

# The Boy Who Would Live Forever

by

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I

On Stan's seventeenth birthday the wrath of god came again, as it did every six weeks or so. Stan was alone in the apartment, cutting up vegetables for his birthday dinner, when he felt that familiar, sudden, overwhelming, disorienting, horny rush of vertigo that everybody called the Wrath and nobody understood. Screams and sirens from outside the building told him that everybody else was feeling it, too. When it hit, Stan managed to drop the paring knife to the floor so he wouldn't cut himself and staggered to a kitchen chair to sweat it out.

People said the Wrath was a terrible thing. Well, it was. Whatever it was, it struck everyone in the world at once-and not just the people on Earth, either; ships in space, the colonies on Mars and Venus, they all were caught up in it at the same moment, and its costs in accidents and disasters were enormous. Personally, Stan didn't mind it all that much. It felt like suddenly being overwhelmed by a vast, lonely, erotic nightmare. Like, Stan thought, probably what it would be like to get good and drunk. The erotic part was not very different from some of the yearnings Stan himself felt from time to time, and when the Wrath was over there was no hangover.

When it had passed, Stan shook himself, picked up the things he had knocked to the floor and turned on the local TV news to see how bad it had been this time. It had been bad enough. Fires. Car smashes-Istanbul's aggressive drivers relied on their split-second reflexes to avert disaster, and when the Wrath took away their skill the crashes came fast. The worst thing that happened this time was an oil tanker that had been coming into the Golden Horn. With everyone on both the tugs and the tanker's own bridge suddenly incapacitated, it had plowed, dead slow and irresistible, into one of the cruise-ship docks on the Old City side and there exploded into flame.

Like any teenager, Stan had a high tolerance for other people's misfortunes. He just hoped the commotion wouldn't make his father too late getting back with the saffron and mussels for the stew. When he finished with the vegetables and put them in a pot of cold water he put a couple of his precious old discs on to play-this time it was Dizzy Gillespie, Jack Teagarden, and the Firehouse Five Plus Three-and sat down to wait, thumbing through some of his comics and wondering if, for once, his father would have stayed sober long enough to get him some kind of a present for his birthday.

That was when the polis came to the door.

There were two of them, male and female, and they looked around the shabby apartment suspiciously. "Is this where the American citizen, Walter Avery, lived?" the woman demanded, and the past tense of the verb told the whole story.

The rest of the facts were quickly told. The Wrath had made a statistic of Stan's father. Overcome, he had fallen while crossing the street and a spellbound taksi driver had run right over him. There was no hope of holding the driver responsible, the woman said at once; the Wrath, you know. Anyway, the driver had long disappeared. And, besides, witnesses said that Stan's father had of course been drunk at the time. Of course.

The male polis took pity on Stan's wretched stare. "At least he didn't suffer," he said gruffly. "Died right

away."

The woman was impatient. "So you've been notified," she said. "You'll have to come to the morgue to collect the body before midnight, otherwise there'll be a charge for holding it an extra day. Good-bye."

And they left.

## II

Since there would be neither mussels nor saffron for his birthday meal, Stan found a few scraps of leftover ham and tossed them into the pot with the vegetables. When he had put them on to simmer he sat down with his head in his hands, to think about what it meant to be an American-well, half-American-orphan, alone in the city of Istanbul.

Two facts presented themselves at once. First, that long-dreamed-of day when his father would sober up, take him back to America and there make a new life for the two of them-that day wasn't going to come. From that fact it followed that, second, there was never going to be the money to pay for his college, much less to indulge his dream of flying to the Gateway asteroid and wondrous adventure. Therefore he wasn't ever going to have the chance to become one of those colorful and heroic Gateway prospectors who flew to strange parts of the Galaxy. He wasn't going to discover a hoard of priceless artifacts left by the vanished old race of Heechee. And so he wasn't going to become both famous and rich.

Neither of these new facts was a total surprise to Stan. His faith in either had been steadily eroding since he reached the age of the first dawn of skepticism at twelve. Still, they had seemed at least theoretically possible. Now, nothing seemed possible at all.

That was when Stan at last allowed himself to begin to cry.

While Stan was drearily cleaning up the kitchen after his flavorless birthday meal, Mr. Ozden knocked on the door.

Mr. Ozden was probably around seventy years old. To Stan he might just as easily have been a hundred-a shriveled, ugly old man, hairless on the top of his head, but with his mustache still black and bristly. He was the richest man Stan had ever met. He owned the ramshackle tenement where Stan lived, and the two others that flanked it, as well as the brothel that took up two floors of one of them. Mr. Ozden was a deeply religious man, so devout in his observances that he did not allow alcohol on his premises anywhere except in the brothel, and there only for the use of non-Islamic tourists. "My deepest sympathies to you on your loss, young Stanley," he boomed in his surprisingly loud voice, automatically scanning everything in sight for traces of a forbidden bottle of whiskey. (But he never found any; Stan's father had been clever about that.) "It is a terrible tragedy, but we may not question the ways of God. What are your plans, may I ask?"

Stan was already serving him tea, as his father always did. "I don't exactly know yet, Mr. Ozden. I guess I'll have to get a job."

"Yes, that is so," Mr. Ozden agreed. He nibbled at a crumb of the macaroon Stan had put on a saucer for him, eyeing the boy. "Perhaps working at the consulate of the Americans, like your father?"

"Perhaps." Stan knew that wasn't going to happen, though. It had already been discussed. The Americans weren't going to hire any translator under the age of twenty-one.

"That would be excellent," Mr. Ozden announced. "Especially if it were to happen quickly. As you know, the rent is due tomorrow, in addition to last week's, which has not been paid, as well as the week's before. Would they pay you well at the consulate, do you think?"

"As God wills," Stan said, as piously as though he meant it. The old man nodded, studying Stan in a way that made the boy uneasy.

"Or," he said, with a smile that revealed his expensive teeth, "I could speak to my cousin for you, if you like."

Stan sat up straight; Mr. Ozden's cousin was also his brothel-keeper. "You mean to work for him? Doing what?"

"Doing what pays well," Mr. Ozden said severely. "You are young, and I believe in good health? You could have the luck to earn a considerable sum, I think."

Something was churning, not pleasantly, in Stan's belly and groin. From time to time he had seen the whores in Mr. Ozden's cousin's employ sunning themselves on the rooftop when business was slow, often with one or two boys among them. The boys were generally even younger than himself, mostly Kurds or hill-country Anatolians, when they weren't from Algeria or Morocco. The boys didn't seem to last long. Stan and his friend Tan had enjoyed calling insults at them from a distance, and none of them had seemed very lucky.

Before Stan could speak Mr. Ozden was going on. "My cousin's clients are not only men, you know. Often women come to him, sometimes wealthy widows, tourists from Europe or the East, who are very grateful to a young man who can give them the pleasures their husbands can no longer supply. There are frequently large tips, of which my cousin allows his people to keep nearly half-in addition to providing his people with Term Medical as long as they are in his employ, as well as quite fine accommodations and meals, at reasonable rates. Quite often the women clients are not unattractive, also. Of course," he added, his voice speeding up and diminishing in volume, "naturally there would be men as well." He stood up, most of his tea and macaroon untouched. "But perhaps the consulate will make you a better offer. You should telephone them at once in any case, to let them know of your father's sad accident. It may even be that he has some uncollected salary still to his account which you can apply to the rent. I will come again in the morning."

When Stan called the consulate Mr. Goodpastor wasn't in, but his elderly secretary was touched by the news. "Oh, Stanley! This terrible Wrath thing! How awful for you! Your father was a, uh, a very nice man." That part was only conditionally true, Stan knew. His father had been a sweet-natured, generous, unreliable drunk, and the only reason the consulate had given him any work at all was that he was an American who would work for the wages of a Turk. And when Stan asked diffidently if there was any chance of uncollected salary she was all tact. "I'm afraid not, Stanley. I handle all the vouchers for Mr. Goodpastor, you know. I'm sure there's nothing there. Actually," she added, sounding embarrassed, "I'm afraid it's more likely to be a little bit the other way. You see, your father had received several salary advances lately, so his account is somewhat overdrawn. But don't worry about that, dear. I'm sure no one will press a claim."

The news was nothing Stan hadn't expected, because he knew how chronically short of money they had always been. All the same, it sharpened his problem. The Americans might not demand money from him, but Mr. Ozden certainly would. And had. And would do his best to collect. The last time someone had been evicted from one of his tenements Mr. Ozden had seized every stick of their possessions to sell for

the rent owed.

Which made Stan look appraisingly around their tiny flat. The major furnishings didn't matter, since they belonged to Mr. Ozden in the first place. Even the bed linens and the kitchenware. His father's skimpy wardrobe would certainly be taken. Stan's decrepit music player and his stacks of ancient American jazz recordings; his collection of space adventures, both anim  and morphed; his schoolbooks; the small amount of food on the shelves-put them all together and they would barely cover the rent. The only other things of measurable value were the musical instruments, his battered trumpet and the drums. Of course Mr. Ozden had no proper claim to the drums, since they weren't Stan's. They'd been brought there and left by his friend Tan, when Tan's parents refused to have any more music-making in their house.

That Stan could do something about. When he phoned it was Tan's mother who answered, and she began weeping as soon as she heard the news. It was a while before Mrs. Kusmeroglu could manage to tell Stan that Oltan wasn't home. He was at work, but she would get the sad message to him at once, and if there was anything they could do...

When he got off the phone with Mrs. Kusmeroglu Stan looked at the clock. He had plenty of time before he had to get to the morgue, so he opened up the couch he slept on-he wasn't quite ready to move into his father's bed-and lay down in case he needed to cry some more.

He didn't, though. He fell asleep instantly, which was even better for him. What woke him, hours later, was Tan Kusmeroglu standing over him. Stan could hear the braying of the muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer from the little mosque around the corner, almost drowned out by Tan's excited voice as he shook Stan awake. "Come on, Stan, wake up! The old fart's at prayer now and I borrowed my boss's van. You'll never have a better time to get your stuff out!"

That meant they had ten minutes at most. Stan didn't argue. It took less than that to load the drums, the trumpet, the precious music discs and player and a handful of other things into the van. They were already driving away before Stan remembered. "I have to go to the morgue," he said.

Tan took his eyes from the tour bus before them and the delivery truck that was trying to cut in from the side long enough to glance at Stan. His expression was peculiar-almost unTanly sympathetic, a little bit flushed in the way he always looked when about to propose some new escapade. "I have been thinking about that," he announced. "You don't want to go there."

"But they want me to identify my father's body, so I have to."

"No, you don't. What's going to happen if you do? They're going to want you to pay for a funeral, and how are you going to do that? No. You stay out of sight."

Stan asked simply, "Where?"

"With us, stupid! You can share my room. Or," he added, grinning, "you can share my sister's if you'd rather, only you would have to marry her first."

