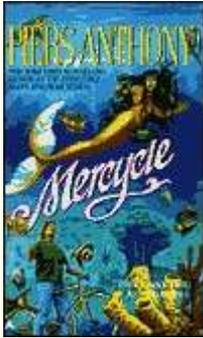


by Piers Anthony

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## CHAPTER 1 DON

Proxy 5-12-5-16-8: Attention.

Acknowledging.

Status?

Four locals have been recruited and equipped. They are waiting for the signal to commence.

They are ignorant of their mission?

They believe they have missions, but none know the true one. They have been given a cover story relevant to their interests. By the time they realize that the cover story is irrelevant, they should be ready for the truth.

Contraindications?

One is an agent of a local government.

Why is this allowed?

The recruitment brought the response of this person. It seemed worth trying. That one can be eliminated if necessary. Such involvement might prove to be advantageous.

With the fate of a world at stake?

We do not know what will be most effective. It is no more risky than the exclusion of such persons might be.

It remains a gamble.

Any course is a gamble.

True. Proceed.

Acknowledged. I will start the first one through the phasing tunnel.

Don Kestle pedaled down the road, watching nervously for life. It was early dawn, and the sparrows were twittering in the Australian Pines as they waited for the picnickers, but nothing human was visible.

Now was the time. He shifted down to second, muttering as the chain caught between gear-sprockets and spun without effect. He still wasn't used to this multiple-speed bicycle, and it seemed to be more trouble than it was worth. He fiddled with the lever, and finally it caught.

He bucked the bike over the bank and into the unkempt grass, moving as rapidly as he could. He winced as he saw his thin tires going over formidable spreads of sandspur, though he knew the stuff was harmless to him and his equipment. That was because, as he understood it, he wasn't really here.

Soon he hit the fine white dry sand. He braked, remembering this time to use the hand levers instead of embarrassing himself by pedaling backwards, and dismounted automatically. Actually it was quite possible to ride over the sand, for it could not toss this bike—but anyone who happened to see him doing that might suspect that something was funny. A bicycle tire normally lost traction and support, skewing badly in such a situation.

In a moment the beach opened out to the sea: typical palm-studded Florida coastline. Seagulls were already airborne, raucously calling out. A sign warned NO SWIMMING, for there were treacherous tidal currents here. That was why Don had selected this spot and this time to make his cycling debut; it was least likely to harbor prying eyes. He had been given a place and a time to be there; his exact schedule was his own business.

The tide was out. Don walked his bicycle across the beach until he reached the packed sand near the small breaking waves. Myriad tiny shells formed a long low hump, and he realized that early-rising collectors could appear at any moment. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Yet when else could he enter the water, clothed and on a bicycle, by daylight? He simply had to risk it.

Beyond the shell ridge, the sand was wet and smooth. He looked carefully, both ways, as if crossing a busy intersection. Was he hoping that there would be someone, so that he would have to call it off?

No, he wanted to do it, Don reassured himself. In any event, his timing was such that he could not spare the hours an alternate approach would require. He had chosen dawn at this beach, and now he was committed. He had been committed all along. It was just that—well, a bit hard to believe. Here he was, a healthy impetuous fair-complexioned beginning archaeologist with a bicycle—and a remarkable opportunity. What could he do except grasp it, though he hardly comprehended it?

Don remounted and pushed down hard, driving his machine forward into the flexing ocean. The waves surged through the wheels, offering no more resistance than air. He moved on, feeling the liquid against his legs as the force of gentle wind. He didn't really need more power, but he shifted into first anyway, bolstering his confidence. It remained hard to believe that he was doing this.

The bottom dropped, and abruptly he was coasting down into deeper water. Too fast for his taste. Now he did backpedal, futilely. There was no coaster brake on this machine!

The water rose up to his thighs, then his chest, then his neck. Still he coasted down. In another instant it was up across his face, and then it closed over his head. Don did not slow or float; he just kept going in.

He could see beneath, now. There was a rocky formation here, perhaps formed of shell. He would have investigated the local marine terrain more carefully, if only he had had time. But the whole thing had been set up so rapidly that he had barely had time to buy his bike before going through the tunnel. Now here he—

He realized that he was holding his breath. He forced himself to breathe, surprised in spite of himself that he still could do it. He had tested it by plunging his head into a tub of water, but somehow the surging seawater had restored his doubt. He applied his handbrakes.

The bicycle glided to a halt. Don braced it upright by spreading his legs, and rested in place for a moment with his eyes closed. This way he could breathe freely, for he couldn't see the surrounding water.

Don found himself cowering. He knew he was not physically courageous, but this seemed to be an overreaction. In a moment he realized why: it was the noise.

He had somehow imagined that the underwater realm was silent. Instead it was noisier than the land. Some was staccato sound, some was whistling, and some was like the crackling of a hot frying pan. Grunts, clicks, flutters, swishes, honks, rattling chains, cackling hens, childish laughter, jackhammers, growls, knocking, whining, groaning, mouse squeaks—it all merged into a semi-melodious cacophony. He had no idea what was responsible for the assault, but was sure that it couldn't all be inanimate. The nearest commercial enterprise was twenty miles away!

Could fish talk? Probably he would soon find out. It would be no more fantastic than the other recent developments of his life.

He was way under the water, standing and breathing as if it didn't exist. How had he gotten into this?

"Well, it all started about twenty three years ago when I was b-born," he said aloud, and laughed. He was not unduly reflective, but he did stutter a bit under tension. So maybe it wasn't really funny.

