

The complete solo short SF of

# Judith Merril



## Homecalling

and other stories



# Homecalling

Judith Merrill

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THERE WAS NO warning. Deborah heard her mother shout, 'Dee! Grab the baby!'

Petey's limbs hung loose; his pink young mouth fell open as he bounced off the foam-padded floor of the play-space, hit more foam on the sidewall, at a neat ninety-degree angle, and bounced once more. The small ship finished upending itself, lost the last of its spin, and hurled itself surfaceward under constant acceleration. Wall turned to ceiling, ceiling to floor and Petey landed smack on his fat bottom against the foam-protected toy-bin. Unhurt but horrified, he added a lusty wail to the ever shriller screaming of the alien atmosphere, and the mighty reverberations of the rocket's thunder.

'... the bay-beeee... Dee!'

'I got him.' Deborah hooked a finger finally through her brother's overall strap, and demanded: 'What do I do now?'

'I don't know; hold on to him. Wait a minute.' Sarah Levin turned her head with difficulty towards her husband. 'John,' she whispered, 'what's going to happen?'

He gnawed at his lower lip, tried to quirk a smile out of the side of his mouth nearest her. 'Not good,' he said, very low. 'The children?'

'Dunn.' He struggled with levers, frantically trying to fire the tail rockets--now, after their sudden space-somersault became the forward jets. 'Don't know what's wrong,' he muttered fiercely. 'Mommy, it hurts..?'

Petey was really crying now, low and steady sobbing, and Dee

whimpered again, 'It hurts. I can't get up.'

'Daddy's trying to fix it,' Sarah said. 'Dee... listen..? It washard to talk  
'If you can, try to... kind of... wrap yourseh around Petey...'

I can't..? Deborah too broke into sobs.

Seconds of waiting, slow eternal seconds; then incredibly, gout of flame burst out ahead of them.

The braking force of the forward rocket eased the pressure inside, and Dee ricocheted off a foamed surface--wall, floor ceiling? She didn't know--her finger still stuck tight through Petey'; strap. The ground, strange orange-red terrain with towering bluish trees, was close. Too close. There was barely time before the crash for Sarah to shout a last reminder.

'...right around him!' she yelled. Dee understood; she pulled her baby brother close to her chest and wound her arms and leg( around his body. Then there was crashing splintering jagged noise through all the world.

It was too warm. Dee didn't want to look, but she opened an eye.

Nothing to see but foam-padded sides of the play-space, with the toys scattered all over.

A bell jangled, and a mechanical voice began: 'Fire... Fire... Fire... Fire... Fire... ' Dee knew what to do. She wondered about letting go of Petey, but she'd have to, she couldn't ask her mother, because the safety door was closed. Her mother and father were both on the other side in front--that was where the fire would be. She wondered if they'd get burned up, but let go of Petey, and worked the escape lock the way she'd been taught. While it was opening, she put on Petey's oxy mask and her own. She didn't know for sure whether they

would be needed on this planet, but one place they'd been called Carteld, you had to wear a mask all the time because there wasn't enough oxygen in the air.

She couldn't remember the name of this planet. They'd never been here before, she knew that much; but this must be the one they were coming to, or Daddy wouldn't have started to go down, and everything wouldn't have happened.

That meant probably, at least the air wasn't poisonous. They had space-suits and helmets on the ship, and Dee had space-suit drill every week; but she was pretty sure she didn't need anything more than the mask here. And there wasn't time for space-suits anyhow.

The lock was all the way open. Deborah went to the door and recoiled before the blast of heat; it was burning outside. Now she had to get away, quick.

She picked up Petey, looked around at all the toys, and at the closet where her clothes were; at the blackboard, the projector, and the tumbled pile of fruit and crackers on the floor. She bent down and stuffed the pockets of her jumper with the crumbly crackers and smashed sticky fruit. Then she looked around again, and felt the heat coming through the door, and had to leave everything else behind.

She climbed out, and there were flames in the back. She ran, with Petey in her arms, though she'd been told never to do that. She ran straight away from the flames, and kept going as long as she could; it was hard work, because her feet sank into the spongy soil at every step. And it was still hot, even when she got away from the rocket. She kept running until she was too tired, and began to stumble, then she slowed down and walked--until Petey began to be too heavy, and she couldn't carry him any more. She stopped, and put him down on the ground and looked him over.

He was all right, only he was wet--very wet--and the whole front of her jumper was wet too, from him.

Deborah scowled, and the baby began to cry. She couldn't stand that, so she smiled and tried playing games with him. Petey wasn't very good at games yet, but he always laughed and stayed happy if she played with him. Sometimes she thought he liked her better than anybody else, even Mommy. He acted that way. Maybe it was because she was closer to his size--a medium size giant in a world full of giant-giants; that's how people would look to Petey.

When he was happy again, she gave him half a cracker from her pocket, and a piece of fruit for his other hand. He tumbled over backwards, and lay down, right on the muddy ground, smearing the food all over his face and looking sleepy.

Sooner or later, Dee knew, she was going to have to turn around and look back, meanwhile, she sat on the ground, crosslegged, watching Peter fall asleep. She thought about her ancestors, who were pioneers on Pluto, and her father and how brave he was. She thought once, very quickly, about her mother, who was may-be all burned up now.

She had to be brave now--as brave and strong as she knew, in her own private self, she really was. Not silly-brave the way grown-ups expected you to be, about things like cuts and antiseptics, but deep-down important brave. She was an intrepid explorer on an alien planet, exposed to unknown dangers and trials, with a help-less infant under her wing to protect. She turned around and looked back.

Her own footsteps faced her, curving away out of sight between two tall distant trees. She looked harder in the direction they pointed to, if the fire was still burning, she ought to be able to see it. The trees

were far enough apart, and the ground was clear between them--clearer than any ground she'd ever seen before. There were no bushes or branches near the ground, higher than a rocket-launch--tall yellow orange poles with wispy foliage at the top.

The overhead canopy was thick and dark, a changeable ceiling with grey and green and blue fronds stirring in the air. She couldn't see the sky through it all, or see beyond it to find out whether there was any smoke. But that made it dark here, underneath the trees, so Dee was sure she would be able to see the fire, if it was still going.

She got up and followed her own footsteps back, as far as she could go without losing sight of Petey, that was the spot where the trail curved away in a different direction. It curved again, she saw further on; that was strange, because she was sure she'd been going in a straight line when she ran away. The trees all looked so much alike, it would have been hard to tell. She'd heard a story once about a man who went around and around in circles in a forest till he starved to death. It was a good thing that the ground was so soft here, and she could see the footprints so clearly.

Petey was sound asleep. She decided she could leave him alone for a minute. She hadn't seen any wild beasts or animals, or heard anything that sounded dangerous. Deborah started back along her own trail, and at the next bend she saw it, framed between two far trees: the front part of the rocket, still glowing hot, bright orange red like the persimmons Daddy had sent out from Earth one time. That was why she hadn't been able to see it before, the colour was hardly different from the ground on which it stood: just barely redder.

Nothing was burning any more.

'Mommy I' Deborah screamed, and screamed it again at the top of her lungs.

Nothing happened.

She started to run towards the rocket, still calling; then she heard Petey yelling, too. He was awake again and she had to turn around and run back and pick him up.

Then she started the trip all over again, much slower. Petey was dripping wet now, and still hollering. And heavy. Dee tried letting him crawl, but it was too slow. Every move he made, he sank into the soft ground an inch or so; then he'd get curious and try to eat the orange dirt off his fingers, so she had to pick him up again.

By the time they got back to the rocket, Dee was wet all over, plastered with the dirt that Petey had picked up, and too tired even to cry when nobody answered her call.

THE LADY OF the house sat fat with contentment on her couch, and watched the progress of the work. Four of her sons—precision masons all—performed deft manoeuvres with economy and dispatch; a new arch took place before her eyes, enlarged and re-designed to suit her needs.

They started at the floor, sealing the jagged edges a full foot farther back on either side than where the frame had been before. They worked in teams of two, one to stand by and tamp each chip in place with sensitive mandibles, smoothing and firming it into position as it set; the other stepping off to choose a matching piece from the diminishing pile of hard-wood chips, coating it evenly with liquid plastic from his snout and bringing it, ready for placement in the arch, just at the instant that his brother completed the setting of the preceding piece.

Then the exchange in roles: the static partner moving off to make his choice; the second brother setting his new chip in perfect pattern with the rest. Two teams, building the two sides of the arch in rhythmic concert with each other. It was a ritual dance of function and form, chips and plastic, workers and work, each in its way an apparently effortless inevitable detail of the whole. Daydanda gloried in it.

The arch grew taller than ever before, and the Lady's satisfaction grew enormous, while her consort's fluttering excitement mounted. 'But why?' he asked again, still querulous.

'It is pleasant to watch.'

'You will not use it?' He was absurdly hopeful.

'Of course I will!'

'But, Lady... Daydanda, my dearest, Mother of our children, this whole thing is unheard of. What sort of example... ?'

'Have you ever,' she demanded coldly, 'had cause to regret the example I set to my children?'

'No, no my dear, but..?'

She withdrew her attention entirely, and gave herself over to the pure aesthetic delight of watching her sons--the two teams of masons--working overhead now on the final span of the arch, approaching each other with perfect timing and matched instantaneous motions, preparing to meet and place the ceremonial centre-piece together.

Soon she would, rise, take her husband's arm and experience--for the first time since her initial Family came to growth--the infinite pleasure of walking erect through her own door into the next chamber.

Even the report, shortly afterwards, of a fire spreading on the eastern boundary.

failed to diminish her pleasure. She assigned three fliers to investigate the trouble, and dismissed it from her mind.



FOR A LONG, long time Deborah sat still on the ground, hugging Petey on her lap, not caring how wet he was, nor even trying to stop his crying--except that she rocked gently back and forth in a tradition as ancient as it was instinctive. After a while, the baby was asleep; but the girl still sat crosslegged on the ground, her shoulders moving rhythmically, slower and slower, until the swaying was almost imperceptible.

The rocket--the shiny rocket that had been new and expensive a little while ago--lay helpless on its side. The nozzles in the tail, now quiet and cool, had spouted flame across a streak of surface that stretched farther back than Dee could see, leaving a Hal-lowe'en trail of scorched black across the orange ground. Up forward, where the fire in the ship had been, there was nothing to see but the still-red glow of the hull.

Deborah tried to figure out what flames she had seen when she left the ship with Petey; but it didn't make sense, and she hadn't looked long enough to be sure. She'd been taught what to do in case of fire: get out! She'd done it; and now... The lock was still open where she'd climbed out before. Very very carefully, not to wake him she laid her baby brother on the soft ground, and step by reluctant step she approached the ship. Near the lock, she could feel heat; but it was all coming from one direction--from the nose, and not from inside. She touched a yellow clay stained finger to the lock itself, and felt the wall inside, and found it cool. She took a deep breath, ignored the one tear that forced its way out of her right eye, and climbed up into the rocket.

It was quiet in there. Dee didn't know what kind of noise she'd expected, until she remembered the last voice she'd heard when she

left, saying calmly, 'Fire... fire... fire...'

She thought that out and knew the fire had stopped; then it was all right to open the safety door to the front part. Maybe... maybe they weren't hurt or anything; maybe they just couldn't hear her call. If there was just a little fire in there, it might have damaged the controls so they couldn't open the door for instance.

She knew where the controls on her side were, and how to work them. Her hand was on the knob when she had the thought, and then she was afraid. She knew from T.Z.'s how a burning body smelled; and she remembered how hot the outside of the hull was.

Her hand withdrew from the knob, returned, and then withdrew again, without consulting her at all.

That wasn't any little fire.

If they were all right, they'd find some way to open the door themselves; Daddy could always figure out something like that.

If people ask, she told herself, I'll tell them: I didn't know how.

'Mommy,' she said out loud. 'Mommy, please...'

Then she remembered the tube. She ran to it and took the speaker off the hook, fumbling with impatience so that it fell from her hand and dangled on its cord, it buzzed the way it should; it was working!

She grabbed at it, and shouted into it. 'Mommy! Daddy! Where are you?' That was a silly thing to say. 'Please answer me. Please. Please!' I'll be good all the rest of my life, she promised silently and faithfully, all the rest of my life, if you answer me.

But no one answered.

She didn't think about the door controls again. After a while she found she could look around without really seeing the locked safety door. She had only to try a little, and she could make-believe it was a wall just like the sidewalls, that belonged there.

Eight and a half years is a short span of time to an adult; no one seriously expects very much of a child that age. But almost nine years is a long time when you're growing up, and more than time enough to learn a great many things.

Besides the sealed-off control room, and the bedroom-play-space, the family rocket had a third compartment, in the rear. Back there were the galley, bathroom facilities, and the repair equipment, with a tiny metals workshop. Only this last section held any mysteries for Deborah. She knew how to find and pre-pare the stored food supplies for herself and the baby; how to keep the water-reuser and air-fresher operating; where the oxy tanks were, and how to use them if she needed them.

She knew, too, how to let the bunks out of the wall in the play-space, and how to fasten Petey in so he wouldn't smother or strangle himself, or fall out, or even get uncovered in the night. And she knew where all the clean clothes were kept, and how to change the baby's diapers.

These things she knew as naturally and inevitably as a child back on Earth would have known how to select a meal on the push-panel, how to use the slide-walks, how to dial his lessons.

For five days, she played house with the baby in the rocket.

The first day it was fun; she made up bottles from the roll of plastic containers, and mixed milk in the blender from the dried supply. She

ate her favourite foods, wore all her best clothes, dressed the baby and undressed him, and took him out for sun and air in the clearing blasted by the rocket jets. She discovered the uses of the spongy soil, and built fabulous mud castles while Petey played. Inside, when he was sleeping, she read films, and coloured pictures, and left the T.Z. running all the time.

The second day, and the third, she did all the same things, but it wasn't so much fun. Petey was always crying for something just when she got interested in what she was doing. And you couldn't say, 'Soon as I finish this chapter,' because he wouldn't understand.

Deborah got bored; then she began to get worried, too.

At first she had known that help would come; the people who lived on this planet would come looking for them. They'd rescue her and Petey; she'd be a heroine, and perhaps they'd never even ask if she knew how to open that door.

The third day, she began to think that perhaps there weren't any people on the planet at all—at least not on this part of it. There always had been a few people at least, whenever they went any place. The Government didn't send out survey engineers or geologists, like John and Sarah Levin, until after the first wildcat claims began to come in from a new territory. But this time maybe nobody knew they were coming. Or perhaps nobody had seen the crash. Or maybe this wasn't even the right planet.

She worried about that for a while, and then she remembered that her father always sent back a message-rocket when they arrived anyplace. He'd told her it was so the people on the last planet would know they were safe; if it didn't come at the right time, somebody would come out looking, to see what had hap-pened to them.

Dee wondered how long it would take for the folks back on Starhope to get worried and come and rescue them. She couldn't even figure out how long they'd been in space on the way here. It was a long trip, but she wasn't sure if it had been a week, or a month, or more. Trips in space were always long.

The fourth day, she got tired of just waiting, and decided to explore.

She wasn't bothering with the masks any more. The dials still said full after the first three times they went out, and that meant air had enough oxygen in it so that the masks weren't working. So that was no problem.

And she could take along plenty of food. The only thing she wasn't sure about was Petey. She was afraid to leave him by him-self, even in the play space, and he was too heavy to carry for very long. She took his stroller out and tried it, but the ground was too soft to push it when he was inside.

The next morning, early, Deborah packed a giant lunch, and took the stroller out again. She found out that, though it wouldn't push, it could be pulled, so she tied a rope to the front, and loaded it up with bottles and diapers and her lunch and Petey.

Then she set off up the broad black avenue of the rocket jets; that way she could always see the ship, and they wouldn't get lost.

# IV

DAYDANDA WAS TIRED. Truthfully, all this walking back and forth between chambers was a strain. Now she submitted gratefully to Kackot's fussing anxiety as he plumped the top mat here and pulled it there, adjusting the big new dais-couch to conform to her swollen body.

'I told you it was too much,' he fumed. 'I don't see why you want to do it anyhow.'

Now you rest for a while. You...' 'I have work to do,' she reminded him.

'It can wait; let them think for themselves for once!'

She giggled mentally at the notion. Kackot refused to share her amusement.

'There's nothing that can't wait half an hour anyhow.' He was almost firm with her; she loved to have him act that way some-times. Contentedly, she stretched out and let her weight sink into the soft layers of cellulose mat. Her body rested, but her mind and eye were as active as ever. She studied the new shelves and drawers and files, the big new desk at the head of the bed. Every-thing was at hand; everything in place; it was wonderful. The old room had been unbearably cluttered. Now she had only the active records near her. Everything connected with the departed was in the old room: easy to get at on the rare occasions when she needed it; but not underhand every time she turned around.

Daydanda examined the perfect arch her sons had built, and exulted in the sight of it. When she wanted anything on the other side, all she

had to do was walk right through.

She was aware of Kackot's distress. Poor thing, he did hate to have her do anything unconventional. But no one had to know, no one who wasn't really close to them...

'Lady! Mother Daydanda!'

Kackot's image blanked out. This was a closed beam, an urgent call from an older daughter, serving her turn in training a s relay-receptionist for messages from the many less articulate children of the Household.

'What's wrong?'

'Mother! The Stranger Lady has left her wings at last! She came out from inside them! And with a babe in arms! She... oh Mother, I do not know how to tell it; I have never known the like, She is not of our people. The wings are not proper wings. She has no consort. A Family of one! I do not understand...'

