## The Deep

Isaac Asimov

### One

In the end, any particular planet must die. It may be a quick death as its sun explodes. It may be a slow death, as its sun sinks into decay and its oceans lock in ice. In the latter case, at least, intelligent life has a chance of survival.

The direction of survival may be outward into space, to a planet closer to the cooling sun or to a planet of another sun altogether. This particular avenue is closed if the planet is unfortunate enough to be the only significant body rotating about its primary and if, at the time, no other star is within half a thousand light-years.

The direction of survival may be inward, into the crust of the planet. That is always available. A new home can be built underground and the heat of the planet’s core can be tapped for energy. Thousands of years may be necessary for the task, but a dying sun cools slowly.

But planetary warmth dies, too, with time. Burrows must be dug deeper and deeper until the planet is dead through and through.

The time was coming.

On the surface of the planet, wisps of neon blew listlessly, barely able to stir the pools of oxygen that collected in the lowlands. Occasionally, during the long day, the crusted sun would flare briefly into a dull red glow and the oxygen pools would bubble a little.

During the long night, a blue-white oxygen frost formed over the pools and on the bare rock, a neon dew formed.

Eight hundred miles below the surface, a last bubble of warmth and life existed.

### Two

Wenda’s relationship to Roi was as close as one could imagine, closer by far than it was decent for her to know.

She had been allowed to enter the ovarium only once in her life and it had been made quite clear to her that it *was* to be only that once.

The Raceologist had said, “You don’t quite meet the standards, Wenda, but you are fertile and we’ll try you once. It may work out.”

She wanted it to work out. She wanted it desperately. Quite early in her life she had known that she was deficient in intelligence, that she would never be more than a Manual. It embarrassed her that she should fail the Race and she longed for a single chance to help create another being. It became an obsession.

She secreted her egg in an angle of the structure and then returned to watch. The “randoming” process that moved the eggs gently about during mechanical insemination (to insure even gene distribution) did not, by some good fortune, do more than make her own wedged-in egg wobble a bit

Unobtrusively she maintained her watch during the period of maturation, observed the little one who emerged from the particular egg that was hers, noted his physical markings, watched him grow.

He was a healthy youngster and the Raceologist approved of him.

She had said once, very casually, “Look at that one, the one sitting there. Is he sick?”

“Which one?” The Raceologist was startled. Visibly sick infants at this stage would be a strong reflection upon his own competence. “You mean Roi? Nonsense. I wish all our young were like that one.” I

At first, she was only pleased with herself, then frightened, finally horrified. She found herself haunting the youngster, taking an interest in his schooling, watching him at play. She was happy when he was near, dull and unhappy otherwise. She had never heard of such a thing, and she was ashamed.

She should have visited the Mentalist, but she knew better. She was not so dull as not to know that this was not a mild aberration to be cured at the twitch of a brain cell. It was a truly psychotic manifestation. She was certain of that. They would confine her if they found out. They would euthanase her, perhaps, as a useless drain on the strictly limited energy available to the race. They might even euthanase the offspring of her egg if they found out who it was.

She fought the abnormality through the years and, to a measure, succeeded. Then she first heard the news that Rio had been chosen for the long trip and was filled with aching misery.

She followed him to one of the empty corridors of the cavern, some miles from the city center. *The* city! There was only one.

This particular cavern had been closed down within Wenda’s own memory. The Elders had paced its length, considered its population and the energy necessary to keep it powered, then decided to darken it. The population, not many to be sure, had been moved closer toward the center and the quota for the next session at the ovarium had been cut.

Wenda found Rio’s conversational level of thinking shallow, as though most of his mind had drawn inward contemplatively.

Are you afraid? she thought at him.

Because I come out here to think? He hesitated a little, then said, “Yes, I am. It’s the Race’s last chance. If I fail—”

Are you afraid for yourself?

He looked at her in astonishment and Wenda’s thought stream fluttered with shame at her indecency.

She said, “I wish I were going instead.”

Roi said, “Do you think you can do a better job?”

“Oh, no. But if *I* were to fail and-and never come back, it would be a smaller loss to the Race.”

“The loss is all the same,” he said stolidly, “whether it’s you or I. The loss is Racial existence.”

Racial existence at the moment was in the background of Wenda’s mind, if anywhere. She sighed. “The trip is such a long one.”

“How long?” he asked with a smile. “Do you know?”

She hesitated. She dared not appear stupid to him.

