

ALIEN RESONANCE

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a novella of about 25,300 words

I

Alec Strange balanced on a lichen-covered boulder. Other boulders lay to right and left, rounded humps and tilted slabs set in a matrix of sand and gravel and broken sticks. The heavy boughs of balsam firs swayed at his back, saplings of birch and maple thrusting up among them. Sunlight striking through new growth bathed him in cool, soft green.

He faced a deep pool set about with granite and shale, its waters darkened by the juices of rotting leaves. Glints of sun soaked into the brook, glowing brown. Dabs of foam drifted on the current. Shadows marked the bottom, and a hollow fell away beneath a steep-sided rock.

When Alec cast his fly over the pool's deepest spot, a gray-green shape sped from the dark below. His heart began to race. He grinned, his hand tensed on the rod, and a moment later he held an eight-inch trout in his hand.

Then he moved on, stepping from his boulder to another, savoring the crunch of lichen, the cushion of moss, the brush of fir across his cheek. He moved up the stream, following a redstart as it soared bright from shade to sun. He stepped over a cleft in the rock, and he paused.

Beneath him gleamed something odd. He shifted his feet, laid down his rod, and bent to thrust his arm shoulder-deep into a miniature, gravel-bottomed canyon. He touched strangeness, a golden ovoid as out of place in these woods as a Cadillac. He scraped it with his nails, rapped it with his knuckles, measured it with his eyes. Its metallic luster deceived, for though it rang lightly at his touch, it seemed less like gold than like some high-quality ceramic, a giant egg perhaps two feet long. He wondered at the sort of people who would leave such a thing in wilderness. He wondered if it might not have fallen from a plane, perhaps a military craft on maneuvers. He wondered if it could be a bomb. But he did not wonder long or hard. A bomb seemed unlikely, the other possibilities irrelevant. His curiosity was easily satisfied for now, and his mind was on his fishing. Perhaps, he thought, he would pry it from its crack on his way back to camp. If nothing else, his friends would be intrigued.

To Walter Ybarra, the rocks along the brook meant much more than they did to Alec Strange. Alec taught English at the university a hundred miles away. Ybarra was a geologist. Shade and coolness and fragrance and birdsong were not lost on him, but he saw more deeply. He noted the split and eroded layers of the local sedimentary bedrock, and he tracked ancient glaciers in the rounded igneous boulders they had left behind. He saw a hint of iron in the dark waters of the stream, and he wondered how acid the rains had made this calm fraction of the world he loved.

The rains couldn't be that bad, however. The fish were there. Alec had preceded him up the brook, but he hadn't caught them all, and Ybarra doubted he had caught the largest. He had one eleven-incher himself, sharing his creel with his empty beer can.

A broad stretch of spume-flecked water attracted him. He mounted a boulder, larger and flatter than its neighbors, and dropped a weighted nymph where the current would tumble it past the predatory eyes he knew must lie in wait.

A murmur of rapids, muted by the firs and a bend of the stream, drew him on. But as he turned upstream, a light caught his eye. The light was not one that belonged in that setting. It reflected cleanly, polished, like metal. His first

thought was for an abandoned can, but he turned anyway. He followed the alien gleam to a cleft in the shade, and there he saw the egglike mystery. He did not leave it. He set his rod and creel aside and bent to touch, to rap, to push. It seemed like opaque glass, resonant and light, but not light enough to carry easily, nor small enough. He drew it from its niche, startling a small black salamander, and laid it on the forest mold. He squatted on his heels, wondering, thinking that its gemlike substance was like nothing he had ever seen before.

He did not guess that his find was unusual litter, or a lost piece of airplane, or a bomb. He did not even think that his companions back in camp would be fascinated by an oddity. He was a scientist, and at the moment he wanted nothing more than to lug his find back to his campus lab, on foot if need be, the whole hundred miles, and examine it properly with reagents, diamond saws, and polishers. He thought that it was precious enough to him as it was, for beauty and novelty. But it would surely be worth a paper or two as well.

Camp nestled on the shore of a small pond, backed by fir, cedar, and birch. Five small tents, two red, one blue, and two yellow, barred a crescent beach of leaf-matted shingle. Two canoes flanked the array, beached on their sides. A cairn of rock, ringed by stone and log seats, held smoldering coals, a wisp of smoke lazying into the sky past a blackened aluminum coffee pot. A crusted grill leaned against the cairn.

An alto sang nonsense syllables from beyond one horn of the crescent beach, punctuated by splashing sounds. Brush crackled, and onto the beach stepped Diana Hadden. On the plate she held were five trout. Their offal had gone to feed the pond's minnows, who would in turn be food for trout and other creatures.

Di was a biologist. She too taught at the university, and she too was treasuring the ten-day break at the end of the spring term. She too loved woods and waters, but she did not care for tramping brooks. Her jeans, wet to their thighs, showed her preference for wading the margins of a pond, casting flies where no boughs conspired to frustrate her. This afternoon she had been using small streamers, with such success that she had released more trout than she had kept.

Setting the plate on the table, she looked past the other horn of the crescent, shaking her head to settle her dark hair out of her gaze. A clatter of stone, a splash, and she grinned. Franklin Massey, fellow biologist, had gone that way with Ellen Young, chemist, and by now, fish or no, he must be out of sorts. She almost laughed when she saw Ellen first, but she managed instead a sympathetic grin. Ellen was walking straight-backed along the water's edge. Her lips were a compressed line, and her normally hazel eyes were darkly shadowed. Her fly rod stood as straight as her spine, a lance at rest. Her creel hung from one shoulder like a purse.

Behind her came Franklin, his spinning rod horizontal, his creel slapping the small of his back, a plastic worm box jutting from his belt. His mouth was open, his shoulders slumped, and his free hand flapped, appealing.

Di imagined he was pleading with Ellen to forget the pass he had surely made, to forgive his hand or voice or... He had wanted her ever since he had first joined their group, ever since the first expedition he had shared with them the year before. And Ellen, while she would accept him as a friend, would have no more of him.

Both relaxed when they came near Di. They leaned their rods against the aluminum camp table and emptied their creels in one heap of fish on the ground. "They're hitting better today," said Ellen. "Even for him." She patted Franklin's bald spot, a little harder than necessary, as he knelt to transfer the fish to a plate.

He snorted. "I got more than you did yesterday. Bait's more reliable."

"But messier."

"I'll be back in a minute." Plate and knife in hand, he headed down the shore even as Alec emerged from the woods.

"Wait a minute, Franklin. I'll be right with you." Alec's rod joined the others

and, creel in hand, he followed the other man. As he passed Di, he said, "Found something interesting. Tell you later."

Her face softened as she watched his tall figure walk away, feet scuffing leaves and crunching gravel, large hands already opening his jackknife. But she did not watch long. She took bowl and corn meal from the table and rummaged through wrappers and boxes for the salt and pepper to mix the coating for their fresh-caught supper. Ellen said nothing as she in turn took the coffee pot to the pond's edge to rinse and fill it.

As Ybarra emerged from the shrubbery near where Alec and Franklin were cleaning trout, Alec laughed. "So that's where it went."

Ybarra grinned back at him, breathing hard. His belly was larger than Alec's, and his burden had gotten to him. "Had to pick it up, you know. Never seen anything like it."

Alec nodded. "Toss us your fish, and go on."

Ybarra did, and when Alec and Franklin followed him, they found the egg lying on the ground beside the fire cairn. Franklin set the trout on the table and asked, "What is it?"

There were only shrugs to answer him. The five friends gathered around the ovoid, staring. The sun was setting. Reddened light brought warm highlights from the thing. Hands touched its strangeness. Di brought a solid ring from it when she rapped it with a spoon handle. Franklin made it chime like a crystal wine glass when he stroked it with fingers still wet from the pond.

Alec and Ybarra both told their stories. All agreed the thing was odd, and none could guess what it might be or how it had come to lie among the rocks. It could be no kind of egg, despite its looks. It could be no rock, no crystal, no mechanical contrivance, nothing they knew but mystery. Finally, as the light grew dim and the evening began to cool, they agreed they would have to take it home. Ybarra's lab might give them answers, or Ellen's. It seemed unlikely that the biologists would be much help.

Alec built up the fire with wood from the pile beside the yellow tent. Di added larger pieces and greased their cast-iron frying pan. Franklin measured coffee grounds into the basket in the pot. Ybarra cleared room on the table and laid out plates. They had no chairs. They would eat sitting on the ground, or on the rocks and logs scattered near the fire.

They paused repeatedly to stare at the egg. When Di set the frying pan on the grill to grow hot, Alec finally said, "Shouldn't we put that thing someplace safe? Wouldn't want to stumble over it and break it."

Ellen pointed. "Franklin's tent is closest."

Ybarra nodded. Carefully, he picked up the egg and carried it to the blue tent in the middle of the row. When he emerged, he said to Franklin, "It shouldn't be in the way. I tucked it in behind your dirty laundry."

The evening's conversation was not profound. Franklin wished there were more dollars for research. Ybarra agreed. Ellen said there was plenty, if your work interested the Defense Department. Di glumly added another dollop of rum to her coffee.

Alec took the bottle and tipped a splash onto the ground before freshening his own cup. "The gods are sore at us," he said. "With reason."

Ybarra bent his head upward as sparks flew from the fire. "We see the stars here."

"And all the rest." Franklin waved an arm and took the bottle in his turn.

"Wilderness," said Di. "Animals, birds, fish, trees."

"Water," added Alec. "You can drink it without making a face."

"For a few weeks in the year." Ellen dashed dregs from her cup and reached for the pot, venting red-lit steam beside the coals of their fire. She shared a log with Ybarra.

"The air's clean in town." Franklin, his back against a lonely rock, watched as

Ellen stretched and poured.

"But there are so many lights--pass the rum, please--and people."

"For how long?" Ybarra's voice went flat.

"Famines, wars, plagues..." Ellen echoed his tone.

"International paranoia." So did Franklin.

"Don't forget the dread specter of academic unemployment." Alec tried to chuckle, but the specter was hardly academic. Each of them had friends who had failed to keep their footholds.

Di shook her head. "No bread lines for us, now."

"Chablis lines, maybe." Ellen laughed.

"Dip lines, chip lines," offered Alec.

"Hip lines, bust lines." That was Franklin.

"Fly lines and tag lines," said Ybarra, snorting. Franklin lacked, he thought, a sense of the appropriate. It was no wonder that Ellen kept rejecting the graceless fellow. Then why had they ever let him join their group? They were all of an age and they all loved the outdoors, but... He looked at his friends, his gaze settling on Ellen. She met his eye. He smiled. Franklin was a relative outsider, but he was one of them. He was not merely tolerated.

No one picked up the line of banter Ybarra had dropped. Night surrounded them, not silent, broken by the insistent bellows of tiny frogs, the scream of some predator's hapless victim, the splash of a fish in the pond. Finally, Ybarra sighed. "And pass the rum."

Eventually, they ran down. "Man~ana," said Ellen, yawning. "We'll have to paddle for miles."

"And drive for hours," said Ybarra.

Alec groaned theatrically. "Teaching! Students! Deans!"

"Paychecks," said Di. "Go to bed!"

They left the warmth of the fire and hurried to their separate tents. Sleeping bags beckoned them past a flurry of good-nights, and there was silence.

Alec woke at dawn, knowing he had dreamed. He recalled nothing of the dream itself, but he felt better, more cheerful, warmer, than he could remember ever having felt before. He stretched in his sleeping bag, smiling gently despite his awareness that today they would return to civilization. It was only a dream, and already the feeling was evaporating.

He crawled from his bag, unzipped his tent, and headed toward the crescent horn they had dubbed the "men's." As he relieved himself on the beach, he watched a loon floating on the sheet of silver that was the pond, saw it dive and resurface, fed, a hundred feet beyond. There were no noises until a startled "Hey!" broke the silence behind him.

The voice was Franklin's. Alec didn't hurry back. He thought perhaps his friend had found a garter snake sharing his bed, or a red squirrel in the potato chips. He was surprised to see Ellen standing by the blue tent and two sets of legs poking from the narrow portal. Ellen was saying, "What is it?"

"Damn!" came Ybarra's voice.

"It's broken," said Di.

"But how?" cried Franklin. "I didn't hear a thing."

"Let me see!" Alec crowded in as best he could, leaning over three bodies, bracing himself on hands and toes. There, scattered among Franklin's dirty laundry, was a nest of broken shards, as colorful as ever, tinted violet by the tent-filtered light.

Ybarra was poking among the fragments with a tentative finger. "Damn!" Di grabbed a shard. Alec saw something else in the pile. Reaching for it, he lurched, and for a moment his weight pressed Di into Franklin's side, still wrapped in his sleeping bag.

When they emerged from the tent, each had a prize. Ybarra had a handful of shards to analyze. Di had three. Franklin, with the rest wrapped in a sweatshirt, let Ellen pick a few for herself.

Alec's find seemed whole. It was a convoluted lump, resembling an egg that had

been half melted, pinched in the middle, stretched, and twisted. He held it out to Ybarra, who shook his head. "You saw it first."

"But you fetched it."

Franklin reached toward it, his expression covetous. Alec had found it in his tent, hadn't he? But he contented himself with running a finger over its curves. Alec nestled it in his palm, stroking it with a thumb. At last, he slipped it into his pants pocket.

Alec sighed as he pulled out of the parking area onto the gravel road that was the next leg of the trip home. Ybarra echoed him, and then he asked, "May I see...?"

Alec fished the lump he had taken from the ruins of the egg out of his pocket. He stroked it with a thumb before he handed it over, and Ybarra did the same as he received it.

"Feels good. Smooth, but..." His voice trailed off, bobbling as the Nissan pick-up hit potholes and ruts. He held the thing up to the light. It glowed gold, translucent, its surface alive with highlights. "I wonder what it is?" Alec spared a glance for his friend. "Think it's the same stuff as the shell?" "Looks like it." Ybarra drew a shard from his shirt pocket and held it up beside the other. "Same color, same glow. Have to get them in the lab. Though that won't tell us where it came from."

They rounded a curve and saw before them a single state police car, blocking half the road a hundred yards away. The trooper straddled the other lane, waving his arms for them to stop.

"Wonder what the roadblock's for," said Ybarra as Alec slowed the truck. He put his shard away and handed the lump back to Alec. Alec put it away and patted his pocket. "Some escaped con?"

As they stopped, Alec craned his neck out his window. "What's up?"

The state trooper was young, not long out of the state academy. His hair was short, his face bare, his uniform a creased powder-blue. The name tag on his breast said "Veilleux." "Just checking," he said. "See anything strange this weekend?"

"Just fresh air and trees and trout. Ate them all, too." For some reason, Alec said nothing about the egg. Ybarra did not try to add anything to his reply.

