

Jack L Chalker - When the Changewinds Blow
WHEN THE CHANGEWINDS BLOW

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For Eva

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The Girl Who Was Afraid of Thunderstorms

There is something almost other-worldly about a huge shopping mall; enter it and you leave heat or cold, night and day behind, and enter a futuristic Disney-like vision of a future world which is all antiseptic, insulated, and artificial yet somehow it caters to all your basic modern needs. It is the synthesis of the ancient bazaar, the communal marketplace, the soda fountain, the drive-in, and the town square and more. Its vast interiors with their wasted space, careful fountains, phony waterfalls, plastic park benches and canned music which may be The 1001 Strings Play the Best of the Rolling Stones but somehow sounds like the same elevator music the parents and grandparents of those denizens of malls heard in their day. To many of the youth who are too young to be allowed in the adult bars and clubs and too old to be in by eight o'clock it is a massive singles bar as well.

Wednesday night wasn't the best night out, even in the mall, and it was tough on a school night to figure out an excuse to get there that parents might accept, but teens have had many centuries of evolution to get to a point where they instinctively know how to manage such urgencies when they have to, and Sharlene "Charley" Sharkin certainly felt like she had to.

It wasn't anything to do with the mall itself, but rather what it filled in her life. She was seventeen and due to graduate in five months, an occasion she was looking forward to with great anticipation. She was bright, athletic, and had good grades for the most part, but she hated school and all it stood for. Her parents had all sorts of plans for her, all of which included college and perhaps beyond, but the thought of four or more years of additional school was just gruesome, that was all. She could see herself putting up with some secretarial school-she was already a lightning typist and did some word processing on the school computer for office brownie points-or maybe even a medical technician's course, or paralegal, or something like that, but nothing more. College wasn't like regular school in one way: if you didn't get it and later regretted it there was nothing that said you had to be eighteen and not twenty or even older to get in.

She had a nice, round face with just a bit of an overbite set off by mid-length Clairol brown perm-curl hair, no beauty but cute and she knew it. She was slightly chubby and thought she was fat and hated it but not enough to really work at dieting or giving up all the nice foods that made life worthwhile. She'd been a skinny, athletic kid but it had just started to come on and stay there, particularly in the past year or two, but at five foot three and a hundred and thirty-six pounds she didn't feel out of whack. She'd really let herself go since-well, since Tommy.

She had just turned sixteen, and was real popular with the boys, and the night of the junior prom Tommy Meyers had brought out this bottle of high-proof whiskey he'd gotten someplace and before she knew it Tommy had popped her cherry for good in his brother's borrowed conversion van, and while nothing had come of it she'd gone through months of nervous fear wondering if she was pregnant, or had caught something, or who knew what, and it'd scared her far more than all that blood. The experience made her something of a leader among her friends, of course, but it'd also given her a reputation among the boys as an easy girl and she'd had more than her share of troubles from that.

She'd let herself go after that, giving up most of the athletics and pigging out on whatever she wanted, particularly chocolate. If it hadn't been for Sam moving into the city she might have gotten really depressed, but even though Sam was a real straight arrow she didn't care and there was no closer friendship.

And now Sam was gone.

Samantha Buell was certainly her best friend in the whole world and the only person she felt she could confide in. Sam had needed a friend when she'd moved here with her mother a little over a year ago and they'd hit it off, the original thing they had in common being that they both went by nicknames that sounded more boy than girl-although Sam just called it "unisex." They liked the same rock bands, the same TV shows, they swapped romance novels-although Sam was more of a reader than she was-and they both loved roaming the mall and trying on all sorts of outrageous fashions. They spent a lot of free time together and talking on the phone and all that. They were the same height, and while Sam had a better figure she had a little bit of extra weight herself. Still, they looked enough alike to be mistaken more than once for sisters, and they were both also the only children of well-off professionals, spoiled without really realizing it.

Not that there weren't real differences, the least of which was Sam's slight but noticeable New England accent contrasted with Charley's southwestern twang.

Sam's folks were divorced, and she lived here now with her mother who was a lawyer who worked for some federal agency or another. Environment, she thought, but she'd never really gone into it. Sam's dad was a contractor in Boston and they still got along pretty good-Sam would fly out to stay with him part of the summer and some of the long holidays and he called a lot-but maybe three thousand miles was a lot of distance for so-called "joint custody."

But Sam's voice was, well, unique. She had one of the deepest, most asexual voices Charley had ever heard in a girl, although not unpleasant or irritating. It was just, well, asexual, the kind of tonal voice that was stuck between the half octaves and could easily belong to a boy her age although it didn't sound wrong in her, either. Sam said that her grandmother- her dad's mothers-had the same kind of voice. She could actually shift that voice even lower a bit and you'd swear she was all male, too, or higher a bit and sound feminine and sassy. Sam had hoped that this odd ability might get her into acting one day.

She'd always been something of a tomboy type, fooling around in Dad's workshop as a kid. She particularly liked carpentry and was really good at it, but her Dad had always tried to steer her away with some ingrained sexist ideas about what was properly boys' work and girls' work while her mother, who wanted her to be like the first female President or a great doctor or something was appalled by Sam's taste for manual skills. Charley, on the other hand, wouldn't be caught dead if not dressed in the latest style. Until she'd met Charley the only real concession she'd made to unmistakable femininity was long, almost waist-length straight black hair.

Still, under Charley's skilled eye and guidance, Sam had lately taken to trying all sorts of new and feminine fashion, taken a real interest suddenly in perfume and cosmetics and stuff like that, which somewhat pleased her mother and also started getting her all sorts of attention from the boys. So far she hadn't done much, though; Sam had some real hangups of her own. Back in Boston she'd gone to this private all-girls' school, and two of her classmates had done it before they were past sixteen that Sam knew about. It was sheer stupid bad luck, but one of them had gotten pregnant the first time out and the other one had come down with VD. The odds against both of 'em, or even either of 'em, having anything like that happen was small, and maybe that was only the two Sam found out about, but it had scared the hell out of her. She was still a virgin and not real inclined to changing that in the immediate future. That was why a best girlfriend was an essential. They protected and supported each other. Together, somehow, they were safe.

And now Sam was gone.

At first she hadn't thought anything of it, when Sam hadn't shown up for school on Monday. Charley had been away visiting relatives all weekend, and had been too damned tired to feel sociable on Monday. On Tuesday she'd called over to the house and gotten Sam's mother's answering machine and left a message. No big deal. Maybe somebody got sick back east or something. Later, she heard it had been in the news over the weekend and in the Sunday paper, but they'd thrown out everything but the comics.

But today, in school, she'd been called out of first period English to Mr. Dunteman's office-he was the administrative vice principal-and waiting there had been this strange man who introduced himself as Detective O'Donnell of the Juvenile Division and said he wanted to know if Charley had heard from Sam in the last few days.

"Huh? No. Why? Has something happened?"

"We-don't really know. When was the last time you saw or spoke to her?"

"Uh-Friday. Here. I went away that night for the weekend and didn't get back til Sunday night."

"Uh-huh. And did she seem-different? I mean, did she seem out of the ordinary in any way? Nervous? Irritable? Depressed? Anything like that?"

She thought a moment. The fact was, there had been something wrong. She'd sensed it rather than been told it, but it was noticeable enough that she'd asked Sam if there were any problems.

"She seemed-you know, tense. Yeah, maybe nervous. I figured at first it was just her period or something but it wasn't like that, really. She looked, well, kinda scared. But she said everything was okay when I asked her about it. She just sorta' shrugged it off and said she was havin' some problems and that she'd tell me when I got back. I did kinda get the idea that she wanted to say more but when she found out I was goin' away, well, she just tried to laugh it off. Why? What's happened to her?"

O'Donnell had sighed. He was big and craggy and built like cement block, with curly red hair and real pale blue eyes. If you'd been ordered -to build an Irishman he was about what you'd come up with.

"She left school normally-we know that much," he told her. "She caught the first bus home, got a few things-her mother wasn't back from work yet-and then left. We don't know anything beyond that. She simply-vanished." He paused as he watched her look of horror grow. "These things do happen, Miss. All the time. It's my job to piece everything together and see if we can find her before something very bad happens to her."

"You think she-ran away? Not Sam! The only one she could run to would be her Dad and he'd send her right back here. I know!"

"We don't honestly know. She certainly hadn't made any long-range plans to bolt; there's no sign of it. Everything points to a sudden decision to just take off. She went home, packed a small suitcase, went down to the Front Street Bank's automated teller with the backup of her mother's card and withdrew the maximum three hundred dollars allowed by the machine."

"Yeah, her mom gave her the card just in case she needed money when her mom wasn't around but I don't think she ever used it for more'n twenty bucks. Three hundred ..."

"That's really not that much when you consider it," the detective had pointed out. "Enough to buy a ticket to most places but only if you had money or people at the other end.

We checked the airlines and bus stations-no sign, although that doesn't always mean much. She didn't have a driver's license?"

Charley shook her head. "Nope. Flunked the test three times. She was just too scared behind the wheel."

"And no boyfriends? Particularly new ones? No major infatuations? You're positive?"

"Positive! She's not gay or nothin' like that-she liked boys and all, but if she had anything going she'd'a told me. No way there was anybody she'd do this for, not unless it happened between Friday morning and Friday afternoon."

"Stranger things have happened, but I admit it's unlikely unless it involved someone in school and we can account for everyone but her. Very well-if she contacts you let me know immediately. I'll give you a card, here, with my name and number. It looks very likely that something scared her very badly. Something she couldn't or wouldn't confide for any of a thousand reasons to either her best friend or her mother. She panicked. She ran. No note, nothing. But her resources are quite limited. If she uses any of her mother's charge cards we'll find her and I think she's bright enough to know that. Her cash will be running

low if it isn't gone already. She'll only have a few choices, and they're crime, or falling prey to the seamier side of society, or she'll have to contact somebody she trusts. You're a likely candidate for that. If she does, try and get her what she needs and find out where she's staying and then call me. And, if you can, find out what in the world could scare her so much that this was the only way out."

She had promised it all, but the truth was that if Sam called she didn't know what she would do, and she suspected O'Donnell knew that, too. What the hell could have scared her like that? Caused her to run rather than go to her mom or best friend? Had Sam been less honest than she seemed? Had she, like, gotten knocked up? No, that wouldn't do it. Hell, she might get grounded for six months but her mom would still have worked it all out and Sam would know that. Her mom was pretty busy but she was all right deep down-much more modern than Charley's parents, anyway.

Sam always said she wanted to be an actress; she'd been in the drama club and was set for a pretty good part in the class play coming up in April, but she had few other real interests. Setting off for Hollywood on impulse just wasn't her style.

It was hard for Charley to imagine Sam out there on her own in any event. Hell, she was scared to go out alone most times. Like, she was even scared of thunderstorms. Well, maybe she'd find out now.

Charley had gone through the day confused and depressed and then went straight home. She'd gotten the mail and found a small envelope addressed to her and postmarked locally with very familiar handwriting and she'd torn it open. Inside, on a piece of notepaper in Sam's handwriting, had been a nervously scrawled message.

Dear Charley-Sorry to get you into this but I got noplacelike else to go. Can you meet me at the mall at seven o'clock? Just go browse at Sears. Look normal, then at seven go back to credit like you was going to the ladies room. Don't tell nobody or let them see this note. Don't let nobody follow you. I'm OK so long as you don't bring nobody. Love and kisses, Sam.

Charley was afraid at first that she wouldn't make it in time. . Her Dad had a bunch of stuff to talk about and wasn't in any mood to let her out, but she'd convinced him it wouldn't be long and that she really needed to pick up something for school tomorrow. She barely had time to change into an outfit more appropriate for the mall-the satiny blue pantsuit and the mid-calf boots with the fold-down leather fringes. And it'd been like six-thirty when she'd gotten the okay, and while it was only a ten-minute drive to the mall she had to park and go to Sears and spend some time browsing, too, so it'd look natural when she went to the jane. There was also the level of paranoia the note induced.

"Don't let nobody follow you. . . ."

Like, who would be following her? Well, okay, the cops, maybe-if they figured one runaway teen was worth a stakeout. Or, maybe, whoever scared Sam so bad. They might figure it like O'Donnell and keep an eye on her best friend, right? Damn it, she's got me seein' cars and mysterious people in trenchcoats!

The worst part of it was, she had to wear her glasses and she hated that. Made her look like some dumb librarian. But she was fairly nearsighted and needed them to drive, and she'd had her contacts in all day at school. Not like Sam-Sam only needed glasses to read close up, and she'd look like an idiot, face at arm's length from a book, rather than wear them in school.

The mall was pretty crowded for a winter Wednesday, maybe because it was unusually warm tonight for this time of year, and Charley saw one or two kids she knew, but the time didn't allow for her to be anything but single-minded. If somebody was following they'd just have to follow, that's all. What the hell could happen in a place crowded like this, anyway?

She made her way to Sears, then went and looked at some of the clothes mere. She knew she didn't have Sam's acting talent and she probably was giving the most unconvincing show of her life, but she had to try. She glanced at her watch-five after seven! Past time to go to the bathroom.

Had she delayed long enough? Had she delayed too long? She went on back to the business office and then around the corner toward the restrooms. You sure knew

where they were in a big mall. Most times the biggest department stores had the, only bathrooms in the place.

The restrooms were near the end of a corridor that wound up at an "Employees Only" door to the warehouse part, and there was a branch corridor just before them leading to some offices. She went into the bathroom expecting Sam to be there, but it was empty. She wasn't sure if she should just stay there or not, but she sure as hell wasn't gonna stay there all night. She really did have to go-this Jane Bond shit didn't really make it at all-and so she decided to just do everything normal. Maybe Sam wasn't there tonight. Maybe something happened, or Sam figured the note would come earlier, or maybe this was just a way for Sam to check and see that she wasn't being followed.

She gave it fifteen minutes, during which one pregnant lady came in and nobody else, and men decided to get out of mere. She opened the door and heard, behind her, in a loud whisper, "Charley! In here-quick!"

She turned and saw a small, chunky figure in boys' blue denim jeans and matching jacket holding the employee door open. She hesitated a moment, then went to the door and out just before the pregnant lady exited.

Charley stared at the other. "Christ, Sam-is that really you?"

"Yeah! Come on! I want to get us out of here and someplace where we can talk. Hurry up!"

As close as she'd been to Sam she wouldn't have recognized her from any distance. Gone was the long, straight black hair, replaced with a slightly curly sandy brown cut, extremely short, like a boy's, and combed straight back with a side part. She was also wearing a man's style rose-tinted pair of glasses and dressed in the stiff denim that completely concealed her figure and some cheap sneakers and high black socks. It was a fairly simple disguise but by its subtlety very effective. No fake beard or shit like that that would never be convincing. The fact that Sam was one of those people whose face by itself could be either male or female depending on the hair and body and the like helped, too. It was also a natural disguise-her voice was already unusually low, and it didn't take much effort to get it low and raspy enough to sound like maybe a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old boy.

They wound up outside, then walked across the parking lot to the theater entrance. Sam bought two tickets to the newest Disney cartoon, knowing that for the late show there'd be very few people there and none they would know. Not with a "G" rating.

Sam was right. There were like a dozen people in there for the Wednesday late show. They took seats on a side aisle near the back, away from the rest. Sam put her arm around Charley. "Just act like we don't care about the movie, which we don't," she said. "Nobody ever notices much about a boy and a girl makin' out in the back of a theater."

"Okay, I'll play along," Charley whispered back, "but what the hell is this all about? Why'd you run? Where you been? Everybody's worried sick. ..."

"Long story," Sam responded. "I'll tell you as much as I can. Some of it'll sound crazy and maybe I am, but it's damned real."