Don opened his eyes.

He was down under, all right. He could see clearly for perhaps twenty feet. Beyond that was just bluegreen water-color wash. Above him, eight or ten feet, was the restless surface: little waves cruising toward ruin against the beach. Beneath him was a green meadow of sea grass, sloping irregularly down.

Now that he was stationary, he did not feel the water. He waved his hands, and they met no more resistance than they might have in air. It was warm here: about 88 ° Fahrenheit according to the indicator clipped to his bicycle. The temperature of subtropical coastal water in summer. He would be able to work up a sweat very quickly—unless he chose to descend to the deeper levels where the water got cold. He did not choose to do so, yet. Anyway, he was largely insulated from the water's temperature, as he was from its density. That was all part of the miracle of his situation.

A small fish swam toward him, evidently curious about this weird intruder. Don didn't recognize the type; he was no expert on marine biology. In fact he didn't know much about anything to do with the ocean. It was probably a nondescript trash fish, the kind that survived in these increasingly polluted waters. This one looked harmless, but of course even the deadliest killer shark was not harmful to him now. He was really not in the water, but in an aspect of reality that was just about 99.9% out of phase with what he saw about him. Thus the water had the effective density of air.

In impulse, he grabbed at the fish as it nosed within reach. His hand closed about its body—and passed through the flesh as if it were liquid foam. The bones of his fingers hooked into the bones of its skeleton without actually snagging.

Don snatched his hand away. Equally startled, the fish flexed its body and shot out of range. There had been a kind of contact, but not one that either party cared to repeat. No damage done, but it had been a weird experience.

It was one thing to contemplate a reality interaction of one part in a thousand, intellectually. It was quite another to tangle with a living skeleton.

Well, he had been warned. He couldn't stand around gawking. He had a distance to travel. The coordinate meter mounted beside the temperature gauge said 27°40'—82°45'. He had fifteen hours to reach 2700'—83015'. He had been told that a degree was sixty minutes, and a minute just about a mile, depending on location and direction. This sounded to his untrained ear like a mish-mash of temperature, time, and distance muddled by an incomprehensible variable. It seemed that he had about thirty miles west to go, and about forty south, assuming that he had not become hopelessly confused. The hypotenuse would be fifty miles, per the three-four-five triangle ratio. Easy to make on a bicycle, since it came to only three and a third miles per hour average speed.

Of course he probably wouldn't be able to go straight. What was his best immediate route?

He didn't want to remain in shallow water, for there would be bathers and boaters and fishermen all along the coast. His depth meter showed two fathoms. That would be twelve feet from bike to surface. Entirely too little, for he must be as visible from

above as those ripples were from below. How would a boater react if he peered down and saw a man bicycling blithely along under the water?

But deep water awed him, though he knew that pressure was not a significant factor in this situation. Men could withstand several atmospheres if they were careful, and he had been told that there were no depths in the great Atlantic Ocean capable of putting so much as two atmospheres on him in his phased-out state. He could ignore pressure. All of which somehow failed to ease the pressure on his worried mind. This business just wasn't natural.

He would take a middle course. Say about a hundred feet, or a bit shy of seventeen fathoms. He would stick to that contour until he made his rendezvous.

Don pushed on the left pedal—somehow that was his only comfortable starting position—and moved out. The sea grass reached up with its long green leaves, obscuring his view of the sloping floor. But his wheels passed through the weeds, or the weeds through the wheels, and so did his body. There was only a gentle stroking sensation that affected him with an almost sexual intimacy as plant collided with flesh. The grass might be no denser than the water, but it was solid, not liquid, and that affected the contact.

He didn't like it, this naked probing of his muscle and gut, but there was nothing he could do about it. Except to get out of this cloying patch of feelers.

At nine fathoms the grass did thin out and leave the bottom exposed. It needed light, and the light was dimming. Good enough. But this had a consequence for Don, too. Just below the surface things had looked normal, for the limited distance he could see. Now the color red was gone. It had vanished somewhere between three and four fathoms, he decided; he hadn't been paying proper attention. He had a red bag on his bicycle that now looked orange-brown. The effect was eerie and it alarmed him despite his awareness of its cause.

"S-steady," he told himself. "The water absorbs the red frequencies first. That's all there is to it. Next orange will go, then yellow, then green. Finally it will be completely dark." He found his heart pounding, and knew he had succeeded only in bringing out another fear. He just didn't feel safe in dark water.

He had somehow supposed that the ocean floor would be sandy and even, just like a broad beach. Instead it was a tangled mass of vegetation and shell—and much of the latter was living. Sponges grew everywhere, all colors (except red, now) and shapes and sizes. His wheels could not avoid the myriad starfish and crablike creatures that covered the bottom in places.

But at least he was getting his depth. The indicator showed ten fathoms, then fifteen, then twenty. Down far enough now to make headway toward the rendezvous.

But he had to go deeper, because the contour would have taken him in the wrong direction. He had been naive about that; if he tried to adhere strictly to a given depth, he would be forced to detour ludicrously. The ocean bottom was not even; there were ridges and channels, just as there were on land.

The medley of mysterious sounds had continued, though he had soon tuned most of it out. Now there was something new. A more mechanical throbbing, very strong, pulsing through the water. Growing. Like an approaching ship.

A ship! He was in the harbor channel for the commercial ships using the port of Tampa. No wonder he had gotten his depth so readily.

