

## Your Haploid Heart

James Tiptree Jr

ESTHAA (Aurigae Epsilon V)

Type: Solterran .98

Dom. race: Human to undet. degree

Fed. status: Pending certification

Extraplanetary delegs; embs; missions: None

Esthaa, sole inhabited planet of system, first contact from Aurigae Phi 3010 SP, native cultural level then approx. Terran Greek city states, grouped around inland sea on single continental mass. Navigation, wheel, money, protoalphabetic script, numbers to zero, geometry; smelting, weaving, agriculture. Space trade route estab. 3100 ST. Esthaan students to Gal. Fed. no perm. emigration. Progress rapid in light metals extraction, machine tooling, assembly. Exports: Electronic and mechanical components. Imports: Tool, vehicle and generator prototypes, scientific instruments. Esthaan workers noted for ability to copy complex mechanisms.

Sociological: Since contact, pop. concentration in urban complex around spaceport, becoming one-city planet.

Political structure thought to be oligarchy, or council of family heads.

Religion unreported. Language one, agglutinative. No known wars except sporadic police actions against nomadic tribes of hinterland known as the Flenn peoples. The Esthaan temperament reported as peaceful and friendly but remarkably reserved.

MacDorra's landsled brought us down fast-Marscots don't waste fuel. Pax lunged across me to peer out my port. I saw the color on his high cheekbones and the light in his eyes. His first big job. He had a severe, luminous eye just like a certain Chesapeake retriever I recalled too well.

Reeling past below was as charming a great garden city as you could wish for. Miles on miles of honey and cream-colored villas in a froth of pinky-green flower trees with here and there, an administrative center or industrial park; like plates of pastel pastry. On the far horizon a gently glittering sea-one-city world.

The spaceport showed beyond a line of wooded hills, and the pilot finally slammed us into a wallowing stall. Suddenly there was a blaze of color in the hills below- red, purple, orange-A carnival? No-a warren of twisted streets alive with people! A hidden village.

Then we were back over spacious suburbs and braking into the field. When the ports cleared we saw a human-looking figure in a soft gold uniform getting out of a rollercar.

The human-looking part was why I was there.

MacDorra's pilot had us and our equipment out into the dust before you could say "parsimony." Three clipboards to sign, a handshake that broke my pencil-"See you in six months, Doc, good luck!"-and we were fleeing for the roller with the field lab while the sled's turbines howled up. The Esthaan came to help. He was big, and seemed amused by MacDorra's operation. We sorted ourselves out in Interhuman while the roller trundled through tree-lined avenues. Reshvid Ovanha had a well-cultivated Gal Fed University accent.

Very human, was my snap reaction. He came with the same number of fingers and features, joints worked like ours, and skin texture-a feature on which place great hunch reliance-was a cream-yellow version of my own brown. His eyes were round, with laugh lines, and his smile showed human teeth with an extra pair of frontals. All quite standard, except that his torso looked a trifle thick or blocky. Like me, he was beardless. I could see nothing to explain why, as of that minute, I would bet my tour pay that MacDorra's return would find me with a negative report to file.

Wait till we see the women, I told myself.

Pax was pointing his profile like Scouts of the Galaxy as we trundled up endless avenues bright with suburban shrubbery. Possibly he had much the same idea ... It has always struck the younger ISB agents as grossly unfair that middle-aged, monogamous and non-charismatic types should be charged with investigating the question of alien sex.

Bureau Personnel learned that the hard way. The first ISB agent sent to Esthaa, over a century back, had been a lad called Harkness. Among other idiosyncrasies, Harkness had had a weakness for laboratory-fermented brew. The sensitive, reserved Esthaans had been very unfavorably impressed when a wing of their new university went up with him. After the investigation and reparations Esthaa had been dropped to the bottom of the sector list to cool off. A hundred years later Auriga Sector had only Esthaa left to check, and the Esthaans had been persuaded to accept another Interplanetary Survey team, guaranteed non-explosive. Which was now arriving as one Pax Patton, mineralogist-stratigrapher, and

one Ian Suitlov, middle-aged ecologist in public and Certified Officer in fact-as Harkness had tried to be before me.

"What's this 'mystery man' bit they give you C.O.s?" Pax had asked me while we were getting acquainted on the ship. I had looked at his eager face and cursed Bureau security.

"Well, there is the Mystery, you know. Silly name, to your generation. But when I started work people were still ready to fight about it.

The One-World Crusade was active -in fact, two of my graduating class got kidnapped and were given the conversion treatment. One forgets how much energy and money -and blood-got spent over the fact that human races have been found scattered through the galaxy. It was a highly emotional thing. Powerful religions were upset. Some people wouldn't believe it.

Nowadays we've just settled down to the job of counting and describing. We don't call it a Problem.

But it is a mystery. Where do we come from? Are we a statistical peak, a most probable bridge-hand of evolution? Or are we one crop out of one seed pod that somehow got spilled through the stars? People got pretty excited over it. I know one or two who still are."

"But why the Security hang-up, Ian?"

"Use your head. Look at the human position in the galaxy. A new race can get all wrought up over whether or not they're certified human. We know it doesn't really matter-there are Hrattli in top Gal Fed jobs, and they look like poached eggs. But can you explain this to a newly-contacted, proud, scared humanoid race? No! They take noncertification as inferiority. That's why C.O.s are not called C.O.s out loud. We try to get in and get the data quietly before any uproar can start. Ninety percent of the time there's no problem anyway, and C.O. work is the dullerest kind of routine. But when you hit one of the emotional ten percent- well, that's why the Bureau pays our insurance. I'm telling you this so you'll remember to keep your mouth very carefully shut about my work. Didn't anybody brief you? You do your rocks, I do my biology-but nothing about humans, humanity, mystery-right?"

"Aye aye, sir!" Pax grinned. "But Ian, I don't get it. What's the problem? I mean, isn't being human basically a matter of culture, like sharing the same values?"

"Curdled Chaos, what do they teach you rock hounds these days?"

Look: Shared culture is shared culture. Psychic congeniality. It is not humanity. What kind of arrogance could label any general ethical value a criterion of humanity? Being human is nothing so vast. It reduces to one nitty gritty little point: Mutual fertility!"

"What a limited concept of humanity!" said Pax.

"Limited? Crucial! Look at the consequences. When we meet and mix with a nonhuman race, no matter if they're totally sympatico and look like the girl next door, the two groups stay separate to the end of time. But when we meet a human race, even if they look like alligators-and some of 'em do- sooner or later those genes are going to flow into the human gene pool, despite any laws or taboos you can set up. Q.E.D. every time -with all the social, religious, political consequences the mixture entails. Now do you see why that's the one fact the Bureau has to know?"

Pax had subsided, giving me his Chesapeake stare. I wondered if I had been out too long. Auriga Sector

had caught me a month short of Long Leave and talked me into helping close out the Sector survey. "A piece of cake," the chief had called it.

Well, I had to admit that it looked like a piece of cake as we rolled up to the palatial Esthaan guest villa. Reshvid Ovancha's horn brought a squad of servants for our bags, and he personally showed us about. It was amazingly like a deluxe version of a Gal Fed faculty residence. Even the plumbing worked the same. The only alien feature I saw was a diffuser emitting a rather pleasing floral scent.

"This is the home of my cousin who is away at sea," Ovancha informed us. "I trust you will be comfortable, Reshvidi."

"We will be more than comfortable, Reshvid Ovancha. We did not expect such luxury!"

"Why not?" he smiled. "Civilized men enjoy the same things!" He made a minute adjustment to the scent dispenser. "When you are ready I will take you to lunch at the University where you will meet our Senior Councillor."