It hadn't been all that sudden, only the final act. For months, almost since moving out west, she had been having strange experiences. First it was the dreams-lots of them, long and elaborate, sometimes several nights in a row with no break, and always involving the same things although never quite the same. Charley knew about the dreams. The most frequent one involved the demon and Sam, who was always driving a red sports car around a twisting mountain road along a coast, "although Sam couldn't drive and they were hundreds of miles from any coast.

It always began with a dark figure, sitting alone in a comfortable-looking room that none the less resembled more a medieval castle than anything modern. There was a low fire in the fireplace and a few goblets about, but everything was indistinct, as if in a dream. She saw his form, but not really his face, masked in shadow, but it was a strange form of a fairly large man in flowing robes and wearing what might have been a helmet with two large, crooked horns emerging from each side. She saw him, though, not as a vision, or a completed scene, but

as if she were there as well, sitting opposite him in a chair of her own, looking at his dark form with her own eyes. Somehow, she was aware that the goblet near her on a small table had until recently contained some kind of drug, and that the dark figure's mysterious, hazy, dark presence was partly due to that.

Suddenly there was a rumble and crackling, more like an electrical short circuit than anything else, but it seemed to overwhelm them, to carry them, not physically but mentally, through a dizzying, blinding, multicolored ride like an out of control carousel, although the dark form in the chair was still there, silhouetted against the swirling maelstrom.

And then there had been darkness, with scenes illuminated now by flashes of lightning and accompanying clashes of thunder, and a view from a great height down to a frothing ocean below beating itself against black rocks, and a low range of mountains forming a jagged and serpentine coastline, and, in the distance, two small lights approaching along that coast. They were not the storm, but they were of and with the storm, and they moved swiftly inland to a point where storm and lights must meet.

And now she saw herself driving that red sports car, but not from the point of view of the driver. Rather, she saw herself from the height during the flashes of lightning, and now they were nearly on top of it, and the dark, horned figure whispered fearsomely in a tone that somehow still cut through the noise of storm and surf, "Now! I was correct. The equations are perfectly in balance. She is the one we seek and she sleeps in the stupors of over indulgence. Minimum resistance, maximum

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flow, calculated odds of success in the ninety-plus per centile. . . . Now!"

And from the cloud a great bolt of lightning shot out, and while it struck just ahead and on the ocean side of the road the car suddenly slammed on its brakes and spun, aided by the sudden rain, and . . .

All then was blackness.

That had been the first of them, repeated many tunes with little or no variation, but it had not been the last. At first she put them down as mere fantasies, as nightmares, maybe, or possibly even a sign of a good imagination, but then the dreams progressed and she began to see a pattern both in when the dreams came and in their progression.

Always in the night. Always when thunderstorms approached and then raged around her.

But during this season of the year she felt she'd almost licked it. No thunderstorms, no really bad dreams. Not until last Thursday night, when this freak warm front had moved in and clashed with the very chilly winter air and set off a rare winter one.

Charley frowned. "I don't remember a thunderstorm last Thursday."

"It was real early in the morning. Like two or three. You'd sleep through an atomic bomb anyway. You can check it in the papers, though. We had it-and I had another real mean one."

"You mean you're running from a dream?"

"Not-exactly."

She had awakened to the sound and fury of the freak storm, and lay there, eyes wide open, feeling wide awake and afraid to go back to sleep, but even though the storm raged and she was fully conscious, through the thunder, through the roar of rain and hail on the roof and the rattling of windows by heavy winds, the voices intruded and the room seemed to fade. It was also quite dark, but she was seeing through another's eyes, a visitor without influence or control; an interloper who should not have been there, wherever "there" was.

It was the hall of a medieval-tike castle, damp and somewhat dark, illuminated by torches and by a fire in the great fireplace. She sat in a large, lushly upholstered chair at the head of a long table, an elegant if greasy and overcooked meal in front of her. She knew it was a woman's body, and probably royalty; long, feminine arms reached out for food and wine, with long, delicate fingers unblemished by any sign of work or wear, with crimson, perfectly trimmed and shaped nails so long they could not have withstood doing anything serious.

There were others at the table. A large man with a full beard and shoulder-length hair, stocky and rough but dressed in fine clothing including a cape. Several others, mostly rough-looking men, some accompanied by young women dressed in satin and gold, were also there-and a few others.

One was a tiny, gnarled man who must have been no more than three feet high, dressed in gray and brown with a rich black beard that seemed to go down almost to his feet, sitting there on a very high stool to be at equal height to the others. Another wore a crimson cloak and hood but seemed to have a frog-like snout extending from it and two round, yellow eyes that never blinked but, cat-like, reflected the torchlight. Yet another had a long, distorted, puffy kind of face, huge round blue eyes, and a rhinoceros-like horn rising up from the center of his forehead, and a woman whose hairless head seemed covered by a bony gray plate and whose arms ended not in hands but in claw-like mandibles. There may have been more, _ but the onlooker did not focus on them but rather on eating.

Finally the hairy man closest to her asked, "Highness, has the problem of the simulacra been disposed of?"

From behind her a voice, that voice, responded, "My Lord Klewa, we all know that nothing is certain except that the unthinkable must be thought, but there was little danger. So far we have found only a very few in all our months of searching that even slightly posed a danger and we are dealing with each in turn. The odds of that ever being a factor were always slim-the enemy would have to find a simulacrum and somehow transport before we could find and destroy them, and we had the only model for such loci searching anyway. You have no idea how many levels up we have gone and continue to go. Just when we believe it is no longer possible my storms find another, but so far away. . . . Even so, I shall deal with each.

"If you wish certainties, then kill yourself ," the strange one continued, "for that will produce a certainty in this world, at least. If you desire minimum risk, we have gone far further in that regard than anyone could imagine. But risk there will always be, and should be, for gain without risk would make a prize meaningless. So vast is our enterprise that we risk disrupting the fragile fabric of our reality and might cause the changewinds to increase and turn on us as well, but consider the goals and the alternatives. Be at ease."

And then she spoke, with a voice not unlike her own voice, strangely deep, although the tongue was strange and musical and not at all like English or any other language she had known, and the tone was softer, gentler, maybe sexier than she'd ever used.

"My Lord, why these questions now? You know my talents, and you know the skills of Protector Klittichorn. None of you entered into this alliance blindly, and our ideals and goals are of the highest order. The small brains who blindly struck down your own son to preserve their evil statist values would also have at me. We unite and triumph or die, or we do nothing and thus only die ever so slowly but no less certainly. But if we die, let it not be from faint hearts when all goes well. Speak your mind freely here, for we are equals at this table."

"Equals, aye, except for him," muttered the gnome-like man in a surprisingly deep, gruff voice. "We would follow you and your ideals to the death. My Lady, but not to deliver ourselves into the hands of another oppressor."

"The Protector is a brilliant man who has the same dreams as we," she responded.

"I have complete confidence in him, and, of course, there is no real chance of true victory without his tremendous skills. I regret that he has not the pleasing personality of court and politics, but I do not doubt his motives. He has always served me faithfully and well, and if you have any doubts then you must discard them. All of us must trust one another and give our bond; it is the only true thing of value between us."

Suddenly the scene began to fade, jumping in and out, becoming disjointed and impossible to follow, .like hearing three seconds out of every ten in a conversation. Another voice seemed to be cutting out the connection, with intermittent words here and there in a totally different tone and appearing to

come from much farther away.

. . . bee . . . kow . . . low . . . bap . . .

There was a sudden dizziness, first one way, then the other, as if someone were tuning a radio and she was the dial. It stopped almost as quickly as it began, and again there was a sense of contact with someone or something far away, but with a difference. This time she was lying there in the dark, fully aware of herself and her surroundings, her skin tingling oddly, and there was a sense that now the situation was reversed and that someone, or something, was looking at her or through her to the room beyond.

"There is darkness. She is awake and her eyes are open but there is darkness."

There was a sudden slight tickling sensation as if cobwebs had been run up and down her body. "Hmmm . . . Nothing really wrong. I was afraid for a moment she was blind or something."

"It's nightttime, you idiot, and she's in bed in a trance," came another voice.

"Who are you?" she called aloud to the voice in her head. "What do you want with me?"

The voice either did not or could not hear, and ignored her. It was inside her head, yet distanced. A man's voice, but not any of the men at the court dinner she had witnessed. Someone new, someone different, almost clinical-sounding, like some of her doctors. More interesting, if a bit more frightening, the words were certainly American English.

"I have her construct now. It is identical in every detail-. Astonishing. There must not be one point of similarity in background or origin yet there is an identical genetic code.'" A sigh. "Too late. The storm is passing and the lock of hair is not sufficient for more. But-does he know of her? He must-the storms are passing through and she's next. Still alive, Cromil! The first one we've found before he's killed her!"

"The one in the red car was barely dead," the other noted optimistically. "At least we're catching up."

The man ignored the comment. "Too late to do more now, damn it! Time for preparations. We must not let him kill her if we can. In our hands, she would be a great weapon. One test, no more. It already fades. . . ."

Suddenly, eerily, she was entirely back in the room, the storm already going away, her senses abnormally keen and sharp.

And then someone began to run his fingers through her hair!

It was terrifying, horrible. She wanted to scream, but dared not. The sensation faded in a moment but it was some time before she could move, dared to sit up, to turn-and find no one there.

Charley didn't know what to believe but she could understand her friend's tenor.

"Jeez! That's why you looked like hell and were so shook up at school Friday."

Sam nodded. "Yeah-but what could I do? You were goin' away for the weekend, and my mom would have all kinds of pop psychology bullshit. I mean, I didn't have any proof or nothin'. Hell, maybe I was nuts. I didn't know. But when we got out of school, well, something else happened. Just comin' out the door, kids all around, I thought I saw this big guy out of the corner of my eye, all black and stuff, maybe ten feet away. I turned, but there was nobody there. I got spooked. I got on the bus and sat up front, almost behind Miss Everett. I was lookin' out, and I know it's nuts, but I saw him again. Out of the corner of my eye, like before-standin' on the street In a crowd. But when I looked around, he was gone."

"Just nerves."

"Yeah, that's what I told myself, but then I looked up for some reason straight into the rear view mirror. You know what I mean-shows the aisle and seats? And he was there, sittin' in the back, and he didn't disappear. I turned, and there was nothin' where he should'a been but empty seats. I turned back to the mirror and there he was."

"What-what did he look like?" Like, was this a loony tune or was this strait jacket city?

"He-he didn't have any real features. He was all black, kinda like a cardboard cutout of black paper, but he moved. He breathed. He was alive! And, I mean, I had to get off that bus. I walked the last three blocks, and when the bus passed

I kinda saw him on it still. I got into the house, I didn't know what to do, but I knew it'd be dark in an hour and Mom wouldn't be home for three. Besides, they'd got me in my own room in my own bed. All she'd do would be to get me off to the funny farm where I'd be cooped up, and I figured he'd find me easy there. I looked out the front windows and I saw him, across the street, by the mailbox, just standin' there. I didn't know what he was doin', but I figured he was either just keepin' an eye on me for somebody else or he was waitin' til dark and I just wasn't gonna give him no chance. I panicked. I stuffed one of Mom's overnight bags with whatever I could find quick, grabbed the cash card, and got out the cellar window and out through the backyard. I snuck six blocks to Central Avenue, hit the automatic teller-I forgot you couldn't get much from one- and then caught the bus to the mall. I knew I'd given him the slip-no sign of him, not in the mirror of the bus, not anywhere. All I wanted was to shake him-and I did."

She blew a hundred and ten bucks on the boy's denims and shoes and another forty in the Hair Palace, a unisex hair salon. "I told them it was for a school play," she said. "That I had to look like a boy 'cause the role was a girl pretending to be a boy. The glasses were fifteen bucks. Plain lenses. I washed the stuff at the little coin-op at the motel over on Figueroa. I finally dumped most everything I brought with me in the dumpster. Then I started hidin' out here in the mall. There's all sorts of places if you really want to, and don't mind gettin' locked in. They got a couple of security guards but they're easy to dodge and they only go to midnight, eight on Sundays, then they just lock up tight and go. The water fountains work and the employee rest rooms in the mall security area ain't never locked. Durin' the day I been hustlin'. You know-carrying groceries to cars down at the Food Mart, helpin' little old ladies with shit, that kind of thing. I been doin' maybe twenty, thirty bucks a day in tips."

"And, like nobody's recognized you?"

She grinned. "Nope. I even been real close to some of the 'gang from school, mostly by accident-no use in pushin' things-and they never gave me a glance. You'd be surprised how many kids are around durin' school days, too. Nobody ever says nothin' unless they're at the arcade or like that. And everybody's been treat in' me like a boy. I even use the men's room. I always wondered what a urinal looks like. No wonder they can be in and out so fast. Only thing wrong is the mice." She shivered. "You'd think a classy place like this wouldn't have things like them hiding around. At least they should get a cat or something. And I'm dying for a shower!"

Charley stared at Sam in the darkness as an evil cartoon cat was chortling over plans to do in a very strange-looking duck in France or someplace on the screen. "You nuts? You gone stark raving mad? Sam, you can't keep going on like this! Your mom's probably worried sick by now, the cops are all over looking for you, and sooner or later somebody's gonna notice."

The fugitive sighed. "I know. I know. But I can't go home yet-I'll never feel real comfortable there again, and what if this character doesn't care who he hurts? I know it sounds nuts, like spook city, but it's for real. When I get out of this and have some breathing time I'll call Mom and tell her I'm okay. It won't stop her worryin' but at least she'll know I'm not kidnapped or dead or somethin'." She paused, sensing that it wasn't getting through. "Charley-I'm scared. I've never been more scared in my whole life. I'm-doing this-'cause I don't know what else to do."

"Sam-you just gotta come home. You just gotta. You're not cut out for this. Sooner or later somebody's gonna find you out anyway, or somebody else will spot you for what you are and you'll wind up in some strange city all doped up and turnin' tricks or somethin' like that. Jesus, there must be a hundred rapes a year just in this town! This ain't TV and you're no karate queen!"

"I made out so far. It's different when they think you're a boy. I found out how different just around here. But-you think I like this? I never thought ahead. I had to run and hide. Whoever it is, though-they haven't found me here. Not yet, anyway."

"Look-your mom and the cops can help."

"How? From a black figure who's only visible when he wants to be seen? From fucking thunderstorms that can put something in my own bedroom with me? You're say in' go back and stand in front of the guys with guns who want to kill ya 'cause if you run through the door and get away from 'em you just might run into a guy with a gun someplace who wants to kill ya."

"They're just dreams, Sam! Just dreams. They're just all in your head. And a black figure who's seen only in mirrors and once in a while when you're alone-that's creepy but it's right out of a horror movie. Those things just don't exist in the real world. I may not be a real brain but I know better than to believe in elves and fairies and Santa Claus and the Boogey-man."

Sam sighed. "I kinda thought you'd say that. I know that's what Mom and Dad and the cops would say-what almost anybody'd say. Okay, forget the dreams, forget the Boogeyman, forget everything I told you. Just promise me that you won't give me away here. Not until I can get clear and get settled someplace. A day. Two days tops. Will you promise me that?" She stared at her friend in the darkness of the movie house. "Charley-if I have to go home now, or to the funny farm, I'll kill myself. You can't know what it was like. Don't force me to do that. Please!"

Charley didn't really know what to do. Sam needed help-a lot of it. That was for sure. Help she couldn't give. She needed a really good psychiatrist and a lot of time. On the other hand, Sam was still Sam and she was still her friend, and there was such a note of desperation there that Charley felt Sam might well kill herself at this point. She needed advice on what to do and there was no way she could get it. Anybody she told about this would be hell-bent to recapture Sam, and if anything happened to Sam as a result of what she did she'd never forgive herself.

