"Could be no calamity at all," the woman told the baby. "With a thumb like yours, what couldn't I do?" She glanced at her own hand as her fingers patted the newly born. Must everyone stay the same, she wondered, going against everything she'd ever heard. She pressed her lips so tight together her mouth was no more than a line across her face, for such a thought must stay unvoiced. She'd been in the world long enough to know when people stoned old women. "Firmest grip ever I met. Could hold the whole earth with that." But she did not say it aloud.

VASTER THAN EMPIRES AND MORE SLOW

by Ursula K. Le Guin

The laws of heredity insured that Ursula Le Guin would be an outstanding science fiction writer, for her father was Alfred Kroeber, the doyen of American anthropologists, and her mother, Theodora Kroeber, produced that remarkable study of an all-but-vanished culture, *Ishi In Two Worlds*. Ursula Le Guin's short stories have been appearing in s-f magazines since 1962; and her novels since 1966; but despite her formidable genetic heritage, she attracted no wide attention until the publication of her Hugo-winning and Nebula-winning *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969. Since then a kind of retroactive reevaluation of her work has been taking place, and it has become apparent not only that most of her stories fit into a single coherent schema of future history, but that that framework of the future is one of the richest and deepest such patterns yet devised.

Here, embellishing a couple of lines from Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* ("My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires, and more slow"), she offers a glance at the periphery of the Le Guin universe, in a story marked by sensitive prose, shrewd insight into character, and a fascinatingly intimate acquaintance with the workings of extrasensory perception.

You're looking at a clock. It has hands, and figures arranged in a circle. The hands move. You can't
tell if they move at the same rate, or if one moves faster than the other. What does *than* mean? There is a relationship between the hands and the circle of figures, and the name of this relationship is on the tip of your tongue; the hands are... something-or-other, at the figures. Or is it the figures that... at the hands? What does *at* mean? They are figures—your vocabulary hasn't shrunken at all—and of course you can count, one two three four etc., but the trouble is you can't tell which one is one. Each one is one: itself. Where do you begin? Each one being one, there is no, what's the word, I had it just now, something-ship, between the ones. There is no between. There is only here and here, one and one. There is no there. Maya has fallen. All is here now one. But if all is now and all here and one all, there is no end. It did not begin so it cannot end. Oh God, here now one get me out of this—

I'm trying to describe the sensations of the average person in NAFAL flight. It can be much worse than this for some, whose time-sense is acute. For others it is restful, like a drug-haze freeing the mind from the tyranny of hours. And for a few the experience is certainly mystical; the collapse of time and relation leading them directly to intuition of the eternal. But the mystic is a rare bird, and the nearest most people get to God in paradoxical time is by inarticulate and anguished prayer for release.

They used to drug people for the long jumps, but stopped the practice when they realized its effects. What happens to a drugged, or ill, or wounded person during near-lightspeed flight is, of course, indeterminable. A jump of ten light-years should logically make no difference to a victim of measles or gunshot. The body ages only a few minutes; why is the measles patient carried out of the ship a leper, and the wounded man a corpse? Nobody knows, except perhaps the body, which keeps the logic of the flesh, and knows it has lain festering, bleeding, or drugged into mindlessness, for ten years. Many imbeciles having been produced, the Fisher King Effect was established as fact, and they stopped using drugs and transporting the ill, the dam-

aged, and the pregnant. You have to be in common health to go NAFAL, and you have to take it straight.

But you don't have to be sane.

It was only during the earliest decades of the League that Earthmen, perhaps trying to bolster their battered collective ego, sent out ships on enormously long voyages, beyond the pale, over the stars and far away. They were seeking for worlds that had not, like all the known worlds, been settled or seeded by the Founders on Hain, truly alien worlds; and all the crews of these Extreme Surveys were of unsound mind. Who else would go out to collect information that wouldn't be received for four, or five, or six centuries? Received by whom? This was before the invention of the instantaneous communicator; they would be isolated both in space and time. No sane person who has experienced time-slippage of even a few decades between near worlds would volunteer for a round trip of a half millennium. The Surveyors were escapist; misfits; nuts.

Ten of them climbed aboard the ferry at Smenig Port on Psem, and made varyingly inept attempts to get to know one another during the three days the ferry took getting to their ship, *Gum*. *Gum* is a Low Cetian nickname, on the order of Baby or Pete. There was one Low Cetian on the team, one Haifnicman, one Beldene, and five Terrans; the ship was Cetian-built, but chartered by the Government of Earth. Her motley crew came aboard wriggling through the coupling-tube one by one like apprehensive spermatozoa fertilizing the universe. She flitted for the navigator put *Gum* underway. She zittered for some hours on the edge of space a few hundred million miles from Psem, and then abruptly vanished.

When, after ten hours twenty-nine minutes, or 256 years, *Gum* reappeared in normal space, she was supposed to be in the vicinity of Star KG-E-96651. Sure enough, there was the cheerful golden pinhead of the star. Somewhere within a 400-million-kilometer sphere there was also a greenish planet, World 4470, as charted by a Certain Mapmaker long ago. The ship now had to find the planet. This was not quite so easy as it might sound, given a 400-million-kilometer haystack. And
Gunn couldn't bat about in planetary space at near lightspeed; if she did, she and Star KG-E-96651 and World 4470 might all end up going bang. She had to creep, using rocket propulsion, at a few hundred thousand miles an hour. The Mathematician/Navigator, Assnafol, knew pretty well where the planet ought to be, and thought they might raise it within ten E-days. Meanwhile the members of the Survey team got to know one another still better.

"I can't stand him," said Porlock, the Hard Scientist (chemistry, plus physics, astronomy, geology, etc.), and little blobs of spittle appeared on his moustache. "The man is insane. I can't imagine why he was passed as fit to join a Survey team, unless this is a deliberate experiment in non-compatibility, planned by the Authority, with us as guinea pigs."

"We generally use hamsters and Hainish guinea-pigs," said Mannon, the Soft Scientist (psychology, plus psychiatry, anthropology, ecology, etc.), politely; he was one of the Hainishmen. "Instead of guinea pigs. Well, you know, Mr. Osdon is really a very rare case. In fact, he's the first fully cured case of Rendel's Syndrome—a variety of infantile autism which was thought to be incurable. The great Terran analyst Hammergeld reasoned that the cause of the autistic condition in this case is a supernormal empathic capacity, and developed an appropriate treatment. Mr. Osdon is the first patient to undergo that treatment, in fact he lived with Dr. Hammergeld until he was eighteen. The therapy was completely successful."

"Successful?"

"Yes; yes. He certainly is not autistic."

"No, he's intolerable!"

