

KATHRYN SULLIVAN



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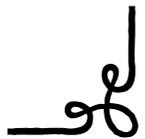
Talking to Trees



Agents
Adepts
and
Apprentices

A collection of speculative fiction
by

Kathryn
Sullivan



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

AGENTS, ADEPTS, AND APPRENTICES

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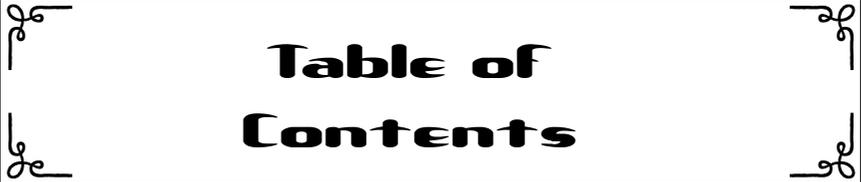


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THE DEMONS' STOREROOM

Brambel sighed unhappily at the short wand in his hand; its moonglow spell never wore off unless he needed it. He rummaged through the chaotic clutter of his shelves. No spare wands. And he had so wanted to gather dragonwort under tonight's full moon!

He tugged thoughtfully at his sparse gray beard, then scratched his bald pate. Much as he disliked it, he would have to obtain a few more of the moonglow wands. And that meant paying another visit to the demons' storeroom. He shivered at the thought. He was only a minor wizard. Not for him the dangerous and frightening adventures of dragon-slaying and spell-gathering. He much rather preferred tending his small garden. But if he wanted dragonwort he would need another moonglow wand.

Sighing, he gathered the materials needed to travel to the demon world—incense mixed with sulfur, his bottomless satchel, the blessed candles to protect his cottage against any returning evil, and lastly, the pentagram portal drawn on the floor with colored sand.

The glowing brazier filled the room with clouds of incense. Brambel stepped inside the portal with his satchel and lit the candles at the points of the pentagram with his last magic flint. He double-checked the pentagram lines to make sure all were intact, then uttered the magic words of transference.

Instantly, he stood within the demons' storeroom. The room was dark, but the lines of the pentagram glowed faintly on the floor about him, marking the portal.

He scurried hastily out of the pentagram. He had little time; no telling when a demon might enter, and he had no desire to meet one after his last near-encounter with one of their watchguards.

Brambel hurried up and down the aisles, searching by touch and memory for the wands, not risking the light of his magic flint. The demons were sensitive to fire. Finally, he found the wands three shelves down from where he last remembered them. He stuffed a generous supply of them into the satchel, adding several handfuls of the short spell containers.

He closed the satchel and listened for any approaching demon. He might have time to gather a few more needs. The demons kept a few plants in this storeroom, but they were prickly things, and he wanted no evil growth in his garden. Perhaps just a few more of the magic flints. Carefully, he retraced his steps to the pentagram. The flints were kept near there, behind a long table.

Hurriedly, he gathered the flints, surprised anew at their various sizes. He rummaged about the table, hunting for more. He sensed the light trap the second his foot broke it. Clever demons!

Bells clanged outside the storeroom, and he heard a far-off moaning. He scrambled around the table, bumping into things in his haste, and dove into the safety of the portal, quickly saying the words of return.

The cottage reappeared about him, and he swiftly erased the pentagram. Safe! Safe! Brambel mopped his forehead and patted his bulging satchel.



Officer Finseth shook his head in disgust as he returned to his partner.

"Same as last time," he said. "The manager says all that's missing are a few flashlights, batteries, and a lot of lighters."

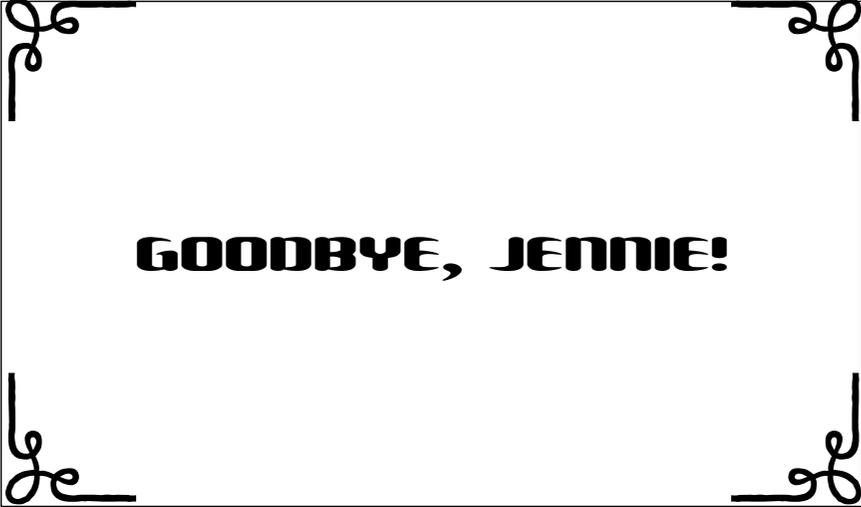
"Same sulfur smell, too," his partner commented.

"I don't get it. The guy breaks into the mall with no visible signs of entry, hits the same drugstore every time, and only takes a few flashlights?"

"You know what I think," his partner started.

"Yeah, yeah. But what would the Devil want with a lighter?"

"The Demons' Storeroom" previously appeared in *Another Realm*, December 1999. Reprinted from *Fury*, April 1993



GOODBYE, JENNIE!

Dear Jennie,
Burn this after you've read it.

Within a short time you will be hearing that your beloved sister is dead. An accident, they'll say, with flames consuming car and occupant. I won't be dead, Jen, but you must pretend that this is so. Never let anyone know the contents of this letter, and I mean anyone—not friends, not even Grandfather and Grandmother. Let this just be our little secret, and, twin, this is an important one! There are quite a number of people around who would not take very kindly to what I am about to tell you (that is, if they believed you to begin with).

I suppose I should have just let you believe, along with everyone else, the news of my death—it certainly would be safer for you if I did—but knowing how we both felt when Mom and Dad died, I couldn't do that to you. Believe me, if there were any other way to disguise my going, I would have used it. I know the real truth won't make you any happier, but knowing my twin sister as well as I do, I had to make sure you wouldn't simply set out to disprove my death. Please, just let the story stand unchallenged. A good deal depends on that story holding up.