"Okay, okay, keep cool," Charley responded, trying to think. "Look, there's not much I can do tonight, and I got school tomorrow and Friday. I was supposed to go to a movie with Harry Friday night, but I can break that without my folks knowing. Look, I'll pick you up here. We'll do this boyfriend-girlfriend bit so it'll look right. I'll pick you up in front of the Food Mart say ... seven-thirty. We'll go someplace and try and really figure it out. If anything happens before then, call me and I'll see what I can do. I swear I won't tell nobody nothin'. All right?"

Sam seemed somewhat relieved. "All right. Friday night, then. You better get home now-I'll get by."

Charley kissed Sam and squeezed her hand and then, hesitantly, got up and walked out of the theater. The mall was already mostly closed down, and she had no trouble finding her car. She got in, started it, and pulled out toward the exit light, trying to think, to figure things out, and not paying any attention to the rock blaring from the car radio.

"And here's the latest from Action Weather. Cool tonight, lows about thirty-five in the city and lower than that in the suburbs, with light snow possible above the six thousand foot mark. In spite of this, unseasonable freak thunderstorms continue in the area due to an unsettled mix of very cold air aloft and relatively warmer air near the surface. High tomorrow around fifty. This is Doctor Ruben Miller with Action Weather. ..."

A car's lights turned on behind her and slowly pulled out toward the exit traffic light. Just nerves, she told herself. Most people would be leaving now who hadn't already left.

She turned onto the street and couldn't help but see the lights of the other car turn the same way. She began feeling very paranoid, very silly. Sam was, well, sick, that's all. It'd take a shrink to figure it out, but Sam never really liked it out here in the southwestern boonies or being this far from her dad, she was too straight arrow to even date in the usual ways, and she was hemmed in by her lack of wheels to get out and enjoy things. She'd gone so far into that fantasy life she couldn't quite get out anymore, Charley decided.

Still, she couldn't shake some of the paranoia that rubbed off Sam like din. Was that the same car still following? What if she made a turn?

Feeling stupid, she turned onto a side street well before hers just to get a

little peace of mind. She went about a block and then saw headlights turn in from the main street. She made a left, then another right before the other car could possibly see her, then pulled over and parked just ahead of a big black car that would partially shield her from view.

A car passed on the cross street; a dark blue Ford. It was impossible to see who was driving, but that was certainly the car. She pulled back out, then threaded her way through the development and back toward her house again. She chided herself for being so spooked and came up to the stop sign on her street, then forward to the middle of the block where her house was. She almost panicked when she passed a blue Ford-the blue Ford-parked at the corner across the street from her house. It looked like there was somebody in it, but she couldn't really make him out.

Unnerved now, she parked in the driveway and got out, wanting to be inside as quickly as possible. It was probably a cop-all the cops on TV seemed to drive big, dark cars like that. O'Donnell or his boss had decided to bet a couple of men that Sam was still in town and would be likely to contact her best friend, that was all. It was scary, but it sure as hell wasn't no mysterious dark figure you could see only in mirrors or any magic princesses.

A mall is a strange place at night, full of half-lit halls and ghostly stores and vast, deserted airspace. There were bars or roll-down security fronts on the stores, of course, and after Security left at midnight all of the entrances and exits also were wired, although, of course, a few key doors had safety bars just in case someone got trapped inside. Some malls had twenty-four-hour security inside, but, fortunately, this wasn't exactly a major crime area and the place was pretty secure against burglars and vandals. All the stores closed at nine; only the theaters were open later, usually until eleven or so, and they had a separate outside exit allowing them to have their final show without disturbing the mall routine.

By ten the merchants were gone and the cleaning crews were out in force. It was pretty impressive to see them work a whole mall in such a short time, but everything was on such an impressive system that they almost never strayed past midnight. The theaters had their own crew that came in at seven in the morning; their first features were the matinees and it was more efficient to clean them during the unused morning time than pay overtime to a night crew.

The first security personnel arrived about seven, give or take a couple of minutes.. They checked the locks and made the rounds once to make certain that all was well. Around seven-thirty some mall personnel showed up, checking all the settings and turning on the lights, fountains, and the rest, and soon after the early merchants would begin to show, starting with the food stall people and then the rest. By nine it was all ready to go once again. Only on Sundays, when the mall was only open noon to six, did anything vary. Then, starting at six, a veritable army of cleaning and maintenance personnel moved in and it was often after midnight when they left.

Behind the facade, however, were miles of service corridors, storerooms, and other areas that were the nuts and bolts of running such a place. There were even some classroom-sized rooms and a small complex of offices. By now Sam had explored them all and discovered the areas where virtually no one went on a regular basis, and mere, well hidden from even the most chance encounter, she'd made something of a nest using some removable seat cushions from stored chairs and other things picked up along the way that nobody would miss. Saturday night she'd made a valuable find, in fact, although she hadn't yet had to use it, where the day cleaning crew who picked up while all was open changed. It was a nice red security badge with a male name on it-George Trask, whoever he was-and a number but no photo. She always wore it when getting in or out of here, though, just in case. She had run in terror and run to the only place she could think of, but when it became clear that she had not been seen or followed and she had, at least temporarily, some safety, the focus had changed. The more nights she got away with it, the more confident she became, now often staying awake late and sleeping late, sneaking out into the mall itself well after it was alive and going. By Monday it had become something of an adventure, although

she knew full well it couldn't last. She also had to know what was going on, what was being said about her, how large the hue and cry, and that was the reason for the note to Charley. She wasn't sure what Charley could do, if anything, but it was better than being alone.

She also felt frustrated. She didn't want her mom to worry, or her dad, either. He was probably flying out now if he wasn't already here yelling and screaming at her mom and the cops and everybody else. Better they should worry than find her dead, though.

She would have liked to have reassured them, but what the hell could she say? She'd tried the truth with Charley and Charley had reacted like it was psycho city, so explaining this to her parents was just impossible. She needed to get away for a while, far from here, and sort it all out. Maybe north or east into the real cold where they didn't have thunderstorms this time of year. Someplace where she could get some kind of menial job that would keep her going. Damn it, she knew carpentry and construction. There had to be something out there someplace. Not much chance for a girl, but she played a mighty convincing boy if she did say so herself. She had the walk and the moves and the vocabulary down pat. Hell, she had it down so pat she'd gone right past some people she'd been in school with for a year and they never noticed, and she'd even gotten friendly with a couple of fifteen-year-old girls who hung out here.

She'd kind of fantasized being a boy off and on and she had to admit it had its points. Boys didn't have to spend an hour and a half just getting ready to go out in public; they didn't have to suffer lewd comments from passing pickup trucks or worry much about being alone on the bus or why a guy was being nice. In a sense, they were just more invisible in everyday life.

She acted the part well enough but she wasn't a boy, and on Thursday evening that was driven home to her hard. Everything was closed, she was getting her damned period, and there wasn't a reachable tampon in sight. Some blood had seeped through, soaking her panties and getting on the jeans. She had spare panties but she knew she had to work on that jeans stain before it set. The one small washroom that was open had some soap but the basin wasn't big enough for that. Okay, Sam, you figured out the rest up to now-what the hell do you do about this?

And so she found herself, at two in the morning, stark naked in the middle of the main concourse of the mall, sitting on the edge of the fountain and soaking her pants and underwear. The fountain was turned off for the night, but there was a pool of water there maybe two feet deep. It was also surprisingly warm-well, tepid, anyway-and quite clear. At the bottom she saw what seemed to be hundreds of coins thrown in by people over the week-they generally fished out the stuff on Sundays. Mostly pennies, but there was occasional silver in there and she found herself slipping into the fountain and combing the bottom. She came up in the end with only three dollars, and fifty-five cents in non-pennies but it was okay.

She finally decided to hell with it and gave herself something of a rinse and she felt a lot better for it. Her flow was still intermittent; by tomorrow she'd buy something that would keep it from betraying her.

When she got out, rinsed out the clothes and laid them out to dry as much as possible, she found herself feeling a lot cheerier but not at all sleepy, even though she should have been dead tired. She looked out at the silent mall and felt a kind of kinky thrill. In a few hours this place would be jammed with people, but here she was, stark naked in the middle of it all. She decided to have a stroll around the mall. She'd once had a dream about touring a mall stark naked, although, of course, all the stores were open in the dream. Even so, it was sort of like living a brief fantasy and it was kind of funny.

Most of the stores kept lights on at low levels, but a few were completely dark, and their display windows reflected her form. She stopped at one and stared at herself. She sure didn't look like a boy now, and for the moment she didn't want to. She'd never been thrilled with her face-her ears were too big and her nose was wrong and her teeth were too big and prominent and she had a kind of chubbette face, or so she thought, but there was nothing wrong with her body. It amazed her that breasts like hers could be so effectively concealed by that

stiff denim jacket, although she'd paid a price for it in rubbing and chafing. Nice body curve, too, and pretty good hips if she did say so herself. Her ass looked fatter than it should be, but that was about it. She struck a few sexy poses and kind of liked it. She was getting turned on by all this and she didn't fight it. She tried to imagine herself as a boy now, though, and couldn't. No, she could play one all right, but she didn't want to give up what she was seeing now.

She passed close to one of the security cameras monitoring the staff exit and suppressed a giggle. Couldn't she give 'em something to really look at! Not that she would. If anybody saw her like this now, she'd just die. Suddenly the thrill was gone. What if somebody did show up now? What if some merchant or security man or mall supervisor had to come in real early for something? They hadn't yet, but suddenly the possibility loomed like a certainty in her mind.

She went back down to the fountain where her clothes were. In the dry mall air the undies were almost dry although they looked like veterans of a chainsaw massacre; the jeans, however, seemed as wet as ever. They generally took an hour on high in the dryer at home. Hell, it might be a long time before they were dry enough to wear, damn it. Still, scrubbing the fresh stain with some hand soap and water had done wonders. It was still there but wasn't much and certainly didn't look like blood anymore.

Outside, as if very far away, she heard a faint rumble. Oh, God! Not a thunderstorm! Not now! To be heard much at all inside here it must be right on top of her! They were still looking for her, that was for sure. They'd lost her once but they wouldn't give up if they thought she was still around the town. She knew that. If the cops were still looking, then they were sure as hell not gonna give up.

She felt sudden panic. What would she do if they found her in here right now? Visions of mad slasher movies started running through her head. The jeans were still so wet they'd be more a hindrance than a help. Being chased, naked, through a deserted mall by him . . .

What was that? Some kind of noise over by the book store . . .

She grabbed up everything and made for the staff exit, being careful to avoid the camera and other more actual traps and back to her hiding place. She could hear the storm a bit more here, closer to the outer walls, but she could do nothing but huddle, shivering in the dark, eyes glued to the door of the storeroom.

Oh, God! Please, God! Steer them away from me! I'll do anything, anything, but please don't let them find me tonight! Just send the storm away from here, away from me!

And, although wide awake and terrified, she seemed to hear the Honied One's voice, as if in a whisper far away.

"Damn it, I almost had her, but something is deflecting the storms, interfering with the focus. I can't seem to get a fix. This requires too much energy; I am drained. But we will find her, never fear. If not this night, another night. This one must be dealt with. She has tapped the Power. Potentially she is the most dangerous one we have yet encountered. . . .

And all the while the object of this ghostly conversation sat crouched against the wall in the corner of the storeroom, naked, helpless, and terrified in the dark.

2

The Maelstrom

Morning dawned bright if a little crisp over the valley. Inside the insulated mall the canned music was turned on and a chorus of massed violins was playing a soft, melodic version of Beast of Burden. In the storeroom, Sam had gone to sleep after several hours in spite of herself but her real gain was perhaps two hours of rest and she felt like she'd been run over by a truck.

Even so, she felt some elation. Once again, somehow, she'd beaten them, if only for a night. One thing was sure, though- she had to get out of here now. They knew, or at least suspected, that she was here. They'd be back, again and again, until they found her. She wanted to meet no dark figure in this mall at two the

next morning.

Still, it was now Friday. If Charley hadn't decided to stay out of it and if she really wanted to help she'd be there tonight, maybe with a car.

The jeans were still damp and badly wrinkled, but they would do. The socks might as well be abandoned. After days in them they were beyond the help of merely soaking. She never liked the feel of them anyway.

First things first. She'd have to get out of here and find enough light to count her money and see just what she did and didn't have. She didn't feel much like eating right now, but she needed tea or a Coke or something with a jolt in it to get her going and keep her moving today. It was gonna be one damned long day. She managed to dress and slip out and into the mall proper. She had to pass a few people in back as she always did, but so long as you looted like you belonged nobody ever said much, particularly if you were going out. She headed first for the now open public restrooms. Nothing like a well-lighted stall for privacy, although the men's rooms weren't as nice as the ladies' rooms and had far fewer stalls.

She sat down and pulled out the crumpled mass of coins and bills and flattened and counted them. A hundred twenty-seven sixty-five. Not much. She still had her mother's bank card but the odds were they changed that just in case she was kidnapped or something. Still, it might be worth a try tonight. Friday night-if the number hadn't been changed it'd be Monday before anybody'd find out it was used again and by that time she really would be gone while they searched here. Not bad. Nothing to lose, anyway.

A pocket-sized pack of maxi-pads solved the immediate problem and just in time, too. That and some Panadol for the cramps, although it only helped a little. She was one of those unlucky ones who got it bad, at least for a day or so. Charley was luckier in that regard; she hardly ever had it bad. Sam always wondered if it was because she was oversexed or, something or if it was easier once your cherry was popped or if the combination would turn her into a nymphomaniac or something. Hustling much was out today; her lack of sleep, period, and nerves combined to make her unfit for much of anything. She picked up a couple of donuts and a Coke and managed to get them down. It helped only in that it was an improvement over no donuts and no Coke.

It was tough to stay awake and kill a whole day without doing much. She browsed a lot, but the fact was that time really crawled and she was feeling just miserable. Worse was seeing all the things she'd like to buy, things she really needed-like more clothes and a jacket at least-but didn't dare pick up. By the time Charley was due she was in pretty bad shape. Still, she spotted the little red Subaru wagon cruise by the entrance slowly, then stop by the curb, and she practically ran to it and jumped in. Charley pulled away almost immediately.

"Jeez! You look like warmed over shit," her friend commented. Charley was dressed like she was going on a real heavy date-lipstick, makeup, perfume, fake fur jacket, nice satiny blouse and short skirt, even pantihose and heels. She even had her contacts in-at least, Sam hoped she did.

"This has been one of the worst days of my whole life," Sam responded honestly.

"No sleep, cramps, you name it. Glad to see you dressed up for me, though."

Charley laughed. "I had a couple of days to work this out and some of the gang at school were willing to help out, too."

Sam had closed her eyes but one opened. "You didn't tell nobody else about me, did you?"

"No, relax. There's a group going up to Taos to ski this weekend and I just begged my folks to be included, since the weather's been so weird and we have a four-wheel-drive wagon I think they're happy to get me out of town and someplace safe for the weekend. It's not the first time-you know that-and Monday's a school holiday. The cops seem to have given up on you but my folks are still real paranoid about me since you vanished, it was almost World War Three just to go to the bathroom alone after they found out about you yesterday."

"Yeah? And what's the group gonna say when you don't show up?"

Charley laughed. "Oh, if necessary they'll cover for me. They think I'm sneaking out this weekend to spend it with a new and secret boyfriend. Remember my

reputation at school. I'm a woman of experience, remember. I'll give my folks a call later on tonight and again tomorrow night and lie and that gives me until Monday night before I have to be back."

Sam leaned back in the seat, too exhausted to even be concerned anymore. "I just need someplace to sleep and get myself together if you know what I mean," she sighed. "A hot bath and a bed."

"I've got some money for the weekend and I got my own Visa, remember. When the bill comes in next month I'll just kinda tear off the bottom of the form and lose it and stick it in the pile to be paid. We'll get you a motel tonight but tomorrow I think we'll go up to my folks' cabin by the lake. Dad bought it years ago but we hardly ever use it. I think there've been more relatives stay there than us. Nobody'll be up there now and maybe not for miles. I figure it's as good a place as any to start. We got all Saturday to work something out."