'Be comforted, child. There is no need for you to understand. With her own mind seething, Daydanda could still send a message of ease and understanding to her daughter. 'You have done well. She is not of our people, and we must expect many strange things. Now I want the scout.'

The daughter's mind promptly cleared away; in its place, Day-danda felt the nervous tingling excitement of the winged son who had been sent out to report on the fire in the east, and then to keep watch over the Strange Wings he had found there.

'Mother! I am frightened!'

The message was weak; the daughter through whom it came would

be struggling with her curiosity. She was of the eighth family, almost mature, soon to depart from the Household and already showing signs of individualism and rebelliousness. She would be a good Mother, Daydanda thought with satisfaction, even as she closed the contact with the scout and shut the daughter out with a sharp reprimand for inefficiency.

'There is nothing to fear,' she told her son sharply; 'tell me what you have seen.'

'The Strange Lady has left her Wings. She has not enough limbs, and she uses a Strange litter to carry her babe. She...'

'She is a Stranger, son! And you have already quite adequately described her appearance. If you fear Strangeness for its own sake, you will never pierce the tree-tops, nor win yourself a Wife. You will remain in the Household till your wings drop off, and you are put to tending the corral..?'

As she had expected, the familiar threat reassured him as nothing else would have done. She listened closely to his detailed report of how the Stranger had left her Wings, and set off down the blackened fire-strip, pulling behind her a litter containing the Strange babe and some Strange, entirely unidentifiable, goods.

'She has not seen you?' the Mother asked at last.

'No.'

'Good; you have done well. Keep her in sight, and do not fear. I shall assign an elder brother to remain near the Wings, and to join you when the Stranger chooses her new site. Do not fear; your Mother watches over all.' But when the contact was broken, she turned at once in perturbation to her consort: 'Kackot, do you suppose...

please, now, try to use a little imagination... do you suppose... ?'

She caught his apprehensive agreement, even before the thought was fully articulated; clearly that was the case: 'The little one is no babe, but her consort!'

That put a different complexion on the whole matter. The flames of landing clearly could not be considered an act of deliberate hostility, if the Strange Lady's consort were so small and weak that he could not walk for himself, let alone assist in the clearing of a House-site. The fire thus assumed a ritual-functional aspect that made good sense.

If the explanation were correct, there need be no further fear of fire. And since the Strangers' march now was in a direction that would carry them towards the outer boundary of Daydanda's Houseland--or perhaps over it, into neighbouring territory--there was no need either for immediate conflict of any kind.

Daydanda wondered that she did not feel pleased. As long as one assumed the smaller creature to be a babe, it would have meant that a fully-developed Mother was capable of leaving her home, and walking abroad...

Kackot, pacing restlessly across the big room, sputtered with derision. 'A Mother,' he reminded her irritably, 'of a very Strange race!'

'Yes,' Daydanda agreed. In any case, they had been wrong in assuming the smaller one to be a babe, simply because of size. Still, as she lay back to rest and think, the Lady was bemused by a pervading and inexplicable sense of disappointment.

IT WAS VERY hot. After half an hour of sweat and glare, Deborah compromised with her first plan of staying out in the open, and began following a path just inside the forest edge. She kept one tree at a time--and only one--between herself and the 'road'. That way she had shade and orientation both.

Lunch time seemed to come quickly, judging from her own hunger. She stepped out from under the trees, and tried to look up at the sun to see how high it was. It was too bright; she couldn't look at it right. Then she realized she was fooling herself. You didn't need a clock if you had Petey. He would be wanting his bottle before it was time for her to eat. She trudged on, dragging the ever-heavier stroller behind her. Petey just sat there, quiet and content, gurgling his approval of the expedition, and refusing to show any interest in food at all.

Dee might have been less concerned with her insides if the exterior were any less monotonous. It didn't seem to matter where she was, or how far she walked: the forest went on endlessly, with no change in appearance except the random situation of the great trees.

After a while, she stepped out again and sighted back to the rocket, then off the other way. The end of the blasted road was in sight, now; but as far as Dee could see, there was nothing beyond it but more trees--exactly the same as the ones that stretched to left and right: tall straight dirty-yellow trunks, and a thin dense layer of grey-blue fronds high up on top.

At last Petey cried.

Dee was delighted. She tilted him back in his seat, and adjusted the plastic bottle in the holder, then fell ravenously on her own lunch.

When she was finished, she looked around again, more hope-fully; at least they'd come this far in safety. Tomorrow, maybe she'd try another direction, through the woods, away from the road. While Petey napped, she raised a magnificent edifice of orange towers and turrets in the soft dirt; when he woke, she pulled him home again, content.

Maybe nobody lived here at all; maybe the planet had no aborigines. Then there was nothing to be afraid of, and she could wait safely with Petey till somebody came to rescue them. She was thinking that way right up to the time she stepped around the tail-jets of the rocket, and saw tracks.

There were two parallel sets of neat V-prints, perhaps two feet apart; they came from behind a tree near the ship, went almost to the open lock, and curved away to disappear behind another tree.

Two not-quite-parallel sets of tracks; nothing else.

Dee had courage. She looked to see what was behind the tree before she ran. But there was nothing.

That night was bad. Dee couldn't fall asleep, even in the foam bunk, even after the long walk and exercise. She twisted and turned, got up again and walked around and almost woke Petey, and got back in bed and tried to read. But when she got tired enough to sleep, and turned the light out, she'd be wide awake again, staring at the shadows, and she'd have to turn the light on and read some more.

After a while she just lay in her bunk, with the night light on, staring at the closed safety door to the control room, where her mother and father were. Then she cried; she buried her face in the pillow and cried wetly, fluently, hopelessly, until she fell asleep, still sobbing.

She dreamed, a nightmare dream with flaming V-shaped feet and a smell of burning flesh; and woke up screaming, and woke Petey too. Then she had to stay up to change and comfort him; by the time she got him back to sleep again, she was so tired and annoyed that she'd forgotten to be scared.

Next morning, she opened the lock cautiously, expecting to see... almost anything. But there were only giant trees and muddy orange ground: no mysterious tracks, no strange and horrifying beasts. And no glad crew of rescuers.

Maybe the V-tracks never existed, except in that nightmare. She spent most of the morning trying to decide about that, then looked out again, and noticed one more thing. Her own footsteps were also gone; the moist ground had filled in overnight to erase all tracks. There was no way to know for sure whether she had dreamed those tracks or seen them.

The next two days, Dee stayed in the rocket. She was keeping track of the days now. She'd looked at the chrono right after they crashed, so she knew it was seven Starhope days since they came to the planet. She knew, too, that the days here were different, shorter, because the clock was getting ahead. The seventh day on the chrono was the eighth Sunday here; and at high noon the dial said only nine o'clock.

She could still tell noon by Petey's hunger, and she wondered about that: his hunger-clock seemed to have set itself by the new sun already. Certainly, he still got sleepy every night at dusk, though the clock told three hours earlier each time.

Deborah spent most of one day working out the difference. She couldn't figure out any kind of arithmetic she'd been taught to do it with, so she ended up by making little marks for every hour and

counting them. By evening, she was sure she had it right. The day here was seventeen hours instead of twenty. And then she realized she didn't know how to set days on the chrono anyhow; all that work was useless.

The next morning she went out again. Two days of confinement had made Petey cranky and Dee brave.

Nothing happened; after that, they went out daily for airings, as they had done at first. Dee made a calendar, and marked the days on that; then she started checking the food supplies.

They had enough of almost everything, too much to figure out how long it would last. But she spent one afternoon counting the plastic bottles on Petey's roll, and figured out that they'd be gone in just three weeks, if he kept on using four a day.

Someone would come for them before that; she was sure of it. Just the same, she decided that baby was old enough to learn to drink from a glass, and started teaching him.

Eight days became nine and ten, eleven and twelve; still nothing happened. There was no sign of danger nor of help. Dee was sure now that she had dreamed those tracks, but somewhere on this planet she knew there were people. There always were; always had been, whenever they came to someplace new. And if the people didn't come to her, she'd have to find them. Deborah began to plan her second exploratory expedition.

There was no sense in covering the same ground again. She wanted to go the other way, into the woods. That meant she'd need to blaze a trail as she went; and it meant she couldn't use the stroller.

She added up the facts with careful logic, and realized that Petey

would simply have to stay behind.

# VI.

Tim BABY CRAWLED well now, and he could hold things; he could pick up a piece of cracker and get it to his mouth. He couldn't hold the bottle for himself, of course, but...

She tried it, closing her ears to the screams that issued steadily for an hour before he found his milk. But he did find it; her system worked. If she hung the bottle in the holder while his belly was still full, he ignored it; but when he was really hungry, he found it, and wriggled underneath to get at the down-tilted nipple. That gave her, really, a whole day to make her trip.

The night before, she packed her lunch, and for the first time, studied the contents of her father's workshop. There was a small blowtorch she had seen him use; and even in her present restless state Deborah was not so excessively brave that the thought of a weapon, as well as tree-marker, didn't tempt her. But when she found the torch, she was afraid to try it out indoors, and had to wait till morning.

At breakfast time, she stuffed Petey with food till he would eat no more. Then she clasped a bottle in the holder she'd rigged up, set the baby underneath to give him the idea once again, and went outside to try her skill with the torch. She came back, satisfied, to finish her preparations. When she left, a second bottle hung full and tempting in the play-space; Petey's toys were spread around the floor; and a pile of the crackers in the corner would keep him happy, she decided, if all else failed.

There was no way to solve the diaper-changing problem; he'd just have to wait for her return.

At first she tried to go in a straight line, marking every second tree

along the way.

After just a little while, she realized that it didn't matter which direction she took; she didn't know where she was going, anyway.

She walked on steadily, a very small girl under the distant canopy spread by the tall trees; very small, and insignificant, but erect and self-transporting on two overalled legs; a small girl with a large hump on her back.

The hump disappeared at noon, or somewhat earlier. She stuffed the remaining sandwich and a few pieces of dried fruit into her pockets, and tied the emptied makeshift knapsack more comfortably around her waist where it flopped rhythmically against her backside at every step.

Never did she forget to mark the trees, every second one along the way.

Nowhere did she see anything but more trees ahead, and bare ground underfoot.

She had no way of knowing how far she'd gone, or even what the hour was, when the silence ceased. Ever since she'd landed, the only noise she'd heard had been her own and Petey's. It was startling; it seemed impossible, by now, to hear anything else.

She stopped, with one foot set ahead of the other in midstep, and listened to the regular loud ticking of a giant clock.

It was impossible. She brought her feet into alignment and listened some more, while her heart thumped sympathetically in time to the forest's sound.

It was certainly impossible, but it came from the right, and it called to

her; it promised warmth and haven. It was just an enormous alarm-clock, mechanically noisy, but it was somehow full of the same comfort-and-command she remembered in her mother's voice.

Deborah turned to the right and followed the call; but she didn't forget to mark the trees as she passed, every other one of them.

If it weren't for the trail-blazing, she might have missed the garden entirely. It was off to one side, not directly on her path to the ticking summons. She saw it only when she turned to play the torch on one more tree: a riot of colours and fantasy shapes in the near distance, between the upright trunks.

Not till then did the ticking frighten her: not till she found how hard it was to move crosswise, or any way except right to-wards it. She wanted to see it. Most likely it was just wild, but there was always a chance...

And when she tried to walk that way, her legs didn't want to go. Panic clutched at her, and failed to take hold. She was an intrepid explorer on an alien planet, exposed to unknown dangers. Also, she was a Space Girl.

I pledge my honour to do everything in my power to uphold the high standards of the human race,' she intoned, not quite out loud, and immediately felt better. A Space Girl is brave. A Space Girl is honest. A Space Girl is truthful. A Space Girl...'

She went clear down the list of virtues she had learned in Gamma Troop on Starhope, and while she mumbled them, her legs came under control. The ticking went on, but it was just a noise--and not as loud as it had been, either. She dodged scout-wise from behind one tree-trunk to another, approaching the garden. If, indeed, it was a garden. Two trees away, she stopped and stared.

Every planet had strange new shapes and sights and smells; the plants in each new place were always excitingly different. But Dee was old enough to know that everywhere chlorophyll was green, as blood was red. Oh, blood could seem almost black, or blue, or pale pink, or even almost white; and chlorophyll could shade to dark grey, and down to faint cream-yellow. But growing gardens had green-variant leaves or stems. And every-where she'd been, the plants, however strange, were unified. The trees here grew blue-green-grey on top. The flowers should not grow, as they seemed to do, in every random shade of colour.

There was no way to tell the leaves from seeds from stems from buds. It was just... growth. A sort of arched form sprouted bright magenta filaments from its ivory mass. A bulbous some-thing that tapered to the ground showed baby blue beneath the many-coloured moss that covered it. Between them on the ground, a series of concentric circles shaded from slate grey on the out-side to oyster white in the centre, only it was so thin that a tinge of orange showed through from the soil below.

Dee would not have thought it lived at all, until she noticed a slow rippling motion outward towards the edges.

Farther in, one form joined shapeless edges with another; one colour merged haphazard with the next. Deborah blinked, con-fused, and walked away, following the call of the great ticking clock, then mumbled to herself, 'I pledge my honour to do every-thing...' She turned back to the puzzling growths again, aware now that the calling power of the sound diminished when she said the words aloud.

The colours were too confusing. She had to concentrate, and couldn't think about the garden while she talked to herself. May-be the Pledge wasn't the only thing that would do it. She said under her breath: 'That one is purple, and the other's like a pear...'

It worked. All she had to do was make her thoughts into words. It didn't matter what she said, or whether she whispered or shouted. As long as she kept talking, the summoning call would turn to a giant clock again, with no power over the movements of her legs. She went up closer to the baffling coloured shapes, and made out a fairy-delicate translucent spiral thing and then a large mauve mushroom in the centre.

Mushroom! At last she understood. They were so big, she hadn't thought of it at first: it was all fungus growth, and that made sense in the dim damp beneath the trees.

Strange it isn't every place, all over, she thought, and realized she was moving away from the garden again, and remembered this was one time it was all right to talk to herself out loud. 'There must be some people here. Some kind of people or natives. That noise is strange, too. It couldn't just happen that way; somebody lives here...'

She didn't want to touch the fungus, but she went up close to it. 'Things don't just happen this way. That stuff would grow all over if it was wild; somebody planted it.'

She peered through the arch-shape to the inside, and jumped back violently.

The thing was lying on its side, sucking a lower follicle of the arch, its livid belly working as convulsively as its segmented mouth, its many limbs sprawled out in all directions.

Dee jumped away in horror, and crept back in fascination. 'It doesn't know I'm here,' she remembered to whisper. From around the other side of the bulbous growth she watched, and slowly understood.

'It's like some kind of insect.' It couldn't really be an insect, of course.

because it was two feet long—much too large for an insect. An insect this size, on a planet as much like Earth as this was, wouldn't be able to breathe. They'd explained about why insects couldn't be any larger than the ones you found on Earth in Space Girl class. But men had found creatures on other planets that did look a lot like insects, and acted a lot like them, too. And even though people knew they weren't really insects, they still called such creatures 'bugs'...

Well, this thing was as close to an insect as a thing this size could be, Deborah decided. It was two feet long, and that made sense when you stopped to think about it, what with the tall trees and the giant mushrooms. She counted six legs, and then realized that the other two in front, resting quietly now, were feelers. The two front legs clutched at a clump of hairy shoots on the arched moss, almost like Petey holding his bottle. The back leg that was on top was longer than the front ones; it was braced against the arch for steadiness. The lower leg was tucked under-neath the body; its lower middle leg also lay still on the ground, stretched straight out. The upper middle leg was busily scratch-ing a t a small red spot on the belly, acting absurdly independent of the rest of the feeding creature.

There was really, Dee decided, nothing frightening except the mouth. She looked for eyes, and couldn't see them, then remem-bered that some bugs on other planets had them on the backs of their heads. But that mouth...

It worked like Petey's on a nipple; but not like Petey's, because this one had six lips, all thick and round-looking instead of like people's lips, and all closing in towards each other at the same time. It was horrible to watch.

Dee backed off silently, and found herself walking the wrong way again. She tried the multiplication table while she made a circuit of the 'garden', examining it for size and shape, and look-ing for a clear

part that would let her see into the centre.

She found, at last, a whole row of the jelly-like translucent things, lying flat and low, so she could look inside. The ground beneath them was scattered with flashing jewel-like stones...

No, black stones, with the bright part in the middle, she thought in words. No, not the middle. At one end... each stone was lying partly on an edge of the jelly-stuff... about as big as my foot, she thought, and saw the tiny feet around the edge of every stone.

Eyes on the backs of their heads, she thought, and they have car... carpets?...

carapaces! These bugs were smaller than the first one, and not frightening at all.

Bugs only looked bad from the bottom, she realized, and instantly corrected that impression.

Something walked into the garden, and picked up four of the little ones.

Something as tall as Dee herself when it went in, and half again as high when it left. It entered on four legs, and walking upside-down, head carried towards the ground, and looking backwards... no, facing backwards, looking forward. It entered calmly, moving at a steady even pace; approached the edge of the garden where Deborah watched the infants feeding... and froze.

An instant's immobility, then the big bug erupted into a frenzy of activity: scooped up the four closest little ones--two of them with the long hairy jointed arms (or legs? back legs?), and two more hurriedly with two front legs (or arms?)--and almost ran out, now on just two legs, the centre ones, its body neatly balanced fore and aft, almost

perfectly horizontal, the heavy hooded head in front, the spiny rounded abdomen at the back.

