

WET PAINT

IN ALL probability you've never heard of Kinsolving—most people, and that includes the majority of spacemen, have not. It's one of the Rim Worlds, which means that it's well off the beaten track even for the Commission's Epsilon Class tramps. It's an Earth-type planet, but not sufficiently similar to Earth to make it attractive to colonists. The gravity is a little too heavy and the air is a little too thin and a little too rich in carbon dioxide. Its sun is hot enough, but not very bright, and its light is so blue as to convey the impression of chilliness. Then, of course, there is that aching emptiness of the night sky for six months of the year without even a moon to take the curse off it.

Kinsolving, then, is just a name in the Survey Commission's files—just a name and a few lines of relevant data. Discovered and charted by Commodore Pearson of the Survey Ship *Magellan*, named after his second-in-command. Survey team left on planet, taken off after the usual two years of exploration and research. Colony established, complete with machinery and necessary flora and fauna. After ten years colony removed, at its own request, and transferred to Clarency, q.v.

"What do you know about Kinsolving?" Warburton asked me.

Warburton is my immediate superior and is the Director of the Survey Commission's little publicized Department of Investigation. Boiled down to essentials his job is to read reports—reports written by captains of Survey ships, by masters of the Interstellar Transport Commission's vessels and, now and again, by the masters of ships owned by those few alien races that meet us on equal terms on a technological level. Sometimes he finds something of interest in these reports—and when he does he sends an investigatory team which, in its turn, makes out its own report. What happens next is up to the high brass.

"What do you know about Kinsolving?" he asked again. "Rear Admiral, Retired," I said. "Useful but undistinguished career. That's all."

"Not the man," snapped Warburton. "The planet. He had a world named after him. Look it up, Tarrant."

I looked it up. I dialed the Central Library, said what I wanted, and in a matter of seconds Warburton and I were watching the pitifully few paragraphs of printed matter glowing on the screen.

"A typical Rim World," I said. "Rather worse than most, perhaps."

"I have a report here," said Warburton, "from one Captain Spence, Master of *Epsilon Eridani*. She was on charter for a while to Thule Lines. She was en route from Elsinore to Ultimo when she had trouble with her Drive—and, as you know, the Mannschenn Drive controls can be recalibrated only on a planetary surface. The nearest planet was Kinsolving and Spence landed there, at the old spaceport. Anyhow, you can read." He handed me the sheaf of papers. "See what you make of it."

I sat down and read the report. Reports made by shipmasters, I have found, fall invariably into either one or the other of two categories. They are either tersely official or too, too literary. It was soon obvious to me that Captain Spence fancied himself as a latter-day Conrad.

"The derelict spaceport buildings looked, in that livid light, like tombstones in a deserted graveyard," he wrote. "A little to the south lay the town, obviously dead. It was hard to believe that it had ever been inhabited. The only visible movement was that of the smoke and steam drifting in ragged streamers up past our Control Room ports—the apron, as we had noticed from the air prior to our landing, was overgrown with some tough, indigenous creeping plant, the tendrils of which had been incinerated by the backblast of our Interplanetary Drive.

"I looked at Makins, my Chief Officer. Something of my feelings, must have shown in my expression. He looked at me and said, 'Fine place for a funeral, Captain.' "

So it went on. I skipped a few pages of rich, beautiful atmospheric writing. Then:

"Laurencon, the Interstellar Drive Engineer, told me that the work of recalibration would take at least six days, local time. On hearing this Mr. Makins asked my permission to break out the helicopter and, accompanied by a party of junior officers and cadets, to carry out an exploration of his own. He assured me that no dangerous animals existed on Kinsolving, and a copy of Commodore Pearson's report, which

had been put aboard, together with other useful literature by the management of Thule Lines, bore him out. He said that it was probable that some of the pigs and rabbits brought by the colonists had survived and pointed out that meat in our tissue culture vats had become rather flavorless. He said that he wished to find some of the caves reported by the original survey team and to take photographs of the paintings on their walls. He even thought that his own unskilled investigations might do something towards solving the mystery of the disappearance of the long-ago humanoids who had produced those paintings. I was reluctant at first to give my permission, then remembered that it is the duty of every shipmaster to further the work of interstellar survey when by so doing he does not endanger either his own ship or her personnel. I told him to go ahead with his preparations.

"Mr. Makins is an efficient officer, and by early afternoon of that same day he had everything ready. The helicopter was assembled and standing on the apron, looking like some huge, ungainly insect. Its storage space was packed with provisions and ammunition for the light sporting rifles that all of us carried; on the Rim Worlds there is little in the way of amusement and hunting is one way of spending one's shore leave. He had chosen to accompany him Wallis, the Third Officer, and Penrod and Gilbey, two of the cadets.

"He told me that he planned to take the helicopter to the foothills of the McIvor Range, in the valleys of which the caves with the paintings had been found. He said that he would keep in touch with the ship by means of the helicopter's radio telephone and that he had already drawn up a schedule of times with Mr. Cade, the Radio Officer. I made sure that he and his party had everything that they were likely to need—there were, however, a very few suggestions that I could make—then stood back and watched as the little flowers of flame blossomed at the tips of the rotor blades, as the ungainly contraption lifted and in its graceless way flew to the westward, to the dull blue serrated line of the Range in silhouette against the dull blue sky, the bright metal of it gleaming drearily in the light of that dreary blue sun."