She said primly, “The common talk is that it is to the First Level.”

When Wenda had been little and the heated corridors had extended further out of the city, she had wandered out, exploring as youngsters will. One day, a long distance out, where the chill in the air nipped at her, she came to a hall that slanted upward but was blocked almost instantly by a tremendous plug, wedged tightly from top to bottom and side to side.

On the other side and upward, she had learned a long time later, lay the Seventy-ninth Level; above that the Seventy-eighth and so on.

“We’re going past the First Level, Wenda.”

“But there’s nothing past the First Level.”

“You’re right. Nothing. All the solid matter of the planet comes to an end.”

“But how can there be anything that’s nothing? You mean air?”

“No, I mean *nothing*. Vacuum. You know what vacuum is, don’t you?”

“Yes. But vacuums have to be pumped and kept airtight.”

“That’s good for Maintenance. Still, past the First Level is just an indefinite amount of vacuum stretching everywhere.”

Wenda thought awhile. She said “Has anyone ever been there?”

“Of course not. But we have the records.”

“Maybe the records are wrong.”

“They can’t be. Do you know how much space I’m going to cross?”

Wenda’s thought stream indicated an overwhelming negative.

Roi said, “You know the speed of light, I suppose.”

“Of course,” she replied readily. It was a universal constant infants knew it. “One thousand nine hundred and fifty-four times the length of the cavern and back in one second.”

“Right,” said Roi, “but if light were to travel along the distance I’m to cross it would take it ten years.”

Wenda said, “You’re making fun of me. You’re trying to frighten me.”

“Why should it frighten you?” He rose. “But I’ve been moping here long enough—”

For a moment, one of his six grasping limbs rested lightly in one of hers, with an objective, impassive friendship. An irrational impulse urged Wenda to seize it tightly, prevent him from leaving.

She panicked for a moment in fear that he might probe her mind past the conversational level, that he might sicken and never face her again, that he might even report her for treatment Then she relaxed. Roi was normal, not sick like herself. He would never dream of penetrating a friend’s mind any deeper than the conversational level, whatever the provocation.

He was very handsome in her eyes as he walked away. His grasping limbs were straight and strong, his prehensile, manipulative vibrissae were numerous and delicate and his optic patches were more beautifully opalescent than any she had ever seen.

### Three

Laura settled down in her seat. How soft and comfortable they made them. How pleasing and unfrightening airplanes were on the inside, how different from the hard, silvery, inhuman luster of the outside.

The bassinet was on the seat beside her. She peeped in past the blanket and the tiny, ruffled cap. Walter was sleeping. His face was the blank, round softness of infancy and his eyelids were two fringed half-moons pulled down over his eyes.

A tuft of light brown hair straggled across his forehead, and with infinite delicacy, Laura drew it back beneath his cap.

It would soon be Walter’s feeding time and she hoped he was still too young to be upset by the strangeness of his surroundings. The stewardess was being very kind. She even kept his bottles in a little refrigerator. Imagine, a refrigerator on board an airplane.

The people in the seat across the aisle had been watching her in that peculiar way that meant they would love to talk to her if only they could think of an excuse. The moment came when she lifted Walter out of his bassinet and placed him, a little lump of pink flesh encased in a white cocoon of cotton, upon her lap.

A baby is always legitimate as an opening for conversation between strangers.

The lady across the way said (her words were predictable), “What a *lovely* child. How old is he, my dear?”

Laura said, through the pins in her mouth (she had spread a blanket across her knees and was changing Walter), “He’ll be four months old next week.”

Walter’s eyes were open and he simpered across at the woman, opening his mouth in a wet, gummy grin. (He always enjoyed being changed)

“Look at him smile, George,” said the lady.

Her husband smiled back and twiddled fat fingers.

“Goo,” he said.

Walter laughed in a high-pitched, hiccupy way.

“What’s his name, dear?” asked the woman.

“He’s Walter Michael,” Laura said, then added, “After his father.”

The floodgates were quite down. Laura learned that the couple were George and Eleanor Ellis, that they were on vacation, that they had three children, two girls and one boy, all grown-up. Both girls had married and one had two children of her own.

Laura listened with a pleased expression on her thin face. Walter (senior, that is) had always said that it was because she was such a good listener that he had first grown interested in her.

Walter was getting restless. Laura freed his arms in order to let some of his feelings evaporate in muscular effort.

“Would you warm the bottle, please?” she asked the stewardess.

