

Paul Anderson

THE DIPTEROID PHENOMENON

Moru understood about guns. At least, the tall strangers had demonstrated to their guides what the things that each of them carried at his hip could do in a flash and a flameburst. But he did not realize that the small objects they often moved about in their hands, while talking in their own language, were audiovisual transmitters. Probably he thought they were fetishes.

Thus, when he killed Donli Sairn, he did so in full view of Donli's wife.

That was happenstance. Except for prearranged times, morning and evening of the planet's twenty-eight hour day, the biologist, like his fellows, sent only to his computer. But because they had not been married long, and were helplessly happy, Evalyth received his 'casts whenever she could get away from her own duties.

The coincidence that she was tuned in at that one moment was not great. There was little for her to do. As militech of the expedition - she being from a half barbaric part of Kraken where the sexes had equal opportunities to learn of combat suitable to primitive environments - she had overseen the building of a compound; and she kept the routines of guarding it under a close eye. However, the inhabitants of Lokon were as cooperative with the visitors from heaven as mutual mysteriousness allowed. Every instinct and experience assured Evalyth Sairn that their reticence masked nothing except awe, with perhaps a wistful hope of friendship. Captain Jonafer agreed. Her position having thus become rather a sinecure, she was trying to learn enough about Donli's work to be a useful assistant after he returned from the lowlands.

Also, a medical test had lately confirmed that she was pregnant. She wouldn't tell him, she decided: not yet, over all those hundreds of kilometres, but when they lay again together. Meanwhile, the knowledge that they had begun a new life made him a lodestar to her.

On the afternoon of his death she entered the biolab whistling. Outside, sunlight struck fierce and brass-coloured on dusty ground, on prefab shacks huddled about the boat which had brought everyone and everything down from the orbit where *New Dawn* circled, on the parked flitters and gravsleds that took men around the big island that was the only habitable land on this globe, on the men and the women themselves. Beyond the stockade, plummy treetops, a glimpse of mud-brick buildings, a murmur of voices

and mutter of footfalls, a drift of bitter woodsmoke, showed that a town of several thousand people sprawled between here and Lake Zelo.

The biolab occupied more than half the structure where the Sairns lived. Comforts were few, when ships from a handful of cultures struggling back to civilization ranged across the ruins of empire. For Evalyth, though, it sufficed that this was their home. She was used to austerity anyway. One thing that had first attracted her to Donli, meeting him on Kraken, was the cheerfulness with which he, a man from Atheia, which was supposed to have retained or regained almost as many amenities as Old Earth knew in its glory, had accepted life in her gaunt grim country.

The gravity field here was 0.77 standard, less than two-thirds of what she had grown up in. Her gait was easy through the clutter of apparatus and specimens. She was a big young woman, good-looking in the body, a shade too strong in the features for most men's taste outside her own folk. She had their blondness and, on legs and forearms, their intricate tattoos; the blaster at her waist had come down through many generations. Otherwise she had abandoned Krakener costume for the plain coveralls of the expedition.

How cool and dim the shack was! She sighed with pleasure, sat down and activated the receiver. As the image formed, three-dimensional in the air, and Donli's voice spoke, her heart sprang a little.

'- appears to be descending from a clover.'

The image was of plants with green trilobate leaves, scattered low among the reddish native pseudo-grasses. It swelled as Donli brought the transmitter near, so that the computer might record details for later analysis. Evalyth frowned, trying to recall what... oh, yes. Clover was another of those life forms that man had brought with him from Old Earth, to more planets than anyone now remembered, before the Long Night fell. Often they were virtually unrecognizable; over thousands of years, evolution had fitted them to alien conditions, or mutation and genetic drift had acted on small initial populations in a nearly random fashion. No one on Kraken had known that pines and gulls and rhizobacteria were altered immigrants, until Donli's crew arrived and identified them. Not that he, or anybody from this part of the galaxy, had yet made it back to the mother world. But the Atheian data banks were packed with information, and so was Donli's dear curly head

And there was his hand, huge in the field of view, gathering specimens. She wanted to kiss it. *Patience, patience*, the officer part of her reminded the bride. *We're here to work. We've discovered one more lost colony, the most wretched one so far, sunken back to utter primitivism. Our duty is to advise the Board whether a civilizing mission is worthwhile, or whether the slender resources that the Allied Planets can spare had*

better be used elsewhere, leaving these people in their misery for another two or three hundred years. To make an honest report, we must study them, their cultures, their world. That's why I'm in the barbarian highlands and he's down in the jungle among out-and-out savages.

Please finish soon; darling.

She heard Donli speak in the lowland dialect. It was a debased form of Lokonese, which in turn was remotely descended from Anglic. The expedition's linguists had unravelled the language in a few intensive weeks. Then all personnel took a brain-feed in it. Nonetheless, she admired how quickly her man had become fluent in the woodsrunners' version, after mere days of conversation with them.

'Are we not coming to the place, Mora? You said the thing was close by our camp.'

'We are nearly arrived, man-from-the-clouds.'

A tiny alarm struck within Evalyth. What was going on? Donli hadn't left his companions to strike off alone with a native, had he? Rogar of Lokon had warned them to beware of treachery on those parts. But, to be sure, only yesterday the guides had rescued Haimie Fiell when he tumbled into a swift-running river... at some risk to themselves...

The view bobbed as the transmitter swung in Donli's grasp. It made Evalyth a bit dizzy. From time to time she got glimpses of the broader setting. Forest crowded about a game trail, rust-coloured leafage, brown trunks and branches, shadows beyond, the occasional harsh call of something unseen. She could practically feel the heat and dank weight of the atmosphere, smell the unpleasant pungencies. This world (which no longer had a name, except World, because the dwellers upon it had forgotten what the stars really were) was ill suited to colonization. The life it had spawned was often poisonous, always nutritionally deficient. With the help of species they had brought along, men survived marginally. The original settlers doubtless meant to improve matters. But then the breakdown came - evidence was that their single town had been missiled out of existence, a majority of the people with it - and resources were lacking to rebuild, and the miracle was that anything human remained except bones.

'Now, here, man-from-the-clouds.'

The swaying scene grew steadily. Silence hummed from jungle to cabin. 'I do not see anything,' Donli said at length.

'Follow me. I show.'

Donli put his transmitter in the fork of a tree. It scanned him and Moru while they moved across a meadow. The guide looked childish beside the space traveller, barely up to his shoulder: an old child, though, near-naked body seamed with scars and lame in the right foot from some injury of the past, face wizened in a great black bush of hair and beard. He, who could not hunt, could only fish and trap to support his family, was even more impoverished than his fellows. He must have been happy indeed when the flitter landed near their village and the strangers offered fabulous trade goods for a week or two of being shown around the countryside. Donli had projected the image of Moru's straw hut for Evalyth, the pitiful few possessions, the woman already worn out with toil, the two surviving sons who, at ages said to be about seven or eight, which would equal twelve or thirteen standard years, were shrivelled gnomes.

Roger had seemed to declare - the Lokonese tongue was by no means perfectly understood yet - that the lowlanders would be less poor if they weren't such a vicious lot, tribe forever at war with tribe. *But really*, Evalyth thought, *what possible menace can they be?*

Moru's gear consisted of a loinstrap, a cord around his body for preparing snares, an obsidian knife, and a knapsack so woven and greased that it could hold liquids at need. The other men of his group, being able to pursue game and to win a share of booty by taking part in battles, were noticeably better off. They didn't look much different in person, however, Without room for expansion, the island populace must be highly inbred.