Now, don't get worried at all this secrecy. I'll explain as I go along. All that really matters is that I am well, and happier than in my wildest dreams. The reason? I'm finally going into space! No, I haven't joined the space program. I doubt NASA would want a skinny redhead who can't remember her math. I found another way.

I suppose I'd better start at the beginning. Remember that meteor shower last week, and how I drove up to our old summer place in Wisconsin especially to see it? (Yes, I know my vacation ends this week, but Dr. Larson will have to find

a new lab technician.) Anyhow, I reached the cabin without any trouble. The forest seems smaller than it looked from a ten-year-old's eyes, but the meadow below it is as spacious and wide as ever. I watched the meteors from there, madly clutching a flashlight for company. I say madly because that night was so dark and so quiet that for the first time in my life I was lonely. I don't mean no-other-person-around lonely; I mean the-last-living-creature-on-Earth lonely! Then the meteors came.

Jen, mere words cannot describe that meteor shower. It wasn't just a collection of wandering space rocks burning up in the outer reaches of our atmosphere. There was something more about it, something so strange and wonderful that, just watching it, I felt somehow different. A warm feeling of kinship with the rest of the universe rose in me as I watched those falling rocks, along with a frightened, yet wondering, awe at the cold glory of the watching stars. It was so beautiful.

The last meteor gone, I was still wrapped in that awe when I had a creepy feeling of someone watching me. You know me—I don't have sense enough to be afraid; so, instead of leaving quietly and quickly like any normal person, I turned on the flashlight and looked around the meadow. I didn't see anyone, but then I suddenly realized I didn't *hear* anything, either. No crickets, no owls from the woods, not even a mosquito buzzing around my ear. It was a little frightening, but I kept looking. I knew there was someone around watching me, and you know me and my stubbornness. Finally, my light caught an answering glint from the grass in one corner of the meadow.

Investigating further, I found a small globe of what appeared to be glass nestled in the long grass. It looked like someone's paperweight, but if it was, it was an awfully odd one. The globe filled the palm of my hand but felt so light for glass and too glassy for plastic that I didn't know what to make of it. And when I turned my flashlight full on it, it seemed to be filled with swirling mists of green and white.

Right at my ear, a voice suddenly remarked, "You'll do."

To say I jumped is putting it mildly. I was so startled I dropped the flashlight and almost dropped the sphere. But that was only a light shock compared to the next one. Jennie, the meadow was empty! The only thing that voice could have come from was the sphere!

"Wh-what did you say?" I stammered. The globe was glowing now; I could see the swirling green and white mists quite clearly.

The sphere...chuckled. Sounded just like Grandfather.

"I said, 'You'll do.' And you proved my point nicely."

I will never know why I didn't throw that globe away and run screaming to the cabin at that point. This thing didn't feel like a machine or a new kind of walkie-talkie. It felt...unearthly. Still, I didn't run and I didn't scream. I guess I'm just too curious for my own good.

"Who, or what, are you?" I asked.

The sphere chuckled again. "You might call me a friend. One who has come a long way to meet you."

At that moment, the stars seemed to close in on me.

"What...do you want?" I ventured.

“Open your mind,” the little alien said.

I really don't know what happened next. I stood gazing into that sphere for what seemed to be an eternity, with that calm voice droning on inside my head. I don't remember anything he said, but after he stopped I looked up at the stars and *knew*. I knew what this little visitor was, what he wanted of me, and why. Best of all, I could look up into that brilliant night sky and see not just faint and faraway suns but the universe! Jen, the galaxy was opened before me! I saw the planets as Apson, the little being inside the globe, saw them. And I saw the stars as I had never dreamed I could. The universe is filled with life, and in so many varieties and forms it could take several lifetimes to know them all. And I'm going out to meet them!

By now you probably think your sister has gone crazy, or worse. I know how you feel because I thought I had, too. Even now, after several days of thinking and organizing (Apson's handling my “death”—my poor, beautiful car will be totaled), I keep feeling that I must be dreaming, that this can't be happening to me. Then I see that little blob of alien life sitting on Dad's desk and know my dream is reality. (Yes, I stayed on at the cabin, although I'll be gone by the time you receive this).

Why me? Why, out of several billion people on this planet, did Apson pick me to go back into space with him? That's a question I can't answer. All I know is that somewhere among the stars is a race of beings whose entire purpose in life is to help others along the path to maturity. They pick natives of the more advanced planets, train them, and appoint them to watch over and, whenever necessary, nudge their home planet and others onto the right road. And I know your next question. How can I be sure Apson isn't lying and that your gullible sister is not going to be kidnapped by alien mist-monsters? He opened his mind to me, Jennie. I could see his every thought, and I know for a fact that he is telling me the truth and would never hurt me. I have a friend in the truest sense of the word, Jen—one from the stars, no less!

But, even for me, the decision to go was a tough one. Sure, I could see the stars as I've always wanted to, but that kind of travel has quite a few disadvantages. I'm going to be on my own, more so than when Mom and Dad died, because you won't be there to pull me out of trouble and give me a good talking-to when the responsibility becomes too much. You probably won't see me again, not unless something earth-shaking happens in Evanston, and even then you won't recognize me. I'll have to remain dead as far as my friends are concerned, since the role or roles I might have to play could raise some very embarrassing questions if someone recognized me. That's why you'll soon be hearing of my “death.” There's truly no other way to mask my going without raising questions.

But, looking at it another way, I had to agree. I might have a chance to stop some of the blind cruelties of today's world. Plus, I'll be working with Apson. That part was irresistible. You'd like him, Jen. He's a sweet little guy, even if he is older than Grandfather and can sometimes act more dignified than that cat of yours.

Get that envious glint out of your green eyes, Jennie. You're the homebody half of us. I've always been the adventurous one, never content to sit still. This new life will be fun, but it will be dangerous, too. I'm looking forward to it just the same.

Still, I know I'm going to miss you terribly, Jen. Think kindly of your nutty twin when you see the stars at night. Goodbye, Jennie.

Your wandering half,
Janice

“Goodbye, Jennie!” previously appeared in *Shadowstar* #3, October 1981



Of course, with these summer cottages you have full access to the lake,” the tall young man was saying.

Marian stood in the dusty gravel road and listened to the advantages of renting one of his cottages with a slightly growing trace of boredom. What had she expected? When she’d felt that faint probe at her mind last night, she’d instantly thought of another esper, one unknown to her. But after a morning of searching in the direction from which the probe had stemmed and finding nothing but mind-blind people, she was ready to give up.