Under strict but friendly questioning, Laura explained the number of feedings Walter was currently enjoying, the exact nature of his formula, and whether he suffered from diaper rash.

“I hope his little stomach isn’t upset today,” she worried. “I mean the plane motion, you know.”

“Oh, Lord,” said Mrs. Ellis, “he’s too young to be bothered by that. Besides, these large planes are wonderful. Unless I look out the window, I wouldn’t believe we were in the air.

“Don’t you feel that way, George?”

But Mr. Ellis, a blunt, straightforward man, said, “I’m surprised you take a baby that age on a plane.”

Mrs. Ellis turned to frown at him.

Laura held Walter over her shoulder and patted his back gently. The beginnings of a soft wail died down as his little fingers found themselves in his mother’s smooth, blond hair and began grubbing into the loose bun that lay at the back of her neck.

She said, “I’m taking him to his father. Walter’s never seen his son, yet.”

Mr. Ellis looked perplexed and began a comment, but Mrs. Ellis put in quickly, “Your husband is in the service, I suppose?”

“Yes, he is.”

(Mr. Ellis opened Ms mouth in a soundless “Oh” and subsided.)

Laura went on, “He’s stationed just outside of Davao and he’s going to be meeting me at Nichols Field.”

Before the stewardess returned with the bottle, they had discovered that her husband was a master sergeant with the Quartermaster Corps, that he had been in the Army for four years, that they had been married for two, that he was about to be discharged, and that they would spend a long honeymoon there before returning to San Francisco.

Then she had the bottle. She cradled Walter in the crook of her left arm and put the bottle to his face. It slid right past his lips and his gums seized upon the nipple. Little bubbles began to work upward through the milk, while his hands batted ineffectively at the warm glass and his blue eyes stared fixedly at her.

Laura squeezed little Walter ever so slightly and thought how, with all the petty difficulties and annoyances that were involved, it yet remained such a wonderful thing to have a little baby all one’s own.

### Four

Theory, thought Gan, always theory. The folk of the surface, a million or more years ago, could *see* the Universe, could sense it directly. Now, with eight hundred miles of rock above their heads, the Race could only make deductions from the trembling needles of their instruments.

It was only theory that brain cells, in addition to their ordinary electric potentials, radiated another sort of energy altogether. Energy that was not electromagnetic and hence not condemned to the creeping pace of light. Energy that was associated only with the highest functions of the brain and hence characteristic only of intelligent, reasoning creatures.

It was only a jogging needle that detected such an energy field leaking into their cavern, and other needles that pin-pointed the origin of the field in such and such a direction ten light-years distant. At least one star must have moved quite close in the time since the surface folk had placed the nearest at five hundred light-years. Or was theory wrong?

“Are you afraid? Gan burst into the conversational level of thought without warning and impinged sharply on the humming surface of Roi’s mind.

Roi said, “It’s a great responsibility.”

Gan thought, “*Others* speak of responsibility.” For generations, Head-Tech after Head-Tech had been working on the Resonizer and the Receiving Station and it was in his time that the final step had to be taken. What did others know of responsibility.

He said, “It is. We talk about Racial extinction glibly enough, but we always assume it will come someday but not now, not in our time. But it will, do you understand? It will. What we are to do today will consume two thirds of our total energy supply. There will not be enough left to try again. There will not be enough for this generation to live out its life. But that will not matter if you follow orders. We have thought of everything. We have spent generations thinking of everything.”

“I will do what I am told,” said Roi.

“Your thought field will be meshed against those coming from space. All thought fields are characteristic of the individual, and ordinarily the probability of any duplication is very low. But the fields from space number billions by our best estimate. Your field is very likely to be like one of theirs, and in that case, a resonance will be set up as long as our Resonizer is in operation. Do you know the principles involved?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you know that during resonance, your mind will be on Planet X in the brain of the creature with a thought field identical to yours. That is not the energy-consuming process. In resonance with your mind, we will also place the mass of the Receiving Station. The method of transferring mass in that manner was the last phase of the problem to be solved, and it will take all the energy the Race would ordinarily use in a hundred years.”

Gan picked up the black cube that was the Receiving Station and looked at it somberly. Three generations before it had been thought impossible to manufacture one with all the required properties in a space less than twenty cubic yards. They had it now; it was the size of his fist.

Gan said, “The thought field of intelligent brain cells can only follow certain well-defined patterns. All living creatures, on whatever planet they develop, must possess a protein base and an oxygen-water chemistry. If their world is livable for them, it is livable for us.”