Don turned around and pedaled madly back the way he had come. He had to get to shallow water before that ship came through, churning the water with its deadly screws. He could be sucked in and cut into shreds.

Then he remembered. He was out of phase with the world; nothing here could touch him. He had little to fear from ships.

Still, he climbed out of the way. A ship was a mighty solid artifact. The hull would be thick metal—perhaps solid enough to interact with his bones and smash him up anyway. After all, the bicycle's wheels interacted with the ocean floor, supporting him nicely. Could he expect less of metal?

The throbbing grew loud, then terrible. There was sound throughout the sea, but the rest of it was natural. Now Don appreciated the viewpoint of the fish, wary of the alien monsters made by man, intruding into the heart of their domain. But then it diminished. The ship had passed, unseen—and he felt deviously humiliated. He had been driven aside, in awe of the thing despite being a man. It was not a fun sensation.

Don resumed his journey. He followed the channel several miles, then pulled off it for a rest break. The coordinate meter said he had traversed only about four minutes of his fifty, and he was tiring already. He was wearing himself down, and he had hardly started. Cross-country underwater hiking was hardly the joy that travel on land-pavement was.

Wouldn't it be nice if he had a motorcycle instead of this pedaler. But that was out of the question; he had been told, in that single compacted anonymous briefing, that a motor would not function in the phase. So he had to provide his own power, with a bicycle being the most efficient transportation. He had accepted this because it made sense, though he had never seen his informant.

Something flapped toward him. Don stiffened in place, ready to leap toward the bike. He felt a chill that was certainly not of the water. The thing was flying, not swimming! Not like a bird, but like a monstrous butterfly. It was a small ray, a skate. A flattened fish with broad, undulating, winglike fins. All quite normal, nothing to be alarmed about.

But Don's emotion was not to be placated so simply. A skate was a thing of inherent terror. Once as a child he had been wading in the sea, and a skate had passed between him and the shore. That hadn't frightened him unduly at the time, for he had never seen one before and didn't even realize that it was really alive. But afterwards friends had spun him stories about the long stinging tail, poisonous, that could stun a man so that he drowned. And about the creature's cousins, the great manta rays, big as flying saucers, that could sail up out of the water and smack down from above. "You're

lucky you got out in time!" they said, blowing up the episode as boys did, inventing facts to fit.

Don had shrugged it off, not feeling easy about taking credit for a bravery he knew he lacked. But the notion of the skate grew on him, haunting him retrospectively. It entered his dreams: standing knee-deep or even waist-deep in a mighty ocean, the long small beach far away, seeing the devilfish, being cut off from escape, horrified at the approach of the stinger but afraid to wade out farther into that murky swirling unknown. But the ray came nearer, expanding into immensity, and he had to retreat, and the sand gave way under his feet, pitching him into the abyss, into cold smothering darkness, where nothing could reach him except the terrible stinger, and he woke gasping and crying.

For several nights it haunted him. Then it passed, being no more than a childish fancy he knew was exaggerated. He never had liked ocean water particularly—but since he didn't live near the shore, this was no handicap. For fifteen years the nightmare had lain quiescent, forgotten—until this moment.

Of course the creature couldn't get at him now, any more than it could have in the dream. Not when its body was phased out, with respect to him, to that one thousandth of its actual solidity. Or vice versa. Same thing. Let it pass right through him. Let it feel the brushing of bones.

The skate veered, birdlike—then came back unexpectedly. It was aware of him. Without conscious volition Don was on the bike and pedaling desperately, fleeing a specter that was only partly real. The thing's flesh might be no more than a ghost to him, but that very insubstantiality enhanced the effect. The supernatural had manifested itself.

Adrenaline gave him strength. By the time he convinced himself that the skate was gone, he was miles farther along. He had never been overly bold, but this episode had certainly given his schedule a boost.

Next time, however, he would force himself to break out his camera and take a picture. He couldn't afford to run from every imaginary threat.

He had lost track of the channel. The meter now read eight fathoms. He had moved about three minutes west, and would have to bear mainly south henceforth. But he could use some deeper water, as patches of weed still got in his way.

But deep water was not to be found. Sometimes it was nine or ten fathoms, but then it would shrink to six. He had to shift gears frequently to navigate the minor hills and dales of this benthic terrain, for he was tired. The wind—really the currents of the water—made significant difference. Some spots were hot; others cool, without seeming pattern. Some were darker, too, as if polluted, but this could have been the effect of clouds cutting off the direct sunlight.

Don was tired of this. The novelty had worn off quite quickly. His time in the water had acclimated him; what could there be in the depths more annoying than this? He

cut due west again, knowing that there had to be a descent at some point. The entire Gulf of Mexico couldn't remain within ten fathoms.

His legs protested, but he kept on. Miles passed—and gradually it did get deeper. When he hit fifteen fathoms he turned south, for he was now almost precisely north of his target area.

There was still enough glow for him to see by, which was good, because he didn't want to use his precious headlamp unnecessarily. Actually this objection was nonsensical, he realized, because it had a generator that ran from his pedaling power. But he was still having trouble overcoming his lifelong certainties: such as the fact that one could use a flashlight only so long before the battery gave out. Besides, a light might attract larger creatures. He didn't care how insubstantial they might be; he didn't want to meet them.

Don had thought it ridiculous to enter the water fifty miles from his destination, and doubly so to do it alone. What did he know about the ocean? But now he was able to appreciate the rationale. He had a lot of mundane edges to smooth before he could function efficiently in this medium. Better to work it out by himself, and let the others do likewise; then they would all three be broken in and ready to function as a team, minus embarrassments. That was the number he had guessed; each would have a relevant specialty for the mission. Strangers, who would get along, perforce.