Charley was still a little paranoid from Wednesday night and decided to see if anybody was following. Not that she could do much if they were, but it would give something of an edge. She took a number of turns and spent a good fifteen minutes at it until she felt sure she wasn't being tailed. Then she headed out to the freeway and headed north, out and away from the city. Only then did she look over and see that Sam was out cold, dead to the world. She looked so damned-helpless out like that.

For Charley, it was just helping out a friend and a little touch of adventure that broke the boredom of day to day routine. She found a small motel off the highway and registered as "Mr. and Mrs. Sam Sharkin." She had to use her last name since it was on the credit card. She didn't know why she put that down instead of passing Sam off as a more credible little brother or something, but it kind of added to the adventure, to the sense of doing something naughty. Sam was still out cold and it took some doing just to get her awake enough to get her inside. The room was small but comfortable, with a full bath and a queen-sized bed. Charley went back out to get her suitcase and lock the car, and found that Sam had gotten awake enough to strip and was running a hot bath. She certainly needed it, so Charley took the opportunity to call her parents and lie enthusiastically. They seemed satisfied, relieved that she was out of town and with a group and told her to have a good time. She felt much better afterward, and turned on the TV. She was a woman now, damn it, and a bit too old to be towing her parents' line all the time. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Sam was in the tub so long Charley got worried that maybe she'd gone to sleep in there, but then her friend struggled in, dried herself with a towel, and flopped down on the bed. "You bring any tampons?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure." Charley got one from her suitcase. "Don't leave home without it. How are you feeling?"

"Dead. Like a pool of warm shit and my head's poundin' something fierce. Dead-but clean." She said the word like a religious fanatic talking about heaven. "You?"

"I'm okay. A little tired but not like you. What happened to you? You looked so good on Wednesday." She got up and turned off the TV-nothing much on anyway-and the lights and crawled back into bed. She'd brought pajamas with her but somehow they just didn't seem right.

Sam sighed. "Just my nuttiness screwin' me up again."

"Tell me-if you want." It might be easier if she could get it out of her system. Slowly, Sam described the previous night in the mall, sparing nothing.

"You actually walked nude around the mall?" The image .had an erotic kinkiness to it that appealed to her, although she was sure she couldn't have done it.

"Yeah. It was kinda fun, but then the thunder came and I panicked and then the voices in my head started again and that was the end of that. The worst part was being all alone." She shivered.

Almost instinctively Charley put her arms around Sam and drew her close. "Well, Charley's here now. You're not alone tonight."

Sam clung to her tightly, and Charley, a bit embarrassed, realized that her friend was softly crying.

It was a small, very dark cloud in the night sky, nearly impossible to see, yet if it could have been seen from the ground it would resemble a swirling,

seething mass that pulsed almost as if it were alive. It flowed like an amoeba across the dark sky, jointly pulsing with electrical energy that made it appear almost to have a broad, comic, if still demonic face, the internal flashes of lightning illuminating two small areas almost as if they were eyes.

It settled first over the mall and remained there for quite some time, drifting a bit this way and that as if trying to catch a scent. Then, finally, catching a hint of something, it began to move out, away from the mall, stopping again over a residential neighborhood where it swirled in sudden confusion for almost an hour. Then it seemed to find its direction again and slowly moved northward. It was tenacious but ponderously slow. It headed northward now, following a road below, but it was no longer going with the prevailing winds and the energy drain was enormous. Even as it moved, it shrank, losing little bits and pieces of itself to the atmosphere. With single-minded determination it ignored this, but the effect was to slow it even more. The fight against the other elements was too great, its dissipation too fast. Even as the scent grew stronger the cloud grew weaker and weaker, until, perhaps just short of its goal, it weakened sufficiently that it could no longer maintain its structural integrity.

For a brief moment, the swirling mass gone, only two bright, terrible spots of light remained suspended in the air, and then suddenly they were shattered by the prevailing winds.

Saturday dawned bright if a bit crisp and cool, and the brightness was reflected in Sam's attitude as well. She had slept for eleven straight hours and she felt hung over, but she also felt a tremendous lessening of the tension she'd been under for a week. Charley checked out and then they went over to MacDonalds and had what was essentially a brunch. Charley was never very hungry and nibbled on a cheeseburger and fries, but Sam was ravenous, putting away two quarter-pound burgers, a fish sandwich, fries, and a shake. It was as if she hadn't eaten in a week. Still, by the time they were off again it was almost like the old Sam was back and it was the two of them out for a lark.

In Amarillo they found a mall and made good use of Charley's credit card. Sam declared the old denim outfit unfit for further human consumption and hit a western-wear store for a new if similar outfit in a young boy's size, cowboy boots, leather belt with antique copper buckle, and even a Stetson. Considering the season, the addition of an imitation sheepskin jacket was welcome. She also got a small overnight case of fake leather, with a shoulder strap, which looked pretty masculine but could double as a purse, and some boys' underwear. She also hit a barber and got a haircut so short it was called "the military cut" in the style book—very short and flat on top and almost shaved on the sides. She still looked fourteen but, dressed that way and with that cut, just about every outward trace of femininity was erased. In fact, with her cool, tough, male act, Charley thought Sam was kind of cool and cute and sexy, not butch but convincing.

It was a bit over two hours more on back roads before they reached the cabin. It had been so long since Charley herself had been there that she had to check all sorts of landmarks and even then missed the dirt road turnoff twice. The cabin itself was a single-room log affair about a mile and a half off the main road and sheltered from view by both the land and the trees. Fortunately, it was locked with combination locks the numbers for which were in Dad's address book, so they were able to enter and look around.

"It's not much," Charley admitted. "It was supposed to be hot shit when we bought it but they never developed the so-called getaway wilderness resort they were selling in the brochures. Some folks camp around here in summer but I think we're the only ones that ever built anything within miles of here. Dad sued the hell out of them and got the cabin in a settlement. This was used as the sales office years ago and it's the only one with a well and septic system. You still gotta pump it up by hand over there, though, and add water to the toilet to flush it. They powered the place in the old days with a generator and they took that with 'em. No electricity."

There were, however, kerosene lamps, a wood stove built out of a fireplace, a sink with an old-fashioned handle pump where the faucets should be, a bare

toilet that once had a curtain around it, some cabinets, pots, pans, and an old and squeaky but serviceable double bed. "Used to be my folks' but it either got too squeaky or too small for 'em so they moved it here," Charley explained. Sam looked around. "Real country primitive, that's for sure. Matches the outfit, though. How long's it been since anybody was here?"

"Oh, a couple of cousins used it like for a week last year, I think-there's wood in the woodpile out there that we can use that I guess is from them. I don't think my folks have been here since the one and only time I was, which was like years ago. The river out back's supposed to have good fish in it, leastwise in the summer .and fall. I don't know why Dad hangs on to it 'cept I guess you can't get much for it. Ain't exactly the great vacation spot of the universe or even Texas. I guess maybe he like figures he fought for it and it cost him, so he's keepin' it on principle or something."

They took turns trying to make the pump work. It took several minutes to get any water up, all the time screeching like the wail of the dead, and when it did come it was very rusty, but after pumping what seemed to be gallons it cleared enough so neither felt nervous about drinking or using it.

Charley had prepared for many of the cabin's obvious lacks. They'd stopped at a grocery store and picked up a pretty good assortment of stuff, although very little in the way of meat and nothing frozen since there was no refrigerator. Still, with the kind of stuff you could buy freeze-dried or boil-in-bag these days you could get by pretty good without it for a while.

They spent the day cleaning up and more or less playing house for real, and it struck Charley after a while that even out here and with the act down they had just sort of naturally assumed sexual roles, with Sam doing the logs and heavy stuff and she doing the cooking and making the bed with the linen she'd brought along. It was almost like they were acting like- well, her mom and dad-and it hadn't been deliberate. It was kind of fun, really; if Sam had really been a boy it might be different, but this was like a pleasant fantasy game and far preferable to making the hard choices ahead.

Sam came in from the car with a small brown bag which she'd obviously already opened, then pulled out a fifth of vodka. It was open, but still three-fourths full. "And what's this? Lighter fluid?"

"It's from home. There's so many bottles in the club room they'll never miss it. At the time I kinda figured you might need it, but to tell you the truth I forgot about it. I could'a got some grass from Louisa but I knew you couldn't stand the smell of the stuff."

Sam sighed. "I never really touched much of any of that. Too scared, I guess. What's it taste like?"

"Not much of anything, really. You just mix it with juice or pop. It just makes me real silly and it makes you feel good for a while. Too much can make you sick in the morning, though." Sam looked back outside. "Well, we got a nice fire in here, it's hot as hell inside, dark and cold outside; we got no TV, no radio 'less we want to sit in the car, and not much else. Maybe I can stand bein' silly once."

And they did get silly, partly because they had no real way to measure the stuff and partly because the early attempts caused no real effect quickly and by the time they had enough to really feel it it was pretty cumulative. They sang and they danced to the songs they sang and they laughed at really stupid things and Charley got up on the table and did a silly strip tease and just like the last time she'd gotten drunk she got real turned on. She had no inhibitions at all and it was all impulse, all feel, now, not thinking. Sam, too, seemed real vacant and giggly and pretty unsteady.

They were both pretty giddy and helped each other to blow out the lamps and make it to bed. Charley snuggled up close to Sam and started gently rubbing the other. She sensed Sam stiffen. "What's wrong?"

"I-I dunno. I have these funny feelings inside and I'm all mixed up. It's all-wrong."

"You want me to stop?"

"That's just it-I don't want you to stop. I-I had other dreams, not just the bad ones. Ones I never told about. You dream about boys. I know you do. Mine had you

and me in bed, like this, only in my dreams I was a boy and you was you and that made it all right. . . ."

In any other circumstances Charley would have reacted differently, but she was high as a kite and horny as hell. "Okay, just for tonight, then, let's do a fantasy. You're the boy and I'm the girl and we're here all alone. Jus' relax and pretend and ol' Charley'll show you just what to do."

It wasn't clear how long it went in the darkness before they both passed out from the booze, but it was day when Charley awoke with a splitting headache to the sounds of Sam throwing up into the toilet. Charley didn't feel that sick, but her head was throbbing and the room was slightly spinning and she could do nothing but lie there and try not to move.

She didn't remember much about the night but she remembered-enough, and it started her thinking and worrying. She was slightly troubled about herself, wondering if this was anything much inside her head or not. She sure as hell fantasized about boys, but she'd gotten turned on by looking at a girl or two and it hadn't bothered her much. Hell, when she'd been fourteen she'd had a real, if short, adolescent crush on Mrs. Santiago, her English teacher at the time. Months later Mrs. Santiago had been replaced with Mr. Horvath. Sam, though-she was such a damned straight arrow it must be killing her inside, or would when she stopped being sick and really sobered up. She and Sam were physically only a month apart in age, but emotionally Sam was closer to fourteen than seventeen going on eighteen, and she'd had that split home and since being separated so long and so far from her dad Sam had turned him into almost Superman in her mind so no boy could ever compare or measure up.

Boy, Dr. Joan Henvitz-she was the phone-in psychologist on the radio-had lots of cases like this. Sam got a crush on Charley but it went against everything her straight arrow upbringing and church groups believed. So she couldn't handle it, and finally invented this weird fantasy world and dark mysterious ghosts and talking thunderstorms. Man! These were heavy thoughts! Sam was running, all right, but not from the darker dreams and fantasies but rather to them. The solution startled Charley but it also cheered her. It explained everything! The trouble was, would Sam buy it now and deal with it? It was Sunday. There was only one day left.

Still, they had to survive a rough morning first. Charley had one of those awful problems-she desperately needed to take some industrial-strength Tylenol she had with her but to do so involved pumping some water and the screeching of the pump was unendurable. It was also very cold in the cabin; Sam was covered with goosebumps but first things came first and upchucking had a way of forcing itself to the head of the line. Even so, once her stomach was empty she felt much better if dizzy and lightheaded. Still, she had enough sense to know that building a fire was essential and she managed to throw some wood in the stove, light some paper with a cheap lighter, and toss it in. It would take a few minutes but at least things would be livable.

She found an unopened bottle of orange juice that was slightly cold because of the cabin's temperature and got the pills from Charley's purse and brought them to her. It was only then that they both discovered that Sam, the bed, and even Charley were something of a bloody mess and Sam felt bruised and scratched up inside. It confused her. "Jeez-my period's pretty well over and I never had flow like that."

Charley had to laugh even though it hurt to do so. "Long fingernails," she muttered. "Sam, I popped your cherry last night. Don't worry-it'll never happen again. Hurt a little inside?"

"Uh-huh."

"That'll go away, too, and shouldn't ever come back." She sighed. "I guess if we can heat a little water we can wash ourselves off but I didn't bring but one set of bedding. I figured it was only a couple of days. Best we can do I guess is wash 'em in the sink when my head slows down. They'll still look awful but at least they can be used."

By the early afternoon both were feeling much better, although the after-effects lingered on in upset stomachs and generally feeling drained. Sam, perhaps

because she'd cleared her stomach, seemed to get over it faster than Charley, much to Charley's chagrin, although the mental effects of the binge were dwelling inside the fugitive.

"So what do I do now? Go to San Francisco or Greenwich Village or somethin'?" Sam muttered unhappily. "'Cept I don't wanna go to any of them places."

"Oh, come on, Sam. Like, you never even tried it with a boy. Hell, I been pretty straight lately myself but I'm no saint. I got all sorts of urges and attractions and most of 'em I don't let out unless I'm high or drunk or whatever, but some I do. Don't you see? That's what's happened to you. You been so scared of letting go, lettin' your hair down when you had it and, well, sinning a little. You're scared you won't be the Virgin Mary and you're not. Nobody is. You're almost scared of makin' friends or gettin' into a little hell raisin' and that's got it all bottled up inside. I don't know if you really swing that way exclusive or not and I don't think you do, neither. You don't have the experience yet to know."

Sam sighed. "I always felt I should'a been a boy, that somebody screwed up someplace. I never felt comfortable around boys 'cept my dad, of course. Even my voice wasn't no girl's voice. But when I was naked in front of that store window I kinda liked what I saw mere, too. Fact was, for the first time in my life I liked me as I was, if that don't sound crazy."

Charley shook her head. "I understand."

"But it didn't change nothin'. I still felt the same towards you, and when you not only didn't turn me in but picked me up and went to all this trouble it was like, well, you felt somethin' for me, too. And since we been together I felt, well, safe."

Charley hesitantly chewed on her lower lip, thinking hard, then said, "And you don't see the connection? It's been buildin' up inside you and it scared you, that's all. When I went away for the whole weekend leavin' you alone around the house you had your shadow man. When you looked at yourself in the mall and turned yourself on you got panicky and had another dream. I bet almost all of 'em happened after something stuck in your mind about your own feelings or me. And since we been together there's been nothin'. Don't you see, Sam? Them dreams, them voices, they're not real. They come for you when you get hung up and feelin' guilty and all. They're in your head, that's all. They're scarier even than what you're really 'fraid of so you don't think about that no more." Sam thought it over. "They're so real. And the thunderstorms-they're real, too. Thunderstorms at high altitude here in the middle of winter."

"Yeah, I guess the storms are real, but they're real with you or without you. It's not like they never happened before-I heard the weather guy on the radio. Come on, Sam! Lotsa folks are scared by things that don't make no sense. Me, I'm terrified of spiders and I ain't too fond of tall buildings, neither, even when I'm inside 'em. You step on spiders and leave 'em outside to catch flies and I bet back in Boston you went in lots of tall buildings and never thought 'bout it. You got thunderstorms which I always thought were kinda neat and exciting so long as you was lookin' at 'em from inside someplace. You just put your storms and your fears together and it still wasn't enough. Your shadow man didn't come durin' no thunderstorm, did he?"