The dwarfish man squatted, parting a shrub with his hands. 'Here,' he grunted, and stood up again.

Evalyth knew well the eagerness that kindled in Donli. Nevertheless he turned around, smiled straight into the transmitter, and said in Atheian: 'Maybe you're watching, dearest, If so, I'd like to share this with you. It may be a bird's nest.'

She remembered vaguely that the existence of birds would be an ecologically significant datum. What mattered was what he had just said to her. 'Oh yes, oh yes!' she wanted to cry. But his group had only two receivers with them, and he wasn't carrying either.

She saw him kneel in the long ill-coloured vegetation. She saw him reach with the gentleness she also knew, into the shrub, easing its branches aside, holding his breath lest he -

She saw Moru leap upon his back. The savage wrapped legs about Donli's middle. His left hand seized Donli's hair and pulled the head back. The knife flew back in his right.

Blood spurted from beneath Donli's jaw. He couldn't shout, not with his throat gaping open, he could only bubble and croak while Moru haggled the wound wider. He reached blindly for his gun. Moru dropped the knife and caught his arms, they rolled over in that embrace, Donli thrashed and flopped in the spouting of his own blood, Moru hung on, the brush trembled around them and hid them, until Moru rose red and dripping, painted, panting, and Evalyth screamed into the transmitter beside her, into the universe, and she kept on screaming and fought them when they tried to take her away from the scene in the meadow where Mora went about his butcher's work, until something stung her with coolness and she toppled into the bottom of the universe whose stars had all gone out forever.

Haimie Fiell said through white lips: 'No, of course we didn't know till you alerted us. He and that - creature - were several kilometres from our camp. *Why* didn't you let us go after him right away?'

'Because of what we'd seen on the transmission,' Captain Jonafer replied. 'Sairn was irretrievably dead. You could've been ambushed, arrows in the back or something, pushing down those narrow trails. Best you stay where you were, guarding each other, till we got a vehicle to you.'

Fiell looked past the big grey-haired man, out of the door of the command hut, to the stockade and the unputying noon sky. 'But what that little monster was doing meanwhile -' Abruptly he closed his mouth.

With equal haste, Jonafer said: 'The other guides ran away, you've told me, as soon as they sensed you were angry. I've just had a report from Kallaman. His team flitted to the village. It's deserted. The whole tribe's pulled up stakes. Afraid of our revenge, evidently. Though it's no large chore to move, when you can carry your household goods on your back and weave yourself a new house in a day.'

Evalyth leaned forward. 'Stop evading me,' she said. 'What did Moru do with Donli that you might have prevented if you'd arrived in time?'

Fiell continued to look past her. Sweat gleamed in droplets on his forehead. 'Nothing, really,' he mumbled. 'Nothing that mattered... once the murder itself had been committed.'

'I meant to ask you what kind of services you want for him, Lieutenant Sairn,' Jonafer said to her. 'Should the ashes be buried here, or scattered in space after we leave, or

brought home?'

Evalyth turned her gaze full upon him. 'I never authorized that he be cremated, Captain,' she said slowly.

'No, but - Well, be realistic. You were first under anaesthesia, then heavy sedation, while we recovered the body. Time had passed. We've no facilities for, um, cosmetic repair, nor any extra refrigeration space, and in this heat -'

Since she had been let out of sickbay, there had been a kind of numbness in Evalyth. She could not entirely comprehend the fact that Donli was gone. It seemed as if at any instant yonder doorway would fill with him, sunlight across his shoulders, and he would call to her, laughing, and console her for a meaningless nightmare she had had. That was the effect of the psychodrugs, she knew, and damned the kindness of the medic.

She was almost glad to feel a slow rising of anger. It meant the drugs were wearing off. By evening she would be able to weep.

'Captain,' she said, 'I saw him killed. I've seen deaths before, some of them quite as messy. We don't mask the truth on Kraken.

You've cheated me of my right to lay my man out and close his eyes. You will not cheat me of my right to obtain justice. I demand to know exactly what happened.'

Jonafer's fists knotted on his desktop. 'I can hardly stand to tell you.'

'But you shall, Captain.'

'All right! All right!' Jonafer shouted. The words leaped out like bullets. 'We saw the thing transmitted. He stripped Donli, hung him up by the heels from a tree, bled him into that knapsack. He cut off the genitals and threw them in with the blood. He opened the body and took heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, thyroid, prostate, pancreas, and loaded them up too, and ran off into the woods. Do you wonder why we didn't let you see what was left?'

'The Lokonese warned us against the jungle dwellers,' Fiell said dully. 'We should have listened. But they seemed like pathetic dwarfs. And they did rescue me from the river. When Donli asked about birds - described them, you know, and asked if anything like that was known - Moru said yes, but they were rare and shy; our gang would scare them off; but if one man would come along with him, he could find a nest and they might see the bird. 'A "house", he called it, but Donli thought he meant a nest. Or so he told us.

It'd been a talk with Moru when they happened to be a ways offside, in sight but out of earshot. Maybe that should have alerted us, maybe we should have asked the other tribesmen. But we didn't see any reason to - I mean. Donli was bigger, stronger, armed with a blaster, what savage would dare attack him, and anyway, they *had* been friendly, downright frolicsome after they got over their initial fear of us, and they'd shown as much eagerness for further contact as anybody here in Lokon has, and - ' His voice trailed off.

'Did he steal tools or weapons?' Evalyth asked.

'No,' Jonafer said. 'I have everything your husband was carrying, ready to give you.'

Fiell said: 'I don't think it was an act of hatred. Moru must have had some superstitious reason.'

Jonafer nodded. 'We can't judge him by our standards.'

'By whose, then?' Evalyth retorted. Supertranquillizer or no, she was surprised at the evenness of her own tone. 'I'm from Kraken, remember. I'll not let Donli's child be born and grow up knowing he was murdered and no one tried to get justice for him.'

'You can't take revenge on an entire tribe,' Jonafer said.

'I don't mean to. But - Captain, the personnel of this expedition are from several different planets, each with its characteristic societies. The articles specifically state that the essential mores of every member shall be respected. I want to be relieved of my regular duties until I have arrested the killer of my husband and done justice upon him.'

Jonafer bent his head. 'I have to grant that,' he said low.

Evalyth rose. "Thank you, gentlemen," she said. 'If you will excuse me, I'll commence my investigation at once.'

- while she was still a machine, before the drugs wore off.

In the drier, cooler uplands, agriculture had remained possible after the colony otherwise lost civilization. Fields and orchards, painstakingly cultivated with neolithic tools, supported a scattering of villages and the capital town Lokon.

Its people bore a family resemblance to the forest dwellers. Few settlers indeed could

have survived to become the ancestors of this world's humanity. But the Highlanders were better nourished, bigger, straighter. They wore gaily dyed tunics and sandals. The well-to-do added jewellery of gold and silver. Hair was braided, chins kept shaven. Folk walked boldy, without the savages' constant fear of ambush, and talked merrily.

To be sure, this was only strictly true of the free. While *New Dawn's* anthropologists had scarcely begun to unravel the ins and outs of the culture, it had been obvious from the first that Lokon kept a large slave class. Some were sleek household servants. More toiled meek and naked in the fields, the quarries, the mines, under the lash of overseers and the guard of soldiers whose spearheads and swords were of ancient Imperial metal. But none of the space travellers were unduly shocked. They had seen worse elsewhere. Historical data banks described places in olden time called Athens, India, America.