"And they called it the birth of the blues," I muttered.

"What was that?" demanded Warburton. He grinned. "Yes Captain Spence's prose is rather overpowering at times. But read on."

I read on.

"That night Makins called the ship at the appointed time. He had little to report. He had shot a pig, and he and his party were supping off roast pork. He had found the entrances to several promising looking caves but, so far, had deferred investigation. I rather gained the impression that the real purpose of his expedition had been to get away from the deadly monotony of ship's food.

"He called again the following morning. He said that he was about to commence his exploration of the caves. I told him to make sure that he used the balls of twine that he had taken to mark his inward track; he replied rather curtly that as he had thought of those balls of twine he was not likely to forget their purpose. At noon young Penrod called the ship, telling me that the others were still in the caves and that he had been left at the camp to cook the mid-day meal. They were having rabbit, he said, and sweet corn, a goodly supply of which was growing wild near where the helicopter had landed.

"The next call was scheduled for late afternoon. I was in the Radio Room waiting for it to come through, but I was expecting little more, by this time, than a detailed account of the day's meals. Makin' voice, however, was excited.

" 'Captain,' he said, 'we've found the paintings!'

" 'Good,' I replied. 'Did you get photographs?'

He ignored my question.

" 'Captain!' he almost shouted, 'the paint is *wet*!'

" 'Mr. Makins,' I said, 'a Survey Team spent all of two years on this planet. Had there been intelligent life here they must surely have found it. Perhaps your wet paint is due to seepage of moisture from the cave roof.'

"He replied with a rude monosyllable. Then, 'Sir,' he said stiffly. 'I'm Mate of a ship. I know something about paint and painting. It's part of my job. If I say that the paint is wet, it *is* wet. I am returning to the spaceport at once, and I suggest that you come with me in the helicopter to see for

yourself.'

"I was waiting outside when the helicopter returned. The sun was down, but we saw its navigation lights and the red exhaust flames when it was still a few miles distant; they stood out sharply and brightly against the black, almost starless sky. All of us, except the engineers who were working on the recalibration of the Drive controls, were waiting outside. News spreads very fast through a ship.

"The helicopter landed. We stood back until the vanes had almost stopped whirring, then almost ran to the door of the cabin. Makins was the first out. He stood there mutely and showed me his hands. The palms of them were smeared with black and ochre. There was a strong smell of vegetable oil and other, unidentifiable smells that must have come from the pigments used. I touched Makins' right palm with the index finger of my own right hand. The tip of my finger was stained black.

" 'Mr. Makins,' I asked, 'is this a hoax?'

" 'I am not a first-trip cadet,' he replied. 'I have learned that a sense of humor does little to aid one's promotion.'

"He was rather annoyed when I told him that Mr. Wallis would pilot me back to the cave and that he would have to remain with the ship. Regulations make it quite clear that on planets with no proper port facilities—and surely Kinsolving comes into that category!—either the Mate or the Master must be aboard at all times. He told me that he had left a good fire burning in the valley and that Mr. Wallis would have no trouble in finding the landing place. So it proved to be.

"It was cold in the valley—in spite of the fire—and dark. The little river running down it chuckled and gurgled over the stones of its bed, sounding uncomfortably like voices. Something was rustling in the bushes. A pig, perhaps, or a rabbit, or one of the large, harmless herbivorous mammals native to the planet, or one of the predatory lizards. According to the Survey Team and according to the colonists these lizards never attacked Man, but there has to be a first time for everything.

"At its upper end the valley was more of a canyon, and that is where the caves were. Wallis took a torch from the cabin of the helicopter and guided me over the rough ground. The two cadets tailed along behind.

"We found the mouth of the cave without any difficulty. The end of the ball of twine shone white in the light of our torches; it was made fast to a bush. The cave itself was all of seven feet from floor to ceiling and must once have had a stream flowing through it; there was a fair thickness of fine white sand on its floor. For about fifty feet we walked, descending gradually. Then, after a sharp turn, we came into the first chamber. On all the walls were the paintings. I have seen photographs of similar work by primitive artists on Earth and other humanoid-inhabited worlds. They all run very much to pattern. They all, or almost all, depict hunting scenes. There are the hunters with their spears or bows, sometimes their dogs. There is the mammoth or the buffalo, or its other-wordly equivalent, resembling an animated pincushion. There is the peculiar blend of crudity and sophistication that is inevitable when the artist has yet to learn his craft.

"It was all very impressive. I walked to the nearer of the paintings, put out an experimental finger.

" 'Mr. Wallis,' I said, 'it is obvious, even to me, that these paintings were made at least thousands of years ago.' " 'These, sir,' he said, 'are not *the* paintings.'

"He led us along what seemed at least another two miles of tunnel. We came at last into another chamber, larger than the first. Its walls, too, were covered with paintings. The hunting theme was again predominant.

"And the paint was wet."

I looked up from the report.

"That initial Survey Team must have made a very poor job," I said.

"Initial Survey Teams just don't make very poor jobs," said Warburton, "ever. If the Initial Survey Team said that there was no intelligent life on the planet—then there *was* no intelligent life on the planet. When you finish reading Captain Spence's report you will find that the wet paint was the only evidence of intelligent life found by the crew of *Epsilon Eridani*. She couldn't stay after the recalibration of her Drive controls was completed—Captain Spence was bound by the terms of the time charter—but her people

used every remaining second of the period of their stay on Kinsolving to try to find the answer to the riddle. Spence took scrapings of paint both from the old and the new paintings. They have been analyzed. The old paint is *old*—at least fifty thousand years. The new paint was mixed only a few months ago. The oil was not, as he assumed, of vegetable origin, but animal. The pigments were powdered charcoal and an ochreous earth."