Reassured, he stopped for lunch. Actually it was only nine a.m. and he had been under the water about three hours. But it seemed like noon, and he needed a pretext to rest.

There was a radio mounted within the frame of his bicycle. It was not for news or entertainment, but for communication with his companions, once he had some. He didn't see the need for it, as sound crossed over perfectly well. But of course there could be emergencies requiring separation of a mile or two. The radios would not tune in the various bands of civilization, he had been told; they were on a special limited frequency. But they should reach as far as necessary. Idly, he turned the ON switch. There was no tuning dial or set of station buttons; all he would get from this thing would be an operative hum.

"Hello," a soft feminine voice said.

Surprised, Don didn't answer.

"Hello," she repeated. Still he was silent, having no idea what to say, or whether he should speak.

"I know your set is on," the voice said. "I can hear the sea-noises in the background."

Don switched off. There wasn't supposed to be anybody on the line! Especially not a woman. Who was she, and what did she want?

By the coordinates, he had come barely ten or twelve miles. It was hard to figure, and not important enough to warrant the necessary mental effort. Three or four miles an

hour, average. On land, the little distance he had gone, he was sure his rate had been double or triple that. He could have walked as fast, down here. And with less fatigue.

No, that was not true. He had to be honest with himself. He was carrying considerable weight in the form of food and clothing and related supplies. He even had a small tent. Then there was the converter: portable plumbing. And complex miniaturized equipment to keep the humidity constant, or something. His instrumentation was formidable. That coordinate meter was no two-bit toy, either. He had not known that such things existed, and suspected their cost would have been well beyond his means. Regardless of their miniaturization, they weighed a fair amount. His bicycle weighed about forty pounds, and the other things might total a similar amount. Half his own weight, all told. He would have felt it, hiking, and would not have been able to maintain any four miles an hour.

Naturally the bike was sluggish. Even the quintuple gearing could not ameliorate weight and terrain and indecision. Once he found a good, smooth, level stretch without weeds or shells, he could make much better time.

Even so, he was on schedule. Fortunately he was in good physical condition, and recovered quickly from exertion. How good his mental state was he wasn't sure; small things were setting him off unreasonably, and he was hearing female voices on a closed-circuit radio.

He unpacked the concentrates, having trouble finding what he wanted. These were supposed to be packages of things that expanded into edibility when water was added.

He had a bulb of water: a transparent pint-sized container. There was a second pint in reserve. After that he would have to go to recycled fluid, a prospect he didn't relish.

There were a number of things about this business that did not exactly turn him on. But two things had over-whelmed his aversions: the money and the chance to be involved in something significant. The mission, he had been told, would be done within a month, and the pay matched what he would have had from a year with a good job in his specialty. And if he did not agree that it was a mission he was proud to be associated with, that pay would double. The money had been paid in advance, in full; there was no question about that. So he had been willing to take the rest on faith, and to put up with the awkward details. They were, after all, necessary; he could not drink the water of the sea because it was both salty and phased out, and he could not eat the food of it either. He had to be self sufficient, except for the supplies which would be found in depots along the way.

Don inserted the syringe into the appropriate aperture of his food-packet and squeezed. The wrapping inflated. The principle was simple enough; he could have figured it out for himself if he had not been told, and there were instructions on the packets. He kneaded it, feeling the content solidify squishily. He counted off one minute while it set. His meal was ready.

He tore along the seam, exposing a pinkish mass. Cherry flavored glop, guaranteed to contain all the essential nutrients known to be required by man, plus a few good guesses. Vitamins A, B, C; P and Q; X, Y, and Z? It looked like pureed cow brains.

Don brought it cautiously to his nose and sniffed. Worse. Had he done something wrong? This smelled as if he had used urine as the liquid ingredient. He would never make his mark as a chef!

He suppressed his unreasonable revulsion and took a bite. After all, what could go wrong with a prepackaged meal? He chewed.

He spat it out. The stuff was absolutely vile. It tasted like rotten cheese laced with vinegar, and his stomach refused to believe it was wholesome. He deposited the remains in the converter, for even this must not be wasted.

Now he had sanitary needs. The hard labor of travel had disturbed his digestion. Or was it the experience with the foul glop? No, neither; it was the emotional strain of traversing the ocean floor in this remarkable phase state. He had practiced breathing in that tank of water, just after tunneling through, so that he had known it was feasible. But that had hardly prepared him for the psychological impact of pedaling a bicycle under the heaving sea.

He had to admit that this was an interesting adventure, even in its bad aspects. He knew already that he would not be demanding double pay. He had not been told he would like every aspect, just that it would be significant, and that it was.

He wound up with a plastic bag of substance. He hesitated, then reluctantly deposited it, too, in the converter. This stuff was in phase with him, and there was not much way to replace it; it must not be wasted. The unit would process it all, powered by a spur from his pedaling crank just below, reducing the solids to ash and filling another pint container with potable water.

Water, water, everywhere—how odd that he should be immersed in it, yet have to conserve it rigidly lest he dehydrate. There was a dichotomy about this phaseout that he wasn't clear about. The sea was like air to him, yet it remained the sea to its denizens. Fish could and did swim right through him and his bicycle without falling or gasping for gill-fluid. So it wasn't air at all, merely water at one one-thousandth effective density. So how was he able to breathe it? That little matter had not, in the rush, been clarified.