It scuttled off with its four tiny wriggling bundles, and as it left, Dee registered in full the terror of what she had seen.

She fled... and by some miracle, fled past a tree she'd marked, so paused in flight to find the next one, and the next, and followed her blazed trail safely back. The ticking of the forest followed for a while, then stopped abruptly. But while it lasted, it pushed away as hard as it had pulled before.

# VII

DAYDANDA MADE THE last entry in her calendar of the day, and filed it with yesterday's and all the others. Things were going well. The youngest Family was thriving; the next-to-youngest the Eleventh--was almost ready to start schooling; ready, in any case, for weaning from the Garden. Soon there would be room in the nurseries for a new brood.

Kackot was restless. She hadn't meant the thought for him at all, but he was sensitive to such things now, and he moved slightly, eagerly, towards her from his place across the room--perhaps honestly mistaking his own desire for the summons.

She sent a thought of love and promise, and temporary firm refusal. The new Family would have to wait. Within the House-hold, things were going well; but there were other matters to consider.

There was the still-unsolved puzzle of the Strangers, for instance. For a few hours, that mystery had seemed quite satisfactorily solved. When the Strange Lady left her Wings with baby-or-consort--now it seemed less certain which it was--to travel the path the flames had cleared for her, the whole thing had assumed a ritual aspect that made it easier to understand. What-ever Strange reasons, motives, or traditions were involved, it all seemed to fit into a pattern of some kind.. , until the next report informed Daydanda that the two Strangers had returned to their Wings--an act no less, and no more, unprecedented than their manner of arrival, or their strange appearance.

They had not since departed from the...

The house? she wondered suddenly. Could a House be some-how

made to travel through the air?

She felt Kackot's impatient irritation with such fantasizing, and had to agree.

Surely the image of--it--relayed by the flier-scout who had approached most closely, resembled in no way any structure Daydanda had ever seen or heard of.

But neither was it similar in any way, she thought--and this time guarded the thought from her consort's limited imagination--to ordinary, Wings, except by virtue of the certain knowledge that it had descended from the sky above the trees.

Today there had been no report. The fliers were all busy on the northern boundary, where a more ordinary sort of nesting had been observed. When the trouble there was cleared up, she could afford to keep a closer watch on the apparently not-hostile Strangers.

Meantime, certainly, it was best to let a new Family wait. Lay-ing was hard on her; always had been. And with possible action developing on two fronts now...

Kackot stirred again, but not with any real hope, and the Lady barely bothered to reply. It was time to bring the young ones in. Daydanda began the evening Homecalling, the message to return, loud and strong and clear for all to hear: a warning to unfriendly neighbours; a promise and renewal to all her children in the Household, young and old.

'Lady! oh, Mother!' Daydanda sustained the Homecalling at full strength, through a brief surge of stubborn irritation; then, suddenly worried--the daughter on relay knew enough not to interrupt at this time for anything less than urgent--she allowed enough of her

concentration to be distracted so as to permit a clear reception.

'Lady!... nurse from east garden... very frightened, con-fused... message unclear ... she wishes.'

'Send her in!' Daydanda cut off the semi-hysterical outburst, and terminated the Homecalling abruptly, with extra emphasis on the last few measures.

The nurse dashed through the archway, too distraught to make a ritual approach, almost forgetting to prostrate herself in the presence of the Lady, her Mother. She opened communication while still in motion, as soon as she was within range of her limited powers. Daydanda recognized her with the first contact: a daugh-ter of the fifth family--not very bright, even for a wingless one, but not given to emotional disturbance either, and a fine nurse, recently put in charge of the east garden.

'The Stranger, Mother Daydanda! The Strange Lady!... she came to the nursery ... she would have stolen... killed... she would have...'

To the nursery!

The Mother had to quell an instant's panic of her own before she could commence the careful questioning and reiterated re-assurance that were needed to obtain a coherent picture from the nurse. When at last she had stripped away the fearful imaginative projections that stemmed from the daughter's well-conditioned protectiveness, it appeared that the Strange Lady had visited the Garden, had spied on the feeding babies, and then had departed with haste when the Nurse came to fetch them home for the night.

'The babies are all safe?' the Mother asked sternly.

'Yes, Lady. I brought them to the House quick as I could before I

came to you. I would not have presumed to come, my Lady, but I could not make the winged one understand. Will my Mother forgive...'

'There is nothing to forgive; you have done well,' Daydanda dismissed her. 'You were right to come to me, even during the Homecalling.'

Breathing easy again, and once more in full possession of her faculties, the nurse offered thanks and farewell, and wriggled backwards out of sight under the arch, quite properly apologetic. The Lady barely noticed; she was already in contact with the flier-scout who had been reassigned from the North border by the daughter on relay, as soon as the nurse's first wild message was connected with the Strange Wings.

It was a son of the eighth Family, the same scout who had approached the Wings before, a well-trained, conscientious, and devoted son, almost ready to undertake the duties of a consort-ship. Daydanda could not have wished for a better representative through whose sense to perceive the Strangers.

Yet, there was little she could learn through him. The Strange Lady had returned to the Wings... the House? More and more it seemed so... where the small Stranger presumably awaited her. Now they were both inside, and the remarkable barrier that could be raised or lowered in a matter of seconds was blocking the entranceway.

Perception of any kind was difficult through the dense stuff of which the...

whatever-it-was: Wings? House?... was made. The scout was useless now.

Daydanda instructed him to stay on watch, and abandoned the

contact. Then she concentrated her whole mind in an effort to catch some impression--anything at all--from beyond the thick fabric of... whatever-it-was.

Eventually, there was a flash of something; then another. Not much, but the Lady waited patiently, and used each fleeting image to build a pattern she could grasp.

One thought, and another thought, and...

To Kackot's astonishment, the Lady relaxed suddenly with an outpouring of amusement. She did not communicate to him what she knew, but abruptly confirmed all his worst fears of the past weeks with a single command: 'I will go to the Strange Wings, oh Consort. Prepare a litter for me.'

When she addressed him thus formally, he had no recourse but to obey. If she noticed his sputtering dismay at all, she gave no sign, but lay back on her couch, thoroughly fatigued, to rest through the night while her sons and daughters prepared a litter, and enlarged the outer arches sufficiently to accommodate its great size.

DEE WAS SCARED, and she didn't know what to do. She wanted her mother; it was no fun taking care of Petey now. She made him a bottle to keep him from screaming, but she didn't bother with his diaper or fixing up his bunk or anything like that. It didn't matter any more.

There were no people on this planet.

Nobody was going to rescue them; nobody at all.

It wasn't the right planet, at all. If anybody on Starhope got worried and went to look for them, it was some other planet they'd look on. It had to be, because there were no people here. Just bugs!

Petey fell asleep with the bottle still in his mouth, sprawled on the floor, all wet and dirty. Deborah didn't care; she sat on the floor herself and fell asleep and didn't even know she slept till she woke up, with nothing changed, except that the clock said it was morning.

And she was hungry after all.

She started back to the eallev. but first she had to onen the outer lock. She actually had her hand on the lever before she realized she didn't want to open it. She was hungry; the last thing in the world she wanted to d o was look outside again. She went back and got a piece of cake and some milk.

Milk for Petey, too. If she got it fixed before he woke up, she wouldn't have to listen to him yelling his head off again. She started to fix a bottle, but first she had to open the lock.

This time, she stopped herself half-way there.

It was silly to think she had to look out; she didn't want to. Petey was awake, but he wasn't hollering for once. She went back and got the bottle, and brought it into the play-space. 'Open it,' Petey said.

'Come out. Mother.'

'All right,' Dee told him. She gave him the bottle, went over to the lock, and then turned around and looked at him, terrified.

He was sucking on the bottle. 'Come on,' he said. 'Mother wait-ing.'

She was watching him while he said it. He didn't say it; he drank his milk.

She didn't think she was crazy, so she was still asleep, and this was a dream. It wasn't really happening at all, and it didn't matter.

She opened the lock.

# IX

Once she had flown above the tree-tops, silver strong wings beating a rhythm of pride and joy in the high dry air above the canopy of fronds. Her eyes had gleamed under the white rays of the sun itself, and she had looked, with wild unspeakable elation, into the endless glaring brilliance of the heavens.

Now she was tired, and the blessed relief from sensation when they set her down on the soft ground--after the lurching motion of the forest march--was enough to make her momentarily regret her decision. A foolish notion this whole trip...

Kackot agreed enthusiastically.

The Lady closed her thoughts from his, and commanded the curtain at her side to be lifted. Supine in her litter, safely removed from the Strangers under a tree at the fringe of the clearing, her vast body embedded on layers of cellulose mat, Daydanda looked out across the ravaged black strip. And the sun, in all its strength, collected on the shining outer skin of the Strange Wings, gathered its light into a thousand fiery needles to sear the surface of her eye, and pierce her very soul with agony.

Once she had flown above the trees themselves...

Now her sons and daughters rushed to her side, in response to her uncontained anguish. They pulled close the curtain, and formed a tight protective wall of flesh and carapace around the litter. And from the distance, came a clamouring bloodlust eager-ness: the Bigheads waking in answer to her silent shriek of pained surprise. She sent them prompt soothing, and firm command to be still; not till she was certain they understood, and would obey, did she dare turn

any part of her mind to a consideration of her own difficulties. Even then she was troubled with the knowledge that her stern suppression of their rage to fight would leave the entire Bighead brood confused, and useless for the next emergency. It might be many days before their dull minds could be trained again to the fine edge of danger-awareness they had just displayed. If any trouble should arise in the meanwhile...

She sent instructions to an elder daughter in the House to start the tedious process of reconditioning at once, then felt herself free at last to devote all her attention to the scene at hand. To-morrow's troubles would have to take care of themselves till tomorrow. For now, there was disturbance, anxiety, and mortification enough.

That she, who had flown above the trees, higher and further than any sibling of her brood, that she should suffer from the sunlight now...

'It was many years and many Families ago, my dear, my Lady.'

Daydanda felt her consort's comforting concern and thought a smile. 'Many years indeed...' And it was true; she had not been outside her chamber till this day--since the first Family they raised was old enough to tend the fungus gardens, and to carry the new babes back and forth. That was many years behind her now, and she had grown through many chambers since that time: each larger than the last, and now, most recently, the daring double chamber with the great arch to walk through.

The Household had prospered in those years, and the boundaries of its land were wide. The gardens grew in many places now, and the thirteenth Family would soon outgrow the nursery. The winged sons and daughters of Seven Families had already grown to full maturity, and departed to establish new Houses of their own... or to die in failure. And through the years, the numbers of the wingless ones who

never left the Household grew great; masons and builders, growers and weavers, nurses and teachers--there were always more of them, working for the greater welfare of the House, and their Mother, its Lady.

Through all those building, growing, widening years, Day-danda had forgotten...

forgotten the graceful wings and the soaring flight; the dazzling sunlight, and the fresh moist air just where the fronds stirred high above her now; the bright colours and half-remembered shapes of trees and nursery plants. Not once, in all that time, had she savoured the full sensory sharpness of outside...

She thought longingly of the nursery garden, the first one, that she and Kackot had planted together when they waited for the first Family to come. She thought of it, determined to see it again one day, then put aside all thoughts, hopes, and regrets of past or future.

Daydanda directed that her litter be moved so that the opening of the curtain would give her a view of the forest interior. Then, while her eye grew once again accustomed to their former functioning, she began to seek--with a more practised organ of perception--the mind-patterns of the Strangers inside that frighteningly bright structure in the clearing.

It was hard work. Whether there was something in the nature of the dense fabric of the Wings, or whether the difficulty lay only in the Strangeness of the beings inside, she could not tell, but at the beginning, the Lady found that proximity made small difference in her ability to perceive what was inside.

Strangers! One could hardly expect them, after all, to provide familiar friend-or-enemy patterns for perception. Yet that very knowledge

made the brief flashes of contact that she got all the more confusing, for they contained a teasing familiarity that made the Strange elements even less comprehensible by contrast.

For just the instant's duration of a swift brush of minds, the Mother felt as though it were a daughter of her own inside the Strange structure; then the feeling was lost, and she had to strain every effort again simply to locate the image.

A series of slow moves, meantime, brought her litter gradually back round to where it had been at first; and though she found it was still painful to look for any length of time directly at the blazing light reflected from the Wings, the Lady discovered that by focusing on the trees diagonally across the clearing, she could include the too-bright object within her peripheral vision.

That much assured, she ceased to focus visually at all. Time enough for that when—if—the Strangers should come forth. Once more she managed to grasp, briefly, the mental image of the Strangers, or of one of them; and once again she felt the unexpected response within herself, as if she were in contact with a daughter of the Household...

She lost it then; but it fitted with her sudden surmise of the night before.

Now, in the hopeful certainty that she had guessed correctly, she abandoned the effort at perception entirely; she gathered all her energies instead into one tight-beamed communication aimed at penetrating the thick skin of the Wings, and very little different in any way from the standard evening Homecalling.

It took some time. She was beginning to think she had failed: that the Strangers were not receptive to her call, or would respond only with fear and hostility. Then, without warning, the barrier at the

entranceway was gone.

No... not actually gone. It was still there, and still somehow attached to the main body of the Wings, but turned round so it no longer barred the way. And the opening this uncovered turned out to be, truly, the double-arch she had seen--but not quite credited--through her son's eyes.

Two arches, resting on each other base-to-base, but open in the centre: the shape of a hollowed-eve. Such a shape might grow, but it could not be built. Half-convinced as she had been that the Wings or House, or whatever-it-was, was an artificial structure rather than a natural "form, Daydanda had put the relayed image of the doorway down to distortion of communication the night before. Now she saw it for herself: that, and the device that moved like a living thing to barricade the entrance.

Like a living thing...

It could fly; it was therefore, by all precedent of knowledge, alive. Reluctantly, the Lady discarded the notion that the Wings had been built by Strange knowledge. But even then, she thought soberly, there was much to be learned from the Strangers.

And in the next moment, she ceased to think at all. The Stranger emerged--the bigger of the two Strangers--and at the first impact of full visual and mental perception, Daydanda's impossible theory was confirmed.



DEBORAH STOOD OUTSIDE, on the charred ground in front of the rocket, earnestly repeating the multiplication table: 'Two two's are four. Three two's are six. Four two's...'

She was just as big as any of these bugs. The only one that was bigger was the one inside the box that she could only see part of--but that one had something wrong with it. It just lay there stretched out flat all the time, as if it couldn't get up.

The box had handles for carrying, too, so Dee didn't have to worry about how big that one was.

All the rest of them were just about her own size, or even smaller but there were too many of them. And when she thought about actually touching one, with its hairy, sticky legs, she re-membered the sick crackling sound a beetle makes when you step on it.

She didn't want to fight them, or anything like that; and she didn't think they wanted to hurt her specially, either. She didn't have the knotted-up, tight kind of feeling you get when somebody wants to hurt you. They didn't feel like enemies, or act that way, either. They were just too...

'Four four's are sixteen. Five four's are twenty. Six four's are twenty-four. Seven ...'

... too interested ! And that was a silly thing to think, because how could she tell if they were interested? She couldn't even see their faces, because all the ones in front were bending backwards-upside-down, like the one she'd seen in the garden...

'... four's are twenty-eight. Eight four's are thirty-two. Nine four's are...

... just standing there, the whole row of them, with their back legs or arms or whatever-they-were sticking up in the air, and their heads dipped down in front so they could stare at her out of the big glittery eye in the middle of each black head...

'... thirty-six. Ten four's are forty. Eleven...'

What did they want, anyhow? Why didn't they do something? '... four's are forty-four. Twelve four's...'

The Space Girl oath was hard to remember if you were trying to think about other things at the same time; but Deborah knew the multiplication tables by heart, and she could keep talking while she was thinking.

Daydanda was fascinated. She had guessed at it, in her chamber the night before ... more than guessed, really. She would have been certain, if the notion were not so flatly impossible in terms of all knowledge and experience. It was precisely that conflict between perception and precedent that had determined her to make the trip out here.

And she was right! These two were neither Lady and consort, nor Mother and baby, but only two children: a half-grown daughter and a babe in arms. Two young wingless ones, alone, afraid, and... Motherless?

Eagerly, Daydanda poured out her questionings:

Where did they come from?

What sort of beings were they?

Where was their Mother?

'Twelve four's are forty-eight. One five is five. Two five's are ten, Three...'

The important thing was just to keep talking--Dee knew that from when she had so much trouble at the garden. As long as she was saying something, anything at all, she could keep the crazy stuff out of her head... five's are fifteen. Four five's are twenty. Five five's...'

It was harder this time, though. At the garden, with the drum-beat-heartbeat sound that felt like Mommy's voice, all she had to do was think words. But now, it was stuff like thinking Petey was saying things to her--or feeling like somebody else was asking her a lot of silly questions. And every time she stopped for breath at all, she'd start wanting to answer a lot of things inside her head that there wasn't even anybody around to have asked... are twenty-five. Six five's are thirty.'

The aching soreness in her body from the jolting journey through the forest... the instant's agony when the sunlight seared her eye... the nagging worry over the disturbed Bigheads... all these were forgotten, or submerged, as the Lady experienced for the first time in her life the frustration of her curiosity.

Every answer she could get from the Strange child came in opposites. Each question brought a pair of contradictory replies... if it brought any reply at all. Half the time, at least, the Stranger was refusing reception entirely, and for some obscure reason, broadcasting great quantities of arithmetic--most of it quite accurate, but all of it irrelevant to the present situation.

