

# *Grant's Big Advent Calendar*

THANKS FOR PARTICIPATING!

*Merry  
Christmas  
one and all*



Here's your  
Master Author Showcase story  
from the pages of the  
Inner Circle Writers' Magazine



PRESENTS

MASTER AUTHOR  
SHOWCASE

THE LOST  
KAFOOZALUM  
PART ONE

BY  
PAULINE ASHWELL



**Pauline Whitby**, a British science fiction author who wrote under the pseudonym **Pauline Ashwell** (1926 - 2015) also wrote under the names Paul Ashwell and Paul Ash, taking her surname from Ashwell, Hertfordshire. Her first published work was a children's fantasy book, *Little Red Steamer* (Methuen, 1941) and her first science fiction story, "Invasion from Venus", was published when she was only 16 years old. Ashwell was discovered by science fiction editor John W. Campbell, who published her debut novel, *Unwillingly to School* in the January 1958 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, leading to a nomination for the Hugo Awards for Best New Author and Best Novelette. Her third story for Campbell was 'The Lost Kafoozalum', again under the name Pauline Ashwell, published in the October 1960 issue of *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*. This story was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Short Story. Although she published little between 1966 and 1988, a burst of stories appeared that year in *Analog*, with more stories following during the next two decades. Her story 'Man Opening a Door', published in the June 1991 issue of *Analog* under the name Paul Ash, was on the final ballot as a nominee for the Nebula Award for Best Novella.

*One of the beautiful things about a delusion is that no matter how mad someone gets at it ... he can't do it any harm. Therefore a delusion can be a fine thing for prodding angry belligerents....*

I remember some bad times, most of them back home on Excenus 23; the worst was when Dad fell under the reaping machine but there was also the one when I got lost twenty miles from home with a dud radio, at the age of twelve; and the one when Uncle Charlie caught me practicing emergency turns in a helicar round the main weather-maker; and the one on Figuerra being chased by a cyber-crane; and the time when Dad decided to send me to Earth to do my Education.

This time is bad in a different way, with no sharp edges but a kind of a desolation.

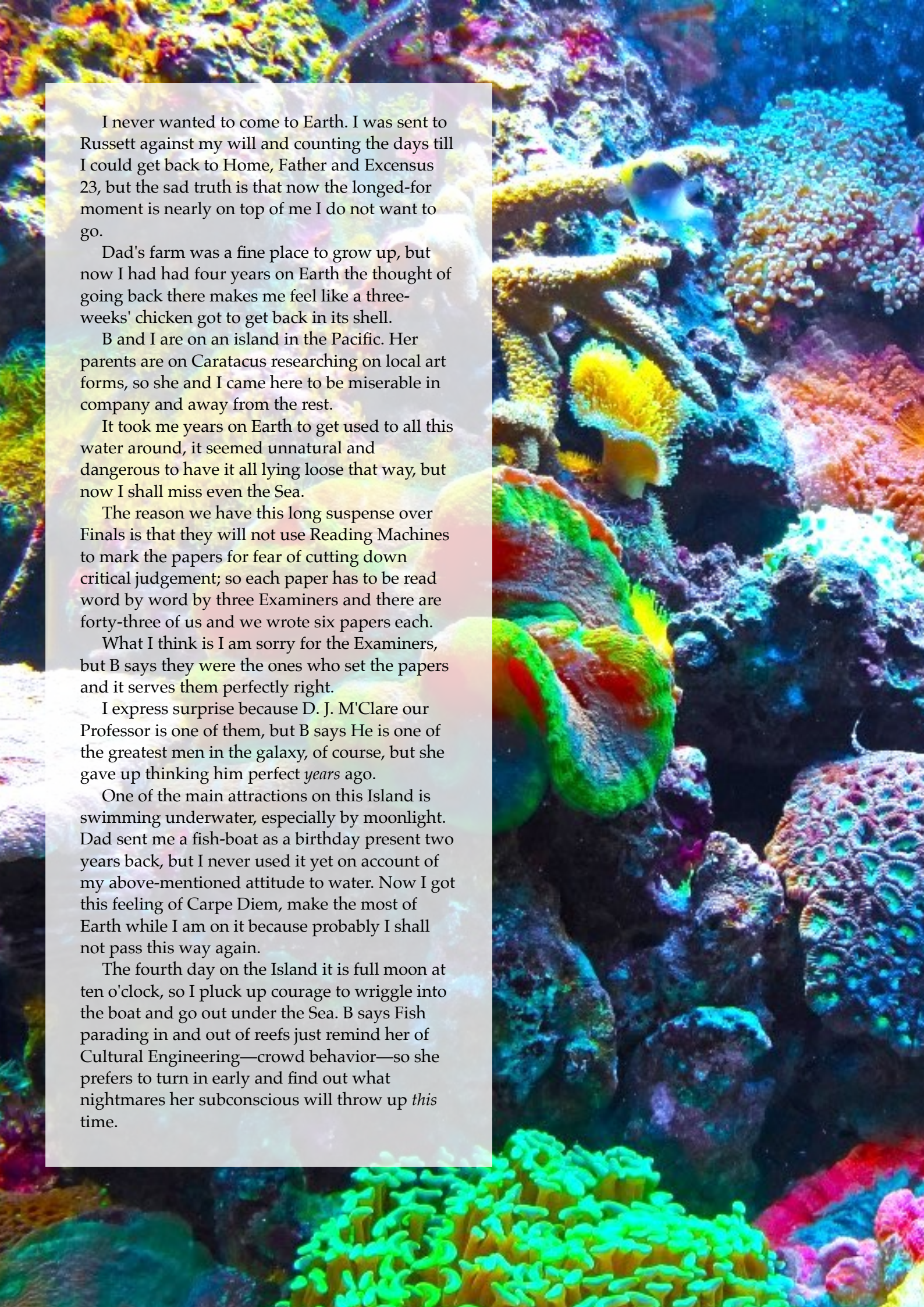
Most people I know are feeling bad just now, because at Russett College we finished our Final Examination five days ago and Results are not due for a two weeks.

My friend B Laydon says this is yet another Test anyone still sane at the end is proved tough enough to break a molar on; she says also the worst part is in bed remembering all the things she could have written and did not; the second worst is also in bed picturing how to explain to her parents when they get back to Earth that *someone* has to come bottom and in a group as brilliant as Russett College Cultural Engineering Class this is really no disgrace.

I am not worried that way so much, I cannot remember what I wrote anyway and I can think of one or two people I am pretty sure will come bottomer than me—or B either.

I would prefer to think it is just Finals cause me to feel miserable but it is not.

In Psychology they taught us the mind has the faculty of concealing any motive it is ashamed of, especially from itself; seems unfortunately mine does not have this gadget supplied.



I never wanted to come to Earth. I was sent to Russett against my will and counting the days till I could get back to Home, Father and Excensus 23, but the sad truth is that now the longed-for moment is nearly on top of me I do not want to go.

Dad's farm was a fine place to grow up, but now I had had four years on Earth the thought of going back there makes me feel like a three-weeks' chicken got to get back in its shell.

B and I are on an island in the Pacific. Her parents are on Caratacus researching on local art forms, so she and I came here to be miserable in company and away from the rest.

It took me years on Earth to get used to all this water around, it seemed unnatural and dangerous to have it all lying loose that way, but now I shall miss even the Sea.