Don was no chemist, but he knew that  $H_2O$  did not convert to—what was it?  $N_4O$ ? No, air wasn't that kind of combination, it was just a mixture of gases. Anyway, the O, for oxygen, in  $H_2O$  could not be assimilated for respiration. He knew that much. Water vapor wasn't breathable. Even the fish had to sift their oxygen from the air dissolved in water, not the water itself. Yet even if he could have breathed the water, he would have been getting only one thousandth of the oxygen it contained, or maybe one five-hundredth what he was accustomed to. That was extremely slim pickings.

He was wasting time. He had perhaps forty miles to go yet—a good four or five hours even on a decent surface. Twelve hours at his present rate. Which left him no time at all to rest or sleep. He had to keep moving.

Maybe his contact was expecting him. Was he in radio range? He flicked the radio switch.

"Now don't turn me off," the female voice said, "before I—" But he had already done so.

Now as he rode he tried to analyze his motive. Why did he object to hearing from a woman? So maybe she had somehow tuned in on this private band; that did not make her a criminal. She evidently had some notion where he was. What harm would there be in talking to her?

He got under way and tuned out the scenery. Not that he had paid much attention to it so far. What had he seen, actually? Fish, sponges, a blur of water, the shift of digits on the meters, and the irregular terrain of the sea floor.

Somehow the radio voice seemed one with the scenery. Both needed to be tuned out. Yet he knew that this was nonsensical. The scenery was already over-familiar, but the woman was a stranger. Why wouldn't he talk to her?

He realized that he couldn't blame it on the secrecy of the mission, because he knew no secrets yet, and was not responsible for radio security. It was the fact that she had caught him by surprise, and that she was a sweet-voiced young woman. That voice conjured a mental image of an attractive creature—the kind that paid no attention to a studious loner like him. So he had tuned out immediately, rather than get involved and risk the kind of put-down that would inevitably come. It was a virtually involuntary reflex.

So now he understood it. That didn't change it. He was afraid to talk to her.

He moved, he rested, he moved less, he rested more, he ground on, he tried another meal—and quickly fed it into the converter. It couldn't be his imagination! That food was spoiled. Fortunately his appetite was meager.

Don woke from his travel-effort oblivion to see to his dumbfounded joy that he had picked up on his schedule and could afford an hour's break. So he propped his bike, lay down on the strangely solid sand, and sank into a blissful stupor until the alarm went off. The world outside his little sphere became as unreal as it seemed.

Just so long as he didn't miss his rendezvous. He thought of himself as a loner, but that was mainly with respect to women. He had been alone more than enough, in this odd region on this strange mission.

He made it. He was on 83 °15' west longitude already, and bearing down on 27 ° north latitude. It was a few minutes (time, not distance) before nine in the morning. Nothing was visible, of course. It was dark above, and even with his headlight on he could not see far enough to locate anything much smaller than an active volcano. Water in his vicinity might feel like air, but it still dampened vision in its normal fashion. Except that the lamp restored full color, blessedly. Even if he could have seen for miles, the problem of pinpoint location would be similar to that in a dry-land wilderness. His meter was not that precise.

As his watch showed the moment of scheduled contact, Don stood still and listened. The ever-present noises of the sea crowded in annoyingly. Sound: there was the key.

Here in the ocean, sound traveled at quadruple its speed in air, and it carried much better. Light might damp out, and radar, but sound was in its element here. Make a noise in the sea and it would be heard.

Don heard. It was the faint beep-beep of a signal no marine creature made—he hoped. It was Morse Code. And it had an echo: the slower arrival of the impulse through the air of the phase?

When it paused, he answered. He did not know Morse himself, except as a typical pattern of dots and dashes, so he merely sounded three blasts on his whistle. After a moment the same signal was returned.

Contact had been made.

## CHAPTER 2 CASPAR

Proxy 5-12-5-16-8: Attention.

Acknowledging.

Status?

The first three recruits have been sent through the phase tunnel and the fourth alerted. The mission is proceeding as designed.

Contraindications?

The first recruit refuses to hold a radio dialogue. This may indicate an intellectual problem that did not manifest itself on the initial screening. He is otherwise normal, and seems to be pursuing the mission in good faith. The second recruit is more assertive, and may override this attitude or incapacity in the first. This foible does not appear to pose a threat to the mission.

There are always peculiarities of local situations. If this is the extent in your case, you are well off. 5-12-5-16—9 has a suicidal recruit.

That world may be lost!

Not necessarily. A suicidal person may be in a position to understand the loss of a world.

And may not care.

True. But what we offer does seem preferable to complete destruction.

"Caspar Brown, marine geologist," the man said. He was short and fairly muscular, dark-haired and swarthy and looked to be in his mid thirties.

"Don Kestle, archaeologist," Don responded. "Minoan."

The bicycles drew together and the men reached across to shake hands. Don was phenomenally relieved to feel solid flesh again. He found himself liking Caspar, though he had never met the man before. At this stage he liked anything human. The specters of his loneliness had retreated immeasurably.

"S-so you know about the ocean," Don said, finding nothing better as conversation fodder at the moment. He had never been much for initiating a relationship, and hoped Caspar was better at it.

"Almost nothing."

"W-what?"

"I know almost nothing about the ocean," Caspar said, "compared to what remains to be discovered. I can't even identify half these fish noises I'm hearing. They're much louder and clearer and more intricate than normal."