When we rolled through the University gates Pax muttered, "Looks just like Gal Fed campus before the Flower Dance."

"Ah, the Flower Dance!" said Ovancha gaily. "Delightful! Did you encounter Professor Flennerly? And Dr. Groot? Such fine men. But that was long before your time, I fear. We live long on Esthaa, you know. A most healthy world!"

Pax's face grew longer. I personally was wondering what had happened to the famous Esthaan reserve.

We met it at lunch. Our hosts were gracious but formal, smiling gently when Ovancha laughed, and gravely observant while he chatted. Some were in faculty robes; a few, like Ovancha, in uniform. The atmosphere was that of a staid gentleman's club.

"We hope you will feel at home, Reshvidi," intoned the councillor, who had turned out to be Ovancha's uncle.

"Why not?" laughed Ovancha.

"Now come, you must see your laboratories."

The laboratories were very adequate, and by evening we had our schedules and contacts set.

"Do we have to go to all those dinners?" Pax complained. He was prowling the patio and eyeing the line of distant mountains, where two pink moons were coming up.

Fountains tinkled and a bird sang.

"One of us must. You can start some field work."

"While you look into the fertility. Say, Ian, how-" "With a culture tank," I told him, "and a great deal of caution.

And it is a ticklish business until you know what the taboos are.

How do you think Victorian England, say, would have reacted to a couple of aliens who demanded a look at people's sex organs and a fresh slice of someone's ovary? I'd like to get it through your head that this is a very good subject to shut up about."

"Aren't you up too tight, Ian?

These people are very enlightened types."

"One of my friends had both feet cut off by some supposedly enlightened types."

Pax grunted. Maybe I had been out too long. Why did this place give me the feeling of a stage set? It was so insistently human-norm. Well, I'd know more when I saw the women.

Three weeks later I was still wondering. Not that I hadn't seen Esthaan ladies-at dinners, at lunches, at merry family picnics, even on a field trip with two lady marine biologists. Or rather, with what passed for biologists on Esthaa? it had soon appeared that with all the shiny instruments, science on Esthaa was more an upper-class hobby than a discipline. People collected oddities and studied what amused them, without system. It was an occasion for wearing a lab coat, just as their army seemed to be merely a game of wearing uniforms. My Esthaan ladies were like everything else here, charming, large, and wholesome. And decorously mammalian to outward view. But had I seen women?

Well, why not? As Ovancha would say-I needed a closer look.

The usual approach on an advanced planet is through the schools of medicine. But Ovancha had been right in claiming Esthaa was healthy. Aside from injuries and a couple of imported infections now controlled by antibiotics, sickness did not seem to exist here.

Medicine, I found, referred to the pathology of aging; arthritis, atherosclerosis and the like. When I asked about internal medicine, gynecology, obstetrics, I was stopped cold.

One chubby little orthopedist allowed me to take a few measures and blood samples from his child patients. When I persisted in asking to see adult females he began to dither. Finally he sent me to a colleague who reluctantly produced the cadaver of an aged female worker, a cardiac-arrest case. She had evidently been operated on for hernia in middle life.

"Who did this operation, Reshvid Korsada?" I asked. He blinked.

"This is not the work of a doctor," he replied slowly.

"Well, I would like to meet the person who did this work," I persisted. "Also I would like to meet one of your doctors who assist in delivering new life."

He laughed embarrassedly and licked his lips.

"But-there is no need for doctors! There are certain women-" He ran down there, and I saw the sweat on his forehead and talked of other matters. I have not lived twenty years in this job by poking sticks into sore places, and I wanted to make that Long Leave back to Molly and the kids.

"These people are touchy as a pregnant warthog," I told Pax that night. "Apparently birth is so taboo they can't mention it, and so easy they don't need doctors. I doubt " these medicos ever see a woman naked. Like Medieval Europe where they diagnosed with dolls. This is going to be very ticklish indeed."

"Can't you count chromosomes or something?"

"To determine fertility? The interior of the cell is not called the last fortress of neg entropy for nothing. It's the pattern, that counts; quantitative DNA analyses and the few gene loci we know are nothing. The only reliable index we have is the oldest one of all-you bring a male and female gamete together and see if the zygote grows. But how in Mordor am I going to get an ovum?"

Pax guffawed. "I hope you don't expect me to-" "No, I don't. I'll put in time cataloguing and figure something out. How are your rocks, by the way?"

"That reminds me, Ian, I think I've hit a taboo myself. You remember that village we saw coming in? I asked Ovancha's wife about it last night, and she sent the kids out of the room. It's where the Flenni live. She said they were silly people, or little people. I asked her if she meant childish-at least I think that's what I said. That's when she sent the kids out. Why | don't they hurry up and invent that telepathic translator the videos show?"

"Maybe it's some tie-up with child ... baby ... birth."

"No, I think it's the Flenni. Because of what happened today. I was out on that geosyncline back of the port and I heard music- from the village. I started over, but suddenly here comes Ovancha in the university roller and tells me to go back. He said there was sickness there. He almost hauled me into the roller."

"Sickness? And Ovancha was right there? Indeed I do agree with you. Pax. I'm very glad that you thought of telling me about this.

And as nominal head of this mission," I continued in a tone that brought his stare around to me, "I want you to stay away from the Flenni and any other sensitive subjects you happen across. I'm responsible for getting us out of here in one piece, and there's something about this place that worries me.

Call me what you like, but stick to rocks. Right?"

For the next two weeks we were model agents. Pax made a brief coastal profile, and I buried myself in routine taxonomy. One of my chores was to compile a phylogenetic survey of native life forms based on the Esthaan's own data.

Their archives were a curious jumble of literary bestiaries, and morphological botany, topped off by a surprisingly large collection of microscopic specimens. It was abominably muddled and dispersed. To my astonishment, in a packet of miserable student mounts of rotifers I came upon what I realized must be Harkness's work.

Back at base they had told me that all Harkness's data vanished with him. I had taken the trouble to look up the old report of the ISB inquiry. There seemed to be no doubt that Harkness had been running a still, and that there had been a big fire. The only note the ISB team found was on a scrap of paper in a drain. In a large and wavery script were the words, "MUSCI! They are BEAUTIFUL!!!"

Musci are, of course, terrestrial mosses, unless Harkness had been abbreviating Muscidae, or flies. Beautiful mosses? Beautiful flies? Clearly, Harkness was a rumhead. But he was also a first-rate xenobiologist when sober, and his elegant mounts, still clear after a century, saved me a lot of work. The neat marginal chromosome counts were accurate. There were other brief notations, too, which began to

get me very excited as my data piled up. Harkness had been finding something-and so was I. The problem of getting human gametes receded while I chased down the animal specimens needed to fill in the startling picture.

In our free evenings, Pax and I took to cheering ourselves with song. It turned out we were both old ballad buffs, and we worked up a repertory including "Lobachevsky," Beethoven's "Birthday Calypso," and "The Name of Roger Brown." When we added an Esthaan mouth organ and a lute I noticed that our Esthaan house-factor was wearing small earmuffs.

Our reward for all this virtue arrived one morning in the form of Ovancha with a picnic hamper.

"Reshvidi!" he beamed. "Perhaps today you would like to visit the Flenn?"

We trundled out across the spaceport and over a range of low hills in bloom. Then the roller lurched into a gorge under a shower of flowers, and jolted up a stony pass in which there were suddenly adobe walls, brilliantly colored in hot pink, greens, electric blue, purple, dry-blood color and mustard. I caught the start of an amazing smell as we burst over the hilltop and into a village square. It was empty.

"They are timid," said Ovancha apologetically. "The sickness also has been hard."