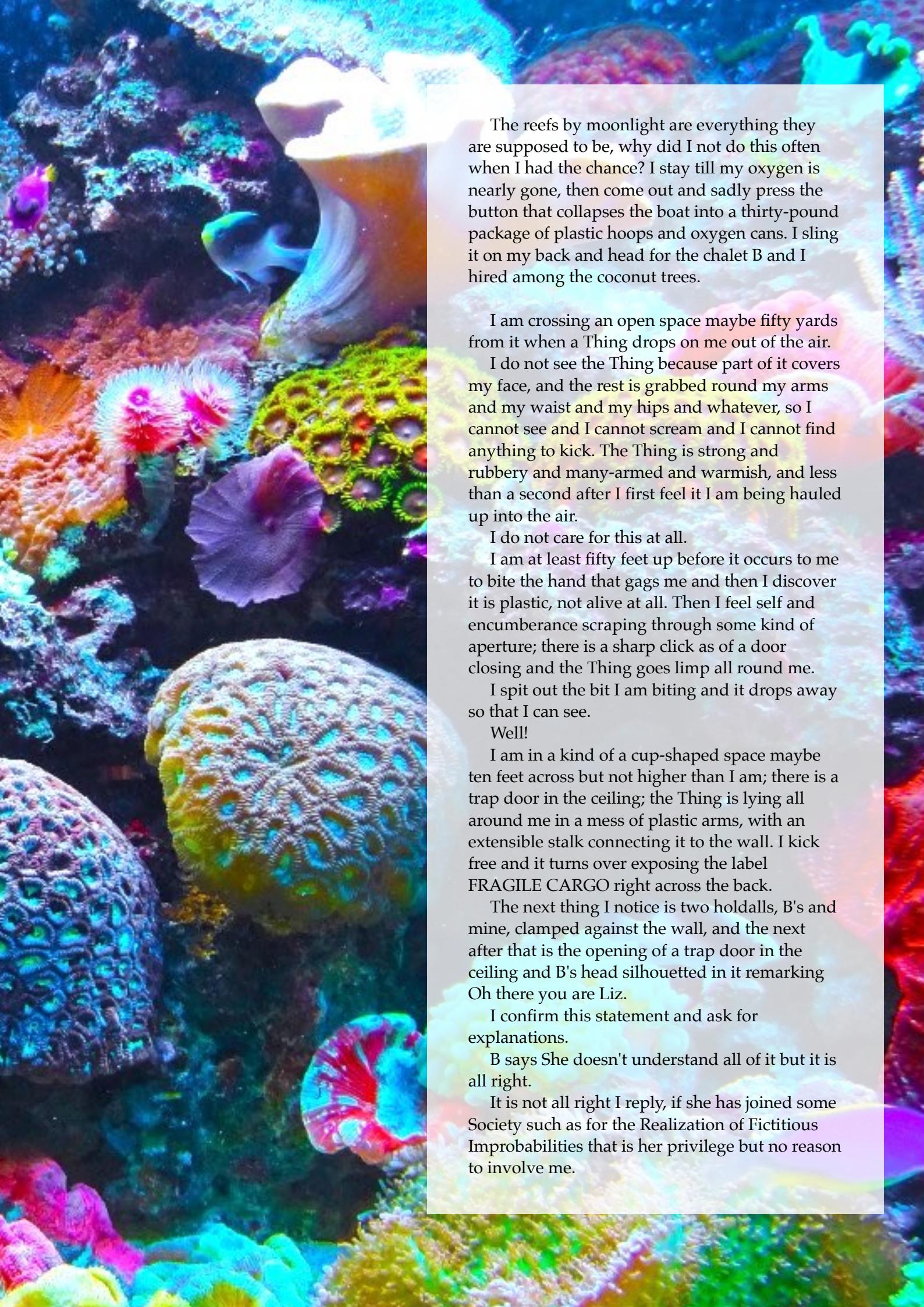
The reason we have this long suspense over Finals is that they will not use Reading Machines to mark the papers for fear of cutting down critical judgement; so each paper has to be read word by word by three Examiners and there are forty-three of us and we wrote six papers each.

What I think is I am sorry for the Examiners, but B says they were the ones who set the papers and it serves them perfectly right.

I express surprise because D. J. M'Clare our Professor is one of them, but B says He is one of the greatest men in the galaxy, of course, but she gave up thinking him perfect *years* ago.

One of the main attractions on this Island is swimming underwater, especially by moonlight. Dad sent me a fish-boat as a birthday present two years back, but I never used it yet on account of my above-mentioned attitude to water. Now I got this feeling of Carpe Diem, make the most of Earth while I am on it because probably I shall not pass this way again.

The fourth day on the Island it is full moon at ten o'clock, so I pluck up courage to wriggle into the boat and go out under the Sea. B says Fish parading in and out of reefs just remind her of Cultural Engineering—crowd behavior—so she prefers to turn in early and find out what nightmares her subconscious will throw up *this* time.



The reefs by moonlight are everything they are supposed to be, why did I not do this often when I had the chance? I stay till my oxygen is nearly gone, then come out and sadly press the button that collapses the boat into a thirty-pound package of plastic hoops and oxygen cans. I sling it on my back and head for the chalet B and I hired among the coconut trees.

I am crossing an open space maybe fifty yards from it when a Thing drops on me out of the air.

I do not see the Thing because part of it covers my face, and the rest is grabbed round my arms and my waist and my hips and whatever, so I cannot see and I cannot scream and I cannot find anything to kick. The Thing is strong and rubbery and many-armed and warmish, and less than a second after I first feel it I am being hauled up into the air.

I do not care for this at all.

I am at least fifty feet up before it occurs to me to bite the hand that gags me and then I discover it is plastic, not alive at all. Then I feel self and encumbrance scraping through some kind of aperture; there is a sharp click as of a door closing and the Thing goes limp all round me.

I spit out the bit I am biting and it drops away so that I can see.

Well!

I am in a kind of a cup-shaped space maybe ten feet across but not higher than I am; there is a trap door in the ceiling; the Thing is lying all around me in a mess of plastic arms, with an extensible stalk connecting it to the wall. I kick free and it turns over exposing the label FRAGILE CARGO right across the back.

The next thing I notice is two holdalls, B's and mine, clamped against the wall, and the next after that is the opening of a trap door in the ceiling and B's head silhouetted in it remarking Oh there you are Liz.

I confirm this statement and ask for explanations.

B says She doesn't understand all of it but it is all right.

It is not all right I reply, if she has joined some Society such as for the Realization of Fictitious Improbabilities that is her privilege but no reason to involve me.

B says Why do I not stop talking and come up and see for myself?

There is a slight hitch when I jam in the trap door, then B helps me get the boat off my back and I drop it on the Fragile Cargo and emerge into the cabin of a Hopper, drop-shaped, cargo-carrying; I have been in its hold till now.

There are one or two peculiar points about it, or maybe one or two hundred, such as the rate at which we are ascending which seems to be bringing us right into the Stratosphere; but the main thing I notice is the pilot. He has his back to us but is recognizably Ram Gopal who graduated in Cultural Engineering last year, Rumor says next to top of his class.

I ask him what kind of a melodramatic shenanigan is this?

B says We had to leave quietly in a hurry without attracting attention so she booked us out at the Hotel *hours* ago and she and Ram have been hanging around waiting for me ever since.

I point out that the scope-trace of an Unidentified Flying Object will occasion a lot more remark than a normal departure even at midnight.

At this Ram smiles in an inscrutable Oriental manner and B gets nearly as cross as I do, seems she has mentioned this point before.

We have not gone into it properly when the cabin suddenly shifts through a right angle. B and I go sliding down the vertical floor and end sitting on a window. There is a jolt and a shudder and Ram mutters things in Hindi and then suddenly Up is nowhere at all.

B and I scramble off the window and grab fixtures so as to stay put. The stars have gone and we can see nothing except the dim glow over the instruments; then suddenly lights go on outside.

We look out into the hold of a ship.

Our ten-foot teardrop is sitting next to another one, like two eggs in a rack. On the other side is a bulkhead; behind, the curve of the hull; and directly ahead an empty space, then another bulkhead and an open door, through which after a few seconds a head pokes cautiously.

The head is then followed by a body which kicks off against the wall and sails slowly towards us. Ram presses a stud and a door slides open in the hopper; but the new arrival stops himself with a hand on either side of the frame, his legs trailing any old how behind him. It is Peter Yeng Sen who graduated the year I did my Field Work.





He says, Gopal, dear fellow, there was no need for the knocking, we heard the bell all right.

Ram grumbles something about the guide beam being miss-set, and slides out of his chair. Peter announces that we have only just made it as the deadline is in seven minutes time; he waves B and me out of the hopper, through the door and into a corridor where a certain irregular vibration is coming from the walls.

Ram asks what is that tapping? And Peter sighs and says The present generation of students has no discipline at all.

At this B brakes with one hand against the wall and cocks her head to listen; next moment she laughs and starts banging with her fist on the wall.

Peter exclaims in Mandarin and tows her away by one wrist like a reluctant kite. The rapping starts again on the far side of the wall and I suddenly recognize a primitive signaling system called Regret or something, I guess because it was used by people in situations they did not like such as Sinking ships or solitary confinement; it is done by tapping water pipes and such.

Someone found it in a book and the more childish element in College learned it up for signaling during compulsory lectures. Interest waning abruptly when the lecturers started to learn it, too.