The young man smiled at her, and Marian returned it, feeling anything but pleasant toward this dull individual. She watched him carefully, frowning behind her mask. She’d pinpointed the probe to this area, but exasperatingly enough, nothing showed on her mental sweep of the neighborhood. It was beginning to look more and more as if she was the only young, sane esper in this part of the country. All the others she knew of were either old, dying people who were vaguely disturbed by their strange new abilities, or insane individuals who couldn’t handle the full powers of their minds. Marian had thought she was going insane herself when her abilities had suddenly appeared.

She sighed. It was lonely without someone who also talked mind-to-mind; she was still of an age to wish for a friend, one who was as different as she. She had friends among the normal people—those without ESP—but how many of those would remain so if they knew she could read their minds? She hated being on her guard at all times, watching what she said and did so no one would suspect she was different. Wasn’t there someone with whom she could relax and be herself?

“And that comes to only eight hundred dollars a month,” the young man finished.

Marian was about to thank him and go on her way when a small chipmunk darted under her car, followed by a large gray cat. Raw fear touched her mind. She peered under the car. Large yellow eyes glared warily at her as their owner cradled the chipmunk between its forepaws. The cat was toying with its captive, letting it escape only to close savage jaws on it and drag it back to its paws again and again.

The shared terror hurt. Marian picked up a stone and slung it at the cat. With a yowl of pain, it leaped to its feet, releasing its prey. Marian could feel its mind whirl with pain and anger as the chipmunk dashed out from under the car. Fury at the loss of its captive overwhelmed the pain, and the cat raced after the chipmunk.

The tiny animal was trapped between Marian and the cat. Marian moved back to give it room to escape, but, much to her surprise, the chipmunk sprang into the air and landed on her shoulder. She was startled, but rose quickly, reaching up to protect it as the cat circled her feet. She gently pushed the cat away with her foot, but it lashed at her angrily.

Ignoring the open-mouthed man beside her, Marian calmly hit the cat with a mental blow of terror. Yowling with fear, it vanished behind the cottage.

“Careful, miss,” the man stammered. “Animals don’t act like that unless they have rabies.”

Marian ignored him. Animals couldn’t harm her as long as she could control them. She suppressed any thought of biting in the small creature’s mind and tried to get the chipmunk off her shoulder. Slowly she released its claws’ frenzied grip on her blouse and gently deposited it on the ground. Instead of fleeing from her, however, it sat at her feet and looked up into her face. Then it flipped its tail as if in farewell and scampered away.

Marian stared after it. No wild animal had ever acted like that, not even when she controlled its mind. Probably had been tame once, she decided. She dismissed the incident and thanked the boring young man for his time. As she got into the car, she saw a chipmunk—Was it the same one?—watching her from the branch of a tree.

“Forget it,” she told herself firmly and drove to the next town.

She finally returned to her apartment late that night. Tired, she gave only slight attention to an unfamiliar car in the parking lot. If someone was having company, she wasn’t interested in checking out a stranger at this late hour.

Marian approached the building entrance, fumbling for her key. A dark figure detached from the building’s shadow, and she froze, directing all of her senses towards it.

“Good evening,” a familiar voice said.

It was that boring young man from the cottages. Marian started to relax, then realized something was wrong. His mind seemed asleep, almost as if he wasn’t controlling his actions. She peered deeper into his thoughts.

“Hmm, someone learns fast,” she muttered softly.

She reached out with her mind and snapped the strands of thought controlling the man. He sagged weakly, like a puppet with cut strings, and caught himself with a hand against the building.

“Are you okay?” she asked as he blinked at her. “Do you know where you are?”

“Where...?” he repeated slowly. “How—how did I get here?”

“Don’t you remember? You brought me some brochures about the resort.” She pointed. “Isn’t that your car in the lot?” Marian sensed upset from another’s mind as well as his. Better to end this conversation quickly.

“Yeah, that’s my car. Funny, I don’t remember driving here.” The man shrugged. “I’d best be getting back.”

“Thanks again.” Marian watched as the man hurried to his car and drove away.

She waited a bit longer, making sure the nosier neighbors had left their windows.

I’m sorry I overlooked you this morning, she said silently. She unlocked the entrance to the building and waited, holding the door open.

She sensed forgiveness and approval in another’s mind.

The chipmunk darted out of the shadows and stopped before her. It sat and watched her.

Now that I’ve passed your test, Marian said silently, *you and I have a lot to discuss*.

“Lonely” reworked from the version in *Shadowstar* #4, December 1981

TRANSFER STUDENT

Well, it's a typical first night back at the dorm," Cheryl said. "Did you see all the suitcases in the lobby?"

Tina grinned and leaned against the elevator wall. "More people at the bars tonight, too." The doors opened, and she winced at the loud blare of stereos. "Study floor, hah! Why do they always have to put freshmen in with us juniors and seniors?"

Cheryl laughed. "You expect it to be quiet on the first night? Wait until after classes start, grump."

"Humph. Remember last summer session? When you had to sleep on the floor in our room because your neighbors on both sides had midnight-until-two-A.M. parties? Hope we have a better RA this summer."

She followed Cheryl through the maze of boxes and plants outside one door.

"Did you hear Kara going on and on about her new major? Sounded as if she expected us to rush right out and change our majors, too."

"Well, ET studies *is* interesting, and there are more jobs in it."

"Not more than nursing." Tina eyed her roommate. "You going to change majors again? You'd have two years before graduating rather than a year and a half, and I always said you were wrong to change from sociology. How many isolated tribes are left to study firsthand? What good is cultural anthropology?"

Cheryl shook her head. "Look, Kara may have been your roommate last quarter and ET studies may be a great new field according to her, but I—"

"Only said at the end of last quarter you were bored stiff with anthro, so don't try to tell me different."

"What I'm trying to tell you is that there's something strange about this new major. When did you ever hear of new courses being offered during the summer

instead of the fall? And did you know this is the only university on Earth to have a major in ET studies? This tiny little university?"

"Kara's only been telling me that all night. Anyway, we've only met one alien race. Why 'extraterrestrial studies?' Why isn't it called 'Parrot studies' or 'Parrot culture' or something?"

"You think those are the only aliens in the universe? Anyhow, the correct name isn't 'Parrot.' That's just what the media call them."

"Who can pronounce the real name? Much less spell something that has to be whistled." Tina attempted a few notes.