"But I thought you didn't have-" said Pax, and glared at me for the jab.

"We do not," said Ovancha.

"They do, because of their way of life. They have a bad way of life, bad and silly. They do not live long.

We try to help them, but-" He made a graceful gesture and then tooted melodiously on the roller's horn. We got out. Shrill orange flowers were blowing across the cobbles. The smell was remarkable. From somewhere a flute blared brilliantly and stopped.

Across the square a door opened and a figure limped toward us.

It was an old man, robed in blue.

As he came up I saw he was very delicate-or rather, Ovancha suddenly became an oversized rubber truncheon. I stared; something about the old man was sending strongly to my hunch-sense.

I had missed Ovancha's introduction.

We began to walk down a side street. It, too, was empty. There was an overpowering feel of hidden eyes watching, ears listening. A gate snicked shut like a clamshell. The houses were interspersed with tents, pavilions, shanties, dark recesses which rustled.

We came to a courtyard covered with a torn green canopy. Under it a dozen frail old people reclined silently against the curb. Their faces were turned away. I could see their skeleton hips and ribs under the bright, soiled cloaks. Was this the sickness of which Ovancha had warned Pax? But he had led us right to it.

Suddenly a side door creaked and out into the silent scene there burst a flock of children. The old ones roused, held out shaking arms, smiling and murmuring. Voices were calling urgently from the doorway, but the little ones ran wild-incredibly tiny and active, fluttering gay silks, shouting high and sweet. Then a

robed figure ran out and herded them inside and the old ones sank back.

Ovancha was making a strange sound. I saw his mouth working in a greenish face as he marshaled us back toward the roller.

But Pax had other ideas. He strode smartly on around a corner. Ovancha threw me a distraught look and went after him. I followed with the limping old man. We proceeded thus around a second corner, and I was about to shout after Pax when a flurry of silk came shooting out of the wall beside me.

I felt my hand clutched by something tiny and electric. An impossibly small girl was running beside me, her face turned up to mine. Our eyes met, jokingly. Something was being pushed into my fist. Her head went down-soft, fierce lips pressed my hand-and then she was gone.

Twenty years of discipline strove to open my fingers. The old man was gazing straight ahead.

We came up to Pax and Ovancha in the square. I saw Pax's back was rigid. As we said our farewells he gripped both the old man's hands in his. Ovancha seemed pale. As the roller started, the unseen flute pealed out again and was joined by a drum. A trumpet answered from across the square. We drove away in a skirl of sound.

"They are fond of music," I said inanely. My hand felt on fire, and Pax's eyes were smoldering.

"Yes," said Ovancha, and added with an effort, "some do not call it music. It is very harsh, very wild. But I find ... I find it has some charm."

Pax snorted.

"In my home," I said, "we have also an animal like your Rupo which we use for huni-ing. They have a very strong character and think only of hunting. Once my friends and I took a certain Rupo on a hunting trip and, as is also your custom, we drank wine with our lunch and sometimes did not hunt in the afternoon. The Rupo regarded this as a sin. So one night when we were many days from base he carried all the wine bottles to a deep swamp and buried them."

They both stared at me and Ovancha finally smiled. The tension broke. Back at the villa I saw Pax's mouth opening and pulled him over by a fountain.

"Keep it low," I told him.

"Ian, those people are human! They're the only human Esthaans I've seen. These owl-eyed marshmallows-Ian, the Flenni are the people you should be looking at!"

"I know," I said gently. "I felt it, too."

"Who are they? Could they be the survivors of some wreck?"

"They were here before First Contact."

"They're terrified of the Esthaans. I saw them run for cover as we came up. They're in trouble, Ian. It isn't right. You've got to do something!"

He was flushed and frowning.



Just like the Chesapeake the night before he imposed Prohibition.

"You, Dr. Patton, are a professional mineralogist, sent here at enormous cost to do a specific job your Federation wants done. Same here. And our jobs do not include mixing into native political or social conflicts. I feel, as you do, that the Flenni are an appealing native group who are being oppressed or exploited in some way by the civilized Esthaans. We have no idea what the history of the situation is.

But the point is, we are not free to endanger our mission by intruding into what is clearly a very tense position. This is something you will have to face on planet after planet in order to do your job. It's a big galaxy, and you'll see worse things before you're through."

He blew out his lips. This was not like the videodrams.

"I thought your job was to find humans."

"It is. And I'll check the Flenni before we're through. And I'll report their condition, for what good it'll do ... Now let me tell you something I suspect. Did you ever hear of polyploidy?"

"Something about big cells- what has that got to do with the Flenni?"

"Bear with me. I can't be sure until I get a few more specimens, but I think we've come on something unique: Recurrent tetraploidy in the higher animals. I've found it in eighteen species so far, including rodents, ungulates, and carnivores. In each case you find two closely similar animals, one of which is bigger, stronger and more vigorous. And tetraploid-that means, by the way, not big cells but an extra set of chromosomes. It's a mutation. Tetraploidy and higher polyploid mutations have been used on many planets to produce bigger and better food plants, but it's almost unknown among animals. Here you have it all over the place-again often in the tame domestic form. That big cowlike creature they milk has twice the number of chromosomes the little wild cow has. Same with their wool-bearing beast and the wild sheep. Their common rodent has twenty-two chromosomes, but I trapped a king rat-a gigantic brute-with fortyfive. Harkness was working on it before me. Now, do you see what the possibility is?"

"You mean, these Esthaan jumbos are tetraploid Flenn?"

"That's exactly what I expect to find. And if so, what?"

"Well, what?"

"A case where nature has set the stage for genocide, Pax. The two forms compete, and the bigger, stronger, more vital form wins. The Flenni are weak, short-lived, defect-prone and they are up against people who are simply more of everything they are. Shocking as it sounds, you have here almost a quantitative measure of humanity -if they're human. Under the circumstances, it's a credit to the big Esthaans that the little race has survived so far. Remember, our species tolerated no living relatives."

"But... if they could be given a place of their own..."

"Provided the mutation isn't a recurrent one. If it is recurrent, the situation will only repeat. And it looks as if it is ... why does each species have a tetraploid companion? If there had been only one mutation 'way back, the separate evolutions would have diverged. Now I suggest we quit talking and play something. How about 'Hold That Tiger'?"

But our hearts weren't in it. When we turned in I took a look at the note which had been burning a hole in my pocket.

Doctor from the stars come to us! Help us dying we pray.

I slept badly. In the morning we found a sheaf of the vivid orange flowers had been thrown over the wall by our table.

Ovancha joined us after breakfast. With him was a muscular young Esthaan wearing high boots and imported dark glasses.

"Reshvid Goffafa!" Ovancha announced. "He is ready to guide Reshvid Pax to the volcanic mountains. Perhaps this is too short notice? But Reshvid Goffafa has classes beginning just after the rest days and he has returned specially for you!"

With Pax gone I concentrated better and in a few days steady drudging I had turned up three Harkness slides marked Fl. In a collection of waterplant tissues I found a firmly stained section marked Fl. Inf., vascular marrow which gave me what I needed. There were karyokinetic anomalies, but the chromosome count was clearly half of that on my Esthaan samples. My involuntary satisfaction gave me a pang of shame; the thing was a tragic trap for the Flenni. And mixed with the pang was something like a faint voice saying "Tilt" over the whole beautiful structure. But surely Harkness-

"You study in a trance!" laughed Ovancha, who had entered quietly.

"It is our way," I returned absently. It had just struck me that Ovancha was unusual in another way. He had gray eyes, the norm was olive-brown. And the old Flenn also had gray eyes.