### III

Everybody in the Kusmeroglu family worked. Mr. Kusmeroglu was a junior accountant in the factory that made Korean-brand cars for export. Tan delivered household appliances for a hardware store. His sixteen-year-old sister, Naslan, worked in the patisserie of one of the big hotels along the Bosphorus. Even Mrs. Kusmeroglu worked at home, assembling beads into bracelets that spelled out verses from the

Koran for the tourist trade-when she wasn't cleaning or cooking or mending the family's clothes. Even so, Stan knew without being told, they were barely making ends meet, with only the sketchiest of Basic Medical and a constant fear of the future. Finishing school was now as out of the question for Stan as it had been for Tan. So was sponging off the Kusmeroglus for any length of time. He had to find a way to make money.

That wasn't easy. Stan couldn't get a regular job, even if there was one to be got, because under Turkish law he was now an unregistered nonperson. He wasn't the only one of that sort, of course. There were millions like him in poverty-stricken Istanbul. It wasn't likely the authorities would spend much effort in trying to track him down-unless he made the mistake of turning up on some official record.

The good part was that the season was spring, well on the way to becoming summer. That meant that the city's normal population of twenty-five million, largely destitute, was being enriched each week by two or three million, maybe even five million, tourists. These were people who, by definition, had money and nothing better to spend it on than Istanbul's sights, meals, curios, and inhabitants. "You can become a guide," Mr. Kusmeroglu pronounced at dinner. "You speak both Turkish and English without flaw, Stanley. You will do well."

"A guide," Stan repeated, looking as though he thought it a good idea out of courtesy to his host, but very far from convinced.

"Of course a guide," Tan said reprovingly. "Father is right. You have learned all you need to know about Istanbul already-you remember all those dull history classes when we were at school together. Simply subtract the Ottoman period and concentrate on those crazy empresses in the Byzantine, which is what tourists want to hear about anyway. Also we can get guidebooks from the library for you to study."

Stan went right to the heart of the matter. "But I can't get a guide's license! The polis-"

"Will not bother you," Tan's mother said firmly. "You simply linger around Topkapi, perhaps, or the Grand Bazaar. When you see some Americans who are not with a tour group you merely offer information to them in a friendly way. Tell them you are an American student here-that is almost true, isn't it? And if any polis should ask you any questions, speak to them only in English, tell them you are looking for your parents, who have your papers. Fair-haired, with those blue eyes, you will not be doubted."

"He doesn't have any American clothes, though," Naslan put in.

Her mother pursed her lips for a moment, then smiled. "That can be dealt with. You and I will make him some, Naslan. It is time you learned more about sewing anyway."

The endless resources of the Lost & Found at Naslan's hotel provided the raw material, the Kusmeroglu women made it fit. Stan became a model American college student on tour: flared slacks that looked like designer pants, but weren't, spring-soled running shoes, a Dallas Dodgers baseball cap and a T-shirt that said, "Gateway or Bust," on the front, and on the back, "I busted." The crowds of tourists were as milkable as imagined. No, more so. The Americans on whom he concentrated all seemed to have more money than they knew what to do with. Like the elderly couple from Riverdale, New York, so confused by the hyperinflated Turkish currency that they pressed a billion New Lira banknote on Stan as a tip for helping them find clean toilets when a million or two would have been generous. And then, when he pointed out the error, insisted that he keep the billion as a reward for his honesty. So in his first week Stan brought back more than Tan earned at his job and almost as much as Naslan. He tried to give it all to Mrs. Kusmeroglu, but she would take only half. "A little capital is a good thing for a young man to have."

And her daughter added, "After all, someday soon you may want to get married."

Of course, Stan had no such plans, although Naslan certainly was pretty enough in the perky pillbox hat and miniskirt that was her uniform in the patisserie. She smelled good, too. That was by courtesy of the nearly empty leftover bits of perfume and cosmetics the women guests of the hotel discarded in the ladies' room, which it was part of her duties to keep spotless, but it had its effect on Stan. Sometimes, when she sat close to him as the family watched TV together in the evenings, he hoped no one was noticing the embarrassing swelling in his groin. It was natural enough. He was, after all, a male, and seventeen.

But he was also thoroughly taken up by his new status as an earner of significant income. He was diligent in memorizing whole pages from the guidebooks, and he supplemented them by lurking about to listen in on the professional guides as they lectured to their tour groups. The best places for that were in places like the Grand Mosque or Hagia Sofia, where all the little clusters of a dozen or a score tourists were crowded together, with six or eight guides all talking at once, in half a dozen languages. Their gossip was usually more interesting than anything in the books, and a lot more scurrilous.

That was not without risk, though. In the narrow alleyway outside the great kitchens of Topkapi Palace he saw a couple of the licensed guides looking at him in a way he didn't like as they waited for their tour groups to trickle out of the displays. When both of them began talking on their pocket phones, still looking at him, he quickly removed himself from the scene.

Actually, he was less afraid of the guides, or the polis, than he was of Mr. Ozden finding him. What the old man could do if that happened Stan didn't know. In a pinch, he supposed he could actually pay off the overdue rent out of the wads of lira that were accumulating under his side of the mattress he shared with Tan. But who knew what law he had broken by his furtive departure? Mr. Ozden would know all about that, all right, and so Stan stayed far away from his old tenements.

It wasn't all work for Stan. If he got home in time, he helped Mrs. Kusmeroglu with the dinner-she affected to be amazed by his fairly rudimentary cooking skills-and then sometimes they would all watch TV together. Mrs. Kusmeroglu liked the weighty talk shows, pundits discussing the meaning of such bizarre events as that inexplicable Wrath of God that visited them from time to time, or what to do about the Cyprus question. Mr. Kusmeroglu preferred music-not the kind the boys could play, though. Both Tan and Stan voted for programs about space or sports. But then it seldom came to a vote, because what Naslan liked was American sitcoms-on the English-language channels, so she could practice her English-happy groups of wealthy, handsome people enjoying life in Las Vegas or Malibu or the Hamptons, and Naslan talked faster than anyone else. It didn't matter. What they did was to share things as a family. A real family. And that was in some ways the best part of all for Stan, who had only the faintest memories of what living in a family was like.

Although the Kusmeroglus were all unfailingly kind to Stan, their tolerance did not extend to getting out the drums and trumpet in the house. So once or twice Stan and Tan lugged their instruments to the school gym, where the nighttime guard was a cousin and nobody cared how much noise you made when school was out.

It wasn't the same, of course. When they were twelve-year-olds in school they had a plan. With the Kurdish boy on the bass fiddle and the plain little girl from the form below theirs on keyboard, they were going to be a group. The four of them argued for days, and finally picked out a winner of a name: "Stan, Tan and the Gang." The plan was to start small, with birthday parties and maybe weddings. Go on to the clubs as soon as they were old enough. Get a recording contract. Make it big.... But then the Kurdish boy got expelled because his father was found to be contributing money to the underground Kurdistan

movement, and the little girl's mother didn't want her spending so much time with older boys anyway.

It wasn't too much of a blow. By then Stan and Tan had a larger dream to work on. Space. The endless frontier. Where the sky was no limit to a young man's ambitions.

If they could only somehow get their hands on enough money to pay their way, they were determined to go there, to Gateway, or maybe to one of the planetary outposts. Stan liked Mars, where the colonists were making an almost Earthlike habitat under their plastic domes. Tan preferred the idea of roaming the ancient Heechee catacombs on Venus, where, who knew?, there might still be some old artifacts to discover that might make them almost as rich as any Gateway prospector. The insuperable problem was the money to get to any of those places. Still, maybe you didn't need money, because there were other chances. Robinette Broadhead, for instance, was rich beyond avarice with his Gateway earnings, and he was always funding space missions. Like the one that even now was gradually climbing its years-long way toward the Oort cloud, where some fabulous Heechee object was known to exist but no one had found a way to get to other than a slow, human rocket ship. Broadhead had paid the way for volunteers to make that dreary quest; he might pay for others. When Tan and Stan were old enough. If by then everything hadn't already been explored.

Of course, those were childish dreams. Stan no longer hoped they could become real. But he still dreamed them.

Meanwhile there was his work as a guide and his life with the Kusmeroglu family, and those weren't bad, either. In his first month he had accumulated more money than he had ever seen before. He made the mistake of letting Naslan catch him counting it, and she immediately said, "Why, you're loaded, Stanley! Don't you think it's about time you spent some of it?"

He gave her a guarded look. "On what?"

"On some decent clothes, for God's sake! Look, Friday's my day off. Dad won't let me skip morning prayers, but afterward how about if I take you shopping?"

So the first thing that Friday morning Stan and Naslan were on a bus to the big supersouks and Stan was accumulating his first grown-up wardrobe. Everything seemed to cost far more than Stan wanted to pay, but Naslan was good at sniffing out bargains. Of course, she made him try on six different versions of everything before letting him buy any. And then, when they had all the bundles they could carry and half his bankroll was gone, they were waiting for a bus when a car pulled up in front of them. "Hey, you!" a man's voice called.

It was a consulate car, with the logo of the United States of America in gold on its immaculate black door, and the driver was leaning out, gesturing urgently to Stan. "Aren't you Stan Avery, Walter Avery's son? Sure you are. Listen, Mr. Goodpastor's been looking all over hell and gone for you. Where've you been hiding yourself, for God's sake?"

Stan gave Naslan a trapped look. "I, uh, I've been staying with friends."

Behind the stopped car half a dozen others were stuck, and they were all blowing their horns. The driver flipped them an obscene gesture, then barked at Stan, "I can't stay here. Look, Mr. Goodpastor's got something for you. Have you at least got an address?"

While Stan was trying to think of an answer, Naslan cut in smoothly. "But you're not sure of what your address will be, are you, Stan? He's getting ready to move into his own place," she informed the driver.

"Why don't you send whatever it is to where he works? That's the Eklek Linen Supply Company. It's in Zincirlikuyu, Kaya Aldero Sok, Number 34/18. Here, I'll write it down for you." And when the driver at last unplugged the street and was gone, she said sweetly, "Who knows what it might be, Stan? Maybe they want money for something or other, maybe your father's funeral? Anyway, there's a foreman at the linen supply who likes me. He'll see that I get whatever it is, and he won't tell anybody where it went."

But when Naslan brought the envelope home, thick with consular seals, it wasn't a bill. There was a testy note from Mr. Goodpastor:

Dear Stanley:

When we checked the files it turned out your father still held a life-insurance policy, with you as beneficiary. The face amount is indexed, so it amounts to quite a sum. I hope it will help you make a proper life for yourself.

Stan held the note in one hand, the envelope it was attached to in the other, looking perplexedly at Mr. Kusmeroglu. "What does 'indexed' mean?"

"It means the face value of the policy is tied to the cost of living, so the amount goes up with inflation. Open it, Stanley. It might be quite a lot of money."