"Mind if I take a look?"

Alec felt a lurch of impending loss in his gut. Were there any shards in the duffel? In the creels? Were they all in Ybarra's pockets? It was a struggle to show no alarm, but he thought he managed. "Not at all."

Officer Veilleux peered into the space behind Alec's seat. He leaned into the truck body, patting the tent sacks and sleeping bags and packs beneath the canoe. Finally, he stood back and waved them on.

As they gathered speed again, Alec asked, "Why didn't we tell him?"

"Because he would have taken what's left of that egg away from us."

"I bet. But why?"

Ybarra shrugged. "We could have found out, but..."

"But some things are meant to stay mysteries." Alec made a motion as if to turn the truck's radio off. It had not been on, and he had no intention of changing its status. He was in no rush to renew contact with the world ahead of them.

II

Alec's small rented house, painted in shades of blue, sat near the edge of town not far from the university. There were woods behind it, rimmed with blackberry bushes. An apple tree shaded one back corner of the yard.

Inside, a round oak table held all the work he had yet to do to prepare for the summer trimester. He made a face. That could wait. Better, he thought, to catch up on what had been going on while he was gone.

The television announcer was a dark-haired woman with a machine-gun delivery. "The nation," she said, erectly serious, "remains mystified. Those colorful giant eggs are being reported from all over the planet." She vanished from the screen, replaced by a shot of gold and crimson and purple eggs, dwarfing the feet of the humans beside them. Uniformed figures appeared beside a pile that must have held hundreds of the things. Alec pulled his nugget from his pocket and stared at it. That many? He had suspected there were at least a few others, once they had met the roadblock. But so many? What were they?

The announcer's voice went on. "There are thousands of them. They appear in gardens and hedges, in woods and fields, in city parks and parking lots. They're all the same size, but they come in all the colors of the rainbow. And they're unbreakable, except..."

A young man appeared clad in mustache and white lab coat and hard hat, holding a sledgehammer. He was saying, "We've tried, but they just won't break. But if we leave them alone and go away for awhile--a coffee break, you know?--they fall to pieces." He gestured toward a pile of shards on the table beside him and added, "Not all of them, and not all at once, but..."

The announcer leaned toward the camera, grinning. "They won't break unless no one's looking. And when they do--this is what's inside them. She held up a nugget that might have been a twin to Alec's own. Alec imitated her motion as she stroked it with her thumb. "I don't know what this is, but it's the best worrystone I've ever seen."

Another clip showed a white-haired scientist in a laboratory full of glassware and computer consoles. "They must be from space. There's nothing remotely like them on Earth, although these nuggets"--he too had one in his hand--"do make me think of a petrified egg yolk."

The announcer looked more serious. "Did some interstellar spaceship dump them when they spoiled in transit? Who knows? But government scientists are concerned that the eggs may carry totally unknown bacteria or viruses. Arrangements are already being made to collect them and store them safely. If you have one, please turn it in to your local police station. Do not keep any worrystones or bits of egg shell. Turn them all in. We don't know they are dangerous, but just in case..."

Now Alec understood the roadblock, though he barely believed the reason for it. Yes, there were thousands of the things. Maybe millions. But from space? He almost laughed; he was no believer in ancient astronauts or science fiction. The eggs couldn't be dangerous. He fondled his nugget, his worrystone, once more, and again. No. It felt good. It was benign, wherever it came from. He would not surrender it, and he felt sure that he would not be alone in his possessiveness.

That night, Alec dreamed again. Once more, he woke feeling cheerful and warm, loving and loved. He stretched in the morning light, grinning, and he remembered a shred of the dream. There were no details, no shapes or figures or words, but he knew that he should seek the mate to his worrystone. He thought the dream might even have called the nugget that.

He laughed at the thought. How could a stone--or a piece of petrified egg yolk--have a mate? But then he frowned, sitting nude on the edge of his bed. The dream was oddly compelling. He felt driven to go out and search for other stones, for one particular other stone. It took effort to stay seated, to do no more than scratch his ribs and think of what he had to do that day. And where could the dream have come from? Could his stone influence him? Was it perhaps dangerous after all?

He fetched the stone from his pants pocket. He stroked it, fondled it, rubbed it against the side of his nose, and watched the sheen of skin oil disappear as if soaking into the stone. He thought of leaving it in a drawer, and he surprised himself when he put it back in his pocket instead.

The Sunday paper was obsessed with the stones. They were the grandest mystery in

ages, and the government was acting delightfully paranoid. The Bolivian crisis, the power shortages on the West Coast, the Antarctic war for control of all the fresh water locked in the ice cap, the nation-wide smog from garbage incinerators that had never worked as designed, all had vanished from the headlines. The editorials reserved judgment, but Alec thought he detected a note of approval, of liking for the strange things. He guessed that the paper's editors had their own worrystones, and he wondered if they too had dreamed. He spent the day cleaning house and mowing lawn. He itched to be doing something, and he hated the thought of the next few weeks. He had had enough of students in the year just past, and here he was about to take on more. He wished he could enjoy summer teaching as much as Ybarra seemed to, or Ellen, or Di. Franklin was as unhappy as he.

Toward the end of the afternoon, his mother called from Seattle. She had never accompanied him and his Dad on their fishing trips when he was a boy, and she had never seemed to worry until after Dad's death. Then, almost as if her husband's final disease had been pneumonia caught on a Puget salmon boat, and not the cancer that had withered his arms and legs, she had forbidden the sport. Alec had had to wait for college before he could return to the forests and streams he had been raised to love. Sometimes he wondered why he hadn't become a biologist like Di.

Perhaps it was just that she had seemed so pleased when he told her he was going to major in English. As it was, every time she had known of his trips, she had called for assurance that he hadn't drowned. This time was no different, though her hectoring was brief. She had a stone of her own; like him, she had dreamed; and she was wondering what it meant to find her stone a mate.

Like Alec and Ybarra, Di and Ellen had revealed nothing at the roadblock. Their shards were their own, secrets to be hoarded, and they were confident that Franklin felt the same. He had been ahead of them, and yet the cop had shown no suspicion.

Di lived in a university apartment near the edge of campus. She had three rooms, with large windows and daffodil walls, furnished in an ordinary mixture of modern and antique. Her desk was a tall secretary she had inherited from her grandmother.

Once she knew how widespread the eggs and worrystones were, she was tempted to call Alec. Would he turn the stone in now? She wanted to keep her shards, danger or no. She wanted to see more of him, yet she was also leery of changing their relationship. She and the others shared a rare warmth and easiness, flawed only by Franklin's endless pursuit of Ellen. She didn't want to increase that flaw, to weaken the group's unity with a relationship that might too easily become exclusionary.

She did not call him. She called no one, though early Sunday afternoon Ellen did call her. The two took a walk then, wandering through the campus arboretum and the woods beyond it while steering clear of the hundreds of others who seemed to have the same thing in mind. They were exploring a sumac thicket when they heard a triumphant yell. They burst back onto the path in time to see a heavy-set man in blue jeans and graying beard stagger toward them, an egg cradled in his arms. "That's Abrams, in Math," said Ellen. "Do you think he'll turn it in?"

Ellen laughed as the man used a shoulder to block a student who wanted a closer look and then brushed by them without a word. Others along the path went quiet too, staring after him.

They observed only a few other discoveries that afternoon and made none of their own. Eventually they gave up on their search, though others didn't.

Over dinner at Ellen's apartment, Di finally let her feelings speak: "Our group... Do you think it can last?"

Ellen eyed her carefully. "You like Alec, don't you?"

"I'd like to... to know him better."

Ellen nodded. "I feel that way about Walter, a little."

Di looked up from her plate, amused and slightly startled. "But--Franklin?"

"Him!" The other snorted, not delicately at all. "He's a nuisance. Sometimes I want to grab Alec or Walter just to discourage him."

"But wouldn't that break us up?"

Ellen shrugged. "I don't think so. Couples can be friends, too."

"Even with an odd man out?"

"Would it matter? He could always bring another woman in. Or leave."

Di thought that Ellen had harder edges than she did herself. She enjoyed more certainties, could be more definite, could judge with fewer reservations. In that way, she was like Ybarra, both of them physical scientists. She, on the other hand, was a biologist. And her field had as much in common with the humanities--with English--as with chemistry or geology. Franklin shared her field, but she did not find him at all as appealing as she did Alec. He could be only a friend, never...

When Di later said she still had work to do for her classes, Ellen offered to drive her home. She declined, saying the distance was not great, the evening was not cold, and who knew? Perhaps she would find her egg on the way.

Di had about a mile to walk. Ellen lived in town, in the upstairs half of a frame house long emptied of the large family for which it had been built. That mile followed streets lined with similar houses, few less than a century old, their lawns edged with hedges and dotted with shrubbery and the fairy lights of searchers.

As she walked, she realized that home held few attractions at the moment. Her classes had been an excuse. The week's lectures, all of them, were tucked into her texts. What waited for her now were only the two issues of Science that had come while she had been off fishing. There were three letters she should answer, too.

She didn't know what she wanted to do until she stood before her building, staring at her own dark windows.

Somehow, Alec was not surprised to find Di standing on his stoop. Her presence eased the itch that had not left him even as he worked, and he grinned at her.

"C'mon in. Drink?"

"You don't mind being interrupted?"

"More like I'd mind not being interrupted. Just working on notes." He led the way to the kitchen, where he opened a half-gallon of white wine. "What's up?" She told him how she had spent the afternoon. He described what he remembered of his dream, and he added, "I wish you'd found one."

"It might not have been a mate."

Their eyes met, and they might have touched. But Alec looked away. He knew it was irrational, but he could not stop himself from drawing back.

They took their drinks into Alec's living room, and he opened a window that faced the back yard. A light breeze moved the draperies in and out like breath behind a veil. They talked companionably for awhile, and eventually they turned on the television.

Once more, the eggs dominated the news. This time, however, the tone was different. Some people had turned in their eggs and shards and worrystones. The National Guard, combing the countryside, had found more. Every police station and armory in the country had a few, and some had already been shipped to Washington, where government scientists were trying to unravel their secrets. But everyone who had had a stone and slept had dreamed. The woman on the screen explained it: "When I woke up, I remembered only one thing. I was supposed to go out and look for another of the things. I was supposed to find it a mate." There was laughter in the studio. Di said, "Just like yours."

The announcer went on: "Maybe I should have taken a cold shower. As it was, the feeling of compulsion lasted until after my second cup of coffee." More laughter. "Government representatives are concerned."

She vanished, replaced by a uniformed man standing before a flag. "This could be the start of something a few of us have worried about for a long time. If these stones want mates, then they can breed. We may be seeing the first steps of an

invasion."

The announcer returned, making a face at the camera. "No one knows where this invasion may be from. And not everyone believes the danger is real." Her second clip showed a street scene. "In Chicago, people who surrendered their finds are now demanding them back." A mob faced a stone building with the word "Police" over its door. There were screams, shouts, surges of angry faces toward the few officers who blocked the doorway.

"Elsewhere, police are voluntarily returning the stones." Another scene, a cop, his holster empty, passing stones to outstretched hands. Some hands promptly vanished, securing their prizes in pockets and purses. Others stayed visible, raised aloft, waving as if groping, seeking. From time to time, two hands met, and their stones sounded a solid "Clack!"

"The 'mates' may not be for breeding," said the announcer. "Watch." The camera zoomed in for a close-up of two hands, one dark, one light, as they neared each other. The stones knocked together, but instead of a "Clack!" there was a resonant "Rringg!!"

Around the sound, the crowd fell still. The camera kept its focus on the hands, slid downward to show two rapt faces, drew back to show embracing arms, and back again to show two figures walking from the crowd, absorbed in each other.

A wave of knocking worrystones spread from the moving pair like the wake behind a boat. Their success clearly excited those around them, and the camera lingered while the clacks rattled like castanets. There were no more Rringg!!s until the view shifted to other crowds.

"The enchantment seems to be only temporary," said the announcer. "But enchantment it is. An enchantment of good feeling that some people are saying exceeds even a drug trip.

"And more eggs are coming. We're getting reports that they are falling from the sky, drifting slowly, like giant, colorful snowflakes. There will be thousands more on the ground by morning.

"Will there be enough for everyone?" She held up her own worrystone, her thumb stroking, stroking. "Anyone want to knock?"

Alec whistled. "I can just imagine what they're saying right now in the Pentagon."

Di laughed, but uneasily. "They won't want to let people keep them, will they?"

"It wouldn't be in character, would it?"

Di raised one hand, suddenly attentive. She looked toward the half-open window.

"Shh!"

He waited until her hand fell. "What was it? An egg-hunter?"

She shook her head. "Something else. Not loud. Faint. Like breaking glass."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe!" She jumped to her feet. "Let's go see."

He followed her through the back door and into the yard. The night was cool and the sky was clear. Stars glimmered above them. The moon was in its first quarter, and there was just enough light to see the blackberry bushes.

"Over there." As they neared the bushes, they went down on hands and knees. They searched the edge of the lawn, and then, wincing at every brush of thorny stems, they pressed into and through the canes. Finally, among the trees beyond, they found the pile of shards whose forming Di had heard.

On her knees again, Alec looming over her, Di sorted through the fragments until she found the worrystone. She raised it toward Alec, waiting. He fished his own from the depths of his pocket and held it out. They knocked, but the only sound was the "Clack" both had feared.

Her face fell. Alec felt a surge of disappointment. Neither said a word as they took a more roundabout path back to the house.

Inside again, Di held her stone to the light. It glowed the spring green of pine candles. "It's real," she said. "But..."

"Try again?" They knocked once more, with the same result. "These two aren't mates, are they?"

"I'd like to feel what the people on TV were feeling."

"So would I." Alec laid one hand on her shoulder. She turned, her face against his chest, her hair fragrant with shampoo and leafsmell. He tightened the curl

of his arm, and bent his head to kiss her.

"Alec?"

"Hmm?"

"I don't want to be alone tonight." She looked down, away from him, at the stone in her hand.

"I have a spare toothbrush."

For the first time, they went to bed together. They lay side by side, comforting each other's disappointment. They touched, holding, stroking. They kissed again, and again, and when they made love they achieved a pale sense of what they thought a Rringg!! must bring the world's few lucky pairs.

At last, they slept, each with a worrystone wrapped in a fist, thrust beneath the edge of a pillow, close to a dreaming head, praying that closer contact might bring something more.

III

Golden shards were scattered across Ybarra's lab bench. One rested on the stage of a binocular microscope near the old-fashioned slate sink. Ellen Young was delicately adjusting the fine focus, her dark hair fanning forward like wings.

"I see pores," she said as Ybarra pushed the button on the 'scope's camera.