I never paid much attention not expecting to be in Solitary confinement much; this just shows you; next moment Ram opens a door and pushes me through it, the door clicks behind me and Solitary confinement is what I am in.

I remember this code is really called Remorse which is what I feel for not learning when I had the chance.

However I do not have long for it, a speaker in the wall requests everyone to lie down as acceleration is about to begin. I strap down on the couch which fills half the compartment, countdown begins and at zero the floor is suddenly *down* once more.

I wait till my stomach settles, then rise to explore.

I am in an oblong room about eight by twelve, it looks as though it had been hastily partitioned off from a larger space. The walls are prefab plastic sheet, the rest is standard fittings slung in and bolted down with the fastenings showing.

How many of my classmates are on this ship?  
*Remorse* again as tapping starts on either side of me.

Discarding such Hypotheses as that Ram and Peter are going to hold us to ransom—which might work for me, since my Dad somehow got to be a millionaire, but not for B because her parents think money is vulgar—or that we are being carried off to found an ideal Colony somewhere—any first-year student can tell you why that won't work—only one idea seems plausible.

This is that Finals were not final and we are in for a Test of some sort.

After ten minutes I get some evidence; a Reading Machine is trundled in, the door immediately slamming shut so I do not see who trundles it.

I prowl round it looking for tricks but it seems standard; I take a seat in it, put on the headset and turn the switch.

Hypothesis confirmed, I suppose.

There is a reel in place and it contains background information on a problem in Cultural Engineering all set out the way we are taught to do it in Class. The Problem concerns developments on a planet that got settled by two groups during the Exodus and had been isolated ever since.

Well, while a Reading Machine is running there is no time to think, it crams in data at full speed and evaluation has to wait. However, my subconscious goes into action and when the reel stops it produces a Suspicion full grown.

The thing is too tidy.

When we were First Year we dreamed up situations like this and argued like mad over them, but they were a lot too neat for real life and too dramatic as well.

However one thing M'Clare said to us, and every other lecturer too, just before the Finals, was Do not spend time trying to figure what the examiner was after but answer the question as set; I am more than halfway decided this is some mysterious Oriental idea of a joke but I get busy thinking in case it is not.







The Problem goes like this:

The planet is called Incognita in the reel and it is right on the edge of the known volume of space; it got settled by two groups somewhere between three and three and a half centuries ago. The rest of the human race never heard of it till maybe three years back.

(Well, it happens that way, inhabited planets are still turning up eight or ten a century, on account of during the Exodus some folk were willing to travel a year or more so as to get away from the rest).

The ship that spotted the planet as inhabited did not land, but reported to Central Government, Earth, who shipped observers out to take a look.

(There was a rumor circulating at Russett that the Terry Government might employ some of us on that kind of job, but it never got official. I do not know whether to believe this bit or not.)

It is stated the observers landed secretly and mingled with the natives unobserved.

(This is not physically impossible but sounds too like a Field Trip to be true.)

The observers are not named but stated to be graduates of the Cultural Engineering Class.

They put in a few months' work and sent home unanimous Crash Priority reports that the situation is *bad*, getting worse and the prognosis is War.

Brother.

I know people had wars; I know one reason we do not have them now is just that with so many planets and cheap transportation, pressure has other outlets; these people scrapped their ships for factories and never built more.

But.

There are only about ten million of them and surely to goodness a whole planet gives room enough to keep out of each other's hair?

Well, this is not Reasoning but a Reaction, I go back to the data for another look.

The root trouble is stated to be that two groups landed on the planet without knowing the others were there, so when they met thirty years later they got a disagreeable shock.

I cannot see there was any basic difference between them; they were very similar, especially in that neither lot wanted anything to do with people they had not picked themselves.

So they divided the planet along a Great Circle which left two of the main land-masses in one hemisphere and two in another.

They agreed each to keep to its own section and leave the other alone.

Twenty years later, trading like mad; each has certain minerals the other lacks; each has certain agricultural products the other finds it difficult to grow.

You think this leads to Co-operation Friendship and ultimate Federation?

I will not go into the incidents that make each side feel it is being gypped; it is enough that from time to time each has a scarcity or hold-up on deliveries that upsets the other's economy; and they start experimenting to become self-sufficient: and the exporter's economy is upset in turn. And each thinks the other did it on purpose.

This sort of situation reacts internally leading to Politics.

There are troubles about a medium-sized island on the dividing line, and the profits from interhemispherical transport, and the laws of interhemispherical trade.

It takes maybe two hundred years, but finally each has expanded the Police into an army with a whole spectrum of weapons not to be used on any account except for Defense.

This situation lasts seventy years getting worse all the time, now Rumors have started on each side that the other is developing an Ultimate Weapon, and the political parties not in power are agitating to move first before the thing is complete.

The observers report War not maybe this year or the next but within ten, and if neither side was looking for an Ultimate Weapon to begin with they certainly are now.

Taking all this at face value there seems an obvious solution.

I am thinking this over in an academic sort of way when an itchy trickle of sweat starts down my vertebrae.

Who is going to apply this solution? Because if this is anything but another Test, or the output of a diseased sense of humor, I would be sorry for somebody.





I dial black coffee on the wall servitor and wish B were here so we could prove to each other the thing is just an exercise; I do not do so well at spotting proofs on my own.

Most of our class exercises have concerned something that happened, once.

After about ninety minutes the speaker requests me to write not more than one thousand words on any scheme to improve the situation and the equipment required for it.

I spent ten minutes verbalizing the basic idea and an hour or so on "equipment"; the longer I go on the more unlikely it all seems. In the end I have maybe two hundred words which acting on instructions I post through a slit in the door.

Five minutes later I realize I have forgotten the Time Factor.

If the original ship took a year to reach Incognita, it will take at least four months now; therefore it is more than four months since that report was written and will be more than a year before anyone arrives and War may have started already.

I sit back and by transition of ideas start to wonder where this ship is heading? We are still at one gee and even on Mass-Time you cannot juggle apparent acceleration and spatial transition outside certain limits; we are not just orbiting but must be well outside the Solar System by now.

The speaker announces Everyone will now get some rest; I smell sleep-gas for one moment and have just time to lie down.

I guess I was tired, at that.

When I wake I feel more cheerful than I have for weeks; analysis indicates I am glad something is *happening* even if it is another Exam.

I dial breakfast but am too restless to eat; I wonder how long this goes on or whether I am supposed to show Initiative and break out; I am examining things with this in mind when the speaker comes to life again.

It says, "Ladies and gentlemen. You have not been told whether the problem that you studied yesterday concerned a real situation or an imaginary one. You have all outlined measures which you think would improve the situation described. Please consider, seriously, whether you would be prepared to take part yourself in the application of your plan."

Brother.

There is no way to tell whether those who say No will be counted cowardly or those who say Yes rash idiots or what, the owner of that voice has his inflections too well trained to give anything away except intentionally.

D. J. M'Clare.

Not in person but a recording; anyway M'Clare is on Earth surrounded by exam papers.

I sit back and try to think, honestly, if that crack-brained notion I wrote out last night were going to be tried in dead earnest, would I take a hand in it?

The trouble is, hearing M'Clare's voice has convinced me it is a Test, I don't know whether it is testing my courage or my prudence - in fact I might as well toss for it.

Heads I am crazy, Tails a defaulter; Tails is what it is.

I seize my styler and write the decision down.

There is the slit in the door.

I twiddle the note and think Well, nobody asked for it yet.

Suppose it is real, after all?

I remember the itchy, sweaty feeling I got yesterday and try to picture really embarking on a thing like this, but I cannot work up any lather today.

I begin to picture M'Clare reading my decision not to back up my own idea.

I pick up the coin and juggle it around.

The speaker remarks When I am quite ready will I please make a note of my decision and post it through the door?

I go on flipping the coin up and presently it drops on the floor - it is Heads this time.