But when Stan plucked the green US government voucher out of its envelope the numbers were a cruel disappointment. "Well," he said, trying to smile as he displayed it to the family, "what shall we do with it? Buy a pizza all around?"

But Naslan's eyes were sharper than his. She snatched it from his hand. "You stupid boy," she scolded, half-laughing, "don't you see? It isn't lira, it is in American dollars! You're rich now, Stan! You can do what you like. Buy yourself Full Medical. Marry. Start a business. Even go to a whole new life in America!"

"Or," Tan put in, "you can pay your way to the Gateway asteroid, Stan."

Stan blinked at him, then at the voucher. It was true. There was plenty of money there for the fare, indeed much more than enough.

He didn't stop to think it over. His voice trembled as he said, "Actually, we can both go, Tan. Shall we do it?"

#### IV

The first thing that struck Stan about the Gateway asteroid was that, since he weighed next to nothing at all there, the place had no solid up. His body had only one way of dealing with this unprecedented state of affairs; it responded by becoming violently ill. This sudden mal d'espace took Stan completely by surprise because he had never had any experience of being seasick or airsick-well, had never been on either a ship or a plane at all until now. He was thrown by the sudden dizzying vertigo as much as by his quick and copious fountain-ing that followed. The guards at Reception weren't surprised. "New meat," one sighed to another, who quickly produced a paper sack for Stan to finish puking into.

Mercifully, Stan wasn't the only one affected. Both of the other two strange men in his group were hurling as violently as he. The one woman, sallow, frail, and young-and with something very wrong about the way her face was put together, so that the left side seemed shorter than the right-was in obvious



distress, too, but she refused the sick bag. Tan was the only one spared. So he was the one who collected their belongings-drums, trumpet, music, and not much else-and got him and Stan through the formalities of registering. Then he managed to haul Stan, baggage and all, through the labyrinthine corridors and drops of Gateway to their assigned cubicle. Stan found the strength to hitch himself into his sleeping sack, miserably closed his eyes, and was gone.

When he woke Tan was looming over him, one hand on a holdfast, the other carrying a rubbery pouch of coffee. "Don't spill," he cautioned. "It is weak, but it is coffee. Do you think you can keep it down?"

Stan could. In fact, he was suddenly hungry. Nor was the twisting, falling feeling as bad, though there were enough remnant feelings to make him uncomfortable.

Tan seemed immune. "While you slept I have been busy, old Stan," he announced affectionately. "I have found where we eat, and where we can go for pleasure. There do not seem to be any people from Istanbul on Gateway, but I have met another Moslem here. Tar-sheesh. He is a Shiite from Iran, but seems a good enough fellow. He checked and told me that we have funds enough to stay for eighteen days, while we select a mission. Unfortunately there are not very many missions scheduled for some reason, but we'll find something. We have to. If our funds run out before that they will simply deport us again." Then he grinned. "I also spoke with the young woman who came up with us. One could get used to the way her face looks, I think. With luck, soon I will know her quite well."

"Congratulations," Stan said. Experimentally he released himself from the sleep sack, grabbing a holdfast. Weightlessness was not permanently unbearable, he discovered, but there was another problem. "Have you also discovered a place where I can pee?" he asked.

"Of course. I'll show you the way. Then we can start studying the list of available missions, because there's no sense hanging around here when we could be making our fortunes."

Time was, Stan knew, when any brave or desperate volunteer who got to Gateway could have his choice of a score of the cryptic Heechee ships. You got into the one you picked. You set the funny-looking control wheels any which way you liked, because nobody had a clue which ways were "right." You squeezed the go-teat. And then-traveling faster than light, though no one knew how that was done-you were on your way to adventure and fortune. Or to disappointment and frustration, when the chance-set destination held nothing worthwhile. Or, frequently enough, to a horrible death... but that was the risk you had to take when the rewards were so great.

That was then. It was different now. Over the years, nearly two hundred of the ships that had bravely set off had never come back. Another few dozen of those that remained-particularly the larger ships, the Fives and a few Threes-were now set aside for transport duty, ferrying colonists to newly discovered livable worlds like Valhalla or Peggy's Planet, or to exploit the other cache of usable ships that had been found on Gateway Two. When the boys checked the listings they were disappointed. Three or four missions were open, but every one of them was in a One-no use at all to two young men who were determined to ship out together.

They didn't stop at watching the postings on the screen. They went to see the dispatcher himself, a fat and surly Brazilian named Hector Montefiore. To get to Montefiore's office you had to go all the way to Gateway's outermost shell, where the ships nestled in their pods, waiting for a mission. Some of the pods were empty, the outer port closed against the vacuum of space; those were where their ships were actually Out. When they had looked their fill they shook the curtain of Montefiore's office and went in.

The dispatcher was idly watching an entertainment screen, eating something that had not come out of the

Gateway mess hall. He listened to them for a moment, then shook his head. "Fuck off, you guys," he advised. "I can't help you. I don't assign the missions, that's the big domes that do that. When they decide on a flight the computer puts it up on the board and I just take the names of the volunteers. Next big one? How the hell do I know?"

Stan was disposed to argue. Tan pulled him away. In the corridor outside Stan snarled at his friend. "He's bound to know something, isn't he?"

"Maybe so, but he isn't going to tell us, is he? We could try bribing him-"

Stan laughed sourly. "With what?"

"With nothing, right. Exactly, Stan. So let's get out of here."

They retired to the common space in Gateway's central spindle, the place they called the Blue Hell, to consider their options over cups of Gateway's expensive and watery coffee. Coffee was not all you could buy in the Blue Hell. There was fine food, if you could pay the price, and liquor of all sorts, and the gambling that gave the place its name. The boys jealously smelled the great steaks, and watched the magnetized roulette ball spin around, and then Stan took a deep breath.

He poked Tan in the shoulder. "Hey, man! We're on Gateway! Let's at least look around the joint!"

They did, almost forgetting that their money was going and the mission they had come for did not appear. They went to Central Park, where fruit trees and berry bushes grew-but were not to be picked unless you paid their price. They looked at Gateway's great water reservoir, curling up with the shape of the asteroid but reminiscent of the big underground lakes of Istanbul. And they went, reverently, to Gateway's museum.

Everything they saw was halfway familiar to Stan from the Gateway stories he had devoured in his youth, but nothing matched actually being in the museum itself. It was filled with Heechee artifacts, brought back from one mission or another: prayer fans, fire pearls, gadgets of all kinds. There were holos of planets that had been visited; they admired Peggy's Planet, with its broad, cultivated fields and handsome woods; they shivered at Valhalla-habitable, the Gateway authorities had pronounced, but more like Siberia than Paradise.

Most interesting, in a practical way, were the holos of the various models of Heechee ships, Ones, Threes, and Fives. Some of them had fittings that didn't seem to do anything, particularly the few that contained a Heechee-metal dome that no one had dared try to open. Many were armored, particularly the Threes and Fives. Nearly all had human-installed external sensors and cameras, as well as racks of food, tanks of oxygen, rebreathers, all the things that made it possible for a prospector to stay alive while he flew, though if the Heechee had had anything of the sort it was long gone.

While they were puzzling over how the Heechee had survived they heard a cough from behind. When they turned it was the girl with the lopsided face who had come up from Earth with them, Estrella Pancorbo. She seemed a lot less pale, and a lot more lively. Surprised, Stan said, "You're looking, uh, well." Meaning, apart from the fact that your face looks as though someone sat on it.

She gave him a searching look, but bobbed her head to acknowledge the compliment. "Better every day, thank you. I fooled them," she added cryptically, but didn't say who the "them" was. She didn't want to continue the conversation, either; had studying to do, she said, and immediately began running through the ship holos and taking notes.

The boys lingered for a while, but then they left because it was clear she preferred to be alone-but not without having had her effect on Stan, who had not been near a girl of anything like his own age since Naslan.

On the way out Tan mused, "I wonder how the folks are getting along back home."

Stan nodded. He recognized homesickness when he saw it. He even felt a little of it himself, though he hadn't had much experience of having a real home. "We could write them a letter," he offered.

Tan shook himself, and gave Stan a grin. "And pay transmission costs? Not me, Stan. I'm not much for writing letters anyway. Let's get some more coffee."

V

That day passed. So did another day. A couple of Ones appeared on the screen, but nothing better, and even those were snapped up. The boys spent more and more of their time hanging around the Blue Hell, wondering, but not willing to ask each other, what they were going to do when their money ran out.

They did not lack for advice. Old Gateway hands, many of them wearing the wrist-bracelets that showed that they had been Out, were often willing to share their lore. The friendliest was a spry, middle-aged Englishwoman with a drawn face and unshakable views on what missions to take. "Do you know what the Heechee control wheels look like? What you want are settings that show two bands in the red on the first wheel and none in the yellow on the second," she lectured.

"Why?" Tan asked, hanging on every word.

"Because they are safe settings! No mission with those settings has ever been lost. Trust me on this, I know." And when she had finished the coffee she had cadged from them and left, Tan pursed his lips.

"She may have something there," he said.

"She has nothing there," Stan scoffed. "Did you count her bangles? Nine of them! She has been Out nine times and hasn't earned the price of a cup of coffee. No, Tan. We want something that might be less safe, but would be more profitable."

Tan shrugged, conceding the point. "In any case," he said philosophically, "if any of them did know what to do, they would be doing it instead of telling us about it. So let us go eat."

"All right," Stan said, and then shook his head, struck with a thought. "The hell with that. I'm not hungry. Besides, I've got a better idea. We lugged those instruments with us, why not jam a little?"

Tan blinked at him. "Here? They'd throw us out."

"Maybe. Or maybe not, if we practiced a little first-there's not much entertainment here, is there? We could go somewhere where nobody would be bothered for practice. Maybe Central Park?"

Stan was right, there was nobody there. They picked a corner with plenty of holdfasts and set up to play.

Stan had no problem with his trumpet, once he was securely hooked to a wall bracket. Tan's drums

were another matter. He had to lash them to each other and to a pair of holdfasts, and then he complained that the sticks wouldn't bounce properly without solid gravity. All the same they managed "When the Saints Come Marching In," after a fashion, and did better on "A String of Pearls." Stan was riffing on "Saint James Infirmary Blues" when Tan stopped drumming and caught his arm. "Look there!"

Tarsheesh was hurtling toward them around the rim of the lake. As soon as he came close, Tan called, "Are we making too much noise?"

Tarsheesh grabbed a bracket and stopped himself, painting in excitement. "Noise? No! It is the news that just came! You haven't heard? The Herter-Hall party has reached the object in the Oort, and it is big, and it is Heechee, and it is still working!"

There hadn't been that much excitement in Gateway in years—a whole working Heechee orbiter, the size of an ocean liner, of a kind never seen before. The thing manufactured food! CHON-food, they called it, made out of the basic elements that were in the comets of the Oort cloud: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen. And the old Heechee machine was still doing it, after all those hundreds of thousands of years. And if they could bring it to a near-Earth orbit, as the Herter-Hall people were trying to do, and if they could feed it with comets as they entered the lower solar system, why, hunger for the human race was over!