Theory, thought Gan on a deeper level, always theory. He went on, “This does not mean that the body you find yourself in, its mind and its emotions, may not be completely alien. So we have arranged for three methods of activating the Receiving Station. If you are strong-limbed, you need only exert five hundred pounds of pressure on any face of the cube. If you are delicate-limbed, you need only press a knob, which you can reach through this single opening in the cube. If you are no-limbed, if your host body is paralyzed or in any other way helpless, you can activate the Station by mental energy alone. Once the Station is activated, we will have two points of reference, not one, and the Race can be transferred to Planet X by ordinary teleportation.”

“That,” said Rois “will mean we will use electromagnet energy.”

“And so?”

“It will take us ten years to transfer.”

“We will not be aware of duration.”

“I realize that, sir, but it will mean the Station will remain on Planet X for ten years. What if it is destroyed in the meantime?”

“We have thought of that, too. We have thought of everything. Once the Station is activated, it will generate a para-mass field. It will move in the direction of gravitational attraction, sliding through ordinary matter, until such time as a continuous medium of relatively high density exerts sufficient friction to stop it. It will take twenty feet of rock to do that. Anything of lower density won’t affect it. It will remain twenty feet underground for ten years, at which time a counterfield will bring it to the surface. Then one by one, the Race will appear.”

“In that case, why not make the activation of the Station automatic? It has so many automatic attributes already—”

“You haven’t thought it through, Roi. We have. Not all spots on the surface of Planet X may be suitable. If the inhabitants are powerful and advanced, you may have to find an unobtrusive place for the Station. It won’t do for us to appear in a city square. And you will have to be certain that the immediate environment is not dangerous in other ways.”

“What other ways, sir?”

“I don’t know. The ancient records of the surface record many things we no longer understand. They don’t explain because they took those items for granted, but we have been away from the surface for almost a hundred thousand generations and we are puzzled. Our Techs aren’t even in agreement on the physical nature of stars, and that is something the records mention and discuss frequently. But what are “storms.”

“earthquakes,” “volcanoes.”

“tornadoes.”

“sleet,” “landslides.”

“floods.”

“lightning,” and so on? These are all terms which refer to surface phenomena that are dangerous, but we don’t know what they are. We don’t know how to guard against them. Through your host’s mind, you may be able to learn what is needful and take appropriate action.”

“How much time will I have, sir?”

“The Resonizer cannot be kept in continuous operation for longer than twelve hours. I would prefer that you complete your job in two. You will return here automatically as soon as the Station is activated. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready,” said Roi.

Gan led the way to the clouded glass cabinet. Roi took his seat, arranged his limbs in the appropriate depressions. His vibrissae dipped in mercury for good contact.

Roi said, “What if I find myself in a body on the point of death?”

Gan said as he adjusted the controls, “The thought field is distorted when a person is near death. No normal thought field such as yours would be in resonance.” Roi said, “And if it is on the point of accidental death?” Gan said, “We have thought of that, too. We can’t guard against it, but the chances of death following so quickly that you have no time to activate the Station mentally are estimated as less than one in twenty trillion, unless the mysterious surface dangers are more deadly than we expect… You have one minute.”

For some strange reason, Roi’s last thought before translation was of Wenda,

### Five

Laura awoke with a sudden start. What happened? She felt as though she had been jabbed with a pin.

The afternoon sun was shining in her face and its dazzle made her blink. She lowered the shade and simultaneously bent to look at Walter.

She was a little surprised to find his eyes open. This wasn’t one of his waking periods. She looked at her wrist watch. No, it wasn’t. And it was a good hour before feeding time, too. She followed the demand-feeding system or the “if-you-want-it-holler-and-you’ll-get-it” routine, but ordinarily Walter followed the clock quite conscientiously.

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Hungry, duckie?”

Walter did not respond at all and Laura was disappointed. She would have liked to have him smile. Actually, she wanted him to laugh and throw his pudgy arms about her neck and nuzzle her and say, “Mommie,” but she knew he couldn’t do any of that. But he *could* smile.

She put a light finger to his chin and tapped it a bit. “Goo-goo-goo-goo.” He always smiled when you did that

But he only blinked at her.

She said, “I hope he isn’t sick.” She looked at Mrs. Ellis in distress.

Mrs. Ells put down a magazine. “Is anything wrong, my dear?”

“I don’t know. Walter just lies there.”

“Poor little thing. He’s tired, probably.”