"I wonder what you see." There was a hint of seriousness under his light tone. Was it possible that Ovancha was different enough to be of use to me?

"I see something of great scientific interest on your delightful planet," I began hopefully. He seemed to follow, but when I tried to show him a chromosome his aristocratic eyelids drooped, and he barely glanced through the scope.

When I spoke cautiously of a possible genetic difference between himself and unnamed "others" his mouth twisted.

"But one can see the difference, Reshvid lan!" he reproved me. "There is no need to go further. We are not interested in such things in our science."

No help here. I began chewing on the problem of obtaining Esthaan gametes, while Ovancha chatted on about a Reshvid doctor who perhaps had some slides, and a Reshvid somebody else who would be delighted to show me his preserving technique-after, the rest days, of course. Meanwhile, since no one was really working now, why not come to dinner and view the museum president's collection of luminous sea bats?

The -next day the university blimp-flier went out to pick up Pax and Goffafa, but they were not there. No one was concerned, since they had ample supplies. It was decided to try again in three days. The second try was also unsuccessful, and the third. Ovancha told me tensely that Goffafa was now late for classes.

The orange flowers came over the wall again that night. At noon next day a uniformed Esthaan appeared in my lab and told me I was to come to the councillor's office.

Ovancha was standing outside. He acknowledged me with a curt nod and went in, leaving me to stare at the antiseptic and cylindrical maiden behind the desk.

When I was ushered into the presence of the white-haired senior councillor Ovancha was looking at a wall map. I was not offered a chair.

"Reshvid Ian, your colleague Reshvid Pax is a criminal. He has committed murder. What have you to say?"

I stammered my bewilderment. Ovancha wheeled about.

"Reshvid Goffafa is dead. His body was found buried in an obvious attempt at concealment. He died by strangulation. Your colleague Pax has fled."

"But why should Pax do such a thing? Why do you believe he was the murderer? He admires and respects your people, Reshvid Ovancha!"

"The murderer was large and strong. Your friend is strong-and he is excitable, uncontrollable. Disgustingly silly!"

"No-"

"He quarreled with Reshvid Goffafa, killed him and fled."

"When Reshvid Pax returns," I said, fighting for anchorage, "I hope you will listen to his explanation of the sad death of Goffafa."

"He will not return!" Ovancha fairly shouted. "He has sneaked into a camp of Flenni and is hiding there. Do you dare to suggest he is not guilty?"

The councillor cleared his throat sharply and Ovancha's mouth snapped shut.

"That is all," said the councillor.

"You will be so good as to stay in your quarters until transportation is arranged. I regret that your laboratory here is closed."

The next days passed in that agony of boredom and worry known only to those who have been alone and in jail on an alien planet. My field kit was returned to me; I set it up and forced myself to study the garden flora. There was a sentry outside the gates. There was a nocturnal scuffle, and no more flowers came over the wall.

Then one night the almost-cat had kittens.

I had been pacing the terrace. Senior ISB biologists are not supposed to get the shakes, the horror alieni. Certainly on the surface I was in no danger. Pax was in serious trouble, but all I faced was grief from the Sector over a fouled-up mission. And yet I could not get rid of the notion that an invisible set of jaws were all around me and about to go crunch. Something here was wrong; something that killed

biologists. Harkness had been a biologist, and he was dead.

I became aware of action by my feet, under the amber ferns. The pet we called the almost-cat was "rolling on the ground, among a heap of small, scuffling, squeaking things. I focused my pocket light, and the "cat" suddenly sat up, yawned in my face and sauntered off, leaving me gaping at the wiggling heap on the ground. Kits! But how many were there? A dozen tiny faces turned up to the light- two dozen-four dozen-and how tiny! Still more were struggling or still among the fern roots.

I picked up a handful and started up to my lab.

In my head all the puzzle pieces which had fitted themselves so neatly into that damned wrong pattern were again in motion-coming together in a larger, frightening pattern. One of the items in the new pattern was the great likelihood that I would be killed. As Harkness had been when he stumbled on the truth.

Could I conceal it? No chance; two sleepy servants had seen me with the kits, and I had said far too much to Ovancha.

I worked carefully. It was gray dawn when the microscope had abolished all possible doubts. Outside a sweeper-boy with a box was scrabbling under the amber ferns. He had some trouble-the kits, four hours old, were running and biting -but he got them all. He took the box to the back gate and passed it to the sentry.

Even unto the least, I thought dismally. More pieces fell into place. Why had I not considered the city more? When I turned Ovancha was in the room. His gray eyes flicked over my bench.

"Good morning, Reshvid Ovancha. Has there been word from Pax?"

Some of the anger fell from his face, leaving it grave and full of human trouble. Human! How desperately they had wanted the meaningless certification. How intricately they had built! Ovancha must have been one of the leaders-exceptional Ovancha, able to dare, to cope with us. He was speaking with obvious pain.

"Reshvid lan, why do you- We ... I have welcomed you as a friend-"

"We, too, wish to be friends."

"Then why do you occupy yourself with revolting, unspeakable things?"

He was asking in all seriousness. It was not just a futile plot! It was a real and terrible delusion. They had somehow come to hate what they were so unbearably that they were living a myth of denial-a psychotic fantasy. Had Harkness done it? What had he told them? No matter-we had punctured it now and there was no hope for us. But I must answer his question.

"I am a scientist, Reshvid Ovancha," I said slowly. "In my world I was trained to study all living things. To understand. To us, life of any sort is neither good nor bad. We study all that lives, all life."

"All life," Ovancha repeated desolately, his eyes on mine. "Life-"

Pitying I made my greatest blunder.

"Reshvid Ovancha, perhaps you might be interested to know that in my original world we had once a

very great problem because our people were not all alike. We had not two but many different peoples who hated and feared each other. But we came to live together as one family, as brothers-"

His eyes had dilated, and I saw his nostrils flare. His lips rolled back from his teeth-the face of one hearing the ultimate insult. His hand twitched toward his ornamental side arm. Then his lids fell. He turned on his heel and was gone.

The least likely male can move with unexpected agility if he is sufficiently motivated, and if his employers have insisted on regular training courses. As Ovancha went downstairs, I went out the lab window with a bundle, and over the kitchen roof to the wall, which was set with broken glass.

I landed in the alley on an ankle that felt severed, and a cheek and arm full of glass. I put on the Esthaan cloak and hobbled up the alley. Each block had a walled center alley that concealed one from the sides, but I had to cross the wide avenues between blocks. Luckily it was just dawn. I had made three crossings when a big roller full of uniforms whooshed by the end of the block I was in.

I limped four more blocks, my face and arm on fire, and my ankle gave out. There was a trash recess in the wall. I dodged in-how ^| quickly fugitives connect with garbage!-and listened to the Esthaan police bell clanging from the direction of my home.

Suddenly a big mustard-colored roller came swishing into my alley and stopped fifty feet away. I heard the driver get out. A gate bell tinkled, and the gate opened and closed. Silence.

I made it to the roller, pulled open the tailgate and scrambled inside. It was roomy and dark, with a piercing odor. I got behind some crates next to the canvas that closed off the driver's compartment.

The tailgate opened and a crate slammed in. Then we were off.

I believe I wept when I heard the sounds coming from the crate. If my luck held-if the driver didn't take all the crates out-if I could hold out against what was now clearly poison in my cuts-if...

For hours of agony the truck started and stopped, opened to receive more crates, slammed and jolted on. The noise inside would have covered a trumpet solo, and the smell was a stench. Finally came the steady drumming of a highway, and when I had lost almost all hope, we stopped.

The driver got out and came around to open up. This was bad. I had done some knife work on the canvas curtain, but I wasn't sure I could move. Frantically, I cut the last threads and pushed and rolled myself through to the front floorboards. The pain was shocking.