"Fine lines linking them. Rounded bulges. Hexagonal, like a reversed honeycomb.

The pores are at the corners."

Alec absorbed it all as he entered the room. His first class was not until after lunch, and he had wanted to see what his friends were up to. Now he said, "You found some time."

Ybarra grimaced. "You might have guessed. I was in here at five."

Alec laughed. Sometimes he wished he had the other's burning curiosity. "Did you find anything else?"

Ybarra rose from his stool to reach for a small pair of pliers. "Watch." He picked up a small shard and caught one corner with the pliers. As he squeezed, a cloud of glittering dust sifted to the bench top. "They said the eggs were unbreakable."

"But..."

"But. Precisely. Once it breaks itself, the shell is as strong as... as eggshell."

"Show him the rest." Ellen had turned away from the 'scope. Now she pointed further down the bench, where a row of small dishes, each half filled with fluid, sat beside single shards. Some of the fluids looked oily, some watery, some colored, some clear.

"Reagents," said Ybarra. "Every one I could think of. And the stuff reacts with the acids. It seems to be a carbonate, again like eggshell."

"What about the worrystones?"

"Haven't got one to try."

Alec produced his own, though not without a moment of hesitation. The other immediately dipped its end into a dish, examined it, and rinsed it with a squirt from a bottle marked "Distilled H2O." He repeated the process with each of the dishes. Finally, he sighed. "Nothing."

"Try the pliers." Ellen held them out. Alec's throat tightened as he quelled the impulse to protest. They needed to know. He wanted to know.

Ybarra tried to get a grip on the stone, but it was too fat for the small tool.

And when he tried to gouge it, the metal simply slid off, harmlessly. Alec almost laughed with relief. His sudden rush of confidence even let him nod when Ellen suggested they try the geologist's hammer lying on a shelf above the bench. But the stone continued to seem invulnerable.

"And it looks just the same," Ellen murmured. "I wish we could get it under the scope, but it's too big. Maybe the SEM." Alec had heard of that. The school's scanning electron microscope could provide a strikingly three-dimensional image of almost any microscopic structure. It could also measure the energies of

reflected electrons and so detect an object's constituent elements.

Ybarra handed the stone back to Alec. "I think we'll have to. But first we'll need a bigger scope chamber. The shards--well, we can break them to fit." He glanced toward Ellen, who had wandered toward the window. "We can probably borrow one from Boston."

Alec turned to follow his gaze as Ellen waved at them. "Hey, come here. Look at this."

They crossed the room. Ellen pointed out the window. A class period was ending, and students were spilling out of buildings. Some were gathering on the lawn, forming two broad circles.

"Looks like a folk dance," said Alec.

Ellen leaned close to Ybarra as he answered. "That's just what it is, I think. Of a sort."

More students gathered, some joining the circles to make them wider, others forming clumps of observers to one side. As Alec and his friends watched, the students in the circles raised their hands. Each one held a worrystone.

The observers began to clap. The circles began to move, counterrotating so that, for a moment, each student in one circle would face each one in the other. As they passed, the students knocked their stones. The clacks reverberated across the lawn and through the window, joining with the claps to define a cosmic rhythm.

"Efficiency," said Ybarra. "I'll bet there's an art--or dance--student behind that."

"How about phys ed?" asked Ellen.

"Business?" rejoined Ybarra with a snort. But despite the lightness of his tone, he kept watching. In the end, he was rewarded by hearing three Rringg!!s and seeing three pairs leave the crowd, clasping hands. One of the pairs was two young men, an engineering major with a handcomp in a holster on his belt and an English student with a brace of colorfully jacketed novels under one arm. They stared at each other as if they had discovered some great commonality.

Alec felt a pang of envy, much stronger than he had felt the night before, watching television. As Ellen and Ybarra turned away from the window, their arms aligned but not yet clasping hands, he thought they felt the same. Too, he felt a vague regret that Franklin had no Di, no Ellen, with whom to share what already seemed the dawning of a new age. The regret was tempered with relief that Franklin could not see how thoroughly he had lost all hope of Ellen.

The campus pub had been created when the state university had deemphasized agriculture in favor of more technological research. Most of the large cowbarn had been converted into classrooms and offices, but one end had been left almost alone. The stanchions that had once immobilized cows for milking now formed the walls of booths.

It was not the faint effluvium of cow manure, drawn from the woodwork on any damp day, that shattered Alec's anticipatory mood almost as soon as he entered. Di was there, holding a stall for him, but with her was Franklin, too full of something to let them have a word. Alec wondered if somehow their new involvement with each other did not show.

Franklin almost bounced in his seat as he opened one hand to reveal the pinkish worrystone he had been stroking. "Hey!" he cried. "I got one!"

"Right in my front yard! The egg had busted, but the shards were there, and this. Under a bush, first thing this morning. I was heading out for my run, you know..." And he was off. Alec tuned him out, focussing instead on Di, glorying when she seemed to aim her eyes and thoughts his way in return. Had last night been a one-time thing? Or would they be a pair from now on, for at least a while?

With a start, he played back the last few words that had washed over him.

"Psychic activity?" he asked.

"Yeah. The eggs are unbreakable, according to the news. At least until they decide to break. I've been wondering how that could be, and I think there must

be some kind of psychic force that stabilizes the intact egg shell..."

Alec interrupted the flow with a snort. Di stiffened her face to keep from smiling. "I'm sure there's a more reasonable explanation, and Ybarra and Ellen will find it."

"Ellen?"

"They're working together." He suppressed a malicious urge to say it was more than that. Franklin's face had fallen low enough as it was.

Di kept the subject on a safer track. "It could be electrical, or magnetic. But whatever the explanation, the first thing we have to do is figure out how to cope with the stones. They are going to be very disruptive."

Alec wondered what she meant, and he said so.

"Fred Altman made the mistake of starting his botany class this morning by knocking with his students. Only six in the class had stones, but he got a Rringg!!, and he never did get around to lecturing. One of my advisees--Oh! She was ripped!--told me about it."

"I'll bet she doesn't have a stone," said Franklin.

"That isn't what matters!" Di frowned at her fellow biologist. "We don't need these things interfering with our jobs."

Alec sighed. "There's a Senate meeting next week. We could mention the problem then."

"By then we won't have to."

"The dean will beat us to it." Franklin looked at his watch. "I've got to get ready for class. See you later?"

"Me, too," said Alec, but he didn't leave. As soon as Franklin was gone, he returned his attention to Di. "Where's your stone?"

"Right here." She smiled as she brought it from her purse. "Try again?"

They knocked once more, just as they had so many times already, and once more all they got was a dull "Clack." Their smiles wavered as their grips on each other's hands tightened. "Will you have supper with me tonight?"

"I might even move in with you." She smiled, but she looked away as she did so. He squeezed her hand still harder. "I'd like that."

Alec and Di woke to a chill, gray drizzle. They drove to campus, saying, "Fishing weather, if you can stand it." She had come east from the coast of Oregon, and they shared an inbred familiarity with lowering skies, open waters, and soggy landscapes. They both preferred to be dry, and the only western features they really missed were those of the mountains that loomed over their home coast. After their classes, they met again to share coffee in the biology department's lounge. They took seats near a window that overlooked the common. Alec hung his sodden raincoat over the back of a vacant chair. Di laughed, "Better you than me," and gestured at the scene outside. Heavy rain now veiled the gym in the distance. The library was close enough to stand out, white-corniced brick in a gray frame. The English building was out of sight to one side. Other buildings--chemistry, engineering, art, and law, and two dorms--sank their stone and glass into the landscape. Ivy pulled them down. Ancient trees leaned on them, their arching, spidery branches painfully raised against the works of human architects.

Alec shuddered at the bleakness before him. He lifted his plastic cup to Di. "A beautiful day to stay indoors. All we need is a couple of easy chairs, hassocks, good books."

"And a fire in a fireplace."

"A mug of toddy."

"So pretend." She sipped ostentatiously at her coffee, as if to show him what to do.

Their eyes went to the window. Outside, people were gathering on the lawn despite the rain. Their feet were awash in puddles, hats and raincoats were dripping, a scatter of umbrellas was raised against the clouds. Most were students, but as they formed into the double circle Alec had seen before, he spotted a number of faculty members and other adults. "They must be crazy," he

said.

But Di was already on her feet. "Oh, come on. Ours aren't working. Don't you want to find out?"

"Sure, but..."

"So let's go!"

"We'll get pneumonia!"

"That's what antibiotics are for. Come on!" She vanished, gone to her office to fetch her slicker. Alec sighed and emptied his cup. His raincoat was wet inside and out, but he supposed it was better than nothing. And he did want a Rringg!! As they squeezed into the outer circle, Alec was struck by the rapt expectancy on faces so sodden and chilled that they should have looked miserable. Slowly, someone began to chant "Havah nagilah." Alec held his stone out to the girl who faced him from the other circle. They knocked, but all the sound their stones made was that solid "Clack." Their neighbors knocked too, and the clacks spattered among the raindrops, uncoordinated. The circles began to revolve. More knocks came, synchronized now by the rhythms of the words and feet. The circles accelerated, and so did the knocks and clacks.

This time, there were no spectators, except perhaps from behind windows, warm and dry. With a small part of his mind, Alec thought they alone were sane. Certainly he was not, staggering widdershins in the rain to an ancient folksong, knocking his worrystone against those of total strangers and vague acquaintances. Here was that redhead from his writing class, here a young man in a dripping black leather jacket, here a secretary from the admissions office, here a department head, here a young assistant professor he barely recognized. And it was clack, clack, clack, nothing but clacks.

A Rringg!! resounded down the circles to his left. He could see the lucky pair sorting themselves from the herd as it paused in its orbit. Others saw too, and Alec noted one fellow whose face bore no trace of the expectancy shared by all the rest. He was as young as any student, his face clean-shaven. He wore no hat, and his hair was plastered to his forehead by the rain. The color of his tie, its knot visible in the vee of his raincoat, was leaching into the striped fabric of his collar.

Alec stared, intrigued, as the misfit shook his stone over his head and cried, "Mine won't work! Anyone wanta trade?" He was surprised when the woman facing him cried as loudly, "Anything for luck!" and exchanged stones with the man. The circles began to move again, the chant picking up speed. Soon there was another Rringg!!, close by, and Alec felt his stomach cramp. This time it was Di. He shook as she left the circle beside him, arm in arm with a man he thought he had last seen coaching the basketball team. Both their faces were radiant, their eyes only for each other.

Water blinded him, but it was not rain. That should have been his Rringg!! with Di. He had lost her now, and it was all bad luck, all the cursed stones, all a fate that had no pity on him. Yet he kept knocking, moving automatically, knocking and knocking, dripping and weeping with jealousy and envy.

And there was a billowing sou'wester, yellow vinyl, all-covering pants and jacket and hat. The face seemed that of a football player, a hulking, mindless jock, but it was as expectant as Alec's had been a moment before, and it was touched with sympathy as the eyes registered Alec's pain.

"Was that your girl?" An over-sized hand raised a rose-pink stone as lambently translucent as Alec's gold. A rubber band held the cuff of the plastic raincoat closed against the rain.

Alec nodded, reluctant to meet the other's eyes, and they knocked. And at last it happened. The sound was no clack, but a solid, reverberating Rringg!! Alec's hand tingled and his arm sang. His pain evaporated as if it had never been, and he looked clearly at the other man.

The face glowed, as did his own heart within him. Alec basked in a strong feeling of being loved, and he guessed--he knew--the other did as well. He felt none of the anxiety, the threat, of two strangers meeting for the first time. They were old friends, they had been friends all their lives, and perhaps for more lives before that. They trusted each other. They accepted each other, with all their foibles, all unknown. They appreciated each other.

All in an instant, they were in love, though sex never entered the equation. Alec wondered if it would or could with man and woman. He doubted it. It seemed far more important that here was someone he could talk with for hours, feel for, feel with and about, a companion and soulmate, a stonemate. He barely felt the sturdy arm link his and steer him from the still-moving throng.

"I'm Bruce Dietz."

Alec introduced himself as they turned toward the pub. Over hot coffee, he told how he had acquired his stone in the forest. He told of Di, and he told of his friends' probings of the shards, and...

Bruce told him of other things: He had spent two years advising guerrillas in Africa and South America. On his return to civilian life, he had learned to use the same skills as an insurance adjuster. But then he had lost his wife and their two sons when she had received a job offer in another state. He had started drinking and lost his job. Now he was an education major who had always done his best to stay away from the English department.

"Where did you get your stone?"

"It landed right behind the dorm, crashed in a forsythia bush. A bunch of us saw it, but I got there first." He laughed.

"I'm glad you didn't turn it in." Alec turned his stone in his fingers. Bruce reached to touch it with his own.

"The feds are just paranoid. Though..." He shrugged. "Well, the eggs are landing all over the place. Mostly in cities, near where people live. And they also figure too many Rringg!!s will be bad for the economy, bad for taxes, bad for the Defense Department..."

"Defense?"

"They don't want people feeling too friendly, you know."

They talked on. They shared. They loved each other like brothers, or father and son, or long-married man and wife. But eventually the spell did fade.

Alec returned to his office slowly, savoring the rain, savoring the glow that still pervaded him. There was a lethargy to that glow, more like the aftermath of a bowl of hot soup on a cold day than the afterglow of sex, but there was an energy to it as well. He felt as he had sometimes felt after a reunion with an old friend, satisfied and relieved, happy and expectant, full of the memory and the anticipation of joy.

Later, Alec looked for Di. But she was not in her office, not in her lab, not in the library. No one had seen her after she had left the circles on the common. Yet Alec's jealousy did not return. He felt that he understood. Her stonemate had been an attractive man, though it was his being the stonemate that mattered. Appearance was nothing.

He swore he would demand no accounting. He would not press her on her whereabouts, though he missed her. He would accuse her of no infidelity, no disloyalty, no betrayal.

Or did he swear? The thoughts went round and round in his head, but they lacked the vehemence to suit that word. It was more as if he knew that the traditional issues had no place in the context of the stones. And it was the stones themselves that had given him that knowledge.

The knowledge cheered him so little that he was ready to spend the evening morosely in his armchair, drinking, staring at the blind eye of the television. On the way home, however, he stopped once more at the geology lab.

Ybarra and Ellen were still at it, but they said nothing when he entered. He watched them, bent over their microscopes, and he turned to the window, staring out at the cloudy skies, so apt a reflection of his temper. In a moment, both his friends stood silently beside him.

He thought of what the experience had felt like. He felt a pang of envy, much stronger than he had felt the first time he had seen a Rringg!! and its consequence, watching television. He turned from the window, and Ellen must have seen something in his face. She turned with him, her hand lightly brushing his arm.

He asked, "Have you seen Di?"