"Well, you see," said Mannon, gazing mildly at the saliva-flecks on Porlock's moustache, "the normal defensive-aggressive reaction between strangers meeting—let's say you and Mr. Osdon just for example—is something you're scarcely aware of; habit, manners, inattention get you past it; you've learned to ignore it, to the point where you might even deny it exists. However, Mr. Osdon, being an empath, feels it. Feels his feelings, and yours, and is hard put to say which is which. Let's say that there's a normal element of hostility towards any stranger in your emotional reaction to him when you meet him, plus a spontaneous dislike of his looks, or clothes, or handshake—it doesn't matter what. He feels that dislike. As his autistic defense has been unlearned, he resorts to an aggressive-defense mechanism, a response in kind to the aggression which you have unwittingly projected onto him." Mannon went on for quite a long time.

"Nothing gives a man the right to be such a bastard," Porlock said.

"He can't tune us out?" asked Harfax, the Biologist, another Hainishman.

"It's like hearing," said Olleroo, Assistant Hard Scientist, stooping over to paint her toenails with fluorescent lacquer. "No eyelids on your ears. No Off switch on empathy. He hears our feelings whether he wants to or not."

"Does he know what we're thinking?" asked Eskswana, the Engineer, looking round at the others in real dread.

"No!" Porlock snapped. "Empathy's not telepathy! Nobody's got telepathy."

"Yes," said Mannon, with his little smile. "Just before I left Hain there was a most interesting report in from one of the recently rediscovered worlds, a hilli named Rocannon reporting what appears to be a teachable—telepathic technique existent among a mutated hominid race; I only saw a synopsis in the HILF Bulletin, but—" He went on. The others had learned that they could talk while Mannon went on talking; he did not seem to mind, nor even to miss much of what they said.

"Then why does he hate us?" Eskswana asked.


"He acts as if he hated us," said Haito, the Coordinator. She was a delicate-looking woman of pure Asian descent, with a surprising voice, husky, deep, and soft, like a young bullfrog. "Why, if he suffers from our hos-
s question, does he increase it by constant attacks and

dners? I can’t say I think much of Dr. Hammergield’s
cure, really. Matlon; autism might be preferable..."
She stopped. Osdien had come into the main cabin.

He looked flayed. His skin was unnaturally white and
thin, showing the channels of his blood like a faded
roadmap in red and blue. His Adam’s apple, the mus-
cles that circled his mouth, the bones and ligaments of
his wrists and hands, all stood out distinctly as if dis-
played for an anatomy lesson. His hair was pale rust,
like long-dried blood. He had eyebrows and lashes, but
they were visible only in certain lights; what one saw
was the bones of the eye sockets, the veining of the lids,
and the colorless eyes. They were not red eyes, for he
was not really an albinos, but they were not blue or
grey; colors had canceled out in Osdien’s eyes, leaving a
cold waterlike clarity, infinitely penetrable. He never
looked directly at one. His face lacked expression, like
an anatomical drawing, or a skinned face.

“I agree,” he said in a high, harsh tenor, “that even
autistic withdrawal might be preferable to the smog of
cheap secondhand emotions with which you people sur-
round me. What are you sweating hate for now, Por-
lock? Can’t stand the sight of me? Go practice some
autocriticism the way you were doing last night, it im-
proves your vibes. —Who the devil moved my tapes,
here? Don’t touch my things, any of you. I won’t have
it."

“Osdien,” said Asnanifoi, the Hairy Cetian, in his
large slow voice, “why are you such a bastard?”

Ander Eskwana cowered down and put his hands in
front of his face. Contention frightened him. Oileroo
looked up with a vacant yet eager expression, the et-

ernal spectator.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” said Osdien. He was not look-
ing at Asnanifoi, and was keeping physically as far
away from all of them as he could in the crowded
cabin. “None of you constitute, in yourselves, any rea-
son for my changing my behavior.”

Asnanifoi shrugged; Cetians are seldom willing to
state the obvious. Harfex, a reserved and patient man,
said, “The reason is that we shall be spending several
years together. Life will be better for all of us if—"

“Can’t you understand that I don’t give a damn for
all of you?” Osdien said, took up his microtapes, and
gang out. Eskwana had suddenly gone to sleep. Asnan-
foi was drawing sleeping in the air with his fingers
and muttering the Ritual Primes. “You cannot explain
his presence on the team except as a plot on the part of
the Terrain Authority. I saw this almost at once. This
mission is meant to fail,” Harfex whispered to the
Coordinator, glancing over his shoulder. Porlock was
fumbling with his fly-button; there were tears in his
eyes. I did tell you they were all crazy, but you thought
I was exaggerating.

All the same, they were not unjustified. Extreme Sur-
veyors expected to find their fellow team members
intelligent, well trained, unstable, and personally sympa-
thetic. They had to work together in close quarters, and
nasty places, and could expect one another’s paranoias,
depressions, manias, phobias, and compulsions to be
mild enough to admit of good personal relationship, at
least most of the time. Osdien might be intelligent, but
his training was sketchy and his personality was disas-
troous. He had been sent only on account of his singular
gift, the power of empathy: properly speaking, of
wide-range biophematic receptivity. His talent wasn’t
species-specific; he could pick up emotion or sentience
from anything that felt. He could share last with a
white rat, pain with a squashed cockroach, and pho-
tropy with a moth. On an alien world, the Authority
had decided, it would be useful to know if anything
nearby is sentient, and if so, what its feelings towards
you are. Osdien’s title was a new one: he was the
team’s Sensor.

“Who is emotion, Osdien?” Haiko Tomiko asked him
one day in the main cabin, trying to make some rap-
port with him for once. “What is it, exactly, that you
pick up with your empathic sensitivity?”

“Muck,” the man answered in his high, exasperated
voice. “The psychic excreta of the animal kingdom, I
wade through your facces.”
"I was trying," she said, "to learn some facts." She thought her tone was admirably calm.  

"You weren't after facts. You were trying to get at me. With some fear, some curiosity, and a great deal of distaste. The way you might poke a dead dog, to see the maggots crawl. Will you understand once and for all that I don't want to be got at, that I want to be left alone?" His skin was mottled with red and violet, his voice had risen. "Go roll in your own dung, you yellow bitch!" he shouted at her silence.  

"Calm down," she said, still quietly, but she left him at once and went to her cabin. Of course he had been right about her motives; her question had been largely a pretext, a mere effort to interest him. But what harm in that? Did not that effort imply respect for the other? At the moment of asking the question she had felt at most a slight distrust of him; she had mostly felt sorry for him, the poor arrogant venomous bastard, Mr. Noon Skin as Olleroo called him. What did he expect, the way he acted? Love?  

"I guess he can't stand anybody feeling sorry for him," said Olleroo, lying on the lower bunk, gilding her nipples.  

"Then he can't form a human relationship. All his Dr. Hammergold did was turn an autism inside out..."  

"Poor rot," said Olleroo. "Tomiko, you don't mind if Harfex comes in for a while tonight, do you?"  

"Can't you go to his cabin? I'm sick of always having to sit in Main with that damned peeled turmp."  

"You do hate him, don't you? I guess he feels that. But I slept with Harfex last night too, and Asanifol might get jealous, since they share the cabin. It would be nicer here."  

"Service them both," Tomiko said with the coarseness of offended modesty. Her Terran subculture, the East Asian, was a puritanical one; she had been brought up chaste.  