They speculated enviously on what that could be worth to the Herter-Hall family and to Robinette Broadhead himself, as backer of the expedition. "Billions," Stan said profoundly, and Tan gave him a look of scorn.

"Only billions? For a thing like that?"

"Billions of American dollars, you cow. Many billions for all of them, so Robinette Broadhead can add more billions to the billions he already owns. So you see, old Tan, what one lucky find can do?"

Tan did see. So did everybody else. When they checked the listings every one of the few missions offered had been snapped up. "Not even a One left! Nothing at all," Tan complained. "And yet they take money out of our balance every day, even when there is nothing for us to sign up for."

So they did. And kept on doing it, one day, and then another day, and then another. The boys followed the mission listings obsessively, but without much luck. A One showed up, then two more—both of them also Ones, and taken as soon as they appeared. Tan groaned when he saw the notice that the third ship was filled, because the name on the roster was his friend Tarsheesh. "I was hoping the three of us could ship together," he said, angry. "He wouldn't wait!"

Stan couldn't blame him. He even toyed with the thought of taking a One himself, leaving Tan behind. But then no more Ones showed up, so he didn't have to deal with that strain on his conscience.

There was a little traffic in the other direction. Two or three ships straggled back from their missions. All Ones, and mostly duds of one kind or another. And then a lordly Five made it back, and this one had had success. Well, some success. Not the dazzling kind, but not bad. They had reached an airless moon of a gas-giant planet they couldn't identify. It had Heechee artifacts, all right. They could see a domed Heechee-metal structure, and things that looked sort of like tractors nearby, but they could only look. They couldn't touch. Their ship had no equipment to let them maneuver in vacuum. The pictures they did come back with earned them enough of a bonus to retire to, respectively, Cincinnati, Johannesburg, Madrid, Nice, and Mexico City, and their Five was thus open for anyone who cared to take it.

Not right away, of course. The elderly Englishwoman with the nine Out bangles caught Tan and Stan as they were leaving the mess hall, giddy with excitement. "There's your best bet, ducks! They'll clean it up and put in fresh stores, and then they'll send it right back to make the finds-this time with space suits and handling equipment aboard. Oh, it'll take a while. A fortnight or so, I imagine, but wait for it! Good color, too-but we don't want everyone to know, so, remember, softly-softly-catchee-monkey!" and hurried happily off to tell her secret to anyone else with the price of a cup of coffee.

Of course, the secret wasn't worth much more than that, especially to two young men who didn't have a fortnight or so to spare.

Then, without warning, a Five did appear on the list. It didn't do Stan and Tan any good, though. The listing appeared while they were asleep, and by the time they saw it the crew roster was long filled.

What made it worse was that every day, every day of those few remaining days, there were fresh bulletins from the people who were; making it really big, the Herter-Hall party on the Food Factory in the Oort. The Herter-Halls were strapping ion rockets onto the object to nudge it out of orbit and back toward Earth. Then further news: the object wouldn't be nudged. Somehow it counteracted the force applied, they couldn't say how. Then they found indications that there was someone else aboard. Then-oh, miraculous happening!-they met that someone. And he was a human boy! And he seemed to have a Heechee ship of his own that he used to commute between the Food Factory and some even larger, more complex Heechee vessel. A vast one, stuffed with Heechee machines of all kinds, and still working!

Tan was surly with envy, Stan little better. Snapping at each other, they parked themselves in front of the mission screen, taking turns to pee, refusing sleep. "The very next one," Tan vowed. "Three or Five, we will be on it!"

Stan concurred. "Damn right we will! We may not make trillions, like these people, or even billions, but we'll make something out of it, and we won't let anything get us away from this screen-"

But then something did.

Stan stopped in the middle of his vow, suddenly stricken. His eyes burned. His throat was suddenly agonizingly raw. His head pounded, and he could hardly breathe.

It was the Wrath of God again. Not exactly the same as before. Worse. Stan felt his whole body burning with fever. He was sick. Tan was in equal distress. Sobbing, his hands to his temples and curled up like a baby in the womb, he was floating away, the holdfast forgotten. It wasn't just sickness, either. Under the malaise was the familiar desperate sexual yearning, the loneliness, the unfocused, bitter anger....

And it went on, and on...

And then, without warning, it was over.

Stan reached out to catch Tan's flailing arm and dragged him back to a holdfast. "Jesus," he said, and Tan agreed.

"That was a pissar." And then, urgently, "Stan! Look!"

He was staring at the mission monitor. Gateway's computers, unaffected by whatever it was that drove every human momentarily mad, had been carrying out its programmed routine. Something new was

posted on the screen:

Mission 2402

Armored Three, immediate departure

"Let's take it!" Tan yelled.

"Of course," Stan said, already logging in. In a moment their names appeared on the roster:

Mission 2402

Armored Three, immediate departure

Stanley Avery

Oltan Kusmeroglu

Rapturously the two boys pounded each other's arms and backs. "We made it!" Tan shouted.

"And just in time," Stan said, pointing. "Look at that!" Only seconds later another name had appeared:

Mission 2402

Armored Three, immediate departure

Stanley Avery

Oltan Kusmeroglu

Estrella Pancarbo

Roster complete

VI

The dream had come true. Stanley Avery was actually in an actual Heechee ship, actually following in the footsteps of those immortal Gateway heroes who braved the perils of star travel and came back to wealth unimaginable and fame that would go down through the ages....

"Or," Tan growled, when Stan ventured to say as much to him, "to some very unpleasant death. I do not care for this shit-struck little ship. Why is it armored?"

Across the cabin, Estrella Pancorbo looked up from her task of stowing her possessions. "If this trip is to be bearable at all," she said, "it would be better if you spoke only English when I am present."

Tan's lips compressed. "And, in this closet we are to live in, when will you not be?" he demanded, but Stan spoke quickly.

"She is right," he told Tan. And, to the woman, "We'll try to remember. He was only wondering why our ship is so heavily armored."

"Because it accepts some destinations which would damage a ship that wasn't, of course. Don't be afraid. Such destinations are rare; this particular Three has been Out four times, but not to any such dangerous place. Didn't you familiarize yourself with its specifications? All the data for every working ship was on file," she said.

The reproof didn't improve Tan's mood. "I'm not afraid, Estrella," he snapped, wounded, and cast about for something hurtful to say in return. He found it. "Why does your face look like that?" he demanded.

She gave him a long stare. Her left eyelid, Stan noticed, hung lower than the other. "Because a bull stepped on it," she said at last, and added, "I think this is going to be a very long cruise."

How long the trip was going to take was a question always in their minds. Estrella's researches had given them some information. "This Three has never gone more than eighteen days in each direction," she informed them. "We have supplies for more than sixty. Of course," she added, "they can't always read the colors right, but it shouldn't be more than that. We'll know at the halfway point."

They would. Stan knew that much, as everybody did. Gateway prospectors always kept their eye on that funny-looking drive coil every waking minute, because it held the secret of life or death. When it changed color they were at the halfway point; the gentle micro-G that tugged them toward the stern of the craft would change so that then they would drift gently toward the bow. That was the time for doing arithmetic. If they had then used up less than a quarter of their air, water, and stores, that meant they had enough to last them for the remainder of their outbound leg and for the return. If they hadn't, they didn't.

The three of them lived, ate, and slept in the same tiny space, no bigger than Stan's very small bathroom in Mr. Ozden's tenement. Being so intimately close with a girl of more or less his own age was a disturbing experience for Stan, and they were very intimate. They couldn't help it. When Tan was in the toilet Stan averted his eyes from Estrella's, because the sound of his urination was loud and clear. All three of them had to get used to each other's smells, too, of which there were many. There were not many opportunities for exercise in a Three, and so the diet the Gateway authorities provided for them was high in fibers. Stan tried to break wind inconspicuously; Tan didn't, grinning widely every time he farted. Estrella succeeded in paying no attention.

The funny thing was that the more time Stan spent with Estrella's damaged face seldom out of his sight, the less damaged it looked. Tan was affected, too. Once or twice, when Estrella was momentarily more or less out of earshot-in the crapper, or asleep-he muttered something dark and lecherous in Stan's ear. In Turkish, of course. There wasn't any place in the Three that was really out of hearing range except for the lander, tucked in its bay in the bottom of the vessel and not comfortable enough for anyone to stay in it for very long.

Estrella spent most of her time reading from a little pocket screen, but after the third day she allowed herself to be persuaded into a card game with the boys. When Tan had lost his third big pot to her he gave her a suspicious look. "I thought you said you didn't know how to play poker," he growled.

"I didn't. It's a very simple game," she said carelessly, and then realized she had hurt his feelings. She tried to be complimentary. "I meant to tell you that I was surprised at your command of English, Tan. You speak it very well."

He shrugged. "Why should I not? I went to the English-language school from the age of six until I had to leave to go to work, at fourteen." But he was mollified. More cheerfully, he went on. "It is where I met Stan. We became friends quickly, because we were interested in the same things. Even as small boys, in

recess we would run out to the teeter-totter and climb on, bouncing each other up and down and pretending we were on a Gateway ship like this one."

"And no one more surprised than I that we are finally here," Stan added, grinning. "What was your life like, Estrella?"

She picked up the cards and shuffled for a moment without answering. Then she said briefly, "I was a butcher. Whose deal is it now?"

By the seventh day the three of them were having trouble keeping their eyes off the coil. It didn't change. "Well," Estrella said brightly, "I guess this Three is setting a new record for itself. Still, we have a good margin in supplies, and anyway it will probably change tomorrow."

It didn't, though, not on the eighth day and not on the ninth. On the eleventh day Tan sighed, pushed the cards away, and said, "Now we must face the facts. We may go on forever in this flying rathole."

Estrella patted his arm. "You give up too easily, Tan."

He glowered at her. "What do you know? Such things have happened before! Haven't you heard the story of, I forget his name, the old prospector who only got home because he ate his shipmates?"

"Don't quarrel," Stan begged.

But Estrella's temper was up. "Why did I sign on with two Turks-well, a Turk and a half-who are willing to be cannibals? I suppose you have already decided which of us you will eat first, Tan. Me? Because you are both strong, and I am the smallest? Well, let me tell you-

Her voice trailed off. Her damaged face looked startled, then seraphic. Stan felt it, too, as down in the little ship slipped gently to up and the coil brightened.

It was the halfway point at last. So they were not going to die, after all, or at least not in that particular way.

Since they were to live, the atmosphere became more relaxed. Tan gave Estrella a great smile, and to Stan he muttered, in Turkish, "Perhaps we will eat this one after all, but in a more friendly way."