Their simultaneous head-shakes spurred him on. He told them of losing her in the crowd that afternoon, of finding his own stonemate. He said nothing of what he felt, but Ellen sensed it, and when he left, she went with him.

As they stepped out of the geology building, Ellen took his hand, saying, "I wish I had a stone, too."

"You'll find one. They're all over the place."

She nodded. "Di and I took a walk Sunday, through the arboretum. There were people everywhere, searching for them."

"And finding them?"

She nodded again. "She likes you, you know. We talked a bit about what's going to happen with our group. Nobody's paired off, and that's rare."

He bent their path toward the English building, gripping her hand more tightly.

"It's not for lack of trying. Franklin..."

She snorted and tossed her head. "Him!" They walked in silence for a moment.

Finally, she said, "We were just about done. I was planning to fry a hamburger for supper. I'll fry two, if you want to join me."

He hesitated. But Di had disappeared, and he wasn't at all sure he should waste more time looking for her.

He squeezed Ellen's hand. "I'd be delighted."

IV

As Alec had thought when he had seen Di get her Rringg!!, Andy Witham was a basketball coach. And as Alec might have guessed, sports were the only thing he could or would talk about. However, the power of the Rringg!! was such that Di, who usually had little time for spectator sports, listened raptly. Walking with him through the rain, her arm in his, she let him tell her all about the new crop of players due to arrive that fall. In his car, she listened to his own history, the athletic scholarship, the injury that had stopped him playing, the winning team that he had built up at a smaller school, the offer that had brought him here. In the living room of his condo near the river, she finally got to say a little about herself, as biologist and teacher and displaced westerner.

But her turn did not last long. Hardly had she admitted what she taught than Andy was saying, "We've got to do something about those science courses. Some of my boys don't get along too well with all those facts, and when their average drops, they can't play. That's no way to run a school."

Later, Di would wonder how she had been able to stand him as long as she had. But the spell of the Rringg!! was strong, and while it lasted she thought him a marvelous fellow, true friend and soulmate. She let him feed her, beef bouguignon on foil plates from the freezer, and she complimented his cooking. She listened agreeably to his monolog, and when she got a chance she said she thought fly casting must have a lot in common with putting basketballs through nets.

That, finally, diverted him. He admitted that he had used to fish, though never with flies. His daddy had been a fan of tournament bass fishing, and he had taught young Andy to use a spinning reel and plugs. Trout? In Missouri, where he had grown up, they weren't considered much. Bass, now... They argued amicably, Di urging him to try the fishing near the university, he saying he hadn't the time.

Eventually, as it had with Alec and Bruce, the spell began to fade. But Di and Andy were man and woman, feeling close despite their differences, and it seemed only natural for them to try to extend the mood instead of parting. She let him lead her to the bedroom.

Later she stared at the man sprawled in his bed. She had looked at him so fondly

before, but now she felt betrayed. The Rringg!! was a high, yes, but it had nothing to do with sex. She had made a mistake, and now she felt dirty, soiled. She had abandoned someone who meant much more to her. Perhaps she had lost him. A glance at the clock told her it was not too late. She wondered where Alec was. Had he found a stonemate too? Not bothering to wake Andy, she used his phone to call a cab and dressed hurriedly, already praying she was wrong about losing Alec, wondering where she might find him.

"Have you seen Alec?" She felt close to tears. She had had a Rringg!! but it wasn't the same as what she had had, or what she was beginning to have, with Alec. Andy wasn't the same kind of man at all. They had much less in common. He was less considerate, less sharing, less of everything her long friendship with Alec had revealed in him. Even the sex...

"He was in the lab this afternoon." Ybarra's voice sounded sympathetic. She wished he were not on the other end of a phone line. Lacking Alec, she would quite happily accept his hand on her shoulder, his arms around her back. She needed a hug. But... "He left with Ellen."

She barely registered her friend's tone as the corners of her mouth curved still further downward. Tears began to form at the corners of her eyes. She remembered what Ellen had told her Sunday afternoon. Had she seen an opportunity to grab Alec?

She hung up the phone and paced across her kitchen to the window. She stood looking down upon the street. Where were they now? In bed?

Alec was in his narrow office, leaning back in his gray steel swivel chair, his feet on his desk. A stack of student papers waited by his elbow. One was spread across his lap. But he was not reading. Eyes shut, he fondled his worrystone and remembered. Ellen had fed him that hamburger, along with half a bottle of wine, and then she had led him to her leather couch, soft and comforting. They had turned on the television, and they had watched for awhile.

When the news had showed circle dances, line dances, modified folk dances, throughout the country and around the globe, he had felt a certain morose satisfaction. Businesses were faltering as their employees abandoned their duties to knock stones. Rush-hour traffic crawled as people turned opposing lanes into motorized knockfests, holding out their stones to passing drivers, stopping and snarling the flow whenever they got a Rringg!! Shoppers were as bad.

Alec remembered Officer Veilleux and the government demand that people surrender their stones. Perhaps the officials were right. The stones might indeed prove more disruptive than civilization could stand. But he, like Bruce, like so many others, was not about to surrender his own.

Ellen had laid her head on his shoulder, an arm across his chest. His own arm had been over her shoulder, the hand close to her breast, and he had been tempted to accept what she offered. A touch, a word, and he could have replaced Di so easily, at least for the night. What had stopped him? Ellen, he thought, was too much Ybarra's, or nearly so. And she was not Di. That was all. Di was... Di, and he had not wanted to give up on all the possibilities she represented. In time, he might have made the move Ellen was inviting. She had her own possibilities. And he liked her nearly as much as he had Di before she had come to his house. But then there had been that knock on the apartment door. Ellen had pulled away from him, and there she was. He had leaped to his feet, his face hot, feeling guilty for what he had almost done. He had said, "Di!" And she had run to him.

He had not failed to note the frustration on Ellen's face, but his arms were around Di, his face buried in her hair. And they had stayed no longer than it took him to say, "Thanks."

That had been a week ago. He wished Di would say more about her day and evening after her Rringg!! than that he knew the feeling himself. He would like to know what had happened between her and her stonemate. Perhaps someday he could bring himself to ask.

His thumb followed the curves of the stone. He opened his eyes and stared at it. A thin line of sunlight struck his lap with warmth, making the stone glow like a cat's eye in the beam of a car's headlights. He and Di had knocked so many times in the last few days, and every time they had heard only a clack. He shifted his gaze to the paper on his lap. He groaned. Student papers were uniformly awful, the exceptions rare enough to make him feel good for days. And he had seen no exceptions in the stack so far.

He thought again of Di, picturing her oval face, the tilt of her breasts, and more. Her mind, her personality, those aspects of her he had known longer, he could not visualize.

The Rringg!! experience was a precious thing. He had never felt the sense of fellowship he had found with Bruce. Never. Not even with Di. And he would love to talk about it, if only she would give him an opening, say something, not pretend it had never happened. Or could one talk about it only with a stonemate? He shook his head. Anyone who had had the experience would want to share it as widely as possible, wouldn't they? Or would they? Could it be a private ecstasy? Something, like an orgasm, that one simply assumes others are familiar with? People didn't talk about their orgasms. And people who had never had one could have very little idea of what they were really missing.

He looked back at the papers. It didn't help that their topics were so monotonous. The eggs. The stones. Flights of sophomoric philosophy. Speculations on origins and causes. False romanticism and fin de siecle pessimism. Nothing about orgasms.

Alec and Di sat together, facing their friends over the lunch table. Franklin sat to one side, looking wistful as Ellen and Ybarra touched each other repeatedly and tenderly. He did not know what Alec--and perhaps Di--suspected, that Ellen's motivation had an element of revenge, of anger at Alec for leaving her as soon as Di had appeared.

Ellen was saying that her students were as obsessed with the stones as Alec's. "A few," she said. "A few are even putting in extra time in the lab, studying the things. We've got lasers, and they're doing sonography, and microscopy. And they're testing the reagents on every stone they can find."

Ybarra picked at his french fries. "Are your kids finding anything? Mine aren't."

"They haven't seen any internal structure. Outside, they're all the same except for color." She paused to sip at her coffee. "There's a hint of microwaves, radio waves."

"What about the shards?" asked Franklin.

Ybarra grunted. "Crystalline carbonates, doped with metals to give the colors."

"Doped?" asked Alec.

"Traces of copper, uranium, chromium. Like pottery glazes."

"Oh, yeah." Suddenly, Ellen brightened. "Just yesterday, one of the kids found a couple of stones that react with nitric acid."

Ybarra sat up straighter. Franklin, Di, and Alec all leaned forward. "What?"

"The acid drops foam on contact."

"Then they must be carbonate too."

"Sure, but..."

"Do they Rringg!!?"

"What, Alec?"

"Do they work?"

"And why did they lose their, their immunity to your tests?" asked Franklin.

Ellen shook her head. "I haven't the faintest, but why should..."

"We've got to check," said Ybarra. "There may be a connection. Maybe whatever force stabilizes these things is what gives them the Rringg!! ability. And this is the first real handle on the things we've found. Maybe..."

"But how?" asked Di.

Franklin grinned at them. "That's easy. Find a few, and track them through a couple of circle dances. Where are those foamers now?"

Two days later, the answer was clear: The foamers never gave a Rringg!! at all. They were clackers only, and even their clacks sounded faintly different. They were gathered in Ellen's lab with the half dozen students who had been testing the foamers in the field. Alec was preparing to hoist himself onto a black and green cabinet when Ybarra cried, "Easy, Alec! That's an expensive piece of machinery."

Alec slid back onto the floor. "What is it?"

"It's for nuclear magnetic resonance studies." At Alec's perplexed expression, Ellen laughed. "Don't worry. There's no radiation. It uses magnetic fields to track atomic nuclei."

"Has it given you anything?"

"Zilch." The students laughed. The speaker, Michael Weldon, was short and muscular. He wore a green T-shirt that revealed zippers tattooed on his arms; they had been a low-key fad for several years. When the laughter stopped, he scowled, for neither he nor the other students were really pleased. They had had to trade their own nonfoamers to get their experimental duds. "The foamers seem to have plenty of hydrogen in their carbonate. The real ones--they don't even register."

Ellen glared when Franklin muttered, "I still think it might be psychic..." But neither said anything more.

A slight girl with a forlorn expression held up her foamer. She wore a single blonde braid coiled like a headband around her head. The rest of her hair fell free. "Are they dead? Do they live for only a few days?"

"I don't think so, Naomi." Alec held out his own stone. "We found this one the very first day. Where's the acid?"

Ellen passed him a beaker of dilute nitric acid and an eye dropper. A student held out a wash bottle. Alec tested his stone, and it failed to foam. So did Di's and Franklin's. When Ellen produced one of her own, a deeper green than Di's, it too passed the test. Alec looked at Ybarra, but he had apparently not found one. He shook his head. "If they're inert to everything, they certainly shouldn't deteriorate."

Alec knocked with Franklin, with Ellen, and--hopefully--with Di. They knocked with each other. But there were no Rringg!!s. Di touched her stone more gently to his a second time, and she murmured, "Maybe next time."

"Then what?" said Naomi. "If they're not dead, then..."

"Maybe they're fakes," offered Michael Weldon.

"No!" Cries of protest erupted from the other students. Tears welled from Naomi's eyes. "Who would do that?"

Ybarra shrugged his ignorance for them all. "You'll have to find new ones. But they're still showing up. There's no shortage."

"Yeah." Weldon stared at the floor. One white-knuckled hand clutched his foamer.

"We can trade again, too. And maybe we can find out where those foamers come from."

Ellen opened an overhead cupboard. "You'll need a way to spot them." She found a box of small vials, each one with a screw-on eyedropper. She taped them together in pairs. Then she filled one in each pair with dilute nitric acid, the other with distilled water, for rinsing. As she passed them out, she said, "Test kits. Use them when you get the chance."

When the lab door had closed behind the students, Alec bounced a test kit in his palm. "I'd like to know, too. Who's the counterfeiter?"

Ybarra slipped a kit into his shirt pocket. "I think our crew got their foamers from other students."

"Guess who their friends are," snorted Ellen.

"Still," said Di. "I've seen them trading stones in the dances. Could someone be taking advantage of that...?"

"To slip in ringers?" No one smiled. Ellen ran her fingers over her own stone for a moment, and then she gripped it tightly. The tendons in her wrist stood out. "We could find out. We could accept a trade. But..."

"I don't want to either," said Alec. He clutched his own stone in the darkness of his pocket.

Alec never did have to trade his stone. Neither did the others, for their students answered their questions for them. Alec and Di were on their way to his place late that afternoon, walking toward the parking lot by the gym, carrying briefcases full of texts and notes and student papers. Their free hands were entwined, their legs brushing as they walked.

The gym sat at the end of the long common, a rectilinear mass of brick and concrete. Its own drive arced off the main thoroughfare, enclosing a half-moon of grass and shrubbery and trees. A battered yellow van was parked at one end of the arc, a thread of smoke rising from its tailpipe. On the grass, surrounding an island of yew and maple, were the familiar concentric circles of students. Alec and Di could see Naomi and Michael, chanting and knocking with the rest. Michael was bare-armed, his tattooed zippers showing.

Alec and Di had no interest in the dance this time. They had had enough of the campus for the day. They wanted time to themselves, a few hours of reading papers facing each other across Alec's oaken table. Their path would lead them well clear of the gym and the students.

But just as one corner of the gym began to cut their line of sight--if they had bothered to look--they heard someone yell: "It's a fake!"

They looked. The circles were breaking, milling, converging on one small portion of their rim.

They let go of each other's hands and began to run. They said nothing, but each wanted badly to know what was going on.

They shouldered their way through the crowd to find one disheveled young man on the ground, tie askew, his arms and legs pinned by rough hands while Michael Weldon went through his pockets. He was not struggling, and his eyes were intent on Naomi, who was carefully touching drops of acid to the stones Michael found. Beside her already rested two small piles of stones.

When Michael saw them, he explained: "He wanted to trade. When I checked, it was a foamer."

Alec nodded approvingly. Di scowled. Naomi pointed at one of her piles.

"Foamers," she said. She sounded disgusted, contemptuous. "A mess of them.

Fakes. The others are real."

The students surrounding them began to protest: "Hey! I traded with this bird yesterday--today--this morning. I want my stone back. Cream the bastard!"

Michael found one more stone. "That's it."

Naomi waved her fellows back. "Let me check yours. We'll give you good ones."

She vanished in a press of bodies, a wall of hands and stones and pleading voices. The hands that had held the trader down let go.

Alec said, "Michael! Bring him over here! Let's find out who he is."

As Michael pushed through the crowd, his prisoner in tow, an engine sounded near. No one looked. Di said, "Who's he working for? Where's his ID?"