Cheryl rubbed her ear. "If I have a choice, I'd rather listen to the whistler in the shower." She glanced down the hallway. "It's awfully quiet on this end of the floor. Wonder why?"

Tina stopped outside their door and rummaged for her key. "I wonder why I always have to unlock the door. What's wrong with a little quiet? Probably everybody's still out at the bars. We'd still be there if we both didn't have classes at seven-thirty tomorrow morning."

"There're lights on under most of the doors."

"So people are still unpacking."

"Who do you know that can unpack quietly?"

Tina sighed and opened the door. "You going to conduct a behavioral study of college students at eleven o'clock at night? Again?"

"Hmm. Let me brush my teeth first." She grinned at Tina's exasperated expression.



The splashing of water in the sink competed with the whirring hum of blowdryers across the bathroom. Cheryl glanced down the row of sinks to see who was using the dryers and froze, the toothbrush halfway to her mouth.

The alien's blue-and-green fur was still damp from the shower. Eyes closed, and trilling softly, it stood under the directed flow of three wall blowdryers, the brush in one clawed hand fluffing its blue head-fur out in the hot air. Cheryl numbly wondered how the being planned to dry its tail.

At first glance, the extraterrestrial resembled either a furry dinosaur or a human-sized parrot with arms rather than wings. The strong hooked beak strengthened the parrot resemblance, as did the feather-like fur, dark blue on the head and short tail and damp green down to its bare pink feet with two black-clawed toes pointing forward and two back. The furred hand holding the spiky brush had three clawed fingers and a clawless thumb. A circle of bare, chalk-white skin surrounded each eye, giving it a masked appearance.

The blowdryers abruptly shut off, and with a whistle that was almost a sigh, the ET opened its eyes and reached for the dryer's controls. The large dark-brown eyes fastened on Cheryl, and the brush paused in mid-stroke.

"Hello," the alien said.

Tina walked through the door behind Cheryl and stopped.

"Oh, no," she moaned, closing her eyes. "Don't tell me I'm going to have to give up beer."

“You’re not seeing things,” Cheryl whispered swiftly. “I just found out why they put that crazy toilet in this bathroom.”

She carefully put her toothbrush down and walked over to the ET, not wishing to shout across the room at it. *No*, she corrected herself, *that “it” has to be a “she” to be in here.*

“Hello. I’m Cheryl, and that’s my roommate Tina.”

The ET placed the claws of one hand against her furry chest and bobbed her head. “Cheryl. Tina. May your nests be filled with glad music. I am...” She whistled a long, sweet trill.”...but the humans on the ship shortened that to Sstwel.”

“Sstwel.” Cheryl hesitated, then copied the ET’s bob. “May your nest be filled with glad music.”

Sstwel seemed delighted, bobbing her head vigorously while chortling deep in her throat.

Tina giggled. “You’ve got a nice laugh, Sstwel.”

The ET bobbed to her. “I feared that I had committed some...” She whistled a sour note. “...to offend you humans. Silence among my people is used to correct hatchlings.”

Cheryl and Tina exchanged glances.

“Freshmen,” Tina said disgustedly. “Who’s the idiot RA on this floor?”

“What can she do?” Cheryl said cynically. “She’s only the resident advisor.” She turned back to the puzzled ET. “Sstwel,” she began, “the young of our species are...fearful of strangers.”

Rims of orange cornea appeared as the brown of Sstwel’s eyes shrank, then dilated. She clicked her beak. “Our young are much alike. *Tiveel*, the fears I had when I was to become adult! The home nest seemed so safe and the outside world so big and unknown. This university has young-who-would-become-adult, as well as adults?”

Cheryl firmly pushed her desire to hear more into a back corner and tried to think of a way to help the ET.

“Uh, yes. Sstwel, you must be cold in your damp fur. I have a handheld blow dryer that will do a better job than those wall units. Come, you can use it in my room.”

Puzzled, Tina watched as Cheryl all but pushed Sstwel out the door. Cheryl mouthed one word behind the ET’s back and jerked her thumb towards the opposite hallway door. Tina smothered a laugh and dashed out, counting rapidly on her fingers.

“Renaë and Jil are on this floor, and Donna might be back by now. Wonder if Kara would be willing to come over from her dorm at this hour?”



There was a limit to how many people could fit in a dorm room, especially when one of them had a tail. Neighbors came out to see what was causing all the noise, and more than a few of them stayed. The popcorn party spilled out into the hallway and spread to other rooms, but the largest group of people stayed around the main attraction.

“What’s it like to travel in hyperspace? Does it feel any different from normal space?”

“Don’t interrupt, Kara. Sstwel was telling us about the singing insects.”

Sstwel bobbed, nibbling delicately on a piece of popcorn. The ET was delighted with the treat and ecstatic over the music recordings, trilling along with each selection unless distracted by a question. Tina muttered that she seemed to be getting drunk on either the music or the attention.

Cheryl grinned at her roommate. “Both, I’ll bet. She’s probably never met this many strangers all at once.”

“There’re as many Parrots as humans.”

“Only because they colonized another planet. Don’t you remember that big uproar a few years back? When the very people who once said space exploration was useless threatened to sue the space agency because it hadn’t found a planet for us to colonize?”

“I don’t have the time to read newspapers. You wouldn’t either if you didn’t have that job at the library.”

“Never mind. You remember that ‘nest’ Sstwel spoke of? It’s a big interrelated family. The young don’t come into contact with anyone outside the nest until they reach adulthood, when each one becomes apprenticed to an older family member’s trade. Sstwel won’t begin her apprenticeship until after she finishes here, so she isn’t even accustomed to social contact among adults of *her* world.”

Tina blinked. “Cheryl, if you don’t stop speaking anthropologese, I won’t be able to understand you all summer.” She shook her head. “That explains why you looked so disgusted with us when we came in. You certainly learned a lot from her in a few minutes.”

“I only hope she learned enough from me about humans to suss us out before any misunderstandings develop.”

“Will you stop being the anthropologist studying the aborigines for once and relax?” Tina indicated the knot of people about the ET. “Look at her. Everybody likes her. Why should she get into any trouble? Never mind, don’t answer that.” She glanced into their crowded room and sighed. “Well, you started this. Now think of a way to get this mob to leave before they camp here all night.”



Due to lack of sleep, Cheryl gave up trying to concentrate on her seven-thirty class halfway through the lecture. She stared unseeingly at the clock and wondered how Sstwel would be received by the campus.

By the time her nine o’clock class started, she knew.