Evalyth strode down twisted, dusty streets, between the gaudily painted walls of cubical, windowless adobe houses. Commoners going about their tasks made respectful salutes. Although no one feared any longer that the strangers meant harm, she did tower above the tallest man, her hair was coloured like metal and her eyes like the sky, she bore lightning at her waist and none knew what other godlike powers.

Today soldiers and noblemen also genuflected while slaves went on their faces. Where she appeared, the chatter and clatter of everyday life vanished; the business of the market plaza halted when she passed the booths; children ceased their games and fled; she moved in a silence akin to the silence in her soul. Under the sun and the snowcone of Mount Bums, horror brooded. For by now Lokon knew that a man from the stars had been slain by a lowland brute; and what would come of that?

Word must have gone ahead to Rogar, though, since he awaited her in his house by Lake Zelo next to the Sacred Place. He was not king or council president or high priest, but he was something of all three, and he it was who dealt most with the strangers.

His dwelling was the usual kind, larger than average but dwarfed by the adjacent walls. Those enclosed a huge compound, filled with buildings, where none of the outworlders had been admitted. Guards in scarlet robes and grotesquely carved wooden helmets stood always at its gates. Today their numbers were doubled, and others flanked Rogar's door. The lake shone like polished steel at their backs. The trees along the shore looked equally rigid.

Rogar's majordomo, a fat elderly slave, prostrated himself in the entrance as Evalyth neared. 'If the heaven-borne will deign to follow this unworthy one, *Klev* Rogar is within - ' The guards dipped their spears to her. Their eyes were wide and frightened.

Like the other houses, this turned inward. Rogar sat on a dais in a room opening on a

courtyard. It seemed doubly cool and dim by contrast with the glare outside. She could scarcely discern the frescos on the walls or the patterns on the carpet; they were crude art anyway. Her attention focused on Rogar. He did not rise, that not being a sign of respect here. Instead, he bowed his grizzled head above folded hands. The majordomo offered her a bench and Rogar's chief wife set a bombilla of herb tea by her before vanishing into the women's quarters.

'Be greeted, *Klev*,' Evalyth said formally.

'Be greeted, heaven-borne.' Alone now, shadowed from the cruel sun, they observed a ritual period of silence.

Then: 'This is terrible what has happened, heaven-born,' Rogar said. 'Perhaps you do not know that my white robe and bare feet signify mourning as for one of my own blood.'

'That is well done,' Evalyth said. 'We shall remember.'

The man's dignity faltered. 'You understand that none of us have anything to do with the evil, do you not? The savages are our enemies too. They are vermin. Our ancestors caught some and made them slaves, but they are good for nothing else. I warned your friends not to go down among those we have not tamed.'

'Their wish was to do so,' Evalyth replied. 'Now my wish is to get revenge for my man.' She didn't know if this language included a word for justice. No matter. Because of the drugs, which heightened the logical faculties while they muffled the emotions, she was speaking Lokonese quite well enough for her purposes.

'We can gather soldiers and help you kill as many as you choose,' Rogar offered.

'Not needful. With this weapon at my side I alone can destroy more than your army might. I want your counsel and help in a different matter. How can I find him who slew my man?'

Rogar frowned. 'The savages can vanish into trackless jungles, heaven-borne.'

'Can they vanish from other savages, though?'

'Ah! Shrewdly thought, heaven-borne. Those tribes are endlessly at each other's throats. If we can make contact with one, its hunters will soon learn for you where the killer's people have taken themselves.' His scowl deepened. 'But he may have gone from them, to hide until you have departed our land. A single man might be impossible to find.'

Lowlanders are good at hiding, of necessity.'

'What do you mean by necessity?'

Rogar showed surprise at her failure to grasp what was obvious to him. 'Why, consider a man out hunting,' he said. 'He cannot go with companions after every kind of game, or the noise and scent would frighten it away. So he is often alone in the jungle. Someone from another tribe may well set upon him. A man stalked and killed is just as useful as one slain in open war.'

'Why this incessant fighting?'

Rogar's look of bafflement grew stronger. 'How else shall they get human flesh?'

'But they do not live on that!'

'No, surely not, except as needed. But that need comes many times, as you know. Their wars are their chief way of taking men; booty is good too, but not the main reason to fight. He who slays, owns the corpse, and naturally divides it solely among his close kin. Not everyone is lucky in battle. Therefore those who did not chance to kill in a war may well go hunting on their own, two or three of them together hoping to find a single man from a different tribe. And that is why a lowlander must be skilful at hiding.'

Evalyth did not move or speak. Rogar drew a long breath and continued trying to explain: 'Heaven-borne, when I heard the evil news, I spoke long with men from your company. They told me what they had seen from afar by the wonderful means you command. Thus it is clear to me what happened. This guide, what is his name, yes, Moru, he is a cripple. He had no hope of killing himself a man except by treachery. When he saw that chance he took it.'

He ventured a smile. 'That would never happen in the highlands,' he declared. 'We do not fight wars, save when we are attacked, nor do we hunt our fellow men as *it* they were animals. Like yours, ours is a civilized race.' His lips drew back from startingly white teeth. 'But heaven-borne, your man was slain. I propose we take vengeance, not simply on the killer if we catch him, but on his tribe, which we can certainly find as you suggested. That will teach all the savages to beware of their betters. Afterwards we can share the flesh, half to your people, half to mine.'

Evalyth could only know an intellectual astonishment. Yet she had the feeling somehow of having walked off a cliff. She stared through the shadows, into the grave old face, and after a long she heard herself whisper: 'You... also... here... eat men?'

'Slaves,' Rogar said. 'No more than required. One of them will do for four boys.'

Her hand dropped to her gun. Rogar sprang up in alarm. 'Heaven-borne,' he exclaimed, 'I told you we are civilized! Never fear attack from any of us! We - we -'

She rose too, high above him. Did he read judgement in her gaze? Was the terror that snatched him on behalf of his whole people? He cowered from her, sweating and shuddering. 'Heaven-borne, believe me, you have no quarrel with Lokon - no, now, let me show you, let me take you into the Sacred Place, even if, if you are no initiate... for surely you are akin to the gods, surely the gods will not be offended - Come, let me show you how it is, let me prove we have no will and no *need* to be your enemies -'

There was the gate that Rogar opened for her in that massive wall. There were the shocked countenances of the guards and loud promises of many sacrifices to appease the Powers. There was a stone pavement beyond, hot and hollowly resounding underfoot. There were the idols grinning around the central temple. There was the house of the acolytes who did the work and who shrank in fear when they saw their master conduct a foreigner in. There were the slave barracks.

'See, heaven-borne, they are well-treated are they not? We do have to crush their hands and feet when we choose them as children for this service. Think how dangerous it would be otherwise, hundreds of boys and young men in here. But we treat them kindly unless they misbehave. Are they not fat? Their own Holy Food is especially honourable, bodies of men of all degree who have died in their full strength. We teach them that they will live on in those for whom they are slain. Most are content with that, believe me, heaven-borne. Ask them yourself... though remember, they grow dull-witted, with nothing to do year after year. We slay them quickly, cleanly, at the beginning of each summer - no more than we must for that year's crop of boys entering into manhood, one slave for four boys, no more than that. And it is a most beautiful rite with days of feasting and merrymaking afterwards. Do you understand now, heaven-borne? You have nothing to fear from us. We are not savages, warring and raiding and skulking to get our man-flesh. We are civilized - not godlike in your fashion, no, I dare not claim that, do not be angry - but civilized - surely worthy of your friendship, are we not, are we not, heaven-borne?'