"I only like one a night," Olleroo replied with innocent serenity. Beldene, the Garden Planet, had never discovered chastity, or the wheel.  

"Try Osdon, then," Tomiko said. Her personal insta-

bility was seldom so plain as now; a profound self-distrust manifesting itself as destructivism. She had volunteered for this job because there was, in all probability, no use in doing it.  

The little Beldene looked up, paintbrush in hand, eyes wide. "Tomiko, that was a dirty thing to say."  

"Why?"  

"It would be vile! I'm not attracted to Osdon!"  

"I didn't know it mattered to you," Tomiko said indifferently, though she did know. She got some papers together and left the cabin, remarking, "I hope you and Harfex or whoever it is finish by last bell; I'm tired."  

Olleroo was crying, tears dripping on her little gilded nipples. She wept easily. Tomiko had not wept since she was ten years old.  

It was not a happy ship; but it took a turn for the better when Asanifol with his computer raised World 4470. There it lay, a dark-green jewel, like truth at the bottom of a gravity well. As they watched the jade disc grow, a sense of mutuality grew among them. Osdon's selfishness, his accurate cruelty, served now to draw the others together. "Perhaps," Mannon said, "he was sent as a beating-gon. What Terrans call a scapegoat. Perhaps his influence will be good after all." And no one, so careful were they to be kind to one another, disagreed.  

They came into orbit. There were no lights on nightside, on the continents none of the lines and clots made by animals who build.  

"No men," Harfex murmured.  

"Of course not," snapped Osdon, who had a viewscreen to himself, and his head inside a polythene bag. He claimed that the plastic cut down the empathic noise he received from the others. "We're two lightcenturies past the limit of the Hainish Expansion, and outside that there are no men. Anywhere. You don't think Creation would have made the same hideous mistake twice?"  

No one was paying him much heed; they were looking with affection at that jade immensity below them, where there was life, but not human life. They were misfits among men, and what they saw there was not
desolation, but peace. Even Osdon did not look quite so expressionless as usual; he was frowning.

Descend in fire on the sea; air reconnaissance; landing. A plain of something like grass, thick, green, bowing stalks, surrounded the ship, brushed against extended view-cameras, smeared the lenses with a fine pollen.

"It looks like a pure phytosphere," Harfex said. "Osdon, do you pick up anything sentient?"

They all turned to the Sensor. He had left the screen and was pouring himself a cup of tea. He did not answer. He seldom answered spoken questions.

The chitinous rigidity of military discipline was quite inapplicable to these teams of Mad Scientists; their chain of command lay somewhere between parliamentary procedure and peck-order, and would have driven a regular service officer out of his mind. By the inescapable decision of the Authority, however, Dr. Haito Tomiko had been given the title of Coordinator, and she now exercised her prerogative for the first time. "Mr. Sensor Osdon," she said, "please answer Mr. Harfex."

"How could I 'pick up' anything from outside," Osdon said without turning, "with the emotions of nine neurotic hominids pulling at me like worms in a can? When I have anything to tell you, I'll tell you. I'm aware of my responsibility as Sensor. If you presume to give me an order again, however, Coordinator Haito, I'll consider my responsibility void."

"Very well, Mr. Sensor. I trust no orders will be needed henceforth." Tomiko's bullfrog voice was calm, but Osdon seemed to flinch slightly as he stood with his back to her; as if the surge of her suppressed rancor had struck him with physical force.

The biologist's hunch proved correct. When they began field analyses they found no animals even among the microbiota. Nobody here ate anybody else. All life-forms were photosynthesizing or saprophagous, living off light or death, not off life. Plants: infinite plants, not one species known to the visitors from the house of Man. Infinite shades and intensities of green, violet, purple, brown, red. Infinite silences. Only the wind moved, swaying leaves and fronds, a warm soughing wind laden with spores and pollens, blowing the sweet pale-green dust over prairies of great grasses, heaths that bore no heather, flowerless forests where no foot had ever trodden, no eye had ever looked. A warm, sad world, sad and serene. The Surveyors, wandering like picnickers over sunny plains of violet filiciforms, spoke softly to each other. They knew their voices broke a silence of a thousand million years, the silence of wind and leaves, leaves and wind, blowing and ceasing and blowing again. They talked softly; but being human, they talked.

"Poor old Osdon," said Jenny Chong, Bio and Tech, as she piloted a helijet on the North Polar Quadrating run. "All that fancy hi-fi stuff in his brain and nothing to receive. What a bust."

"He told me he hates plants," Olleroo said with a giggle.

"You'd think he'd like them, since they don't bother him like we do."

"Can't say I much like these plants myself," said Porlock, looking down at the purple undulations of the North Circumpolar Forest. "All the same. No mind. No change. A man alone in it would go right off his head."

"But it's all alive," Jenny Chong said. "And if it lives, Osdon hates it."

"He's not really so bad," Olleroo said, magnanimous. Porlock looked at her sidelong and asked, "You ever slept with him, Olleroo?"

Olleroo burst into tears and cried, "You Terrans are obscene!"

"No she hasn't," Jenny Chong said, prompt to defend. "Have you, Porlock?"

The chemist laughed uneasily: Ha, ha, ha. Flecks of spittle appeared on his mustache.

"Osdon can't bear to be touched," Olleroo said shakily. "I just brushed against him once by accident and he knocked me off like I was some sort of dirty... thing. We're all just things, to him."

"He's evil," Porlock said in a strained voice, startling the two women. "He'll end up shattering this team, sabotaging it, one way or another. Mark my words. He's not fit to live with other people!"
They landed on the North Pole. A midnight sun smouldered over low hills. Short, dry, greenish-pink bristleform grasses stretched away in every direction, which was all one direction, south. Subdued by the incredible silence, the three Surveyors set up their instruments and collected their samples. Three voices twitching minutely on the hide of an unmoving giant.

Nobody asked Osden along on runs as pilot or photographer or recorder, and he never volunteered, so he seldom left base camp. He ran Harfex’s botanical taxonomic data through the on-ship computers, and served as assistant to Eskwana, whose job here was mainly repair and maintenance. Eskwana had begun to sleep a great deal, twenty-five hours or more out of the thirty-two hour day, dropping off in the middle of repairing a radio or checking the guidance circuits of a helijet. The Coordinator stayed at base one day to observe. No one else was home except Poswet To, who was subject to epileptic fits; Mannon had plugged her into a therapy-circuit today in a state of preventive catatonia. Tomiko spoke reports into the storage banks, and kept an eye on Osden and Eskwana. Two hours passed.

“You might want to use the 860 microwavecycles in scaling that connection,” Eskwana said in his soft, hesitant voice.

“Obviously!”

“Sorry. I just saw you had the 840’s there—”

“And will replace them when I take the 860’s out. When I don’t know how to proceed, Engineer, I’ll ask your advice.”

After a minute Tomiko looked round. Sure enough, there was Eskwana sound asleep, head on the table, thumb in his mouth.

“Osden.”

The white face did not turn, he did not speak, but conveyed impatiently that he was listening.