“Hey, everybody!” an excited sophomore yelled as he burst through the door. “There was a big green chicken walking around Memorial Hall!”

The bearded graduate assistant permitted himself a skeptical chuckle. “A green chicken?”

“Parrot,” a junior corrected scornfully. He noticed the assistant’s confusion and added, “One of those aliens. I saw it at breakfast. Somebody said there are five of them on campus.”

“A real alien?” The grad assistant nervously fumbled his papers. “What is an alien doing here?”

“They probably plan to colonize this planet, too.” The junior scowled. “Lousy aliens think they’re so superior.”

“I wouldn’t say they’re superior,” the sophomore said, calming. “We found them, after all.”

“Look, kid—” the junior started.

“But what are they doing here?” the grad assistant repeated.

“There is only one ET,” Cheryl said, deciding she had listened long enough. “And she’s a student, just like us.”

“She? It’s a she?”

“Well, I think it’s very brave of her to come among us lousy aliens,” the sophomore said, enjoying the junior’s discomfiture.

“A green chicken,” the grad assistant said uneasily.

Cheryl heard similar comments on her way back to the dorm. She frowned as she noticed someone demonstrating Sstwel’s stooped, pigeon-toed walk to a disbelieving audience.

That the powers-that-be had seen fit to throw a young, naive ET into university life without any preparation on either side was to be expected. Ditto the fact the University’s newly hired expert in ET psychology wasn’t due to arrive until fall quarter. At least Sstwel’s first day hadn’t sounded *too* bad.

The cafeteria buzzed at lunch. Cheryl stared curiously at the high table adjoining theirs, then carefully placed her tray down with enough force to rattle the flatware.

“I saw you coming,” Tina said, not lifting her eyes from her textbook. “You didn’t need to announce yourself.”

“Just wanted to make sure you hadn’t fallen into your usual trance.” She slid into the chair opposite Tina’s. “What’s been happening? I heard two instructors fainted.”

“Hmm? No, just one. You remember Dr. Hager? Seventy if he’s a day and still believes the world is flat.”

“He’s also so nearsighted he can’t find his own office without help. How did he get close enough to Sstwel to even guess she’s an ET?”

Tina laughed and closed her book. “Her feet are too big for stairs unless she goes up them sideways. Fortunately, all her classes are in buildings with elevators.”

“What does that have to do with Dr. Hager? Oh.”

“Oh’ is right. From what I heard, Dr. Hager stepped into an elevator and told the student there to press the button for the second floor. The rest you can guess.”

“Hi, fellow humans! Sstwel will be down for lunch in a minute.” Donna slid the small stack of books away from Tina and settled herself into the vacated spot. “You should have seen her at breakfast!”

“We had earlier classes. What did we miss?”

Donna laughed. “She wears makeup!”

Tina stared. "Where?"

"You know those big white circles around her eyes? Brightly decorated with the most brilliant orange paint I've ever seen. She also had a wide belt of the same bright orange." Donna shook her head. "The cafeteria was so quiet I could hear her claws click on the floor."

"And?" Cheryl prodded.

Donna shrugged. "And nothing. Who's awake at breakfast? A few people did look at her as if she were a new kind of pink elephant, but that was about it. Plus, part of my floor and some of yours ate with her." She gestured vaguely at the high table. "I'm not used to people standing while they eat, but her people don't sit. They do talk and eat at the same time, though. She seemed really excited, twittering and nodding her head all the time."

Tina smiled. "It's the kid's first day of school. Say, Cheryl, how can Sstwel be starting as a junior if there're no universities on her planet?"

Cheryl reached for her glass. "I think the university's considering her a transfer student. After all, she *has* had her people's equivalent of general education at college level."

Donna nodded. "So, all she needs here is her major. Know what it is?" Cheryl shook her head, and Donna grinned at them. "Marketing. She plans to go into advertising."

"Marketing?" her audience chorused.

Donna's grin broadened. "And I found out who the RA on your floor is."

Tina groaned. "From that nasty look on your face she must be that Lynn Whats-her-name we had last summer. How did you find out? We didn't see any sign of her last night."

"She introduced herself to Sstwel at breakfast."

"How did she explain last night's silent treatment?" Tina growled.

"According to Lynn, most people aren't used to blue-and-green fur."

"She hasn't changed," Tina muttered. "Still sticking her foot in her mouth."

"Yep. Renae and Kwang immediately asked if she was implying there was something wrong with Sstwel's color. Then, while Lynn was standing there with her mouth hanging open, Sstwel started twittering that the red-and-oranges may be more numerous, but the blue-greens outnumber the red-greens or the grays." She laughed. "Good thing for Lynn we had to leave for class at that point. Sstwel still had a few more colors to go."

Cheryl smiled and wondered if Donna knew that the fur colors of Sstwel's people, unlike human hair colors, included all the shades of the spectrum and that the possible combinations were endless. Sstwel had been telling Lynn the colors of her nest.

Tina looked up and waved. "Kara! How's ET studies coming?"

"Don't ask." The petite blonde dumped her books atop the growing stack and rummaged through a folder. "They canceled one class on the..." She whistled the eight-note name. "...since the instructor now won't be here until fall. All that's offered is the introductory class, and the reading list is nothing but science fiction."

Cheryl glanced at the reading list held out to her. "All the classic first-contact stories."

"But we've known the Parrots for four years now and have found several planets without intelligent life!" Kara replaced her folder. "What's wrong with a little facts in with the theory?"

"Seems odd, doesn't it?"

"Don't get Cheryl started," Tina groaned. "It's just the introductory class, Kara. Freshman-level, right? So it's as basic as possible. The higher-level classes will get into the probes."

"How are the guys on your floor reacting to the idea of an ET?" Cheryl interrupted.

Kara shrugged. "The same as the girls. Mixed reactions, with some grumblings and some curiosity. Everybody is waiting to see what everybody else will do."

Donna grimaced. "Five weeks for this session, a week off, then five weeks for second summer session. It's going to be a long summer for Sstwel if everybody just waits."

"It certainly will be an interesting one," Cheryl said absently. Sstwel had entered the cafeteria, and Cheryl began counting how many people actually drew away from the ET versus smiled or greeted the furry being. She nodded in satisfaction, noticing a larger group of curious watchers. "Yes, it will be interesting."

Donna scrambled to her feet. "There's Sstwel. Hurry, so we can go through the lunch line with her."

"Why? I already have my lunch." Tina warily prodded her sandwich.