Chena Darnard, who headed the cultural anthropology team told her computer to scan its data bank. Like the others, it was portable, its memory housed in *New Darwin*. At the moment the spaceship was above the opposite hemisphere, and perceptible time passed while beams went back and forth along the strung-out relay units.

Chena leaned back and studied Evalyth across her desk. The Krakener girl sat so quietly. It seemed unnatural, despite the drugs in her bloodstream retaining some power. To be sure, Evalyth was of aristocratic descent in a warlike society. Furthermore, heredity psychological as well as physiological differences might exist on the different worlds. Not much was known about that, apart from extreme cases like Gwydion (or this planet?). Regardless, Chena thought it would be better if Evalyth gave way to simple shock and grief.

'Are you quite certain of your facts, dear?' the anthropologist asked as gently as possible. 'I mean, while this island alone is habitable, it's large, the topography is rugged, communications are primitive, my group has already identified scores of distinct cultures.'

'I questioned Rogar for more than an hour,' Evalyth replied in the same flat voice, as before. 'I know interrogation techniques, and he was badly rattled. He talked.'

"The Lokonese themselves are not as backward as their technology. They've lived for centuries with savages threatening their borderlands. It's made them develop a good intelligence network. Rogar described its functioning to me in detail. It can't help but keep them reasonably well-informed about everything that goes on. And, while tribal customs do vary tremendously, the cannibalism is universal. That's why none of the Lokonese thought to mention it to us. They took for granted that we had our own ways of providing human meat.'

'People have, m-m-m, latitude in those methods?'

'Oh yes. Here they breed slaves for the purpose. But most low-landers have too skimpy an economy for that. Some of them use war and murder. Among others, men past a certain age draw lots for who shall die. Among still others, they settle it within the tribe by annual combats. Or - Who cares? The fact is that, everywhere in this country, in whatever fashion it may be, the boys undergo a puberty rite that involves eating an adult male.'

Chena bit her lip. 'What in the name of chaos might have started -? Computer! Have you scanned?'

'Yes,' said the machine voice out of the case on her desk. 'Data on cannibalism in man are comparatively sparse, because it is a rarity. On all planets hitherto known to us it is banned, and has been throughout their history, although it is sometimes considered forgivable as an emergency measure when no alternative means of preserving life is available. Very limited forms of what be called ceremonial cannibalism have occurred, as for example the drinking of minute amounts of each other's blood in pledging oath

brotherhood among the Falkems of Lochlanna -'

'Never mind that,' Chena said. A tautness in her throat thickened her tone. 'Only here, it seems, have they degenerated so far that - Or is it degeneracy? Reversion, perhaps? What about Old Earth?'

'Information is fragmentary. Aside from what was lost during the Long Night, knowledge is under the handicap that the last primitive societies there vanished before interstellar travel began. But certain data collected by ancient historians and scientists remain.

'Cannibalism was an occasional part of human sacrifice. As a rule, victims were left uneaten. But in a minority of religions, the bodies, or selected portions of them, were consumed, either by a special class, or by the community as a whole. Generally this was regarded as theophagy. Thus, the Aztecs of Mexico offered thousands of individuals annually to their gods. The requirement of doing this forced them to provoke wars and rebellions, which in turn made it easy for the eventual European conqueror to get native allies. The majority of prisoners were simply slaughtered, their hearts given directly to the idols. But in at least one cult the body was divided among the worshippers.

'Cannibalism could be a form of magic, too. By eating a person, one supposedly acquired his virtues. This was the principal motive of the cannibals of Africa and Polynesia. Contemporary observers did report that the meals were relished, but that is easy to understand, especially in protein-poor areas.

'The sole recorded instance of systematic non-ceremonial cannibalism was among the Carib Indians of America. They ate man because they preferred man. They were especially fond of babies, and used to capture women from other tribes for breeding stock. Male children of these slaves were generally gelded to make them docile and tender. In large part because of strong aversion to such practices, the Europeans exterminated the Caribs to the last man.'

The report stopped. Chena grimaced. 'I can sympathize with the Europeans,' she said.

Evalyth might once have raised her eyebrows; but her face stayed as wooden as her speech. 'Aren't you supposed to be an objective scientist?'

'Yes. Yes. Still, there is such a thing as value judgement. And they did kill Donli.'

'Not they. One of them. I shall find him.'

'He's nothing but a creature of his culture, dear, sick with his whole race.' Chena drew a breath, struggling for calm. 'Obviously, the sickness has become a behavioural basic,' she said. 'I daresay it originated in Lokon. Cultural radiation is practically always from the more advanced peoples. And on a single island, after centuries, no tribe has escaped the infection. The Lokonese later elaborated and rationalized the practice. The savages left its cruelty naked. But Highlander or lowlander, their way of life is founded on that particular human sacrifice.'

'Can't they be taught differently?' Evalyth asked without real interest.

'Yes. In time. In theory. But - well, I do know enough about what happened on Old Earth, and elsewhere, when advanced societies undertook to reform primitive ones. The entire structure was destroyed. It had to be.

"Think of the result, if we told these people to desist from their puberty rite. They wouldn't listen. They couldn't. They *must* have grandchildren. They *know* a boy won't become a man unless he has eaten part of a man. We'd have to conquer them, kill most, make sullen prisoners of the rest. And when the next crop of boys did in fact mature without the magic food... what then? Can you imagine the demoralization, the sense of utter inferiority, the loss of that tradition which is the core of every personal identity? It might be kinder to bomb this island sterile.'

Chena shook her head. 'No,' she said harshly, 'the single decent way for us to proceed would be gradually. We could send missionaries. By their precept and example, we could start the natives phasing out their custom after two or three generations... And we can't afford such an effort. Not for a long time to come. Not with so many other worlds in the galaxy, so much worthier of what little help we can give. I am going to recommend we depart as soon as possible. When we get home, I shall recommend this planet be left alone.'

Evalyth considered her for a moment before asking: 'Isn't that partly because of your own reaction?'

'Yes,' Chena admitted. 'I can't overcome my disgust. And I, as you pointed out, am supposed to be professionally broad-minded. So even if the Board tried to recruit missionaries, I doubt if they'd succeed.' She hesitated. 'You yourself, Evalyth-'

The Krakener rose. 'My emotions don't matter,' she said. 'My duty does. Thank you for your help.' She turned on her heel and went with military strides out of the cabin.

The chemical barriers were crumbling. Evalyth stood for a moment before the little building that had been hers and Donli's, afraid to enter. The sun was low, so that the compound was filling with shadows. A thing, leathery-winged and serpentine, cruised silently overhead. From outside the stockade drifted sounds of feety foreign voices, the whine of a wooden flute. The air was cooling. She shivered. Their home would be too hollow.

Someone approached. She recognized the person glimpsewise, Alsabeta Mondain from Nuevamerica. Listening to her well-meant foolish condolences would be worse than going inside. Evalyth took the last three steps and slid the door shut behind her.

Donli will not be here again. Eternally.