“You can’t be unaware of Eskwana’s vulnerability.”

“I am not responsible for his psychopathic reactions.”

“But you are responsible for your own. Eskwana is essential to our work, here, and you’re not. If you can’t control your hostility, you must avoid him altogether.”

Osden put down his tools and stood up. “With plea-
sure!” he said in his vindictive, scraping voice. “You could not possibly imagine what it’s like to experience Eskwana’s irrational terrors. To have to share his horrid cowardice, to have to cringe with him at everything!”

“Are you trying to justify your cruelty towards him? I thought you had more self-respect.” Tomiko found herself shaking with spite. “If your empathic power really makes you share Ander’s misery, why does it never induce the least compassion in you?”

“Compassion,” Osden said. “Compassion. What do you know about compassion?”

She stared at him, but he would not look at her.

“Would you like me to verbalize your present emotional affect regarding myself?” he said. “I can do so more precisely than you can. I’m trained to analyze such responses as I receive them. And I do receive them.”

“But how can you expect me to feel kindly towards you when you behave as you do?”

“What does it matter how I behave, you stupid sow, do you think it makes any difference? Do you think the average human is a well of loving kindness? My choice is to be hated or to be despised. Not being a woman or a coward, I prefer to be hated.”

“That’s rot. Self-pity. Every man has—”

“But I am not a man,” Osden said. “There are all of you. And there is myself. I am one.”

Awed by that glimpse of abysmal solipsism, she kept silent a while; finally she said with neither spite nor pity, clinically. “You could kill yourself, Osden.”

“That’s your way, Haito,” he jeered. “I’m not depressive and seppuku isn’t my bit. What do you want me to do here?”

“Leave. Spare yourself and us. Take the aircar and a data-feeder and go do a species count. In the forest; Harfex hasn’t even started the forests yet. Take a hundred-square-meter forested area, anywhere inside radio range. But outside empathy range. Report in at eight and twenty-four o’clock daily.”

Osden went, and nothing was heard from him for five days but incoherent all-well signals twice daily. The
mood at base camp changed like a stage set. Bskwana stayed awake up to eighteen hours a day. Poswet To got up her stellar lute and chanted the celestial harmonies (music had driven Osdon to frenzy). Mannon, Harfex, Jenny Chong, and Tomiko all went off tranquilizers. Porlock distilled something in his laboratory and drank it all by himself. He had a hangover. Asmang-foi and Poswet To held an all-night Numerical Epiphany, that mystical orgy of higher mathematics which is the chiefest pleasure of the religious Cethian soul. Olleroo slept with everybody. Work went well.

The Hard Scientists came towards base at a run, laboring through the high, fleshy stalks of the graminiformes. "Something—in the forest—" His eyes bulged, he panted, his mustache and fingers trembled. "Something big. Moving, behind me. I was putting in a benchmark, bending down. It came at me. As if it was swinging down out of the trees. Behind me." He stared at the others with the opaque eyes of terror or exhaustion.

"Sit down, Porlock. Take it easy. Now wait, go through this again. You saw something—"

"Not clearly. Just the movement. Purpose. An—an—I don't know what it could have been. Something self-moving. In the trees, the arboriformes, whatever you call them. At the edge of the woods."

Harfex looked grim. "There is nothing here that could attack you, Porlock. There are not even microzoa. There could not be a large animal."

"Could you possibly have seen an epiphyte drop suddenly, a vine come loose behind you?"

"No," Porlock said. "It was coming down at me, through the branches, fast. When I turned it took off again, away and upward. It made a noise, a sort of crashing. If it wasn't an animal, God knows what it could have been! It was big—as big as a man, at least. Maybe a reddish color. I couldn't see, I'm not sure."

"It was Osdon," said Jenny Chong, "doing a Tarzan act." She giggled nervously, and Tomiko repressed a wild reckless laugh. But Harfex was not smiling.

"One gets uneasy under the arboriformes," he said in his polite, repressed voice. "I've noticed that. Indeed

that may be why I've put off working in the forests. There's a hypnotic quality in the colors and spacing of the stems and branches, especially the helically arranged ones; and the spore-throwers grow so regularly spaced that it seems unnatural. I find it quite disagreeable, subjectively speaking. I wonder if a stronger effect of that sort mightn't have produced a hallucination...?"

Porlock shook his head. He wet his lips. "It was there," he said. "Something. Moving with purpose. Trying to attack me from behind."

When Osdon called in, punctual as always, at twenty-four o'clock that night, Harfex told him Porlock's report. "Have you come on anything at all, Mr. Osdon, that could substantiate Mr. Porlock's impression of a motile, sentient life-form, in the forest?"

Siss, the radio said sardonically. "No. Bullshit," said Osdon's unpleasant voice.

"You've been actually inside the forest longer than any of us," Harfex said with unmitigated politeness. "Do you agree with my impression that the forest ambiance has a rather troubling and possibly hallucinogenic effect on the perceptions?"

Siss. "I'll agree that Porlock's perceptions are easily troubled. Keep him in his lab, he'll do less harm. Anything else?"

"Not at present," Harfex said, and Osdon cut off.

Nobody could credit Porlock's story, and nobody could discredit it. He was positive that something, something big, had tried to attack him by surprise. It was hard to deny this, for they were on an alien world, and everyone who had entered the forest had felt a certain chill and foreboding under the trees. ("Call them trees, certainly," Harfex had said: "They really are the same thing, only, of course, altogether different.") They agreed that they had felt uneasy, or had had the sense that something was watching them from behind.

"We've got to clear this up," Porlock said, and he asked to be sent as a temporary Biologist's Aide, like Osdon, into the forest to explore and observe. Olleroo and Jenny Chong volunteered if they could go as a pair. Harfex sent them all off into the forest near which they were encamped, a vast tract covering four..."
fifths of Continent D. He forbade side arms. They were not to go outside a fifty-kilo half-circle, which included Osden's current site. They all reported in twice daily, for three days. Porlock reported a glimpse of what seemed to be a large semi-erect shape moving through the trees across the river; Olleroo was sure she had heard something moving near the tent, the second night.

"There are no animals on this planet," Harfax said, dourly.

Then Osden missed his morning call.

Tomiko waited less than an hour, then flew with Harfax to the area where Osden had reported himself the night before. But as the helijet hovered over the sea of purplish leaves, illimitable, impenetrable, she felt a panic of despair. "How can we find him in this?"

"He reported landing on the river bank. Find the air-car; he'll be camped near it, and he can't have gone far from his camp. Species-counting is slow work. There's the river."

"There's his car," Tomiko said, catching the bright foreign glint among the vegetable colors and shadows. "Here goes."

She put the ship in hover and pitched out the ladder. She and Harfax descended. The sea of life closed over their heads.