The trader looked battered. He needed a shave. His jacket, a gray nylon windbreaker, was torn at shoulder and pocket. There was a rip in one denim trouser leg. A hip pocket flapped. Short blond hair lay over his forehead. A bruise swelled on his cheekbone. His lips were pressed tightly together.

Clearly, he had no intention of speaking.

Michael bent the man's arm up behind his back. "I'll make him tell us."

But even as the man's lips whitened in pain, there was a brief squeal of brakes. A sudden blow knocked Alec to his knees. He rolled, and he saw the van he and Di had noted earlier. Its dirty yellow door was open, swinging where Alec had stood a moment before. Two men, clad like the trader in gray windbreakers, were clubbing Michael into a yew bush. Di was sitting on the grass, her skirt askew, her briefcase open, spilling papers. The trader was diving into the van.

It took only seconds. The two strangers followed the trader, the van's engine roared, its tires squealed as it reached the pavement, and the van disappeared around the gym corner and through the parking lot.

Alec picked himself up and helped Di to her feet. Michael extricated himself from the shrubbery, his face red with anger and frustration, tears in his eyes, scratches marring his zippers. He stood, fists clenched, and stared after the van. "Who are they?" he cried.

Alec felt no less furious. His knees trembled, and his voice shook when he tried to speak. He gave up the effort, prying his hand loose from Di's arm, where it must have been hurting her though she made no sign. Her own hand lay on his, clenching just as hard. He watched as his tension eased, as hers died down as well and the pink returned to her knuckles. Her grip remained tight.

Michael had stated the question indeed. Just as they had guessed, there were counterfeit stones. They had met those who passed them. Behind them, somewhere, were the counterfeiters. But who were they? What were their goals? What did they want? No answers were in sight.

Although... Naomi was holding a well-aged wallet in one hand and saying, "I think he lost this."

V

Di's touch helped soothe the congestion of rage in Alec's chest. He wanted to call the cops, the FBI, the dean, the... anyone who could conceivably undo the evil they had met. If he were still a child, he would be calling for his mother. But Di's grip gentled him, calmed him. He became able to talk, and to listen, and he let Di talk him into returning to his office. Once there, he called their friends. Ybarra and Ellen came immediately; Franklin, stuck teaching a lab, said he would catch up on the news later.

Ybarra, as he perched on the edge of Alec's desk, asked, "So who was he?"

But Alec could only shake his head. The wallet had been empty except for a few small bills and a single piece of paper with a phone number written on it.

"He had a lot of the stones?"

Di nodded. She and Ellen were sitting in the pair of fiberglass seats that took up too much of Alec's floor space. "He must have had two dozen fakes. Naomi gave them to me." She opened her purse and began to pile the stones on the desk.

"The government?" asked Ellen. "They're still collecting them?" Ybarra stirred the pile with one hand. When she reached out, he handed her two.

"By taking advantage of people who haven't had Rringg!!s yet, Ellen?" Alec turned sideways in his chair, still fuming, his hands gripping his knees, and stared at the bookshelves in front of him. There was a Bible there, and other holy books, a text or two on ethics. He had once thought he could write a book on the differences between how people thought they should behave and how they actually did. Now he wondered briefly if a better comparison might not be between people and institutions, especially governments.

"I suppose," he added. "I suppose it would work."

"It's better than taking them by force."

"Is it?" Alec stared at Ybarra. He recalled the circle dance where he and Di had had their first Rringg!!s. "It's theft, deception, cheating. And they've been doing it for awhile." He told them of that first trader he had seen, his expression so uninvolved in the circle ritual, so intent on something else, so calculating. "I can guess why," he said. "If they can put enough fakes in circulation, they run the odds of getting a Rringg!! way down. That gets people's minds back on their work and keeps the economy from falling apart." He shook his head.

"At least, now we know what's going on," said Di.

"And the test kits worked."

"But don't we need a better test, Walter?"

Ybarra nodded. "I'll have to think about that, Ellen. Right now, I'd like to know how they make the fakes."

Ellen took her worrystone from her purse and held it beside the fakes. "Ground shell, I'll bet. With some sort of binder."

Alec and Di took fakes of their own to compare with their stones. "They look just the same."

"We should get the word out, tell people not to trade."

Ybarra shook his head. "It wouldn't work. They'd still do it, if they thought they could trust the other guy, and they'd still get robbed."

"I think," said Alec, "that you'd better come up with that better test pretty soon, then. And it had better be easy to use."

"I have an idea or two."

Ellen was the first to rise, one hand tugging gently at Ybarra's shoulder.

"C'mon then. Back to the lab."

Ybarra grunted as he rose from the edge of the desk and began to scoop stones into his pockets. "Home, first. I'll sleep on it." One of the stones fell on the floor.

Di stood, saying, "Here's one test." She brought the heel of one shoe down hard on the stone. There was a noise like grating glass, and it lay in a dozen pieces, puddled in gem-like dust.

She whistled. "My father once had an agate worrystone, shaped something like these things." She paused. "It wouldn't Rringg!! but it was a lot stronger than that. He wore it on his keychain."

Ybarra took a piece of paper from Alec's desk and knelt to scoop the fragments up. He looked thoughtful as he creased the paper into an envelope. "They react with acid, and they're more fragile. That's something."

Ellen touched him on the knee. "Maybe the right test is just to knock them together hard."

He shook his head. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, then," said Alec. He ushered them out and locked his door, and he and Di once more headed for home.

He did not know what he had hoped the meeting would accomplish. What could they do? Four junior faculty members, far from the seats of power, could only dream of changing the world. That did not mean that they should not dream or try what they might, but it did mean they should be realistic.

Yet he did not want to be realistic. He was mad.

When Alec stopped by the department office after class the next afternoon, Cam Dvorak beckoned him into his spacious quarters. Dvorak was the head of the department that year, a tall man but heavy, his cheeks jowling beneath curly black sideburns. His message was simple. A speaker was arriving that evening, and he wanted Alec to meet him at the airport. "You'll like him," said Dvorak. "Right up your alley. Wrote that book on business writing." He rummaged on his desk until he found it. The cover was a striking black, with red lettering. Alec carefully noted the photo of the author when Dvorak opened the book to the back flap. As he left, the department secretary handed him a pink message slip. It bore a single word, "Lasagna," but that cryptic message he understood. Ellen had decided the day was cool enough to cook, she had been free of lectures and labs, and she had thought it too long since she had last indulged her friends. Alec laughed and told the secretary where he'd be.

Ellen's apartment boasted sliding glass doors open onto a small redwood deck that held a table set with plastic cups, chips, and finger salad. Franklin and Ybarra were already there when Alec and Di arrived, both seated near the doors, where they could watch the cook.

As Alec uncorked the bottle he had brought and poured for Di, he thought that Franklin was behaving well. He surely knew he had lost all dream of Ellen, but he was chatting now with no sign of animosity for the man she had chosen.

"Have you figured it out yet?" asked Ybarra.

"No," said Alec.

"What?" asked Franklin.

"The phone number." Alec held up the scrap of paper and explained where it had come from.

"So dial it," said Ybarra, grinning as Ellen took a seat beside him.

Franklin shook his head. "That might let them know too much. But..." He stepped into the apartment, returning promptly with the phone in his hand. "Not the operator, " he said. "'Weee don' give owwwt that informaaaation!' But I've got a sister..."

He held out a hand for Alec's scrap of paper. A moment later, he was saying, "Hey, Shawna... Right. Look something up for me?" His hand covering the mouthpiece, he explained: "She's a billing super..." He listened, scribbling on the scrap. "I'll tell you all about it later on. See you Sunday?"

"There," he said. "Simple." He looked at Ellen as if for approval.

She raised her cup to him. "If you have the contacts."

"Let's see." Ybarra took the scrap of paper. "Jason Burr," he read. "Not a very good neighborhood."

"But that's where they're hiding," said Alec. "I'll bet they've got a factory for the fakes, and a closet full of real ones."

"Maybe." Di leaned over Ybarra's shoulder to read what Franklin had written. "If it has anything to do with the traders."

"Sure it does," insisted Franklin. He pouted, as if she had challenged his contribution to the mystery. "Though I'll bet the name's a fake."

Ybarra grinned. "Too many whodunnits, my boy. Real life..."

The kitchen timer dinged. Ellen interrupted. "There's our Rringg!!!"

The table was littered with the empty pan, a platter with two limp celery stalks, a scatter of dirty paper plates, and five wine glasses. The nearly empty bottle sat precariously on the deck's narrow railing. Alec cradled a coffee mug in his lap as he leaned his chair back against the wall.

Ybarra was saying, "The stones fluoresce, you know? The kids were shining ultraviolet lights on them, and they got quite a glow."

"Just the real ones? The fakes?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh, Di. Both. But I've been wondering. Maybe there's some difference there. Maybe they respond to different UV frequencies. I've got to check."

Franklin snorted. "I can just see it. A special flashlight in every hand.

Looking for new stones in the bushes..."

"Hey! That'd work!"

"Criss-crossing beams above the circles on the common."

They all laughed.

"Maybe we could even sell the things. Get rich, and retire young. Spend the rest of our lives fishing."

Ellen looked as if she didn't approve of Franklin's dream, but before she could speak, a buzz broke the mood. She left, and in a moment she led a hesitant Bruce Dietz onto the deck. "Alec?"

"Bruce!"

"I was looking for you this afternoon. The department told me..."

"Sure!" Alec introduced them all, while Franklin held out a plastic cup of wine. Bruce explained himself: "A friend of mine on the paper showed me a wire story I thought you'd like."

"So tell." And he did. It had come in on the satellite beam, complete with pictures and bearing the wire service's official stamp. A reporter, on a hunch, had visited a zoo, and he had found that the apes there, chimps and gorillas and orangutans, had their own stones. They were knocking them, too, and some were even getting Rringg!!s.

"Are they reaching through the bars?" Ellen wanted to know.

"What about in the wild?" asked Di.

"And porpoises!" exclaimed Franklin.

Bruce shook his head. "I don't know about porpoises, and it didn't say anything about the apes trying to knock with people. But, yes, they're apparently doing it in the jungle, too. The story mentioned a few reports. But..." He paused.

"Best of all, when the paper called the service to confirm, all they got was a denial."

"What?"

He nodded. "They're guessing a wee bit of government pressure."

Alec laughed and checked his watch. "I'm not surprised. But I've got to run." He explained his errand. Ybarra and Franklin volunteered to help clean up, and Bruce said, "Let's take my van. Room for all." Alec and Di followed him from the apartment.

There was no mistaking Wendell Collin among the crowd disembarking from the plane. His head erupted above the mass, its rumpled red hair a banner for attention. Alec waved a hand, calling, "Dr. Collin!"

As the man turned toward him, Di let one small giggle escape. Collin's prominent chin jutted like the prow of a boat while his body was so skinny that it seemed impossible he would leave a wake. But his face was wrinkled with good humor, and his smile was open as he held out a hand. Alec introduced himself and his friends. "The motel's just a few minutes away, and the van's in the lot.

Luggage?"

"This is it." Collin hefted the canvas bag in his left hand.

They were at the motel only long enough to drop the bag in Collin's room and decide where to take the visitor for a bite and a drink.

The Pilot's Haven was a nondescript structure of brick faced with creosoted timbers and relieved with lignum vitae shrubs set in beds of bark chips. Inside, the walls bore plastic imitations of ship's wheels, sextants, and astrolabes. The booths were padded plastic dimly illuminated with vaguely nautical brass lamps.

While they waited for their orders, Collin drew from his jacket pocket a worrystone. He held it up, saying, "If we're lucky, it'll be a great way to get acquainted."

Alec produced his own, they knocked, and they got a clack. When Di and Bruce fared no better, Collin said, "At least, we've done our duty by the new order. You do know what these things are?" He held his stone in one hand, stroking it with the other.

They shook their heads. He said, "Do you remember the telephone system years ago? Before they broke it up as a monopoly? They called it 'Ma Bell,' and she had a slogan."

Di laughed. "You mean, 'Reach out and touch someone?'"

He touched his stone to hers once more. "It's the ghost of Ma Bell behind it all, I'm sure. Making us reach out and touch, and then ringing our chimes for a reward." He was interrupted by the arrival of their drinks and his sandwich. "At least, that's the Bell hypothesis."

Bruce raised his glass, toasting the idea. "Have you heard about the chimps?" Collin nodded, adding that he just been in New York, and he had heard that that city's Finest had been sent into the Bronx Zoo's cages to confiscate the stones. "But the apes didn't cooperate any more than people have been doing. They threw things. One gorilla even threw a cop."

Alec, grinning, said, "They're sneakier here." He told of the traders and the fakes and of their test for real ones. Collin said, "I'll pass the word on that, if I may. Lots of people are frustrated because they don't get the Rringg!!s they want."

"But even the real ones don't Rringg!! every time."

Collin nodded. "There's a group at Columbia. They tell me the stones have to be responding to some sort of resonance feature inside them. And since two stones never seem to Rringg!! twice in succession, they have to reset the feature, whatever it is."

Di leaned forward. "But when do they reset it? Not just when they Rringg!!

People get a clack with one knock and a Rringg!! the next time they try."

"So they do it spontaneously." Bruce raised a hand for the waitress. "And periodically, randomly."

Alec drained his beer. "If they didn't, we wouldn't see so many Rringg!!s. Just think, there's probably at least one stone for everyone on Earth, and if they

didn't reset, lots of people would never find their stonemates. They'd be in China or someplace."

Collin's sharp face scanned them admiringly. "That's what they told me, though they did say it might not be that bad. There might be only a few settings for the resonances. A stone might not have just one mate, but dozens, or hundreds."

VI

After his first class the next day, Alec walked over to Ybarra's lab, where he found the geologist leaning over a video camera on a tripod. It was pointing at a glowing violet egg on a lab bench; on its side was a sticker identifying it as the property of the university broadcasting studio. Not far from the egg sat a brown carton with the markings of an air freight service.

"I haven't seen that color before," said Alec.

"Me neither," said Ybarra. "But there it was. I even watched it land, right on the lawn." He gave a sigh of satisfaction. "It took me long enough to get one." He stepped around the tripod and patted his prize. "And I've been keeping my eye right on it. Stayed up all night."

"Aren't you going to let it break?"

He shook his head. "Not until I've got this set up. Then I'll leave the room. With luck, I'll get a record of the process."

"Dr. Ybarra?" The student in the door was Michael Weldon. Alec remembered him and his arm zippers both from this lab and from the donnybrook in front of the gym. "Have you seen any circle dances this morning?"

When both Ybarra and Alec shook their heads, Michael added, "The traders aren't around. They're gone."

"They must be afraid you'd jump them again." Alec grinned at the thought.