Estrella heard, and even in the rapture of the moment her expression froze. "Tan," she said, "I do not understand Turkish, but I understand fully the way you look when you speak it. You have pricks sticking out of your eyes, Tan. Save them for someone else. I am a virgin. I have remained so when it was more difficult than it is here, and will go on as a virgin until I marry."

"Hell and devils," Tan groaned. "I thought it was only Moslem girls who kept their knees locked so, not free-spirited Americans."

She chose to be friendly. "So you have learned something new about American women. Some of them, at least. Now shall we play cards again, or maybe get some sleep?"

## VII

For most of a day Tan was glumly quiet, but his good nature came back. After all, they were on their way to a great adventure together. Stan could see him revising his attitude toward Estrella. All right, she



was not to be a lover. A sister, then, and Tan had long practice at living with a sister.

The thing at which Tan had had no practice at all was being confined in a tiny space with nothing to do. "I wish we had at least brought our damn instruments," he growled to Stan, who shrugged.

"No room," he said.

Estrella looked up from her plate. "We could play a few hands of poker," she offered. Tan, his lips pressed tightly together, shook his head. "Or," she added, "we could just talk. There is so much I don't know about you guys. Oltan? What was your life like in Istanbul?"

He declined to be cheered up. "I drove a van for a living," he said sourly. "I lived with my mother and father and my kid sister, Naslan, and I had five, actually five, regular girlfriends, who were very fond of me and extremely obliging. What else is there to tell?"

She nodded as though that were a pleasing answer and turned to Stan. "How about you?"

Stan did his best to cooperate. "My father was a code clerk at the American consulate, a very well-paid job, when he met my mother. She was Turkish, but Christian-a Methodist, like him. I was born in the hospital at the embassy in Ankara, which was American soil so I would be born as an American, like you."

That made her smile. "Not much like me."

"You mean the well-paid part? I guess not, but that was only when I was little. My mother died when I was seven, and after that-" He shrugged without finishing the sentence, not willing to tell her about his father's steady decline to drink.

Tan, listening without patience, straightened up and pushed himself away. "I have to pee," he said.

Stan looked after him, then back to Estrella. "And you?" he said, over the plashing sounds from the crapper. "You said you were a butcher?"

She reached up to stroke her left, off-center cheekbone. "Until the accident, yes. In Montana. I'm a mixture, too, Stan. My father was Basque, mostly. My mother was Navajo, with a little Hopi, but a big woman, and strong. There was no work around the Four Corners, so they managed to get up to Montana to work in the corrals. You know the bison ranches in America?"

"Oh, yes. Well, sort of. I read stories when I was little. Before I thought of Gateway I thought it would be great to be a cowboy, sitting around the campfire at night, herding the bison across the prairies."

That time she laughed out loud. "You don't herd bison, Stan. They won't let you. You let them run free, because the prairie grasses are all they need to eat anyway. Then, when they're old enough for slaughter, you lay a trail of something they like to eat even better than the prairie grasses. That takes them right into the corrals, that have a three-meter steel-plate fence all around them, because the bison can jump right over anything smaller. They can run fast, too, a hundred kilometers an hour. And then, one by one, the handlers like my parents let them into the chutes to the slaughterhouse. And then the pistoliers shoot them in the head with a big gun that has a kind of a piston, goes right into the brain and comes out again, ready for the next one. When they're dead the belt carries them to me, to slit their throats. Then I clamp on the irons from the overhead tracks and they're picked up so the blood can drain, and taken to the coolers before they're cut into steaks and roasts. Each bison has nearly fifty liters of blood, which goes into the

tank below-what doesn't go onto me."

Tan had come out of the head, fastening his clothes as he listened. "Yes, Estrella," he said argumentatively, "but you said a bull stepped on you and broke your head. How does a dead bison step on you?"

"It wasn't a dead one," she said shortly.

"But if the pistolier shot it in the head-"

"This time he shot it only in the shoulder. It was very alive when it came to me, and very angry."

"It sounds like a nasty accident," Stan offered.

"No. It wasn't an accident. He did it on purpose. He was a man with pricks in his eyes, too, Tan, and when I would not go to bed with him he taught me a lesson."

Twentieth day. Twenty-first day. They didn't play cards much anymore, because they couldn't concentrate. They didn't even talk much. They had already said everything they could say about their hopes to each other, and none of them wanted to speak their fears out loud. Their nerves were taut with the itch of a gambler with a ticket on a long shot that is coming up fast in the stretch, but maybe not quite fast enough. Finally, Estrella said firmly, "There is no use fidgeting around. We should sleep as much as we can."

Stan knew that was wise. They would need all their strength and alertness to do whatever there was to be done when they were-there. Wherever "there" turned out to be.

The wise advice was hard to follow, though. Hard as it was for Stan to make himself fall asleep, it was even harder for him to make himself stay that way. He woke frequently, counting the time by minutes as the twenty-first day passed and the twenty-second began.

Then none of them could sleep at all. Looking at the time every few seconds. Arguing fiercely about at what hour and what minute turnaround had come, and thus at what minute and hour they would arrive....

And then they did arrive. They knew it when the coil winked out.

And, at once, every instrument on the ship went wild.

The readings were preposterous. They said their Three was immersed in a tenuous plasma, hotter than the Sun, drenched with death-dealing radiation of all kinds, and then Stan understood why their Three was armored.

This was no planet to make them rich with its abandoned trove of Heechee treasures. There wasn't even a star close enough to matter. "Get us the hell out of here!" Tan was bellowing, and Estrella shrielled:

"No, take readings first! Pictures! Make observations!"

But there was nothing to observe beyond what the instruments

had told them already. When Stan closed his hand on the go-teat

Estrella didn't object any more, but only wept.

The flight back was no longer than the flight out, but it didn't seem that way. It seemed interminable. They could not wait for it to be over, and then, when it was, the bad news began.

The ancient Oriental woman who climbed aboard their Three as soon as it docked listened to their story with half an ear. It was the instrument readings that interested her, but she absently answered a few questions. "Yes," she said, nodding, "you entered a supernova remnant. The Heechee were very interested in stars that were about to explode; many courses led to observe one. But in the time since, of course, some of those stars have actually exploded. Like yours. And all that is left is a nebula of superheated gases; it is a good thing for you that your Three was armored."

Estrella was biting her lower lip. "Do you think there will be a science bonus, at least?"

The old woman considered. "Perhaps. You would have to ask Hector Montefiore. Nothing very big, though. There is already a large body of data about such objects."

The three looked at each other in silence. Then Stan managed a grin. "Well, guys," he said, "it's like my father used to say. If you fall off a horse, you want to get right back on again."

The woman peered at them. "Horses?"

"He means," Estrella explained, "we will all ship out on another mission the first chance we get."

"Oh," the old woman said, looking surprised, "you were out when it happened, weren't you? You didn't hear. They've solved the guidance problem. There are no more missions. The Gateway exploration program has been terminated."

## VIII

Terminated! Gateway terminated? No more missions? No more of those scared, valiant Gateway prospectors daring everything to fly out on mystery missions to pick over the tantalizing scraps the long-ago Heechee had left behind when they went away-whenever they went, and wherever it was they went to?

It was all Robinette Broadhead's doing again. While Estrella and the boys were Out, things had gone crazy at the Food Factory and some other fabulous Heechee ship nearby. Broadhead had flown there solo to straighten it out. And had succeeded. And in the process had not only elevated his already sky-high fortune to incalculable heights, with this fabulous new cache of Heechee wonders, but in the process had learned the secret of controlling Heechee spacecraft.

The other thing he had done was to turn Gateway itself into a backwater. There would be no more random flying to God knew where. There would be no more flying to anywhere at all until the big brains who planned Gateway missions decided how to use all this new data. Meanwhile, nothing. Everything was on hold. The scores of would-be explorers had nothing to do but to grit their teeth and practice patience.

In the mess hall Tan nibbled at his meal, glowering. "So what's our plan supposed to be now?" he demanded.

Stan swallowed his mouthful of vegetarian lasagna. "We wait. What else can we do? But this can't last

forever. The ships are still there! Sooner or later they'll start up again, and then maybe we'll have a chance at going on a different kind of mission. Better! Knowing where we're going before we start! Maybe even knowing that we'll live to come back!"

Tan gazed around the mess hall, where a couple of dozen other would-be adventurers were as subdued as themselves. "Maybe," he said.

"At least we're not using up capital," Stan pointed out. The Gateway Corporation had elected to show that it had a heart. No per diems would be charged until further notice, so at least their clocks were not running out.

"The bastards can afford it," Tan grumbled.

Of course the bastards could afford it. The bastards were the Gateway Corporation, and they owned a piece of every discovered piece of Heechee treasure. The Corporation was owned in consortium by the world's governments-on paper-but it was just about as true to say that they owned the world's governments. And, after due deliberation, the Corporation decided it could even afford a little something for Tan, Stan, and Estrella.

They found out about it when, for lack of anything better to do, Tan and Stan were nursing their weak, but more or less drinkable, coffees in the Blue Hell, watching the other prospectors gamble away their no longer needed per diems. Estrella was perched beside them, as always studying something or other from her pocket plate. This time, Stan saw wonderingly, what she was studying was music, and she fingered the air as she read. "Do you play?" he asked, surprised.

She flushed. "A little. The flute," she said.

"Well, why didn't you say so? Maybe the three of us can play together sometime. What do you think, Tan?"

Tan wasn't listening. He nudged Stan. "Here come the big shots," he said as Hector Montefiore sailed in, along with two or three others of the permanent party. They were obviously looking for action, and Stan was not pleased to see that Montefiore was coming in their direction. He did not care for Hector Montefiore. He liked him even less when the man slapped his shoulder and patted Estrella on the rump. "Congratulations," he boomed. "Getting ready to celebrate, are you?"

"Celebrate what?" Tan demanded.

The fat man gave him a look of surprise. "Your science bonus, of course. Didn't you know? Well, check it out, for Christ's sake! Who knows, then you might loosen up and buy me a drink!"

He didn't wait for it, though; went off, chuckling, while the three of them bent over Estrella's plate as she switched to the status reports.

And, yes, their names were there. "Not bad," Tan said, when he saw the amount.

Estrella shook her head. "Divided among the three of us, not all that good, either," she said practically. "Are you willing to settle for a little money?"

"A little money would be enough for me to go home and buy my own van, so I could go into business for myself," Tan said stiffly.

"If that is what you wish. It isn't, for me. I didn't come all this way to spend the rest of my life struggling to stay alive in a one-room condo with Basic Medical and no future. Anyway, Hector says there will surely be more missions soon."

Stan gave her a thoughtful look. "How do you know what Hector says?" he asked, surprising himself by the tone of his own voice. He almost sounded jealous.

Estrella shrugged. "He likes me," she said, as though that explained everything.

"He likes everybody," Tan sneered. "Boys, girls, he doesn't care, as long as it has a hole he can get into."