"So," I asked, "what?"

"So we are sending our team of investigators," he told me. "This is all part and parcel of the . . . the general queerness that you find out at the Rim. The Rim governments aren't interested—they never are unless there's money involved. So it's our baby."

"Who are you sending?" I asked.

"The Rhine Institute will supply an Esper if I ask them nicely. Then there's Rizzio, our own tame gunman. An ethnologist might not come amiss. There seems to be scope for speleologist. Then, of course, we must have the usual man in the street who has knocked around a bit and who is not entirely devoid of imagination as coordinator. That's where you come in."

"That's what I feared," I said.

"You don't like the Rim, do you?" he asked.

"Who does? There's that feeling that all the time that you're on the very edge of *something*—or *nothing*. I'm never sure which of the two is worse."

"You'd better start getting packed and saying your goodbyes," he said. "If you catch *Alpha Draconis* next week you'll get out to Thule in under three months. If you miss her it means a roundabout route, mainly in Delta and Epsilon Class tramps and, possibly, an occasional Shaara ship. As it is, the *Alfie Dragon* can't take you all the way. Her terminal planet's Mergenwiler."

So I made a start by handing things over to my immediate inferior, a youth called Jones. I wondered how the office would manage without me. There were only four of us in the Department in those days—Warburton, Rizzio, Jones and myself.

The next day Warburton was in a bad temper. He had succeeded in persuading the Rhine Institute to lend us an Esper free of charge—after all, the Institute is usually only too grateful to be allowed to poke its collective nose into anything smacking of para-normal phenomena. The grounded Commodore who was his superior had refused, however, to sanction the expense of hiring any of the experts that he had considered necessary for the job. The team, then was to consist of Rizzio, the Esper and myself.

Rizzio, who had been called into his office for instructions, wasn't worried about it. He believed—and not without cause—that there was no possible jam in the Universe out of which he could not shoot his way. His favorite weapons were a pair of beautifully balanced, beautifully inlaid point five automatics, although in his hands a little Minetti needle gun was equally deadly. But Rizzio liked the feel of the heavier weapons, liked the kick of them, the roar of them. For the various radiation pistols he had nothing but contempt. "These," he would say, pulling his big automatics with a lightning movement, "will always knock a man down no matter what sort of armor he's wearing or what sort of screen he's using. Those other toys will only give him a mild case of sunburn."

That, then, was Rizzio, a little man with all of the little man's aggressiveness, a little man elevated to giant's stature by virtue of the weapons that he handled with such assured mastery. I liked him, but I was a little afraid of him. I was always conscious of the viciousness that I had seen, more than once, transform the dark, normally pleasantly smiling face into a snarling, feral mask.

We sat there—Warburton, Rizzio, Jones and myself—drinking coffee from the automatic dispenser and smoking. We advanced various theories to account for the still-wet cave painting—Jones, I remember, insisted on calling Central Library for information about some hoax in the Twentieth Century involving some allegedly prehistoric but actually non-existent being called Piltdown Man. The cave paintings, he said, could well be a similar hoax.

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in!" called Warburton.

The girl who entered looked out of place in our dingy office. She was a little taller than the average

and slim with the deceptive slenderness of the professional model. Her sleek hair was burnished copper and her eyes were green rather than gray. Her face was thin and finely modelled, with a wide, generous mouth. She was dressed with the extreme simplicity that looks far more expensive than deliberate, would-be impressive sumptuousness.

"Commander Warburton?" she asked.

Warburton got to his feet, as we all did.

"Yes. I am Warburton. What can I do for you—Miss . . .?"

"Wells, Sarah Wells. The Rhine Institute sent me."

So this, I thought, is the Esper. My experience of women with psionic gifts has been that they run to fat, with puddingy faces and poor complexions. This Sarah Wells must be the exception that proved the rule.

"Coffee, Miss Wells?" Jones was falling over himself like a puppy eager to please. "Cigarette?"

"Thank you."

She took a cigarette from Jones' case with the slender fingers of her right hand, put it to her lips. She ignored Jones' lighter. The end of the little cylinder glowed suddenly into incandescence.

Warburton refused to be impressed.

"What other qualifications have you?" he asked. "No doubt you've heard what the job is. It calls for something else than the ability to light a fire without matches."

"They class me as a G.P.," replied the girl, "General Purpose. I could get a job as a Psionic Communications Officer, I suppose. I have limited precognition. Telekinesis to a certain extent, although without sufficient control to make me an adept. Telemetering . . ."

"You'll do," said Warburton, "You'll do. We don't know what we're looking for, so an all-arounder like yourself is better than a specialist."

"You flatter me," she said. "but I hope to be of service."

We saw little of each other in the short time that remained to us before the departure of *Alpha Draconis*. Each of us had his own private affairs to put in order, his own farewells to make. Each day we would report to Warburton by videophone to see if there were any fresh developments, but there were none. Rizzio, I know, spent most of his spare time on the pistol range trying to improve upon the near perfection that was already his.