There were figures outside the open cab door, but no one heard me above the uproar. I heard the tailgate slam-the driver was coming back. I cried out and pitched myself out.

I must have blacked out as I hit.

The next thing I heard was the crunch of the roller's tires by my head. Something filmy was over my face, something was pressing me down. I felt quick hands on me, voices whispering: "Stay down!"

I stayed down, all right. The world went away and didn't come back except as hot clouds of pain and confusion for several days.

My first really clear moment came in the form of an endless plain of grass lurching across my view. I

focused interestedly, and it stayed put. It was I who was doing the lurching, tied into the saddle of a pack beast.

Ahead of me was a small hooded rider. I gazed contentedly at the saffron robes, reveling in no-pain. We had, it seemed to me, been traveling thus for some time.

The rider ahead looked about, and suddenly my beast was prodded into violent flight across a stream bed. Then both beasts were under trees, and the rider was off and racing up the bank in a whirl of silk. This, too, seemed to have happened many times before-and there had been night and stars, and hot days in thickets, and pain, and soft hands.

My guide returned, slowly, throwing back the hood. The face I saw was the flower face of the child who had put the note in my hand. Her eyes were smiling stars, her hair was the night sky, as she bent over me. I breathed in her perfume. And then I remembered what I knew.

"Friends come now," she smiled, the voice like a bird's wing.

She laid a slight, violently alive hand over my heart, and we stayed thus until hoof-beats pounded close.

There were three bright-robed Flenni and a larger rider- "Pax!" I croaked.

"Ian, man!"

"Where are we?"

"You're coming to the mountains. To the camp."

But my little guide was already up and riding away. Of course, I thought, my knowledge a cold sadness. The men had stayed hooded, too.

They got me up and going, although I kept twisting round against the pain to see her dwindling across the savannah. Pax did most of the talking.

"What happened to Goffafa?" I asked.

"That kralik. We came to a party of Flenn women. He was going to shoot them down."

"Shoot them?"

"He got wild, as if they were dangerous vermin. I had to take his gun away. Like fighting a rubber octopus. He glared at me and foamed, and believe it or not he threw up his lunch. Agh! I got him in the roller and he tried to brain me with the Geiger."

"So you strangled him?"

"I only choked him a little. Last I saw of him he was crawling. I was going to come back for him when he cooled off."

"He's dead. The Esthaan Council has you booked for murder."

Pax gave a growl of disgust.

"Some Flenni found him during the night. They told me he shot two of them when they offered him water, and they finished him. I believe it."

He smote his boot, and his mount curvetted.

"Those swine, Ian! I can't begin to tell you what I've learned. The Esthaans won't let them raise food! The Flenni start farms and the Esthaans come out here in those gasbag fliers and spray poison. They poison waterholes. Ian, they're forcing the Flenn into those shantytowns where they can keep them under their thumbs. And I believe they spread that sickness, they don't cure it. They're trying to kill them off. Ian, it's what you said. Genocide!"

Our guides, hearing the word "Esthaan", had turned their now unveiled heads to us. It was my first look at young Ftenni males.

Handsome was no word for the intensity of life in their proud beaked faces, their brilliant eyes and fine nostrils and lips. They had male beauty, and something more -virility that blazed and yet was somehow vulnerable. I knew I was seeing human males of a quality none had seen before. Involuntarily I bowed my head to acknowledge their gaze. They returned my bow and looked away, their profiles pure and grave against the mountains.

"Pax, it's not-" I began, when my mount careened forward under a Flenn whiplash and we were racing pell-mell for a clump of scrub. Behind us arose a soft unearthly hooting. I got a glimpse of a golden contraption about fifty feet up and coming fast. We careened on. Pax was fighting his mount. A black smoke began belching from the flier's nose.

Pax flung himself to the ground as I was swept into the copse. There was a roar and a confused crashing, and the Flenni had dragged me off and were covering my head. For several heartbeats nothing happened.

I got an eye free. The black stuff was blowing past us. The gasbag flier was down on one side and the pilot was struggling out with a gun in one hand. Pax was somewhere in the smoke.

The gas was making me slightly dizzy, but the Flenni were out cold. I fumbled around in my swaddling and found the pistol still in my bundle. The second shot got the pilot's wrist, and then Pax stumbled out of the smoke and fell on him.

We had the pilot nicely trussed up when our Flenni revived. There was a little difficulty in making them understand that I wanted him alive, and they threw him behind my saddle with the controlled disdain one shows to a dog who rolls in dead fish. They were enthusiastic about helping Pax rip out the flier's transmitter and load it on.

We rode on in silence. My captive's face was in rictus and his eyes were rolled up. I reflected on the curious difference in the hate shown by Esthaan and Flenn. Why was it the big, victorious Esthaans who panicked like cornered rats? In twenty years of strange and often pitiable cases I had seen nothing sadder.

Pax was outlining his plan. He had, it seemed, worked up his field kit into a transmitter, which with the flier's power packs, should be able to contact MacDorra when the freighter came near.

"What makes you think MacDorra will rescue us?" I asked him. "We're both under murder charges.

MacDorra won't offend a planetary customer. And he'd let his mother drown rather than pay for cleaning his dress uniform, you know that. The most he will do is slow-signal the Sector HQ-collect-for instructions ... the very most."

"It's not a question of rescuing| us!" Pax told me indignantly. "I'm going to see the Flenni get justice. I want MacDorra to send an emergency message to Gal Fedg charging the Esthaans with genocide and asking for intervention. The Flenni are human beings, Ian-I don't know what the Esthaans are, but I'm not going to stand by and watch humans wiped out by| some kind of things!"

"Justice?" I asked weakly. "Genocide?" It was all my fault, but was suddenly too tired.

"Not genocide, Pax," I muttered and blacked out in my saddle. The image of the girl who had guided| me kept me company in the dark.

I woke to find myself in the Flenni camp. An enormous cavern, sparkling with campfires, rustling with silk and loud with song. The voices, naturally, were all masculine; only males were here. I was fed and put to rest against my saddle amidst the quick feet, the soft fiery voices. The air was pungent with smoke and Flenn.

During the night I found that the pilot had been dumped near me, still trussed like a sausage. He was the fattest Esthaan I had ever seen. When I cleaned his wrist he writhed and turned purple, and presently, like Goffafa, he foamed. I gave him water, which he vomited. Finally he lay with eyes wide and glaring, breathing loudly and sweating rivers. I checked his circulation and lay down to sleep.

Pax was conferring with a group of young Flenni when I woke. He towered among them, bronzed and eager. Every inch the guerrilla leader of the oppressed. There would have to be explanations ... but my head ached very much, and I took some fruit and went to sit outside the cave.

An old man came quietly to join me.

"You are a doctor?" He used a noun meaning also wise man.

"Yes"

"Your friend is not," he said.

"He is young. He does not understand. It is only recently that I myself have understood."

"Can you help us?"

"I do not know, my friend. There is nothing like this on other worlds I have seen."

He was silent.

"About the sickness," I asked.

"How is it done?"

"With music," he said grimly.

"Can you not block the hearing?"



"Not enough. Not enough. I myself survived three times, but then-"

He grimaced, looking at his hands. Frail, parched, the hands of great age.

"I will die soon," he observed. "Yet only this spring I helped open the Great Cave."

"Where are the women?" I asked after a bit.

"To the north, half a night's ride. Your friend knows the way."

We looked at each other in silence. I dimly recalled Pax's figure against the cave mouth during the night.

"You live long," he mused. "Like the others, the Esthaans. Yet you are like us, not like them. We knew at once. How is this possible?"