"We would, too, but..."

"What?"

"There's a couple of new guys. They say they've been collecting stones out in the woods. And they're selling them."

"Did you get one?"

"Are you kidding? For fifty bucks? And none of the buyers will let us check."

"They don't want to know if they've been taken," suggested Alec.

"I've got one." The new speaker was Naomi, another of Ybarra's student helpers. She was grinning and breathing hard, as if she had been running to catch up with Michael; the single braid she wore around her head had slipped over one brow.

"They left their car unlocked."

"And I'll bet it's a foamer," said Ybarra.

She nodded and held out a yellow worrystone. He took it, ran a thumb over its contours, and said, "We'll get a good look at it later." He pointed at the carton on the bench. "The new SEM chamber came this morning. But first..." He set the stone down and flipped a switch on the side of the video camera. "Let's get out of here for awhile. I want to watch a real one hatch."

"It worked," said Ybarra as he set his tray down and slid into the booth beside Ellen. He held out his hand, palm up, to show them all a violet worrystone. One thumb caressed it as if against his will.

"What worked?" said Di.

Alec explained briefly about the videotaping, and Ybarra produced a glossy black and white photo marred by several white streaks of static. "It's a still from the tape," he said, pointing. "See? Some of the shards are still falling, and you can make out this--it looks like a spider web, or a system of membranes. They support the stone in the middle. When the egg breaks, they turn to powder." Di pointed at the static lines. "That's not supposed to be there, is it?" The geologist shrugged. "It wasn't, anywhere else on the tape. Just Murphy, I guess." He drew a small clear glass bottle from his shirt pocket. It was half

full of violet dust. "But look. That's the powder. It's the same stuff as the shell, carbonates, but there's an organic component as well."

Ellen laughed. "Franklin would say that proves it's alive. Psychokinetic membranes! They let the eggs float gently to Earth. And telepathic, too! That's how they tell when you're watching."

"So what else could it be?" Franklin was standing by the end of the table, scowling at Ellen. No one had noticed his approach, but apparently he had been there long enough to realize what they were talking about. Now he said, "I find it hard to believe that no one else has set up a camera."

"They surely have," said Ellen. "In some government lab. But they're not talking."

"I expect," said Ybarra. "I expect they're trying very hard to figure out that anti-gravity effect."

"Did you get a chance to try that new SEM chamber?" asked Alec.

Another photo landed on the table. "Look," said the geologist. "Individual grains." His finger traced their borders. "In some kind of a binder. Probably plastic or epoxy. Something strong enough to stand up to knocking, but not to stomping." He grinned. "Press the mixture in a mold. Polish the surface. And you've got a fake. A foamer."

"So they're changing their tactics," said Di. "They must make the fakes from crushed shell. But why?"

Alec sighed. "The government doesn't want people ringing each other's chimes." He barely registered Di's sudden blush. "It's bad for business. And it cuts the efficiency of the armed forces."

"You think it's the government?"

"Who else?"

The strangest of events can come to seem normal if they but continue long enough. Alec knew that, but still the newscaster's expressions of shock and outrage and disappointment struck him as funny. "People are watching the skies tonight," she said. "But in vain. Those gaily colored Easter Eggs have finally stopped drifting down from heaven." She held up a pale blue worrystone. "Did you get yours? If not, it's too late now. They have fallen everywhere, an estimated two apiece for every human being on the planet. They have landed on lawns and in parks and in forests and lakes and oceans. Most have surely been found. A few may still be out there, awaiting their lucky discoverers. But there will be no more. They have stopped coming."

"I never found one," a few dismayed members of the public said into the microphones before them. "And now I never will." They looked ready to cry. Government representatives sang a happier tune: "At last," they said. "The crisis is over. We can get back to important matters such as the war in..." Business people also seemed relieved, if for different reasons: "People just haven't been spending the way we'd like," said one. "Employees have been knocking stones with each other and the customers, and then knocking off to chat up their stonemates. They still have their stones, of course. But maybe now things will get back to normal."

"A 'crisis,' they call it," said Alec. He and Di had returned Wendell Collin to his motel after his talk, and their time was now their own. In the morning, Collin would take a cab to the airport. They just might stay in bed, right where they were now, watching the television, snuggling warmly and companionably.

"Not for the fake-sellers," said Di. "They won't be able to make their phonies fast enough, and the price will go through the roof. They couldn't have timed their shift in tactics any better."

Alec agreed. "People want what the stones provide. When the chimes ring, they feel an intense bond with another person. It's not love, but..."

"Of course it is," said Di. She fingered the rim of his navel as she spoke. "Not erotic love. Brotherly love. What the Greeks called agape."

"It's too bad it's temporary," said Alec. "And over. A little more of the stuff could help us solve a lot of problems."

"It's not over. And I'm beginning to see that even the fakes can help us, really."

He made a skeptical noise in his throat.

"Sure. When people are looking for a Rringg!! they're not looking for power or money. And they'll keep looking even if they don't get one right away. They know it takes awhile."

He laughed. "So the government has shot itself in the foot. It's defeated itself. It wanted to get rid of a distraction, and instead..."

She giggled. "And now they've even put a price on love. It'll be a better motivator than ever."

"They've put the price on brotherly love. That's a first."

There was silence. Di turned her head away and back again. Her hand clutched at the skin of his belly.

"What's the matter?"

"You haven't said a thing. But... But, it's funny, what the stones do. People don't distinguish types of love very well." She was talking rapidly, babbling as if she had a lot to say all at once. "Some people can't even tell erotic love from parental love or filial love," she said. "It's even harder to tell erotic from agapic love."

Alec winced as he guessed where she was leading. He tightened his arm around her.

"Certainly," Di went on. "Certainly, I had the problem. I did."

Alec said nothing.

"It's time I told you," she said. "That stonemate I found? I slept with him. He was a self-centered boor, but the stones..." When Alec nodded she went on. "The glow was wearing off. We wanted to stretch it out. Or I did, anyway. He might just have been taking advantage of me. That's the kind of man he is. But it didn't work. When I left, I didn't want ever to see him again."

Alec thought he understood, and he said so. He did not say that he had come close to doing the same thing with Ellen, and without the excuse of the stones.

The morning paper bore a banner headline:

"GOD'S GRACE IS MISSING!"

The story beneath said that the Reverend Jimmy-Bob Gregory had announced the formation of the Church of the Second Chance. His message was simple: God had sent His eggs to Earth as a gift of Grace in tangible form. The Rringg!! and the temporary bond of stonemate to stonemate brought imperfect human beings as close as they could ever come to the ever-lasting Brotherly Love felt by all in Heaven. They should have been grateful. They should have flocked in their millions to the Jimmy-Bob's Church to be baptized and saved. But they hadn't. Now God had withdrawn his gift. The absence of new eggs and stones was all the proof anyone needed. Henceforth, everyone who had not been baptized by Jimmy-Bob himself would most surely fry in Hell!

When Alec and Di reached the campus, they found a gray-haired man standing on a concrete bench, haranguing a small crowd of students who had paused on their way to breakfast or classes. He wore a robe of rough gray cloth, as did his assistant, a young woman who was clutching a sheaf of pamphlets to her chest. His message too was simple: His was the true Church of the Second Chance, and he alone truly knew what was going on. God had whispered to him in the night, in his dreams, and he knew that God had by no means withdrawn His Grace. The eggs and stones were gone, yes, but only for a moment! They would be back! God was doing it right this time. He had learned from His mistake of two thousand years before that it did not work simply to tell human beings to love their neighbors. He had to show them how, and that was what the stones and their Rringg!!s were all about! They would be back! They would be different! And in due time, God would send an egg that would hatch into Jesus Christ Himself, the Second Coming.

This was Judgment Day!

Later, over coffee in his lab, Ybarra said, "I didn't see him, no, but he was on the radio this morning. As soon as the media heard about him, they all sent out crews. Reporters, cameras, mikes, the works."

"I saw it on TV," said Ellen. "He was surrounded."

"Me too," said Franklin. "He said he received the Word just last night. He was half asleep, and God told him very clearly that the Reverend Jimmy-Bob was absolutely wrong, as wrong as he could be. The Rringg!!s were Divine Grace, yes, but that Grace was not withdrawn. No, the Divinity was simply pausing while He shifted His weight in preparation for another step upon the stairs."

"We should have expected them," said Di. "Both of them. Every time something strange happens, the religious nuts come out of the woodwork. It's a Sign of the Rapture to come. It's the Second Coming. It's the Anti-Christ. And we aren't that far from the turn of the millennium."

Ybarra nodded. "We should have expected it as soon as the first eggs appeared. The surprising thing is how long it took."

"People were busy," said Alec. "Preoccupied. Chasing eggs and Rringg!!s."

"They can still knock their stones."

"But what they've got is all they've got. No more spending all day hunting through the shrubbery. They have time to fantasize."

"It had better be fantasy," said Di with a shudder. She, like the others, was not a believer, and she knew that if God were to touch her life directly and unmistakably, the shock would be as great as if she were to meet an actual, in-the-flesh vampire.

VII

"Look at this, Alec," said Ybarra. What he held looked like a flashlight with a pistol grip. On the lab bench behind him were two antique china egg cups, one holding the violet worrystone that had hatched from the egg he had found a few days before, the other holding the false stone Naomi had stolen.

"Michael figured it out," said Ellen. As she spoke, the student proudly shook one fist above his head. "It has an ultraviolet bulb from the spectrophotometer."

When Alec looked puzzled, she added, "That's a gadget we use to identify molecules in liquid solutions. Put a test tube full of the solution in the machine, vary the frequency of the UV light you shine through it, and graph which frequencies are absorbed, or which ones make the molecules glow."

"Like this." Ybarra aimed the strange device at his violet stone and pulled the trigger. The end of the flashlight turned a vibrant blue, and nothing happened. When he aimed at the yellow stone and fired again, the stone glowed green.

"It's the binder," said Michael Weldon. "It fluoresces at a different frequency from the material of the stones and shards. If we shine the right frequency of UV on an egg..." He gestured, saying plainly, "There you see it."

"It's a test gun," said Ybarra. "Ten feet is close enough, and then just aim and fire. If it glows, it's a fake."

"How many of them can you make?" asked Alec.

Ybarra shrugged. "We have enough bulbs for three. So..." He opened a drawer beneath the bench top and handed another of the test guns to Alec.

That evening, for awhile, the test guns seemed already obsolete.

Alec and Di had eaten at her apartment. Afterwards, they had begun to walk into town, thinking of visiting the ice cream parlor, but they never made it. They were passing the town's small park when a cry drew their attention. They saw pointing arms and up-turned faces, and when they too looked up, they saw a scatter of translucent gems, shining in the sunset light, drifting slowly toward the ground.

"The eggs!" someone cried. "They're back!"

The announcement was hardly necessary. The days of deprivation indeed were over, although these eggs were not quite the same as the old. As soon as the first of them reached the ground, all could see that they were nearly large enough to hold a ten-year-old child. They were also so translucent that the shapes at their cores were visible.

The first arrivals were immediately surrounded by hushed groups of people. Alec and Di found themselves on the fringe of one such group, watching. At first, everyone kept an awed, respectful distance, but soon a denim-clad young woman stepped toward the nearest of the new eggs. She leaned over it, hesitated, and reached. She touched it, and it burst, the shards falling musically into a ring around a stone about twice as large as those with which everyone was familiar. The watchers sighed, and Alec said quietly, "It smells like drinking eggnog by a beaver pond. Nutmeg and mud."

As if his words had released them from physical bonds, the crowd moved forward, each of its members aiming toward an egg, touching and, after the burst of sound and scent, picking up the new worrystones.

Some members of the crowd were prompt to produce their older worrystones and offer to knock. Others were as prompt to respond. And Rringg!!s were chiming across the park.

"They're not quite the same," said Alec. "And there are too many of them."

"They never fail!" said Di. Her voice was awed.

"Except..." Alec pointed at a couple who had knocked two of the new stones together. "And..." He drew his test gun from his pocket and aimed it at a stone whose owner was still waving it in the air. He pulled the trigger, and the stone glowed yellow. "The fakes," he said. "The new stones Rringg!! whenever they touch an old one. We don't need these." He bounced the test gun in his hand.

Di laid her palm on his forearm. "Of course we do," she said. "It can check many stones at once, and at a distance, and without distraction by the Rringg!!s."

He nodded, eyeing the crowd. That distraction was very real. He saw one man who held two stones, one old, one new, in either hand. Every few seconds, he touched them together; his face was totally oblivious to his surroundings, and a string of drool fell from one corner of his mouth. He might as well have been on the most powerful of drugs, or had a wire plugged into his pleasure center.

Alec put the test gun away. He found his worrystone and held it toward his mate. She produced her own, touched his, and when the result was a disappointing

"clack," said, "We need one, don't we?"

It did not take them long as soon as they had put some distance between themselves and the crowd. The new eggs were everywhere, and even in the glowing dusk they emitted a dim but brilliantly hued light, as if each one had stored a fragment of the sunset.

Alec and Di knelt by a pale green egg. "Go ahead," said Alec. "You touch it."

She shook her head. "No. You."

They reached together and released the burst of sound and scent. Di picked up the worrystone. Alec retrieved a handful of shards for his friends' labs. When he found something like a damp scrap of popped balloon, he said, "Look at this. The membranes don't go to powder."

"Never mind," said Di. "Feel this. It's softer, almost like cartilage, but... Where's your stone?"

They touched, and at last they had a Rringg!! Yet it was not what they had expected. They did not feel the sudden upwelling of affection and good opinion and generosity that had marked their previous Rringg!!s with other people. Instead, they found themselves staring at the new stone, feeling affection, yes, but also immense respect and even awe.

The tide of emotion did not last as long as that spell emitted by the original stones, but it was in its way as powerful. When it subsided, Alec said, "Is that what religion is like?"

Di shook her head. "I wouldn't know." She paused, staring at the stone in her hand. "It is another kind of love. But it's not aimed at people. Not at whoever is holding the stone you knock yours against."

"It's aimed at the stone itself, isn't it?"

By lunchtime the next day, nearly everyone had one of the new worrystones, and Franklin and Ybarra had each found time to do some testing. "The material is the same." The geologist set one of the new stones in the center of the table as he spoke. "So is the structure. But there is more water, as if the first eggs and stones were simply these, dried out."

The five friends were once more in the campus pub. Franklin nodded eagerly over his sandwich. "They're flesh!" he said. "I looked at the membrane that supports the stones, and it has a cellular structure, with long strands that must be nerve cells. That's how they float down from the sky, how they tell we're looking or not looking, how they make us love one another, or them."

Ellen laughed. So did Di, who then said, "They can't be psychic. There's no such thing. It's technology. Alien super-science."