But the cabin proved not to be empty of him. Rather, it was too full. That chair where he used to sit, reading that worn volume of poetry which she could not understand and teased him about, that table across which he had toasted her and tossed kisses, that closet where his clothes hung, that scuffed pair of slippers, that bed, it screamed of him. Evalyth went fast into the laboratory section and drew the curtain that separated it from the living quarters. Rings rattled along the rod. The noise was monstrous in twilight.

She closed her eyes and fists and stood breathing hard. *I will not go soft*, she declared. *You always said you loved me for my strength (among numerous other desirable features, you'd add with your slow grin, but I won't remember that yet), and I don't aim to let slip anything you loved.*

I've got to get busy, she told Donli's child. *The expedition command is pretty sure to act on Chena's urging and haul mass for home. We've not many days to avenge your father.*

Her eyes snapped open. *What am I doing*, she thought, bewildered, *talking to a dead man and an embryo?*

She turned on the overhead fluoro and went to the computer. It was made no differently from the other portables. Donli had used it. But she could look away from the unique scratches and bumps on that square case, as she could not escape his microscope chemanalysers, chromosome tracer, biological specimens... She seated herself. A drink would have been very welcome, except that she needed clarity. 'Activate!' she ordered.

The On light glowed yellow. Evalyth tugged her chin, searching for words. "The objective," she said at length, 'is to trace a low-lander who has consumed several kilos of flesh and blood from one of the party, and afterwards vanished into the jungle. The killing took place about sixty hours ago. How can he be found?'

The least hum answered her. She imagined the links: to the maser in the ferry, up past the sky to the nearest orbiting relay unit, to the next, to the next, around the bloated belly of the planet, by ogre sun and unhuman stars, until the pulses reached the mother ship: then down to an unliving brain that routed the question to the appropriate data bank: then to the scanners, whose resonating energies flew from molecule to distorted molecule, identifying more bits of information than it made sense to number, data garnered from hundreds or thousands of entire worlds, data preserved through the wreck of Empire and the dark ages that followed, data going back to an Old Earth that perhaps no longer existed. She shied from the thought and wished herself back on dear stern Kraken. *We will go there*, she promised Donli's child. *You will dwell apart from these too many machines and grow up as the gods meant you should.*

'Query,' said the artificial voice. 'Of what origin was the victim of this assault?'

Evalyth must wet her lips before she could reply: 'Atheian. He was Donli Sairn, your master.'

'In that event, the possibility of tracking the desired local inhabitant may exist. The odds will now be computed. In the interim, do you wish to know the basis of the possibility?'

'Y-yes.'

'Native Atheian biochemistry developed in a manner quite parallel to Earth's,' said the voice, 'and the early colonists had no difficulty in introducing terrestrial species. Thus they enjoyed a friendly environment, where population soon grew sufficiently large to obviate the danger of racial change through mutation and/or genetic drift. In addition, no selection pressure tended to force change. Hence the modern Atheian human is little different from his ancestors of Earth, on which account his physiology and biochemistry are known in detail.

'This has been essentially the case on most colonized planets for which records are available. Where different breeds of men have arisen, it has generally been because the original settlers were highly selected groups. Randomness, and evolutionary adaptation to new conditions, have seldom produced radical changes in biotype. For example the robustness on the average Krakener is a response to comparatively high gravity, his size aids him in resisting cold, his fair complexion is helpful beneath a sun poor in ultraviolet. But his ancestors were people who already had the natural endowments for such a world. His deviations from their norm are not extreme. They do not preclude his living on more Earth-like planets or interbreeding with the inhabitants of these.

'Occasionally, however, larger variations have occurred. They appear to be due to a

small original population or to unterrestroid conditions or both. The population may have been small because the planet could not support more, or have become small as the result of hostile action when the Empire fell. In the former case, genetic accidents had a chance to be significant; in the latter radiation produced a high rate of mutant births among survivors. The variations are less apt to be in gross anatomy than in subtle endocrine and enzymatic qualities, which affect the physiology and psychology. Well-known cases include the reaction of the Gwydiona to nicotine and certain indoles, and the requirement of the Ifrians for trace amounts of lead. Sometimes the inhabitants of two planets are actually intersterile because of their differences.

'While this world has hitherto received the sketchiest of examinations -' Evalyth was yanked out of the reverie into which the lecture had led her - 'certain facts appear. Few terrestrial species have flourished; no doubt others were introduced originally, but died off after the technology to maintain them was lost. Man has thus been forced to depend on autochthonous life for the major part of his food. This life is deficient in various elements of human nutrition. For example, the only Vitamin C appears to be on immigrant plants; Sairn observed that the people consume large amounts of grass and leaves from those species, and that fluoroscopic pictures indicate this practice had measurable modified the digestive tract. No one would supply skin, blood, sputum, or similar samples, not even from corpses.' *Afraid of magic*, Evalyth thought drearily, *yes, they're back to that too*. 'But intensive analysis of the usual meat animals shows these to be under-supplied with three essential amino-acids, and human adaptation to this must have involved considerable change on the cellular and sub-cellular levels. The probable type and extent of such change are computable.

'The calculations are now complete.' Evalyth gripped the arms of her chair and could not breathe. 'While the answer is subject to error for lack of precise data, it indicates a fair probability of success. In effect, Atheian flesh is alien here. It can be metabolized, but the body of the local consumer will excrete certain compounds and these will impart a characteristic odour to skin and breath as well as to urine and faeces. The chance is good that it will be detectable by neo-Freeholder technique at distances of several kilometres, after sixty or seventy hours. But since the molecules in question are steadily being degraded and dissipated, speed of action is recommended.'

I am going to find Donli's murderer. Darkness roared around Evalyth.

'Shall the organisms be ordered for you and given the appropriate search programme?' asked the voice. "They can be on hand in an estimated three hours.'

'Yes,' she stammered. 'Oh, please - Have you any other... other... advice?'

'The man ought not to be killed out of hand, but brought here for examination: if for no other reason, then in order that the scientific ends of the expedition may be served.'

That's a machine talking, Evalyth cried. It's designed to help research. Nothing more. But it was his. And its answer was so altogether Donli that she could no longer hold back her tears.

The single big moon rose nearly full, shortly after sundown. It drowned most stars; the jungle beneath was cobbled with silver and dappled with black; the snowcone of Mount Burus floated unreal at the unseen edge of the world. Wind slid around Evalyth where she crouched on her gravsled; it was full of wet acrid odours, and felt cold though it was not, and chuckled at her back. Somewhere something screeched, every few minutes, and something else cawed reply.

She scowled at her position indicators aglow on the control panel. Curses and chaos, Moru had to be in this area! He couldn't have escaped from the valley on foot in the time available, and her search pattern had practically covered it. If she ran out of bugs before she found him, must she assume he was dead? They ought to be able to find his body regardless, ought they not? Unless it was buried deep - Here. She brought the sled to hover, took the next phial off the rack, and stood up to open it.

The bugs came out many and tiny, like smoke in the moonlight. Their cloud whirled, began to break apart. Evalyth felt a nausea. Another failure?

No! Wait! Were not those motes dancing back together, into a streak barely visible under the moon, and vanishing downward? Heart thudding, she turned to the indicator. Its neurodetector antenna was not aimlessly wobbling but pointed straight west-north-west, declination thirty-two degrees below horizontal. Only a concentration of the bugs could make it behave like that. And only the particular mixture of molecules to which the bugs had been presensitized, in several parts per million or better, would make them converge on the source.