"It is thus with all the worlds we know. And only here is it different."

"It is a bitter thing," he said at last. "My friend from the stars, it is a bitter thing."

"Explain to me a little more, if you will," I said. "Explain how it is with the sickness."

When I went in search of Pax I found him jubilant amidst a tangle of wiring.

"I've made contact!" he announced. "MacDorra's in the system! They acknowledged my Mayday and the Federation Emergency appeal."

I groaned.

"The genocide part, too?"

"Right. I requested emergency transport and asylum for the Flenni."

"Have you checked this with the Flenni?"

"Why, it's obvious!"

I held my head.

"Pax, it's all my fault. Have you ever heard of the general class of plants called Bryophytes, chief of which are the mosses, or Musci?

Have you ever heard of the Terran animals called Hydrae?"

"Ilan, I'm a geologist!"

"I'm trying to tell you, the Esthaans are not committing genocide, Pax. It's parricide, filicide . . . perhaps suicide-" There was a high-pitched commotion behind us, and a racing figure that streamed pale gold rounded the transmitter and materialized before me into the loveliest girl I had ever seen. I simply gaped at her. Honey and pale flame, high-arched breasts, tiny waist, full oval haunches, an elf's hands and feet, and the face of a beautiful child in love-unfortunately, turned on Pax.

Then she was in his arms, her luminous face eclipsed in his chest, her little hands clutching and caressing him.

Having no hope of being included in this communication, I turned and saw that the camp was in motion. Saddles and bundles were being hoisted, fires stamped out. Angry voices echoed. My friend the elder was standing quietly with others.

"What is happening?" I asked.

"They have captured the women.

The young Flanya, who was with your friend, returned to her camp to find the soldiers there, and rode to warn us."

"What can be done?"

"There is nothing to do but flee.

They will come here-they will drive them here with the music.

Against the music we can do nothing. The young men must be gone.

As for myself and these others, we will wait. We will see our women once more before they kill us. If only ... if only they do not hurt the women-" "Do they dare?"

"It was not always so. But in recent lives I think they grow mad.

It is becoming unthinkable. I fear that when they find the men gone they will drive the women after them and on-" His voice failed. Pax had somewhat disentangled himself, and the girl was veiling her face.

"How many Esthaans are there?"

"About thirty, lan; it was too dark to see well. I'm sure we can take them. I've got eight pretty fair marksmen with handguns, plus the converted ditcher and our two heavy guns. The damnable part is that they intend to use the women as cover."

"Pax, I cannot allow you to shoot g|| Esthaans, and the boys you have trained cannot stay here-they must get out. Listen, Pax, what's coming here is nothing you can fight with guns. All you'll see will be the Flenni girls, plus some mobile sound equipment. You've got to listen! The Esthaans and the Flenni are one-" An ear-splitting screech came from under our legs. The Esthaan pilot, who had been huddled puffy and fasting, now lay on his back kicking like a frog. Flenni who were moving outwards turned at his screams.

"Look here. Pax!" I shouted above the din. I ripped at the pilot's clothes, exposing his swollen body. Two great angry scars ran from each pubic ligament to above the crest of the pelvis.

"He's a woman!" Pax exclaimed.

"No, he's not. He's a sporozoon -an asexual form that reproduces by budding. Watch."

The pilot had collapsed into moans, his body racked by wavelike contractions. Several Flenni had

brought up large baskets stuffed with silk.

"I think most Esthaans are not informed of their true nature," I told Pax. "This man probably believes he is dying."

A supreme convulsion swept over the Esthaan, and the two gashes in his flanks swelled, pulsed, and slowly everted themselves like giant pea pods turning inside out. A mass of wriggling blobs of flesh tumbled down his sides. He was screaming. I pinioned his flailing legs, and the girl Flanya rushed forward with the baskets. A high wailing-with which I was very familiar-rose from the mites as we gathered them. I held one up to Pax.

"It's ... It's a Flenn child!" he exclaimed. It was unmistakable- barely an ounce of male life, with bright gold eyes, clutching, kicking and keening. I laid it on the silk and showed him another, an even smaller female with coordinated eyes and the start of a smile reflex.

And a withered leg. There were others with defects, or lying still.

The Flenni were plucking my arm. I stepped back and they ran with the baskets to mount and go. I threw the pilot's tunic over his empty belly; he had fainted. We were alone now, the old men, Flanya and Pax.

"Do you see, Pax? A case of alternate generations, with both the sexual and asexual generations fully developed and complete. Unheard of. It only lasted as far as the mosses and hydrae on Terra, and then the sporogenetic form took over the gametes-that's you and I. We're somatic sporozoons, our gametes are reduced to cells. The Esthaans are not tetraploids, Pax- they're normal diploids. But the Flenni are living gametes, with a half-set of chromosomes each. They mate and produce Esthaans-who spore out Flenni, alternately and forever."

"You mean the Esthaans and Flenni are each other's children? But-we saw Esthaan families!"

"No. Their Flenn offspring are carried secretly out to the Flenni village, along with newborn dogs, cats and everything else, and the Esthaan offspring of the Flenn are brought in for Esthaans to raise. Pseudo-families roles. It's literally insane-they may have built it up after Harkness told them they weren't human. Listen!"

A throbbing pulse was in the air. One of the elders caught my eye.

"Pax, barricade this transmitter and get the power leads out of sight. I'm going to try a forlorn hope."

He raced off, Flanya behind him. I turned to my old friend who spoke Esthaan.

"This machine will carry your voice to men like me on other stars," I told him. "First I will speak, and then you must say what I will now tell you."

As I was coaching him, the throbbing strengthened, and was joined by a rippling, wailing moan which rose and fell with frightful effect on the ears-no, on the nerves. The other elders drifted towards the cave mouth, staring blindly. A flash of silk caught my eye.

"Pax! Grab her!"

He was deep in wires. I forced my legs into a sprint and tackled her fifty feet from the door. Her eyes

came round on me; staring wild, and her body plastered itself against me like an electric eel. The drum note was pulsing through her like a resonator. I finally found a spot on her neck which put out the crazy life in her eyes.

"Take her back and tie her up!" I howled over the rising hurricane of music. "Do you understand? Tie her tight if you want her alive!"

We made it behind the barricade as the first women faltered into sight beyond the cave.

I grabbed the mike and began sending to the only source I knew which might get action from the gray remoteness of the Federation Council. If only Pax's lash-up worked! If only the electronic bedlam outside wasn't jamming us! I repeated, and passed the mike to the elder. His whispered, gasping and yet vibrant, voice would melt stone-if MacDorra had his recorder on.

"What's that about the Flenni being human and the Esthaans not?" Pax hissed. "I thought you said-"

"Pragmatic definition. How can you fertilize something that doesn't have gametes? Ergo, the Esthaans are nonhuman, right? By the same token, whose child is Flanya carrying? Ergo-Quick, find us something for ear plugs!"

The cave was clanging and sirening with sound. We crawled to the top of the barrier. It was terrible.

The driven women came like a sea of flowers, limping, stumbling, holding one another as they fanned out into the great cave. Here and there one walked alone with blind ecstatic eyes. They fell, crawled, rose again, magically beautiful even in exhaustion. Around them the music was a punishing bray.

Then they reached the campfires -and began to run, searching among the rocks, seizing the men's garments to their breasts, their faces. Some weaved in trance, while others pushed on, picking up and dropping even the sand itself as if seeking the trace of a particular man. The music was a pounding ache, relentless slow crescendo of sirens, bagpipes, drums.