"Clarke's law," said Ybarra. When the others looked puzzled, he added, "I paraphrase, but the point is that if a technology is so advanced that you can't grasp the foggiest notion of how it works, it might as well be magic."

"Psychic or not," said Alec. "It makes no difference, eh?"

Ybarra shrugged. "Exactly. I'm more interested in..." He hesitated. "First they made us love each other. Then they made us love them. What's next?"

"Is there a sequence?" asked Di. "Are the Second Chancers right?"

"I'd rather know how they work," said Franklin.

Ellen said, "The new ones give off stronger bursts of microwaves." She tilted her head toward Ybarra. "My students checked a few this morning."

Franklin nodded furiously. "Electromagnetic waves can affect the brain," he said. "They've been shown to cause seizures and change reaction times, among other things."

"Will there be another round?" asked Alec. "Bigger eggs? Stronger signals?"

Another kind of love?"

"And what's the point?" asked Ybarra. "What are they here for? Are they benign? Or a threat?"

"They're softening us up," said Franklin.

"For what?" said Ellen. "Invasion? Alien contact? Or...?"

"The Second-Chancers know the answer," said Di.

Their uneasy laughter stopped when Alec said, "We don't."

"I don't trust them," said Franklin.

The Reverend Jimmy-Bob Gregory was on the television news that evening, flamboyant in sequined cassock and rhetorical gestures. He had been wrong, he said, displaying a virtuoso talent for changing his mind. The stones were not God's gift of Grace. The new stones proved that. They made people worship them, as if they were graven idols. They turned people away from God. And they revealed themselves at last to be temptations of the Devil. The eggs and the stones, old and new, he declared anathema. All who used them were damned. "Gregory," said the round-faced, balding announcer, "gained followers very quickly when the eggs stopped coming. People were disappointed, and worse, and they demanded answers. But now those same followers are fleeing Gregory's camp as fast as they arrived. The eggs are back, and other answers are more popular." The screen filled with the prophet of the second Church of the Second Chance, the very man Alec and Di had seen on campus. He was indoors now, standing behind a pulpit, and while his gestures were as extravagant as Gregory's, his robe was the same drab garment he had worn before. "The new stones," he shouted. "They link brotherly and divine love. They extend God's lesson. And when Christ comes for the second time, all, everyone, the entire human species, will be prepared to love Him as He should be loved. Salvation is at hand!"

Alec and Di were sitting side by side on the low couch in his living room. The

television was off. The shrill peeping of small frogs came through the open window. On the hassock before them their two original worrystones, gold and spring green, flanked the single new stone, a slightly darker green, that they had found in the park.

They could now, they knew, have a Rringg!! whenever they wished. All they had to do was push one of the smaller stones, his or hers, across the inch of space that separated them from the larger one. They had done it twice already. But it wasn't the same.

They picked up their original stones, studied them, stroked them, and held them toward each other. They knocked. But all they heard was a lifeless "clack."

Alec took Di's hand in his. "I wish...", he said.

She nodded. She knew and shared his wish. They had already talked it out: A Rringg!! could forge a bond between strangers. They already had a bond of their own, a more traditional one. Both felt that becoming stonemates as well could only draw them closer to each other, deepen and reinforce their feelings. But the Rringg!! they craved remained elusive.

They were not alone in their craving. The campus circle dances continued, often with an air of frenzied desperation, and when Ybarra's acid kits and test guns revealed fake stones, their owners cursed and wept and drew larger stones from their pockets, saying they were not the same, but they were better than nothing. "Is that true?" said Alec the first time he saw that reaction. "Love for other people, brotherly love, agape, can it really be better than divine love? Is divine love just a substitute for brotherly love, for people who can't find the latter?"

"Don't those who love God the most love their fellow men the least?" asked Ellen.

She and Alec and Di were watching a dance near the campus library. They saw no offers to trade, no harvesters with stones to sell. They did see testers with acid kits roaming the edges of the crowd, stopping now and again to check a stone for foam.

"Did you see that?" cried Ellen in an outraged voice. She was pointing toward a young man not far away. He wore stained jeans and a black T-shirt, and his forearms were tattooed. In one hand he held a pair of glass bottles topped with rubber bulbs. He was nodding reassuringly as with the other hand he passed an orange stone back to its owner.

"What?" asked Di.

"He checked that stone and said it was okay, and then he switched it! He palmed it!"

But before any of them could shout out what they had noticed, the tester's "client" produced her own test kit. The tester, eyes now wide with alarm, turned as if to run, but bystanders blocked his path.

VIII

Alec breathed a sigh of relief when the door of the small van parked beside his walk opened and Bruce Dietz stepped out. "Is Di with you?" he began to call, but then she jumped from the other side of the vehicle. "Wait till you see what we've got here!" she cried.

As he got closer, he could make out several figures behind the smoky glass of the van's rear section. Di slid open the side door. Bruce said, "They found him in a dorm."

The van's seats had been arranged to face each other. Sitting on them were five students, their grins a mixture of pride and anger. Beneath their feet was a rather older young man, unshaven and dirty and pale with fear, tied hand and foot with what looked like strips of torn bedsheet.

"Right," said one of the students. Alec had had him in one of his classes the

term before. His name was Dana something, and he belonged to the school's wrestling team. "He was going through drawers. Stealing worrystones." He held up a cloth sack.

"So we grabbed him. Then we went looking for Dr. Hadden." The words reminded Alec that Dana was a biology major.

"I saw them crossing the quad," said Bruce. "So I tagged along."

"Why didn't you call the cops?"

Another student snorted derisively. "You're the head of the Resistance, aren't you?"

Alec hadn't realized that the spotting of the fakes that had grown from their small effort to analyze the stones had been so glorified. But he supposed they were indeed a Resistance of sorts, and the only one on campus. "Okay." He sighed again. "Then let's get him inside. Down in the basement."

One of the basement's two small chambers was occupied by a gas furnace. The other, crowded with firewood and assorted junk, was clammy even in the heat of summer. Now it was almost cold, and spiderwebs and dirt gave it a dungeon-like air that seemed appropriate at the moment. "I don't have a rack," said Alec.

"Sorry."

Bruce Dietz laughed. "What's your name?"

"Jimmy Crane."

It took very little persuading to get his story. He was, he said, a part-time student who had been in the habit of amplifying his income by peddling a little dope. Recently, however, one of his customers had shown a badge. Crane had promptly agreed to collect worrystones for the government. Now the agent came by his apartment every night for the stones he had collected that day. He thought his "owners" must have recruited others like him.

"I'll bet they have," said Di.

"We ought to set a trap," said Dana. "Go to his apartment, grab whoever shows up, and make him talk too."

"How?" snorted one of his friends. "He's bound to be tougher."

"There's more of us," said Bruce.

Jimmy Crane's apartment was surprisingly well furnished, but dust was everywhere, streaked by fingerprints, and dirty dishes littered the small kitchen.

"He likes flight simulation games," said Bruce Dietz, pointing at an elaborate control yoke wired to an expensive personal computer.

Alec made sure the door was unlocked while the others concealed themselves as best they could. Then he pushed Crane into a leather sling chair, turned on the television, and said, "When he knocks, you just say, 'It's open. C'mon in.'" The knock did not come for another hour, when it was completely dark outside. Crane obeyed his orders, and the gray-suited man who stepped into the apartment was immediately surrounded. He did not seem surprised as he raised his hands and said, "I don't carry a gun, Dr. Strange, Dr. Hadden." When Bruce effortlessly pushed him against the wall and patted him down, he added, "You've been trained." Surprise showed in his voice.

"Army," said Bruce.

"Zimbabwe?"

Bruce said nothing.

"You know us?" asked Di.

"Of course." He did not look at her, or Alec, but kept his gaze on Bruce as if recognizing that this was the only one of his captors who really had much chance of keeping him from escaping. But Bruce stared back as intently and alertly as he. "We've been watching you, wishing we could stop your interference."

"Who's 'we'?" asked Bruce.

The agent shrugged. "I might as well tell you. The government wants the stones out of circulation, and that's our job. We come from several agencies."

"But why?" said Dana. Di made a face and turned the television off. "The stones are harmless. They're even..."

The agent shook his head. "They're alien devices, and you know it. They're setting us up for an invasion, weakening us, distracting us. We're defending the nation."

"Then that makes us..." Alec cleared his throat. He had expected that he and his friends would be in control of the situation, but their prisoner seemed supremely confident of the rightness of his and his superiors' actions. Jimmy Crane was smirking. "That must make us traitors, or collaborators. We don't agree with you."

The agent nodded earnestly. "We'll be taking care of you later." His tone said that he was making no empty threat but an inexorable promise.

"I think," said Bruce. "I think we're more legal than you are. At least, we aren't burglars."

"There are higher loyalties." The look he turned on Bruce was one generally reserved for erring children. Clearly, he thought that a soldier, even an ex-soldier, had no business opposing his government's wishes.

Alec made a disgusted face. The response was predictable.

"We should check his car," said Dana. "If he has any stones, we can try to return them."

"Go ahead," said Alec. To the agent, he said, "Your keys?"

A few minutes later, Dana spilled a larger sack than they had taken from Jimmy Crane onto the carpet. The result was a sparkling rainbow that made Alec think of a pirate's treasure.

But when he brought his attention back to the room and the people around him, he found the agent gone and the apartment door standing ajar.

"We were watching the..." Di gestured at the pile of stones.

Alec never even turned off the engine of his truck.

The sun was low in the sky behind his house. It shone through the windows on the far wall, reflected from the painted walls inside, and made the nearside windows glow.

There should have been no sign that anyone was in the building, but a shadow moved, and Alec caught his breath. He knew that it could not be Di. That afternoon, his department secretary had handed him a pink message slip that bore the single word, "Spaghetti." Once more he had laughed and told the secretary he would be at Ellen's. Then he had called Di to say he would pick her up at her apartment, as soon as he had fetched a bottle of wine from home.

"What about Bruce?" she had asked, and it struck him that whenever his stonemate, student though he be, showed up, he fitted right into their circle.

"Check with Ellen," he had told her. "We can find him when I've got the wine."

But the wine would have to stay where it was. He did not like that shadow. It wasn't Di. He knew where she was. None of his other friends had a key, and even if they did, they would wait outside, at least while the weather was as nice as it was.

He stepped on the gas again, and the truck moved on as if its driver had stopped simply to check an address or light a cigarette. He did not imagine that whoever was hidden in his house was fooled.

As soon as Alec slowed the truck to a stop, Di opened the door, slid in, and said, "Ellen already asked him. Where's the wine?"

"I didn't get it." He told her why.

"A burglar?"

He shook his head. "I thought maybe we--Ybarra, Bruce, Franklin--could go back and find out. We should be able to outnumber whoever it is, if he's still around."

"Not without me, you're not." When he snorted in reply, Di said, "And what if he has a gun? If you're going to get killed, I'm going to be right there with you." Bruce was waiting on the lawn outside the converted house that held Ellen's apartment. When they got out of the truck, he said, "There's no answer."

Alec looked up at the windows of Ellen's apartment. Her deck was on the other side of the building, but he could see into her living room. It was dim, as if only a single small lightbulb burned there. He could also see the door to her kitchen, and that room was dark. He tried her buzzer, but though he held the button down for nearly a minute, she did not respond.

Di told Bruce what Alec had seen, and suddenly Alec wondered whether the shadow in his house had belonged to a mere burglar after all. Perhaps the government had decided he was too much of a nuisance, that he and his friends were getting too much in their way. Ellen too. And...

"Shit!" he said.

"I did see Dr. Ybarra," said Bruce. "He was in the back of a van, going that way." He pointed in the general direction of the city center.

"Where were you when you saw him?" asked Di.

"A couple of blocks over that way. He might have been coming from here. I didn't see the driver."

Alec's throat was so tight that his sigh seemed to tear on its way out. "They don't like interference, do they?"

IX

Was that Alec's friend? Bruce? He was walking in the direction of Ellen's apartment. Soon he would find that no one was home, and then...

"Get down!"

A hard hand struck Ybarra's knee. The blow was a little more painful than was necessary just to get his attention. He slid off the seat, joining Ellen and Franklin on the floor. Their two guards likewise crouched below the level of the windows. One, the one farthest away, the one most out of reach, held a gun in one hand. A third man drove the van.

The knock had come as no surprise. Ybarra and Franklin had been drinking wine and chopping vegetables for the salad while Ellen stirred sauce and set the table. They had been waiting for the rest of their friends, and they had opened the door without suspicion.

The two men in the hall had held badges in their hands and said, "You're coming with us." When Franklin had asked to see their warrant, one had drawn a gun, the same gun Ybarra could see so close right now. The other had said, "We don't need one," grabbed Franklin by one arm, and shoved him toward the wall. "Hands up and apart. Spread your legs. And hold it." As soon as Ybarra and Ellen were in the same awkward position, the invader had patted them down and found and removed their worrystones. Then he had made a quick circuit of the apartment, returning empty-handed except for half of a tomato that had been intended for the salad. "Nothing," he said. "No stones. No..." He shrugged and took a bite.

The government, Alec had told him. They wanted the stones for themselves, and they had to be responsible for the fakes, as well as for the many thefts. He suspected that their captor's uncompleted "No..." meant that he had been looking for the fake detectors he and his students had cobbled together. To himself, as expressionlessly as he could manage, he laughed. Alec had one. So did Michael Weldon. He had set his own on a table in the living room, not far from the TV set.

A moment later, the three of them were being herded down the stairs. The van's driver had said, "Just three? No matter. We'll have the others soon enough." Now the vehicle leaned as it rounded corners. When Ybarra fell against Franklin, he said nothing, neither aloud nor by his body language. When his body pressed against Ellen's, he added a little weight as if to say, "I'm here. We're in this together. If we can, we'll get out of it together." She answered him with a look, a blink, a nervous thrust of her tongue tip between her lips.

Dark shadows, cast by the low sun, flickered past. The motor roared. The brakes squealed. Concrete walls loomed overhead, all that Ybarra could see from his low vantage point. An echoing clash of metal announced the opening of a door into

some cavernous space, and they were surrounded by near-total blackness broken only by the small gray patches that were high-up windows. A warehouse, thought Ybarra. Not a jail. They want us on ice, out of reach of lawyers, where we can't interfere while they... What?

The engine died. Dim lights came on. The van's doors opened. "Let's go," someone said, and near a distant wall Ybarra saw a table heaped with worrystones. Not far from the table was a small forklift.

Their cell was a windowless room whose starkness was relieved only by the thick foam pads that covered half the floor. Ybarra had folded one of the pads against the wall to make a backrest. Now he sat, leaning against it. Beside him, Ellen had her legs crossed in a patiently meditative lotus. Franklin was at the edge of the pad, his chin on his folded knees. All three were facing the locked door with what they could muster of hope.