For the first time there was a glimmer of doubt in Sam's mind. "You really think so? That this was all for nothin'? But everything was so real."

"I guess it can be. But it's out in the open now, at least between the two of us, and I don't care. You told me and showed me and I didn't run screamin' away or nothin'. Look, you go home, you see a shrink. Your mom's into all that liberal cause shit; you'll wind up gettin' one that'll say just what I'm sayin', I'll bet you. We won't tell anybody else about it." She was thinking furiously now. She'd hooked the fish and didn't want to let it slip away. "Maybe we'll go off to college together. How's that sound? We'll room together and raise a little hell ourselves."

"But you hate the idea of college!"

"Well, like maybe I can stand it with a good friend, huh? It'll freak out our parents but they'll love it. Come on-what do you say?"

Sam thought hard about it. "I really want to believe it, Charley. But what if I

go back and it all starts again anyway? They'll get me sure, mthen, and you better believe I'll be grounded for months."

"And if you don't? Where you gonna run, Sam? Sure, you look and can act like a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old boy, but ten years from now you're still gonna look fifteen or sixteen. Nobody'll hire a kid that young with no ID, no background, no experience, no family. Nobody you could ever trust workin' for, anyways. You can't even get a job for the minimum at MacDonaldis, for Christ's sake, without a Social Security card, home address, parental permission, you name it. Only thing you could do would be to turn yourself back into a girl with everything hangin' out and sell yourself."

"I-I couldn't do that."

"You get hungry enough or fall into the wrong hands and you damn well will, or you'll die-and what's the difference if your shadow man kills you or you freeze to death hitchin' or starve to death in Denver? Hell, you can't even drive. There's bastards out there pickin' up boys for the last ride, you know, and if they find out you're a girl they'll find your body in a ditch someplace years from now if ever."

"But what if my dreams are real?"

"They're not, damn it, but real or not they'll follow you and you know it. You don't face it, it'll get you. I can just see you hitchin' on some warm day in the middle of nowhere when t thunderstorm comes up. There you face it alone. Back we face it together."

"Charley, I-I really want to believe you but I have to know. Before I can go back, I just have to."

Charley looked out the window. It was a clear sky, only a few high wispy clouds, but the winter sun was coming close to the horizon. "Then let's face them now, huh? All night if necessary, or until we freeze our tits off. Together."

Sam looked suddenly nervous as Charley pulled on designer jeans, a lavender cashmere sweater, her calf-length boots with high, thick heels, then got her fur coat. "Put on your boots, coat, and hat and we'll see just how nasty this all is. If they're so hot to find you, then they should accept a call."

"What?"

"If you love me, or think you love me, then you'll do it. For me."

"But-what if they come?"

Charley sighed. "Well, if you can conjure up a storm it'll show there's some ESP or that kind of stuff and if you can do it here you sure as hell can convince other folks. Besides, didn't you tell me that you thought you sent it away from the mall? If anything really shows up, push it back."

She didn't really believe any of this, but clearly Sam did. It was better to play the game out.

"Come on," said Charley. "Prove to me that you can screw up this pretty day."

They walked down the dirt road until they cleared the trees, Charley leading. She wanted as unobstructed a view of the sky as possible, convinced that there was no way to imagine storms or demons in a sky like this. There was a chill in the air but it wasn't unbearable, partly because there was almost a dead calm; the sky pale blue with only those high, thin, wispy clouds and nothing else visible as far as they could see.

"Here. This is far enough," Charley said firmly. She stopped and looked around.

"Well, I don't see no shadow man and I don't see no storm clouds. If you can conjure up anything in the here and now then you got a hell of a power."

Sam looked uncomfortable, feeling vulnerable, but she was unable to back out at this point. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Call 'em. Just look up in the sky or towards the horizon and just sort of like think them to come. Just tell 'em, 'Here's Sam Buell! If you want me come and get me!' Do it over and over for a few minutes and see if anything develops. Either it works or it don't. If it don't you're home free."

Sam looked up at the very pale sky with perhaps no more than an hour's light left in it. She had real problems with this because she was not at all convinced that it was all in her head, but, damn it, Charley was right She had to know, and this time ' somebody else was watching, too.

She stared at the clouds, took a deep breath, then closed her eyes and thought, hard, Who are you? What do you want with me? I'm sick of naming from you! If you want me come here, now, and have it out, or get away forever and let me alone! She tensed, then after a few moments opened her eyes. It all looked the same. Nothing had changed. She felt, suddenly, very emotional, even angry, and tears welled up inside her. "You bastards!" she screamed at the sky. "You storms and shadow men! Come and get me! Now! Or the hell with you!"

Very slowly, the wind began to pick up. The temperature was certainly dropping, at least in wind chill, and what had felt pleasant at die start now began to feel pretty cold. Still, nothing else had changed and the wind was more natural than the calm had been.

"Come on," Charley muttered. "My fingers are turnin' blue. Let's get back up to the cabin and thaw out."

Sam nodded, and they started back up the road toward the cabin. "I dunno if I feel happy or sad," Sam muttered. "On the one hand, this proves nothin'. They always picked the time and nine out of ten times it was after dark. Only the shadow man was daytime, and he only scared the shit outta me, followin', waitin'-until dark, maybe. Still and all, it's lookin' more and more like I'm really a nut case and that don't 'zactly make me wanna shout 'Hallaluja.'"

"Yeah, well, it proves something, anyways. Look, we'll do one more night even if we have to sleep on them sheets. If no thin' happens, then you come home with me tomorrow. Man! That wind is really pickin' up." She looked over her shoulder and up at the sky. "Oh my god!"

Sam froze just before the door of the cabin and turned to look and saw immediately what Charley was seeing.

The sky was alive!

The thin, wispy clouds were now suddenly in motion, rapid motion, and they were moving in a circular pattern around a broad arc of sky, moving outward to form a circular collection barrier around an invisible blue center, thickening every second, growing dense and ugly with every increase in speed. It was as if they were at the point where the eye of a hurricane formed, the motion violent and building all around them.

The circle of thick clouds now began to grow inward, toward the center, in a spiral pattern. Charley stared at it in sheer terror, for the first time experiencing what Sam surely must have felt. "Sam! Send it away!" she screamed as the noise grew and the ominous, distant rumbling of thunder sounded. "Send it away!"

"Back off!" Sam screamed at the sky. "Get away! I called you, I send you back! Get away from me!"

For a second the entire sky seemed to freeze and there was a momentary stillness that was almost as frightening as the spectacle, but then enormous claps of thunder answered the frightened girl and it started up again. "It's too strong! Damn you, Charley! Why didn't you believe me?"

Charley was too stunned and frightened for any rational response. Sam took her hard by the hand and pulled her. "Come on! Get inside the cabin! It'll give us some protection!"

They got inside as the storm continued to build. Charley was shaking and Sam wasn't much better, but she was more accepting of what was happening and trying to think fast.

"The car!" Charley muttered. "I'll get the keys! We can try and outrun it-"

"No! That's how they killed that-other-girl!"

"We can't stay here! It'll suck up this whole cabin and make pieces out of it and us!"

Even now the cabin was shaking and things were rattling and foiling all over the place, and Sam realized that Charley was right. They had no damned chance at all in here. "Under the car!" she shouted. "Ain't that where you hide if you get into a big storm? No storm cellar!"

Charley finally got some wits about her and grabbed her purse. "Not under! Inside! It's grounded!" There were sheets of rain coming down now, and wind so great it felt tike the cabin was going to shake apart, yet they both hesitated. Suddenly there was a horrible, gut-wrenching, tearing sound near the bed and a

small section of roof just broke off like ripped by some giant hand. It took both of them to get the door even open, and then they ran for the car. The storm itself had only a superficial resemblance to a natural storm now; it contained not only the grays of its violence but seemed to seethe with electrical power, pulsing like a living beast, each poise a different, color-crimson, violet, emerald green, yellow-there was no end to it. Outside it was a sea of mud in a tropical storm; even the air temperature had warmed incredibly and it felt now like a muggy summer day. Sam made it to the car and had her hand on the door when she heard Charley scream and turned and saw her friend fall forward into the mud. Sam rushed back to her fallen friend and pulled her up. They both just made it to the car when a strong finger of lightning came down and struck the very area where Charley had fallen, sending up a short burst of smoke and mud. They got inside the car and automatically locked the doors. Charley was a mass of mud and Sam was drenched. Charley had lost her purse in the fall and she disregarded the mud and pushed open the glove compartment knob. "There's a spare key in mere! We gotta get out of here!" "No! Don't touch nothin' metal, not even the keys! Lightning strikes the car and you'll fry even if me and the car don't! You think it won't follow us no matter where we go anyways? If it can't get the wind to blow us over" "Damn it, we got to do something!" Lightning was striking all around them with the regularity of a piston engine and the car was being rocked by the wind as if it were under assault by some powerful yet invisible monster. "We hang on if we can! I had the dreams, remember! They can't keep this up real long! If they could they'd'a had me long ago! They ain't God-just the next thing to it!" They both suddenly shrieked as a bolt hit the car and they could feel the electricity crackling in the air and even see it dancing around the hood of the car. A few loose metal objects-keys, an old film can, a loose part of a seat-flew up to the roof and stuck there as if magnetized. The radio crackled and buzzed, although there was no automobile power being fed to it. Suddenly a clear voice in American English said, somewhat tinnily out of the speaker, "If you want to live, then calm down, shut up, and listen to me!" "It's him!" "Who? The one with the horns?" "No! The other one! The one that thinks I'm a lab animal!" "I'm moving the damned magnets on this thing by external force but I can't maintain it for long with all this damned storm interference, so listen up!" snapped the man on the radio through numerous and loud snaps, crackles, and pops. "You called him. He'll never have you as exposed as this again," the voice noted. "He can't keep this up for long but he can hurl trees at you and smash in that car and overturn it and get you exposed before he runs out of steam. I want to save your life. You must believe that, and it's him or me. The other girl-I don't know who you are but he can't tell you apart in this mess so you're in this, too. Now, listen up! Hold hands, close your eyes! Lean back! Clear your minds as much as you can and will yourself to come to me! You'll feel the pull. Don't resist it-and don't let go of each other if you both want to wind up alive and in the same place!" The car shook so violently that the entire left side rose a few inches and came crashing back down. There was a sudden, violent pounding all around and they saw the front and back windshields begin to crack under hail the size of oranges. Even the roof seemed ready to cave in, and the hailstones were like iron balls against the hood. Charley looked at Sam in fear and anguish. Sam grabbed her hand tightly and shouted above the roar, "Let's do it! I don't know about him but it's better than any chance we got here!" It was impossible to ignore the terrors being visited on the car or suppress the fear, but, somehow, through it all, they both seemed to see something in their minds, a tiny point of bright light that grew larger and larger by the second.

There was the sound of shattered glass and Sam felt pain in her leg, but at that moment the light, which seemed to be enormous and approaching them, somehow, reached and engulfed them.

The sound abruptly ceased with a silence so deafening that it was in many ways as scary as the storm had been. Sam couldn't stand it; she opened her eyes, and almost immediately shut them again.

They were floating in air, in the center of the storm, with the swirling, charged, multicolored clouds of violent energy all around them as far as the eye could see, not only on all sides and above them but also below. There had been nothing, no place at all.

Sam opened her eyes again, and after a few moments of vertigo got used to it. She looked over at Charley and saw her friend's eyes tightly shut, lips quivering. "Char-leeeee . . . !" she called, the sound thin and echoing into infinity.

Charley was in the grips of total, unreasoned terror, the only rational thought in her head, going 'round and 'round in a never-ending loop, was God damn all fucking radio psychologists!

"Charlee . . . Open your eyes! It's-beautiful!"

"I-I can't!" But after a moment she did so, since she was suddenly hearing nothing but Sam's voice and did not feel any other sensations, not even wind.

When she saw the maelstrom it almost took her breath away. She tightened her already solid grip on Sam's hand. "Are we-are we dead?"

"You're too damned filthy to be dead and I'm too wet!" Charley responded, the eerie echoes of their voices almost mixing in the distance. "I think we're moving, though. Down!"

It was true. The storm was no storm anymore, if it had ever been, but rather it seemed to be a long tube, or perhaps a giant funnel would be a better term for it. It had such a uniformity of broad bands of lighter cloud, or whatever it was, separated by thin bands of darker stuff that it was hard to really tell movement. Charley looked down once and decided she didn't want to anymore, but she could look straight ahead, at the bands, and when she had looked long enough she began to see, or thought she saw, a scene, a picture, that flipped every second or so to become slightly different, like viewing a movie one frame at a time.

Woods . . . clearing . . . paved road beyond . . . even telephone poles, all against a stormy-looking sky. It was looking out from the car's position-it was the cabin land! But there was no car and no cabin and the image was ghostly, two dimensional, not at all real.

Dark band. Same scene, but suddenly the telephone poles were gone. Dark band. A few differences in trees, subtle differences as each band came floating by. Slowly, ever so slowly, the road was dirt now, then a track, a there trail. Trees changed subtly, not only in number and position but in shape and kind. And now it was a true winter scene, with snow suspended in air while the ground was getting progressively covered.

"Stare straight ahead and watch!" Charley called, pointing but not taking her eyes off the scene.

There was something now in and among the trees. It emerged after a white-time had no meaning in this long descent but it seemed to be going on forever-as some sort of deer, maybe an elk, clear in the stormy twilight and making tracks, one snapshot at a time, in the snow. They watched it walk, but as it did, with each still frame, it, too, subtly changed. The antlers became horns and then bony plates, the dark brown skin changed to tough and leathery, the short tail grew long and thick, the legs thickened and became three-toed and clawed rather than hooved. All this took time-hundreds, maybe thousands of snapshots-and each time the creature looked complete and whole, not in the midst of any transformation. Now it was no elk nor anything like an elk, but rather a creature like a dragon, larger and meaner looking than anything they had ever seen, and it was no longer walking in snow at all but across a swampy region, the trees now more Amazonian jungle than west Texas woodland and hills. Now it, too, was gone from view and the scene continued to change. Unfortunately it also continued to darken, and soon there was nothing left of the scene but a few fleeting impressions of

things that stood out in the storm clouds and the night.

The storm itself had now grown dark and ominous once more, the walls closing in on them where at the start the thing had seemed a mile across. But the storm was still alive; red, pupilless eyes like burning coals started suddenly out at them from below, then leaped out into the maelstrom itself, floating as they were floating but maneuvering toward them.

They were ugly, horrible beasts, three in number; monstrous creatures, resembling dogs, that seemed almost as big as they were, with gaping mouths dripping something yellow. They were still well below, but they were coming, charging toward them as they fell to meet the things. Both girls screamed and tried to flee in horror, but there was no way to break this fall. The creatures had to be even larger than they appeared; huge in fact, because they were growing as they approached yet there was still some distance between the three beasts and their obvious prey.

Both of them stopped screaming only when they saw the others emerge from the walls, closer to them, between them and the beasts. Shadow people, with no features, like two-dimensional black cardboard cutouts, but alive, and, from their looks, not unarmed. The beasts tried to dodge the newcomers, and Charley had the strangest feeling that those six terrible eyes were fixed not on Sam but on her and on her alone.

The three shadow humans worked quickly, one drawing a shadow sword, another placing an arrow in a shadow box, a third with a great, long, sharp spear. All three struck their dog monsters almost simultaneously and with great accuracy, but the beasts, while wounded and suddenly howling in agony a strange, supernatural howl that echoed forever down the spout, kept coming, kept staring not at Sam but at Charley. She could practically smell their breath, but the three shadow hunters were not done turning the tables on the fearsome hunters, falling upon the beasts, stabbing, spearing, gripping their foes and dragging them down and away. One beast let out a great scream and suddenly vanished, dissipating like smoke in the wind, while the other two were now being dragged down, away from the girls, at an accelerating rate until they were just tiny dots, then gone.