Estrella gazed at him for a moment in silence. "He has not got into any of mine," she said finally. "Let's talk sensibly. What do you want to do? Take your share and go home? Or wait for something worthwhile?"

They waited. While they waited they watched the unfolding story of what Robinette Broadhead had discovered on the news.

And what had he not! Strange, semihuman creatures that at first everyone thought, heart-stoppingly, might actually be Heechee, but were not. (Were, it seemed, relatives of primitive humanity, captured by the Heechee on Earth millennia ago and transported to one of their space outposts for study.) There were a clutch of surviving-well, sort of surviving-lost Gateway prospectors, taken to this place by the luck of the draw and unable to leave. Now they were more or less dead, but also more or less still alive, preserved in some bizarre sort of Heechee machinery. There was the half-wild living human boy named Wan, descendant of other Gateway castaways and now, somehow, through some Heechee wizardry that broadcast his yearnings and hates to the entire solar system, the source of the Wrath of God. And-the final secret Broadhead had learned-now he even knew where the Heechee had fled to! They had holed up in the Galaxy's Core, and they were still there, all of them!

It was one wonder after another. Everyone was talking about it-well, everyone but Estrella, it seemed to Stan. For whatever reason, she was spending more and more time with the permanent party and less with her old shipmates. Stan didn't approve. "She shouldn't do that," he told Tan seriously. "They mean her no good."

Tan laughed coarsely. "Depends on what you think 'good' is. Montefiore has his own ideas about that. But don't worry about Estrella," he advised. "That one'll take good care of her maidenhead."

Stan did worry, though. He told himself that what Estrella did was none of his business, but he thought about her a lot as the days passed.

The nine-bangle Englishwoman came back, having earned not only a tenth bangle but, at last, a stake. She had roamed a tunnel on a world not much kinder than Mercury, wearing a spacesuit that kept her in air but didn't keep out the blazing heat that radiated from the tunnel walls. Pushed to the limit she had scoured the empty corridors until she found-something; no one was sure what. Possibly it was a game, something like a 3-D version of Go; at any rate her bonus was enough to pay her way back to a decent retirement in the little village in Sussex she had come from. She even bought coffees for the boys before she left, listening to them tell her about all the amazing things that had happened while she was gone. "Heigh-ho," she said, grinning the grin of someone who no longer had to worry about such things, "sounds like fun and games, doesn't it? Well, good luck to you! Don't give up. You never know, you might hit a good one yet."

Tan looked sourly after her as she made the payback rounds, buying drinks for everyone who had bought them for her. "I doubt it," he said, half under his breath.

"You've been doubting it ever since we got here," Stan said in irritation, though the fact was that he was beginning to doubt it, too. It might have turned into a really serious argument, but that was when Estrella appeared in the entrance, looking around for them.

Estrella didn't hesitate. As soon as she saw the two of them she launched herself in their direction with a great, accurate kick against the doorframe. Tan caught her as she came in range, but she grabbed a holdfast and freed herself. Her twisted face looked grim, but the news she brought was great. She looked around, then whispered: "There's a mission coming up. A big one."

Stan's heart leaped, but Tan was unresponsive. "One of these guaranteed new ones, where the Corporation will keep most of the profits?"

"Yes," she said, "and no. They know the destination, but that's all they know. They don't know how long it will take, so it will be in an armored Five, one of the ones with the special fittings no one understands-but Broadhead says they're essential for this trip. They will load it with supplies and material, enough for a very long flight, so it will be able to carry only two people. I'll be one. There's room for another."

She was looking from one to the other of them, but mostly at Stan. But Tan spoke up. "Not me," he declared. "I don't want any more mystery bus rides."

Stan ignored him. "You said they knew the destination?"

Estrella took a deep breath. "It will go to where the Heechee have gone. Where they have been hiding all this time, in the Core of the Galaxy."

Stan swallowed convulsively. You came to Gateway hoping for a big score-but this big? Not nibbling at bits and pieces the Heechee had left behind, but going straight to those vanished supercreatures themselves?

And what sort of reward might there be for that?

He didn't think. He heard himself saying, "I'll go!" almost before he realized he had made the decision. Then he turned to Tan. "Look. There's only room for two, so you take my share of our bonus, too.

Go home and have a good life. Buy Naslan the prettiest wedding dress she can find." And then he added, "But tell her not to wait for me."

## IX

A Heechee Five was supposed to be much bigger than a Three. Not this one, though. One whole corner of its space was taken up with the peculiar, unexplained device that-Broadhead had said-was necessary for them to enter the Core. Another couple of cubic meters were filled with the goods they were told to deliver to the Heechee-records of Gateway explorations and Heechee finds, background material on the human race, all sorts of odds and ends along with a recorded Message to the Heechee that was meant to explain just who human beings were. Add in their year's worth of supplies for themselves, and there wasn't much room for Stan and Estrella to get around in.

As far as Estrella was concerned, not much room was needed. She didn't move around much. She didn't talk much to Stan, either. She went directly to her sleep sack as soon as they took off and stayed there, coming out only to eat or excrete, and uninterested in conversation in either case. When Stan asked her if something was wrong, she said only, "Yes." When he asked her if there was anything he could do, she shook her head and said, "I have to work through this myself." When he asked her what "this" was, all she would say was, "I have to find a way to like myself again." Then she went back to her sleep shelf again, and stayed there. For three whole days, while Stan wondered and stewed.

Then, on the fourth day, Stan woke up and found Estrella studying him. She was perched on the uncomfortable forked Heechee pilots' seat, and she seemed to have been there for a long time. Experimentally, he said, "Hello?" with a question mark at the end.

She gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment longer, then sighed. "Excuse me," she said, and disappeared into the head again.

She was in there for quite a while. When she came out it appeared that she had spent the time fixing herself up. She had washed her hair and brushed it still damp, and she was wearing fresh shorts and top. She gave him another of those long, unexplained looks.

Then she said, "Stan. I have something to say to you. We will be together for a long time, I think, and it would be better if there were no tensions between us. Do you want to make love to me?"

Startled, Stan said the first thing that came into his head. Which was, "I've never made love to a virgin before."

She laughed, not joyously. "That is not a problem, Stan. I'm not a virgin anymore. How do you think I got us on this mission?"

Stan's only previous coupling, when he had painfully saved up enough to afford one of Mr. Ozden's cousin's less expensive girls, had not taught him much about the arts of love. Estrella didn't know much more than he did, but inexperience wasn't their only problem. A Heechee Five wasn't designed for fucking. They tended to float away from the hold-ons the first time he tried to enter her.

But experimenting was enjoyable enough on its own, and they finally found what worked best was for him to come to her from behind, with Estrella curling her ankles over his while he gripped her waist with both hands. Then it was quick enough.

Then, still naked, they hung together, arms wrapped around each other, without speaking. Stan found it very comfortable. His cheek was pressed against her ear, his nose in her still-damp and sweet-smelling hair. After a bit, without moving away, she asked, "Are we going to be friends, Stan?"

"Oh, yes," he said. And they were.

Now that they were friends, especially friends who fucked, their Five didn't seem so crowded anymore. They touched often, and in all kinds of ways-affectionate pats, casual rubs in passing, quick kisses, sweet strokings that, often, turned into more fucking. Estrella seemed to like it well enough, Stan very much.

They talked, too. About what the Core might be like. About the Heechee who might (or might not) still be there. About what it would be like when they came back and collected the unquestionably huge bonus due the first humans to visit the Heechee-"It'll be billions!" Stan gloated. "Enough to have a waterfront

estate like Robinette Broadhead's, with servants, and a good life-and we'll have plenty of time to enjoy, too, because we'll have Full Medical."

"Full Medical," Estrella whispered, sharing his dream.

"Absolutely! We won't be old at forty and dead at fifty-five. We'll live a long, long time, and"-he swallowed, aware that he was getting into a commitment-"and we'll live it together, Estrella." Which naturally led to more tender kissing, and to not-so-tender sex.

They had much to talk about, including the chapters in their earlier lives that had been omitted in their previous telegraphic summaries. When Stan talked about his mother's death and what it had done to his father, Estrella took his hand in hers and kissed it. When he told her about life in Istanbul she was interested, and more so when he talked about the city itself-about its centuries as the mighty Christian city of Constantinople, about the Christian Crusaders who looted it, about Justinian and Theodora and the well-the Byzantine court of Byzantium. All that fascinated her. She knew nothing of the Byzantine Empire, little enough of Rome itself, its Caesars, its conquests, its centuries of world rule. To her it was all exciting myths and legends, all the better because they were true. Or as true, anyway, as Stan's memory allowed.

While Stan, of course, knew even less of the America of the Native Americans, before their subjugation by the white man and since. It was not the American history of school or his father's stories. Her own people, Estrella told him-the ones on her mother's side-had a history of their own. Sometimes they had even built great cities like Machu Picchu and the immense Mayan structures in the south, and the mysterious works of the Anasazi. But that, she said, sounding both wistful and proud, was only until the Europeans arrived and took their lands away, and often enough their lives as well, and pushed them into harsher lives in reservations, and endless, retreating battles, and finally defeat. "There isn't much left, Stan," she said. "The only good thing-well, it isn't really good, is it?-is that now most of the Yankees are as poor as we."

Which reminded Stan of an unsolved puzzle. "But you weren't all that poor, were you? I mean, personally. Like when you had your, uh, accident. If that had happened to Tan, or almost anybody else I knew, there wouldn't have been any big payoff to finance your going to Gateway. Did you have Full Medical or something?"

She laughed, surprised. "We had no medical. What I had was my brother." Who, she said, let it be known that he was going to kill the pistolier. Whose sister's husband was a clerk in the slaughterhouse's accounts department. Who had juggled the books to pay them off, just to save his brother-in-law's worthless life. "It was supposed to be a death benefit, but I double-crossed them. I lived. Then, when I was well enough to travel, I took the rest of the money and used it for Gateway."

She looked so sad when she was telling about it that Stan couldn't help kissing her, which before long led to more of that pleasurable lovemaking. And why not? After all, they were really on a sort of honeymoon cruise, weren't they?

The days passed, ten, twelve, twenty. They slept holding each other tight, and never seemed to tire of it. It was a little cramped, to be sure. But the one-size-fits-all sleep sacks were constructed to be long enough for a string-bean Maasai or a corpulent Bengali, and skinny Stan and slim Estrella could fit inside well enough for lovers. Sometimes they played music together, weird combinations of Stan's trumpet and the flute Estrella produced from her bags. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes they played cards or read or just sat companionably together in silence. And sometimes Stan pulled out the recorded Message to the Heechee-the reason they were on this trip in the first place-and they played it and wondered what the



Heechee (if any) would make of it.

The Message had been cobbled together in a hurry by God knew who-some of the big brains in Gateway Corp, no doubt, and no doubt with Robinette Broadhead leaning over their shoulder. It didn't have any narration. No point of that, since the Heechee were not likely to understand any human language. Its only sound was music, first Tchaikovsky's somber Pathetique in its entirety, then, to show that humans had more than one musical mood, Prokofiev's jokey, perky Classical Symphony.