"If you go through the lunch line with Sstwel, you can get whatever's left of her type of food. It's pretty good."

Tina pushed her sandwich away. "That's what you said about the meatloaf last night. Is it safe for humans?"

Donna shrugged. "She can eat some types of our food. C'mon, it's much better than the normal food served around here."



"It's *blue!*" Tina drew away from the plate held out to her.

"The lizard eggs this morning were bright-red, but still good." Donna deftly snagged the plate.

Kara gulped. "Don't tell us what we're eating, Sstwel. Please."

Sstwel's large eyes studied Kara. Her head tilted as the claws of one hand combed the fur about her beak. She shook her head and whistled in confusion.

"It is only heated grain, like your popcorn."

"Blue popcorn, yet," Donna said happily.

Tina sidled up to Cheryl on their way back to the tables.

"If Donna asks to try that brown thing with the legs, I'll scream. Blue popcorn I can take, but roasted bugs?"

Cheryl chuckled. "Think of it as a brown lobster with twelve legs. Anyhow, nobody's asking you to try it. The servers didn't give any to us, only to Sstwel."

"Yeah, but with my luck, it's probably better than last night's meatloaf."

Cheryl did not feel like laughing later that afternoon. Kara was waiting for her in the dorm lobby when she returned from her job.

“Renaë called,” Kara said quickly, falling into step with her, “and asked me to come over and warn you when you got back from the library. There’s trouble on your floor. It seems Sstwel’s neighbors don’t want to be her neighbors.”

Cheryl checked her watch. “Sstwel won’t be back from class for another half-hour. Did Renaë say anything else? Such as what the RA is doing to settle this?”

“Just her usual imitation of an RA. First she agrees with the neighbors, then she agrees with Sstwel’s friends from last night’s party.”

Cheryl pressed the elevator call button. “She never should have been given Sstwel’s floor. This is all the result of stupid planning on the university’s part! As usual.” She pushed the button again.

Kara’s eyebrows raised. “Why blame the university?”

“I have the feeling that Sstwel is supposed to be part of an experiment. All the others of her kind here on Earth are full adults, professionals of one type or another. Ambassadors, musicians, businesspeople. As professionals, they’d be on their very best behavior all the time, so we humans wouldn’t form any bad impression of them. We also get a rather biased view of them. Same thing happens with our people on their worlds.”

“So?”

“So when our two cultures finally do mix, when travel to their planets becomes as commonplace as a flight anywhere on this world, Sstwel’s people will be in for a shock! Of course, Sstwel’s people may not all be as polite as she is, either. Our two cultures have to learn to not always expect the best behavior from each other. There’re examples all through our history of cultures contacted by polite, educated people only to have near-wars start up when full contact is achieved and the tourists arrive.”

“I think I see what you’re getting at. Sstwel was sent here to show us what an average Parrot is like. And she’s doing that. So where’s the problem?”

The elevator doors opened, and Cheryl stepped in and jabbed her floor button.

“The problem is that something has obviously gone wrong with the experiment. Your ET classes, I’ll bet, were supposed to help us humans understand her culture a bit, but none of the qualified instructors appeared. There was supposed to be an ET advisor here to help Sstwel understand us a bit. Instead, Sstwel’s been thrown into this entirely on her own.”

The elevator doors opened on an extremely noisy study floor and Kara grinned.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say she’s entirely alone, Cheryl. She has quite a few friends here.”

The shouting match was centered in front of Sstwel’s room. Renaë and a shrill-voiced brunette were at full volume, while between them, Lynn tried vainly to make herself heard.

“I don’t want to live next to some bird!” the brunette shrieked. “It started whistling at seven this morning!”

“And you heard her whistles all the way down in the cafeteria?” Cheryl said as the brunette paused for breath. “While you were having breakfast?”

“Oh, so she was in the cafeteria, huh?” Renae crossed her arms and glared at her opponent. “You must have extremely sensitive hearing.”

“That thing is either chirping or whistling all the time!”

“And some people talk all the time!” Renae retorted. “I certainly wouldn’t want to be your neighbor! Sstwel sounds better!”

“That’s right,” murmured the group behind her.

“Girls, please!” Lynn said, and seemed surprised when she had their attention. “The, uh, best solution would be to, uh, simply change rooms.”

“Fine by me,” the brunette agreed. She studied Renae. “I’m sure you wouldn’t mind being the thing’s neighbor.”

“Fine by me,” Renae mimicked.

“No, Renae,” one of her friends said. “I’d like to be Sstwel’s neighbor.”

“No, no! I will!”

“I think you’re missing the problem,” Cheryl interrupted. “The problem isn’t who’s going to be Sstwel’s neighbor.”

The entire group stared at her in silence.

“It isn’t?” Lynn finally asked.

“Of course not. There are several people right here willing to be Sstwel’s neighbor. The problem is, who wants to be *her* neighbor?” Cheryl asked, indicating the brunette.

“That’s right! Renae, you can’t move! I don’t want to live next to her!”

“Me, neither.”

“Now, wait a minute,” the brunette started, flushing.

Renae grinned. “A show of hands! Who wants...I mean, who can tolerate her as a neighbor?”

The brunette glared at her former supporters.

“I don’t live on this floor,” one of them said.

Another, timid under the laughter of Sstwel’s friends, half-raised her hand.

Cheryl nodded. “You’re one of my neighbors, right? Juanita, you’re on the other side of my room. What do you say?”

The young woman shrugged. “All right. But she’d better be a very quiet neighbor.”



“What,” Tina asked in the reasonable voice reserved for humoring the insane, “do you think you’re doing?”

Cheryl picked up an armload of clothes and stopped as Tina blocked the doorway.

“We’re moving.”

“That’s what it looks like, all right. Why?”

“One of Sstwel’s neighbors didn’t want to be her neighbor.”

A loud squawk came from outside the door, followed by mournful squeaks.

Cheryl dropped the clothes.

“Tina, couldn’t you have told me Sstwel was outside?”

The ET was crouched in a furry huddle, beak tucked tightly against chest, in the center of the hallway. Tina clapped her hands over her ears.

“Sstwel, will you stop that squeaking?”

Cheryl squatted beside the ET. “Sstwel, open your eyes and look at me.”

A brown eye peeked out at her from the blue-and-green huddle. Struggling not to laugh at the comical sight, Cheryl tried to inject a sad note in her voice.

“Sstwel, don’t you want to be our neighbor? Tina and I are moving next door to you.”