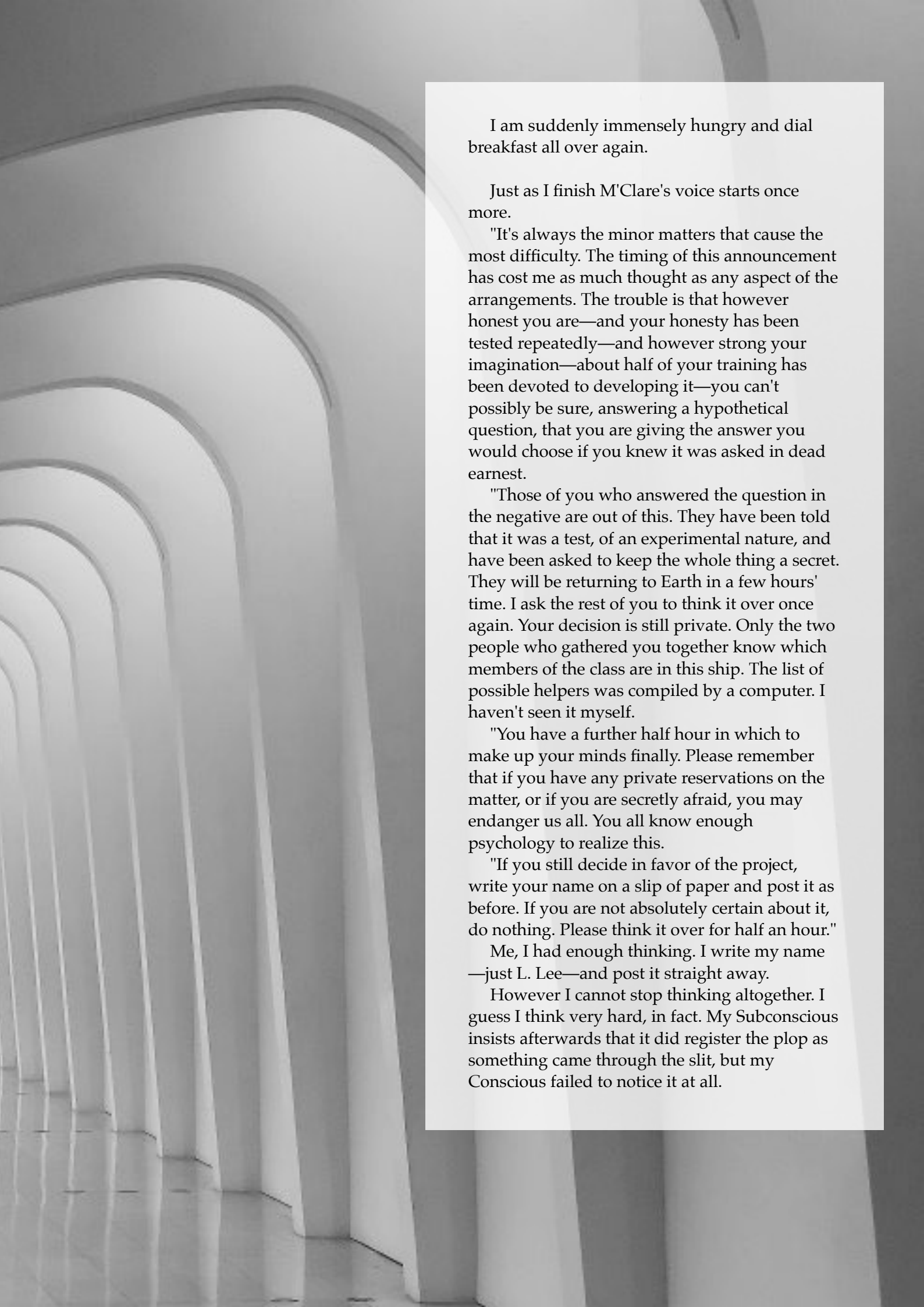
Tossing coins is a pretty feeble way to decide.

I drop the note on the floor and take another sheet and write "YES. Lysistrata Lee."

Using that name seems to make it more legal.

I slip the paper in the slit and poke till it falls through on the other side of the door.





I am suddenly immensely hungry and dial breakfast all over again.

Just as I finish M'Clare's voice starts once more.

"It's always the minor matters that cause the most difficulty. The timing of this announcement has cost me as much thought as any aspect of the arrangements. The trouble is that however honest you are—and your honesty has been tested repeatedly—and however strong your imagination—about half of your training has been devoted to developing it—you can't possibly be sure, answering a hypothetical question, that you are giving the answer you would choose if you knew it was asked in dead earnest.

"Those of you who answered the question in the negative are out of this. They have been told that it was a test, of an experimental nature, and have been asked to keep the whole thing a secret. They will be returning to Earth in a few hours' time. I ask the rest of you to think it over once again. Your decision is still private. Only the two people who gathered you together know which members of the class are in this ship. The list of possible helpers was compiled by a computer. I haven't seen it myself.

"You have a further half hour in which to make up your minds finally. Please remember that if you have any private reservations on the matter, or if you are secretly afraid, you may endanger us all. You all know enough psychology to realize this.

"If you still decide in favor of the project, write your name on a slip of paper and post it as before. If you are not absolutely certain about it, do nothing. Please think it over for half an hour."

Me, I had enough thinking. I write my name—just L. Lee—and post it straight away.

However I cannot stop thinking altogether. I guess I think very hard, in fact. My Subconscious insists afterwards that it did register the plop as something came through the slit, but my Conscious failed to notice it at all.

Hours later—my watch says twenty-five minutes but I guess the Mass-Time has affected it—anyway I had three times too much solitary confinement—when will they let me out of here?—there is a knock at the door and a second later it slides apart.

I am expecting Ram or Peter so it takes me an appreciable fraction of a moment to realize I am seeing D. J. M'Clare.

Then I remember he is back on Earth buried in Exam papers and conclude I am having a hallucination.

This figment of my imagination says politely, "Do you mind if I sit down?"

He collapses on the couch as though thoroughly glad of it.

It is a strange thing, every time I see M'Clare I am startled all over again at how good-looking he is; seems I forget it between times which is maybe why I never fell for him as most female students do.

However what strikes me this time is that he looks tired, three-days-sleepless tired with worries on top.

I guess he is real, at that.

He says, "Don't look so accusing, Lizzie, I only just got on this ship myself."

This does not make sense; you cannot just arrive on a ship twenty-four hours after it goes on Mass-Time; or can you?

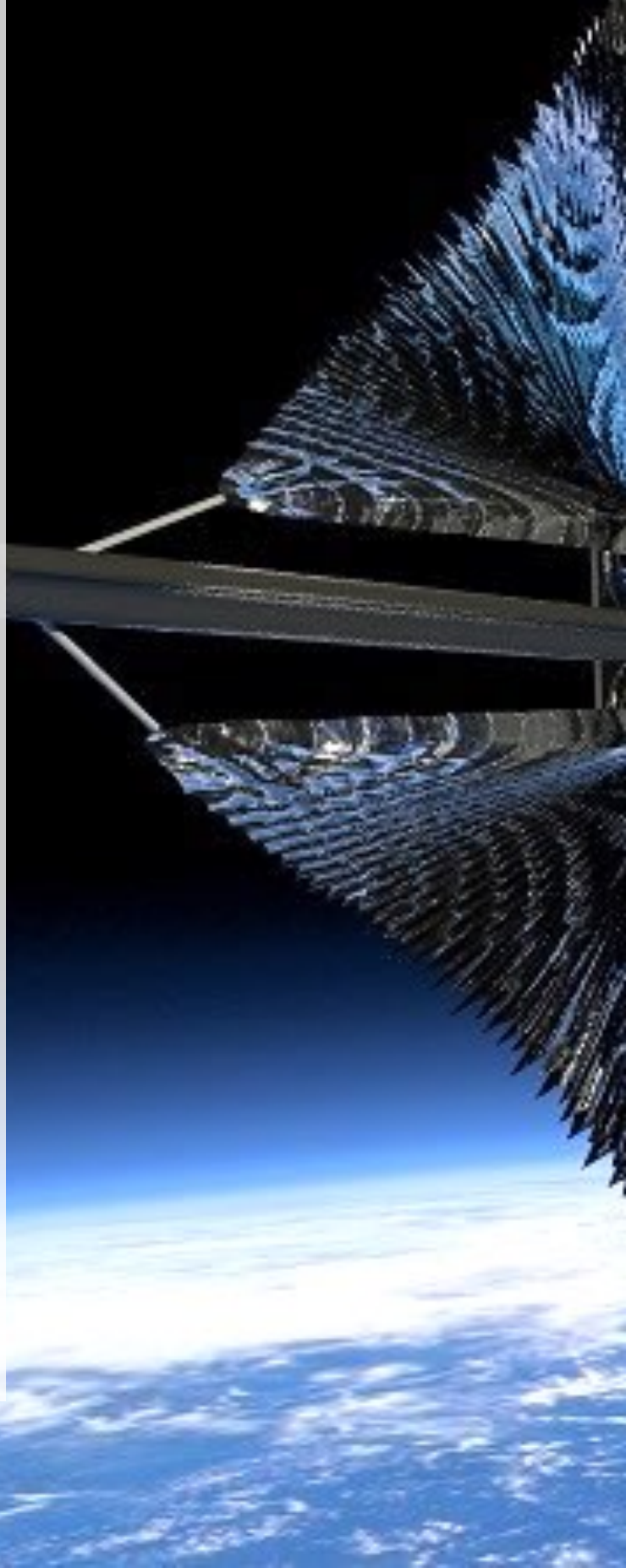
M'Clare leans back and closes his eyes and inquires whether I am one of the Morse enthusiasts?