But mostly the Message was pictures. The empty Heechee tunnels on Venus. The nearly equally empty corridors on Gateway, when human beings first got there. A crew of prospectors warily climbing into an early Five. Another crew, travel-stained, coming out of a Three bearing prayer fans and other Heechee gadgets. A picture of the pin-wheel of the Galaxy, seen from above, with an arrow showing Earth's position in the Orion Arm. A slowly spinning globe of the Earth itself. Quick flashes of human cities-New York, Tokyo, London, Rome. Shots of people doing things: painting landscapes, running a tractor, peering through a telescope, masked around a hospital birthing bed where a new baby was coming into the world. Then things that neither Estrella nor Stan had ever seen before. There was a series of pictures of an enormous floating object, then of a huge spindle-shaped chamber, blue Heechee-metal walls and a strange, huge machine squatting on tractor treads in the middle of it. "The Food Factory and that other thing," Estrella guessed. Then internal passageways and a couple of-they both caught their breaths-queer, hairy creatures that looked almost human, and had to be the primitives Broad-head had discovered there. And, at the last, the shot of the Galaxy again, with a tiny image of a Heechee Five that was probably meant to be their own craft, slowly moving from the Orion Arm to the Core.

When it was over-for the fourth or fifth time-Stan was thoughtfully rubbing the place where his wispy mustache had been until Estrella teased him into shaving it off. They had been watching with their arms around each other. He yawned, which made her yawn, too, because they had both been getting sleepy. She moved slightly for a better fit, but not away, as she saw that he was staring at their stacked piles of supplies.

"What is it, Stan?" she asked.

He said pensively, "It looks like a long flight. I don't know if anybody's gone this far before."

She tried to reassure him. "Sometimes short flights take a long time, and the other way around, too. With Heechee ships you never can tell."

"I guess," he said, turning his head to kiss her ear in the way she liked. She wriggled companiably and put up her lips, and that was better than reassurance.

For Stan was happy with Estrella. He thought about it drowsily. He had never been happier in his life than he was this minute. So why worry about how long the trip would take when he didn't want it to end at all, would have been content if it had lasted a very long time indeed....

But it didn't.

It ended that day, almost at that very moment, when kissing had turned to caressing but before they began to take each other's clothes off, and it ended in a startling way.

The great drive coil gave them no warning. It was that other thing, the squat, domed gadget whose purpose had never been explained to them in any terms that made sense. It began to mutter and glow, then growl, then begin to scream on a rising pitch until they could hear it no more, as the glow brightened.

Then at last the drive coil got into the act, beginning to glow and brightening to an eye-hurting incandescent white, with revolving barber-pole stripes of hot red and chrome yellow. It began to shudder. Or the ship did. Stan couldn't tell which because he was shaking, too, in a way that was frighteningly unlike anything he had felt before. He wasn't sleepy anymore as they clung to each other....

Then, without warning, everything stopped.

Estrella pulled herself free and turned on the outside eyes. Behind them was a scary spread of mottled pale blue. Before them, a sky of unbelievable stars, so many of them, so bright, and, very near, a large metallic dodecahedron, twelve symmetrical sides, each with a little dimple in its center. Their ship plunged with breakneck speed into one of the dimples and nestled there. Before Stan or Estrella could move, the port was opened from outside.

Something that looked like a furry, animated skeleton was glaring in at them. "I think it must be a Heechee," Estrella whispered numbly.

And, of course, it was. And that was the beginning of the longest, the unbelievably longest, day in Stan's life.

X

Nothing in Stan's seventeen years of life had taught him how to greet an alien creature from another planet. He fell back on the fictions of his childhood. He raised his hands above his head, and declaimed, "We come in peace."

In those old fictions that had seemed to work. In the real world it didn't. The Heechee fell back in obvious panic. A low, hooting moan came from its queerly shaped mouth, and it turned and ran away. "Shit," Stan said dismally, staring after it. Estrella clutched his arm.

"We frightened the thing," she said.

"I bet we did. It frightened the hell out of me!"

"Yes, but we have to show him we're friendly. Maybe we should start playing the Message for them?"

That sounded like a good idea. At least Stan didn't have a better one, but while they were trying to start the playback the Heechee came running back. This time he had all his friends with him. There were half a dozen of the creatures, dressed in smocks with curious pod-shaped objects hanging between their legs-king-size jockstraps? Heavy-duty? Stan couldn't guess. The creatures were jabbering agitatedly among themselves as they hurried in, and they wasted no time. One of them slapped Estrella's hand away from the playback machine while a couple of the others grabbed Stan. They were surprisingly strong. They were armed. More or less armed, at least; several of them were carrying an assortment of knives-bright blue metal or gold, some curved like a scalpel, all of them looking dangerous. Especially when one of the Heechee held a knife with its extremely sharp point almost touching Stan's right eyeball and tugged him toward the exit. "Don't fight them!" Estrella cried, herself captive in the same way.

He didn't. He let himself be dragged unresisting into a larger chamber-red-veined blue-metal walls, unidentifiable machines and furnishings scattered around. As they crossed the threshold Stan stumbled, taken unaware by the sudden return of weight; they were in gravity again, not as strong as Earth's, maybe, but enough to make him totter against his captor. He jerked his head back from the blade just in time to avoid losing an eye. The Heechee with the knife screeched a warning, but Stan wasn't trying to

give him any trouble. Not even when he and Estrella were dragged against a wall and chained, spread-eagled, to what might have been coatracks. Or statuary. Or anything at all, but were solid enough to hold them.

Things were coming to a boil. More Heechee were arriving on the run, all of them chattering agitatedly at the top of their voices. As one batch of them disappeared into the Five, others began to use those knives to cut away the captives' clothing. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Stan squawked, but the Heechee didn't try to understand. They didn't stop doing what they were doing, either. As each scrap of garment was cut away, right down to their underwear, it was searched and sniffed and carried away somewhere for study.

Halfway through the process Estrella yelped in sudden shock as one of those knives nicked her thigh. The Heechee wielding it jumped back, startled. "Be careful with her!" Stan shouted, but they didn't even look at him. The one with the knife screeched an order; another produced a little metal cup and caught a drop of the blood that was oozing from the cut. "Are you all right?" Stan called, suddenly more angry and solicitous than afraid.

"It's only a scratch," she said, then added uncomfortably, "But I have to pee."

There didn't seem to be any way to communicate that urgency to their captors. Assuming the Heechee would have cared if there had; but they didn't seem interested in any needs or desires of their prisoners. More and more of the Heechee were crowding into the room, yammering to each other without stop. When one appeared who wore a fancier tunic than the rest, gold-streaked and silky, there was a momentary hush, then they all began talking to him at once. The new one had a sort of frazzled look, the way a man might appear if he had just been wakened from sleep with very unwelcome news. The newcomer listened for just a moment before waving for silence. He snapped what sounded like a command, then raised one skeletal hand to his narrow lips and began to speak into what looked like a large finger ring.

Heechee were beginning to come out of the Five carrying things-spare clothes, packets of food, and, very gingerly, Stan's trumpet. There was a babble over that as they presented it to the one with the ring microphone. He considered for a moment, then issued more orders. Another Heechee bustled forward with what looked like a stethoscope and touched it to the trumpet, here, there, all over, listening worriedly and reporting to the leader.

A moment later there was a sudden squawking from inside the Five, and Stan heard the familiar blare of the opening bars of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. "Listen, Stan, they've turned on the Message!" Estrella cried gladly. "Maybe it'll be all right now!"

But it wasn't all right. It didn't get any better at all. If the Heechee made any sense of the Message, which did not seem likely, it did not appear to reassure them.

How long the two of them hung there, poked and palped and examined, Stan could not know. It seemed to be a very long time. He worried about himself, but worried more about Estrella. Now and then he called empty reassurances to her. She spoke bravely back. "It'll work out, Stan," she said, and then, in a different tone, "Oh, damn it."

Stan saw the problem. Though she had been squeezing her knees together as hard as she could, her bladder would not be denied. Urine was running down her legs. Among the Heechee that produced a new flurry of excitement, as one of them ran for another cup to catch a few drops for study.

What Stan felt was shame-for his lover's embarrassment-and a sudden hot flash of rage at these coarse and uncaring Heechee who had caused it; and that was the end of the first hour of Stan's long, long day.

Then, for no reason that Stan could see, things did improve, and they improved very fast.

The Heechee in the gold-embroidered robe had gone off to do whatever Heechee bosses had to do. Now he returned, puffing importantly as he issued orders in all directions. When he marched up close to Estrella Stan strained against his chains, expecting some new deviltry. That didn't happen. The Heechee reached up with one wide, splay-fingered hand and patted her cheek.

Was that meant as reassurance of some kind? It evidently was, Stan saw, because other Heechee were hurrying toward them to remove their chains, the boss Heechee chattering at them all the while. Stan didn't listen. Staggering slightly-the chains had cut off circulation, and he weighed less than he expected here-he reached out for Estrella. Naked as they were, they hugged each other while the Heechee stared at them in benign fascination.

"Now what?" Stan asked the air. He didn't expect an answer. And got none, unless there was an answer in what happened next. A couple of Heechee hustled toward them, one bearing a few scraps of their ruined clothes, as though to apologize or explain, the other with a couple of Heechee smocks as replacements, gesturing that they might put them on.

The garments didn't fit them all that well. Human beings were a lot thicker front to back than the squashed frames of the Heechee. All the same, having their nakedness covered before these weird beings made Stan feel better.

What it didn't do for Stan was make him understand just what was going on. That wasn't because the Heechee weren't doing their best to explain. They were chirping, gesturing, trying to make something understood, but without a language in common they weren't getting very far.

"At least we're not trussed up like a Christmas pig anymore," Estrella offered hopefully, holding Stan's hand. They weren't. They were allowed to roam freely around the chamber, the busy Heechee dodging around them on their errands.

"I wonder if they'll let us go back in the ship," Stan said, peering inside. A couple of Heechee were playing the Message again, holding what might have been a camera to record what it showed. Another patted Stan's shoulder encouragingly as he stood at the entrance.

He took it for permission. "Let's try it," he said, leading the way. No one interfered, but Estrella gasped when she saw what had been done to their Five. Most of the movables had been taken away, and two Heechee were puzzling over the fixtures in the head.

Estrella asserted herself. "Get out!" she ordered, flapping her arms to show what she meant. The Heechee jabbered at each other for a moment, then complied.

That made a difference. The toilet had been partly disassembled, but it still worked. A little cleaner, a lot more comfortable, Stan and Estrella took care of their next needs: they were hungry. It was impossible to use the food-preparation equipment, because that was already in fragments, but among the odds and ends that had been hauled out of the Five they found a packet of biscuits that could be eaten as they were, and water. Every move they made was watched by the Heechee with interest and approval.