The squeaks stopped, but Sstwel still remained in her huddle.

“Banging on wall not sign of friendship?”

Cheryl shook her head. “No.”

The brown eye closed, and the squeaks resumed briefly. The huddle shuddered as Sstwel took a deep breath.

“I will help you move,” she said, unwinding.

Cheryl glanced among the curious crowd that had gathered in the hallway and noticed that Sstwel’s former neighbor had the decency to look ashamed of herself. Cheryl patted the ET’s arm, briefly marveling at the silkiness of the fur.

“Don’t worry, Sstwel. The first day of school is always the worst.”



The days passed slowly but not uneventfully enough for Sstwel’s friends. A hasty turn by Sstwel in the library stacks cleared several shelves of their books and trapped her tail in the debris. Cheryl watched worriedly from main desk as librarians hurried toward the source of the racket, but Sstwel’s rescuers only asked the ET to watch her U-turns in the future.

Cheryl managed to control a fit of the giggles when Sstwel crouched in the apologetic posture and knocked down a few more shelves with her stubby tail. But a conspiratorial wink from the head librarian destroyed her composure as Sstwel was gently steered to a less-dangerous aisle.

A few rainy days the second week resulted in Sstwel’s first trip downtown after one instructor gently but firmly informed her that students in his class did not shake themselves dry inside the classroom. After the first few stores, Cheryl decided that salespeople were too accustomed to the odd shapes of human customers to be shocked by a mere extraterrestrial. Sstwel in her new raincape and hood soon became a familiar, if comical, sight on campus.

“Strangers smile and wave now,” Sstwel twittered happily. “Does the coat make me look more like a human?”

On the floor, Cheryl held her brush away from the exercise she was copying in Sstwel’s language and struggled to swallow her laughter.

“No,” she choked. She sat back on her heels to look up at the ET and wondered why the being still wore fluorescent-green eye paint and matching belt. Makeup was usually only for classes. “No, I think people are friendly now because they no longer see you as a stranger.”

Sstwel chirped disbelief and hit a computer key with her claw.

“But, friend Cheryl, packaging makes all the difference.”

“Don’t start quoting your textbooks at me. You’re not a product; you’re a person.”

“Sstwel, do you have the blow dryer again?” Tina, a large towel wrapped about her hair, appeared in the open doorway. She looked about the room and shook her head. “Never will get used to how much space a dorm room has without the beds and dressers,” she muttered.

Cheryl followed her gaze. The only furniture Sstwel needed was the high table serving as a desk and the nestlike pile of cushions in one corner. A photo of Sstwel’s closest nestmates stood on one end of the bookshelf and one of the Forever Tree on the other, while gigantic posters of the Grand Tetons and the Swiss Alps covered opposing walls.

Sstwel rummaged through the clutter atop her desk.

“Still, Cheryl, if I had worn my cape the day you and Donna taught me to throw Frisbees, more strangers would have stayed and become friends.”

Tina glanced curiously at the ET. “How many friends do you want? Half the dorm was playing and the other half hanging out the windows watching.”

“There weren’t that many, Tina,” Cheryl disagreed.

“Well, no, not after Sstwel caught that Frisbee in her beak and bit the thing in half.”

Sstwel crouched low. “I did not mean to damage it.”

Cheryl frowned at her roommate. “Oh, Sstwel, get up. Tina knew that. So did the guy who owned the Frisbee. He wouldn’t have asked us to play again this Saturday if you had broken it deliberately.”

Sstwel squawked sharply in dismay. “No blow dryer, friend Tina.”

“Cheryl, are you hiding it again? I can’t find it in the room.”

“But I always leave it on the...” The worried expression on Tina’s face urged her to her feet. “I’ll be back, Sstwel.”

Tina hurried her into their room and closed the door.

“The blow dryer’s right here, Tina.”

“I know.” Tina pulled the towel off her head and tried to pat her dry hair into order. “I couldn’t think of any other excuse.” She gestured Cheryl away from the wall by Sstwel’s room and waited, listening. Soon Sstwel, never long silent, began trilling softly to herself.

“Tina, what’s all the mystery about?”

“There’s a strange character going around campus asking questions about Sstwel.”

“There’re always strange characters on campus. What kind of questions?”

Tina shook her head. “I don’t know. Jil overheard him in the union and followed him around campus all afternoon.”

Cheryl frowned. “Then I’d better talk to Jil. Where—”

“She’s waiting for you down in Donna’s room. So’re Renae and Donna.”

Cheryl smiled and shook her head. “And Kara’s probably on her way over, right? Sounds as if you’re calling a war council.”

“Well, Jil said he didn’t act like a student.”

“He didn’t act like a teacher, either,” Jil said a short time later. “He asked a lot of questions and noticed everything. From Sstwel’s table in the library to her beak marks on some of the trees.”

Cheryl smiled faintly at that. Sstwel did enjoy climbing things. The University had received more than a few complaints about Sstwel monopolizing the town park’s jungle gym.

“He even knew about the Committee to Ban Claws!” Jil finished.

“Those three guys in the men’s dorm?” Donna grinned mischievously. “I thought they gave up after that rumor went around they were against long fingernails on women, too.”

“I wish Whats-her-name, Sstwel’s ex-neighbor, would give up so easily,” Tina muttered. “That girl’s becoming a real nuisance. And Lynn’s no help at all.”

“You expect her to be?” Donna asked in amazement. “What’s Whats-her-name up to now?”

“One problem at a time,” Cheryl interrupted. “Jil, what kind of questions did this man ask? The what-has-Sstwel-been-doing type?”

The junior nodded. “He always asked that first with each person he talked to. And then he’d ask how they felt about her being here.”

“And?”

“That was it.”

“That’s all?” Cheryl saw the others did not share her puzzlement. “He just asked for opinions? He didn’t try to stir up any bad feelings?” Jil shook her head. “Did he have any recording devices?”

Jil shook her head again. “I thought at first that he might be a reporter, but he didn’t take any notes that I could see.”

Kara glanced out the window. “If he’s not a reporter or another troublemaker, what could he be up to? Most of the grumbling stopped after Sstwel got a C and a D on her midterm exams.” She snapped her fingers. “Maybe he’s a spy for the anti-alien groups!”

“With enough anti-alien students here on campus to do all the spying needed?” Cheryl shook her head. “The groups don’t need to bring in any outsiders. They’re already winning.”

