

Mating Call

Frank Herbert, 1961

'If you get caught we'll have to throw you to the wolves,' said Dr Fladdis. 'You understand, of course.'

Laoconia Wilkinson, senior field agent of the Social Anthropological Service, nodded her narrow head. 'Of course,' she barked. She rustled the travel and order papers in her lap.

'It was very difficult to get High Council approval for this expedition after the ... ah ... unfortunate incident on Monligol,' said Dr Fladdis. 'That's why your operating restrictions are so severe.'

'I'm permitted to take only this -' she glanced at her papers - 'Marie Medill?'

'Well, the basic plan of action was her idea,' said Dr Fladdis. 'And we have no one else in the department with her qualifications in music.'

'I'm not sure I approve of her plan,' muttered Laoconia.

'Ah,' said Dr Fladdis, 'but it goes right to the heart of the situation on Rukuchp, and the beauty of it is that it breaks no law. That's a legal quibble, I agree. But what I mean is you'll be within the letter of the law.'

'And outside its intent,' muttered Laoconia. 'Not that I agree with the law. Still -' she shrugged - 'music!'

Dr Fladdis chose to misunderstand. 'Miss Medill has her doctorate in music, yes,' he said. 'A highly educated young woman.'

'If it weren't for the fact that this may be our last opportunity to discover how those creatures reproduce -' said Laoconia. She shook her head. 'What we really should be doing is going in there with a full staff, capturing representative specimens, putting them through -'

'You will note the prohibition in Section D of the High Council's mandate,' said Dr Fladdis. ' *The Field Agent may not enclose, restrain or otherwise restrict the freedom of any Rukuchp native.*'

'How bad is their birthrate situation?' asked Laoconia.

'We have only the word of the Rukuchp special spokesman. This Gafka. He said it was critical. That, of course, was the determining factor with the High Council. Rukuchp appealed to *us* for help.'

Laoconia got to her feet. 'You know what I think of this music idea. But if that's the way we're going to attack it, why don't we just break the law all the way - take in musical recordings, players ...'

'Please!' snapped Dr Fladdis.

Laoconia stared at him. She had never before seen the Area Director so agitated.

'The Rukuchp natives say that introduction of *foreign* music has disrupted some valence of their reproductive cycle,' said Dr Fladdis. 'At least, that's how we've

translated their explanation. This is the reason for the law prohibiting any traffic in music devices.'

'I'm not a child!' snapped Laoconia. 'You don't have to explain all ... '

'We cannot be too careful,' said Dr Fladdis. 'With the memory of Monligol still fresh in all minds.' He shuddered. 'We must return to the spirit of the SocAnth motto: *'For the Greater Good of the Universe'* We've been warned.'

'I don't see how music can be anything but a secondary stimulant,' said Laoconia. 'However, I shall keep an open mind.'

Laoconia Wilkinson looked up from her notes, said: 'Marie, was that a noise outside?' She pushed a strand of gray hair from her forehead.

Marie Medill stood at the opposite side of the field hut, staring out one of the two windows. 'I only hear the leaves,' she said. 'They're awfully loud in that wind.'

'You're sure it wasn't Gafka?'

Marie sighed and said, 'No, it wasn't his namesong.'

'Stop calling that monster a him!' snapped Laoconia.

Marie's shoulders stiffened.

Laoconia observed the reflex and thought how wise the Service had been to put a mature, veteran anthropologist in command here. A hex-dome hut was too small to confine brittle tempers. And the two women had been confined here for 25 weeks already. Laoconia stared at her companion - such a young romantic, that one.

Marie's pose reflected boredom ... worry ...

Laoconia glanced around the hut's crowded interior. Servo-recorders, night cameras, field computers, mealmech, collapsible floaters, a desk, two chairs, folding bunks, three wall sections taken up by the transceiver linking them with the mother ship circling in satellite orbit overhead. Everything in its place and a place for everything.