'Ya-a-a-ah!' She couldn't help the one hawk-yell. But thereafter she bit her lips shut - blood trickled unnoticed down her chin - and drove the sled in silence.

The distance was a mere few kilometres. She came to a halt above an opening in the forest. Pools of scummy water gleamed in its rank growth/The trees made a solid-seeming wall around. Evalyth clapped her night goggles down off her helmet and over her eyes. A lean-to became visible. It was hastily woven from vines and withes, huddled against a pair of the largest trees to let their branches hide it from the sky. The bugs were entering.

Evalyth lowered her sled to a metre off the ground and got to her feet again. A stun pistol slid from its sheath into her right hand. Her left rested on the blaster.

Moru's two sons groped from the shelter. The bugs whirled around them, a mist that blurred their outlines. *Of course*, Evalyth realized, nonetheless shocked into a higher hatred, *I should have known, they did the actual devouring*. More than ever did they resemble gnomes - skinny limbs, big heads, the pot bellies of under-nourishment. Krakener boys of their age would have twice their bulk and be noticeably on the way to becoming men. These nude bodies belonged to children, except that they had the grotesqueness of eld.

The parents followed them, ignored by the entranced bugs. The mother wailed. Evalyth identified a few words, 'What is the matter, what are those things - oh, help -' but her gaze was locked upon Moru.

Limping out of the hutch, stooped to clear its entrance, he made her think of some huge beetle crawling from an offal heap. But she would know that bushy head though her brain were coming apart. He carried a stone blade, surely the one that hacked up Donli. *I will take it away from him, and the hand with it*, Evalyth wept. *I will keep him alive while I dismantle him with these my own hands, and in between times he can watch me flay those repulsive spawn of his*.

The wife's scream broke through. She had seen the metal thing, and the giant that stood on its platform, with skull and eyes shimmering beneath the moon.

'I have come for you who killed my man,' Evalyth said.

The mother screamed anew and cast herself before the boys. The father tried to run around in front of her, but his lame foot twisted under him and he fell into a pool. As he struggled out of its muck, Evalyth shot the woman. No sound was heard; she folded and lay moveless. 'Run!' Moru shouted. He tried to charge the sled. Evalyth twisted a control stick. Her vehicle whipped in a circle, heading off the boys. She shot them from above, where Moru couldn't quite reach her.

He knelt beside the nearest, took the body in his arms and looked upward. The moonlight poured relentlessly across him. 'What can you now do to me?' he called.

She stunned him too, landed, got off and quickly hogtied the four of them. Loading them aboard, she found them lighter than she had expected.

Sweat had sprung forth upon her, until her coverall stuck dripping to her skin. She began to shake, as if with fever. Her ears buzzed. 'I would have destroyed you,' she

said. Her voice sounded remote and unfamiliar. A still more distant part wondered why she bothered speaking to the unconscious, in her own tongue at that. 'I wish you hadn't acted the way you did. That made me remember what the computer said, about Donli's friends needing you for study.'

'You're too good a chance, I suppose. After your doings, we have the right under allied rules to make prisoners of you, and none of his friends are likely to get maudlin about your feelings.'

'Oh, they won't be inhumane. A few cell samples, a lot of tests, anaesthesia where necessary, nothing harmful, nothing but a clinical examination as thorough as facilities allow. No doubt you'll be better fed than at any time before, and no doubt the medics will find some pathologies they can cure for you. In the end, Moru, they'll release your wife and children.'

She stared into his horrible face. 'I am pleased,' she said 'that to you, who won't comprehend what is going on, it will be a bad experience. And when they are finished, Moru, I will insist on having you, at least back. They can't deny me that. Why, your tribe itself has, in effect cast you out. Right? My colleagues won't let me do more than kill you, I'm afraid, but on this I will insist.'

She gunned the engine and started towards Lokon, as fast as possible, to arrive while she felt able to be satisfied with that much.

And the days without him and the days without him.

The nights were welcome. If she had not worked herself quite to exhaustion, she could take a pill. He rarely returned in her dreams. But she had to get through each day, and would not drown him in drugs.

Luckily, there was a good deal of work involved in preparing to depart, when the expedition was short-handed and on short notice. Gear must be dismantled, packed, ferried to the ship, and stowed. *New Dawn* herself must be readied, numerous systems recommissioned and tested. Her militechnic training qualified Evalyth to double as mechanic, boat jockey, or loading gang boss. In addition, she kept up the routines of defence in the compound.

Captain Jonafer objected mildly to this. 'Why bother, Lieutenant? The locals are scared blue of us. They've heard what you did - and this coming and going through the sky, robots and heavy machinery in action, floodlights after dark - I'm having trouble

persuading them not to abandon their town!

'Let them,' she snapped. 'Who cares?'

'We did not come here to ruin them, Lieutenant.'

'No, In my judgement, though, Captain, they'll be glad to ruin us if we present the least opportunity. Imagine what special virtues *your* body must have.'

Jonafer sighed and gave in. But when she refused to receive Rogar the next time she was planetside, he ordered her to do so and be civil.

The *Klev* entered the biolab section - she would not have him in her living quarters - with a gift held in both hands, a sword of Imperial metal. She shrugged; no doubt a museum would be pleased to get the thing. 'Lay it on the floor,' she told him.

Because she occupied the single chair, he stood. He looked little and old in his robe. 'I came,' he whispered, 'to say how we of Lokon rejoice that the heaven-borne has won her revenge.'

'Is winning it,' she corrected.

He could not meet her eyes. She stared moodily at his faded hair. 'Since the heaven-borne could... easily... find those she wished... she knows the truth in the hearts of us of Lokon, that we never intended harm to her folk.'

That didn't seem to call for an answer.

His fingers twisted together. "Then why do you forsake us?" he went on. 'When you first came, when we had come to know you and you spoke our speech, you said you would stay for many moons, and after you would come others to teach and trade. Our hearts rejoiced. It was not alone the goods you might someday let us buy, nor that your wisemen talked of ways to end hunger, sickness, danger, and sorrow. No, our jubilation and thankfulness were most for the wonders you opened. Suddenly the world was made great, that had been so narrow. And now you are going away. I have asked when I dared, and those of your men who will speak to me say none will return. How have we offended you, and how may it be made right, heaven-borne?'

'You can stop treating your fellow men like animals,' Evalyth got past her teeth.

'I have gathered... somewhat... that you from the stars say it is wrong what happened in the Sacred Place. But we only do it once in a lifetime, heaven-borne, and because we

must.'

'You have no need.'

Rogar went on his hands and knees before her. 'Perhaps the heaven-borne are thus,' he pleaded, 'but we are merely men. If our sons do not get the manhood, they will never beget children of their own, and the last of us will die alone in a world of death, with none to crack his skull and let the soul out -' He dared glance up at her. What he saw made him whimper and crawl backwards into the sun-glare.

Later Chena Darnard sought Evalyth. They had a drink and talked around the subject for a while, until the anthropologist plunged in: 'You were pretty hard on the sachem, weren't you?'

'How'd you - Oh.' The Krakener remembered that the interview had been taped, as was done whenever possible for later study. 'What was I supposed to do, kiss his man-eating mouth?'

'No.' Chena winced. 'I suppose not.'

'Your signature heads the list, on the official recommendation that we quit this planet.'

'Yes. But - Now I don't know. I was repelled. I am. However - I've been observing the medical team working on those prisoners of yours. Have you?'

'No.'