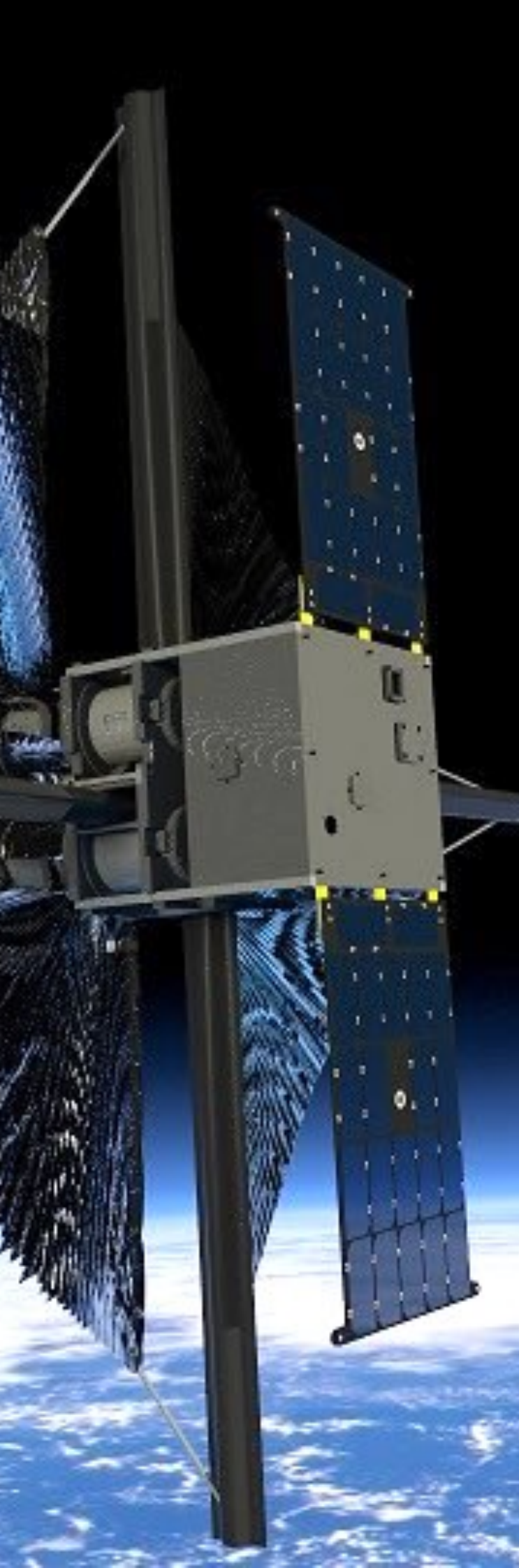
So that is the name; I say when we get back I will learn it first thing.

"Well," says he, "I did my best to arrange privacy for all of you; with so many ingenious idiots on board I'm not really surprised that they managed to circumvent me. I had to cheat and check that you really were on the list; and I knew that whoever backed out you'd still be on board."

So I should hope he might: Horrors there is my first answer screwed up on the floor and Writing side top-most.

However he has not noticed it, he goes on "Anyway, you of all people won't be thought to have dropped out because you were afraid."





I have just managed to hook my heel over the note and get it out of sight, M'Clare has paused for an answer and I have to dredge my Sub-threshold memories for—

WHAT?

M'Clare opens his eyes and says like I am enacting Last Straw, "Have some sense, Lizzie." Then in a different tone, "Ram says he gave you the letter half an hour ago."

What letter?

My brain suddenly registers a small pale patch been occupying a corner of my retina for the last half hour; it turns out to be a letter postmarked Excenus 23.

I disembowel it with one jerk. It is from my Dad and runs like this:

*My dear Liz,*

*Thank you for your last letter, glad you are keeping fit and so am I.*

*I just got a letter from your College saying you will get a degree conferred on you on September 12th and parents if on Earth will be welcome.*

*Well, Liz this I got to see and Charlie says the same, but the letter says too Terran Authority will not give a permit to visit Earth just for this, so I wangled on to a Delegation which is coming to discuss trade with the Department of Commerce. Charlie and I will be arriving on Earth on August 24th.*

*Liz it is good to think I shall be seeing you again after four years. There are some things about your future I meant to write to Professor M'Clare about, but now I shall be able to talk it over direct. Please give him my regards.*

*Be seeing you Lizzie girl, your affectionate Dad  
J. X. Lee.*

Dear old Dad, after all these years farming with a weather-maker on a drydust planet I want to see his face the first time he sees real rain.

Hell's fires and shades of darkness, I shan't be there!

M'Clare says, "Your father wrote to me saying that he will be arriving on Earth on 24th August. I take it your letter says the same. I came on a dispatch boat; you can go back on it."

Now what is he talking about? Then I get the drift.

I say, "Look. So Dad will be on Earth before we get back. What difference does that make?"

"You can't let him arrive and find you missing."

Well, I admit to a qualm at the thought of Dad let loose on Earth without me, but after all Uncle Charlie is a born Terrie and can keep him in line; Hell, he is old enough to look after himself anyway.

"You met my Dad," I point out. "You think J. X. Lee would want any daughter of his backing out on a job so as to hold his hand? I can send him a letter saying I am off on a job or a Test or whatever I please and hold everything till I get back; what are you doing about people's families on Earth already?"

M'Clare says we were all selected as having families not on Earth at present, and I must go back.

I say like Hell I will.

He says he is my official guardian and responsible for me.

I say he is just as responsible for everyone else on this ship.

I spent years and years trying to think up a remark would really get home to M'Clare; well I have done it now.

I say, "Look. You are tired and worried and maybe not thinking so well just now.

"I know this is a very risky job, don't think I missed that at all. I tried hard to imagine it like you said over the speaker. I cannot quite imagine dying but I know how Dad will feel if I do.