'Somehow, I just can't help calling Gafka a him,' said Marie. She shrugged. 'I know it's nonsense. Still ... when Gafka sings ... '

Laoconia studied the younger woman. A blonde girl in a one-piece green uniform; heavy peasant figure, good strong legs, an oval face with high forehead and dreaming blue eyes.

'Speaking of singing,' said Laoconia, 'I don't know what I shall do if Gafka doesn't bring permission for us to attend their Big Sing. We can't solve this mess without the facts.'

'No doubt,' said Marie. She spoke snappishly, trying to keep her attention away from Laoconia. The older woman just sat there. She was always just sitting there - so efficient, so driving, a tall gawk with windburned face, nose too big, mouth too big, chin too big, eyes too small.

Marie turned away.

'With every day that passes I'm more convinced that this music thing is a blind alley,' said Laoconia. 'The Rukuchp birthrate keeps going down no matter how much of our music you teach them.'

'But Gafka agrees,' protested Marie. 'Everything points to it. Our discovery of this planet brought the Rukuchps into contact with the first alien music they've ever known. Somehow, that's disrupted their breeding cycle. I'm sure of it.'

'Breeding cycle,' sniffed Laoconia. 'For all we know, these creatures could be ambulatory vegetables without even the most rudimentary ...'

'I'm so worried,' said Marie. 'It's music at the root of the problem, I'm sure, but if it ever got out that we smuggled in those education tapes and taught Gafka all our musical forms ...'

'We did *not* smuggle anything!' barked Laoconia. 'The law is quite clear. It only prohibits any form of mechanical reproducer of actual musical sounds. Our tapes are all completely visual.'

'I keep thinking of Monligol,' said Marie. 'I couldn't live with the knowledge that I'd contributed to the extinction of a sentient species. Even indirectly. If our *foreign* music really has disrupted ...'

'We don't even know if they breed!'

'But Gafka says ...'

'Gafka says! A dumb vegetable. Gafka says!'

'Not so dumb,' countered Marie. 'He learned to speak our language in less than three weeks, but we have only the barest rudiments of songspeech.'

'Gafka's an idiot-savant,' said Laoconia. 'And I'm not certain I'd call what that creature does *speaking*.'

'It is too bad that you're tone deaf,' said Marie sweetly.

Laoconia frowned. She leveled a finger at Marie. 'The thing I note is that we only have their word that their birthrate is declining. They called on us for help, and now they obstruct every attempt at field observation.'

'They're so shy,' said Marie.

'They're going to be shy one SocAnth field expedition if they don't invite us to that Big Sing,' said Laoconia. 'Oh! If the Council had only authorized a *full* field expedition with armed support!'

'They couldn't!' protested Marie. 'After Monligol, practically every sentient race in the universe is looking on Rukuchp as a final test case. If we mess up another race with our meddling ...'

'Meddling!' barked Laoconia. 'Young woman, the Social Anthropological Service is a holy calling! Erasing ignorance, helping the backward races!'

'And we're the only judges of what's backward,' said Marie. 'How convenient. Now, you take Monligol. Everyone knows that insects carry disease. So we move in with our insecticides and kill off the symbiotic partner essential to Monligolian reproduction. How uplifting.'

'They should have told us,' said Laoconia.

'They couldn't,' said Marie. 'It was a social taboo.'

'Well ...' Laoconia shrugged. 'That doesn't apply here.'

'How do you know?'

'I've had enough of this silly argument,' barked Laoconia. 'See if Gafka's coming.'

He's overdue.'

Marie inhaled a trembling breath, stamped across to the field hut's lone door and banged it open. Immediately the tinkle of glaze-forest leaves grew louder. The wind brought an odor of peppermint from the stubble plain to her left.

She looked across the plain at the orange ball of Almac sinking toward a flat horizon, swung her glance to the right where the wall of the glazeforest loomed overhead. Rainbow-streaked batwing leaves clashed in the wind, shifting in subtle competition for the last of the day's orange light.

'Do you see *it?*' demanded Laoconia.