All returned to normalcy for a moment, but then below them at the point on the storm wall they were facing, another figure seemed to grow, a figure that was anything but cardboard and two-dimensional or even black. It was the figure of a large man, imposing, well built, wearing flowing robes of crimson and gold, his face sporting a full snow-white beard that was trimmed oddly as if an inverted V-shaped notch was cut from it, and on his head was a crown from which arose two long, sharp, slightly curved horns.

Sam gasped, knowing that this was the one she feared the most, her tormentor and would-be murderer. They were falling-or he was rising-at a rate that would bring them face to face in a matter of seconds.

Suddenly there was an odd sound like a giant spring suddenly uncoiled at great speed, and between them and the horned figure there appeared a thin, transparent pink barrier.

"That will hold him only for a minute or so," said a familiar voice nearby. They turned and saw another figure, this of a small man with long, unkempt white hair, a bulbous nose and oddly chubby cheeks, like a doll's, dressed in similar fashion to the Horned One, only in robes of silver and emerald green. This, men, was the voice from the car radio. "I'm going to have to face him down," he told them. "I don't think he wants a full calling out right now, so I can stall him long enough to get you down to someplace neutral and out of the way. Trust Zenchur. He's a scoundrel but he stays bought and he'll be expecting you and know what to do, and he speaks English."

Both of them were beyond shock at this point and it brought a curious clarity of mind, almost like this was normal. "But what's this all about?" Sam called to him. "And where are we going?"

"What's the difference? You're going there anyway," the man in green responded pragmatically. "He's through the barrier already. Stand by. When I divert him you'll get a real sudden push."

The Horned One raised a hand and the barrier vanished, and he continued until he was level with them, perhaps ten feet away from the girls. The one in green, however, stood suspended in the maelstrom between them and their immediate nemesis.

"Enough!" said the Horned One impatiently in that sinister, terribly cold voice Sam had heard in the dreams. "This is not your affair, Boolean. You are out of your league here. Stand aside. She is mine," he said emphatically, holding out a thin, almost skeletal hand and pointing, clearly, not to Sam but to Charley! This is nuts, Sam thought, thoroughly confused. This is my nightmare, not Charley's! And, just as suddenly, she realized what was going on. There was a fair resemblance between the two of them, and the Horned One knew he was seeking a girl. Whatever power or sense he used to track his prey, the two of them, together, touching hands, confused it. Charley was also still pretty well covered with mud, but her hair and dress made it very clear she was female, but Sam looked like a boy and with the very short hair . . .

He thinks Charley is me!

The man in green, who clearly knew different, did nothing to correct the impression. Instead he said, "I am making it my business. Do you want to have it out now over her? You think you're ready for me? You think you can finally beat me in something?"

The comments clearly infuriated the Horned One, but he hesitated. "You would fight me for her? Risk everything?"

For an answer, the small man in green raised his hands and there was a pyrotechnic light show that was almost blinding in its brilliance. At the same moment, both Charley and Sam felt a tremendous push on them, forcing them suddenly and very quickly down and away from the duo. It was so sudden and forceful that it took their breaths away in spite of the green one's warnings, and it was no longer an eternal floating sensation but more the feeling of going down the biggest hill on the roller coaster.

The walls continued to close in until there was no more space between and they were inside the clouds themselves.

Lightly but very suddenly and unexpectedly they hit the ground and rolled, letting go of one another's hand in spite of themselves, tumbling to a stop. Wherever they had been going, they had now arrived.

3

The Mother of Universes

Wherever it was, it was dark and hot and incredibly humid; a layer of gray mist so thick you couldn't see a thing in it lay over the land and extended perhaps two feet up from the ground it clung to. Sam groaned and managed to get first to her knees and then to her feet and look around. The night sky appeared totally clouded over, at least, there were no stars visible, nor any moon, although it wasn't pitch black. She could see the thick carpet of mist well enough, although it seemed that it was not from any light source on high but rather that the mist itself was faintly glowing.

"Charley?" she shouted worriedly. "Are you anywhere in this gook?"

For a moment she was worried that they had not landed together, that the last moment when they'd lost their grip on each other it had sent them to different places and left them both done. Sam's hand hurt like hell from what seemed like hours gripping Charley's hand-and it might well have been that long.

She heard something moving not far from her. "Oh! Jeez! That you, Sam?"

Sam frowned. "That you, Charley?" The voice just didn't sound right, but then she saw a familiar form, still caked with mud, rise eerily from the mist.

"Yeah, I think so. Damn! My voice sounds funny. Are my ears stopped up or what? You sound okay."

Sam frowned, but went over to her friend and helped her to her feet. "Your voice sounds as deep as mine! I don't know. Maybe I-shit!"

"What's the matter?"

"That chubby-cheeked bastard! He saw that Old Horny mistook you for me. He looked, saw a boy and a girl, and since he was after a girl he made the obvious mistake. Old Greenie, then, figured he'd keep it up I bet. He wants old Stick

Head to keep goin' after you, that's what! Both of 'em don't give a damn about you-it's me they both want for some reason. So Greenie, he cast a spell or something to make you sound like me. Keep it up as long as possible. You don't sound to me like I sound to me, but I bet to anybody else your voice and my voice now sound pretty much the same. You still got the accent but who's gonna know the difference here? If I keep my voice on low and keep dressin' and actin' like a boy then anybody sent out lookin' for me'll go for you."

Charley didn't like any of this. She was scared, confused, and totally off-balance, but what Sam said made sense considering the crazy low voice she was hearing in herself and the fact that those things-she shivered at the memory even though it already seemed like a dream-only had eyes for her and even that fancy wizard with the horns had pointed to her. It wasn't at all comforting; she was nothing to them, a sacrificial lamb, no more, no less. She had become the target and it wasn't even her nightmare.

"I'm dreaming this. Somehow this is all a dream and I'm back home or in the cabin or something sound asleep," she muttered in that strange-sounding voice. The whole thing did have a dreamlike, nightmarish quality about it, and to think otherwise was to believe in monster storms called at will and shadow people and wizards and magic spells, none of which she'd believed in for many, many years. She believed in Halston and Gucci and I. Magnum's and they seemed very far from here.

"Sam," she said very softly, "I'm scared. I'm filthy, wet, miserable, and scared to death."

"Yeah. Me, too," sighed the other. She looked around. "Now what are we supposed to do, I wonder? Wait here to be picked up or move someplace or what? And if we're supposed to go someplace, where in hell is it?"

"I don't know. If this is a dream, why can't we conjure up a bath tub? Talk about gettin' mixed up. I dunno if I'm in Alice in Wonderland or The Wizard of Oz. A storm sucks you down the rabbit hole. . . . Can't even get our damn fairy tales straight."

Sam knelt down and felt the ground. They had landed relatively gently for the apparent speed, but it felt like pretty hard rock down there, covered perhaps with moss most places. It was firm, but her hand was wet when she ran it around on the surface.

Off in the distance there was the sudden sound of thunder and an area of the sky was illuminated, briefly. Charley started, then turned quickly back to Sam.

"Don't you dare call it!"

Sam looked out at it. For some odd reason it hadn't the unreasoned fear she had always felt when seeing or hearing such things; instead, it inspired wary caution, as if it were a person, directed by an intelligence, that she had to avoid. Somehow that made it easier to take-particularly since she'd evaded or fooled that intelligence more than once now. But that had been on essentially home turf. This place-whenever this place was-was something else again. Still, she was thinking fast and surprisingly clear considering her experience and how tired she was feeling.

"I don't think it's the same here as back home," she mused.

"No shit. Tell me something else that's brilliant."

"No, no! I don't mean that. You don't have to worry 'bout me callin' no storms, 'cause I bet that's one of the few easy ways Old Horny can find me here. If he could find me here the same way he could back home, then what's the use of sendin' us down here, changin' your voice, and all the rest? Here's got to be different. If I don't call him he's got no more chance of findin' me than if he was lookin' for anybody else. He don't know where Chubby Cheeks plopped us 'cause he was kinda busy. Now he's gotta find me the hard way. The same way somebody normal would try'n find somebody else back home."

"Yeah, that makes sense. But your Chubby Cheeks knows where he dropped us and even which is which. That's okay for you-he wants you alive for something-but it sure as hell paints a target on me. I'm stickin' to you like glue, girl, 'cause if I'm ever separated, your savior there could just let some of Horny's agents bump me off and then he thinks he's home free and you're off the hook."

Sam sighed. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this, Charley, I really am. But it was

your idea to call that damned storm."

"Yeah, but how was I to know it'd actually show up? This isn't real.' It can't be! It just can't be!" And then Charley dissolved into tears.

Sam didn't know what to do except try and comfort her friend. Common sense said to stay the night right here. Charley was right about one thing-old Chubby Cheeks knew just where he dropped them and they were supposed to be met by somebody. Move too far and they might not meet-and then where would they be? Lost in some damned weird world where they didn't know the rules, that's where. And Charley was worried she couldn't cope with Denver!

Still, staying here, in this crap, wasn't too comforting. She was dead tired-they both were-but what lived around here, hidden by this glowing fog? Damn it, what the hell were they supposed to do?

Ultimately, it was decided by practical matters. They were too tired, still too much in shock, and it was too damned dark to make a try for someplace better than they were in now, if in fact that place existed. Still, it was not hard to sit there, just your head and shoulders above the mist, and imagine monsters moving underneath. They clung to each other and comforted each other and, eventually, they went to sleep in spite of themselves, so exhausted that not even fear could hold it back.

Sam awoke suddenly with a start and sat up. It was still quite dark and still, and the mist was still there-in fact, it seemed to have risen some. She was soaked through again by the mist, and it was clammy and uncomfortable, but she put it from her mind. Charley still slept, protected beneath it, but Sam had always been a lighter sleeper and she had been on the run and under tension for more than a week. There was something-an odd noise-coming across the dark to her, approaching.

It was somebody whistling. It was a casual but firm and loud whistle, and whoever it was was whistling a bright, fast tune.

It was Yankee Doodle!

She tensed, alert, and used the mist as a cover so that only her eyes and the top of her head were visible. Protecting Charley and herself became the only purpose in her mind. She reached down and shook the sleeping girl, who mumbled and murmured but suddenly came awake and sat up. "It wasn't a dream," she said, more amazed than anything else.

"Shhhh!" Sam hissed the warning. "Listen and stay low." The whistler continued to approach, and now, too, she could hear the sound of hoofbeats as well on the rocky ground, as if a horse was progressing ever so slowly through this stuff. Now she saw them-two people eerily illuminated by the glowing mist, only their upper torsos showing because of it. One was a woman and she wasn't wearing any clothes! She was a light brown color, and there was something odd about her face and hair, and although it was hard to tell it looked like she had the biggest tits Sam had ever seen.

At first Sam thought that the other was a woman, too; the clean-shaven face was set off by what looked like a mane of hair cascading up and then around the head and down to and below the shoulders. This was the whistler, who suddenly stopped and looked around, appearing very unconcerned about anything lurking in the mists, and called out softly in a voice that was unmistakably a pretty fair male baritone.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," called the man with all the hair. He had a thick, somewhat guttural accent that sounded vaguely east European, but his English was clear. "I do not have eyes to see in this mess. I know you are around, watching us. Do not be afraid-I am Zenchur and this is Ladai. We were told you would be expecting us."

"Can we trust him?" Charley whispered nervously to Sam.

"No, but what other choice we got?" Sam stood and was instantly spotted by the newcomers. "Hey! You from the green guy with the chubby cheeks?"

The man started, then looked a little confused. "What is 'chubby cheeks' meaning? I am hired to get you to someplace safe and to help you. Or would you rather stay here?"

Charley got up, and the sight of her also seemed to surprise the man, while the

woman just looked suspiciously at both of them. The man frowned. "Two of you! I was only told of one. This will double the price. Well, come on-we must be away from here by dawn. There will be others looking for you that you do not want to meet, I think."

They moved hesitantly forward, wary but knowing they were helpless in this situation to do more. Suddenly, both girls stopped and just stared at the female member of the duo. Now, up close, they could see that it wasn't a woman at all. Her hair flared out in front, then seemed to be pinched back to the back of her head, becoming a thick mane of dark brown hair running completely down her upper back. Her ears, their exteriors covered in brown fur, were pointed and seemed to move independently of one another, rising up stiffly from the side of her head in animal fashion. Her eyes were extremely large and bulged slightly outward, and were like two huge black orbs floating in a brown rather than white sea. Her nose was somewhat flattened, but the nostrils seemed to move slightly in and out as she breathed. Her hands had three thick, very long fingers and an even thicker thumb, and seemed to be all fingernail from just beyond the knuckle joints; her breasts hung down huge and fat-although she seemed quite thin otherwise-to or below where her navel would have been, if she'd had a navel. And at the hips, and beyond, she merged into a long body whose top they could barely see but which seemed to reach out in back of her as long as her torso was tall, yet she stood shorter than the man who was of no more than average height and only five or six inches taller than the two girls.

"Is that-is she a centaur?" Charley breathed softly.

"Ah!" responded the man. "That is the word. Yes, centaur in English. They call themselves ba'ahdon, which sort of means human being. It all depends on how you look at it,; yes?" He paused. "She speaks no English, but she is good people. They do not understand why we do not fall over when we walk."

The speaker was himself certainly what they would call a human being, but he, too, was decidedly unusual in appearance. For one thing, his huge head of curly reddish blond hair ballooned out as if permed and framed his face as it dropped below his shoulders. He had no sideburns nor any trace that he ever had to shave; his face was smooth as a woman's although it had clearly seen a lot of exposure as its lines and wrinkles around the eyes demonstrated. It was a large, squared-off face with steel gray eyes and frankly androgynous, a fact emphasized by his twin earrings which hung down from pierced earlobes, each ending in a copper oval in which there was a maltese cross. He had an olive brown complexion that was most certainly dark even without exposure to the sun but now was deeply tanned. He wore frontier buckskins with fringe ornamentation, the jacket ties not fully done and revealing a surprisingly hairy chest for one with no noticeable facial hair. It was almost as if somebody had stuck Farah Fawcett's head on the body of Davy Crockett, Sam thought crazily.

Zenchur turned to the centauress and said something in a singsong tongue that sounded sort of Chinese or something, and she nodded. Then he turned back to them. "Come. Follow us. We have not too far to go but it is best that we go there. It is very unlikely that you can be traced to this spot, but one does not live long by not taking the unlikely into account."

They began walking, the centauress leading the way and the three of them following.

"If you please, sir," Charley said as they walked, "can you tell us just where we are?"

Zenchur chuckled. "You are in Akahlar. That is the name of the world in the dominant language and it is used generally. There are more than six thousand languages, you see, so there had to be some standards."

"Yes, but-where is Akahlar? Is it another world than ours or what?"

"Another world, yes-and no. You come from the Out-planes and it is hard to explain things to you since I do not understand them myself. You are almost where you left yet you are as far away from your home as if you were on a distant star. It is-how you say?-a layer cake. Many layers. Hundreds. Thousands. You fall from somewhere near the top of the cake or in the middle or like that through to the bottom. Is the asshole of creation. People, things, falling down here all the time and stick here because there is no farther place to fall.

Well, there is, but this is last layer where people can live. Every once in a while, when big storms come, some more drop through, but not like the old days."

"But you-you're a native? You're from here?"

"From here, yes. Native-there are no natives of Akahlar. All our ancestors come here from someplace else long ago. Used to be giant storms all the time go far Outplane before they stop, but no more. Oh, we still get big storms, but there is too much out there now. They break up, get weak. We still get some-one here, another there-like you two, but not big groups, whole tribes, towns, like ancient times."