And then, one chilly morning, I was at the airport to catch the rocket mail for Port Woomera. I met Rizzio in the waiting room. He was as cocky as ever and full of the praises of the new hundred shot Minetti that he had bought. We saw the girl come in, escorted by a half-dozen scholarly looking men. Warburton came in, his bald head gleaming in the lamplight. He saw us, hurried across to us. He took us to where the girl was standing with the people from the Institute. There were hasty introductions, and then the impersonal voice of the announcer was telling all passengers to board Flight 306 for Port Woomera and we were walking out to the stratosphere rocket, leaving Warburton and Sarah Wells' colleagues at the door of the waiting room. In silence we climbed the ramp into the long fuselage, in silence we allowed the stewardess to lead us to our seats. None of us was feeling in a conversational mood. I was placed next to the girl, Rizzio sat across the aisle. We survived, as one usually does, the initial, brutal acceleration. We looked out of the ports at the wide expanse of cloud and at the almost black sky above it. We revived slightly when coffee was served, and talked in a desultory manner of unimportant things. I learned that Sarah had never left Earth, had never, even, been as far afield as the Moon. She was a little scared of this adventure that would take us out to the very edge of the Galaxy.

Rizzio broke into the conversation.

"There is nothing to worry about," he said. "I have my guns with me, and they shoot as well at the Rim as on Earth."

"But you are worried," she said, with disconcerting directness. "Both of you. You're scared of the Rim. From your minds I get the impression of the edge of darkness, and the fear that you will fall over that edge."

"Nobody's done it yet," I said.

"There has to be a first time," said Rizzio cheerfully.

Then we were sliding down into denser atmosphere and Woomera was below us—the yellow desert, the white buildings and the silver starships. In seconds the silver ships became more than toys, became great, sky-piercing steeples towering high above our plane as she touched down. From a retractable gaff high on one of the metallic towers fluttered a square of blue and white bunting—the Blue Peter. In gleaming gold and green and crimson on her sleek side sprawled the winged dragon. The cargo ports, I noticed, were closed, and only a trickle of stores and baggage was running up into the vast hull along the one conveyor belt still in operation.

This, then, was *Alpha Draconis*. This was the ship that would take us two-thirds of the way to Thule.

We disembarked at Port Caterick on Mergenwiler, waiting there a week for *Delta Gemini*. Rizzio went out into the forest every day—Mergenwiler is a jungly world—with his precious guns, getting in what he considered valuable practice on the local fauna, especially the *kreeks*, six-legged lizard things well known for their speed and agility. As they are also well known for their depredations on the livestock imported by the colonists Rizzio became very popular. Sarah spent most of her time in the Psionic Radio office at the spaceport. Some days I went out with Rizzio, other days I accompanied Sarah. Being neither a gunsel nor a telepath I wasn't sorry when the *Dratted Twins*, as she was affectionately called, dropped down from the cloudy sky to the apron.

The *Dratted Twins* took us to Waverley, where all of us enjoyed watching the pomp and ceremony of that rather absurd little autonomous, Jacobean kingdom. From Waverley we traveled in *Flora Macdonald* to Elsinore, one of the planets in the so-called Shakespearean Sector, and from Elsinore *Lost Horizon* carried us to Thule.

We were out on the Rim now, and all of us knew it. It was the wrong time of the year on Thule, the time of the year when the night sky was empty of all but the dim and incredibly distant nebulosities that were island universes. It was the time of the year when hardly anybody went out at night, and when those who did so kept their eyes on the ground and never looked up to the forlorn heavens. It was the time of the year when Man's primordial fear of the dark reasserted itself, when the dread of the black nothingness outside was almost palpable.

It hit Rizzio, and it hit me, but it hit Sarah hardest of all. "It's the emptiness pressing in," she said. "Can emptiness press, Jim? Doesn't it make nonsense of all that you've ever learned of physics? But this emptiness presses—or it may be that our expanding galaxy is pressing against it . . . It's the fear. Everybody is telepathic after a fashion, you know, and the fear builds up. These Rim Worlds are no more than vast psionic amplifiers, far more powerful than those pitiful dogs' brains we use in the ships and the shore stations."

I pulled her to me and held her tightly. We were by ourselves in my room at the Rimrock Hotel—Rizzio had found a pistol range and was working off his unease in a thunderous practice session. I held her tightly, and it was the first time in all the long voyage out from Earth that I had touched her. I felt comfort in her nearness. I like to think that she felt comfort in mine.

"This helps a little," she said, "but only a little. The fear is still there, the fear and the loneliness."

"Are you sure that you want to go through with this?" I asked. "Luigi and I can carry on—after all, we're officers of the Survey Service and under orders. You're not. The *Sundowner* blasts off tomorrow for Nova Caledon, and she'll take you well on your way back to Earth."

She thrust her way out of my arms.

"What do you take me for?" she demanded. "You and Luigi may be officers of the Survey Service—but I'm a graduate of the Rhine Institute—and never once has any of us run from the Unknown."

I said, "I'm glad you're staying. But I wish you weren't."

"Why are you glad? So that this investigation of yours can proceed with my help?"

"No. Personal reasons. And the same applies to my wishing that you'd get out of here and back to somewhere safe."

"I'd be lying," she said, "if I told you that this was all a big surprise. You aren't a very good transmitter, but you're good enough at close range. It's rather a pity, darling, that you can't receive what I'm thinking . . ."