Marie dropped her attention to the foot of the forest wall, where stubble spikes crowded against great glasswood trunks. 'No.'

'What is keeping that creature?'

Marie shook her head, setting blonde curls dancing across her uniform collar. 'It'll be dark soon,' she said. 'He said he'd return before it got fully dark.'

Laoconia scowled, pushed aside her notes. *Always calling it a him! They're nothing but animated Easter eggs! If only ...* She broke the train of thought, attention caught by a distant sound.

'There!' Marie peered down the length of glazeforest wall.

A fluting passage of melody hung on the air. It was the meister-song of a delicate wind instrument. As they listened, the tones deepened to an organ throb while a section of cello strings held the melody. Glazeforest leaves began to tinkle in sympathetic harmony. Slowly, the music faded.

'It's Gafka,' whispered Marie. She cleared her throat, spoke louder, self-consciously: 'He's coming out of the forest quite a ways down.'

'I can't tell one from the other,' said Laoconia. 'They all look alike and sound alike. Monsters.'

'They do look alike,' agreed Marie, 'but the sound is quite individual.'

'Let's not harp on my tone deafness!' snapped Laoconia. She joined Marie at the door. 'If they'll only let us attend their Sing ...'

A six-foot Easter egg ambled toward them on four of its five prehensile feet.

The crystal glistening of its vision cap, tipped slightly toward the field hut, was semi-lidded by inner cloud-pigment in the direction of the setting sun. Blue and white greeting colors edged a great bellows muscle around the torso. The bell extension of a mouth/ear - normally visible in a red-yellow body beneath the vision cap - had been retracted to a multi-creased pucker.

'What ugly brutes,' said Laoconia.

'Shhhh!' said Marie. 'You don't know how far away he can hear you.' She waved an arm. 'Gaaafkaa!' Then: 'Damn!'

'What's wrong?'

'I only made eight notes out of his name instead of nine.'

Gafka came tip to the door, picking a way through the stubble spikes. The orange mouth/ear extended, sang a 22-note harmonica passage: 'Maarrrie'

Mmmmmmedilll.' Then a ID-second concerto: 'Laoconnnnia Wiiiikinnnsonnnn.'

'How lovely!' said Marie.

'I wish you'd talk straight out the way we taught you,' said Laoconia. 'That singing is difficult to follow.'

Gafka's vision cap tipped toward her. The voice shifted to a singsong waver: 'But polite sing greeting.'

'Of course,' said Laoconia. 'Now.' She took a deep breath. 'Do we have permission to attend your Big Sing?'

Gafka's vision cap tipped toward Marie, back to Laoconia.

'Please, Gafka?' said Marie.

'Difficulty,' wavered Gafka. 'Not know how say. Not have knowledge your kind people. Is subject not want for talking.'

'I see,' said Laoconia, recognizing the metaphorical formula. 'It has to do with your breeding habits.'

Gafka's vision cap clouded over with milky pigment, a sign the two women had come to recognize as embarrassment.

'Now, Gafka,' said Laoconia. 'None of that. We've explained about science and professional ethics, the desire to be of real help to one another. You must understand that both Marie and I are here for the good of your people.'

A crystal moon unclouded in the part of the vision cap facing Laoconia.

'If we could only get them to speak straight out,' said Laoconia.

Marie said: 'Please, Gafka. We only want to help.'

'Understand I,' said Gafka. 'How else talk this I?' More of the vision cap unclouded. 'But must ask question. Friends perhaps not like.'

'We are scientists,' said Laoconia. 'You may ask any question you wish.'

'You are too old for ... breeding?' asked Gafka. Again the vision cap clouded over, sparing Gafka the sight of Laoconia shocked speechless.

Marie stepped into the breach. 'Gafka! Your people and my people are ... well, we're just too different. We couldn't. There's no way ... that is ... '

'Impossible!' barked Laoconia. 'Are you implying that we might be sexually attacked if we attended your Big Sing?'

Gafka's vision cap unclouded, tipped toward Laoconia. Purple color bands ran up and down the bellows muscle, a sign of confusion.