'You should. The way they cringe and shriek, and reach to each other when they're strapped down in the lab, and cling together afterwards in their cell.'

"They aren't suffering pain or mutilation, are they?'

'Of course not. But can they believe it when their captors say they won't? They can't be tranquillized while under study you know, if the results are to be valid. Their fear of the absolutely unknown - Well, Evalyth, I had to stop observing. I couldn't take any more.' Chena gave the other a long stare. 'You might, though.'

Evalyth shook her head. 'I don't gloat. I'll shoot the murderer because my family honour demands it. The rest can go free, even the boys, even in spite of what they ate.' She poured herself a stiff draught and tossed it off in a gulp. The liquor burned on the way down.

'I wish you wouldn't,' Chena said. 'Donli wouldn't have liked it. He had a proverb that he claimed was very Ancient - he was from my city, don't forget, and I have known... I did know him longer than you, dear - I heard him say, twice or thrice. *Do I not destroy my enemies if I make them my friends?*'

"Think of a venomous insect,' Evelyth replied. 'You don't make friends with it. You put it under your heel.'

'But a man does what he does because of what he is, what his society had made him.' Chena's voice grew urgent; she leaned forward to grip Evelyth's hand, which did not respond. 'What is one man, one lifetime, against all who live around him and all who have gone before? Cannibalism wouldn't be found everywhere over this island, in every one of these otherwise altogether different groupings, if it weren't the most deeply rooted cultural imperative this race has got.'

Evelyth grinned around a rising anger. 'And what kind of race are they to acquire it? And how about according me the privilege of operating my own cultural imperatives? I'm bound home, to raise Donli's child away from your gutless civilization. He will not grow up disgraced because his mother was too weak to exact justice for his father. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get up early and take another boatload to the ship and get it inboard.'

That task required a while. Evelyth came back towards sunset the next day. She felt a little more tired than usual, a little more peaceful. The raw edge of what had happened was healing over. The thought crossed her mind, abstract but not shocking, not disloyal: *I'm young. One year another man will come. I won't love you the less, darling.*

Dust scuffed under her boots. The compound was half stripped already, a corresponding number of personnel berthed in the ship. The evening reached quiet beneath a yellowing sky. Only a few of the expedition stirred among the machines and remaining cabins. Lokon lay as hushed as it had lately become. She welcomed the thud of her footfalls on the steps into Jonafer's office.

He sat waiting for her, big and unmoving behind his desk. 'Assignment completed without incident,' she reported.

'Sit down,' he said.

She obeyed. The silence grew. At last he said, out of a stiff face: "The clinical team has finished with the prisoners.'

Somehow it was a shock. Evelyth groped for words: 'Isn't that too soon? I mean, well,

we don't have a lot of equipment, and just a couple of men who can use the advanced stuff, and then without Donli for an expert on Earth biology - Wouldn't a good study go down to the chromosomal level if not further - something that the physical anthropologists could use - wouldn't it take longer?'

'That's correct,' Jonafer said. 'Nothing of major importance was found. Perhaps something would have been, if Uden's team had any inkling of what to look for. Given that, they could have made hypotheses, and tested them in a whole-organism context, and come to some understandings of their subjects as functioning beings. You're right, Donli Sairn had the kind of professional intuition that might have guided them. Lacking that, and with no particular clues, and no co-operation from those ignorant, terrified savages, they had to grope and probe almost at random. They did establish a few digestive peculiarities - nothing that couldn't have been predicted on the basis of ambient ecology.'

'Then why have they stopped? We won't be leaving for another week at the earliest.'

'They did so on my orders, after Uden had shown me what was going on and said he'd quit regardless of what I wanted.'

'What -? Oh.' Scorn lifted Evalyth's head. 'You mean the psychological torture.'

'Yes, I saw that scrawny woman secured to a table. Her head her body were covered with leads to the meters that clustered around her and clicked and hummed and flickered, She didn't see me; her eyes were blind with fear. I suppose she imagined her soul was being pumped out. Or maybe the process was worse for being something she couldn't put a name to, I saw her kids in a cell, holding hands. Nothing else left for them to hold on to, in their total universe. They're just at puberty; what'll this do to their psychosexual development? I saw their father lying drugged beside them, after he'd tried to batter his way straight through the wall. Uden and his helpers told me how they'd tried to make friends and failed. Because naturally the prisoners know they're in the power of those who hate them with a hate that goes beyond the grave.'

Jonafer paused. 'There are decent limits to everything, Lieutenant,' he ended, 'including science and punishment. Especially when, after all, the chance of discovering anything else unusual is slight. I ordered the investigation terminated. The boys and their mother will be flown to their home area and released tomorrow.'

'Why not today?' Evelyth asked, foreseeing his reply.

'I hoped,' Jonafer said, 'that you'd agree to let the man go with them.'

'No.'

'In the name of God -'

'Your God.' Evalyth looked away from him. 'I won't enjoy it, Captain. I'm beginning to wish I didn't have to. But it's not as if Donli'd been killed in an honest war or feud or - He was slaughtered like a pig. That's the evil in cannibalism; it makes a man nothing but another meat animal. I won't bring him back, but I will somehow even things, by making the cannibal nothing but a dangerous animal that needs shooting.'

'I see.' Jonafer too stared long out of the window. In the sunset light his face became a mask of brass. 'Well,' he said finally, coldly, 'under the Charter of the Alliance and the articles of this expedition, you leave me no choice. But we will not have any ghoulish ceremonies, and you will not deputize what you want done. The prisoner will be brought to your place privately after dark. You will dispose of him at once and assist in cremating the remains.'

Evalyth's palms grew wet, *I never killed a helpless man before!*

But he did, it answered. 'Understood Captain,' she said.

'Very good, Lieutenant. You may go clean up and join the mess for dinner if you wish. No announcements to anyone. The business will be scheduled for -' Jonafer glanced at his watch, set to local rotation - '2600 hours.'

Evalyth swallowed around a clump of dryness. 'Isn't that rather late?'

'On purpose,' he told her. 'I want the camp asleep.' His glance struck hers. 'And want you to have time to reconsider.'

'No!' She sprang erect and went for the door.

His voice pursued her: 'Donli would have asked you for that.'

Night came in and filled the room. Evalyth didn't rise to turn on the light. It was as if this chair, which had been Donli's favourite, wouldn't let her go.

Finally she remembered the psychodrugs. She had a few tablets left. One of them would make the execution easy to perform. No doubt Jonafer would direct that Moru be tranquilized - now, at last - before they brought him here. So why should she not give

herself calmness?

It wouldn't be right.

Why not?

I don't know. I don't understand anything any longer.

Who does? Moru alone. He knows why he murdered and butchered a man who trusted him. Evalyth found herself smiling wearily into the darkness. He has a superstition for his sure guide. He's actually seen his children display the first signs of maturity. That ought to console him a little.

Odd, that the glandular upheaval of adolescence should have commenced under frightful stress. One would have expected a delay instead. True the captives had been getting a balanced diet for a change and medicine had probably eliminated various chronic low-level infections. Nonetheless the fact was odd. Besides, normal children under normal conditions would not develop the outward signs beyond mistaking in this short a time. Donli would have puzzled over the matter. She could almost see him, frowning, rubbing his forehead, grinning one-sidedly with the pleasure of a problem.

'I'd like to have a go at this myself,' she heard him telling Uden over a beer and a smoke. 'Might turn up an angle.'