Then the boss Heechee came back, trundling a gadget that looked like a portable video screen. One of

the Heechee touched something, and a picture appeared.

They were looking at a Heechee male who was talking to them excitedly-and, of course, incomprehensibly to the humans. Behind him was the interior of a Heechee ship, but not any ship Stan had ever seen before. It was much larger than even a Five, and the only familiar item in it was one of those dome-shaped machineries that had got them into the Core.

Then the Heechee in the scene gestured. The scene widened, and they saw something else that was familiar.

"Mother of God," Estrella whispered. "Isn't that Robinette Broad-head?"

It was Broadhead. He was grinning widely, and he was touching the Heechee in the screen, offering a handshake, which the Heechee clumsily accepted.

Beside Stan, the boss Heechee was patting his shoulder enthusiastically with his splayed hand. It seemed to be a gesture of apology, and hesitantly Stan returned it. The Heechee's shoulder was warm but bony, and he seemed to be smiling.

"Well," Estrella said wonderingly. "It looks like we're all friends together now." And that was the end of the second hour in this longest of days.

It was good to be friends, better to have had a chance to eat and drink and relieve themselves, best of all to be free. What Stan really wanted was some sleep, but there didn't seem much chance of that. The Heechee kept trying to tell them things by sign language; they kept not understanding. When the boss Heechee approached, bearing Stan's horn inquiringly, he got that message right away. "It's a trumpet," he informed them. He repeated the name a couple of times, touching the instrument, then gave up. "Here, let me show you." And he blew a scale, and then a couple of bars of the Cab Calloway version of the "St. Louis Blues." All the Heechee jumped back, then made gestures urging him to play more.

That was as far as Stan was prepared to go. He shook his head. "We're tired," he said, demonstrating by closing his eyes and resting his check on his folded hands. "Sleep. We need rest"

Estrella took a hand. Beckoning to the nearest Heechee, she led him to the entrance to the Five, pointing to their sleep shelves, now bare. After more jabbering, the Heechee seemed to get the idea. A couple of them raced away, and the boss Heechee beckoned to them to follow. They left the big chamber that had been all they had seen of the worlds of the Heechee and followed the leader down a short corridor. Its walls, Stan saw, seemed to be Heechee-metal still, but a veined rose pink instead of the familiar blue. They paused at a chamber. A waiting Heechee showed them the ruins of their own sleep sacks, then pointed hopefully inside. There were two heaps of something side by side on the floor. Beds? Evidently so. The Heechee closed the door on them, and Estrella immediately stretched out on one. When Stan followed her example it was more like burrowing into a pile of dried leaves than any bed he had ever had. But it wasn't uncomfortable, and best of all it was flat and horizontal, and no one was jabbering at him.

Thankfully he stretched out and closed his eyes....

But only for a moment.

Almost at once he was awakened as the door opened again. It was the boss Heechee, jabbering in excitement but beckoning insistently.

"Oh, hell," Stan muttered. Things happened pretty fast in this place; but the two of them got up and followed. Farther, this time, along the rose pink corridor and then a gold-colored one. They stopped in a chamber like the one they had first entered, where half a dozen Heechee were jabbering and pointing at the lock.

"I think they're trying to tell us that another ship's coming in," Estrella said.

"Fine," Stan grumbled. "They could've let us sleep a little bit, though."

They didn't have long to wait. There was a faint sound of metal against metal from outside the door. One of the Heechee, watching a display of color from something beside the door, waited just a moment, then opened it. A pair of Heechee came in, talking excitedly to the equally excited ones meeting them, and then a pair of human beings.

Human beings! They were talking, too, but the people they were talking to were the Heechee. In their own Heechee language. And then one of the human arrivals caught sight of Stan and Estrella. His eyes went wide. "Jesus," he said unbelievably. "Who the hell are you?"

Who the hell the man himself was was somebody named Lon Alvarez, one of Robinette Broadhead's personal assistants, and as soon as Stan told him their names he snapped his fingers. "The kids who took off from Gateway right after the discovery, sure. I guess everybody thought you were dead."

"Well, we're not," Estrella said, "just dead tired."

But Stan had a sudden sense of guilt. Everybody thought they were dead? And so they'd be telling Tan so, and Naslan. "Is there some way you can communicate with Gateway? Because if there is, I'd better get a message off to them right away."

Puzzlingly, Lon Alvarez gave Stan a doubtful look. "A message to who?"

"To the Gateway authorities, of course," Stan snapped. "They'll be waiting to hear from us."

Alvarez glanced at the Heechee, then back at Stan. "I don't think they're exactly waiting, Mr. Avery. You know you're in a black hole, don't you?"

"A black hole!" Stan blinked at the man, and heard Estrella gasp beside him.

"That's right. That's what the Core is, you know. A big black hole, where the Heechee went to hide long ago, and inside a black hole there's time dilation." He looked at Stan to see if he was following this, but Stan's muddled stare wasn't reassuring. Alvarez sighed. "That means things go slower in a black hole. In this one, the dilation comes to about forty thousand to one, you see, so a lot of time has passed outside while you were here. How much? Well, when we left it would have been about, let's see, about eleven years."

## XI

When Stan and Estrella could take no more they staggered back to those queer Heechee beds. They didn't talk; there was too frighteningly much that needed to be talked about, and no good place for them to begin.

Estrella dropped off at once, but not Stan. His head was too full of arithmetic, and all the sums were scary. The man had said forty thousand to one! Why, that meant that every minute that passed here in the Heechee's Core was more than a month in the outside world! An hour was five years! A day would be over a century, a week would be-

But then fatigue would no longer be denied. He fell into an uneasy sleep, but it didn't last. There was too much haunting his dreams. But when he woke enough to reach out for Estrella her bunk was empty, and she was gone.

Stan staggered to his feet and went in search of her. It was urgent that he find her. Even more urgently, he wanted the two of them to get right back in their Five, if it would still work after everything the Heechee had done to it, and head for home... before everyone they knew was dead and gone.

Estrella wasn't in the hallway, though there were voices coming from somewhere, lots of them. She wasn't in the room they had entered in, either, though there were plenty of Heechee there looking very busy, about what Stan could not say. One of the Heechee took pity on him. He led Stan, chattering cheerfully, with plenty of those reassuring shoulder-pats, to still another entrance chamber. It was the biggest yet, and the most crowded, with a constant stream of Heechee going in and out of the port to a docked ship. The guide led Stan to the door and gently nudged him inside.

The ship was the biggest he'd ever seen, and it was full of people, both human and Heechee. When one of the humans looked up he saw that it was Estrella, and she was talking-yes, apparently talking-to a Heechee. She beckoned Stan over, holding up a flask of something brown. "It's coffee, Stan," she said with pleasure. "They've got a great kitchen on the immigrant ship. Want some?"

"Sure," he said absently, staring at the Heechee. Incongruously, the creature was wearing a Texas sombrero, a sweatshirt that bore the legend Welcome to Houston, and what looked like cowboy boots. He stuck out an affable hand to Stan.

"Great seeing you again, Mr. Avery," he said-in English! "What, you don't remember me? I'm Doorwatcher. I was in charge of the entry lock when you and Ms. Pancorbo arrived." And added proudly, "I went with the first party of ours to go Outside, as soon as we saw what was happening."

"Nice to see you again," Stan said faintly. "You, ah, speak English very well."

Doorwatcher made a deprecating gesture with those skeletal hands. "I spent four years on your planet, so I had plenty of time to learn. Then when this ship of immigrants was leaving I came home." Someone was chattering urgently to him in the Heechee language. He replied briefly, then sighed. "I'd better get back to work. All these new people! My second-in-command is really swamped. And I'm anxious to see my family, too. It's been a long time for me... though they don't even know I was gone!"

## XII

When Stan tried to remember that very long day, that forty-thousand-days-in-a-day day, its events and discoveries flew wildly around in his mind like angry bees when the hive is attacked. The surprises were too many and too great. The new ship was a human-built ship, though using Heechee drive technology. The humans on it were immigrants, come to the Core to visit the Heechee for a few days or weeks (or centuries!), and that same ship was going to go right back for more. The Door-the floating dock they had come to-was swarming with other humans from previous ships, waiting for transportation to take them to one of the Heechee planets to go on display. Some of them were dignitaries from Gateway Corp or one of the nations of Earth, there to open embassies from the human race to the Heechee. Some were simply

people who hadn't liked the lives they had on Earth, and jumped at the chance for new ones in the Core. "Like us, Stan," Estrella told him as he blearily tried to take it all in. "Like everybody who came to Gateway, and they're going to get what they want here. The Heechee are wild to meet us, Stan. Every human being who gets here is going to live like a king." And then she added worriedly, "Drink your coffee, hon. I think they put something in it to wake us up. You'll need it."

They had. It did. When Stan had swallowed his second flask of the stuff fatigue was banished, and his mind was racing. "What do you mean, live like a king?" he demanded.

"What I said, Stan," she said patiently-or not all that patiently; she was on overdrive, too, her eyes sparkling in a way Stan had never seen before. "They're welcoming us, Stan. They want to hear everything about the human race. They're fascinated by the idea that we have different countries and cultures and all. When I told Doorwatcher about herding bison he begged me to come to his own planet and talk about it-seems he'd missed that when he was on Earth. He says they'll give us our own home, and a wonderful home, too, and... and I don't think they know anything about Istanbul, either, or human history, and they'll want to hear it all from you-"

But Stan was shaking his head. "We won't have time," he announced.

Estrella stopped short, peering at him from under her dragging eyelid. "Why won't we?" she asked, suddenly shot down from her enthusiasm.

"Because we've got to be on that ship when it goes back, Estrella. We have to get there while we're still news, the first people to come back from the Core. Can you imagine what that will be worth? Not just the bonus-I bet that'll be huge-but we'll be famous! And rich, Full Medical and all!" He ran out of steam then, peering at Estrella's face, trying to read her expression. "Don't you see what we're missing, Estrella?"

She said contemplatively, "Full Medical. Long, rich lives."

He nodded with vigor. "Exactly! And time is passing us by. We have to go back!"

Estrella took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. She asked simply, "Why?"

He blinked at her. "What do you mean, why?"

"Well, Stan," she said reasonably, "there's no real hurry, is there? What have we got to go back to that we won't have right here?"

"Our friends-" he began, but she shook her head. She kissed his hand before she released it, and spoke.

"Have you looked at the time, dear? Our friends are getting old, may even have died by now. You wanted to live a long, long time. Now we're doing it." She took pity on the look on his face and hugged him tightly. "Besides," she said persuasively, "we've come all this way. As long as we're here, we might as well see what the place looks like."

Stan found words at last. "How long?"

"Not long, if that's what you want. A week or two-"

"Estrella! That'll be-what? A thousand years or more!"



She nodded. "And by then maybe it'll be worth going back to."

The End

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