Don smiled weakly. "Oh. Yes."

"That's why I welcome this opportunity to explore," Caspar continued, warming. "This way we don't disturb the marine creatures, so they don't hide or shut up. Think of it: the entire ocean basin open to us without the problems of clumsy diving suits, nitrogen narcosis, or the bends."

"N-nitrogen—?"

"You know. Rapture of the deep. Nitrogen dissolves in the blood because of the pressure, and this makes the diver drunk. This can kill him faster than alcohol in a driver, because it's himself at risk, not some innocent pedestrian. So he comes up in a hurry, and that nitrogen bubbles out of his blood like the fizz in fresh soda, blocking blood vessels or lodging in joints and doubling him up like—"

"You're right," Don agreed quickly. "Nice not to have to worry."

"Hey, have you eaten yet? I've been so excited just looking around I haven't—"

"W-well, I—" Don was abashed to admit his problem with the food, so he concealed it. "I haven't eaten, no." Caspar was carrying the conversational ball, and that was a relief. Don was happy to go along, letting his compliance pass for social adequacy. Once he knew a person, it was easier.

"Great." Caspar hauled out his packages and chose one. "Steak flavor. Let's see whether it's close."

Don dug out a matching flavor from his pack, not commenting. If Caspar could eat this stuff...

They squeezed the bulbs and the packages ballooned. Caspar opened his first and took a bite. He chewed. "Not bad, considering," he said. "Not close, but not bad. Maybe it would be closer if it didn't have the texture of paste. Better than K-rations, anyway."

Don got a grip on his nerve and opened his own. The same rotten odor wafted out.

"Hey, is your converter leaking?" Caspar inquired.

"Not that I know of. Why?" As if he didn't know!

"That smell. Something's foul. No offense."

Wordlessly Don held out his package.

Caspar sniffed, choked, and took it from him. In a moment it was in the converter.  
"You got a bad one! Didn't you know?"

"They're all like that, I thought. I was afraid—"

"They can't be! These things are sterile. Let me check."

"B-be my guest."

Caspar checked. "What a mess! I can tell without having to use the water. Did you actually eat that stuff?"

"One bite."

Caspar laughed readily. "You've got more grit than I have. What a rotten deal! Have some of mine."

Don accepted it gratefully. Caspar's cherry glop tasted like cherry, and his steak like steak. Texture was something else, but this wasn't worth a quibble at this stage.

"H-how do you think it happened?" Don asked as his hunger abated.

"Oh, accident, I'd say," Caspar decided. "You know the government. Three left feet at the taxpayer's expense. We'll share mine, and we'll both reload at the first supply depot."

No trouble, really." The man certainly didn't get upset over trifles. But Don wondered what kind of carelessness would be allowed to imperil this unique, secret mission, not to mention his life. For a man had to eat, and they could only assimilate food that had been phased into this state.

"Is it a government operation?" Don asked. "I thought maybe a private enterprise."

Caspar shrugged. "Could be. I wasn't told. But somebody went to a pretty formidable expense to set us up with some pretty fancy equipment. If it's not the government, it must be a large corporation. This looks like a million dollar operation to me, apart from what they're paying us. But you're right: the big companies get criminally sloppy too. It could be either. Let's hope their quality control is better on the other stuff."

That reminded Don about the female voice on his radio.

Had it been mistuned, so that it connected to someone not with this mission? If so, he had been right to cut off contact, though that was not why he had done it. Obviously that person wasn't Caspar. Did she speak on both their radios, or only his own? Or had he imagined it? Should he ask? Yes, he should. "D-did you t-turn on your—?" "Say, look at that!" Caspar cried. Don looked around, alarmed. It was a monstrous fish, three times the length of a man, with a snout like the blade of a chain saw.

"Sawfish," Caspar exclaimed happily. "Isn't she a beauty! I never saw one in these waters before. But then I never rode a bike here before, either. My scuba gear must have scared them away. What a difference that phase makes. Not that I'm any ichthyologist." "I thought sea-life was your specialty." "No. The sea bottom. I can tell you something about rock formations, saline diffusion, and sedimentary strata, but the fauna I just pick up in passing. I know the sawfish scouts the bottom—see, there she goes, poking around—and sometimes slashes up whole schools of fish with that snout, so as to eat the pieces, but that's about all. Relative of the rays, I believe."

That ugly chill returned. The fish was horizontally flattened, with vaguely winglike fins. It did resemble a skate, from the right angle.

"Y-you know, w-we aren't completely apart," Don said. "The bones—they interact—"

"Oh, do they?" Caspar asked, as if this were an interesting scientific sidelight. As of course it was, to him. "I suppose they would, being rigid. There has to be some interaction, or we would sink right through the ground, wouldn't we? In fact, I'm surprised we don't; it isn't that solid, normally. Sediment, you know."

The sawfish vanished, and Don was vastly relieved. "You're right! If we intersect the real world by only a thousandth, why don't we find the sand like muck? If anything, it's harder than it should be. My tires don't sink into it at all. And how is it we can see and hear so well? I should think—"

"I'm no nuclear physicist, either. I have no notion how this field operates, if it is a field—but thank God for its existence."

"Maybe it isn't exactly a field," Don said. He was glad to get into something halfway technical, because it was grist for conversation, and he was curious himself. "Why should we have to ride through that tunnel-thing—you did do that?—to enter it, in that case? But if we were shunted into another, well, dimension—"

"Could be." Caspar considered for a moment. "Maybe one of the others will know. I'm just glad it works."

