McKie tried tipping his head from side to side, wondered if it were possible to achieve an angle of vision where the something across from him would assume recognizable substance.

"What're you doing?" Furuneo asked.

"Trying to see it."

"You seek visible substance?" the Caleban asked.

"Uhhh, yes," McKie said.

Fanny Mae? he thought. It would be like an original encounter with the Gowachin planets, the first Earth-human encountering the first froglike Gowachin, and the Gowachin introducing himself as William. Where in ninety thousand worlds did the Caleban dig up that name? And why?

"I produce mirror," the Caleban said, "which reflects outward from projection along plane of being."

"Are we going to see it?" Furuneo whispered. "Nobody's ever seen a Caleban.'°

"Shhh."

A half-meter oval something of green, blue, and pink without apparent connection to the empty-presence of the Caleban materialized above the giant spoon.

them.

McKie saw Cheo's gloating face, the hand jerking at the controls. He saw a control arm snap over, heard a distant crackling as the jumpdoor ceased to exist.

Someone screamed.

McKie felt himself considerably surprised to be still on hands and knees in the purple gloom of the Beachball's interior. He held his position, allowed his memory to replay that last glimpse of Cheo. It had been a ghostly vision, a smoky substance visible through the PanSpechi's body -- and the visible substance had been that of the Beachball's interior.

"Discontinuity dissolves contract," the Caleban said.

McKie climbed slowly to his feet. "What's that mean, Thyone?"

"Statement of fact with meaning intensity-truth only for Cheo and companions," the Caleban said. "Self cannot give meaning to McKie for substance of another."

McKie nodded.

"That universe of Abnethe's was her own creation," he murmured. "A figment of her imagination."

"Explain figment," the Caleban said.

Cheo experienced the instant of Abnethe's death as a gradual dissolution of substance around and within him. Walls, floor, S'eye controls, ceiling, world -- everything faded into nonbeing. He felt all the haste of his existence swollen into one sterile instant. And he found himself for a transitory moment sharing with the shadows of the nearby Palenki and other more distant islands of movement a place of existence which the mystics of his own species had never contemplated. It was, however, a place which an ancient Hindu or a Buddhist might have recognized -- a place of Maya, illusion, a formless void possessed of no qualities.

The moment passed abruptly, and Cheo ceased to exist. Or it could be said that he discontinued in becoming one with the void-illusion. One cannot, after all, breathe an illusion or a void.