As her feet touched the forest floor, she un snapped the flap of her holster; then glancing at Harfax, who was unarmed, she left the gun untouched. But her hand kept coming back up to it. There was no sound at all, as soon as they were a few meters away from the slow, brown river, and the light was dim. Great boles stood well apart, almost regularly, almost alike; they were soft-skinned, some appearing smooth and others spongy, gray or greenish-brown or brown, twined with cablelike creepers and festooned with epiphytes, extending rigid, entangled armfuls of big, saucer-shaped, dark leaves that formed a roof-layer twenty to thirty meters thick. The ground underfoot was springy as a mattress, every inch of it knotted with roots and peppered with small, fleshy-leaved growths.

"Here's his tent," Tomiko said, cowed at the sound of her voice in that huge community of the voiceless. In the tent was Osden's sleeping bag, a couple of books, a box of rations. We should be calling, shooting for him, she thought, but did not even suggest it; nor did Harfax. They circled out from the tent, careful to keep each other in sight through the thick-standing presences, the crowding gloom. She stumbled over Osden's body, not thirty meters from the tent, but how it by the whitish gleam of a dropped notebook. He lay face down between two huge-rooted trees. His head and hands were covered with blood, some dried, some still oozing red.

Harfax appeared beside her, his pale Hainish complexion quite green in the dusk. "Dead?"

"No. He's been struck. Beaten. From behind." Tomiko's fingers felt over the bloody skull and nape and temples. "A weapon or a tool... I don't find a fracture."

As she turned Osden's body over so they could lift him, his eyes opened. She was holding him, bending close to his face. His pale lips withered. A deathly fear came to her. She screamed aloud two or three times and tried to run away, shambling and stumbling into the terrible dusk. Harfax caught her, and at his touch and the sound of his voice, her panic decreased. "What is it? What is it?" he was saying.

"I don't know," she sobbed. Her heartbeat still shook her, and she could not see clearly. "The fear... the... I panicked. When I saw his eyes."

"We're both nervous. I don't understand this..."

"I'm all right now, come on, we've got to get him under care."

Both working with senseless haste, they hauled Osden to the riverside and hauled him up on a rope under his armpits; he dangled like a sack, twisting a little, over the glutinous dark sea of leaves. They pulled him into the helijet and took off. Within a minute they were over open prairie. Tomiko locked onto the homing beam. She drew a deep breath, and her eyes met Harfax's.

"I was so terrified I almost fainted. I have never done that."

"And you?"

"I always do."

"You're as bad as I am, sometimes."

"Sometimes."

"But mostly you're worse."

"I know."

"So you two can't take care of each other?"

"I'd like to see him."

"So would I."

"I don't know how we can do anything."
"I was . . . unreasonably frightened also," said the Hainishman, and indeed he looked aged and shaken. "Not so badly as you. But as unreasonably."

"It was when I was in contact with him, holding him. He seemed to be conscious for a moment."

"Empathy? . . . I hope he can tell us what attacked him."

Osdon, like a broken dummy covered with blood and mud, half-lay as they had bundled him into the rear seats in their frantic urgency to get out of the forest.

More panic met their arrival at base. The ineffective brutality of the assault was sinister and bewildering. Since Harfex stubbornly denied any possibility of animal life they began speculating about sentient plants, vegetable monsters, psychic projections. Jenny Chong's latent phobia reasserted itself and she could talk about nothing except the Dark Egos which followed people around behind their backs. She and Olleroo and Porlock had been summoned back to base; and nobody was much inclined to go outside.

Osdon had lost a good deal of blood during the three or four hours he had lain alone, and concussion and severe contusions had put him in shock and semi-coma. As he came out of this and began running a lower fever he called several times for "Doctor," in a plaintive voice: "Doctor Hammergeld . . ." When he regained full consciousness, two of those long days later, Tomiko called Harfex into the cubicle.

"Osdon: can you tell us what attacked you?"

The pale eyes flickered past Harfex' face.

"You were attacked," Tomiko said gently. The shifty gaze was hatefully familiar, but she was a physician, protective of the hurt. "You may not remember it yet. Something attacked you. You were in the forest—"

"Ah!" he cried out, his eyes growing bright and his features contorting. "The forest—in the forest—"

"What's in the forest?"

He gasped for breath. A look of clearer consciousness came into his face. After a while he said, "I don't know."

"Did you see what attacked you?" Harfex asked.

"I don't know."
just now. I realize that. I didn't understand how it is, Osden. You can't see how difficult it is for us to understand... But listen. If it were love, instead of hate and fear... Is it never love?"

"No."

"Why not? Why should it never be? Are human beings all so weak? That is terrible. Never mind, never mind, don't worry. Keep still. At least right now it isn't hate, is it? Sympathy at least, concern, well-wishing. You do feel that, Osden? Is it what you feel?"

"Among... other things," he said, almost inaudible.

"Noise from my subconscious, I suppose. And everybody else in the room... Listen, when we found you there in the forest, when I tried to turn you over, you partly wakened, and I felt a horror of you. I was insane with fear for a minute. Was that your fear of me I felt?"

"No."

Her hand was still on his, and he was quite relaxed, sinking toward sleep, like a man in pain who has been given relief from pain. "The forest," he mumbled; she could barely understand him. "Afraid."

She pressed him no further, but kept her hand on his and watched him go to sleep. She knew what she felt, and what therefore he must feel. She was confident of it: there is only one emotion, or state of being, that can thus wholly reverse itself, polarize, within one moment. In Great Hainish indeed there is one word, onta, for love and for hate. She was not in love with Osden, of course, that is another kettle of fish. What she felt for him was onta, polarized hate. She held his hand and the current flowed between them, the tremendous electricity of touch, which he had always dreaded. As he slept, the ring of anatomy-chart muscles around his mouth relaxed, and Tomiko saw on his face what none of them had ever seen, very faint, a smile. It faded. He slept on.

He was tough; next day he was sitting up, and hungry. Harfex wished to interrogate him, but Tomiko put him off. She hung a sheet of polythene over the cubicle door, as Osden himself had often done. "Does it actually cut down your empathic reception?" she asked, and he replied, in the dry, cautious tone they were now using to each other, "No."

"Just a warning, then."

"Partly. More faith-healing. Dr. Hammersgeld thought it worked. Maybe it does, a little."

There had been love, once. A terrified child, suffocating in the tidiest rush and battering of the huge emotions of adults, a drowning child, saved by one man. Taught to breathe, to live, by one man. Given everything, all protection and love, by one man. Father/mother/God: no other. "Is he still alive?" Tomiko said, thinking of Osden's incredible loneliness, and the savage cruelty of the great doctors. She was shocked when she heard his forced, tinny laugh. "He died at least two and a half centuries ago," Osden said. "Do you forget where we are, Coordinator? We've all left our little families behind...

Outside the polythene curtain the eight other human beings on World 4470 moved vaguely. Their voices were low and strained. Eskwana slept; Poswet To was in therapy; Jenny Chong was trying to rig lights in her cubicle so that she wouldn't cast a shadow.

"They're all scared," Tomiko said, scared. "They've all got these ideas about what attacked you. A sort of ape-potato, a giant fanged spinach, I don't know... Even Harfex. You may be right not to force them to see. That would be worse, to lose confidence in one another. But why are we all so shaky, unable to face the facts, going to pieces so easily? Are we really all insane?"