Would they remain here? the Lady asked. Or would they return to their own House? Had they come to build a House here? Or was the

Wing-like structure on the blackened ground truly a House instead?

The answers were many and also various.

They would not stay, the Stranger seemed to say, nor would they leave. The structure from which she had emerged was a House, but it was also Wings: Unfamiliar concept in a single symbol--Wings-House? Both!

Their Mother was nearby--inside--but--dead? No! Not dead!

How could the child possibly answer a sensible question sensibly if she started broadcasting sets of numbers every time anyone tried to communicate with her?

Very rude, Daydanda thought, and very stupid. Kackot eagerly confirmed her opinion, and moved a step closer to the litter, as if preparing to commence the long march home.

The Lady had no time to reprimand him. At just that moment, the Strange child also broke into motion--perhaps also feeling that the interview was over, '... Thirty. Seven five's are thirty-fi...'

One of them moved!

Just a couple of steps, but Dee, panicked, forgot to keep talking and started a dash for the rocket; her head was full of questions again, and part of her mind was trying to answer them, without her wanting to at all, while another part decided not to go back inside, with a mixed-up kind of feeling, as if Petey didn't want her to.

And that was silly, because she could hear Petey crying now. He wanted her to come in, all right, or at least to come and get him. She couldn't tell for sure, the way he was yelling, whether he was scared and mad at being left alone--or just mad and wanting to get picked

up. It sounded almost more like he thought he was being left out or something, and wanted to get in on the fun.

If he thinks this is fun...!

'We're lost, that's what we are,' she said out loud, as if she were answering real questions someone had asked, instead of crazy ones inside her own head. 'I don't know where we are. We came from Starhope. That's a different planet. A different world. I don't know where... One five is five,' she remembered. 'Two sixes are seven. I mean two seven's are twenty-one... I can't think any-thing right!'

It really didn't matter what she said; as long as she kept talking. If she answered the silly questions right out loud that was all right too, because they couldn't understand her anyhow. How would they know Earthish?

It was possible that the Stranger's sudden move to return to the Wings-House was simply a response to Kackot's gesture of readiness to depart. The Lady promised herself an opportunity to express her irritation with her consort--soon. For the moment, however, every bit of energy she could muster went into a plea-command-call-invitation to the Strange child to remain outside the shelter and continue to communicate.

The Stranger hesitated, paused--but even before that, she had begun, perversely, now that no questions were being asked, to release a whole new flood of semi-information.

More contradictions, of course!

These two, the Stranger children, were--something hard to comprehend--not-aware-of-where-they-were.

They were in need of help, but not helpless.

The elder of the two--the daughter who now stood wavering in her intentions, just beside the open barrier of the Wings-House --was obviously acting in the capacity of nurse. Yet her self-pattern of identity claimed reproductive status!

Certainly the girl's attitude towards her young sibling was an odd mixture of what one might expect to find in nurse or Mother. Possibly the relationship could be made clearer by con-tact with the babe himself. There was little enough in the way of general information to be expected from such a source, but here he might be helpful.

Tentatively, with just a small part of her mind, Daydanda reached out to find the babe, still concen-trating on her effort to keep the older one from departing...

'Food... mama... suck... oh, look!'

The Lady promptly turned her full attention to the babe.

After the obstructionist tactics, and confused content of the Strange girl's mind, the little one's response to a brushing con-tact was doubly startling. Now that she was fully receptive to them, thoughts came crowding into the Mother's mind, thoughts unformed and infantile, but buoyantly eager and hope-ful.

'Love... food... good... mama... suck... see... see...'

'Three seven's are twenty one!' Dee remembered triumphantly, and began feeling a lot better. They were all standing still again, for one thing; and her head felt clearer, too.

She moved a cautious step backwards, watching them asshe went, and not having any trouble now remembering her multiplication.

Four seven's are twenty-eight...'

Just a few more steps. If she could just get back inside, and get the door closed, she wouldn't open it again for anything. She'd stay right there with Petey till some people came..?

'... MAMA... SUCK... see... see... good... love...'

It might have been one of her own latest brood, so easy and familiar was the contact. Just about the same age-level and emotional development, too. Daydanda was suddenly imperatively anxious to see the babe directly, to hold it in her own arms, to feel what sort of strange shape and texture could accommodate such warmly customary longings and perceptions.

'The babe!' she commanded. 'I wish to have the babe brought to me!' But the nurse to whom she had addressed the order hung back miserably.

'The babe, I said!' The Lady released all her pent-up irritation at the Stranger child, in one peremptory blast of anger at her own daughter. 'Now!'

'Lady, I cannot... the light... forgive me, my Lady...'

With her own eye still burning in its socket, Daydanda hastily blessed the nursing daughter, and excused her. Even standing on the fringes of the bright-lit area must be frightening to the wingless ones. But whom else could she send? The fliers were unaccustomed to handling babes...

'Kackot.'

He was good with babes, really. She felt better about sending him than she would have had she trusted the handling of the Stranger to a

nurse. Kackot himself felt otherwise; but at the moment, the Lady's recognition of his discomfiture was no deterrent to her purpose; she had not forgotten his ill-advised move a little earlier.

The consort could not directly disobey. He went forward, doubtfully enough, and stood at the open entrance-way, peering in.

'Oh, look I... love... look!'

The babe's welcoming thoughts were unmistakable; Kackot must have felt them as Daydanda did. Stranger or no, the near presence of a friendly and protective entity made it beg to be picked up, petted, fondled, loved--and hopefully, though not, the Mother thought, truly hungrily--perhaps also to be fed.

Meantime, however, there was the older child to reckon with. The babe was eager to come; the girl, Daydanda sensed, was determined not to allow it. Once more, the Mother tried to reach the Strange daughter with empathy and affection and reassurance. Once again, she met with only blankness and refusal. Then she sent a surge of loving invitation to the babe, and got back snuggling eagerness and warmth--and suddenly, from the elder one, a lessening of fear and anger.

Daydanda smiled inside herself; she thought she knew now how to penetrate the strange defences of the child.

DEE STOOD STILL and watched it happen. She saw the nervous fussy-bug--the one that had scared her when he moved before--go right over to the rocket and look inside. He passed right by her, close enough to touch; she was going to do something about it, until Petey started talking again.

He said, 'Baby come to mama.'

At least, she thought he said it. Then she almost thought she heard a Mother say, It's all right; don't worry. Baby wants to come to mama.'

'Mother's dead!' Deborah screamed at them all, at Petey and the bugs, without ever even opening her mouth. 'Five seven's are thirty-five,' she said hurriedly. She'd been forgetting to keep talking, that's what the trouble was. 'Six seven's are forty-two. Seven..?

And still, she couldn't get the notion out of her head that it was her own mother's voice she'd heard. 'Seven seven's..? s h e said desperately, and couldn't keep from turning around to look at the part of the rocket where Mommy was--would be--had been when The smooth gleaming metal nose looked just the same as ever, now it was cool again. There was no way o f knowing any-thing had ever happened in there. If anything had happened...

Deborah stared and stared, as if looking long enough and hard enough would let her see right through the triple hull into the burned-out inside: the wrecked control room, and the two char-red bodies that had been Father and Mother.

'... seven seven's is forty--forty seven?... eight... ?'

She floundered, forgetting, she was too small, and she didn't know what to do about anything, and she wanted her mother.

It's all right. Stand still. Don't worry. Baby wants to come to mama.'

It wasn't her own mother's voice, though; that wasn't the way Mommy talked. If it was these bugs that were making her hear crazy things and putting silly questions in her head... seven seven's... seven seven's is... just stand still... don't worry... everything will be all right... seven seven's... I don't know... don't worry, all right, stand still, seven's is...

'Forty-nine!' she shrieked. The fussy-bug was all the way inside, and she'd been standing there like any dumb kid, hearing thoughts and voices that weren't real, and not knowing what to do.

'Forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two,' she shouted. She could have been just counting like that all along, instead of trying to remember something like seven times seven. Get out of there, you awful hairy horrible old thing! 'Fifty-three, fifty-four.

You leave my brother alone!'

The fussy-bug came crawling out of the airlock, with Petey--soft little pink-and-wet Petey--clutched in its sticky arms.

'Fifty-five,' she tried to shout, but it came out like a creak instead. You leave him alone! her whole body screamed; but her throat was too dry and felt as if somebody had glued it together, and she couldn't make any words come out at all. She started forward to grab the baby.

'Come to Mama,' Petey said. 'Nice Mama. Like. Good.'

She was looking right at him all the time, and she knew he wasn't

really talking.

Just drooling the way he always did, and making happy-baby gurgling noises. He certainly didn't act scared—he was cuddling up to the hairy-bug just as if it was a person.

'Come to Mama,' the baby crooned inside her head; she should have made a grab for him right then, but somehow she wasn't sure...

The fussy-bug walked straight across the Bearing to the tree where the big box was, and handed Petey inside.

'Oo-oo-oooh, Mama!' Petey cried out with delight.

'Mommy's dead!' Deborah heard herself shouting, so she knew her voice was working again. 'Dead, she's dead, can't you understand that? Any dope could understand that much. She's dead!'

Nobody paid any attention to her. Petey was laughing out loud; and the sound got mixed up with some other kind of laugh-ter in her head that was hard to not-listen to, because it felt good.

# XII

HOLDING THE BABE tenderly, Daydanda petted and patted and stroked it, and made pleased laughter from them both. Cautiously, she experimented with balancing the intensities of the two con-tacts, trying to gauge the older child's reactions to each variation. Reluctantly, as she observed the results, she came to the conclu-sion that the Strange daughter had indeed been consciously attempting to block communication.

It was unheard-of; therefore impossible--but impossibilities were commonplace today. The Mother's own presence at this scene was a flat violation of tradition and natural law.

Nevertheless:

The child had emerged from the Wings-House, i n response t o a Homecalling pattern.

Therefore, she was not an enemy.

Therefore she could not possibly feel either fear or hostility towards Daydanda's Household.

These things being true, what reason could she have for desiring to prevent communication?

Answer: Obviously, despite the logic of the foregoing, the Strange child was afraid.

Why? There was no danger to her in this contact.

'Stupid,' Kackot grumbled; 'just plain stupid. As much brains as a Bighead. Lady, it is getting late; we have a long journey home...'

Daydanda let him rumble on. A child was likely to behave stupidly when frightened. She remembered, and sharply re-minded her consort, of the time a young winged one of her own, a very bright boy normally--was it the fifth Family he was in? No, the sixth--had wandered into the Bigheads' corral, and been too petrified with fear to save himself, or even to call for help.

The boy had been afraid, she remembered now, that he would call the Bigheads' attention to himself, if he tried to communicate with anyone, so he closed off against the world. Of course, he knew in advance that the Bigheads were dangerous. If the Stranger here had somehow decided to be fearful in advance, perhaps her effort to block contact was motivated the same way...

'The Homecalling,' Kackot reminded her; 'she answered a Homecalling.'

'She is a Stranger,' Daydanda pointed out. 'Perhaps she re-sponded to friendship without identifying it... I don't know...'

But she would find out. Once again she centred her attention on the babe, keeping only a loose contact with the older child.

Dee kept watching the box on the ground that had the big bug inside it. She couldn't see much of the bug, and she couldn't see Petey at all, after the other bug handed him in. But it wasn't just Petey she was watching for.

It was that big bug that was--talking to her. Well, anyhow, that was making it sound as if Petey talked to her and putting questions in her head and...

She didn't know how it did it, but she couldn't pretend any more that it

wasn't really happening. Somebody was picking and poking at her inside her head, and she didn't know how they did it or why, or what to do about it. But she was sure by now that the big bug in the box was the one.

'Let's see now--seven seven's is forty-nine.' Just counting didn't seem to work so well. 'Seven eight's is... I mean, eight seven's is... I don't know I can't remember...

We came for Daddy and Mommy to make reports. That's what they always do. Daddy's a Survey Engineer and Mommy's a Geologist. They work for the Planetary Survey Commission... I mean they did...'

It was none of their business. And they did know Earthish!

If they didn't, how could they talk to her?

'Seven seven's is forty-nine. Seven seven's is forty-nine. Seven seven's...'

At the first exchange, the Lady had put it down to incompetence, but she could no longer entertain that excuse. The Strangers had no visible antennae, yet the ease of communication with the babe made it clear that they could receive as well as broadcast readily--if they wished.

The perception appeared to be associated with an organ Daydanda had at first mistaken for a mouth: small and flat, centred towards the bottom of the face, and enclosed by just two soft-looking mandibles.

In the babe, the mandibles were almost constantly in motion, and there was a steady flow of undirected, haphazard communication, such as was normal for the little one's apparent level of development. With the older child, it was apparent that the messages that came

when the mandibles were moving were stronger, clearer, and more purposeful in meaning than the others. Unfortunately, the content of these messages was mostly nothing but arithmetic.

Yet even when the 'mouth' was at rest, Daydanda noticed that there was a continuous trickle of communication from the Strange daughter--a sort of reluctant release of thought, rather like the babe's in that it was undirected and largely involuntarily, but with two striking differences: the eagerness of the babe to be heard, and the fact that the content of the older one's thoughts were not at all infantile, but sometimes startlingly mature.

Daydanda repeated her questions, this time watching the mandibles as the answers came, and realized that the thin stream of involuntary communication went on even while mandible messages were being sent--and that the 'opposite' answers she'd been receiving were the result of the differences between the purposeful broadcasts and the background flow.

The Strangers' Mother and her consort, it appeared, (gradually, the Lady learned to put the two answers together so that they made sense) had come here to survey the land (to look for a House-site, one would assume), and they had techniques as well for determining before excavation what lay far underground. However, they were now dead... perhaps... and...

More arithmetic!

'What is it that you fear, child?' the Mother asked once more.

'I'm not afraid of those (unfamiliar symbol--something small and scuttling and unpleasant),' the daughter addressed her sibling, mandibling. 'Scared, scared, scared' came the running edge of thought behind and around it.

'Don't be scared,' Petey told her.

'I'm not afraid of those old bugs!' she told him.

But it wasn't Petey, really; it was that big Mother-bug in the box. Mother-bug?

What made her think that? That was what Petey thought....

Deborah was all mixed up. And she was scared; she was scared for Petey, and scared because she didn't know how they put things in her mind, and scared...

Scared all the time except when that good-feeling laughing was in her head; and then, even though she knew the--the Mother-bug must be doing that too, she couldn't be scared.

Deborah stood still, trembling with the realization of the awful-ness of destruction she would somehow have to visit upon this bunch of bugs, if anything bad happened to Petey. She didn't understand how she had come to let them get him out of the ship at all; and now that they had him, she didn't know what to do about it. The first large tear slid out of the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek.

'Make food for sibling?' the Mother inquired, as she watched the clear liquid ooze out of the openings she had at first thought to be twin eyes.

The Strange daughter was apparently receiving all communication as if from the babe, for her answer was addressed to him: a reassurance, a promise, 'I will prepare (unfamiliar symbol) inside the...' Another unfamiliar symbol there--ship--but with it came an image of an interior room of Strange appearance; and Day-danda safely guessed the symbol to refer to the Wings-House. The first

symbol--bottle, she found now, in the babe's mind--was a great white cylinder, warm and moist, and connected with the sucking concept... but no time to classify it further, because the older child was mandibling another message, this time directly to the Mother.

'Return the babe to me, The babe is hungry. I must prepare his food.'

'You have food for the sibling now,' Daydanda pointed out patently. 'Come here to the litter and feed him.'

'Sure there's milk,' Dee said. 'There's lots of milk, Petey. I'll give you a bottle soon as we get back inside,' she promised, and warned the big bug hopefully: 'That baby's hungry; he's awful hungry--you wait and see. He'll start yelling in a minute, and then you'll see. You better give him back to me right now, before he starts yelling.'

'There is much food inside the ship,' the child told the babe, but all the while a background-message trickled out: 'There isn't; there really isn't. It won't last much longer.' And even as the two conflicting thoughts came clear in her own mind, Daydanda saw a large drop of the precious fluid roll off the girl's face and be lost forever in the ground.

'Come quickly!' she commanded. 'Now! Come to the Mother, and give food to the babe. Quick!'

But the doltish child simply stood there rooted in her fears.

Maybe if she just walked right over and lifted him out of the big box, they wouldn't even try to stop her... but there were too many of them, and she didn't dare get much further away from the rocket.

'You better give him back to me,' she cried out hopelessly.

It took a while to sort out the sense from the nonsense. Of:ourse, the

child believed the babe to be hungry because the message about feeding came to her through him. Actually, the little one was warm and happy and content, with no more than normal infantile fantasies of nourishment in his mind. His belly was still half-full from earlier feeding.

But half-full meant also half-empty. If the older child was now producing food, and could not continue to do so much longer--as seemed clear from the contradictory content of her messages--the babe should have it now, while it was available. The daughter's reluctance to provide him with it seemed somehow connected with the bottle symbol. It was necessary to go into the Wings-House to get the bottle...

Daydanda searched the babe's mind once again. Bottle was food... ? No... a mechanism of some sort for feeding. Perhaps the flat mandibles were even weaker than they looked; perhaps some artificial aid in nourishment was needed...

And that thought brought with an equally startling notion in explanation of the Wings-House... a Strange race of people might possibly need artificial Wings to carry out the nuptial flight...

That was beside the point from now. Think about it later. Meantime... she had to reject the idea of artificial aid in feeding; the babe's repeated sucking image was too clear and too familiar. He nursed as her own babes did; she was certain of it.