"You speak English quite well," Sam put in, feeling left out of this. "Is it spoken around this place?"

"Some places, yes. Not many. I learn it because Akhbreed sorcerers use it. Is good to know the tongues they use. They like it because it is so hard to learn, so confusing. I am good at languages and I buy this one not long ago. I know sixteen very well and another ten or so enough to get along. Ladai, she is also good. Knows ten or more, I forget. Fortunately, we both know one the same so can talk. She can do ones I can not handle. The throat will not make the sounds. You understand? That is why we work so well together."

Sam thought she had enough problems with English. "Are we gonna hav'ta know all those languages to get by here?"

Zenchur laughed. "Oh, no, but the more you know the better it is. I get this job because I know English. Ladai and me, we need them in our work."

"Just what is it you do?" Charley asked him.

"Sort of-what is the term? Mercenary, I think. No, that is not quite it. They are paid soldiers. I fight, when I have to, but I do not like it if I can keep away from having to do it. People pay me to do these things they need to have done that they cannot or will not do themselves. When no one pays me I think up my own little jobs to get pay. Free some extra valuables from ones who will not miss them, that sort of thing. Better working for someone else, though. Same danger, same trouble, but if you get caught you are not alone."

Sam thought about it and saw just what he was. "And, Ladai-she does the same? You are partners?"

Zenchur chuckled. "Partners. Yes, I think that might be the right term. You see, our sort of work-requires-that we live away from most, from civilization. When we go to cities, to lands, it is to either spend money or on the job. Then go, usually run, sometime chased, back to the wastes. You never know where you might have to go. I am Akhbreed. You are Akhbreed. Akhbreed not very welcome in lots of places. If you are not Akhbreed-Ladai, for example-you are not welcome in Akhbreed places. I can do little about Akhbreed law. It stinks. But I can go where few Akhbreed can follow. Akhbreed have the power. Akhbreed sorcerers have the greatest power of all. Like gods. Akhbreed does not see any of the other races as human. They take what they want, all the best, leave the garbage to the rest. Akhbreed have massacred whole races here for petty reasons, for greed. Enslaved others. That is why I do not mind stealing from them or causing them problems."

"But you said you were an Akhbreed," Charley pointed out. She was getting very tired and the short distance was turning into a very long hike in the dark.

"I am sometimes ashamed of it. If one race tortured and enslaved your people and drove them off your lands would you not hate that race? Yet I was trapped, with a storm coming, many years ago out in the wastes. I had no chance. Two ba'ahdon found me, wounded, half dead. They took me to their camp, brought me back to health. I lived with them long time. Got to know them. How could I go back and be Akhbreed again?"

"But couldn't you go back and tell 'em that these are good people? Work to bring everybody together?" Charley couldn't help thinking this sounded a lot like the Indians and the white man in her own southwest in the frontier days.

Zenchur looked at her strangely. "You must have interesting Outplane. If anyone were to go back and say that, they would be called traitors to their kind. If they kept it up, they would be publicly tortured, mutilated, then killed or given to the sorcerers to be made monsters. The kings and queens of Akhbreed do

not permit disagreements."

Suddenly the mist ended, at least just ahead of them, and a grassy hill came out of it and went up and then out. There were some trees and bushes there and what seemed like a rock wall rising imposingly into the darkness. They walked along the bottom of the cliff side for a bit, then entered an area that really could not be seen from outside and which, even in daylight, would betray no hint that it was there. It led to a fissure in the rock that zigzagged back underneath and either led to or became a cave. Well inside the mountain it opened up into a large cavern lit by torches. There was a definite airflow here, and in the center of the cave there was a pool of clear water.

To one side, in a natural depression, was a rather basic camp, with two tents, an obvious fire pit, atop which sat a cold cauldron, all of which sat upon a thick layer of straw with many rugs in front of the tent to add insulation from the cold and damp cave floor. It looked pretty damned primitive but at least it was someplace.

Ladai's full form was visible from the moment they entered the torchlit area. The lower body was not really all that much like a horse's; the legs were far thicker than a horse's legs and ended in large hooved feet that, while proportionately small, reminded them more of an elephant's feet than a horse's. The lower body was relatively short—certainly not much longer than the upper, more human body—and sloped slightly down, terminating in massive hind legs that none the less were shorter than the forelegs by several inches. The mane continued along the back all the way and merged with the tail at the base of the spine where it became rather like a straight, thick head of human-looking hair reaching almost but not quite to the ground. She was not just the old idea of a human upper mated to a horse's lower; in fact, she was an entirely separate creature that seemed to be less hybrid than something new and different but a single whole. Nor was she massive like the centaurs of legend; on the whole, she was about the size of a Shetland pony.

Zenchur and Ladai exchanged more conversation, and she went and started up the fire in the fire pit using one of the torches. Soon it was burning quite well, the smoke rising in a steady diagonal to the roof of the cave and then vanishing somewhere. It had certainly been well thought out; Charley bet that no smoke ever was visible from outside.

Ladai went and brought a loaf of thick, black bread and an amphora and some hand-fashioned but sturdy-looking cups. She poured some of the contents of the amphora into each of the cups, handing one to each girl, then broke the bread. Both were hungry, and the bread was fresh and with an odd but very sweet flavor to it. The liquid in the cups was thin and refreshing, more like white grape juice than wine although they both knew it probably was wine of some sort. It had an aftertaste almost like honey, and in their condition it was irresistible. When they had finished, Charley went over to the side of the pool, knelt down, and stuck her hand in the water. It was quite warm but not hot.

"You wish to wash off the grime," Zenchur said. "By all means. Just stay close to the sides of the pool. It is mostly safe but there is a sharp drop perhaps six paces in. Plenty of room for bath. Ladai bathes in it, and if it is safe for her it is certainly safe enough for you."

She wanted to very much, and so did Sam, but here, in front of Zenchur . . . Neither of them wanted to bring it up, but it seemed to occur to Ladai even though she obviously had no problems with exposure and the centaress said something to Zenchur. He chuckled. "Ah—modesty. You will have to get cured of that out here, although it is an Akhbreed trait. You go ahead—I will go into the tent here. I have—how you say it?—I have to make a long-distance call." And with that cryptic remark, and with something of a flourish, he turned and entered the nearest tent.

There wasn't much to use for soap—Ladai offered them a rough, shapeless white mass that didn't smell like much and didn't work all that well, either—but the water was warm and they both needed it badly. Ladai collected their clothing and took them off toward the cauldron. The clothes were in as bad shape as they were, so they didn't protest too much, although Charley figured it was good-bye to the fake fur jacket. They were a hell of a long way from a dry cleaner's, she

figured, although it was warm enough around here that maybe she wouldn't need it. After all, it wasn't like mink or anything, anyway.

With the neutral, bland soap or whatever it was and no washcloths, they generally had to help one another scrub and get off the grime, particularly Charley's. She longed for her herbal shampoo and rinse but rubbing the soap stuff in and then ducking under and kneading the hair out took out the dried-in mud fairly well. Sam, at least, had less of a problem, with her very short hair, and what mud she'd encountered was mostly on her clothes.

They finally pulled themselves out, feeling clean and much better. Ladai, who seemed to be cooking or burning something very hot and bulky-the black smoke was billowing up from the fire pit and even tainting the air away from it-came away from her activities and brought them two thick towels the size of good hand towels which Charley suspected might have been cheap rugs, as well as a rather primitive brush and comb for Charley's thick, wet hair. They worked, anyway, at least for the basics, although Charley was going to have a time getting her hair completely dry and right.

"I guess we ought'a get our clothes and wash 'em as best we can, too," Sam suggested. "They might hav'ta last awhile."

Charley looked around and frowned. "Where are our clothes?" She stood up and went over to Ladai, who looked up at her from stirring the fire and smiled. "Our clothes," Charley said slowly, then remembered that the centauress couldn't understand them. She made as if to put on pants and a sweater and repeated, "Where-are-our-clothes?"

Ladai smiled sweetly and pointed to the fire pit. Charley looked down and could see the remains of a jacket and boots being charred to bits. "Scan!" she screamed. "She's just burned all our clothes!"

Sam was up and over there in a flash and saw the unmistakable' remains. It was no use reaching in there to get them-the fire was incredibly hot, far too hot to get close to, and what was left in there was beyond help anyway.

Zenchur came out of his tent, frowning. "What is going on out here?"

Both girls instantly reacted with a shriek and covered as much of themselves as possible with their hands and arms. "She burned all our clothes!" Sam complained.

Zenchur sighed. "Yes. Sorry, but it was necessary. The appearance of any clothing or artifacts which you could not get here would be like standing up in the middle of town and saying, 'Here we are!' Even a fragment could be taken and any competent alchemist could indentify it as coming from the Outplane."

"But what do you expect us to do? Parade around stark naked?" Charlie asked, feeling terribly embarrassed.

"No, we will find other clothing for you. Do not worry so. It must be a very strange world you come from. One in which you can openly try to overthrow the king but where the sight of a naked body arouses anyone and incites instant attack. I hope you will not be incited to attack me if you see me naked on this trip." He seemed genuinely bemused by their reaction, yet irritated by its inconvenience.

"Look," he sighed, impatient now. "If I wanted either or both of you I could take you. I would not do so for-many reasons. Not that you are unattractive or undesirable, mind you, but this is business. I am your protector, not your attacker."

When neither of them moved a muscle but just stood there with their arms doing a bad job of covering what they wanted to cover, he got impatient. "I cannot afford such foolishness. I am tempted to let you stand there indefinitely until you get hungry or thirsty or have to go to the bathroom, but I cannot. I have no schedule to keep but something must be done and it must be done yet tonight. If you fight me or fail to trust me from this point you may yet die. I had not thought to need this so soon, but, very well." He reached into a leather pouch hanging from his belt and pulled out a small box. He opened it, and immediately there was a golden glow from it. They watched, not knowing what to do.

He removed the thing from the box, a glowing opaque, oval-shaped jewel perhaps the size of a half dollar, then held it out, waist high. He stared at them, not

at the jewel, and if they had bothered to notice even Ladai was looking away. Although there was no light source for the thing, a pencil-thin ray of the same golden color shot from it and made a small spot of light on the floor of the cave. He suddenly brought it up and let it shine for a moment on Sam's forehead. Charley frowned and looked for a likely place to run, but then he shifted the locus from Sam's forehead to hers.

She felt a sudden shock, then very strange and tingly, but it was another moment before she realized that she could not move a muscle. She was frozen, a statue, in this absurd and embarrassing position.

"The difference between common magic and sorcerer's magic is that common magic comes from an outside source, and belongs to the one who owns the source and knows how to use it. I have no magic powers, but this does. It has gotten me out of many scrapes and at times saved my skin. It was payment by a magician and alchemist for a particularly ugly and dirty piece of work I had to do for him, but it is the most priceless payment I have ever received. It debases it, almost, to use it for so silly a reason. Now-look upon it, both of you."

They did, compelled to in spite of themselves, and felt a numbness come over them. They could see only the gem, could not take their eyes off it.

"Come," he commanded, and they stood up and followed, eyes staring ahead, walking right into his tent.

The tent was larger on the inside than it looked; the floor was covered with rugs, there was a large chest to one side with an ornate gold dragon design on it, an enormous, mattresslike layering of rugs covered with silk, and, off to one side, a disk of polished wood with an intricate design carved in it, raised up on four ornate wooden legs. Five small incense sticks burned around it, each relating to a point on the disk's design.

"Stand before the disk, one on each side," he commanded, and they did so. "Now," he said, sounding somewhat relieved, "when I put this away you will have your wits back, but I want no more hysterics. Were I to focus this once more on your faces and tell you that down is up, black is white, and we are mice in a giant cheese you would believe it and try to eat the ceiling. If I said you both worshiped me like a god and wanted only to be ravished by me you would plead for my favors. I will demonstrate if I have to but at your peril. Such things have been known to permanently damage the mind." And, with that, he placed the jewel back in its case and slipped it back in his pouch.

Instantly they felt some release and both had a slight headache, but they were terrified. Right now, either one of them would do whatever he said rather than be subjected to that thing again, although Sam, in particular, felt disgusted. Not even in the midst of the storm had she ever felt as weak and small and helpless as she did here. And this was supposed to be the good guy!

"Hold hands, do not look at me, and stare at the center of the disk," Zenchur told them. "Just keep staring. He might not be immediately available." Not all the fight was out of Sam. "Who's he?" "My employer."

Sam took Charley's right hand in her left and squeezed it and -they both stared at the center of the funny diagram carved into the wood. He was apparently on hold; things happened almost immediately.

There was a sudden shimmering just above the center of the disk but not touching it, and then it thickened and took on a definite shape outlined first in golden sparklies, but it soon became the form of a man, slightly transparent but in full, realistic three dimensions. The image was a living hologram of the green-robed wizard from the maelstrom, perhaps ten inches high.

"About time," the sorcerer snapped, the voice a bit thin and proportionate to the image, yet very clear. "I dare not risk keeping this open any longer than I have to. Ladies, we have several problems and we must deal with them quickly. I know you have a lot of questions but the answers to most will have to wait, perhaps until we can meet in person. All you need know is that you, with the short hair and the deep voice, are a target here just like you were. The fellow with the horns is very powerful both in magic and in temporal power. I'm also powerful-maybe his superior in magical power but I don't have much of a temporal base. In this case Satan has the army and the Pope has none. Nevermind. He was too gutless to try me back there, so he's lost track of you and unlike on the

old world he can't just whip up a spell of location. If he tried that in Akahlar he'd risk whipping up a changewind even he couldn't handle.

"He knows I've got you, so he'll put all sorts of temporal and magical tails and shadows on me. I can probably get to you and protect you but then we'll be back where we started because he can follow. If he finds you, Short Hair, he'll kill you .without hesitation or mercy. Believe that. Oddly, that's an advantage since he has strict orders to his minions that they are not to harm you but merely to capture and summon him. That's because only he can tell if it's really you. I could run some interference in the tunnel but that wouldn't have fooled him for long if I hadn't been there in person. As such, he's put out a very high reward for you, alive only and held until he can come to you. Every damned crook and politician in the business will be drooling over it, even his enemies. Trust only Zenchur. He is the only one who knows that the greatness of his reward will be matched only by the horror if he sells me out. What is your name, anyway? I can't keep calling you Short Hair."

"S-Sam. Samantha Buell," she managed. "And this is my friend Charley-Sharlene."

"You're not even related? Remarkable. Sam and Charley. Huh! Who'd have thought it?" He sighed. "All right, Charley, I don't know if you are here by accident or choice but you are here and you are stuck and as such you are going to be useful to me and to your friend. You might have noticed old Horn Head and his beasties both got confused, a common occurrence with them. That's why I had to alter your voice. I was afraid you'd say something and give the show away. The fact is, he doesn't know a damn thing more about you than I do and only what he saw. He knows what Sam looks like if Sam's looking like a young woman. I need Sam alive. Not only for now but for the far distant future. Alive and physically unchanged by magic or any other forces. He thinks Sam was a boy, possibly your brother. He'll be looking for an attractive young lady with a deep and distinctive voice. They all will. Sam must continue to be a boy to all outward appearance and that leaves you, Charley."

"You're gonna make her the Judas goat! They'll kill her!" Sam protested.

"Perhaps-but remember that everyone hunting for you knows there is no reward and perhaps some punishment for killing you, and if Horn Head comes without me running interference he'll know it's not. That gives you a chance, which is more than you have on your own. I can't fill the countryside with Sam clones. For one thing, it takes a small part of Sam to do it right and there's only so much of her. Understand, though, I don't want him to catch you, Charley. If he does he'll catch on fast to who the real one must be. We will protect you all the way as if you were the real quarry. In the end, not only your friend's life and future but your own as well will depend on you carrying it off. I can help a little now. Interlock the fingers of the hands you are now holding. Go on-do it."