"We'll soon be more so."

"Why?"

"There is something."

He closed his mouth, the muscles of his lips stood out rigid.

"Something sentient?"

"A sentience."

"In the forest?"

He nodded.

"What is it, then—?"

"The fear." He began to look strained again, and moved restlessly. "When I fall, there, you know, I
anxiety. The murderer is an outsider, a foreigner, not one of us. The evil is not in me.

"The first blow knocked him pretty well out," Tomiko said a little weakly, "he didn't see anything. But when he came to again, alone in the forest, he felt a great fear. Not his own fear, an empathic affect. He is certain of that. And certain it was nothing picked up from any of us. So that evidently the native life-forms are not all insentient."

Harfex looked at her a moment, grim. "You're trying to frighten me, Haito. I do not understand your motives." He got up and went off to his laboratory table, walking slowly and stiffly, like a man of eighty not of forty.

She looked round at the others. She felt some desperation. Her new, fragile, and profound interdependence with Osdens gave her, she was well aware, some added strength. But if even Harfex could not keep his head, who of the others would? Porlock and Eskwana were shut in their cubicles, the others were all working or busy with something. There was something queer about their positions. For a while the Coordinator could not tell what it was, then she saw that they were all sitting facing the nearby forest. Playing chess with Assanfoi, Ollerro had edged her chair around until it was almost beside his.

She went to Mannon, who was dissecting a tangle of spidery brown roots, and told him to look for the pattern-puzzle. He saw it at once, and said with unusual brevity, "Keeping an eye on the enemy."

"What enemy? What do you feel, Mannon?" She had a sudden hope in him as a psychologist, on this obscure ground of hints and empathies were biologists went astray.

"I feel a strong anxiety with a specific spatial orientation. But I am not an empath. Therefore, the anxiety is explicable in terms of the particular stress-situation, that is the attack on a team member in the forest, and also in terms of the total stress-situation, that is my presence in a totally alien environment, for which the archetypical connotations of the word 'forest' provide an inevitable metaphor."
Hours later Tomiko woke to hear Osdan screaming in nightmare; Mannon was calming him, and she sank back into her own dark-branching pathless dreams. In the morning Eskwana did not wake. He could not be roused with stimulant drugs. He clung to his sleep, slipping farther and farther back, mumbling softly now and then until, wholly regressed, he lay curled on his side, thumb at his lips, gone.

"Two days: two down. Ten little Indians, nine little Indians..." That was Porlock.

"And you're the next little Indian," Jenny Chong snapped. "Go analyze your urine, Porlock!"

"He is driving us all insane," Porlock said, getting up and waving his left arm. "Can't you feel it? For God's sake, are you all deaf and blind? Can't you feel what he's doing, the emanations? It all comes from him—from his room there—from his mind. He is driving us all insane with fear!"

"Who is?" said Asranfoil, looming black, precipitous and hairy over the little Terran.

"Do I have to say his name? Osdan, then. Osdan! Osdan! Why do you think I tried to kill him? In self-defense! To save all of us! Because you won't see what he's doing to us. He's sabotaged the mission by making us quarrel, and now he's going to drive us all insane by projecting fear at us so that we can't sleep or think, like a huge radio that doesn't make any sound, but it broadcasts all the time, and you can't sleep, and you can't think. Haito and Harfex are already under his control but the rest of you can be saved. I had to do it!"

"You didn't do it very well," Osdan said, standing half-naked, all rib and bandage, at the door of his cubicle. "I could have hit myself harder. Hell, it isn't me that's scaring you blind, Porlock, it's out there—there, in the woods!"

Porlock made an ineffectual attempt to assault Osdan; Asranfoil held him back, and continued to hold him effortlessly while Mannon gave him a sedative shot. He was put away shouting about giant radios. In a minute the sedative took effect, and he joined a peaceful silence to Eskwana's.

"All right," said Harfex. "Now, by my Gods, you'll tell us what you know and all you know."

Osdan said, "I don't know anything."

He looked battered and faint. Tomiko made him sit down before he talked.

"After I'd been three days in the forest, I thought I was occasionally receiving some kind of faint affect."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Thought I was going spla, like the rest of you."

"That, equally, should have been reported."

"You'd have called me back to base. I couldn't take it. You realize that my inclusion in the mission was a bad mistake. I'm not able to coexist with nine other neurotic personalities at close quarters. I was wrong to volunteer for Extreme Survey, and the Authority was wrong to accept me."

No one spoke; but Tomiko saw, with certainty this time, the flinch in Osdan's shoulders and the tightening of his facial muscles, as he registered their bitter agreement.

"Anyhow, I didn't want to come back to base, because I was curious. Even going psycho, how could I pick up empathic affects when there was no creature to emit them? They weren't bad, then. Very vague. Queer. Like a draft in a closed room, a flicker in the corner of your eye. Nothing really."

For a moment he had been borne up on their listening: they heard, so he spoke. He was wholly at their mercy. If they disliked him, he had to be hateful; if they mocked him he became grotesque; if they listened to him he was the storyteller. He was helplessly obedient to the demands of their emotions, reactions, moods. And there were seven of them, too many to cope with, so that he must be constantly knocked about from one to another's whim. He could not find coherence. Even as he spoke and held them, somebody's attention would wander: Olleroo perhaps was thinking that he wasn't unattractive; Harfex was seeking the ulterior motive of his words; Asranfoil's mind, which could not be long held by the concrete, was roaming off towards the eternal peace of number; and Tomiko was distracted by pity, by fear. Osdan's voice faltered. He lost the thread.
"I... I thought it must be the trees," he said, and stopped.

"It's not the trees," Harfex said. "They have no more nervous system than do plants of the Hainish Descent on Earth. None."

"You're not seeing the forest for the trees, as they say on Earth," Mannon put in, smiling eldrily; Harfex stared at him. "What about those root-nodes we've been puzzling about for twenty days—eh?"

"What about them?"

"They are, indubitably, connections. Connections among the trees. Right? Now let's just suppose, most improbably, that you knew nothing of animal brain-structure. And you were given one axon, or one detached glial cell, to examine. Would you be likely to discover what it was? Would you see that the cell was capable of sentience?"

"No. Because it isn't. A single cell is capable of mechanical response to stimulus. No more. Are you hypothesizing that individual arboriformes are 'cells' in a kind of brain, Mannon?"

"Not exactly. I'm merely pointing out that they are all interconnected, both by the root-node linkage and by your green epiphytes in the branches. A linkage of incredible complexity and physical extent. Why, even the prairie grass-forms have those root-connectors, don't they? I know that sentence or intelligence isn't a thing, you can't find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of a brain. It's a function of the connected cells. It is, in a sense, the connection: the connectedness. It doesn't exist. I'm not trying to say it exists. I'm only guessing that Osdon might be able to describe it."

And Osdon took him up, speaking as if in trance.


"Then why do you receive fear?" Tomiko asked in a low voice.