Then she recalled the Strange daughter's earlier crafty hope of finding some way to return to the Wings-House with the babe, and emerge no more. Add to that the child's threat that the babe, if not immediately returned to her, would start yelling--would attempt to block communication as the girl herself did. It all seemed to mean that bottle was not a necessity of feeding at all, but some pleasurable

artifact inside the ship, somehow associated with the feeding process, with which the daughter was trying to entice the babe.

'You wish to feed?' Daydanda asked the little one, and made a picture in his mind's eye of the girl's face with liquid droplets of nourishment falling unused to the ground.

'Not food,' came the clear response. 'Not food. Sad.' Then there was an image once again of the tubular white container, but this time she realized the colour of it came from a cloudy fluid inside... milk. 'Milk-food, Tears-crying-sad.'

Tears-crying was for the face-liquid. It was useless, or rather useful only as emotional expression. It was a waste product... (and she had been right in the first guess about twin eyes!)... and then the further realization that the great size she had at first attributed to the bottle was relative only to the babe. The thing was a reasonably-sized, sensibly-shaped storage container for the nutrient fluid the babe and child called milk; and it was further-more provided with a mechanism at one end designed to be sucked upon.

Out of the welter of freshly-evaluated information, one fact emerged to give the Lady an unanticipated hope.

There was food--stored, portable food inside the winged structure. The Strangers were not biologically tied to the Wings; there was no need to return the babe in order to satisfy its hunger. Babe and Strange daughter bath could, if they would, return to Daydanda's House, there to communicate at leisure.

It remained only to convince the daughter... and Daydanda had not forgotten that the child was susceptible to the Homecalling and to laughter both.

DEBORAH WALKED BEHIND the litter where Petey rode in state with... with the Mother... and all around her walked a retinue of bugs; dozens of them. They walked on four front legs, heads carried down and facing backwards, eyes looking forward. The tallest of them was just about her own height when it stood up straight.

Walking this way, none of them came above her waist; they weren't so awful if you didn't have to look at their faces.

Certainly they were smart--so smart it scared her some... but not as much as it would have scared her to keep on staying in the rocket. She was just beginning to realize that.

Dee still didn't know how they made her think things inside her head; or how they made Petey seem to talk to her; or how they knew what she was thinking half the time, even if she didn't say a word. She wasn't sure, either, what had made her decide to do what the Mother wanted, and packed up food to take along back to their house. She didn't even know what kind of a house it was, or where it was. But she was pretty sure she'd rather go along with them than just keep waiting in the rocket alone with Petey.

Wherever they were going, it was a long walk. Dee was tired, and the knapsack on her back was heavy. They'd started out right after lunch time, and now the dimness in the forest was turning darker, so it must be evening. It was hot, too. She hoped the milk she'd mixed would keep overnight; but she had crackers and fruit, too, in case it didn't. It wasn't the food that made the knapsack so heavy, though; it was the oxy torch she'd slipped into the bottom, underneath the clean diapers.

These bugs were smart, but they didn't know everything, she thought with satisfaction. They never tried to stop her from tak-ing along the torch.

It was hot and damp, and the torch in the knapsack made a knobby hard spot bouncing against her back. But the bugs never stopped to rest; and Dee walked on in their midst, remembering that she was a Space Girl, so she had to be brave and strong.

Then suddenly, right ahead, instead of more trees, there was a bare round hill of orange clay. Only when you looked closer, it wasn't just a hill, because it had an opening in it, like the mouth of a cave, because the edges of the arch were smooth. It was even on both sides, and perfectly round on top; it had little bits of rock or wood set in cement around the edges to make it keep its shape..

She couldn't tell what was inside. It was dark in there 'Too dark. Deborah paused inside the entranceway, oppressed by shad-ows, aghast at far dim corridors. One of the bugs tried to take her hand to lead her forward. The touch was sticky. She shuddered back, and stood stock-still in the middle of the arch.

I hate you!' she yelled at all of them.

'Not hate,' said Petey, laughing. 'Fear.'

'I'm not scared of anything,' she told him; 'you're the one who's scared, not me. Petey's afraid of the dark,' she said to the big bug. 'You give that baby back to me right now. That's not your baby. He's my brother, and I want him back.'

The rocket, lying helpless on its side in the bare black clearing, seemed very safe and very far away. Dee didn't understand how she could have thought—even for a little while—that this place would be

better. Everything back there was safety: even the burned-out memory of the control room was sealed off behind a safety door.

Everything here was strange and dark, and no doors to close on the shadows--just open arches leading to darker stretches beyond...

"Fraid of a door!" said Petey.

'I'm not afraid of any old door.' Deborah's voice was hoarse from pushing past the choke spot in her throat that was holding back the tears. 'You give me back my brother, that's all; we're not going into your house. He is, too, afraid of the dark; and he hates you too!' A Space Girl is brave, she thought, and then she said it out loud, and walked right over to the shadowy outline of the big bug's box, and reached in and grabbed for Petey.

Only he didn't want to come. He yelled and wriggled away; held on tight to the Mother-bug, and kicked at Dee.

She didn't know what to do about it, till she heard that good laughing in her head again. Petey stopped yelling, and Dee stopped pulling at him. She realized that she was very tired, and the laughing felt like home, like her own mother, like food and a warm room, and a bed with clean sheets--and maybe even a fuzzy doll tucked in next to her as if she were practically a baby again herself.

She was tired, and she didn't feel brave any more. She didn't want to go inside, but she didn't want to fight any more, either--especially if Petey was going to be against her, too. She sat down on the ground under the arch to figure out what to do.

'Light?' a voice like Mother's asked gently inside her head. 'You want a light inside?'

'I've got a light,' Dee said, before she stopped to think. 'I've got a light

right here.'

She dragged the knapsack around in front of her and dug down into it. She was going to have to go in after all; there wasn't any-thing else to do. She got the torch out, and turned it on low, so it wouldn't get used up too fast. Then she started laughing, because this time it was the bugs who were scared. They all started run-ning around like crazy, every which way, and half of them ran clear away, inside.

The child was certainly resourceful, Daydanda thought rue-fully, as she issued rapid commands and reassurances, restoring order out of the sudden panic that the light had caused among the sensitive unpigmented wingless ones.

No daughter of mine, she thought angrily, with admiration, no daughter of mine would even dare to act this way!

'So you begin to see, my dear Lady...' Kackot was obviously irritated and not impressed... 'They have no place in the House-hold. Useless parasites... Why not admit... ?'

'Quiet!'

Useless parasites? No! Dangerous they might well be; useless only if you counted the acquisition of new knowledge as of no use. The child would certainly have to be watched closely. This last trick with the light was really quite insupportable be-haviour: rudeness beyond belief or toleration. Yet the bravado of the Stranger's attitude was not too hard to understand. Still unequipped for Motherhood, she had already acquired the in-stincts for it; she was doing, in each case, her inadequate best to protect both sibling and self from any possible dangers. And each new display of unexpected--even uncomfortable--ingenuity left Daydanda more determined than before to make both Stran-gers a part of her Household.

There was much to be learned. And...

Daydanda was many things:

As a Mother, she felt a simple warm solitude for two un-mothered creatures.

As the administrative Lady of her Household, it was her duty first to make certain that the Strangers were so established that they could do no harm; and then to learn as much as could be learned from their Strange origins and ways of life.

As a person--a person who had flown, long ago, above the tree-tops--a person who had only a short time ago walked through the enlarged archway in defiance of all precedent and tradition--a person who had just this day dared the impossible, and ventured forth from her own House to make this trip--Daydanda chuck-led to herself, and wished she knew some way to make the Stranger understand the quite inexplicable affection that she felt.

The child said the babe feared darkness; this was manifestly untrue. The Mother still held the soft infant in her arms, and she knew there was no fear inside that body.

As for the older one--it was not lack of light that she feared, either. Yet if the presence of accustomed light could comfort her--why, she should have her light!

'Come, child,' Daydanda coaxed the girl gently through the mind of the babe.

Inside, there is a place to rest. You have done much, Strange daughter, and you have clone well; but you are tired now. Inside, there is safety and sleep for the babe and for you. Come with us, and

carry your light if you will. But it is time now to sleep; tomorrow we will plan.'

At the Lady's command, the litter-bearers picked up her stretcher once more, and the lurching forward motion recommenced. The child on the ground stood up slowly, holding her light high, and followed after them. All down the dim corridors, Daydanda's warning went ahead, to spare those whom the little light might hurt from the shock of exposure.

DEBORAH LAY ON her back on a thick mat on the floor. It had looked uncomfortable, but now that she was stretched out on it, it felt fine. She had no blanket, and no sheets, and she'd forgotten to bring along pyjamas. At first she tried sleeping in all her clothes, but then she decided they were only bugs after all, and they didn't wear anything; so she took off her overalls and shirt. The room was warm, anyhow--almost too warm.

She got up and went across the room to the other mat, where Petey was, and changed his diaper and took off the rest of his clothes, too. She didn't know what to do with the dirty things; there was no soil-remover here. Finally, she folded them up neatly--all except the dirty diaper, which she wadded up and threw in a far corner.

The rest of the things they'd have to wear again tomorrow, dirty or not.

Then she propped up Petey's almost empty bottle, and went back to her own mat, lay down again, and turned the oxy torch as low as she could, without letting it go out altogether. She could barely see Petey across the room, still sucking on the nipple, though he was just about asleep.

They hadn't really been captured, she told herself. Nobody tried to hurt them at all. It was more like being rescued. She didn't know what would happen tomorrow, except one thing--and that was that she would have to go back to the rocket to get some clothes at least. It was a long walk, though. Right now, she felt warm and safe and sleepy.

These bugs were smart, but there were plenty of things they didn't

know at all...

She was pretty sure they wouldn't understand anything about the safety door, for instance. Unless...

Maybe they could find out about it in her mind. But even if they did, they wouldn't understand...

And they couldn't even find out anything, if she just didn't think about it any more....

That was the best way. I'll just forget all about it, she decided.

She felt very brave. The Space Girl Troup Leader on Starhope would be proud of her now, she thought, as she reached out and turned the light all the way off before she fell asleep.

Petey was crying again. 'Shut up,' Dee said crossly; 'why don't you shut up a minute?'

Her eyes felt glued together. She didn't want to wake up. She was warm and comfortable and still very sleepy; and now that it was all over, why didn't Mommy come, and... ?

She opened one eye slowly, and couldn't see anything. It was pitch dark in the room; no lights or windows...

She reached out for the oxy torch, her hand scraping across the smooth clay floor, and it wasn't there. The bugs had taken it away. They had come in while she was sleeping and taken it...

Her hand found the torch, fumbled for the switch, and she had to close her eyes against the sudden bright flare of light. Petey, startled, stopped crying for a minute, then started in again just twice as loud.

The knapsack was in the corner, back of the light, and there was a bottle all ready for him inside it, but Dee still didn't want to get up. If she got up, it would be admitting once and for all that this was real, and the other part had been a dream--the part where she'd been waking up in a real bed, with Mommy in the next room ready to come and take care of them and give them breakfast.

It still felt that way a little bit, as long as she lay still with her eyes closed. Mother in the next room... Dee didn't want the feeling to stop, but she couldn't help it if the food was in this room. Mother can't feed me... That was a silly thing to think. She was a big girl; nobody had to feed her...

Dee got up and got the bottle for Petey, and some fruit and crackers for herself.

She was wide awake now and she knew she wasn't dreaming; but when she was all done eating, she didn't know what to do. There was still some food left, but she wasn't really hungry. She knew she might need it later on, so she just sat around listening to Petey making sucking noises on his bottle, and wondering what was going to happen next.

THE MORNING PATTERN of the Household was a familiar and punctilious ritual: a litany of order and affirmation. Each member of each Family knew his role and played it with conditioned ease; the sum of the parts, produced a choreography of timing and motion, such as had delighted the Mother on that day when she watched her mason sons construct the new arch in her double chamber.

Daydanda's great body rested now, as then, on the couch of mats from which she had once thought she would never rise again; but her perceptions spread out of the boundaries of her Household, and her commands and reprimands were heard wherever her children prepared for the day's labour.

Some of the pattern was set and unvarying: the nurses to care for the babes, and the babes to the gardens to feed; the growing sons and daughters to their classrooms, workrooms, and the training gardens; those whose wings are sprouting to instruction in the mysteries of flight and reproduction.

The winged ones whose nuptial flight time has not come as yet wait in their quarters for assignments to scouting positions for the day; the builders breakfast largely to prepare cement, and gather up clay and chips for work in some new structure of the House; the growers, gardeners, and harvesters spread out across the forest, clearing the fallen leaves and branches, sporing the fungi, damming or redirecting a flow of water to some more useful purpose, bringing back new stores of leaf and wood and brush to fill the storage vaults beneath the House.

It was never precisely the same. There was always some minor variation in the combination of elements: a boundary dispute today

on this border, instead of the other; a new room to add to the nursery quarters, or an arch to repair in the vaults; a garden to replant into more fertile soil. And on this particular morning, two matters of special import claimed the Lady's attention.

The most urgent of these was the reconditioning of the disturbed Bigheads. Two of the eldest winged daughters--both al-most ready for nuptial departures from the Household--had been assigned to work with the nurses who ordinarily tended to the needs of the corral. Under different circumstances, Daydanda would have considered the process worthy of her own direct supervision. Now, however, she contented herself with listening in semi-continuously on the work being done. The programme was proceeding slowly--too slowly--but as long as some progress was being made, she refrained from interfering, and concentrated her own efforts on a matter of far greater personal interest: the Strangers in the House.

Or, rather, the Strange daughter. The babe was no great puzzle; his wants were familiar, and easy to understand. Food and love he needed. The latter was easy; the former they would simply have to find some way to provide...

She pushed aside the train of thought that led to making these new arrivals permanent members of the Household. No telling how much longer their supply of their own foods would last; nor whether it would be desirable to keep them in the House. For the time being, Daydanda could indulge her curiosity, and concentrate on the unique components of the Strange daughter's personality.

The child was a conglomeration of contradictions such as the Mother would not previously have believed possible in a sane individual--in one who was capable of performing even the most routine of conditioned tasks, let alone initiating such original and independent actions as those of the Stranger.

And yet, the confusions that existed in the child's thought patterns were so many, and so vital, it was a wonder she could even operate her own body without having to debate each breath or motion in her neurones first.

Fear! The child was full of fear. And something else for which there was no proper name at all: I should-I shouldn't.

Impossible confusion, resulting even more impossibly in better-than-adequate responses!

Hunger... Mother... hunger... Mother?...

The drifting thoughts merged with the Lady's reflections, and for a moment she was not certain of the source. Too clearly-formed in pattern to be the babe... and then she realized it was the older one, just waking from sleep, and still stripped of defences.

'I cannot feed you, child,' she answered the Strange daughter's unthinking plea.

'Not yet. You brought food with you from your... ship. Eat now, and feed the babe; then we will make plans for tomorrow.'

But in her own mind, Daydanda knew, there was no question of what plans to make. If there were any way to do so, she meant to have the Strangers stay within her House. She meant to have the secrets of the Strange Wings-House explored and uncovered and to learn the Strange customs and knowledge. It remained only to determine whether it was possible to feed them and care for them adequately within the Household... and to convince the strange daughter to stay.

The Mother opened her mind once more to her sons and daughters, at their tasks, and found that all was well throughout the Families.

Then she waited patiently till the Strangers were done feeding.

Petey was sleeping. All he ever did was drink milk and go to sleep and yell and act silly. Dee got up and walked around the room, but there was. nothing to see and nothing to do.

She didn't even remember which way they had come to get to this room last night, and she didn't know whether they'd let her go out if she wanted to. There was no door closing the room off from the corridor--just another open archway. But outside there was only dimness and darkness.

Abruptly, she picked up the torch and walked to the doorway, flared brilliance out into the hall, and peered up and down. After that she felt better, at least they weren't being guarded. She had seen half a dozen other open arches along the corridor, but not even a single bug anywhere.

When Pctcy woke up, she decided they'd just start walking around until they found some way to get out. She'd have to wait for him to get up, though, because she couldn't carry the lighted torch and the baby both; and even if she didn't need it to see with, she had to have the torch turned up real bright, because that's what they were afraid of. They wouldn't bother her...

They're not all scared of the light, she thought. Just the white-coloured ones are.

She wondered how she knew that, and then forgot about it, because she was thinking: If we did get out of here, I don't know how we could get back to the rocket.

It was a long way, and she'd have to carry Petey most of the time; and she didn't know which way it was, and...

I'm going to go find the Mother-bug! she decided. For just an instant after that she hesitated, wondering about leaving Petey, but somehow she felt it was all right.

He was asleep, and she figured if he woke up and started yelling, she could hear him; any place in here she'd be able to hear him because there weren't any doors to close in between.

She picked up the torch again, and turned it down low, so there was just enough light to see her way. Don't scare them, she thought. They're friends. But it was comforting to know, anyhow, that she could scare them just by turning it up. The white ones were the only ones who couldn't stand it, but none of them were used to bright light.

She wondered again how she knew that, and tried to remember something from last night that would have let her know it, but that time she was too busy trying to figure out which corridors and archways would take her to the Mother-bug's room.

A TREMENDOUS EXCITEMENT was building up inside Daydanda's vast and feeble bulk, while she guided the Strange child through the labyrinth of the House from the visitor's chamber near the outer walls to her own central domain.