'How?' the medic would have replied. 'You're a general biologist. No reflection on you, but detailed human physiology is out of your line.'

'Um-m-m...yes and no. My main job is studying species of terrestrial origin and how they've adapted to new planets. By a remarkable coincidence, man is included among them.'

But Donli was gone, and no one else was competent to do his work - to be any part of him, but she fled from that thought and from the thought of what she must presently do. She held her mind tightly to the realization that none of Uden's team had tried to apply Donli's knowledge. As Jonafer remarked, a living Donli might well have suggested an idea, unorthodox and insightful, that would have led to the discovery of whatever was there to be discovered, if anything was. Uden and his assistants were routineers. They hadn't even thought to make Donli's computer ransack its data banks for possibly relevant information. Why should they when they saw their problems as strictly medical? And, to be sure they were not cruel. The anguish they were inflicting had made them avoid whatever might lead to ideas demanding further research. Donli would have approached the entire business differently from the outset.

Suddenly the gloom thickened. Evalyth fought for breath. Too hot and silent here; too long a wait; she must do something or her will would desert her and she would be unable to squeeze the trigger.

She stumbled to her feet and into the lab. The fluoro blinded her for a moment when she turned it on. She went to his computer and said: 'Activate!'

Nothing responded but the indicator light. The windows were totally black. Clouds outside shut off moon and stars.

'What -' The sound was a curious croak. But that brought a releasing call: *Take hold of yourself, you blubbering idiot, or you're not fit to mother the child you're carrying.* She could then ask questions. 'What explanations in terms of biology can be devised for the behaviour of the people on this planet?'

'Matters of that nature are presumably best explained in terms of psychology and cultural anthropology,' said the voice.

'M-m-maybe,' Evalyth said. 'And maybe not.' She marshalled a few thoughts and stood them firm amidst the others roiling in her skull. 'The inhabitants could be degenerate somehow, not really human.' *I want Moru to be.* 'Scan every fact recorded about them, including the detailed clinical observations made on four of them in the past several days. Compare with basic terrestrial data. Give me whatever hypotheses looks reasonable.' She hesitated. 'Correction. I mean possible hypotheses - anything that doesn't flatly contradict established facts. We've used up the reasonable ideas already.'

The machine hummed. Evalyth closed her eyes and clung to the edge of the desk. *Donli, please help me.*

At the other end of forever, the voice came to her:

"The sole behavioural element which appears to be not easily explicable by postulates concerning environment and accidental historical developments, is the cannibalistic puberty rite. According to the anthropological computer, this might well have originated as a form of human sacrifice. But that computer notes certain illogicalities in the idea, as follows.

'On Old Earth, sacrificial religion was normally associated with agricultural societies, which were more vitally dependent on continued fertility and good weather than hunters. Even for them, the offering of humans proved disadvantageous in the long run, as the Aztec example most clearly demonstrates. Lokon has rationalized the practice to a degree, making it part of the slavery system and thus minimizing its impact on the

generality. But for the lowlanders it is a powerful evil, a source of perpetual danger, a diversion of effort and resources that are badly needed for survival. It is not plausible that the custom, if ever imitated from Lokon, should persist among every one of those tribes. Nevertheless it does. Therefore it must have some value and the problem is to find what.

"The method of obtaining victims varies widely, but the requirements always appear to be the same. According to the Lokonese, one adult male body is necessary and sufficient for the maturation of four boys. The killer of Donli Sairn was unable to carry the entire corpse. What he did take of it is suggestive,

'Hence a dipteroid phenomenon may have appeared in man on this planet. Such a thing is unknown among higher animals elsewhere, but it is conceivable. A modification of the Y chromosome would produce it. The test for that modification, and thus the test of the hypothesis, is easily made.'

The voice stopped. Evalyth heard the blood slugging in her veins. 'What are you talking about?'

"The phenomenon is found among lower animals on lower worlds,' the computer told her. 'It is uncommon and so is not widely known. The name derives from the Diptera, a type of dung fly on Old Earth.'

Lightning flickered: 'Dung fly - good, yes!'

The machine went on to explain.

Jonafer came alone with Moru. The savage's hands were tied behind his back, and the spaceman loomed enormous over him. Despite that and the bruises he had inflicted on himself, he hobbled along steadily. The clouds were breaking and the moon shone ice-white. Where Evalyth waited, outside her door, she saw the compound reach bare to the saw-topped stockade and a crane stand above like a gibbet. The air was growing cold - the planet spinning towards an autumn - and a small wind had arisen to whimper behind the dust devils that stirred across the earth. Jonafer's footfalls rang loud.

He noticed her and stopped. Moru did likewise. 'What did they learn?' she asked.

The captain nodded. 'Uden got right to work when you called,' he said. 'The test is more complicated than your computer suggested - but then, it's for Donli's kind of skill, not Uden's. He'd never have thought of it unassisted. Yes, the notion is true.'

'How?'

Moru stood waiting while the language he did not understand went to and fro around him.

'I'm no medic.' Jonafer kept his tone altogether colourless. 'But from what Uden told me, the chromosome defect means that the male gonads here can't mature spontaneously. They need an extra supply of hormones - he mentioned testosterone and androsterone, I forget what else - to start off the series of changes which bring on puberty. Lacking that, you'll get eunuchism. Uden thinks the surviving population was tiny after the colony was bombed out, and so poor that it resorted to cannibalism for bare survival, the first generation or two. Under those circumstances, a mutation that would otherwise have eliminated itself got established and spread to every descendant.'

Evalyth nodded. 'I see.'

'You understand what this means, I suppose,' Jonafer said. 'There'll be no problem to ending this practice. We'll simply tell them we have a new and better Holy Food, and prove it with a few pills. Terrestrial-type meat animals can be reintroduced later and supply what's necessary. In the end, no doubt our geneticists can repair that faulty Y chromosome.'

He could not stay contained any longer. His mouth opened, a gash across his half-seen face, and he rasped: 'I should praise you for saving a whole people. I can't. Get your business over with, will you?'

Evalyth trod forward to stand before Mora. He shivered but met her eyes. Astonished she said: 'You haven't drugged him.'

'No,' Jonager said. 'I wouldn't help you.' He spat.

'Well, I'm glad.' She addressed Moru in his own language: 'You killed my man. Is it right that I should kill you?'

'It is right,' he answered almost as levelly as she. 'I thank you that my woman and my sons are to go free.' He was quiet for a second or two. 'I have heard that your folk can preserve food for years without it rotting. I would be glad if you kept my body to give your sons.'

'Mine will not need it,' Evalyth said. 'Nor will the sons of your sons.'

Anxiety tinged his words: 'Do you know why I slew your man? He was kind to me, and like a god. But I am lame. I saw no other way to get what my sons must have; and they must have it soon, or it would be too late and they could never become men.'

'He taught me,' Evalyth said, 'how much it is to be a man.'

She turned to Jonafer, who stood tense and puzzled. 'I had my revenge,' she said in Donli's tongue.

'What?' His question was a reflexive pose.

'After I learned about the dipteroid phenomenon,' she said. 'All that was necessary was for me to keep silent. Moru, his children, his entire race would go on being prey for centuries, maybe forever. I sat for half an hour, I think, having my revenge.'

'And then?' Jonafer asked.

'I was satisfied, and could start thinking about justice,' Evalyth said.

She drew a knife. Moru straightened his back. She stepped behind him and cut his bonds. 'Go home,' she said. 'Remember him.'