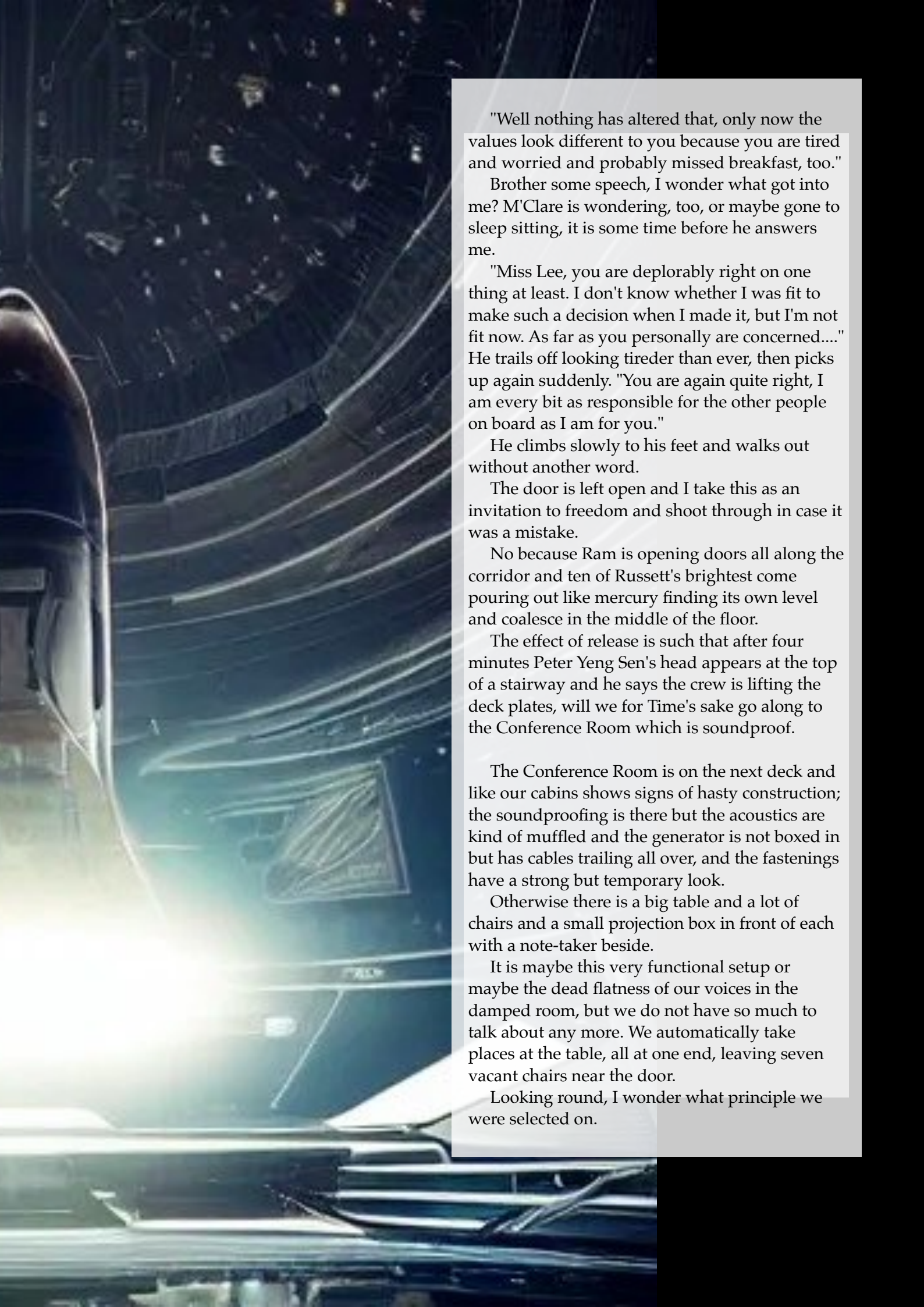
"I did my level best to scare myself sick, then I decided it is just plain worth the risk anyway.

"To work out a thing like this you have to have a kind of arithmetic, you add in everybody's feelings with the other factors, then if you get a plus answer you forget everything else and go right ahead.

"I am not going to think about it any more, because I added up the sum and got the answer and upsetting my nerves won't help. I guess you worked out the sum, too. You decided four million people were worth risking twenty, even if they do have parents. Even if they are your students. So they are, too, and you gave us all a chance to say No.







"Well nothing has altered that, only now the values look different to you because you are tired and worried and probably missed breakfast, too."

Brother some speech, I wonder what got into me? M'Clare is wondering, too, or maybe gone to sleep sitting, it is some time before he answers me.

"Miss Lee, you are deplorably right on one thing at least. I don't know whether I was fit to make such a decision when I made it, but I'm not fit now. As far as you personally are concerned...." He trails off looking tireder than ever, then picks up again suddenly. "You are again quite right, I am every bit as responsible for the other people on board as I am for you."

He climbs slowly to his feet and walks out without another word.

The door is left open and I take this as an invitation to freedom and shoot through in case it was a mistake.

No because Ram is opening doors all along the corridor and ten of Russett's brightest come pouring out like mercury finding its own level and coalesce in the middle of the floor.

The effect of release is such that after four minutes Peter Yeng Sen's head appears at the top of a stairway and he says the crew is lifting the deck plates, will we for Time's sake go along to the Conference Room which is soundproof.

The Conference Room is on the next deck and like our cabins shows signs of hasty construction; the soundproofing is there but the acoustics are kind of muffled and the generator is not boxed in but has cables trailing all over, and the fastenings have a strong but temporary look.

Otherwise there is a big table and a lot of chairs and a small projection box in front of each with a note-taker beside.

It is maybe this very functional setup or maybe the dead flatness of our voices in the damped room, but we do not have so much to talk about any more. We automatically take places at the table, all at one end, leaving seven vacant chairs near the door.

Looking round, I wonder what principle we were selected on.

Of my special friends Eru Te Whangoa and Kirsty Lammergaw are present but Lily Chen and Likoko Komom'baratse and Jean LeBrun are not; we have Cray Patterson who is one of my special enemies but not Blazer Weigh or the Astral Cad; the rest are P. Zapotec, Nick Howard, Aro Mestah, Dillie Dixie, Pavel Christianovitch, Lennie DiMaggio and Shootright Crow.

Eru is at the end of the table, opposite the door, and maybe feels this position puts it up to him to start the discussion; he opens by remarking "So nobody took the opportunity to withdraw."

Cray Patterson lifts his eyebrows ceilingwards and drawls out that the decision was supposed to be a private one.

B says "Maybe but it did not work out that way, everyone who learned Morse knows who was on the ship; anyway they are all still here so what does it matter? And M'Clare would not have picked people who were going to funk it, after all."

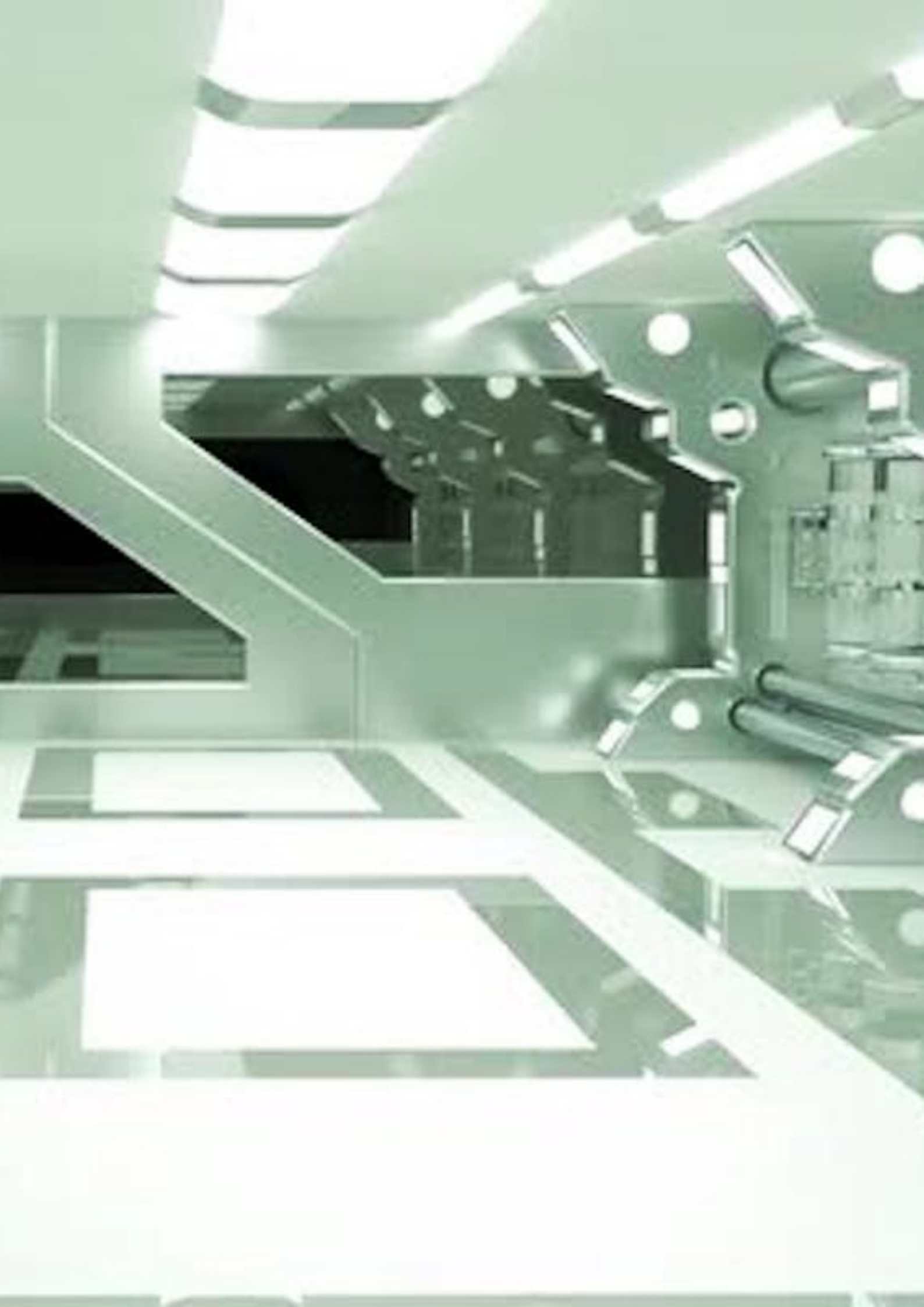
My chair gets a kick on the ankle which I suppose was meant for B; Eru is six foot five but even his legs do not quite reach; he is the only one of us facing the door.