Yesterday, for the first time in many years of Motherhood, she had experienced once more--with increasing ease and pleasure through the day--the thousand subtly different sensations and perceptions of direct vision. Through all the years between, she had known the look of things outside her chamber--and of beings outside her own Families--only through the distortions and dilutions of the minds of her sons and daughters, travelling abroad on missions of her choosing, and reporting as faithfully as they could, all that they saw and touched and felt for her appraisal.

But no image filtered through another's brain emerges quite the same as when it entered... and no two beings, not even those as close as Mother and daughter, can ever see quite the same image of an object. Certainly, Daydanda had perceived both more and less of the winged object in the clearing when she viewed it with her own eye, than when she had watched it through the mind of her own scouting son.

And now she was to have the Strange child here before her eyes again, to watch and study! The thought was so far-removed from precedent and past experience, it would not have occurred to her at all to have the girl come to her chamber. But when she tried to make the child aware of her desire to converse, to exchange information, the prompt and positive response had come clearly: I want to see the Mother. I want to try and talk to her.

And behind the response was a pattern Daydanda dimly perceived, in which two-way communication was commonly associated with visual sensation. The girl seemed to assume that an exchange of information would occur only where an exchange of visimages was also possible!

## DAYDANDA DEBORAH

And now the child was Deborah stood in the open standing in the entrance to the archway between the two big new chamber, and the back-rooms, and peered intently at ground patter of her mind was the great bulk of the Mother-a complaint about the difficulty bug on the couch of mats

of seeing clearly. against the far wall. Then she

. 'You may have more light, decided it was all right now to child, if you wish to see me turn the torch up high, so she more clearly,' the Mother as- could see something more than sured her. 'I told you before, it her own feet ahead of her.

is only the ones unpigmented The shadows jumped back, who are harmed by the bright- and the gently heaving mass ness, and only the wingless who on the cot sprang suddenly in

fear it at all.' to full view. Deborah stood

An instant later, she realized still, and gawped at ugliness she had been boasting.

The beyond belief.

flaring-up of the light caused The big bug's enormous her no agony, such as she had belly was a mound of grey-experienced the day before; white creases and folds and but it was quite sufficient to

bulges under the sharp light, cause her to turn her face reflecting pin-points of bright-abruptly towards the stranger, ness from oily drops of moist

so as to shield her eye. ure that stood out all over the And then there was a far dead-looking mass.

worse pain than anything her And up above the incredible eye could feel. The Mother's belly, a cone-shaped bulbous vanity was almost as carefully lump of the same whitish grey fed, and quite as much en-that must have been a face de-larged, as her great abdomen; spite its eyeless lack of any certainly it was far more vul- expression, tapered into six full nerable to attack. thick lips just like the ones of

Nobody had ever thought the baby bugs in the fungus her anything but beautiful be- garden.

fore. The Stranger child, at the

It was a good thing, Dee

first clear look, thought she thought, that she hadn't seen

was... the Mother-bug this close the

Ugly and awful and fright- day before. She never could ening and fat! have made herself believe that

It was the clearest, sharpest anything that looked ... that message she had had at any looked like that ... could pos-time from the Strange daugh- sibly be friendly. ter ... that she was hideous!

She tried now to believe it

Shame and disappointment was true, tried to remember both

receded before a sudden that good-feeling laughter that access of fury. Reflexively, she was certain had come from Daydanda shot out a spanking the big bug; but the inside of thought; and in the very next her head had begun to prickle, instant, regretted it. just as if somebody was sand

'I am sorry, child. I should papering in back of her eyes. not have punished you for what She shook her head, rubbed at you could not help thinking, her stinging eyes, sniffled, and but ... I am not used to such the feeling went away as sud-thoughts.' denly as it had come.

'You did that?' the child de- Then she got mad. 'You did manded, and angrily : 'You that on purpose!' she gasped.

meant to do it?' And then a moment later, she

'I did not plan to do it; but it had a crazy thought come was done with volition, .yes.' through her head that the

The Stranger, Daydanda Mother-bug wanted her to feel felt, had no clear concept in better, like sometimes Mom ... her mind to understand that the way a mother, maybe, distinction. A thing was done would feel bad after she'deither--on purpose was the spanked a child. The idea of child's symbol, or else involun- being a big fat bug's little girl tarily. Nothing in between. was too silly, and she couldn't Well, it was a common enough help laughing. Then she felt childish confusion, but not one the same kind of panting in-the Mother would have ex- side her head that she remem-pected in this uncommon bered from last night, and child. she knew what Mother-bug

'It was a punishment,' she thought.

tried to explain. 'which I had

no right to administer. You

are my guest, and not my

I am not scared,' she said

daughter. I offer apology.' emphatically. 'What do you

think I do? Laugh when I get

'I am laughing,' came a scared?' Then she thought it mandible message; but the over and decided it wasn't very background was a quick shiver nice of her to laugh at an idea of fear. Daydanda tried to like that--about being the soothe the fright away, and the Mother-bug's child--if the big laughing stopped, to be re bug really could read her mind, placed by a sturdy mandibled so she apologized.

denial of the fear that was, 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I guess

truthfully, already consider it wasn't very nice of me to ably lessened. And then an laugh at you.' And she had a apology! 'I am sorry,' the child feeling as if the Mother-bug said. 'It was most improper of knew she had apologized, and me to laugh.' And the back- was telling her it was all

ground message was no differ- right.

The big old bug was ugly, all

ent, but only more specific: 'It right, Dee thought, but so were was very rude of me to be a lot of people she'd seen ... frightened at the idea of being and the bug was really pretty

your daughter.'

nice. Good, sort of, the way a

This time Daydanda repres- mother ought to be ... sed her reflexive irritation. `Laugh when you like, child,'

she said; `perhaps it is a good

Just the same, Dee realized,

way to release your fear.'

she didn't want to stay here.

Promptly, she was rewarded She didn't want to stay in the

by a clear, unmandibled, but rocket either, though. I don't strong reply : 'You're good; I know which is worse, she like you. I don't care what you thought mournfully; then she look like.' decided this was worse--even though in a lot of ways it was

The woman's vanity quiv- better--just because she didn't ered, but her curiosity trium- know whether she could get phed. The child, at long last, out if she wanted to. was receptive to communica- She had to find that out first.

tion. Daydanda withdrew from She had to get back to the contact entirely, to calm .her rocket. Once she was safe in-wounded feelings, and to form- side again, with Petey, she ulate carefully the question could make up her mind. now uppermost in her mind:

how to gain more knowledge of the Wings-House in which the Strangers had arrived,

# XVIII

THE MORE SHE learned, the less she seemed to know. The Strange child, though still inexplicably frightened, was at last being communicative and co-operative. Yet each new piece of information acquired during the morning's interview had only served to make the puzzle of the Strangers more complex or more abstruse.

How and why they had come here... even whence they had come... their habits, customs, biology, psychology... the nature of the ship in which they lived, and flew ... the very fact of the existence of the older child's continuing fear and doubt... and Strangest of all, perhaps, the by-now irrefutable fact that neither of the children knew whether their Mother was alive, inside the Ship, or had departed...

None of these matters were any easier to comprehend now than they had been the day before; and most of them were more confusing.

However, there was now at least some hope of solving some parts of the puzzle ... two parts, in any case. The Strange daughter had agreed, after only slight hesitation, to allow a flying son to come inside the ship with her, and to explain to the Mother, watching through her son's eyes, as much of what was to be found there as she could. The child apparently had felt that by permitting the exploratory visit, she was securing the right of the babe to accompany her on the trip... a right she would in any case have had for the asking. And there was some further thought in the girl's mind of perhaps not returning... but Daydanda was not seriously concerned about it. She had re-frained carefully from proffering any insistent hospitality, since the daughter's fear of remaining alone with her sibling seemed even greater than that of remaining with the Household, provided only she did not feel herself to be a captive in the House.

It still remained to be seen, of course, whether it would be possible to provide for the two Strangers within the biological economy of the Families. That, however, was the other part of the puzzle that was already on the road to a solution. The daughter had most fortuitously, before leaving the Lady's chamber, expressed an urgent need to perform some biological functions for which, apparently, a waste receptacle of some sort was required. Daydanda had issued rapid orders to one of the more ingenious of the mason sons, to manufacture as best he could a receptacle conforming to the image she found in the child's mind. Then she had seized the opportunity to ask if she might have a nursing daughter take some samples of the milk and other food that had come with them from the ship, and of such other bodily by-products as she had already observed the Strangers to produce; the tears that came from the eyes in the release of grief, and the general bodily exudation for which the child's symbol was sweat, but whose purpose or function she seemed not to understand herself.

Once again, as she had had occasion to do many times before, the Lady regretted the maternal compulsiveness of her own nature that had stood in the way of producing a Scientist within the Household. As matters now stood, the samplings she had secured from the Strange children would have to be flown two full days'

journey away, to the Encyclopaedic Seat, for analysis. If she had been willing—just once in all these years—to inhibit the breeding of a full Family in order to devote the necessary nutrient and emotional concentration to the creation of a pair of Scientists, she would be able to have the answer to the present problem in hours instead of days, and without having to forgo the services of two of her best fliers for the duration of the trip there and back. Then, if it appeared necessary to utilize the more varied facilities of the Seat, she could submit her samples with the security of knowing that her own

representative there would keep watch over her interests; and that everything learned about the Strange samples would be transmitted instantly and fully from the brother at the Seat to the twin in the Household. Daydanda knew only too well how often in the past the Seat had seen fit to retain information for its own use, when the products for analysis came from an unrepresented House...

No use in worrying now, either about what might be, or about what had not been done. One matter, at least, would be resolved before the day was done... the baffling question of what lay inside that double-arched opening in the wall of the Wings-House... and along with it, the answer, perhaps, to the puzzle of the Strange children's Mother.

THUS TIME THEY rode in the litter; and the trip that had taken a long afternoon the day before was accomplished in a short hour of trotting, bouncing progress.

Yesterday, the pace had been slowed as much by the litter-bearers' efforts to spare their Lady any unnecessary jostling, as by the shortness of Dee's leg; today Daydanda's labouring sons were inhibited by no such considerations.

At the edge of the clearing they paused, their eyes averted from the shiny hull.

Dee laughed out loud, and ran out into the sunlight. It felt good. She knew she was showing off, but it made her feel better just to stand there and look straight up, because she knew there wasn't one of them that would dare to do it.

'Sissies!' she yelled out, there was no answer... not even a scolding-feeling from the Mother-bug.

She went back to the litter, got Petey out, and parked him on the muddy ground near the airlock, wondering if it was safe to leave him out there while she went inside.

They wouldn't do anything like grabbing him and running off, she decided. The Mother-bug wanted to know about the rocket too much; and the Mother-bug wanted her to come back, too--not just Petey.

Still, she didn't make any move to go inside. It was good standing there in the sun, even without the show-off part of it. She watched Petey grab big chunks of yellow mud and plaster himself with them,

and felt the sun soak into her shoulders and warm the top of her head.

This place wouldn't be so bad, she thought, if it wasn't for the trees everywhere, cutting out the sun. Inside the forest, it was always a little bit drippy and damp, and the light was always dimmed. But when you got out into it, the sun here was a good one--better than on Starhope. It felt like the sun used to feel, she thought she remembered, when she was almost as little as Petey, before they went away from Earth.

She wished she could remember more about Earth. Mommy always told her stories about it, but. Morn...

Don't think about that!

She wished she could remember more about Earth. It was green there, Green like in the forests here, where the treetops lent their colour to everything? That wasn't what Morn... what the stories meant, she was sure. For just an instant, there was a picture in her mind; and because it came so suddenly, she suspected at first that the Mother-bug put it there, but it didn't feel that way. Then she wasn't sure whether it was something she remembered, from when she was very little, or whether it was truly a picture--one she'd seen at school, or on the T-Z. But she was sure that that was how Earth was supposed to look, wherever she was remembering it from.

The trees there were called Appletrees, for a kind of fruit they had, and they grew separated from each other on a hillside, with low branches where the children could climb right up to the tops of them like walking up steps. Then you'd sit in the top, and the breeze would come by, smelling sweet and fresh like Mom... the way lavender looked. And you would eat sweet fruit from the swaying branch, and...

She jumped as a hairy arm brushed her hand. It was the one with

wings who was supposed to go with her into the rocket. It.. he, the Mother said it was her son, pointed to the airlock, and Dee got the question-y feeling again. Then there were words to go with it.

'Go inside now?'

It was surprising at first that his 'voice"sounded' just like the Mother-bug's. Then she realized it was the Mother-bug, talking through his mind. Dee understood by now that the words she 'heard' were supplied by herself to fit the picture or emotions the other person--that was silly, calling a bug a person!--'sent' to her; but she was pretty sure that the words or the sort-of-a-voice-sound she'd make up for one person--bug--would be different from the way she'd 'hear' another one.

Anyway, the Mother wanted her to go inside. She decided against leaving Petev outdoors by himself, and picked him up and lifted him in before she climbed through the airlock. The bug with wings came right behind her.

The playroom was a mess. Living in there all the time, Dee hadn't realized how everything was thrown around; but now, when she had a visitor with her--even if he was just a bug--she felt kind of ashamed about the way it all looked. Maybe he wouldn't know the difference... but he would. She remembered how the inside of their big House was neat and clean all over; and not just the inside... even the woods were kept tidy all the time. She'd seen a bunch of bugs out picking up dead branches and gathering leaves off the ground on the way over here.

This bug didn't seem to care though. He looked around at everything, with his head bent down backwards so he could see, and Dee got the idea he wanted to know if it was all right to touch things. She picked up a toy and some clothes, and put them into the hands on

his front legs. After that, he went around looking and touching and handling things all over the playroom, while Dee hunted up some clothes to take back with them.

She couldn't find very much that was clean, so she took a whole pile of stuff from the floor, and went to the back to put them into the soil remover. The bug followed her. It--he--watched her put the clothes into the square box; he jumped a little when she turned the switch on and it started shaking, as it always did, a little. Dee laughed.

Then she went around turning on all the machines that she knew how to work, just to show the bug. She wished she knew how to use the power tool, because that made a whole lot of noise, and did all kinds of different things; but Daddy never let... but she didn't know how to, that's all.

The bug just stood still in the middle of the room, looking and listening. He didn't even want to touch anything in here, Dee figured; so she asked him out loud, didn't he want to feel what the machines were like? And then she found out she could tell the difference in one bug's voice and another's, because the Mother said a kind of eager, 'Thank you--are you sure,' the son-bug said at the same time, kind of nervous-sounding, 'No, thank von! these devices are very Strange...' and then he must have realized what his Mother wanted, because he said, 'I am afraid I might damage them.'

Dee felt the Mother's smiling then, and with the smile, a question: 'Where do they breath? With what do they eat?' 'Who?' Dee said out loud.

'Those others... the machines, is your symbol for them.' And at the same time, she saw inside her head a sort of twisty picture of the room all around her. She saw it with her own eyes, the way it really was; and at the same time, she was seeing it the way the Mother-

bug must be seeing it--which was the way her son was seeing it, and 'sending' the picture to her. It wasn't much different, mostly just the colours weren't as bright. And somehow, all the machines, the way the Mother-bug saw them, were alive.

Dee laughed. Those bugs were pretty smart, but there were lots of things she knew that they didn't.

'They don't breathe,' she said scornfully; 'they're just machines, that's all.'

'?????'

'They're machines; they do things for people. You turn 'em on and make them work, and then when you're done, you turn them off again. They run on electricity.'

'?????'

She couldn't explain electricity very well. 'It's like... lightning.' But the Mother didn't know what she meant by that either. 'Don't talk,' the big bug told her; 'make a picture in your head.'

Stand near the machine-that-cleans, and make pictures, not words, in your own head, to show how it works for you.'

Deborah tried, but she'd never seen what the machinery looked like inside the soil remover. There wasn't very much of it anyway. Da... somebody had explained it to her once. There was just a horn--or something like a horn--that kept blowing, without making any noise; at least not any noise that you could hear. The blowing shook all the dirt out of the clothes, and there was a u-v light inside to sterilize them at the same time. That was all she knew, and she didn't know what it really looked like, except for the u-v bulb; and she didn't even know what made that work, really.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'd make a picture for you if I could.'

'Is there one of these creatures... machines... you have seen inside?'

She'd seen inside of the freeze unit when it was being fixed once. She tried to remember just how that looked; but it was complicated, and the Mother still didn't seem to understand.

'The little pipes?' she asked, and Dee wasn't sure whether she meant the freezing coils or the wires; but then she was sure it was the wires. 'They bring food to the creature so it can work?'

'No I told you. It's not a "creature". It doesn't even ever eat. The wires just have electricity in them, that's all. Don't you even know what an electric wire is?'

'Where do the pipes... wires... bring the electric from?'

Dee looked around. The generator was... it was in... 'There's a generator someplace,' she said carelessly. 'It makes electricity; that's what it's for. I can show you how the T-Z works, because somebody I know showed me once.' She went out to the play-room, and started talking, describing her favourite toy, and making pictures in her mind to show the Mother-bug how it worked, and what some of the stories looked like. She talked fast, and kept on talking till she had to stop for breath; but then she realized she didn't have to talk out loud to the Mother, so she went on thinking about stories she'd seen on T-Z, and she decided she'd take it back with some of the film strips, so the Mother could see for herself how it worked.

Machine! An entity capable of absorbing energy in one form, transmitting it to some other form, and expending it in the performance of work... work requiring judgment, skill, training... and

yet the Strange child said these things were not alive!

Daydanda rested on her great couch, but felt no ease, and wished again that she had had the fortitude to go out with the small group. To see for herself...