"They aren't going to let us loose," said Franklin.

"They didn't get us all," said Ellen. "Di's still out there."

"And Alec," said Ybarra. "Maybe he can do something."

A mechanical noise announced the opening of the door. In the background a radio was crackling with urgency: "...big one! Biggest!..."

They looked up at the figure of the agent who had held the gun on them in the van. "Not likely," he said, admitting that every sound they made could be overheard. There was a harsh tone to his words. "We'll have him as soon as he goes home. And then, no more ambushes for us. No more interference." He pushed the door further open to reveal two men standing behind him. "My boss," he said. "Lieutenant Kube."

Lieutenant Kube wore a state police uniform. The other wore an expensive brown suit. When Ybarra stared curiously at him, he said, "Anderson, National Security Agency."

"You're scientists," said Lieutenant Kube. "And you've been studying the stones. That's the only way you could have spotted our fakes."

Anderson glared as if he didn't think Kube needed to reveal so much. Then he said, "What have you found out about them?"

"Why should we tell you?" asked Franklin.

"Because they are the vanguard of an alien invasion." Anderson sighed wearily.

"If you don't, all mankind may be dead in a year."

Ybarra laughed, even though he was not sure they were wrong.

"It's small," said Bruce. "But at least there aren't any strangers here."

A bench-like worktable held his computer, two printers, and an external modem. Across the room, a tiny kitchen occupied a niche that would have been a closet in a larger apartment. Two doors opened on a bathroom and a small bedroom. Beside the bed an amplifier's diodes glowed and a voice said, "God knows what's inside this one. It's the biggest yet, and there's only one. The campus police are trying to rope it off..."

"I wish we were there," said Alec. "That's where all the answers are. What the stones have been leading us toward."

Di and Bruce both nodded. Then she said, "But we have something else to do. Our friends..."

"If we could only find them," said Alec. "They could be anywhere."

"That phone number," said Di. "All we need's the address Franklin got." She recited it from memory.

Bruce produced a city map. "There," he said. "Warehouse district."

"We can't just knock on the door," said Alec.

"Why not?" Bruce gestured toward the radio. "I'll bet the feds are on their way to the campus right now."

The rescue was almost as easy as Bruce had suggested. The warehouse was dark, empty, its entrance unguarded. Bruce used the back of his van to break down the door, and once they were inside it was only a matter of finding the light switches and yelling, "Helen! Franklin! Walter!" Answering cries led them to a steel door whose knob refused to turn. "It's locked," said Alec. "We know," said Ybarra. "Use the forklift." "I see it," said Di.

The van's radio was saying that the newest egg was still sitting on the grass in front of the university library. It was still the largest one that anyone had ever seen. The shadows within it were likewise larger, and they moved, while the egg itself made two distinct and separate noises. One was a constant faint 'rrrinnggg.' The other sounded as if something were scratching on the inside of the shell.

"This one's going to hatch," said Franklin as the van swayed around a corner. He sounded satisfied.

"Then let's hurry up," said Alec. "I want to be there."

"Why should this be the one to hatch?" Ellen asked from her seat in the back of the van. Franklin braced his hands against the vehicle's sides, worked his way forward, and squatted behind the driver's seat so that he could see where they were going. "It's the progression," he said. "First, the stones tried to make people love each other. Not sexually. Brotherly love. Agape. The second batch turned that feeling on the stones themselves. Just on the new ones, really. This batch..." He hesitated while the van swerved to pass a double-parked truck.

"They should turn the feeling on what's behind the stones. And to do that, they have to hatch. To show us what sort of being laid the eggs."

"Aliens," said Ybarra. "That's what that NSA fellow said, and he's probably right. They're coming to visit, and they want to be sure they get a good reception."

"Invaders," said Ellen. "They're softening us up so we won't resist."

"Make us love them," said Bruce. "Then they'll screw us blind."

"Maybe," said Alec. He looked at his friends in the dimness of the van's cramped interior, letting his eyes linger on Di's. "But." He hesitated.

"That's an awfully cynical view," said Di. She deepened her voice so that it boomed portentously within the van. "Expecting evil aliens who accomplish their nefarious ends by manipulating our finer feelings."

"But how can they be evil?" asked Alec. "If they manipulate those feelings..." Franklin interrupted. "Then they have to be able to recognize those feelings.

And they have to have them themselves, don't they?"

"So they're good guys," said Bruce. "And you're a bunch of Pollyannas. But I hope you're right."

X

Headlights flashed behind them. A stentorian horn ordered them to move aside. They obeyed, and a truck dressed in the olive drab of the National Guard roared past them. The Guardsmen packed beneath its canvas top each waved one hand. Their other hands held weapons upright.

The truck stayed in sight ahead of them for what remained of the way to the university. When it reached the quadrangle in the center of campus, it pulled onto the grass, stopped, and disgorged its cargo of armed men. The soldiers promptly dispersed. Some seemed assigned to hold back the students and others who were streaming toward the university library; their efforts were useless, for no one obeyed their shouted commands and imperative gestures and they were too few to present a physical obstacle. The remaining Guardsmen moved rapidly toward the thick cluster of people in front of the library.

Happily, most of the crowd so far had arrived on foot. Franklin directed Bruce toward the biology building's still nearly empty lot.

"Over there," said Ybarra, and a moment later he and his six companions had found room to stand on the library steps where they could overlook the growing crowd. The campus's drives and walkways were illuminated by bright sodium vapor lights, and one was near enough to let them see the object around which the crowd was gathering.

That object was indeed an egg, resting on one end as if it had been set carefully in its place. It was somewhat larger than an adult human, and it glowed a bright orange in the yellow sodium light. The people surrounding it left it virtually no space except that on which it sat. They were almost silent except for a murmur of voices like the sound of the sea washing a rocky shore. Scattered among them were a number of individuals in gray robes. A few carried hastily lettered placards, their paint still reflecting wetly, with the legend, "HE IS COME!" Many members of the crowd, including the Second Chancers, were holding worrystones aloft in their hands. These stones glowed as brilliantly as their oversized successor in the middle of the crowd.

From their vantage point, Alec could hear the egg's constant muted rrrinnngg!! Occasionally, when the crowd's wave-like murmur subsided, he thought he could make out a low crackling sound.

The Guardsmen were erecting floodlights around the edge of the crowd. A captain, the insignia on his helmet gleaming in the lights, was bellowing orders, commanding his forces to disperse the mass of people and surround the egg. In response, the crowd faced outward and drew closer to the egg, packing into an ever tighter wall of flesh. Several Guardsmen, first one and then more, turned to face the egg, dug stones out of their pockets, and held them up.

"There's Anderson," said Ybarra. "The Big Boss."

He was pointing at a well-dressed civilian who was shouting at a National Guard lieutenant while waving one hand toward the giant egg in the middle of the throng. As they watched, the lieutenant drew his sidearm and aimed as if to shoot the egg, but a man in fatigues took the gun away from him. Anderson flung his open hands toward the sky as if in agonized frustration and turned away. The crowd emitted an audible sigh as if it were a single organism and faced the egg once more. They seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

"These aliens had better be the good guys," said Franklin. "If they're not..." Three white TV station vans were now parked on the grass, emptying themselves of minicam crews.

The crowd was still growing. Alec recognized some of the students coming from the direction of the dorms. He saw the campus's parking lots filling and new arrivals simply stopping on the roads and sidewalks and lawns. He saw faculty members and strangers, and though worrystones were visible everywhere, he saw no one knocking.

Newcomers crowded onto the steps around Alec and his remaining friends. Di clutched his arm, and they listened to a quiet conversation not far away:

"Do you remember the communes?" The voice was softly feminine.

"Hippies? The sixties? I thought they were all long gone," said a man.

"There's a few left," spoke a second woman.

"A friend of mine," said the first woman. "She grew up in one in Colorado. Just like the rest of us, they got stones, and they didn't get many Rringg!!s. But they kept trying with each other, and lately..."

"They've been getting more of them?" The second woman sounded excited.

"Maybe," said the man. "Maybe love tunes them to each other. Or maybe you just have to keep trying. Keep knocking, and they get the idea. They learn."

"Could it be?" asked Di, her lips almost against Alec's ear.

"Never say die," he replied softly. "We can hope, and keep trying, and..."

"We haven't tried for awhile, have we?"

"Should we?" He held out his stone with his free hand. The hand quivered with his tension. He had wanted a Rringg!! with her ever since she had appeared on his doorstep. They had achieved something else instead, something more traditional, something as fine and true and good as anyone could wish. They had tried for more, and the Fates--or that gray god Murphy who leaches all color

from the world--had rebuffed them. They had given up the trying, almost without noticing that they were surrendering. But he still wanted a Rringg!! And she wanted it as badly as he.

"Not here." Her dark hair bounced as she shook her head. "We could go home?" He thought: Their hopes had soared. Their knockings had never yielded more than a lifeless clack. They had no real reason to expect anything more tonight. Yet they did, with such an urgency that they both wished to be alone when they raised their worrystones to...

A loud "Crack!" silenced the crowd and froze his thoughts. Alec stared at the giant egg on the grass below him. Its surface was now marred by a jagged line, a break, clearly visible in the dazzle of the National Guard's floodlights and the campus's own sodium vapor lights.

The egg's crackling noises grew louder. Di's hand tightened on his arm until his flesh ached. The egg rocked, and the crowd swayed with it, forward and back, and back again, one step, two, three.

The shell rang musically as something hammered at its interior. The crowd gasped as the crack in the shell widened, fell back upon itself, widened again, and finally branched, smaller cracks shooting from it in all directions. Pieces of shell the size of dinner plates fell aside, and...

The crowd's scream was not loud. The figure that had suddenly appeared was strange, but not too strange. Nor was it frightening or horrifying. Indeed, its very form seemed to awaken an echo of a Rringg!! in the mind of every onlooker. A bond of friendship, of love, even of adoration seemed to hover on the potential edge of actuality. A word would be enough to make it real.

The figure was roughly human in appearance. It had four limbs and a slender torso that bulged in front as if with a small potbelly. It blinked large eyes, its pupils wide despite the bright lights. Those eyes bulged from the upper curve of a broad dome. The mouth was only a little less broad, and its lips did not seem soft, but stiff and rubbery, a stubby beak. The skin was smooth, unmarked by scales or feathers, and it glistened in the light with the fluids that had buoyed and nourished it within the egg. Around its broad feet, a small puddle of excess fluid soaked into the ground. A few drops fell from its body.

"It's a frog," said someone. "A giant frog."

"A duck," said Ellen.

An uneasy laugh rippled through the crowd.

The alien uttered a squawking grunt that did not strike Alec as bearing any resemblance to language. It was the sort of noise a chick, an immature version of the adult of its species, would make, and he found it oddly reassuring. It meant that those adults, wherever they might be, however they might be watching this scene, had to trust humans not to harm their child. Either that, or they were willing to risk what to humans would be their most precious asset of all. Or was it any risk at all? If these aliens were indeed invaders, conquering by stimulating love instead of dread, if they were such masters of manipulation, then perhaps their own children were nothing to them.

Those people in the forefront of the crowd, those nearest to the alien, raised their worrystones. They looked as if they were extending microphones in a vain effort to interview the strange infant.

Alec almost laughed out loud when the alien squawked again. But then it lifted one leg, tottered for a moment as if it were not yet sure of its balance, and staggered forward. It stretched one hand toward the nearest worrystone. The human took half a step forward. The alien touched the stone, and the muted rrrinnnggg! that had issued from the egg returned, stronger, pervasive, humming out across the quadrangle and making every stone within its range, in hand or pocket or purse, hum in resonant reply.

"It's a chime-binder," said Franklin softly, almost whispering.

The alien took the stone from the hand that held it high. It lifted the stone to its lips. It ate it.

The air throbbed. Alec's own stone hummed in his hand. He felt a tide of warmth, of fellow-feeling, of love and adoration, that nearly brought him to his knees. His eyes watered, and through his tears he could see those around him bowing

their heads. A few individuals actually knelt, and the gray-robed representatives of the Church of the Second Chance cried "Hail!" and "Hallelujah!"

Nor were the National Guardsmen who remained on the fringes of the crowd immune. They too bobbed their heads and knelt and wept. And when one resisted the wave of adoration and raised his rifle, another stepped in front of him and held the muzzle of his own gun beneath the other's chin.

Alec sighed. If the aliens were indeed invaders, if they indeed wished to conquer, they could have attacked in no better way. Humans now welcomed what would otherwise have seemed horrible, repulsive, monsters. The eggs and stones had undermined all hope of resistance.

Or had they only undone human xenophobia, fostering a willingness to listen to other viewpoints, to compromise, to seek peace instead of war? He supposed people must still be free to act barbarically. The government's stone-thieves, counterfeiterers, and kidnappers proved that much, as did the two soldiers who had just raised their guns, one against the alien, one against the other.

He felt ashamed of himself and all his kind. All the human ages of barbarism seemed clearly over now, and as soon as humans demonstrated that they could accept this alien child, that they could indeed reject their xenophobia and accept those who were far more alien than their own kind could ever be, the adults would land.

Or was the point to test how successfully the stones and their emotional resonances had enslaved the human species?

What would they want? Were they conquerors? Traders? Missionaries? Or only parents, seeking babysitters?

Was that the secret of the eggs? Were they only food sprinkled on the nesting ground for the chicks to come, and the Rringg!!s and their effects inducement for humans to gather up and deliver all the tidbits?

"Ants do that," said Di. "They lay sterile eggs to feed their larvae."

Did it even matter?

What the aliens had done seemed utterly irresistible.

The alien reached again toward the crowd. A forest of upraised arms and worrystones met its outstretched hands. It hesitated, seeming to consider the choices before it, and then it chose one stone, another, and another. Once more it put them in its mouth.

There had to be more such chicks, scattered around the nation and the world.

More crowds gathering and offering the food the aliens had supplied.

Alec wondered whether those crowds would neglect more human affairs. Was civilization over? Were humans now no more than nannies, servants to alien chicks?

He did not think a Rringg!! was worth the price.

But... Someone giggled. Alec felt a tug on his arm. He turned. Di was there, of course. In her hand, her worrystone was still humming gently. So was his own.

She gestured, away from the crowd, the lights, the alien and its unknown intent, toward the shadows of buildings and trees, toward home.

He resisted for only a moment before following her pull.

They could not wait to reach Alec's house or Di's apartment. As soon as they were out of sight of the crowd, they held their stones toward each other.

Gently, tentatively, they let them touch.

By morning, they knew that, though a Rringg!! awakened only agape, not eros, where eros already existed a Rringg!! awakened something far more marvelous than either form of love alone.

THE END