'Not understand I about sex thing,' said Gafka. 'My people never hurt other creature.' The purple bands slowed their upward-downward chasing, relaxed into an indecisive green. The vision cap tipped toward Marie. 'Is true all life kinds start egg young same?' This time the clouding of the vision cap was only a momentary glimmerwhite.

'Essentially, that is so,' agreed Laoconia. 'We all *do* start with an egg. However, the fertilization process is different with different peoples.' Aside to Marie, she said: 'Make a note of that point about eggs. It bears out that they may be oviparian as I suspected.' Then: 'Now, I must know what you meant by your question.'

Gafka's vision cap rocked left, right, settled on a point between the two women. The sing-song voice intoned: 'Not understand I about different ways. But know I you see many thing my people not see. If breeding (glimmerwhite) different, or you too old for breeding (glimmerwhite) my people say you come Big Sing. Not want we make embarrass for you.'

'We are scientists,' said Laoconia. 'It's quite all right. Now, may we bring our cameras and recording equipment?'

'Bring you much of things?' asked Gafka.

'We'll only be taking one large floater to carry our equipment,' said Laoconia. 'How long must we be prepared to stay?'

'One night,' said Gafka. 'I bring worker friends to help with floater. Go I now. Soon be dark. Come moonrise I return, take to Big Sing place you.' The trumpet mouth fluted three minor notes of farewell, pulled back to an orange pucker. Gafka turned, glided into the forest. Soon he had vanished among reflections of glass-wood boles.

'A break at last!' barked Laoconia. She strode into the hut, speaking over her shoulder. 'Call the ship. Have them monitor our equipment. Tell them to get duplicate recordings. While we're starting to analyze the sound-sight record down here they can be transmitting a copy to the master computers at Kampichi. We want as many minds on this as possible. We may never get another chance like this one!'

Marie said: 'I don't -'

'Snap to it!' barked Laoconia.

'Shall I talk to Dr Baxter?' asked Marie.

'Talk to Helen?' demanded Laoconia. 'Why would you want to bother Helen with a routine question like this?'

'I just want to discuss ... '

'That transceiver is for official use only,' said Laoconia. 'Transmit the message as I've directed. We're here to solve the Rukuchp breeding problem, not to chit-chat.'

'I feel suddenly so uneasy,' said Marie. 'There's something about this situation that worries me.'

'Uneasy?'

'I think we've missed the point of Gafka's warning.'

'Stop worrying,' said Laoconia. 'The natives won't give us any trouble. Gafka was looking for a last excuse to keep us from attending their Big Sing. You've seen how stupidly shy they are.'

'But what if -'

'I've had a great deal of experience in handling native peoples,' said Laoconia. 'You never have trouble as long as you keep a firm, calm grip on the situation at all times.'

'Maybe so. But ... '

'Think of it!' said Laoconia. 'The first humans ever to attend a Rukuchp Big Sing. Unique! You mustn't let the magnitude of our achievement dull your mind. Stay cool and detached as I do. Now get that call off to the ship!'

It was a circular clearing perhaps two kilometers in diameter, dark with moonshadows under the giant glaze trees. High up around the rim of the clearing, moonlight painted prismatic rainbows along every leaf edge. A glint of silver far above the center of the open area betrayed the presence of a tiny remote-control floater carrying night cameras and microphones.

Except for a space near the forest edge occupied by Laoconia and Marie, the clearing was packed with silent shadowy humps of Rukuchp natives. Vision caps glinted like inverted bowls in the moonlight.

Seated on a portable chair beside the big pack-floater, Laoconia adjusted the position of the tiny remote unit high above them. In the monitor screen before her she could see what the floater lenses covered - the clearing with its sequin glitter of Rukuchp vision caps and the faintest gleam of red and green instrument lights between herself and Marie seated on the other side of the floater. Marie was monitoring the night lenses that would make the scene appear as bright as day on the recording wire.