"You can tell me," I said, taking her in my arms again.

She was telling me when Rizzio came back, and the continuation of all she wanted to say had to be deferred to a later date.

Getting from Thule to Kinsolving wasn't easy. The Rim-Worlds are dependent upon shipping, but there is very little traffic along the Rim itself. The Governor of Thule promised us every assistance—but there was very little assistance that he could give. Frankly, I wasn't much worried about it. I was with Sarah, and we knew how we felt about each other, and I was willing to wait ten years, if needs be, for transport. Unluckily Sarah didn't share my sentiments—on the transport question, that is. She was very much a Woman With A Mission and would never be really happy until the mission was accomplished. It was worse for her, of course, than it was for me. She was the telepath. I felt only the vague unease but she was conscious all the time of that all-pervading fear of the dark. That fear of hers was dangerous, too, especially at night when she half awoke and subconsciously used her pyrotic powers to dispel the darkness. I got into the habit of making sure that there was absolutely nothing of an inflammable nature in her room before I left her each night.

Rizzio was getting impatient, too.

"I've lugged my guns more than halfway across the Galaxy," he would growl. "I want to use 'em on something better than paper targets."

Then, after we had been on Thule for over three weeks, the *Lady Faraway* dropped in. She had been an Epsilon Class tramp owned by the Commission. She was still a tramp, but now wore the house-flag of Rim Runners, Incorporated, a one-ship company. Her Master was a retired Survey Service Commander and proved sympathetic and helpful. Between us we worked out a plan of campaign. I would blast off in a second-hand lifeboat at the same time as *Lady Faraway*, making a rendezvous with her in orbit around Thule. We would then secure the boat to the ship, and *Lady Faraway* would break her journey from Thule to Ultimo long enough to cast us off within easy rocket range of Kinsolving. On her return to Thule, two weeks later, she would pick us up. Sarah was confident of her ability to keep in touch with the tramp's Psionic Radio Officer.

That was the scheme, and it worked. Luigi and Sarah rode with me in the boat—such craft are just a little large to operate single-handed, especially when there is any spatial maneuvering to be done. We made our rendezvous with *Lady Faraway* without any trouble. We pulled ourselves across the small gap between the two craft and, in a matter of minutes, were in the tramp's control room staring out at the shimmering glory of the Galactic lens. After that dismal night sky on Thule we couldn't see enough of it.

The voyage to Kinsolving passed pleasantly enough. Most of the time we were content to sip our drinks and let the skipper tell us stories about the Rim, stories that bore out what Warburton had said about the general oddness that exists in that part of the Galaxy. The most fantastic thing, however, was the way in which the Rim Dwellers seemed to take them for granted. The occasional phantom ship in their skies was no more to them than a rainbow in our skies is to us. The queer wreckage that fell on Faraway was melted down and broken up long before anybody thought of making a proper investigation. The ship horn nowhere that appeared off Dunsinane and that was commandeered and manned by the people of that planet, only to vanish into the nothingness from which it had come, was practically laughed off as just one of those things.

"You get this way out on the Rim," said the Captain, sensing our bewilderment. "If you didn't, you'd be round the bend in next to no time. If I'd been Captain Spence I shouldn't have considered a spot of wet paint anything worth writing home about."

"But it was *odd*," I said.

"Everything out here is odd. I have my own private theory, and that is that Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is the only law of nature that's valid in these parts."

"And how does it apply to wet paint?" I asked.

"Like this, Lieutenant. Twenty thousand years ago a caveman painted two pictures. One died, the other one didn't."

"It doesn't satisfy me," I said.

"Or me," said Sarah.

"When I take aim," said Luigi, "it'd take more than the uncertainty Principle to make the bullet go elsewhere than where it was supposed to."

"There are such things as misfires," said the Captain.

I've often wondered if he was really serious about his pet theory. It didn't seem to apply to his own navigation. *Lady Faraway* flickered back into the normal continuum no more than a thousand miles out from Kinsolving and, after we had bidden our hosts farewell, we transferred from the ship to the boat.

I had charts of the planet and was able to find the spaceport, which was in the daylit hemisphere, without trouble. When we hit the outer fringes of the atmosphere Sarah received a message from the ship to say that she would stand by until we had actually landed. When the boat touched down on the patch of lighter, newer green that marked the place where Captain Spence's *Epsilon Eridani* had incinerated the growth covering the apron, Sarah told *Lady Faraway* that we were safely down.

"Good luck," they told us. "Good hunting."

We opened the door of the little airlock and climbed down **to** the ground. It was late afternoon of a fine day—fine, but oppressive. It may have been the heavy gravity, it may have been the excess of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. It may have been something else. In any case, a derelict spaceport with a ghost town in the middle distance is not conducive to cheerfulness.

We had with us a helicopter—a flimsy, collapsible affair but capable of carrying three people, with their supplies, for not too great a distance. The remainder of the day we spent assembling the brute. I am not, I admit, an engineer. As far as Rizzio was concerned the only machinery for which he had any aptitude was of the lethal variety. I hate to have to admit it, but Sarah did most of the work. Tools behaved themselves in her hands. Nuts seemed almost to tighten themselves. Perhaps they did. Her telekinetic talent was of value.