"I don't know. I can't see how awareness of objects, of others, could arise: an unperceiving response... But there was an uneasiness, for days. And then when I lay between the two trees and my blood was on their roots—" Osdon's face glittered with sweat. "It became fear," he said shirilly, "only fear."

"If such a function existed," Harfex said, "it would not be capable of conceiving of a self-moving, material entity, or responding to one. It could no more become aware of us than we can 'become aware' of Infinity."

"The silence of those infinite expanses terrifies me," muttered Tomiko. "Pascal was aware of Infinity. By way of fear."

"To a forest," Mannon said, "we might appear as forest fires. Hurricanes. Dangers. What moves quickly is dangerous, to a plant. The rootless would be alien, terrible. And if it is mind, it seems only too probable that it might become aware of Osdon, whose own mind is open to connection with all others so long as he's conscious, and who was lying in pain and afraid within it, actually inside it. No wonder it was afraid—"

"Not it," Harfex said. "There is no being, no huge creature, no person! There could at most be only a function—"

"There is only a fear," Osdon said.

They were all still a while, and heard the stillness outside.

"Is that what I feel all the time coming up behind me?" Jenny Chong asked, subdued.

Osdon nodded. "You all feel it, deaf as you are. Ekwana's the worst off, because he actually has some empathic capacity. He could send if he learned how, but he's too weak, never will be anything but a medium."

"Listen, Osdon," Tomiko said, "you can send. Then send to it—the forest, the fear out there—tell that we won't hurt it. Since it has, or is, some sort of affect that translates into what we feel as emotion, can't you translate back? Send out a message, We are harmless, we are friendly."

"You must know that nobody can emit a false empathic message, Haito. You can't send something that doesn't exist."
“But we don’t intend harm, we are friendly.”

“Are we? In the forest, when you picked me up, did you feel friendly?”

“No. Terrified. But that—it, the forest, the plants, not my own fear, isn’t it?”

“What’s the difference? It’s all you felt. Can’t you see,” and Osdon’s voice rose in exasperation, “why I dislike you and you dislike me, all of you? Can’t you see that I retransmit every negative or aggressive affect you’ve felt towards me since we first met? I return your hostility, with thanks. I do it in self-defense. Like Porlock. It is self-defense, though, it’s the only technique I developed to replace my original defense of total withdrawal from others. Unfortunately it creates a closed circuit, self-sustaining and self-reinforcing. Your initial reaction to me was the instinctive antipathy to a cripple; by now of course it’s hatred. Can you fail to see my point? The forest-mind out there transmits only terror, now, and the only message I can send it is terror, because when exposed to it I can feel nothing except terror.”

“What must we do, then?” said Tomiko, and Mannon replied promptly, “Move camp. To another continent. If there are plant-minds there, they’ll be slow to notice us, as this one was; maybe they won’t notice us at all.”

“It would be a considerable relief,” Osdon observed stiffly. The others had been watching him with a new curiosity. He had revealed himself, they had seen him as he was, a helpless man in a trap. Perhaps, like Tomiko, they had seen that the trap itself, its crass and cruel egotism, was their own construction, not his. They had built the cage and locked him in it, and like a caged ape he threw flight out through the bars. If, meeting him, they had offered trust, if they had been strong enough to offer him love, how might he have appeared to them?

None of them could have done so, and it was too late now. Given time, given solitude, Tomiko might have built up with him a slow resonance of feeling; a consonance of trust, a harmony: but there was no time, their job must be done. There was not room enough for the cultivation of so great a thing, and they must make do with sympathy, with pity, the small change of love. Even that much had given her strength, but it was nowhere near enough for him. She could see in his flayed face now his savage resentment of their curiosity, even of her pity.

“Go lie down, that gas is bleeding again,” she said, and he obeyed her.

Next morning they packed up, melted down the sprayerform hangar and living quarters, lifted Gum on mechanical drive and took her halfway round World 4470, over the red and green lands, the many warm-green seas. They had picked out a likely spot on Continent G: a prairie, twenty thousand square kilos of windswept graminiforms. No forest was within a hundred kilos of the site, and there were no lone trees or groves on the plain. The plant-forms occurred only in large species-colonies, never intermingled, except for certain tiny ubiquitous saprophytes and spore-bearers. The team sprayed bolomeld over structure forms, and by evening of the thirty-two-hour day were settled in to the new camp. Eskwana was still asleep and Porlock still sedated, but everyone else was cheerful. “You can breathe here!” they kept saying.

Osdon got on his feet and went shakily to the dooryard; leaning there he looked through twilight over the dim reaches of the swaying grass that was not grass. There was a faint, sweet odor of pollen on the wind; no sound but the soft, vast silence of wind. His bandaged head cocked a little, the empath stood motionless for a long time. Darkness came, and the stars, lights in the windows of the distant house of Man. The wind had ceased, there was no sound. He listened.

In the long night Haito Tomiko listened. She lay still and heard the blood in her arteries, the breathing of sleepers, the wind blowing, the dark veins running, the dreams advancing, the vast static of stars increasing as the universe died slowly, the sound of death walking. She struggled out of her bed, fled the tiny solitude of her cubicle. Eskwana alone slept. Porlock lay straightjacketed, raving softly in his obscure native tongue. Olleroo and Jenny Chong were playing cards, grim-
faced. Posset To was in the therapy niche, plugged in. Assantoff was drawing a mandala, the Third Pattern of the Primes. Mannon and Harfex were sitting up with Osdan.

She changed the bandages on Osdan's head. His rank, reddish hair, where she had not had to shave it, looked strange. It was salted with white, now. Her hands shook as she worked. Nobody had yet said anything.

"How can the fear be here too?" she said, and her voice rang flat and false in the terrible silence of the vegetable night.

"It's not just the trees; the grasses too . . ."

"But we're twelve thousand kilos from where we were this morning, we left it on the other side of the planet."

"It's all one," Osdan said. "One big green thought. How long does it take a thought to get from one side of your brain to the other?"

"It doesn't think. It isn't thinking," Harfex said, listlessly. "It's merely a network of processes. The branches, the epiphytic growths, the roots with those nodal junctures between individuals; they must all be capable of transmitting electrochemical impulses. There are no individual plants, then, properly speaking. Even the pollen is part of the linkage, no doubt, a sort of windborne sentence, connecting overseas. But it is not conceivable. That all the biosphere of a planet should be one network of communications, sensitive, irrational, immortal, isolated . . ."

"Isolated," said Osdan. "That's it! That's the fear. It isn't that we're motile, or destructive. It's just that we are. We are other. There has never been any other."

"You're right," Mannon said, almost whispering. "It has no peers. No enemies. No relationship with anything but itself. One alone forever."

"Then what's its function in species-survival?"

"None, maybe," Osdan said. "Why are you getting teleological, Harfex? Aren't you a Hainishman? Isn't the measure of complexity the measure of the eternal joy?"

Harfex did not take the bait. He looked ill. "We should leave this world," he said.