"Others? I thought this was a party of three."

"Oh? Maybe you're right. I wasn't told, just that there would be more than one. I thought maybe four." Caspar seemed to sidestep any potential disagreement, inoffensively. "Do you happen to know his specialty?"

"Me? That official was so tight-lipped I was lucky to learn more than my own name. And we're not supposed to tell each other our last names, I think."

"Necessary security, I suppose," Caspar said. "I clean forgot. Well, you just forget mine, and I'll forget yours. Did you get to see anyone?"

"No, it was just an interviewer behind a screen. A voice, really; it could almost have been a recording."

"Same here. I responded to this targeted ad on my computer, and the pay and conditions—I was about ready for a job change anyway. I still don't know what the mission is, but I'm already glad I'm here." He glanced at Don. "How'd you get into this project, anyway? No offense, but archaeology is mostly landside, isn't it? Digging trenches through old mounds, picking up bits of pottery, publishing scholarly reports? There can't be much for you, under the sea."

"That's a pretty simple view of it," Don said, glad to have a question about his specialty. His reticence faded when he was in his area of competence. "But maybe close enough. The fact is, a great many archaeologists have combed through those mounds and collected that pottery, on land. They've reconstructed some fabulous history. If I could only have been with Bibby at Dilmun..." He sighed, knowing that the other would not comprehend his regret. No sense in getting into a lecture. "But I came too late. Today the major horizon in archaeology is marine, and the shallow waters have been pretty well exploited, too. No one knows how thoroughly the Mediterranean Sea has been ransacked. So that leaves deep water, and I guess you know better than I do why that's been left alone."

"Pressure," Caspar said immediately. "One atmosphere for every thirty four feet depth. A few thousand feet down—ugh! But I was asking about you. I don't want to seem more nosy than I am; I just think we'd better have some idea why and how we were picked for this mission. Because the sea is formidable, even phased out as we are; make no mistake about that. The depths are a greater challenge than the moon. So it figures that the most qualified personnel would be used."

Don laughed, but it was forced. "I—I'm the least qualified archaeologist around. My only claim to fame is that I can read Minoan script, more or less—and there's precious little of that hereabouts."

"I'm not the world's most notable marine geologist, either," Caspar agreed. "Any major oil company has a dozen that could give me lessons. But what I'm saying is that for this project, they should have used the best, and they could have, if they cared enough, because they evidently do have the money. Instead they placed little ads and hired nonentities like us, and maybe we aren't quite even in our specialties. You're—what was it?"

"Minoan. That's ancient Crete."

"And I specialize in marine impact craters. Want to know what there're none of, here in the Florida shallows? If they had taken us down to the coast of Colombia, as I had hoped—" He shrugged.

"What's there?" Don asked.

"You don't know? No, I suppose that's no more obvious to you than Crete is to me. That's where we believe the big one splashed down: the meteor that so shook up the Earth's system that it wiped out the dinosaurs."

"The extinction of the dinosaurs!" Don exclaimed.

"Right. But the site has about sixty five million years worth of sediment covering it. So it will take an in depth—no pun—investigation to confirm it, assuming we can. But instead of sending me there, they sent me here. We'd have to bike across the Puerto Rico Trench to reach it, which is pointless and probably impossible. So either they have some lesser crater in mind for me, or they don't care whether I see a crater at all. I'm out of specialty, just as you are. See what I mean?"

Don nodded soberly. "Maybe we're expendable." "Maybe. Oh, I'm not paranoid about it. This phase thing is such a breakthrough that I'd sell my watery soul for the chance, and I think I mean that literally, to explore the ocean floor at any depth, unfettered by cumbersome equipment— that's the raw stuff of dreams. But why me? Why you?"

"I can't answer that," Don said. "All I can do is say how I'm here. I wasn't the bright boy of my class, but I was in the top quarter, with my main strength in deciphering. The lucrative foundations passed me up, and anyway, I wanted to go into new territory. Make a real breakthrough, somehow. Too ambitious for my own good. The prof knew it, and he made the contact. Swore me to secrecy, told me to buy myself a good bicycle and ride it to the address he gave me—well, that was two days ago, and here I am."

"You're single?"

"All the way single. My father died about five years ago, and my mother always was sickly—no s-sense going into that. I've got no special ties to this world. Maybe that's why the ancient world fascinates me. You, too?"

"Pretty much. Auto accident when I was ten. Since then the sea has seemed more like home than the city. So nobody is going to be in a hurry to trace down our whereabouts. I think I see a pattern developing. We must have had qualifications we didn't realize."

"Must have," Don agreed. "But you know, it's growing on me too. I don't know a thing about the sea, or even about bicycles, but I do know that the major archaeological horizon is right here. Not that I have the least bit of training for it. I guess I just closed my mind to the notion of going to the sea. But now that I'm in it—well, if I have to risk my life using a new device, maybe it's worth it. All those ancient hulks waiting to be discovered in deep water—"

"Sorry. No ancient hulk is in the ocean," Caspar said. "Not the way you're thinking, anyway. Ever hear of the teredo?"

"No."

"Otherwise known as the shipworm, though it isn't a worm at all. It's a little clam that—"

"Oh, that. I had forgotten. It eats wood, so—"

"So pretty soon no ship is left. Modern metal hulks, yes; ancient wood hulks, no."

"What a loss of archaeology," Don said, mortified. "I could wring that clam's neck."