When it was dark we made a meal from our self-heating cans of food. We were all tired. We wasted no time in getting to bed. Sarah and I slept in the boat, Luigi arranged his sleeping bag below the landing gear. I remember that he grinned whitely and patted the butts of his holstered automatics and said that they were the best bed companions on a world like Kinsolving. Sarah was rather shocked and annoyed when I laughed; I thought for a while that she was going to make me keep Rizzio company.

Sarah slept badly—which meant that I did too.

She said, "I wish that I could explain it to you—but it's like trying to explain visual images to a blind man. How can I put it? It's like what I felt on Thule, the fear of the dark, but more intense. Much more intense. Could it be, do you think, that somehow the psychic emanations of all the Rim Worlds are focused here on Kinsolving?"

"You, my darling, are the expert," I said.

She told me that I was no help at all. Then, after a little while, she woke me up again.

"There was a colony here," she said. "They were taken off at their own request. Why?"

"As far as I can gather, they just didn't like it here," I said.

"They felt the same as I'm feeling," she said, "and it was strong enough, even with non-telepaths, to make them clamor for evacuation."

"Could be," I said.

"You're the co-ordinator," she told me.

"Even co-ordinators must sleep," I told her.

And so it went on. When morning came the pair of us were like pieces of chewed string. Rizzio was bright and breezy and repeated his remark about bed companions. Neither of us really thought that it was funny.

We loaded the flimsy helicopter and climbed into the little cabin. I was rather surprised that the thing lifted, but it did so, albeit with a marked reluctance. We flew low—we had no option—following the

route marked on Captain Spence's chart. We saw little of interest, the scenery in general was too Earthlike. In any case, I was spending all my time praying that the collapsible aircraft wouldn't collapse in midair.

We found the valley—it was the only one with a deep canyon at its upper end. We landed by the river. We unloaded from the helicopter what we would need—the powerful torches, the camera, the balls of twine, a Minetti automatic apiece for Sarah and myself. Luigi, of course, was wearing his usual assortment of personal artillery. He would have looked naked without it. Both Sarah and I felt, as we thrust the little pistols into the holsters at our belts, that we were wearing fancy dress.

We found the cave.

The end of the ball of twine paid out by the Mate of *Epsilon Eridani* was still there. We squabbled a little as to which of us should take the lead. Finally, I was able to convince the others that as official leader of the expedition I should go first. Rizzio, his heavy pistols drawn and ready, brought up the rear.

As caves go it was a nice enough cave. There wasn't any spectacular stalactites and stalagmites—neither were there the hordes of swooping, squeaking bats or the like that one finds all too often. The floor was reasonably smooth, reasonably level. The sand still bore the imprint of the feet of Captain Spence and his party.

We found the first chamber with its paintings. We did not need to make a round of the walls prodding with an experimental forefinger. The paint was dry—and it was old.

We found the second chamber. There was, at the end of it, a half-finished painting. A flash bulb flared as Sarah photographed it. We waited until our eyes had recovered from the sudden glare, then looked at the picture by the light of our torches. It was not the same as the others. They showed men attacking animals—this depicted men attacking men.

Cautiously, I went forward, putting out my finger. It came away from the flat wall smeared with black and orange. I smelled it. There was the acrid tang of charcoal, the pungent stink of rancid animal fat.

"Sarah," I said. "Captain Spence was right. There is somebody painting in this cave. Can you *feel* anybody? Is it some half-crazed survivor of a shipwreck? Is it somebody who was left behind when the colony was evacuated?"

"Human . . ." she murmured, her eyes shut and a look of intense concentration on her face.

"Human—but not of Earth. There's anger, and resentment, and it's closing in . . ." Her eyes snapped open. "Jim! Luigi! We'd better get out of here—and fast!"

Then we saw him.

He was standing there, glaring at us. He was human enough, if one discounted the furry, pointed ears. There was little about him of the ancestral ape. He was all of six feet tall and was slenderly built. The dark eyes in the thin dark face were intelligent. He wore a kilt of stinking, half-cured hide of some kind. His hands and forearms were spattered with the primitive pigments that he had been using. He looked at the smear on the wall that I had made. He looked at my stained hands.

"Tell him we're friends!" I said urgently to Sarah.

She said, "I'm trying. He does not want to hear me. He's shutting me out."

"If he starts anything . . ." growled Luigi.

I turned to look at him. He was poised, tense, his heavy pistols ready. I hoped that the unarmed artist wouldn't start anything and wondered if I'd be able to stop Rizzio from doing him serious injury.

The caveman, still glaring at me, said something.

"He is angry with you," said Sarah. "Very angry."

"Try and get the idea across that I apologize for smudging his painting," I said.

"I *am* trying."

What followed was, I know, quite inexcusable. Somehow the three of us, even Rizzio, were concentrating upon that one artist, trying to convey our apologies. We should have left it to our specialist, Sarah. Luigi should have been alert for other dangers. I, as co-ordinator, should have seen to it that each of the others was doing his or her own job. But, somehow, that spoiled painting was for all of us the most important thing in the Universe.

We were unprepared for what happened. We were taken by surprise by the volley of stones, flung with considerable force and accuracy from the shadows. Luigi cursed as his pistols were dashed from his hands. One of them went off, the noise of it in that confined space deafening. One stone hit my right wrist so that I dropped the torch, another caught me fairly in the belly. I heard Sarah scream as the light was smashed from her grasp. I was on the cave floor then, doubled up with agony and gasping for breath. I was aware of the scuffle going on around me and over me. Hard, naked feet kicked the breath from me—what little breath I had remaining after the initial blow. Something hit me violently on the side of the head and I lost consciousness.