"Now you know why I always want to get out, get away from you," Osdan said with a kind of morbid glee. "It isn't pleasant, is it—the other's fear? . . . If only it were an animal intelligence. I can get through to animals. I get along with cobras and tigers; superior intelligence gives one the advantage. I should have been used in a zoo, not on a human team . . . . If I could get through to the damned stupid potato! If it wasn't so overwhelming. . . . I still pick up more than the fear, you know. And before it panicked it had a—there was a serenity. I couldn't take it in, then, I didn't realize how big it was. To know the whole daylight, after all, and the whole night, all the winds and the lulls together. The winter stars and the summer stars at the same time. To have roots, and no enemies. To be entire. Do you see? No invasion. No others. To be whole . . . ."

He had never spoken before, Tomiko thought.

"You are defenseless against it, Osdan," she said.

"Your personality has changed already. You're vulnerable to it. We may not all go mad, but you will, if we don't leave."

He hesitated, then he looked up at Tomiko, the first time he had ever met her eyes, a long, still look, clear as water.

"What's sanity ever done for me?" he said, mocking.

"But you have a point, Haino. You have something there."

"We should get away," Harfex muttered.

"If I gave in to it," Osdan mused, "could I communicate?"

"By 'give in,'" Mannon said in a rapid, nervous voice, "I assume that you mean, stop sending back the empathic information which you receive from the plant-entity: stop rejecting the fear, and absorb it. That will either kill you at once, or drive you back into total psychological withdrawal, autism."

"Why?" said Osdan. "Its message is rejection. But my salvation is rejection. It's not intelligent. But I am."

"The scale is wrong. What can a single human brain achieve against something so vast?"

"A single human brain can perceive pattern on the
scale of stars and galaxies," Tomiko said, "and interpret it as Love."

Mannon looked from one to the other of them; Harfex was silent.

"It'd be easier in the forest," Osden said. "Which of you will fly me over?"

"When?"

"Now. Before you all crack up or go violent."

"I will," Tomiko said.

"None of us will," Harfex said.

"I can't," Mannon said. "I... I'm too frightened.

I'd crash the jet.

"Bring Eskwana along. If I can pull this off, he might serve as a medium."

"Are you accepting the Sensor's plan, Coordinator?"

Harfex asked formally.

"Yes."

"I disapprove. I will come with you, however."

"I think we're compelled, Harfex," Tomiko said, looking at Osden's face, the ugly white mask transfigured, eager as a lover's face.

Olleroo and Jenny Chong, playing cards to keep their thoughts from their haunted beds, their mounting dread, chattered like scared children. "This thing, it's in the forest, it'll get you—"

"Scared of the dark?" Osden jeered.

"But look at Eskwana, and Porlock, and even Asanifoil—"

"It can't hurt you. It's an impulse passing through synapses, a wind passing through branches. It is only a nightmare."

They took off in a helijet, Eskwana curled up still sound asleep in the rear compartment, Tomiko piloting, Harfex and Osden silent, watching ahead for the dark line of forest across the vague gray miles of starlit plain.

They neared the black line, crossed it; now under them was darkness.

She sought a landing place, flying low, though she had to fight her frantic wish to fly high, to get out, get away. The huge vitality of the plant-world was far stronger here in the forest, and its panic beat in im-

mense dark waves. There was a pale patch ahead, a bare knoll-top a little higher than the tallest of the black shapes around it; the not-trees; the rooted; the parts of the whole. She set the helijet down in the glade, a bad landing. Her hands on the stick were slippery as if she had rubbed them with cold soap.

About them now stood the forest, black in darkness.

Tomiko cowered down and shut her eyes. Eskwana moaned in his sleep. Harfex's breath came short and loud, and he sat rigid, even when Osden reached across him and slid the door open.

Oelden stood up; his back and bandaged head were just visible in the dim glow of the control-panel as he paused stooping in the doorway.

Tomiko was shaking. She could not raise her head.

"No, no, no, no, no, no," she said in a whisper.

"No, No. No."

Osembled suddenly and quietly, swinging out of the doorway, down into the dark. He was gone.

I am coming! said a great voice that made no sound.

Tomiko screamed. Harfex coughed; he seemed to be trying to stand up, but did not do so.

Tomiko drew in upon herself, all centered in the blind eye in her belly, in the center of her being; and outside that there was nothing but the fear.

It ceased.

She raised her head; slowly unclenched her hands. She sat up straight. The night was dark, and stars shone over the forest. There was nothing else.

"Osembled," she said, but her voice would not come. She spoke again, louder, a lone bullfrog croak. There was no reply.

She began to realize that something had gone wrong with Harfex. She was trying to find his head in the darkness, for he had slipped down from the seat, when all at once, in the dead quiet, in the dark rear compartment of the craft, a voice spoke. "Good," it said.

It was Eskwana's voice. She snapped on the interior lights and saw the engineer lying curled up asleep, his hand half over his mouth.

The mouth opened and spoke. "All well," it said.

"Osembled—"
"All well," said the soft voice from Eskwana's mouth.
"Where are you?"
Silence.
"Come back."
Wind was rising. "I'll stay here," the soft voice said.
"You can't stay—"
Silence.
"You'd be alone, Osden!"
"Listen." The voice was fainter, slurred, as if lost in the sound of wind. "Listen. I will tell you well."
She called his name after that, but there was no answer. Eskwana lay still. Harfex lay stiller.
"Osden!" she cried, leaning out the doorway into the dark, wind-shaken silence of the forest of being. "I will come back. I must get Harfex to the base. I will come back, Osden!"
Silence and wind in leaves.

They finished the prescribed survey of World 4470, the eight of them; it took them forty-one days more. Asmanfoi and one or another of the women went into the forest daily at first, searching for Osden in the region around the bare knoll; though Tomiko was not in her heart sure which bare knoll they had landed on that night in the very heart and vortex of terror. They left piles of supplies for Osden, food enough for fifty years, clothing, tents, tools. They did not go on searching; there was no way to find a man alone, hiding, if he wanted to hide, in those unending labyrinths and dim corridors vine-entangled, root-flowered. They might have passed within arm's reach of him and never seen him.

But he was there; for there was no fear any more.

Rational, and valuing reason more highly after an intolerable experience of the immortal mindless, Tomiko tried to understand rationally what Osden had done. But the words escaped her control. He had taken the fear into himself, and accepting had transcended it. He had given up his self to the alien, an unreserved surrender, that left no place for evil. He had learned the love

of the Other, and thereby had been given his whole self. But this is not the vocabulary of reason.

The people of the Survey team walked under the trees, through the vast colonies of life, surrounded by a dreaming silence, a brooding calm that was half-aware of them and wholly indifferent to them. There were no hours. Distance was no matter. Had we but world enough and time ... The planet turned between the sunlight and the great dark; winds of winter and summer blew fine, pale pollen across the quiet seas.

Gum returned after many surveys, years, and light-years, to what had several centuries ago been Smeming Port of Pesm. There were still men there to receive (incredulously) the team's reports and to record its losses: Biologist Harfex, dead of fear, and Sensor Osden, left as a colonist.