“Winning what?” Tina asked. “Cheryl, you haven’t made any sense the past two weeks. So a few kids started a petition. They only got twenty signatures.”

“Jil, where is the man now?”

“Somewhere in Altgeld Hall. I lost him in the administrative wing. There’re too many interconnecting offices. Ben was out there trying to straighten out some problem with his records—”

“Ben’s that guy from one of Sstwel’s classes who’s been tutoring her on marketing,” Renae explained to Kara.

“—so he will try to see if he can spot that man leaving.”

Renae whistled sharply. “There are at least ten exits from Altgeld.”

“And six of us,” Cheryl replied. “Let’s go give Ben a hand. I’d like to see this curious stranger.”

Donna flung open the door, almost overbalancing the sunburned individual who stood outside it, one hand ready to knock.

"Is Jil—Jil! Why didn't you tell anyone where you were going? Took me the last half-hour to track you down!"

"Ben!" Jil squeaked. "What are you doing here? Did the man leave? Did you lose him?"

Ben shook his head. "He's here! Upstairs, talking to Sstwel."

"What?" six voices chorused. Ben barely got out of the way of the stampede in time.

"Wait, wait." Tina stopped, blocking the stairwell door. "We can't all go rushing up there at once."

"Why not?"

"Cheryl, tell your roommate to get out of the way."

Tina shook her head. "What if he is a reporter? We need someone to check out the situation while the rest of us sneak into my room and listen at the wall." She beamed at her roommate. "And I know just who would be best at the job. After all, she started this business of being friendly with aliens."

Jil chuckled. "You did say you wanted to see this stranger, Cheryl."

"I know, I know." She eyed Tina. "I suppose it helps that I've left my notes over at Sstwel's?"

"You always did think of the best excuses," Tina agreed as she opened the door for her.

Cheryl paused outside Sstwel's door and frowned thoughtfully at the swift whistle-speech she could hear inside. She felt eyes watching from the distant stairwell as she knocked. Claws clicked across the floor, and the door flew open.

"Cheryl! You have returned." Sstwel's claws plucked at her sleeve. "In, in."

Leaning comfortably against the far wall was a man with flecks of gray at his temples and laugh lines about his eyes. Sstwel twittered excitedly, "Cheryl, this is my dearest adopted-nest-elder, Commander Lohrey."

Cheryl suddenly realized she was gaping at him and shut her mouth.

"C—Commander Lohrey? Not as in *Dr. Lohrey*, the ET psychologist?"

"The same," he said, shaking her limp hand. "And you are Cheryl. I've heard a good deal about you. I had thought you might be that sandy-haired young woman who shadowed me all over campus, but..."

"That's Jil." Cheryl shook her head dazedly, and from the hallway came the distant rumble of six people sneaking quietly into the next room. "Uh, you weren't supposed to be here until fall quarter."

Dr. Lohrey chuckled. "I was supposed to be here *this* quarter. However, a minor emergency on Sstwel's planet delayed me. I was just explaining to this troublesome young..." He whistled a series of descending notes. "...that I had left word for her to delay her departure until I could accompany her."

Sstwel's head lowered, but her claws busily groomed her neck fur.

"I have made many good friends," the ET said proudly, her head fur fluffing out so that she seemed taller.

“Luckily for you,” the psychologist growled. “Or else a certain young colonist would have had her branch on the nestworld’s Forever Tree given to a more obedient nestling.”

This time Sstwel crouched correctly in apology, her head fur sleeked against her skull. But the brown eye nearest Cheryl closed in a hard-learned wink, and Cheryl knew the ET was not greatly intimidated by the threat.

“I’m sorry about your experiment, Dr. Lohrey,” Cheryl interrupted. “We tried to help, but—”

“My experiment?” The psychologist’s wondering innocence was polished perfection, and Cheryl decided he was probably a diplomat as well. He smiled pleasantly, and Cheryl could not restrain her answering grin. The man was truly an expert in his field.

He leaned back against the wall. “Tell me about this ‘experiment.’”

“Well, it’s just a theory of mine. But suppose someone wanted to show that humans and some alien lifeform—”

“Like the Parrots, perhaps?” Dr. Lohrey suggested with a grin.

“—could get along if they were gradually accustomed to the idea. You...I mean, the experimenter...might start off by having alien students attend human universities, and humans attend the alien universities, or their equivalent.”

“You might,” Dr. Lohrey mused thoughtfully. “But why universities?”

“Because the people who work and study there are educated enough to be openminded, to be able to tolerate ideas and people that are a little out of the ordinary.” Cheryl sighed. “But it didn’t work. They aren’t openminded. I’m sorry, Dr. Lohrey, but the experiment didn’t work.”

The psychologist gave her a quizzical look. “When I was last here to start preparations for Sstwel’s arrival, opinion on ETs was sharply divided between the science fiction people and the don’t-cares. Ninety percent of the people I spoke with thought the Parrots had to be dangerous simply because they had claws! As if a tree dweller should only have suction pads or a great deal of rope.”

Sstwel hissed indignantly. “Suction pads! I am no singing leaper or herd bug!”

Muffled clapping came through the wall. “That’s telling them, Sstwel!”

Dr. Lohrey’s eyebrows raised.

“We thought you were one of the enemy,” Cheryl said with a grin. “The rest of the troops are listening next door.” She shrugged. “I suppose the general feeling towards ETs has worsened now.”

“No, quite the contrary,” he said mildly. “About seventy-five percent now think ETs are just like humans. A trifle clumsy, perhaps, but—”

“Too narrow!” Sstwel squawked. “Everything—rooms, buildings—too narrow! I must always stand straight. No place to stoop in comfort indoors without bumping my head or catching my tail in something!” She snapped her beak angrily.

In the silence that followed, Tina’s voice could be heard quite clearly.

“How should I know why they’re both picking on Sstwel? I suppose we’d better go over and rescue her, though.”

As Sstwel, chuckling, went to answer the door, Dr. Lohrey said casually, “There will be about ten more of Sstwel’s people starting here fall quarter. Do you know of any people who might like jobs as RAs in the dorms or as mentors?”

“Oh, I might know a few.” Cheryl grinned. Sstwel bobbed like some mad toy as her friends entered.

“Good.” The psychologist thoughtfully rubbed his jaw. “I think I’ll need help with this new group. Would you be willing to be my assistant? But only for a year,” he added as Cheryl opened her mouth. “After that...hmm. Have you ever considered finishing your education abroad?”

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