Beside me I heard the old men gasping, their eyes aflame. Suddenly one tore the stopples from his ears and dashed over the barricade to the nearest women. They turned to meet him, arms wide and faces wild, and he went down under a wave of silk.

Pax suddenly gripped my shoulder.

"My boys! My marksmen!"

On the far side of the wall there was an explosion of motion. Three -no, five young Flenn, their weapons flung to the rocks, their heads thrown back as they called. Then they were leaping down to the women, the women flying to them.

But they did not fall as the wave met them-they gathered the women in armfuls, spinning on the crest of the terrible music. Five burning whirlpools in a sea of girls.

Behind us Flanya cried savagely, arched and writhing.

An old man pointed to the entrance. Three dark hulks-the Esthaans come to view their handiwork, not yet aware that the main body of the men had escaped. Then they saw. A signal flared, and the music died in reverberating discords. An Esthaan shouted, tiny and hoarse.

All over the cave the women had fallen in heaps. The Esthaan started down among them, kicking, as they converged on the pile of bodies around the Flenni boys.

The sight of those beautiful naked ones affected the Esthaans most horribly. Two turned aside, doubled and retched. The third marched upon them, unhooking a heavy whip from his belt, and booting at the nearest women.

The whip slammed down on the helpless bodies. The Flenni could scarcely rouse even under such pain; they whimpered and held each other. The Esthaan grabbed the nearest boy by the hair and dragged him to his knees.

"Where are the men? Where did they go?" he roared into the boy's face. The boy was silent, his eyes ringed with white. The Esthaan kicked him.

"Where did they go? Tell me!"

The other Esthaans joined him. One of them bent the boy back across his knee.

"Where are they?" the Esthaan thundered as the boy screamed.

It seemed important to what was left of my ISB indoctrination that Pax should not be charged with murder. Each of those Esthaans went down with two holes in him. As the echoes ricocheted we raced for the sobbing boy.

"Cover them, quick!"

We yanked silken stuff across the uniformed hulks and ourselves. I grabbed the boy, felt him go limp.

"They're coming! Keep down!"

We cowered, rigid, hearing the distant tramp above the soft breathing of the Flenn all around us. My field of vision included part of our rock barrier, and a Flenn lad, fallen between two girls.

We could do nothing but wait. I watched the faint heavy pulse in the boy's eyelids. And then I saw he was not only asleep, but was also changing. Luster was going from his skin, his hair. Under my eyes, the firm young flesh was paling, withering on his arms and hands.

His hands. I thought of the leaf-thin hands of the old man who had said, "Only this spring I helped open the Great Cave." The kits, the babies had been growing like hungry flames. In months the little child was a nubile girl. Did they die as fast too, once mated? So it was with the gamete-bearers among plants. This then, was the Esthaan weapon. I shuddered, seeing the boy's temples now sunken and blue. He would waken as an old man, waiting for death.

Boots came into my view. Two Esthaans by the rock barrier. I had set the old man to tapping out a signal which might serve as a beacon in the unlikely event that anyone cared. But the Esthaans would hear-

They had. As they started up the rocks, the old man appeared at the top, straightened, and called something. Then he was falling, on the Esthaans' guns.

"He said safe," I hissed, grabbing Pax. "She's safe- Stay down!"

Pax nearly threw me as the Esthaans disappeared over the barrier. We heard crashing sounds. They reappeared, following the power-lead.

"If they fool with the pack, they'll blow us all."

But a new Esthaan shouted at the cave mouth, and the others trotted back.

"They've sighted the men."

We had to watch while the whips | were unlimbered and the women rounded up. The awful music crashed upon us. All over the cave, the exhausted women who had lain like the dead were rising painfully, beautifully, faltering to the cave door before their herders. A swaying river of bright flowers, upheld only by the dreadful stimulation of the sound. A lagging girl fell to her knees before a soldier, who picked up a rock and crushed her skull.

It was as the old man had feared. There was madness among those Esthaans who knew the truth. The soldier probably did not know what he killed, but his orders had come from those who knew-and | could not bear it.

We were up and running for the rock barrier. The transmitter was a wreck, but Flanya was safe where the old man had hidden her. Pax carried her out, and I followed, stopping to straighten the old body by the barrier. At the cave mouth we watched the stream of colored silk passing from sight in the gorge below. The deathly throbbing died to silence.

"What do we do now?" said Pax. Flanya's eyes followed him like compasses.

"Well, we sit here and have something to eat, and wait. And we might pray to a god named Baal."

"Baal?"

"Or Moloch, if you prefer. An old god of material greed. We pray him to inflame the lust of gain in the guts of an old codger a hundred light-years from here-if he's still alive. If it flames up hot enough, we and the Flenni may survive."

"You mean the Federation Council?" Pax was irritated. "Or the Bureau?"

"The Interplanetary Survey Bureau," I told him, "may respond to our plea in time to help anyone who happens to be alive five years from now. The Galactic Federation Council is quite likely to respond in time to compose a documentary on an extinct race. Neither one can possibly move fast enough to help us mortal flesh now. The only agent who can do that is Captain MacDorra, and the only agent which can move MacDorra is cash. Golden Interstellar credits. And the only source from which such is possibly forthcoming is a human fossil, who, if he is still breathing, is squatting on the ninety-fifth terrace of his private empire on Solvenus. And the only motive which will move him is sheer cupidity and greedy lust to beat out another creaking reprobate basking by his private ocean on Sweetheart, Procyon. Hence, we pray to Baal.

"Luckily," I added as I saw Pax's jaw set, "MacDorra knows I have enough credits in my account to defray an ultrapho signal to Solvenus. Now, how about some chow? And you might rig out a beacon."

It took a little persuasion to make Flanya stay beside me while he went away. She nestled under my arm like a little silken dove, and when he went out of sight she put her hand on my arm and looked up worriedly. I saw she had a slight deformity of one finger. A defective gene, expressed because there was no companion chromosome to mask it. It was, of course, the existence of the haploid Flenni generation, which made the diploid Esthaans so healthy-each time the pairs of Esthaan chromosome broke apart to form a Flenn individual, every sort of recessive defect emerged without an allele to temper it. Those dead kits and babies were filters, which took out defective genes between every Esthaan generation. Cruel and beautiful mechanism ... The quivering under my arm told me Pax was on his way with provisions.

When we had finished, I produced an item I had preserved.

"Can you find us a horn, or a banjo, anything at all to play on?"

He just looked at me, and then became very motherly. Our search turned up no horn or lute, so I showed him what a melodious banging could be made with a cookpot and a broken stirrup. He assented kindly, and we took up our watch by the cave mouth, me with my mouth organ and he with the pot.

We played softly, and Flanya seemed to like parts of it, which helped. I refreshed us on suitable parts of our repertoire, and began teaching him a stirring item called "British Grenadier."

I did not really expect anything to happen.

We jumped when the cutting flash came-the KA-BOOM-OOM! of MacDorra's emergency sled braking into air. MacDorra was a pioneer at heart, if his tightness had let him go it, and his emergency kit was First Landing T E and then some. It set down daintily on the mesa overhead while Pax and I scrambled up, he carrying Flanya and me carrying the pot.

MacDorra's mate, Duncannon, and four husky assistants were pouring out, guns ready.

"Where's the warr?" burred Duncannon. I could have kissed him, red beard, bazooka and all.

"They've captured the women and are marching them to their deaths," I replied. "Over there."

This had its effect on the mate; once it was settled who paid, there were no more gallant fighters in the galaxy.

"We saw something that could be that as we came in. Get in, boys."

"Have you a loud hailer?"

"I do."

"Then fly gently just before them and set down as close as you can."