Marie straightened, rubbed the small of her back. 'This clearing must be at least two kilometers across,' she whispered, impressed.

Laoconia adjusted her earphones, tested a relay. Her feet ached. It had been at least a four-hour walk in here to this clearing. She began to feel latent qualms about what might be ahead in the nine hours left of the Rukuchp night. That stupid warning ...

'I said it's a big clearing,' whispered Marie.

Laoconia cast an apprehensive glance at the silent Rukuchp figures packed closely around. 'I didn't realize there'd be so many,' she whispered. 'It doesn't look to me as though they're dying out. What does your monitor screen show?'

'They fill the clearing,' whispered Marie. 'And I think they extend back under the trees. I wish I knew which one was Gafka. I should've watched when he left us.'

'Didn't he say where he was going?'

'He just asked if this spot was all right for us and if we were ready to help them.'

'Well, I'm sure everything's going to be all right,' said Laoconia. She didn't sound very convincing, even to herself.

'Isn't it time to contact the ship?' asked Marie.

'They'll be calling any -' A light flashed red on the panel in front of Laoconia. 'Here they are now.'

She flipped a switch, spoke into her cheek microphone. 'Yes?'

The metallic chattering in Laoconia's earphones only made Marie feel more lonely. The ship was so far away above them.

'That's right,' said Laoconia. Transmit your record immediately and ask Kampichi to make an independent study. We'll compare notes later.' Silence while she listened, then: 'I'm sure there's no danger. You can keep an eye on us through the overhead lenses. But there's never been a report of a Rukuchp native offering violence to anyone ... Well, I don't see what we can do about it now. We're here and that's that. I'm signing off now.' She flipped the switch.

'Was that Dr Baxter?' asked Marie.

'Yes. Helen's monitoring us herself, though I don't see what she can do. Medical people are very peculiar sometimes. Has the situation changed with the natives?'

'They haven't moved that I can see.'

'Why couldn't Gafka have given us a preliminary briefing?' asked Laoconia. 'I detest this flying blind.'

'I think it still embarrasses him to talk about breeding,' said Marie.

'Everything's too quiet,' hissed Laoconia. 'I don't like it.'

'They're sure to do something soon,' whispered Marie.

As though her words were the signal, an almost inaudible vibration began to throb in the clearing. Glaze leaves started their sympathetic tinkle-chiming. The vibration grew, became an organ rumble with abrupt piping obbligato that danced along its edges. A cello insertion pulled a melody from the sound, swung it over the clearing while the glazeforest chimed louder and louder.

'How exquisite,' breathed Marie. She forced her attention onto the instruments in front of her. Everything was functioning.

The melody broke to a single clear high note of harmonic brilliance - a flute sound that shifted to a second phase with expanded orchestration. The music picked up element after element while low-register tympani built a stately rhythm into it, and zither tinkles laid a counter-point on the rhythm.

'Pay attention to your instruments,' hissed Laoconia.

Marie nodded, swallowing. The music was like a song heard before, but never before played with this perfection. She wanted to close her eyes; she wanted to submit entirely to the ecstasy of sound.

Around them, the Rukuchp natives remained stationary, a rhythmic expansion and contraction of bellows muscles their only movement.

And the rapture of music intensified.

Marie moved her head from side to side, mouth open. The sound was an infinity of angel choirs - every sublimity of music ever conceived - now concentrated into one exquisite distillation. She felt that it could not possibly grow more beautiful.

But it did.

There came a lifting-expanding-floating ... a long gliding suspenseful timelessness.

Silence.

Marie felt herself drifting back to awareness, found her hands limply fumbling with dials. Some element of habit assured her that she had carried out her part of the job, but that music ... She shivered.

'They sang for 47 minutes,' hissed Laoconia. She glanced around. 'Now what happens?'

Marie rubbed her throat, forced her attention onto the luminous dials, the floater, the clearing. A suspicion was forming in the back of her mind.

'I wish I knew which one of these creatures was Gafka,' whispered Laoconia. 'Do

we dare arouse one of them, ask after Gafka?'