“Shouldn’t he be sleeping, then?”

“He’s in strange surroundings. He’s probably wondering what it’s all about.”

She rose, stepped across the aisle, and leaned across Laura to bring her own face close to Walter’s. “You’re wondering what’s going on, you tiny little snookums. Yes, you are. You’re saying, “Where’s my nice little crib and all my nice little funnies on the wall paper?'”

Then she made little squeaking sounds at him.

Walter turned his eyes away from his mother and watched Mrs. Ellis somberly.

Mrs. Ellis straightened suddenly and looked pained. She put a hand to her head for a moment and murmured, “Goodness! The queerest pain.”

“Do you think he’s hungry?” asked Laura.

“Lord,” said Mrs. Ellis, the trouble in her face fading, “they let you know when they’re hungry soon enough. There’s nothing wrong with him. I’ve had three children, my dear. I know.”

“I think I’ll ask the stewardess to warm up another bottle.”

“Well, if it will make you feel better…”

The stewardess brought the bottle and Laura lifted Walter out of his bassinette. She said, “You have your bottle and then I’ll change you and then—”

She adjusted his head in the crook of her elbow, leaned over to peck him quickly on the cheek, then cradled him close to her body as she brought the bottle to his lips-

Walter screamed!

His mouth yawned open, his arms pushed before him with his fingers spread wide, his whole body as stiff and hard as though in tetany, and he screamed. It rang through the whole compartment.

Laura screamed too. She dropped the bottle and it smashed whitely.

Mrs. Ellis jumped up. Half a dozen others did. Mr. Ellis snapped out of a light doze.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mrs. Ellis blankly.

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” Laura was shaking Walter frantically, putting him over her shoulder, patting his back.

“Baby, baby, don’t cry. Baby, what’s the matter? Baby—”

The stewardess was dashing down the aisle. Her foot came within an inch of the cube that sat beneath Laura’s seat.

Walter was threshing about furiously now, yelling with calliope intensity.

### Six

Roi’s mind flooded with shock. One moment he had been strapped in his chair in contact with the clear mind of Gan; the next (there was no consciousness of separation in time) he was immersed in a medley of strange, barbaric, and broken thought.

He closed his mind completely. It had been open wide to increase the effectiveness of resonance, and the first touch of the alien had been-

Not painful-no. Dizzying, nauseating? No, not that, either.

There was no word.

He gathered resilience in the quiet nothingness of mind closure and considered his position. He felt the small touch of the Receiving Station, with which he was in mental liaison. That *had* come with him. Good!

He ignored his host for the moment. He might need him for drastic operations later, so it would be wise to raise no suspicions for the moment.

He explored. He entered a mind at random and took stock first of the sense impressions that permeated it. The creature was sensitive to parts of the electromagnetic spectrum and to vibrations of the air, and, of course, to bodily contact. It possessed localized chemical senses-

That was about all. He looked again in astonishment. Not only was there no direct mass sense, no electro-potential sense, none of the really refined interpreters of the Universe, but there was no mental contact whatever.

The creature’s mind was completely isolated.

Then how did they communicate? He looked further. They had a complicated code of controlled air vibrations.

Were they intelligent? Had he chosen a maimed mind? No, they were all like that.

He filtered the group of surrounding minds through his mental tendrils, searching for a Tech, or whatever passed for such among these crippled semi-intelligences. He found a mind which thought of itself as a controller of vehicles. A piece of information flooded Roi. He was on an air-borne vehicle.

Then even without mental contact, they could build a rudimentary mechanical civilization. Or were they animals tools of real intelligences elsewhere on the planet? No… Their minds said no.

He plumbed the Tech. What about the immediate environment? Were the bugbears of the ancients to be feared? It was a matter of interpretation. Dangers in the environment existed. Movements of air. Changes of temperature. Water falling in the air, either as liquid or solid. Electrical discharges. There were code vibrations for each phenomenon but that meant nothing. The connection of any of these with the names given to phenomena by the ancestral surface folk was a matter of conjecture.

No matter. Was there danger now? Was there danger here? Was there any cause for fear or uneasiness?

No! The Tech’s mind said no.

That was enough. He returned to his host mind and rested a moment, then cautiously expanded…

*Nothing!*

His host mind was blank. At most, there was a vague sense of warmth, and a dull flicker of undirected response to basic stimuli.

Was his host dying after al? Aphasic? Decerebrate?