We came on top of the pathetic army as they were struggling up the rocks toward another cave. It was nearly too late. The Esthaans had brought up reinforcements.

"That thing over there in the yellow suit is the enemy," I told Duncannon. "That gasbag is probably armed, and it shoots a gas that doesn't bother much. The game is to find the noise maker they have and silence it. Fire a flare when you have it stopped, I won't be able to hear you. Stay here, Pax, we have work to do."

I handed him the kettle and turned every dial on the hailer to output max.

I don't know what the Esthaans thought-those who weren't too busy with Duncannon's boys to hear us. I hate to think what we did to delicate Flenni ears. Pax got the idea as I crashed into "Sol-Sol-Solidarity", and came in with a thunderous beat-a walloping polka beat that had no more sex than a pig in clogs-a Donnybrook beat that could bounce a "Liebestodt" to shreds-a ragtime blast to meet and break that mesmeric Esthaan horror. We gave them "Interplanetary Heroes" and "Stars I'm Coming" and "My Buddy was a Bemmy." We blew and banged ourselves silly while Flanya cowered.

Duncannon told us later that our counter-barrage hit just as the first wave of women met and mingled with the men streaming helpless from the cave. Our uproar smote and clashed with the mad Esthaan hooting. As it took precarious control of the air, the Flenni mass shuddered. Couples broke, clung, broke apart-raced wildly, hands over ears-and the women began to drop. Finally only the men stood upright, their heads wrapped in their arms.

When the flare finally went up I slapped Pax's arm and we heard the last toot-bang of our "music" thunder across the hills.

"The only race in history ever saved with a kettle and a mouth organ!" Pax giggled. Then he looked horrified.

We shook hands hysterically and hugged Flanya. The hideous death of the Flenn boy mingled with Irish jigs in my brain, and I was not much help to Duncannon for the next half hour. We found him systematically hog-tying Esthaans beside the gasbag. Most of them were in rather poor shape. Our crew had only a few nicks apiece; ordinary ground-side armament can't do much against First Landing equipment in trained hands.

We sent Duncannon back to comb the line of march for survivors. MacDorra himself came down to oversee the setting up of a relief camp. It was a wonderful camp, with the ship's medicos and a plasma-synth and a nurse, and they worked like good devils. I noticed MacDorra had a little notebook in which he entered such items as the sled's fuel supply, the rounds of cartridge, and the number of disposable shrouds. He fed and ministered lavishly, his face a splendid blend of compassion and business enterprise.

The pitiful burdens Duncannon was bringing in upset the Captain.

"Gurrrl children," he growled, motioning the doctor to open universal serum. He sniffed and turned away to make a notebook entry.

I could see the Esthaans would be having trouble with freight rates.

The last load brought in the small shrouded figure I had feared to see. After a bit I carried my sleeping bag up to the mesa where the pink moons were rising over the floodlights below. A guard stood watch. Somewhere beyond the empty plain the Esthaan Council waited behind frozen masks. I knew they would do nothing now but wait. Somebody else would have to be assigned to unwind their madness; I could not.

Pax climbed to join me. The nurse had taken Flanya away from him.

"All right, Ian," he said. "Who is Santa Claus?"



"Ever hear of the Morgenstern Theory?"

"That Morgenstern? But is he still-?"

"And he still wants his theory of human evolution proved the worst way. I ran into him last leave on Eros with his dearest enemy, old man Villeneuve. Villeneuve thinks Morgenstern is a lunatic; he is heart and soul for the diffusion theory. Between them they're rich enough to buy the Coalsack, and they've been arguing this for years, financing expeditions, and betting fantastic sums. Well, Morgenstern took me aside and told me exactly the kind of thing he wanted to prove his theory. Instances of human development which could not possibly be interpreted as diffusion in Villeneuve's terms. He gave me a code word-Eureka. If I came across the right case I was to UP him collect at once.

"It came to me that the alternating generation setup here, shared by lower mammals and man, is about as close as Morgenstern can get to the proof he wants. It's not a hundred percent; there may be discontinuous mutation. But it's enough to give Villeneuve a very hot time. So I flashed him 'Eureka repeat Eureka,' and added that the evidence would be wiped out within hours by intertribal war unless he chartered MacDorra for immediate intervention and rescue. He may have bought the ship, or the whole freight line. You've seen the result. Sheer orneriness and ego- that's what saved us, son, not altruism or love of science."

There was a companionable silence. It was just dawning on me that I could take Molly's name out of the file marked Widows.

"What about the Bureau?"

"Well, that's where I may get reclassified to assistant jet-cleaner. There is a thing called an Irreplaceable Datum of Human Science. You may have run into IDHS areas somewhere-I believe one is on Terra. In the old training regs it says that any officer of the Service can declare an area, or species, to be an IDHS, and this automatically puts it under Federation protection until the case is reviewed and confirmed, or disallowed. The declaring officer has to present a formal justifying brief. It's a long business and it costs plenty. Almost never done any more: I think there's been only one in my time.

"I signaled the Bureau declaring the Flenni an IDHS in danger. This should eventually produce a Bureau relief team to take over from MacDorra. But it's going to be a sweet mix-up. Old Morgenstern is surely on his way right now with the idea that the Flenni are his personal pets-and in the Bureau's eyes he'll be just a meddling private citizen. I'm going to have a time seeing that the Flenni come out of this right side up and that I'm not thrown out of the Service for exceeding my authority, engaging in local warfare and native homicide, endangering Bureau relations, conveying Federation authority to private citizens, and general knavery. And I have a formal Declaration Brief to write."

"What do you call right side up for the Flenni?"

I sighed, remembering that Pax did not really understand yet.

"Well, tentatively, they should be protected in their efforts to maintain their own cultural identity, to extend their life span by deferring \_" I caught myself-"to build an economy. There's probably always been a hostile tension between the two forms, since they are ecological competitors. The long-lived Esthaans had apparently shut the Flenni out of their urban technology by the time of First Contact, I suspect Harkness of having precipitated the acute stage. The Esthaans got the idea that the Flenni cycle was a dreadful defect, which barred them from human status. They started out to conceal and minimize it, to

ape human ways, and to reduce the Flenni to the status of breeding animals. Maybe it's deeper; the Esthaans have all the Flenn genes, and they may | have some primordial drive towards sex which is impossible to them-and incarnated in the Flenni. At any rate, they're now acting out a full-blown social psychosis, and the engineers are going to have one grand job. But of course, biologically-" I paused.

"Go on, Ian."

"Well, you know it. The Flenni I genes combine with ours. It's possible the alternating system is carried by recessives and could in the long run be bred out."

Pax was silent. Then I heard him catch his breath. I think it was the first time he had considered what his child by Fianya might be. Was it possible that this dove of a girl would give birth to a neuter sausage-an Esthaan?

"Don't you think it's time we turned in?" I asked.

"Yes," he said dully.

I lay gazing at the pink moons, thinking Poor Pax, poor good retriever boy. Interbreeding might eventually solve the planet's dilemma-but meanwhile, how many human hearts would go out to the Flenni beauty, the Flenni sexual impact? Only in dreams do we ever see beings who are literally all male or all female. The most virile human man or the most seductive ordinary woman is, in fact, a blend. But these creatures were the pure expression of one sex alone-electric, irresistible. How many of us would give ourselves to them, only to find the freely given beauty dying in our arms? Whatever Pax's first-born would be, the arms that held it would be those of a dying crone-who only months before had been his blooming love.

The pink moons sailed the zenith, sweet as the gift of Flenni love. The image of Molly's face came finally to comfort me. Molly who could love and live, who would greet me among our children. I must remember, I thought drowsily, to tell her how good it was to be a diploid sporozoon...