But she could never even have got through the narrow double-arch entrance to the ship. The ship... that too, then, was a machine! It was a structure; a builded thing; not-alive; yet it could fly...

These two Strangers were very different creatures from a very different race; she began to understand that now. The striking similarities were purely superficial. The differences...

The thought of the babe tugged at her mind, asking warmth, asking food, and she could not think of him as Strange at all. There were differences; there were samenesses. No need now to make a counting of how many of which kind. Only to learn as much as could be learned, while she determined whether it was possible or desirable to keep the two Strange ones within the Household.

Very well then: these machines are not alive... not all the time. They live only when the Strange daughter permits it, in most cases by moving a small organ projecting from the outside. Not so different, if you stopped to think of it, from the Bigheads, who might be counted not-alive most of the time. It was hard to adjust to the notion of working members of a Household existing on that low level, but... these were Strangers.

And still the child maintained the machines were not alive at all, not members of her Household, merely structures, animated by...

By what? The things absorbed energy from somewhere. Through the little pipes... apparently almost pure energy, the stuff the child called

electric. What was the source of the electric?

The Strange daughter had a symbol and not-clear picture in her mind: a thing with rotating brushes, and a hard core of some kind. A thing kept under a round shelter, made of the same fabric as the ship... metal. From under this metal housing came wires through which electric flowed to the machines... much as cement flowed from the snout of a mason, or honey from the orifice of a nurse.

Into this machine, food was... no, the child's symbol was a different one, though the content of the symbol was the same; food designed for a machine was fuel.

Very well: fuel was fed only to the... the Mother-machine!

Now the whole thing was beginning to make sense. The machines were comparable—in relationship to the Stranger's Household—to the winged or crawling creatures that sometimes co-existed with the Household of Daydanda's own people, sharing a House in symbiotic economy, but having, of course, a distinct biology and therefore, a separate Mother and separate reproductive system.

The generator, said the child, supplied warmth and nourishment and vital power to the other machines; the generator was fed by the humans (the child's symbol for her own people); the machines worked for the humans.

'Is the generator of machines alive?' the Lady asked. 'No. I told you before..?'

'Am I alive?'

'Yes. Of course.'

The wonder was not that the Strange daughter failed to include the

symbiotes in her semantic concept of 'life', but rather that she did include Daydanda, and Daydanda's Household. The Lady abandoned the effort to communicate such an abstraction, and ask if she might be shown the Mother-machine.

Wavering impression of willingness, but...

The thing was on the other side of a door. The daughter went through one doorway into the room she had first entered, ap-proached the far wall, and turned sideways, to demonstrate in great detail a mechanism of some sort (not one of the machines; no wires connected it to the Mother-machine) whose function apparently was educational. It created visual, auditory, and olfac-tory hallucinations, utilizing information previously registered on strips of somehow-sensitized fabric inside it...

roughly anala-gous to the work of a teaching-nurse, who could register and retain for instructive purposes information supplied by the Mother, and never fully available to the nurse in her own functioning, nor in any way necessary for her to 'know'. Thus an unwinged nurse could give instruction in the art of flying, and the biology of reproduction. But, once again, the Stranger's mecha-nism was--or so the child said--simply an artifact, a made thing, without life of its own, and this time it was even more puzzling than before, because the object in question was self-contained-- had its own internal source of electric, and needed no connectinf wires with the Mother-machine.

Mother-machine... Mother!

Daydanda reacted so sharply to the sudden connection of data that Kackot, asleep in the next chamber, woke and came rushing to her side. Smiling, she shared her thoughts with him. Machine-Mother and Stranger-Mother both... behind a door!

The same door?

'The source of electric is behind the other door?' The Mother-bug's question formed clearly in her mind this time. Dee looked up from the T-Z. There wasn't any other door. She looked all around but she couldn't see one. There was just the airlock, and the door to the workroom and kitchen in the back, but the Mother didn't mean either of those.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said, and went back to get the clothes out of the soil-remover, and thawed out a piece of cake from the freeze.

Daydanda looked at one and the same time through the eyes of her son in the Strange ship, and through those of the Stranger. Both focused on the same part of the same wall. Through the son's eyes, the Lady saw a rectangular outline in the surface of the wall, and a dosure device set in one side. Through the child's eyes, she could see only a smooth unbroken stretch of wall.

'There is no door,' the child informed her clearly... then turned around and left the room, once more broadcasting mean-ingless symbols, and accurate, but inappropriate, arithmetic.

Dee made sure she had enough clothes for a while. She didn't want to come back here right away. Maybe later on. She'd have to come back later on, of course. She couldn't really stay with the bugs. But...

She took a long strip off the roll of bottles, and a lot of milk, and all the powdered stuff she could find that looked any good. They probably had water there, anyhow.

Things out of the freeze would spoil if she took them, so she left them for later, when she came back to the rocket.

She had to make a couple of trips to get everything out to the litter: the clothes and food and the T-Z and Petey and some toys for Petey; and the Mother-bug or the son-bug, one of them, kept trying to say things at her, but she wouldn't listen. She just started saying the Space Girl oath again; and when she couldn't remember it, even some of the silly multiplication, because she didn't feel like talking right now.

DAYDANDA WAS SHORT of time, and entirely out of patience. The Strange child's antics had gone from the puzzling to the incomp-rehensible, and the Lady of the House had other concerns... many of them now aggravated by inattention over the preceding days. She simply could not continue to devote nearly all her thought, nor nearly so much of her time, to any one matter.

The children had brought back with them provisions sufficient for a few days at least, and the Mother was satisfied that their presence in the Household for that period represented no menace to the members of her own Families.

There was no purpose to thinking about their continued stay until the Encyclopaedic Seat completed a biological analysis. Nor could she determine how much responsibility she was willing to take for possible damage to the Wings-House in further ex-ploration and examination, until she knew for certain that she could offer the Strange children a permanent home in her own Household.

The flying son who had accompanied the two of them on their trip to the rocket, had informed her that the barrier on which the daughter's fear seemed centred was, like the rest of the Strange structure, composed of metal, and that this metal was the hardest wood he had ever seen. It could be cut through, he thought, but not without damage to the fabric that might not be repairable. As for discovering the secret of the mechanism that was designed to hold the door closed or allow it to open, he was pessimistic.

There was nothing to do, then, but put the matter from her mind until she had more information.

Accordingly, the Mother gave instructions--when all her children were in communion, after the evening Homecalling--that every member of the Household was to treat the Strange guests with kindness and respect; to guard them from dangers they might fail to recognize; to co-operate with their needs or wishes, insofar as they could express them; and to offer just such friendship--no more and no less--as the young Strangers themselves seemed to desire. She then assigned a well-trained elder daughter (a nurse might have done better in some ways, but she wanted a written record of any information acquired, and that meant it had to be a winged one) to maintain full-time contact with the Strange daughter, so as to answer the visitors' questions and to keep the Household informed of their activities.

With that, she turned her mind to more familiar problems of her Household.

Dee was glad she'd decided to come back. Of course, they couldn't really stay here, but just for a little while, it was interesting.

The bugs were really pretty nice people she thought, and giggled at the silly way that sounded... calling bugs people. But it was hard not to, because they thought about themselves that way, and acted that way: and once you got used to how they looked, (And how they looked at you, too: it still felt funny having them turn their backs to you when you talked to them, so they could see you) it was just natural to think of them that way.

Anyhow, they were all nice to her, and especially nice to Petey. She could 'talk' to them pretty easily now, too; but she had an idea she wasn't really doing it herself.

There was a... big-sister?... bug who was sort of keeping an eye on her, she thought. Not a real eye, of course; she giggled again. Just

the kind of an eye that could see pictures in somebody else's head. But any time she wanted to know something, such as whether it was all right to go out, and where could she find some water to mix the food with, and--as now--how to get to one of those gardens--the big-sister-bug would start telling her almost before she asked.

And Dee thought that probably most of the other bugs she talked to were at least partway using the big-sister's mind--the way the Mother-bug had helped her 'hear'

what Petey 'said'--because now they all seemed to have pretty much the same kind of 'voice'. But it was different from the Mother's, or from the one who went to the rocket with her.

That gave her a strange feeling sometimes... thinking that maybe the big-sister one was listening in on her all the time, but at least it wasn't like with the Mother-bug, who'd make that prickly hurting if you thought something she didn't like. The big-sister-bug didn't try to tell her what to do or what not to do, or put ideas in her head, or anything like that. So if she wanted to just listen all the time, Deborah supposed it didn't matter much. And it certainly was useful.

Petey was stuck in the mud again; Dee helped him get loose. She couldn't carry him around all the time, so she'd finally settled for not putting any clothes on him except a diaper, and just letting him go as gucky as he wanted to. He'd learned to crawl pretty well on the soft surface; it was just once in a while that he'd put an arm in too deep, or something like that. But he didn't mind, so she didn't either.

She still couldn't see any garden; just the trees and the mud. 'How far is it?' she asked or wondered.

'Not much more,' Big-sister told her. 'Walk around the next tree, and go to... to your right.'

Just a little farther on, after she turned, Dee saw the sudden splurge of colour. It was a different garden from the one she'd seen the first time; at least the big-sister-bug said it was. The other one was for the tiny babies--the ones who were really about the same age as Petey, but about half his size. This one was for the next oldest hunch, but they were all just about Petey's size, so maybe he could play with them.

It looked just the same, though; the same kind of crazy combinations of colours and shapes. Everything was just as she remembered, except for not being scared now; and when she got right up to it, she saw these bugs weren't nursing on the plants the way the others had been doing. Once in a while, one of them would stop and suck a little while on a tendril; mostly, though they were chasing each other around, and kind of playing games--just like kindergarten kids any place.

There were two big bugs--the kind that had dark-coloured skins, and had eyes, but didn't have any wings. These ones were nurses, Dee figured. There were others just like these, with different kinds of noses--and some with different kinds of hands--who did other things; but these ones had to be nurses, because they were watching the kids. They were sitting outside the garden, not doing anything, and Dee felt funny about going inside, partly because it was supposed to be for little kids, partly because she was afraid she'd step on one of the plants or something like that. So she let Petey crawl, and she sat down next to the nurses, and just watched.

It was warm in the forest. It was always warm there, but she was getting to like it.

She wasn't wearing anything except shorts now, and the only thing she minded was always feeling a little bit damp, because the air was so wet. But altogether, she had to admit it was better at least than

being in the rocket all by themselves; shut up in there as they had been, Petey was always cranky and fussing about something. Now he was having a good time, so he didn't keep bothering her. And she had the T-Z set back in their room, now, and you didn't even need a light on to work that. Of course, she didn't have very many film-strips for it; she'd have to go back to the rocket pretty soon and get some more.

They'd need some more food, too, and she'd have to get Petey's diapers dean again. She wished there was some way to take along frozen food; then she wouldn't have to fuss around with mixing things with water, and all that, but...

The big-sister-bug was asking her what she meant by 'frozen food', but she'd tried to explain that before.

Anyhow, she had to go back there pretty soon, if she and Petey decided to stay here for a while, because she had to leave a message, so that when somebody came to rescue them, they'd know where to look.

'You wish to visit the Wings-House now?' Big-sister asked.

'It's kind of late today,' Dee said; 'tomorrow, I guess.' Sometimes she talked out loud like that, even though she knew it didn't make any difference. All she had to do was think what she meant, but sometimes she just talked out loud from habit.

'The litter goes swiftly,' said Big-sister. 'If you wish to make the visit now...'

Tomorrow! This time she didn't say it... just thought it extra hard. Big-sister stopped bothering her about it, and she sat still and watched Petey crawling around and grabbing at the pretty colours.



DAYDANDA RECEIVED THE report personally, and trusted not even her own memory to retain it all, but relayed to three elder daughters, so that whatever errors any one might make in transcription, the records of the others could correct. There was so much technical symbology throughout the message—even though the clerk at the Seat tried to keep it intelligible—that she could not try to comprehend it entirely as it came. She would have to study and examine the meaning of each datum, before she could fully determine what it meant in terms of the questions she had to answer for her Household and the Strangers.

If she had only had a pair of Scientists! Communicating with each other, they would have known the purpose of the analysis; communicating with her, Mother and sons, there would have been no problem of translation of symbols. But it was hardly possible to give full information to the Scientists at the Seat, when many of them were from neighbouring or nearby Households, whose best interests were by no means identical with her own. Of course, they vowed impartiality when they took up Encyclopaedic work, but...

The next breeding, definitely... ! (Rackot, daily more sensitive, came to the archway and peered in. He had taken to working and napping in the other room these few days. She sent a gentle negative.) The very next breeding would have to be limited to a pair of Scientists! Though now that she had put it off so long, and the youngest babes were already growing too big for fondling...

Scientists it would be! The Household needed them. All very well to follow easily along the drive to procreate, but it was necessary, also, to safeguard those already born. And right now, the problem was not one of breeding, or breeding inhibition, but of making enough sense

out of the message so that she could come to some decision about the Strangers.

She had the three daughters bring her their copies, and lay for a long while on her couch, studying and comparing and making rapid notes. Finally, she called to Kackot, and thought as she did so that it would perhaps do something to soothe his wounded feelings, if he felt she was unable to make this decision without his help.

He listened, soberly, and did what she knew she could count on him to do: reformulated, repeated, and advised according to what she wished. Since the report clearly established that the Strangers represented no biologic danger to the Household--their exudations were entirely non-toxic, and some of the solid matter was even useable, containing large quantities of semi-digested cellulose--it was clearly her duty to keep them in the Household, and learn as much as possible from them. Since the report further indicated that normal food would be non-toxic to the Strangers (and Mother and consort both tended to avoid the question, unanswered in the report, of whether normal feeding would supply all the nourishment the two Strange children needed), it was possible to extend indefinite hospitality to them.

(After all, if there were elements of nourishment they required beyond what the fungus-foods and wood-honey offered, they could continue to make use of their own supplies... which would last longer if supplemented by native food. So Daydanda eased her conscience.)

The question of how far to go in examining the rocket was more complicated. The ethic involved...

'There is no ethic,' Kackot reminded her stiffly, 'above the duty of a Mother to her Household. The obligations to a Stranger in the House are sacred, but...' He dropped his formality, and ended, smiling and

once more at ease '... non-biologic!'

So, again, Daydanda soothed her conscience.

Still, it would be better at least to try to get the child's agree-ment, even though it was a foregone conclusion that they could not expect her co-operation. The Lady summoned the Strange daughter once more to her chamber.

'I could write the message here, I guess,' Dee said thought-fully. 'If you're going to send somebody to the rocket anyhow, there's no reason for me to go.' It wasn't as if she couldn't trust them; they wouldn't hurt anything. And anyhow, the Mother said she wanted to keep showing Dee what the son was doing, s o they could ask questions whenever they didn't understand something.

Right now, t h e Mother-bug w a s feeling a question. 'Write a message?' Dee stopped thinking herself, and then she under-stood. The bugs only used writing for keeping records of things. When they wanted to tell somebody something, it didn't matter how far away the person was; so they didn't write things down for other people. Just for themselves, and to make a kind of history for other bugs later on.

The Mother wanted to know: wouldn't she 'be aware' of the rescue party when it came.

She shook her head, and didn't try to explain anything, be-cause it was just too different. 'I've got some crayons in my room,' she told the Mother-bug, 'but I used up all the paper already.'

'We have paper.' The funny jumpy Father-bug jumped up in his funny way, and went over to a kind of big table full of cubby holes, even before the Mother was done 'talking', and got a piece of their kind of paper, and gave it to Dee. The Mother was asking about crayons,

what they were and how they worked, but Dee was asking her at the same time for something to write with, and what kind of paper was this?

The paper was made out of tree bark, and covered with a kind of waxy stuff that they made in their bodies. They seemed to make everything right inside themselves--as if each bug was a kind of chemicals factory, and you could put in such and such, and turn some switches inside, and get out so-and-so. It was certainly useful, Dee thought, with vague distaste, and then realized nobody had given her a pencil or anything yet.

But you wouldn't use a pencil' on this kind of paper. You'd use a stylus, or something sharp.

'Very soon,' the Mother-bug said. 'My daughter brings you a sharp thing to write with.' Then she raised her arm to show Dee where a little sharp horny tip was, on the back of her elbow, that she used herself.

'But how can you see what... ?' Dee started to ask, and then she felt the Mother-bug laughing, and then she laughed herself. It was so hard to get used to people with eyes in the backs of their heads.

One of the nurse-type bugs came in, bowing and crawling the way they always did if they got near the Mother-bug, handed Dee a pointed stick, and crawled out again.

'I am staying with some bugs in a big house,' Dee scratched as clearly as she could through the wax. The bark underneath was orangy-coloured, and the wax was white, so it showed through pretty well. 'My baby brother Petey is with me. Please come and get us.' Then she signed it, 'Deborah (DEE) Levin.' And then realized she hadn't put anything in about how to find them. She tried to ask the

Mother, but so far they hadn't been able to get together on that kind of thing at all. The bugs didn't use measurements or distances or directions the same way; they just seemed to know where to go, and how far they were.

'We will know if Strangers come,' the Mother promised her; 'we will go to them.'

Dee thought that over, and added to her message: 'P.S. If some big bugs come around, don't shoot. They're friends; they're taking care of Petey and me.' And put her initials at the end, the way you're supposed to do with a P.S.

'When is he going?' she asked. 'I mean, should I stay here, so you can ask me questions, or do you want me to come back later?' Petey was getting kind of restless, and he wanted some-thing, but she wasn't sure what.