He moved quickly to the mind nearest, dredging it for information about his host and finding it

His host was an infant of the species.

An infant? A *normal* infant? And so undeveloped?

He allowed his mind to sink into and coalesce for a moment with what existed in his host. He searched for the motor areas of the brain and found them with difficulty. A cautious stimulus was followed by an erratic motion of his host’s extremities. He attempted finer control and failed.

He felt anger. Had they thought of everything after all? Had they thought of intelligences without mental contact? Had they thought of young creatures as completely undeveloped as though they were still in the egg?

It meant, of course, that he could not, in the person of his host, activate the Receiving Station. The muscles and mind were far too weak, far too uncontrolled for any of the three methods outlined by Gan.

He thought intensely. He could scarcely expect to influence much mass through the imperfect focusing of his host’s material brain cells, but what about an indirect influence through an adult’s brain? Direct physical influence would be minute; it would amount to the breakdown of the appropriate molecules of adenosine triphosphate and acetylocholine. Thereafter the creature would act on its own.

He hesitated to try this, afraid of failure, then cursed himself for a coward. He entered the closest mind once more. It was a female of the species and it was in the state of temporary inhibition he had noticed in others. It didn’t surprise him. Minds as rudimentary as these would need periodic respites.

He considered the mind before him now, fingering mentally the areas that might respond to stimulation. He chose one, stabbed at it, and the conscious areas flooded with life almost simultaneously. Sense impressions poured in and the level of thought rose steeply.

Good!

But not good enough. That was a mere prod, a pinch. It was no order for specific action.

He stirred uncomfortably as emotion cascaded over him. It came from the mind he had just stimulated and was directed, of course, at his host and not at him. Nevertheless, its primitive crudities annoyed him and he closed his mind against the unpleasant warmth of her uncovered feelings.

A second mind centered about his host, and had he been material or had he controlled a satisfactory host, he would have struck out in vexation.

Great caverns, weren’t they going to allow him to concentrate on his serious business?

He thrust sharply at the second mind, activating centers of discomfort, and it moved away.

He was pleased. That had been more than a simple, undefined stimulation, and it had worked nicely. He had cleared the mental atmosphere.

He returned to the Tech who controlled the vehicle. He would know the details concerning the surface over which they were passing.

Water? He sorted the data quickly.

Water! And more water!

By the everlasting Levels, the word “ocean” made sense. The old, traditional word “ocean.” Who would dream that so much water could exist.

But then, if this was “ocean,” then the traditional word “island” had an obvious significance. He thrust his whole mind into the quest for geographical information. The “ocean” was speckled with dots of land but he needed exact-

He was interrupted by a short stab of surprise as his host moved through space and was held against the neighboring female’s body.

Roi’s mind, engaged as it was, lay open and unguarded. In full intensity, the female’s emotions piled in upon him.

Roi winced. In an attempt to remove the distracting animal passions, he clamped down upon the host’s brain cells, through which the rawness was funneling.

He did that too quickly, too energetically. His host’s mind flooded with a diffuse pain, and instantly almost every mind he could reach reacted at the air vibrations that resulted.

In vexation, he tried to blanket the pain and succeeded only in stimulating it further.

Through the clinging mental mists of his host’s pain, he riffled the Tech’s minds, striving to prevent contact from slipping out of focus.

His mind went icy. The best chance was almost now! He had perhaps twenty minutes. There would be other chances afterward, but not as good. Yet he dared not attempt to direct the actions of another while his host’s mind was in such complete disorganization.

He retired, withdrew into mind closure, maintaining only the most tenuous connection with his host’s spinal cells, and waited.

Minutes passed, and little by little he returned to fuller liaison.

He had five minutes left. He chose a subject.

### Seven

The stewardess said, “I think he’s beginning to feel a little better, poor little thing.”

“He never acted like this before,” insisted Laura tearfully. “Never.”

“He just had a little colic, I guess,” said the stewardess.

“Maybe he’s bundled up too much,” suggested Mrs. Ellis.

“Maybe,” said the stewardess. “It’s quite warm.”

She unwrapped the blanket and lifted the nightgown to expose a heaving abdomen, pink and bulbous. Walter was still whimpering.

The stewardess said, “Shall I change him for you? He’s quite wet.”

“Would you please?”

Most of the nearer passengers had returned to their seats. The more distant ceased craning their necks.

Mr. Ellis remained in the aisle with his wife. He said, “Say, look.”