M'Clare has somehow shed his weariness; he looks stern but fresh as a daisy. There are four with him; Ram and Peter looking serious, one stranger in Evercleans looking determined to enjoy the party and another in uniform looking as though nothing would make him.

M'Clare introduces the strangers as Colonel Delano-Smith and Mr. Yardo. They all sit down at the other end of the table; then he frowns at us and begins like this:

"Miss Laydon is mistaken. You were not selected on any such grounds as she suggests. I may say that I was astonished at the readiness with which you all engaged yourselves to take part in such a desperate gamble; and, seeing that for the last four years I have been trying to persuade you that it is worth while, before making a decision of any importance, to spend a certain amount of thought on it, I was discouraged as well."

Oh.



"The criterion upon which you were selected was a very simple one. As I told you, you were picked not by me but by a computer; the one in the College Office which registers such information as your home addresses and present whereabouts. You are simply that section of the class which could be picked up without attracting attention, because you all happened to be on holiday by yourselves or with other members of the class; and because your nearest relatives are not on Earth at present."

Oh, well.

All of us can see M'Clare is doing a job of deflation on us for reasons of his own, but it works for all that.

He now seems to feel the job is complete and relaxes a bit.

"I was interested to see that you all, without exception, hit on variations of the same idea. It is of course the obvious way to deal with the problem." He smiles at us suddenly and I get mad at myself because I know he is following the rules for introducing a desired state of mind, but I am responding as meant. "I'll read you the most succinct expression of it; you may be able to guess the author."

Business with bits of paper.

"Here it is. I quote: 'Drag in some outsider looks like he is going for both sides; they will gang up on him.'"

Yells of laughter and shouts of "Lizzie Lee!" even the two strangers produce sympathetic grins; I do not find it so funny as all that myself.

"Ideas as to the form the 'outsider' should take were more varied. This is a matter I propose to leave you to work out together, with the assistance of Colonel Delano-Smith and Mr. Yardo. Te Whangoa, you take the chair."

Exit M'Clare.





This leaves the two halves of the table eying one another. Ram and Peter have been through this kind of session in their time; now they are leaning back preparing to watch us work. It is plain we are supposed to impress the abilities of Russett near-graduates on the two strangers, and for some moments we are all occupied taking them in. Colonel Delano-Smith is a small, neat guy with a face that has all the muscular machinery for producing an expression; he just doesn't care to use it. Mr. Yardo is taller than any of us except Eru and flesh is spread very thin on his bones, including his face which splits now and then in a grin like an affable skeleton. Where the colonel fits is guessable enough, Mr. Yardo is presumably Expert at something but no data on *what*.

Eru rests his hands on the table and says we had better start; will somebody kindly outline an idea for making the Incognitans "gang up"? The simpler the better and it does not matter whether it is workable or not; pulling it to pieces will give us a start.

We all wait to see who will rush in; then I catch Eru's eye and see I am elected Clown again. I say "Send them a letter postmarked Outer Space signed BEM saying we lost our own planet in a nova and will take over theirs two weeks from Tuesday."

Mr. Yardo utters a sharp "Ha! Ha!" but it is not seconded; the colonel having been expressionless all along becomes more so; Eru says, "Thank you, Lizzie." He looks across at Cray who is opposite me; Cray says there are many points on which he might comment; to take only one, two weeks from Tuesday leaves little time for 'ganging up', and what happens when the BEMs fail to come?

We are suddenly back in the atmosphere of a seminar; Eru's glance moves to P. Zapotec sitting next to Cray, and he says, "These BEMs who lost their home planet in a nova, how many ships have they? Without a base they cannot be very dangerous unless their fleet is very large."

It goes round the table.

Pavel: "How would BEMs learn to write?"

Nick: "How are they supposed to know that Incognita is inhabited? How do they address the letter?"

The Crow: "Huh. Why write letters? Invaders just invade."

Kirsty: "We don't want to inflame these people against alien races. We might find one some day. It seems to me this idea might have all sorts of undesirable by-products. Suppose each side regards it as a ruse on the part of the other. We might touch off a war instead of preventing it. Suppose they turn over to preparations for repelling the invaders, to an extent that cripples their economy? Suppose a panic starts?"

Dilly: "Say, Mr. Chairman, is there any of this idea left at all? How about an interim summary?"

Eru coughs to get a moment for thought, then says:

"In brief, the problem is to provide a menace against which the two groups will be forced to unite. It must have certain characteristics.

"It must be sufficiently far off in time for the threat to last several years, long enough to force them into a real combination.

"It must obviously be a plausible danger and they must get to know of it in a plausible manner. Invasion from outside is the only threat so far suggested.

"It must be a limited threat. That is, it must appear to come from one well-defined group. The rest of the Universe should appear benevolent or neutral."

He just stops, rather as though there is something else to come; while the rest of us are waiting B sticks her oar in to the following effect.


"Yes, but look, suppose this goes wrong; it's all very well to make plans but suppose we get some of Kirsty's side-effects just the same, well what I mean is suppose it makes the mess worse instead of better we want some way we can sort of switch it off again.

"Look this is just an illustration, but suppose the Menace was pirates, if it went wrong we could have an Earth ship make official contact and they could just happen to say By the way have you seen anything of some pirates, Earth fleet wiped them up in this sector about six months ago.

"That would mean the whole crew conniving, so it won't do, but you see what I mean."







There is a bit of silence, then Aro says, "I think we should start fresh. We have had criticisms of Lizzie's suggestion, which was not perhaps wholly serious, and as Dilly says there is little of it left, except the idea of a threat of invasion. The idea of an alien intelligent race has objections and would be very difficult to fake. The invaders must be men from another planet. Another unknown one. But how do the people of Incognita come to know that they exist?"

More silence, then I hear my own voice speaking although it was my intention to keep quiet for once: it sounds kind of creaky and it says: "A ship. A crashed ship from Outside."

Whereupon another voice says, "Really! Am I expected to swallow this?"

We had just about forgotten the colonel, not to mention Mr. Yardo who contributes another "Ha! Ha!" so this reminder comes as a slight shock, nor do we see what he is talking about, but this he proceeds to explain.