'The brother wishes to return to the garden,' the Mother explained. 'He understands what I told you about the food. He wanted to suck on the sweet plants before, but was afraid. Now he desires to return to the garden and to the other children, and suck as they do.' Then she said her son was going to the ship right away; but if Dee wanted to go to the garden with Petey, that was all right; the Mother-bug could talk to her just as well that way.

'I'd rather... I'd kind of rather look at you when we talk,' Dee said. She knew it seemed silly to them, because they weren't used to it, but she couldn't help it.

Anyhow, she got a kind of good feeling being in the Mother-bug's room. The first time she came in here it was awful, but right now she felt nervous or something. She didn't know why, but she did know she'd feel better if she stayed here with the big old bug.

'Stay then, my child.'

One of the ones with wings came in; this kind just bowed, they didn't crawl. He took the message from Dee, and went back to the garden; then they just waited for a while.

The mother was busy, thinking some place else, and the Father-bug gave her a funny feeling when she tried to talk to him, because he wasn't like a Daddy at all. Not the way the big fat bug was like a real Mother. The skinny, jumpy one was nervous and fussy and worried; and Dee thought he probably didn't like her very much. So she just sat still, squatting on the floor with her back against the wall, and thought maybe she'd go get her T-Z set and look at something till the Mother-bug was ready.

But it was warm and comfortable and she didn't want to go away, out of this room, where the Mother was just like a Mother was a Mother--so she sort of rolled over a little bit, and curled up right on the floor and closed her eyes. If she didn't look at the piled-up mats and the ugly old belly on top, it felt more like a Mother than ever before for a long time since it was so warm, hot, glowing red, and the voice said, fire ... fire... fire...

That was on Hallowe'en, all black and orange, witches and ghosts, and the witch said, 'Fire ! Fire! Run ! Run!' but the ghost looked like a big fat bug, only white, except the white ones don't have eyes; and this one had two great big hollow eyeholes; and it was crying because it couldn't find the little girl who should have opened...

opened her eyes, so she could see, why didn't she open her eyeholes, so she could see the little girl? Be-cause the little girl had no eyes, only it didn't matter as long as the door was closed, the ghost couldn't get through a safety safety safe; the little girl is safe, on Hallowe'en when the ground is black and behind the door is black,

black, black you can't see, and black it's all burned up, and the ghost is white; so there's no ghost there in the black, only a great big ugly bugley belly all swell up with white dead long time... No!... all black for Hallowe'en, black, black....

THE LADY HEARD; and by her lights, she understood. It was a sick and ugly thing to hear, and a terrible sad thing to comprehend.

A Mother of fourteen Families is, perforce, accustomed to grief and fear and failing; she has suffered time and again the agonies of flesh and spirit with which her children met the tests of growth: the fears of battle, terror of departure, pains of hunger, the awful shrinking from death. The time they almost lost their House to swarming hostile Families; the time the boy died in the ravenous claws of their own Bigheads; the time the rotten-fungus-sickness spread among them... time after time; but never, in all the crowded years of life-giving and life-losing had Daydanda known a sickness such as now shouted at her from the Strange girl's dream.

Even her curiosity would have faltered before this outpouring, but she could not turn away. One listens to a troubled child's dream to diagnose, to find a remedy...

but this! If it were possible to invade the barriers of a full-grown Mother of crime, one might find sorrow and fear and torment such as this.

As the sunlight had seared her eyeball, so the hellfires of the childish dreaming burned her soul.

The girl desired that they should find her Mother dead! There was no other way to make sense of it. Daydanda tried. Everything in her fought against even the formulation of such a tatement. It was not only evil, but impossible... unnatural. Non-biologic.

The child wanted to know that her Mother had been burned to death.

Within the shining rocket, Daydanda's son moved curiously, feeling and touching each Strange object cautiously, examining with his eager eye each Strange and inexplicable shape. He waited there, unable to be still in the presence of so much to explore; too fearful of doing damage to explore further till his Mother's mind met his.

But the Lady could not be disturbed, the sibling at relay duty said; the Lady was refusing all calls, accept-ing no contact.

Wait!

He waited.

Non-biologic... But what did she know of the biology of a Stranger? Even as much as the clerk at the Seat had told her, from the analysis o f scrapings and samplings—even that much she did not fully understand, and that could not be more than a fractional knowledge in any case.

She could not, would not, believe that the Strange daughter's Strange complex of feelings and fears and desires was as subjectively sick as it seemed, by her own standards and experience, to be. A different biologic economy—which most assuredly they had—or a completely different reproductive social organiza-tion...

It was possible. The child's independence and resourcefulness her untrained awareness of self and others... her lack of certainty even a s to whether her Mother still lived... the very existence of two siblings of such widely divergent age and size, without even a suggestion of others who had departed, or been left behind...

Till now, the Mother had been trying to fit these two Strange children somehow into the patterns of her own world. But she remembered what she had considered at the time to be childish over-statement,

or just a part of the confusion of the girl's mind as to place, time, and direction.

From another world...

From above the treetops, but that had not been startling. A nesting couple always descended from above the trees, after the nuptial flight. From above the treetops, but not from below them. From another world...!

Kackot was hovering nervously above her. The daughter on relay was asking on behalf of the son at the Strange ship. The daughters in the corral wished to report...

To Kackot and the son both, imperative postponements. She clamped control on her seething mind long enough to determine that it was no emergency in the corral, then closed them all out again, and tried to think more clearly.

The dream was still too fresh in her mind. And now there was more data to be had. Don't think, then... just to regain one's sanity, detachment, ability to weigh and to consider. One cannot open contact with the child while looking upon her as a monster.

(A monster! That's how I seemed to her!)

Perspective returned slowly. She groped for Kackot's soothing thoughts, refusing to inform him yet, but gratefully accepting his concern. Then the son, waiting restively inside the Strange Wings-House. And last, the child... Strange child of a Strange world.

'Very well,' she told them all calmly, or so she hoped. 'Let us commence.'

Dee was getting tired of it. For a while, it was sort of fun, looking at

things the way the son-bug saw them, and watching how clumsy he was every time he tried to do anything the way she told him. Even if these bugs didn't have any machines themselves, you had to be pretty dumb not to be able to just turn a knob when somebody explained it to you.

She realized she was being rude again. It was hard to remember, sometimes, that you shouldn't even think anything impolite around here. It would be pretty good for some kids she knew, to come here for a while...

'Other children... others like yourself?' the Mother felt all excited. 'Of your own Family?'

Dee shook her head. 'No; just some of the kids who were in the Scout Troop on Starhope.'

'Others... brothers and sisters... from your Household then?'

She had to think about that, to figure out the right answer. A town or a dome or a city was kind of like the Household here... but of course, the other kids weren't brothers and sisters, just because you played with them and went to school together.

'Petey's the only brother I have,' she said.

She didn't think she'd made it very clear, but she had a feeling that the Mother was kind of glad about the answer. She didn't know why; and anyhow, it had nothing to do with the rocket. The son-bug was waiting for his Mother to pay attention to him again.

For a minute, everybody seemed to go away. Telling secrets! Dee thought irritably. She was beginning to get very bored now, just sitting here answering a lot of silly questions. They'd already put the message on the waxbark up where anybody who came in could see

it, and the son-bug had a batch of diapers cleaned for Petey, and a lot of food picked out of the dry storage cabinet. She hoped it was stuff she liked. She couldn't read the labels when she was looking through his eye; anyhow they didn't need her around any more.

'Don't be silly,' she said out loud. 'There isn't any door to open; they're both open.' Now what did I say that for? 'Listen, I better go see how Petey's getting along. I don't like him trying out that fungus food all by himself. I better...'

She started to stand up, but the Mother said quietly, 'Soon. Soon, child. Just a little more. You did not understand; we wish to know how to close the door... just how to operate the mechanism. My son is eager to try his skill at turning knobs to make machines work.'

'You mean the airlock? You can't close that from outside. But if he just wants to try it out while he's inside, I guess that's all right. It's kind of complicated, though; he might get stuck in there or something, and..?'

'No child. The airlock is the double-arch opening in the outer wall, is it not?'

'... yes, and I don't think he better...'

'He does not wish to experiment with that one. My son is brave, but not foolish.'

Only the other, the inner door. If you will...'

'Okay, but then I want to go see Petey, all right?'

'As you please.'

'Okay. Well, you have to turn the lever on the right hand side...'

'No, please... make a picture in your mind. Move your own hand. Pretend to stand before it, and to do as you would do yourself. Think a picture.'

No! It won't open again! That was a silly thing to think. But all the food's in there!

'He will not dose it then, child. Only show him how it works, how he would close it if he did. He will not; I promise he will not.'

She showed him. She pretended to be doing it herself, but she felt strange; and when she was done showing him, she took a good look through the Mother and through him to make sure he hadn't really done it. The door was still open though.

'Thank you, my child. You wish to go to the garden now?'

Dee nodded, and felt the Mother go away, and almost ran out, She felt very strange.

Wearily, the Lady commended her son for his intelligent perception, and queried him about his ability to operate the mechanism. He was a little doubtful. She reassured him: such work was not in his training; he had done well. She ordered two of her mason-builder sons to join their winged sibling in the ship and left instructions to be notified when they were ready to begin.

She tried to rest, meanwhile, but there was too much confusior in her mind: too much new information not yet integrated And more to come. Better perhaps to wait a bit before the} tried that door? No! She caught herself with a start, realizec that she had absorbed so much of the Strange daughter's terro] of... of what lay beyond...

What lay beyond? Because the child feared it, there was no cause

for her to fear as well. It was all inside the girl's subjective world, the thing that was not to be known, the thing that made the door unopenable. It was all part and parcel of the child's failure to be aware of her own Mother's life or death, of...

Of the sickness in the dream. She, Daydanda, had brought that sickness into her Household. It was up to her now, to diagnose and cure it--or to cast it out. Such facts were communicable; she had seen it happen, or heard of it at least.

When a mother dies, there is no way to tell what will happen to her sons and daughters. Even among one's own people, strange things may occur. One Household she had heard of, after the sudden death of the Mother, simply continued to go about the ordinary tasks of every day, as though no change were noticed. It could not last, of course, and did not. Each small decision left unmade, each little necessary change in individual performance, created a piling-up confusion that led at last to the inevitable re-sult: when undirected workers no longer cared for the food supplies; when the reckless unprepared winged ones flew off to early deaths in premature efforts to skim the tree-tops; when nurses ceased to care for hungry Bigheads, or for crying babes, the starving soldiers stormed the corral fences, swarmed into the gardens and the House, and feasted first on succulent infants; then on lean neighbours, and at last--to the vast relief of neighbouring Households--on each other.

For a time, Daydanda had thought the Strange child's curious mixture of maternal and sibling attitudes to be the product of some similar situation--that the girl was simply trying not to believe her Mother's death, and somehow to succeed in being daughter and Mother both in her own person. But the dream made that hopeful theory impossible to entertain any longer.

Nor was it possible now to believe that the two children were the

remnants of any usual Household. The girl had been too definite about the lack of any other siblings, now or in the past.

What then? Try to discard all preconceptions. These are Strange creatures from another world. Imagine a biology in which there is no increase in the race--only replacement. The Lady recalled, or thought she did, some parasitic life in the House-hold of her childhood wherein the parent-organism had to die to make new life...

The parent had to die!

Immediately, her mind began to clear. Not sickness then... not foul untouchable confusion, but a natural Strangeness. Daydanda remembered thinking of the fires of the landing as a ritual... and now more fire... the Mother must be burned before the young one can mature? Some biologic quality of the ash, per-haps? Something... if that were so, it would explain, too, the child's persistent self-reminder that she must return to the rocket, even while she yearned to stay here where safety and protection lay.

It was fantastic, but fantastic only by the standards of the familiar world. Mother and consort bring the young pair, male and female, to a new home; and in the fires of landing, the parent-creatures die... must die before the young pair can develop.

She thought a while soberly, trying this fact and that to fit the theory, and each Strange-shaped piece of the puzzle fitted the next with startling ease.

Perhaps if a world became too crowded, after many House-holds had grown up, some life-form of this kind might evolve, and... yes, of course!... that would explain as well the efforts at migration over vast distances across the glaring sky.

The Lady was prepared now to discover what lay behind the door; her sons were waiting on her wishes.

PETEY WAS CEASING a young bug just a little bit bigger than he was round and round a mushroom shape that stood as high as Dee herself. Out of the foot-wide base of the great plant, a lacy network of lavender and light green tendrils sprouted.

Deborah watched them play, the bug-child scampering on all sixes, Petey on all fours; and she didn't worry even when they both got tired and stopped and lay down half-sprawled across each other, to stick on adjoining juicy tendrils.

One of the nurses had already told her that Petey had tried some of the fungus juice when he first came out to the garden. That must have been a couple of hours ago, at least. Dee wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, there in the Mother-bug's room, but she thought it was getting on towards evening now. And she knew that a baby's digestion works much more quickly than a grown-up's; if the stuff was going to hurt him, he'd be acting sick by now.

Probably she shouldn't have let him try it at all, until she tested some first herself.

She still didn't really want to, though; and when the Mother said it was all right for him, she hadn't thought to worry about it.

She couldn't keep on fussing over him every minute, anyhow. Besides, that wasn't good for babies either. You have to let them take chances or they'll never grow up...

where did I hear that?... somebody had said that...

She shook her head, then smiled, watching the two kids, Petey and

the bug, playing again. Petey was chortling and laughing and drooling. She decided it was probably pretty safe to trust what-ever the Mother-bug said.

The Strange Mother and her consort were indeed inside the ship, behind the door the child wouldn't see; and they were most certainly dead.

'It is... they look...' Her son had not liked it, looking at them. 'I think the fire's heat did as the teaching-nurse had told us might happen when we go above the tree-tops, if we fly too long or too high in the dry sun's heat.' He had had trouble giving a clear visimage to her, because he did not like to look at what he saw. But the skin, he said, judging by that of the children was darkened, and the bodies dehydrated. They were strapped in-to twisted couches, as though to prevent their escape. That and the locked door... the taboo door?

Each item fitted into the only theory that made sense. For some biologic reason, or some reason of tradition on an over crowded home-world, it was necessary that the parents die as soon as a nesting place for the young couple was found. And the curious conflict in the Strange daughter's mind--the wish that her Mother was burned, with refusal to accept her Mother's death...

After all, many a winged one about to depart forever from the childhood home--not knowing whether happiness and fertility will come, or sudden death, or lonely lingering starvation... many a one has left with just such a complex of opposite-wishes.

But Daydanda could not tell, from what her son had said, or what he showed, whether the parents were burned, within the child's meaning of the word. The son was not too certain, even that the heat had been responsible for death, directly. The room, when he first opened up the door, was filled with a thick grey cloud which dispersed too

quickly to make sure if his guess was right; but he took it to be smoke ... cold smoke. No one could breathe and live through a dozen heartbeats in that cloud, he said.

Whether the cloud formed first, or the heat did its work beforehand, the two were surely dead when their children came back from the first swift trip into the forest, that much was sure.

Whether they had themselves locked the door, and placed a taboo on opening it, or whether the daughter had obeyed the custom of her people in sealing it off, was also impossible to determine--now.

This much, however, was clear: that the children had had ample opportunity to learn the truth for themselves if they wished, or if it were proper for them to do so.

There had been no difficulty opening the door, not even for her sons who were unused to such mechanisms. The daughter knew how to do it; the daughter would not do it. Finally: the daughter had been purposefully set free to develop without the protection of her Mother.

If Daydanda had been certain that the protection of a foster-Mother would also inhibit the growth of the Strange children, she might have hesitated longer. As it was, she asked her consort what he thought, and he of course replied: It might be, my Lady, my dear, that these Strange people live only as parasites in the Houses of such as ourselves. See how their Wings are a semi-House, not settled in one location, but designed for transport. See how they chose a landing place almost equidistant from ourselves and our neighbours, as if to give the young ones a little better chance to find a Household that would accept them. It would seem to me, my dear, my Lady, that our course is clear.'

Daydanda was pleased with his advice. And it was time for the

Homecalling. The Lady sent out her summons, loud and clear and strong for all to hear: a warning to unfriendly neighbours; a promise and renewal to all her children, young and old.

Dee lay on her mat in the chamber she still shared with Petey, and watched the T-Z, but she did not watch it well. Her mind was too full of other things.

The Mother wanted them to stay and... 'join the Household.' She wasn't sure just what that would mean. Doing chores, prob-ably, and things like that. She didn't mind that part; it would be kind of nice to belong someplace... until the rescue party came.

That was the only thing. She hoped the Mother understood that part, but she wasn't sure. They couldn't just stay here, of course.

But it might be quite a while before anybody came after them, and meanwhile...

she looked at Petey, sleeping with a smile on his small fat face, and on his round fat bottom a new kind of diaper, made by the bug-people the same way they made the sleeping mats, only smaller and thinner. That was so she wouldn't have to bother with cleaning the cloth ones any more.

Petey was certainly happier here, but she'd have to watch out, she thought. If the rescue party took too long to come, he'd be more like a bug than a human!

She went back to watching the T-Z set. She had to learn a lot of things, in case she was the only person who could teach Petey anything. Tomorrow, the very next day, she was going to start really teaching him to talk. He could say words all right, if he tried. And with the bugs just in and out of your head, the way they were, he'd never

try if she didn't get him started right away.

She turned back the reel, and started the film from the beginning again, because she'd missed so much.

The Lady of the House was pleased.