'We'd better not,' said Marie.

'These creatures did nothing but sing,' said Laoconia. 'I'm more certain than ever that the music is stimulative and nothing more.'

'I hope you're right,' whispered Marie. Her suspicion was taking on more definite shape ... *music, controlled sound, ecstasy of controlled sound* ... Thoughts tumbled over each other *in* her mind.

Time dragged out in silence.

'What do you suppose they're doing?' hissed Laoconia. 'They've been sitting like this for 25 minutes.'

Marie glanced around at the ring of Rukuchp natives hemming in the little open space, black mounds topped by dim silver. The stillness was like a charged vacuum.

More time passed.

'Forty minutes!' whispered Laoconia. 'Do they expect us to sit here all night?'

Marie chewed her lower lip. *Ecstasy of sound*, she thought. And she thought of sea urchins and the parthenogenetic rabbits of Calibeau.

A stirring movement passed through the Rukuchp ranks. Presently, shadowy forms began moving away into the glaze-forest's blackness.

'Where are they going?' hissed Laoconia. 'Do you see Gafka?'

'No.'

The transmission-receive light flashed in front of Laoconia. She flipped the switch, pressed an earphone against her head. 'They just seem to be leaving,' she whispered into the cheek microphone. 'You see the same thing we do. There's been no movement against us. Let me call you back later. I want to observe this.'

A Rukuchp figure came up beside Marie.

'Gafka?' said Marie.

'Gafka,' intoned the figure. The voice sounded sleepy.

Laoconia leaned across the instrument-packed floater. 'What are they doing now, Gafka?' she demanded.

'All new song we make from music you give,' said Gafka.

'Is the sing all ended?' asked Marie.

'Same,' breathed Gafka.

'What's this about a new song?' demanded Laoconia.

'Not have your kind song before correct,' said Gafka. 'In it too much new. Not understand we how song make you. But now you teach, make right you.'

'What is all this nonsense?' asked Laoconia. 'Gafka, where are your people all going?'

'Going,' sighed Gafka.

Laoconia looked around her. 'But they're departing singly ... or ... well, there don't seem to be any mated pairs. What *are* they doing?'

'Go each to wait,' said Gafka.

And Marie thought of caryocinesis and daughter nuclei.

'I don't understand,' complained Laoconia.

'You teach how new song sing,' sighed Gafka. 'New song best all time. We keep this song. Better much than old song. Make better - ' the women detected the faint glimmer-haze lidding of Gafka's vision cap - 'make better young. Strong more.'

'Gafka,' said Marie, 'is the song all you do? I mean, there isn't anything else?'

'All,' breathed Gafka. 'Best song ever.'

Laoconia said: 'I think we'd better follow some of these ... '

'That's not necessary,' said Marie. 'Did you enjoy their music Dr Wilkinson?'

'Well ... ' There appeared to be embarrassment in the way the older woman turned her head away. 'It was *very* beautiful.'

'And you *enjoyed* it?' persisted Marie.

'I don't see what ... '

'You're tone deaf,' said Marie.

'It's obviously a stimulant of some sort!' snapped Laoconia. 'I don't understand now why they won't let us ... '

'They let us,' said Marie.

Laoconia turned to Gafka. 'I must insist, Gafka, that we be permitted to study all phases of your breeding process. Otherwise we can be of no help to you.'

'You best help ever,' said Gafka. 'Birthrate all good now. You teach way out from mixing of music.' A shudder passed upward through Gafka's bellows muscles.

'Do you make sense out of this?' demanded Laoconia.

'I'm afraid I do,' said Marie. 'Aren't you tired, Gafka?'

'Same,' sighed Gafka.

'Laoconia, Dr Wilkinson, we'd better get back to the hut,' said Marie. 'We can improvise what we'll need for the Schafter test.'

'But the Schafter's for determining *human* pregnancy!' protested Laoconia.

The red light glowed in front of Laoconia. She flipped the switch. 'Yes?'