Returning to my senses was a slow and painful process. The first thing of which I was aware was pain—pain in my head, pain all over my bruised body, pain at my wrists and ankles. I tried to raise my hands to my throbbing temples, found that they were tied. I opened my eyes slowly, was conscious of the flickering redness firelight.

Then I saw Sarah. She was lying not far from me. She was naked, and trussed, as I was trussed, with what looked like strips of hide. A dreadful fear came over me.

Before I could speak, she said, "It's all right. These people don't find me at all attractive—they prefer their women much meatier. The only one who *might* be interested is the artist, but he'll have to have the Chief's permission first ..."

Rizzio, also naked, was just beyond her. He ignored us. He was glaring at the men sitting around the fire. They—squat, chunky savages—were pawing our clothing and possessions with interest. It was obvious, even to a non-telepath like myself, that the gunman regarded the alien hands on his precious firearms almost as a woman would regard her violation.

A little apart from the others sat the artist. He was more, interested in us than in what we had worn, what we had carried. I thought with a chill of what Sarah had said, but I knew that, to him, the first thing of real importance was to depict us in imperishable paint on the eternal stone.

"If these people are cannibals," I said bitterly, "I wish that they'd eaten the Initial Survey Team!"

"You can say that again!" growled Luigi. "When we get back—if we get back—I hope that you put in a stinking report!"

That "if" coming from Luigi was rather shocking—but the loss of his guns had made him feel even more naked and helpless than Sarah and myself.

"Before you start blaming them," said Sarah softly, "just try to work things out . . . Tell me, Jim, have you ever known an Initial Survey to miss a whole tribe of intelligent natives?"

"No. But there has to be a first time for everything."

"Do you really think that they could have remained undetected when this world was colonized—an entire tribe . . .?" "It seems doubtful, Sarah. But how else . . .?"

"I," she said, "am your specialist in certain matters. I'll tell you now that psychic emanations can be focused just as light can be focused—and that, obviously, is what has happened here. To work it out properly I'd have to be an astronomer, which I'm not—but it seems to me that this planet—although perhaps not all the time—gets the full force of the . . . *fear* generated upon a dozen or so of the colonized Rim Worlds. It was that omnipresent dread that made the colonists here demand to be taken off.

"Now—what is that fear? It's a simple one—and a primitive one. Fear of the dark. It's a fear that we've inherited from our forebears, who lived lives very similar to those of these people. It's that intense fear that, beating on and around this planet, has pulled these people from their own time to ours . . .

"Which could," I said slowly, "account for the way in which they vanished. They vanished not in Space, but in Time . . ."

"Then how was it that Captain Spence didn't see them, but found only the wet paint?" asked Rizzio, glad of something to take his mind off the way in which his precious weapons were being pawed by greasy, alien hands.

"I think I can account for that," I said. "He landed here, you remember, to recalibrate his Mannschenn Drive controls. The temporal fields generated by his Drive must have thrown the natives back to their own Time."

"All very interesting," he muttered, "in an academic sort of way. But, as you reminded us

Sarah—you're the telepath. What's cooking?" He essayed a not at all funny jest. "Will it be us?"

"I'm afraid so," she said. "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" I asked sharply.

"There might be a way ..." she said slowly. "After all, I'm an all-rounder—and that's part of the trouble. I can feel as those people feel. These paintings of theirs, of course, have a certain magical significance. The artist depicts men hunting and killing animals—and thereby makes a spell to ensure that the hunt will be successful. *Somebody*— we know that it was Captain Spence and his crew—damaged the paintings and broke the spell. The cavemen knew from the evidence of footprints and such that it was human beings who were responsible—so the artist made more magic to bring the culprits to book. By all the laws of Absolute Ethics they're the injured parties."

"Absolute tomfoolery!" snarled Rizzio.

He spoke too loudly.

One of the cavemen left the group by the fire, lurched across to us and struck him heavily across the mouth. Rizzio spat blood and a broken tooth. If looks could have killed his eyes would have been far more deadly than his guns ever had been.

We were all of us silent for a while, listening to the meaningless chatter of the primitives. We watched as one of the men managed to insert his huge frame into Rizzio's blouse and shorts, listened to the laughter as the material split at the seams. I began to wonder what would happen when they became too curious about the firearms. There, just possibly, might lie our salvation. But they seemed to know, somehow, that the things were weapons and treated them with great respect.

I whispered, "I can see your point, Sarah, although, I don't agree with you. Surely, there must be a way . . ."

She murmured, "There is. You will see. Be ready for anything, both of you."

My wrists were numb, and it was some little time before I became aware of the odd sensation. Like a little snake, it was, slithering over the skin. My hands were tied behind me, and I could not see what was happening. I was afraid. I thought that it was a snake. I dare not move lest I infuriate the thing and cause it to use its poison fangs.

Then there was the same sensation at my ankles. There I could see what it was that was going on. Slowly, the crude knots in the strips of hide were coming untied. I looked at Sarah, saw from her rapt expression that she was concentrating hard, remembered that telekinesis was among her talents.