Laura and the stewardess were too busy to pay him attention and Mrs. Ellis ignored him out of sheer custom.

Mr. Ellis was used to that. His remark was purely rhetorical, anyway. He bent down and tugged at die box beneath the seat

Mrs. Ellis looked down impatiently. She said, “Goodness, George, don’t be dragging at other people’s luggage like that. Sit down. You’re in the way.”

Mr. Ellis straightened in confusion.

Laura, with eyes still red and weepy, said, “It isn’t mine. I didn’t even know it was under the seat.”

The stewardess, looking up from the whining baby, said, “What is it?”

Mr. Ellis shrugged. “It’s a box.”

His wife said, “Well, what do you want with it, for heaven’s sake?”

Mr. Ellis groped for a reason. What *did* he want with it? He mumbled, “I was just curious.”

The stewardess said, “There! The little boy is all nice and dry, and I’ll bet in two minutes he’ll just be as happy as anything. Hmm? Won’t you, little funny-face?”

But little funny-face was still sobbing. He turned his head away sharply as a bottle was once more produced.

The stewardess said, “Let me warm it a bit”

She took it and went back down the aisle.

Mr. Ellis came to a decision. Firmly he lifted the box and balanced it on the arm of his seat. He ignored his wife’s frown.

He said, “I’m not doing it any harm. I’m just looking. What’s it made of, anyway?”

He rapped it with his knuckles. None of the other passengers seemed interested. They paid no attention to either Mr. Ellis or the box. It was as though something had switched off that particular line of interest among them. Even Mrs. Ellis, in conversation witih Laura, kept her back to him.

Mr. Ellis tipped the box up and found the opening. He *knew* it had to have an opening. It was large enough for him to insert a finger, though there was no reason, of course, why he should want to put a finger into a strange box.

Carefully he reached in. There was a black knob, which he longed to touch. He pressed it.

The box shuddered and was suddenly out of his hands and passed through the arm of the chair.

He caught a glimpse of it moving through the floor, and then there was unbroken flooring and nothing more. Slowly he spread out his hands and stared at his palms. Then, dropping to his knees, he felt the floor.

The stewardess, returning with the bottle, said politely, “Have you lost something, sir?”

Mrs. Ellis, looking down, said, “George!”

Mr. Ellis heaved himself upward. He was flushed and flustered. He said, “The box-It slipped out and went down—”

The stewardess said, “What box, sir?”

Laura said, “May I have the bottle, miss? He’s stopped crying.”

“Certainly. Here it is.”

Walter opened his mouth eagerly, accepting the nipple. Air bubbles moved upward through the milk and there were little swallowing sounds.

Laura looked up radiantly. “He seems fine now. Thank you, Stewardess. Thank you, Mrs. Ellis. For a while there, it almost seemed as though he weren’t my little boy.”

“He’ll be all right,” said Mrs. Ellis. “Maybe it was just a bit of airsickness. Sit down, George.”

The stewardess said, “Just call me if you need me.”

“Thank you,” said Laura.

Mr. Ells said, “The box—” and stopped.

What box? He didn’t remember any box. But one mind aboard plane could follow the black cube as it dropped in a parabola unimpeded by wind or air resistance, passing through the molecules of gas that lay in its way. Below it, the atoll was a tiny bull’s eye in a huge target.

Once, during a time of war, it had boasted an air strip and barracks. The barracks had collapsed, the air strip was a vanishing ragged line, and the atoll was empty.

The cube struck the feathery foliage of a palm and not a frond was disturbed. It passed through the trunk and down to the coral. It sank into the planet itself without the smallest fog of dust kicked up to tell of its entrance.

Twenty feet below the surface of the soil, the cube passed into statis and remained motionless, mingled intimately with the atoms of the rock, yet remaining distinct.

That was all. It was night, then day. It rained, the wind blew, and the Pacific waves broke whitely on the white coral. Nothing had happened.

Nothing would happen-for ten years.

### Eight

“We have broadcast the news,” said Gan, “that you have succeeded. I think you ought to rest now.”

Roi said, “Rest? Now? When I’m back with complete minds? Thank you, but no. The enjoyment is too keen.”

“Did it bother you so much? Intelligence without mental contact?”

“Yes,” said Roi shortly. Gan tactfully refrained from attempting to follow the line of retreating thought.

Instead, he said, “And the surface?”

Roi said, “Entirely horrible. What the ancients called 'Sun' is an unbearable patch of brilliance overhead. It is apparently a source of light and varies periodically;’day’ and 'night,' in other words. There is also unpredictable variation.”