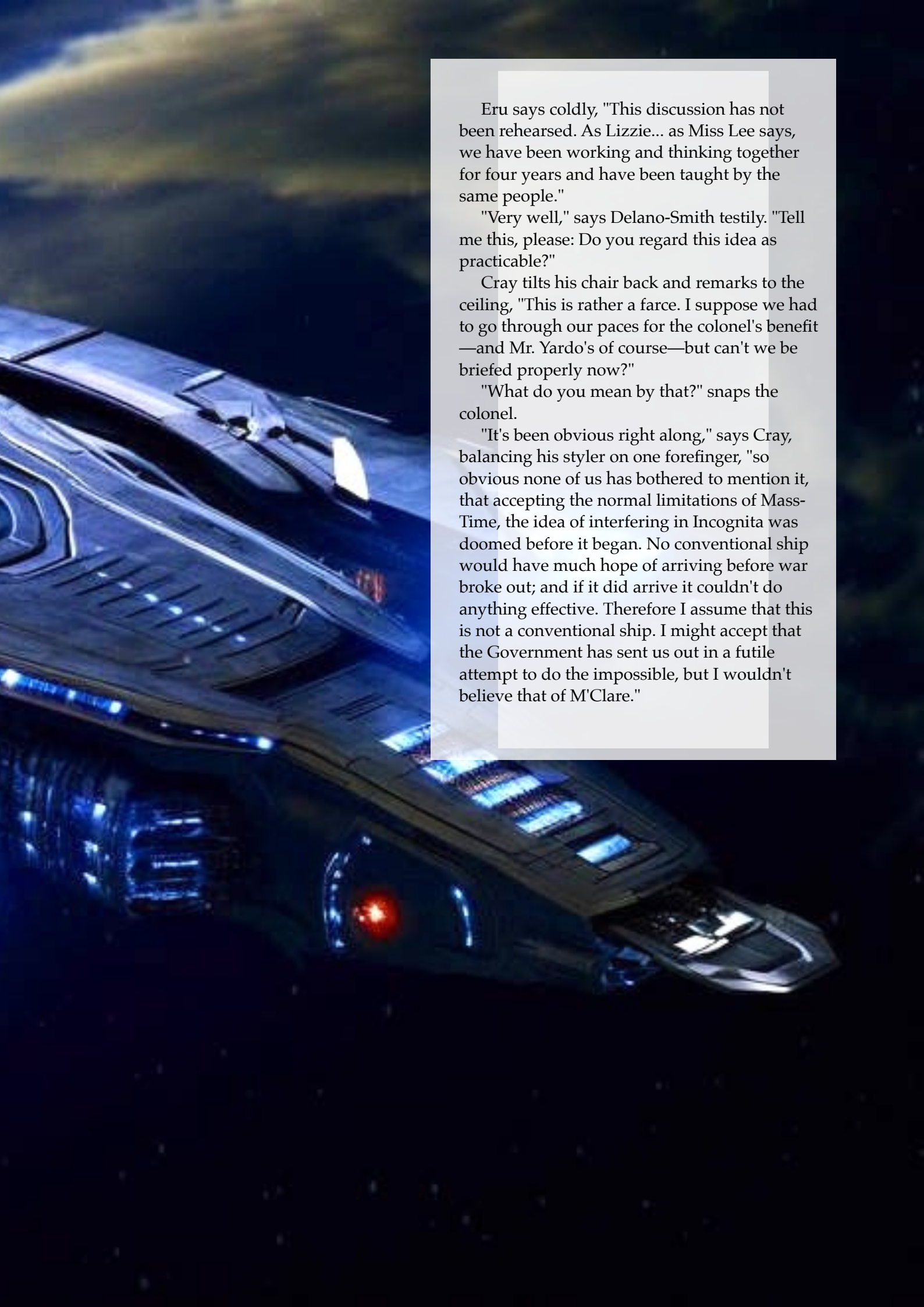
"I don't know why M'Clare thought it necessary to stage this discussion. I am already acquainted with his plan and have had orders to co-operate. I have expressed my opinion on using undergraduates in a job like this and have been overruled. If he, or you, imagine that priming you to bring out his ideas like this is going to reconcile me to the whole business you are mistaken. He might have chosen a more suitable mouthpiece than that child with the curly hair—"

Here everybody wishes to reply at once; the resulting jam produces a moment of silence and I get in first.

"As for curly hair I am rising twenty-four and I was only saying what we all thought; if we have the same ideas as M'Clare that is because he taught us for four years. How else would you set about it anyway?"

My fellow students pick up their stylers and tap solemnly three times on the table; this is the Russett equivalent of "Hear! Hear!" and the colonel is surprised.





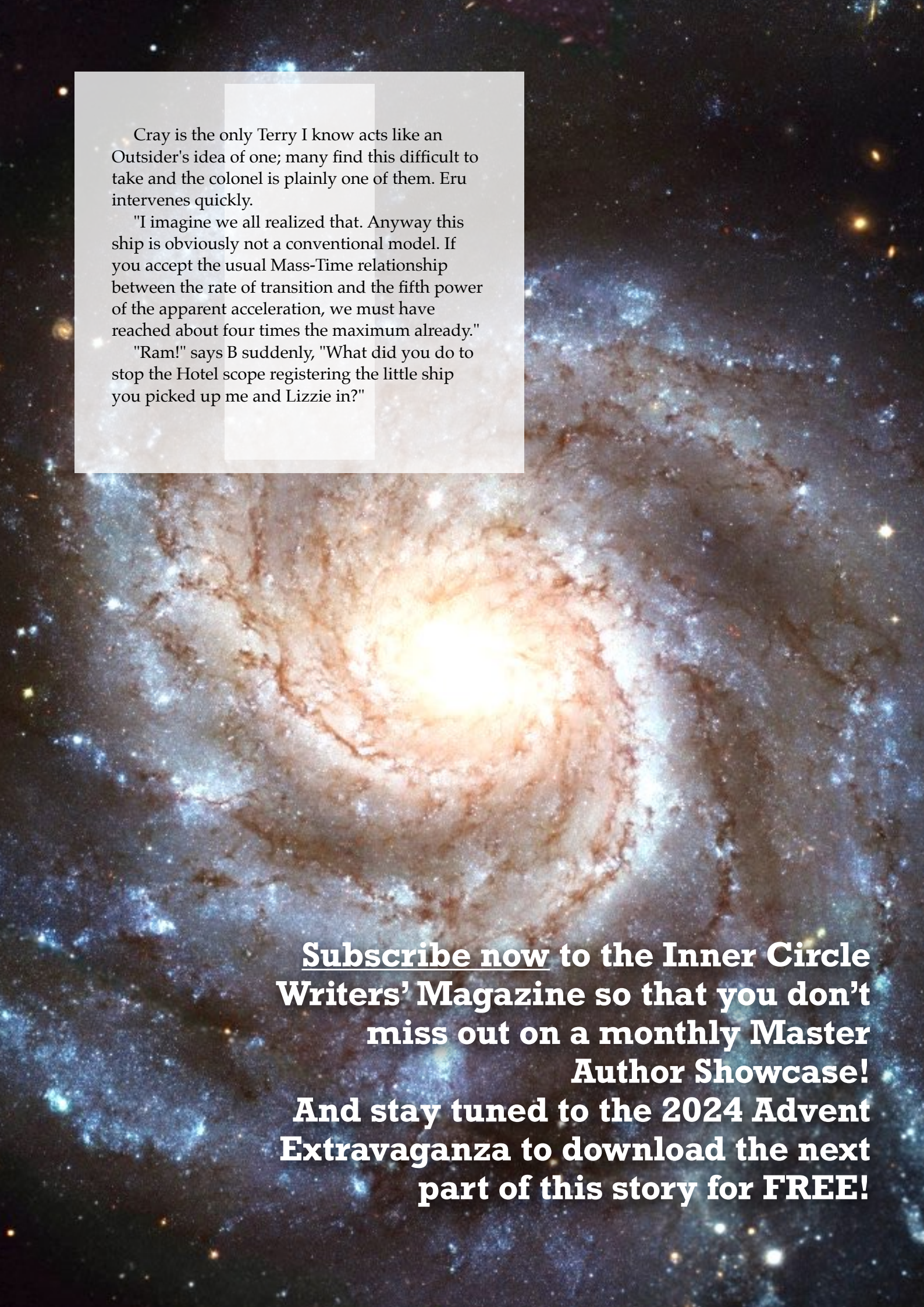
Eru says coldly, "This discussion has not been rehearsed. As Lizzie... as Miss Lee says, we have been working and thinking together for four years and have been taught by the same people."

"Very well," says Delano-Smith testily. "Tell me this, please: Do you regard this idea as practicable?"

Cray tilts his chair back and remarks to the ceiling, "This is rather a farce. I suppose we had to go through our paces for the colonel's benefit—and Mr. Yardo's of course—but can't we be briefed properly now?"

"What do you mean by that?" snaps the colonel.

"It's been obvious right along," says Cray, balancing his styler on one forefinger, "so obvious none of us has bothered to mention it, that accepting the normal limitations of Mass-Time, the idea of interfering in Incognita was doomed before it began. No conventional ship would have much hope of arriving before war broke out; and if it did arrive it couldn't do anything effective. Therefore I assume that this is not a conventional ship. I might accept that the Government has sent us out in a futile attempt to do the impossible, but I wouldn't believe that of M'Clare."



Cray is the only Terry I know acts like an Outsider's idea of one; many find this difficult to take and the colonel is plainly one of them. Eru intervenes quickly.

"I imagine we all realized that. Anyway this ship is obviously not a conventional model. If you accept the usual Mass-Time relationship between the rate of transition and the fifth power of the apparent acceleration, we must have reached about four times the maximum already."

"Ram!" says B suddenly, "What did you do to stop the Hotel scope registering the little ship you picked up me and Lizzie in?"

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