Slowly, circulation returned to feet and hands. It was painful in the extreme. Even so, I was able to see that Luigi was now free and that Sarah's bonds were loosening themselves. I could tell that the gunman was tensing himself for a wild leap towards the heap of our possessions by the fire, that he hoped to be able to snatch his pistols and slaughter our captors.

"Don't!" I growled at him. "*Don't!*"

Some of the tension went out of him, but not much. "Why not?" he demanded.

"Let Sarah play this hand."

"Yes," she said. "Leave it to me."

Once again we were making too much noise. Once again the same brute who had silenced us before left his seat by the fire, began to lurch towards us.

Suddenly there was a scream from the wall of the cave against which the women were huddled. Little tongues of flame had sprung up among the dried bracken which seemed to be their communal bed. A child ran from the group, her hair ablaze.

"*Damn!*" muttered Sarah. "I didn't mean ..."

More flames were springing up—from our untidily piled clothing, from the hide aprons worn by the men. Our self-appointed guard yelled as he pulled his smouldering garment from him.

"*Now!*" shrieked Sarah.

Rizzio and I were on our feet at once. I pulled Sarah to hers. Rizzio sprang for the fire, pushing the astonished and panicking savages out of his way. Careless of burns, he snatched up his two point five automatics.

"Luigi!" Sarah was screaming. "No. *No!* I promised . . ."

The guns spoke, jumping in Rizzio's hands. I heard him cursing above the staccato, echoing thunder of the discharges. Even in the excitement and fear of the moment I could see that all his shots were going wild.

Rough hands grabbed my shoulder. I let go of Sarah, turned to fight off my attacker. It was the artist. He evaded the blow that I swung at him, caught Sarah by the wrist, began to drag her towards the exit of the chamber. I stumbled after them, became aware that Luigi was by my side. Behind us the fire had spread and a barrier of flame was, for the time being, at least, holding off pursuit and giving us enough light to see the way, enough light to see the pale form of the girl, the darker shape of her captor.

They had stopped running. The caveman was squatting on the sandy floor, his arms making strange, sweeping movements. Sarah stood beside him.

"I've still one round!" gasped Rizzio, raising his right hand to fire.

"Luigi!" Sarah's voice was peremptory. "Put that thing down. At once!"

"But . . ."

"Better do as she says," I told him.

"And watch where you're walking!" she ordered.

We approached the pair cautiously. The caveman, I saw, was drawing rapidly in the sand, sketching an outline with swift, sure strokes. With consummate artistry he suggested the hunger of the animal that he was drawing, its hunger and its viciousness. It didn't look the sort of beast that I'd want to meet on a dark night. It didn't look the sort of beast that I'd want to meet at high noon.

There was another tunnel running at right angles to the one that we were in. From it came an ominous snuffling sound, the scraping of sharp talons on rock. I looked at the primitive, yet vigorous, outline in the sand and visualized all too clearly the spiny, long-snouted, sharp-toothed thing that was coming toward us.

The artist whipped off his breech-clout, flung it back the way we had come. Then, catching Sarah's hand again in his, he started to run. We followed. For the last part of the journey we were traveling blind and I wished that Luigi had had the sense to grab our torches rather than his guns. Such an experience is bad enough when you are fully clothed and stoutly shod. Luigi and I were torn and bleeding when we emerged into the open air at last. Sarah and the artist were almost unscratched.

The helicopter was still there. Somehow—although we had to jettison some of our supplies—the cabin managed to hold all four of us. As we took off we heard an increasing uproar coming from the cavern and knew that the cavemen, not lacking in experience in dealing with the brute we had left to cover our escape, would almost certainly be victorious.

It was good to know that they wouldn't be able to reach us in our orbiting lifeboat.

It seemed a long time before *Lady Faraway*, in response to the calls put out by Sarah and Raul, flickered into sight to pick us up. It was a long time, subjectively. It was a long time, that is, for Luigi and myself. Luigi was mourning the loss of his confidence in his hitherto invincible guns and, so far as I know, has never forgiven Sarah for the telekinetic interference that had ruined his aim.

"But I promised Raul," she told him. "I promised him that when he helped us to escape I would not let you use your weapons on his people . . ."

Luigi was mourning the loss of his marksman's confidence—and I was mourning the loss of Sarah.

"I still love you," she said, "in a way. But you're not a telepath, and you have no talent that could be trained and developed. Raul is a telepath—and other things. Look at it this way—could *you* live with a woman with whom you had no common language? I can talk to Raul as I could never talk to you."

"And you can love him as you never loved me," I said bitterly.

"But of course. And I can love him as I never loved any of my fellow telepaths at the Institute. What attracted me to you was that you were a man of action. Raul is a man of action, too—and one of us."

So *Lady Faraway* picked us up and carried us back to Thule. Raul adjusted amazingly both during that voyage and thereafter—but he was living in Sarah's mind and she was living in his, so perhaps it wasn't so amazing after all. He must have done more adjusting on the long voyage back to Earth, but regarding that I have no first-hand knowledge. I made sure that I didn't travel in the same ships.

He's the darling of the Rhine Institute now, which body is having the time of its collective life investigating the sympathetic magic that must have been used by Earth's cavemen-artists in the distant past. They don't know yet how a picture of an animal ever had the power to influence the animal itself, but they hope to find out. They are trying to find out, too, if Raul's last painting on Kinsolving, the one showing men attacking men, *did* pull Sarah and Luigi and myself all the way across the Galaxy to the Rim.