Caspar smiled. "Of course the ship's contents may survive. Gold lasts forever underwater, and pottery—" "Pottery! That's wonderful!" Don exclaimed. For the first time Caspar showed annoyance. "I'm just telling you what to expect."

"I wasn't being sarcastic. Pottery is a prime tool of archaeology. It breaks and gets thrown away, and so it remains for centuries or millennia, undisturbed, every shard a key to the culture that made it. Who wants broken pottery—except an archaeologist? There is hardly a finer key to the activities of man through the ages."

Caspar gazed at him incredulously, or so it seemed in the fading light of the headlamps, whose reservoirs were running down now that the bikes were stationary. "It really is true? You do collect broken plates and things? You value them more than gold?"

"Yes! Gold is natural; it tells little unless it has been worked. But pottery is inevitably the handiwork of man. Its style is certain indication of a specific time and culture. Show me a few pottery shards and let me check my references, and I can tell you where and when they were made, sometimes within five or ten miles and twenty years. It may take time to do it, but the end is almost certain."

Gaspar raised his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, friend. If we find a wreck, I'll take the gold and you take the broken plates. Fair enough?"

"I'll have the better bargain. You can't keep the gold, by law, unless it's in international waters; but the shards could make me famous."

"You archaeologists may be smarter than you look!"

"I should hope so." Gaspar smiled. "Let's sack out. We've got a long ride tomorrow, I fear."

"What's the position?"

"The coordinates for the next rendezvous? I thought you had them."

"N-no. Only this one. The same one you had, it seems, so we could meet."

Gaspar tapped his fingers on his coordinate meter. "What a foul-up! They should have given one of us the next set."

Don's eyes were on Caspar's fingers, because he couldn't meet the man's eyes. "I guess I should have asked. I just assumed—" He paused. Next to the meter was the radio. He had been about to ask Gaspar about that, when they had been interrupted by the sawfish. "Maybe the—did you check your radio?"

Gaspar snapped his fingers. "That must be it. I just came out here, gasping at the sea-floor and fish, never thinking of that." He flicked his switch.

"Leave it on!" the female voice cried immediately.

Startled, Gaspar looked down. Unlike Don, he was not dismayed, and he did not turn it off. "Who are you?"

Don kept silent, relieved to have the other man handle it. Maybe he should have had more confidence in his own judgment about both this and the bad glop, but he couldn't change his nature.

"I'm Melanie. Your next contact. Why haven't you answered before?"

"Sister, I just turned on my set for the first time! What are your coordinates?"

"I'm not going to give you my coordinates if you're going to be like that," she responded angrily.

"M-my fault," Don said, "I—I heard her voice, and thought—no one told me it would be a woman."

Caspar looked at him, comprehending. Then his mouth quirked. "Give with the numbers, girl," he said firmly to the radio, "or I'll turn you off for the night. Understand?"

She didn't answer. Caspar reached for the switch.

"Eighty one degrees, fifty minutes west longitude," she said with a rush, as if she had seen him. "Twenty six degrees, ten minutes north latitude."

"That's better," Gaspar said, winking at Don. "What's the rendezvous time, Melanie?"

"Twenty four hours from now," she said. "You did make it to the first rendezvous point?"

"Right. We're both here. Just wanted you to know who's in charge. Don, turn yours on so we can all talk."

Don obeyed. Caspar had covered nicely for Don's prior mismanagement of the radio, and he appreciated it. Why hadn't he realized that the woman could be one of their party? He had simply assumed without evidence that it was to be three males. Maybe he just hadn't wanted to face the prospect of working with a woman, especially a young one. He wished he could do something about his shyness.

"A day," Gaspar said. "Ten miles an hour for twelve hours, cumulative, and we can sleep as much as we want. That's in the vicinity of Naples, Florida, you see."

Don hoisted up his nerve. "Are—are you—have you gone through the tunnel already? You're in phase with us?"

"Yes," she replied. "I'm still on land, but I'll come into the water at the right time to meet you there."

"D-do you have the coordinates for the next one?"

"Yes, for all of them. I'm your coordinate girl. But I'm allowed to tell only one rendezvous point at a time. You just be thankful you've got company. I'm alone. That is, alone in phase. It's weird."

"Wish you were here," Gaspar said generously.

"Did they tell you what the mission is?" Melanie asked him.

"Nope. They told us no more than you. I answered an ad, believe it or not, and they checked my references—which were strictly average, and sent me out to get a bike. Same as you, probably."

"Yes," she agreed.

"I think this secrecy kick is overdone."

"It certainly is," Melanie agreed. "I never even applied, actually. But here I am."

"There must be some rationale," Don said. "I'm archaeological, you're geological, she's—"

"Hysterical," Melanie said.

"The next member is mechanical, I hope," Gaspar said. "Suppose the phase equipment breaks down when we're a mile under? Do you know how to fix it?"

"N-no." Don shuddered. "I wish you h-hadn't brought that up."

"We're going to click out for about five minutes, Melanie," Gaspar said. "Nothing personal. Man business." Before she could protest, he turned his set off, gesturing Don to do the same.

"Your stutter," Gaspar said then. "Does it affect your decision-making ability in a crisis? I wouldn't ask if I didn't suspect that my life may be subject to your ability to act, at some point."

Don could appreciate why Gaspar had an undistinguished employee record. He was too blunt about sensitive issues. "N-no. Only the v-vocal cords. Only under stress."

"No offense. Ask me one now."

"Not n-necessary," Don said, embarrassed.