Scratching sounds from the earphones broke the silence. Marie felt that she did not want to hear the voice from the ship.

Laoconia said: 'Of course I know you're monitoring the test of ... Why should I tell Marie you've already given Schafter tests to yourself ... ' Laoconia's voice climbed. 'WHAT? You can't be ser ... That's impossible! But, Helen, we ... they ... you ... we ... Of course! ... Where could we have ... Every woman on the ship ... '

There was a long silence while Marie watched Laoconia listening to the earphones, nodding. Presently, Laoconia lifted the earphones off her head and put them down gently. Her voice came out listlessly. 'Dr Bax ... Helen suspected that ... she administered Schafter tests to herself and some of the others.'

'She listened to that music?' asked Marie.

'The whole universe listened to that music,' said Laoconia. 'Some smuggler

monitored the ship's official transmission of our recordings. Rebroadcast stations took it. Everyone's going crazy about our *beautiful* music.'

'Oh. no,' breathed Marie.

Laoconia said: 'Everyone on the ship listened to our recordings. Helen said she suspected immediately after the broadcast, but she waited the full half hour before giving the Schafter test.' Laoconia glanced at the silent hump of Gafka standing beside Marie. 'Every woman on that ship who could become pregnant is pregnant.'

'It's obvious, isn't it?' asked Marie. 'Gafka's people have developed a form of group parthenogenesis. Their Big Sing sets off the blastomeric reaction.'

'But we're humans!' protested Laoconia. 'How can ... '

'And parts of us are still very primitive,' said Marie. 'This shouldn't surprise us. Sound's been used before to induce the first mitotic cleavage in an egg. Gafka's people merely have this as their sole breeding method - with corresponding perfection of technique.'

Laoconia blinked, said: 'I wonder how this ever got started?'

'And when they first encountered our *foreign* music,' said Marie, 'it confused them, mixed up their musical relationships. They were fascinated by the new musical forms. They experimented for new sensations ... and their birthrate fell off. Naturally.'

'Then you came along,' said Laoconia, 'and taught them how to master the new music.'

'Exactly.'

'Marie!' hissed Laoconia.

'Yes?'

'We were right here during that entire ... You don't suppose that we ... that I ... '

'I don't know about you,' said Marie, 'but I've never felt more certain of anything in my life.'

She chewed at her lower lip, fought back tears. 'I'm going to have a baby. Female. It'll have only half the normal number of chromosomes. And it'll be sterile. And I ... '

'Say I to you,' chanted Gafka. There was an air of sadness in the singsong voice. 'Say I to you: all life kinds start egg young same. Not want I to cause troubles. But you say different you.'

'Parthenogenesis,' said Laoconia with a show of her old energy. 'That means, of course, that the human reproductive process need not ... that is, uh ... we'll not have to ... I mean to say that men won't be ... '

'The babies will be drones.' said Marie. 'You know that. Unfertile drones. This may have its vogue, but it surely can't last.'

'Perhaps,' said Laoconia. 'But I keep thinking of all those re-broadcasts of our recordings. I wonder if these Rukuchp creatures ever had two sexes?' She turned toward Gafka. 'Gafka, do you know if ... '

'Sorry cause troubles,' intoned Gafka. The singsong voice sounded weaker. 'Must say farewell now. Time for birthing me.'

'You are going to give birth?' asked Laoconia.

'Same.' breathed Gafka. 'Feel pain on eye-top.' Gafka's prehensile legs went into a flurry of digging in the ground beside the floater.

'Well, you were right about one thing, Dr Wilkinson,' said Marie. 'She-he is not a *him*.'

Gafka's legs bent, lowered the ovoid body into the freshly dug concavity in the ground. Immediately, the legs began to shrink back into the body. A crack appeared across the vision cap, struck vertically down through the bellows muscles.

Presently, there were two Gafkas, each half the size of the original. As the women watched, the two half-sized Gafkas began extruding new legs to regain the normal symmetry.

'Oh, no,' whispered Marie.

She had a headache.