” ‘Clouds’ perhaps,” said Gan.

“Why 'clouds'?”

“You know the traditional phrase: 'Clouds hid the Sun.'”

“You think so? Yes, it could be.”

“Well, go on.”

“Let’s see. 'Ocean' and 'island' I’ve explained. 'Storm' involves wetness in the air, falling in drops. ‘Wind' is a movement of air on a huge scale. 'Thunder' is either a spontaneous, static discharge in the air or a great spontaneous noise. 'Sleet’ is falling ice.”

Gan said, “That’s a curious one. Where would ice fall from? How? Why?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. It’s all very variable. It will storm at one time and not at another. There are apparently regions on the surface where it is always cold, others where it is always hot, still others where it is both at different times.”

“Astonishing. How much of this do you suppose is misinterpretation of alien minds?”

“None. I’m sure of that. It was all quite plain. I had sufficient time to plumb their queer minds. Too much time.”

Again his thoughts drifted back into privacy.

Gan said, “This is well. I’ve been afraid all along of our tendency to romanticize the so-called Golden Age of our surface ancestors. I felt that there would be a strong impulse among our group in favor of a new surface life.”

“No,” said Roi vehemently.

“Obviously no. I doubt if the hardiest among us would consider even a day of life in an environment such as you describe, with its storms, days, nights, its indecent and unpredictable variations in environment.” Gan’s thoughts were contented ones. “Tomorrow we begin the process of transfer. Once on the island-An uninhabited one, you say.”

“Entirely uninhabited. It was the only one of that type the vessel passed over. The Tech’s information was detailed.”

“Good. We will begin operations. It will take generations, Roi, but in the end, we will be in the Deep of a new, warm world, in pleasant caverns where the controlled environment will be conducive to the growth of every culture and refinement.”

“And,” added Roi, “no contact whatever with the surface creatures.”

Gan said, “Why that? Primitive though they are, they could be of help to us once we establish our base. A race that can build aircraft must have some abilities.”

“It isn’t that. They’re a belligerent lot, sir. They would attack with animal ferocity at all occasions and—”

Gan interrupted. “I am disturbed at the psychopenumbra that surrounds your references to the aliens. There’s something you are concealing.”

Roi said, “I thought at first we could make use of them. If they wouldn’t allow us to be friends, at least, we could control them. I made one of them close contact inside the cube and that was difficult. Very difficult. Their minds are basically different.”

“In what way?”

“If I could describe it, the difference wouldn’t be basic. But I can give you an example. I was in the mind of an infant. They don’t have maturation chambers. The infants are in the charge of individuals. The creature who was in charge of my host—”

“Yes.”

“She (it was a female) felt a special tie to the young one. There was a sense of ownership, of a relationship that excluded the remainder of their society. I seemed to detect, dimly something of the emotion that binds a man to an associate or friend, but it was far more intense and unrestrained.”

“Well,” said Gan, “without mental contact, they probably have no real conception of society and subrelationships may build up. Or was this one pathological?”

“No, no. It’s universal. The female in charge was the infant’s mother.”

“Impossible. Its own mother?”

“Of necessity. The infant had passed the first part of its existence inside its mother. Physically inside. The creature’s eggs remain within the body. They are inseminated within the body. They grow within the body and emerge alive.”

“Great caverns,” Gan said weakly. Distaste was strong within him. “Each creature would know the identity of its own child. Each child would have a particular father—”

“And he would be known, too. My host was being taken five thousand miles, as nearly as I could judge the distance, to be seen by its father.”

“Unbelievable!”

“Do you need more to see that there can never be any meeting of minds? The difference is so fundamental, so innate.”

The yellowness of regret tinged and roughened Gan’s thought train. He said, “It would be too bad. I had thought—”

“What, sir?”

“I had thought that for the first time there would be two intelligences helping one another. I had thought that together we might progress more quickly than either could alone. Even if they were primitive technologically, as they are, technology isn’t everything. I had thought we might still be able to learn of them.”

“Learn what?” asked Roi brutally. “To know our parents and make friends of our children?”

Gan said, “No. No, you’re quite right The barrier between us must remain forever complete. They will have the surface and we the Deep, and so it will be.”

Outside the laboratories Roi met Wenda.

Her thoughts were concentrated pleasure. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Roi’s thoughts were pleasurable too. It was very restful to make clean mental contact with a friend.