They did so, although it was a bit awkward.

"There is feminine in the most brutish male, and there is masculine in the most gentle and beauteous female. Sam, I can't change you physically-I wish I could but I cannot and he knows it-but I can make some temporary mental adjustments and Charley stands right next to you now. Put your clasped hands into the center of my image. Go ahead-I'm not . going to turn anybody into a toad."

Hesitantly, they both did as instructed. There was a sudden tingle and the image of the sorcerer seemed to mix with and grow out of the two hands clasped together. There was suddenly a sharp and painful shock through both hands that made them cry out but they could not pull their hands away from his image. Sam felt a wave of nausea and dizziness and would have fallen to the floor if not frozen there; Charley felt the same sensation but in addition a thin, burning sensation that started at the top of her head and went slowly and methodically down through every part of her.

"Okay," the sorcerer said with satisfaction. "You're probably both going to pass out when I break the contact, so I'll say the rest of my piece here. I've been able to get away with this because Horn Head doesn't know where I am yet or where you are at all, but since I have to be public shortly that will end. Within a few days he will have narrowed down and figured out the rough area

where you had to land, so you will have to move. Zenchur will take you to a place where you can be safe and be taught something about this world and trained in what might be needed of you in the future. Horny can't touch you there but if he learns of your presence there he sure as hell can make it hard to get out again. When it blows over and the hue and cry is yesterday's news to all but your enemy and us, then we must meet. We must do what he fears most. I do not understate this. If we fail, it is entirely possible, even likely, that it will mean the destruction or total domination not only of this world but every world-your old world, too-by the blackest of evil. The odds of our survival, let alone success, are quite small, but the alternative is far worse than death. But if we succeed the prize, your prize, will also be great, and Charley will share. "Zenchur-one last thing. I have now done the calculations and the clumsy and heavy-handed attempt on this pair by my adversary has triggered the largest and deepest changewind in a decade. I have calculated it will penetrate the Malabar District just beyond the Brothers. It might well proceed a great distance before going Outplane-it's that bad. Sit tight a full day and night more before moving and take its aftermath into account when you go. I go to alert those I can-or care to. Farewell, and may the winds be with you."

The image flickered out, the hold was released, and, as the sorcerer had predicted, both of them fell unconscious to the floor. With Ladai's help he got them apart and to the other tent, where they were laid side by side on silk-covered rugs and silk pillows. Looking down at the pair, Ladai could only shake her head in wonder. "It is incredible. And at such a distance! What power he must have!"

Zenchur nodded. "And that is why we must do as he says even though our hearts are not in it. I knew I should never have done that job for him, Jewel of Omak or no Jewel of Omak. It was payment for services rendered but the bastard now owns my soul. He knew about this! He knew even then! That is why he threw in the spell that allowed me to learn his accursed tongue."

Ladai nodded sadly. "Still, they seem quite nice, if very shy and very frightened girls. In a sense, they are more victimized than we. Their shyness in front of you was actually quite touching. They took me as an equal, yet were embarrassed and frightened by you. It would be well if they continued to fear the Akhbreed and showed no hatred or fear toward the other races. It shows what this world might become. See them now. They look so tiny-so helpless. What in the name of the Five Netherworlds would cause two such powers to go to such lengths to have them?"

"Just the one," Zenchur told her. She had understood none of the English conversations and was very curious. "That one. The other is the decoy. I have no idea what this could be about, but I am not certain which I envy least-the one they want or the decoy." He sighed. "At least they won't need the Jewel of Omak with us anymore. Our employer has seen to that."

The pair left them to their dreams, and they were vastly different dreams, many in number and vivid in their realism. For Sam, the dreams were adventure stories with, for her, an odd perspective. Time and again, through many variations, she was the hero; a small but handsome man in sword and cape, battling various monsters both human and inhuman, saving the innocent and the helpless and rescuing the fair damsel in distress who then threw herself at "him" in gratitude and love. They were a boy's dreams, romantic dreams, of brave knights and muscled warriors vanquished by power and skill and guts.

And through it all ran a thread that somehow her mind; sorted out, and she understood and she believed. You are a man, born heir to a kingdom that only males can rule, but a great sorcerer stole your soul one day to advance the cause of a greedy rival to the throne and placed it far away, in another world, in the body of a girl. Now you are back in the land of your origins but still in that alien female body but your soul rebels. Henceforth you will let your soul guide you; you will look, act, talk, think like a man and all things womanly you must put aside or you will remain trapped in that body forever. None who do not now know your secret must ever know. You must put aside all womanly things and convince everyone, even yourself, that you are male. Only that way is redemption.

Zenchur told them. "They are forbidden to show any more of themselves in public or to anyone outside their immediate household than you see after they undergo a rite of passage on their tenth birthday. They are also forbidden to speak to or even show they hear the speech of any man save their father and brothers. They live like that until they are married and then, as you see, things loosen up a lot."

"I can't see how any of 'em would ever get married, considerin' them rules," Sam responded.

Zenchur laughed. "All marriages are arranged-by the mothers, by the way, talking to the groom's father or, if orphaned, the male guardian. Oh, there are stories of romantic trysts and separated lovers, of course, but almost nobody does it. Actually, the girl has some power the man does not, since she can see him without his ever really knowing it's her and can make a real case for certain boys and against others with her mother. All the boy gets is a sketch by an artisan known as a Wedding Broker, although in villages such as these he can usually get some information from relatives and friends of relatives."

"The same old story. Women as cattle again, though," Charley noted sourly.

"No, no! The women have rights here. They are given what education they need or can handle, although separately from the boys of course, and they can inherit and have definite rights in courts of law. It is not as bad as it sounds. Most of these shops are run by women and some are even owned by women. This is because, in these conservative societies, the man is the boss but inheritance is through the female line, not the male. I am not saying it is perfect, only that it is not as bad as it looks."

"Still, neither one knows what they're gettin' until they're stuck with it," Sam noted.

"And is it any worse than other ways? Marrying for lust of the moment and then one day you discover you have nothing else in common, or marrying one for supposed wealth or position? I am not defending this system, I am only saying that I have not found the number of successful and happy marriages here any different than other societies' ways."

"Still, with the slim pickings in a village like this and kept apart, I can see why some of 'em would run for the city and sell their bodies rather than take it, particularly if the guy's awful and she can't talk her mom out of it," Charley commented.

Sam looked around. "Somehow, with all them worlds to steal from, I kinda thought this'd be a little more modern than the Dark Ages."

There was a service which unhitched and cared for the horses while you were in town, and they were more than grateful to be out of that box and on their feet again, although both were so sore they had some initial trouble walking. Sam was together enough in a minute or two, though, to note the various signs around the square that all seemed to be filled with little squares and circles and squiggles and realize that her knowledge of the language did not extend to literacy. The letters or symbols or whatever they were seemed to not even have a lot of organizational sense; they were scattered all over and didn't look very consistent at all in their shapes and forms. It reminded her of something that might come out of a kindergarten art class back home.

The one they went into turned out to be a tavern, and a somewhat peculiar one at that. It had the look on the inside you expected going in-round wooden tables, rough, well-worn wooden chairs, sawdust over the wooden, creaky floor, and a long bar with a big polished mirror behind it that just about reflected the whole place. But there were anachronisms as well, things that just didn't make sense.

For example, there were the three Casablanca-style ceiling fans turning slowly above them, keeping the hot air circulating. And the lights, both behind the bar and, subdued, along the side walls, looked, well-not at all primitive. The bottles behind the bar seemed to be of clear glass with fancy labels on them, not the crude stuff of the cave, and when someone yelled to the barman he nodded and drew a tankard of what might have been beer or ale from a tap and brought it over. The customers-the only ones other than themselves-were also obviously from

to stoop to get through the doorway, but he was also enormously broad, the kind of man whose muscles had muscles. He was getting on, though; his hair was gray, his face was lined and wrinkled, the skin on his hands was tight, but most unsettling was the expression in his eyes and on his face, that of a rather childlike confusion.

The woman said something to him in an unintelligible tongue, and he grunted and gave an equally unintelligible reply and went immediately past them and out the doors.

Zenchur looked at Sam and Charley and cocked his finger, and after a moment they followed. He led them down a hall, then up four flights of creaky, narrow stairway. The key was one of those massive types, and he fitted it in a lock and opened the door to the room.

It was not exactly the Regency Plaza. A bare, round bulb burned when a button was pressed on an old wall plate illuminating a smelly room with two large windows covered by tattered drapes. There was a sink with a single long, curved pipe for a faucet, a worn bowl, and two porcelain cups both of which were chipped. There were also two beds the size of double beds, more or less, next to each other opposite the sink. Both had twin sets of small, round pillows, a bedspread that looked clean, and, under it, some dark sheets. Charley hoped that they hadn't been dyed to match the stains.

"The toilets are down the hall," Zenchur told them, "and I do mean just that. If you want a bath it's at a commercial bath house down here, and it's public, so I think Sam will have to wait and I wouldn't like to send Charley in alone. Don't worry-as you probably already know, bathing is not some-tiling done often here, even by the nobility."

Charley sat on the bed. It sank down unevenly, was lumpy, and creaked something awful. It definitely was both too old and not built like beds back home. She wasn't sure she wanted to find out how it was, or was not, put together, though. There was a knock, and Zenchur opened it and found the huge man there carrying one of the heavy trunks in each hand and the duffel on his back. The navigator pointed and the man put them down, then took each one in one at a time and set them near the windows. Zenchur nodded, the man looked pleased, and left.

"What is that?" Charley had to ask.

"Oh, that is Zum. At least he answers to that name. He has been here longer than anyone now at this hotel. He's from some Outland wedge, and he never was very bright and knows none of the language. You might have noticed that the woman downstairs used a different tongue for him if you have a good enough ear. Because of the language problems with such as him there is a straight and simple language-short, net nonsense, perhaps a few hundred real words-that is used by folks to communicate with such as him. He was probably taken here or wound up here as a boy, fell into selling his body-you saw the men in the windows-and then grew too old or perhaps impotent or both. Now he serves out his days doing the basics for this old hotel, just like the woman downstairs, Argua, who was once young and beautiful and had a thousand lovers before she grew old and fat. Zum will see to the horses and wagon, too."

"Speaking of fat, when do we eat? Or do we?" Sam asked.

"Yes, we do, and we might as well. As you might guess the service here is not that great, but there is a not very fancy tavern a few minutes' walk from here that serves some decent food and asks no questions. Come, if you are not too tired- but remain mute, particularly around here, when out of this room. No slips. Here the word will be getting around about you."

Sam glanced at Charley, knowing that her friend must be as dead as she was, but Charley said, "We'll go. I don't think I want to be alone in this place."

"Oh-you may change if you wish now, Charley," Zenchur told her. "In this neighborhood at this time of day a slit skirt, top, and scarf are appropriate, and it might make you more comfortable. Here-I will show you in the trunk."

Charley was of two minds about this. She didn't like the idea of his suggesting such a radical change-they would still be completely at his mercy and who knew what he might do with her?-but the outfit she'd been wearing was now so tight and uncomfortable she was dying to get out of it. She finally accepted his suggestion, choosing a long pattern skirt slit right up to the thigh and a

intricate body designs as well. Sam, too, could hardly fail to notice them as they jumped up to light cigarettes or cigars or get something for their clientele, always with a smile, always their minds totally on anticipating needs.

Sam leaned over to Zenchur and whispered, "What are they?"

"The top of the class," he responded in a very low tone. "They are neither common whores nor servants but experts. Only the smartest and the prettiest get that position. For a very high fee, for an evening, they will try and fulfill any reasonable wish. Shhhh! Waiter!"

A man wearing an apron that was probably white when he'd started work came over.

"What do you wish?" he asked in Akhbreed.

"Full steak for the two of us, medium, and give the lady the lady's plate and house wine. We'll take drafts."

The waiter nodded and went back to the cooking area, told the order to the man there, then brought a tray with a huge pitcher of thick, dark beer, two stoneware mugs that must have held a quart each, and a carafe and tall-stemmed glass. He placed it on the table but did not serve it, instead going back to the counter..

Charley had been watching the other women. She got up, poured the beer into the two mugs with some expertise, showing that she'd poured beer somewhere before. The pitcher was well balanced, which was a good thing because it was close to being too heavy for her. She served each from the left, then went back, poured some of the dark red wine into the glass, took it, and resumed her seat, smiling with some satisfaction as Zenchur approved with a nod. Charley thought it was kind of fun; play-acting a fantasy, more or less, while knowing it wasn't real. Besides, those other women were so damned glamorous and perfect she instantly felt a sense of competition.

She was a bit nervous about the wine on a mostly empty stomach, but she sipped it and found it surprisingly sweet and very good. In the time it took for the food to come she had mostly finished it and was feeling a rosy glow that made it easy to just put everything out of her mind and pretend she was one of those sexy ladies over there.

The steaks came sizzling on the platter, which the waiter put in front of the other two so Charley didn't have to do much there, and he even put a plate in front of her-on oval-shaped dish which was mostly filled with fruits and salad combined with small cubes of cold meat and cheese. It was, in fact, just what she might have ordered rather than the heavy and greasy steaks, and she was both pleased and amazed at it.

Not that there weren't some mysteries there. What were the blue leaves, for example? She tried one and it didn't taste all that bad. Some of the fruit had odd colors and unfamiliar textures as well-light brown, for example, and almost snow white with little red grains-but nothing looked threatening or repulsive and she tried it, keeping an eye on the other two. You apparently ate it with a little spoon and with your hands. Twice she stopped and refilled their mugs, as well as her own glass, but the more she drank of the sweet wine the easier it was to be this courtesan, the more able she was to tune out all the fears and anxieties and the noise and smells of the surroundings and just become this character. She even started trying to imitate the sexy moves of the painted women at the other tables.

Sam was starving and ate heavily, once she'd picked up the system from Zenchur. It had been a little unsettling to discover that the silverware consisted of a very sharp pointed knife, a thin, serrated blade second knife, and a very small spoon, like a demitasse spoon, and nothing else. Clearly nobody had invented forks around here, and you cut the meat by holding it with the sharp knife, cutting with the serrated one, then spearing it with either. The little spoon was used for not just the drippings but also to scoop out the potato-it sort of looked and tasted like a potato although it was kind of purplish inside. Some slicked stalked vegetables were in a small container and proved raw, but tasted all right and gave it whatever balance it might have. Once she'd filled the emptiness inside, though, she also began to observe and to think.

Charley was doing a hell of a job, but she was nothing compared to those others.

She wasn't dressed or made up like they were—that eye and body stuff was particularly erotic— and was clearly not in their class. She was good, but she wouldn't fool anybody that she was one of them. Then why go through this charade? Was Zenchur just playing games, or what? It seemed to her that Charley would've been less conspicuous wearing the sari and being a new girl in town. Not that Charley, usually the more suspicious and the brains of the outfit, seemed to mind or question it. She was really getting into, and off on, this stuff.

A man who'd been sitting alone in a corner booth now got up and came over as they finished their meals. "Zenchur! How have you been? Long time," said the newcomer in Akhbreed.

"Well, Kligos. You received my message, then?"

Sam froze. Because Zenchur didn't know she knew the language he was speaking freely. When did the son of a bitch have a chance to send a message? So the toilet was occupied and a long wait, huh?"

"I need Pilots. One for the seven o'clock sector and one again for the five o'clock in the next cluster."

"Malabar, eh? Rough that way, you know. Changewind came through just yesterday and screwed up the hub and a few sectors something fierce. It'll be several more days before we have any accurate information on just what the damage is."

"It did not touch this cluster. I could be halfway there in several more days and closer to the source of the information. By the time I crossed clusters to Malabar the Pilots should have it well in hand. I need ones that keep their mouths shut and know the back ways."

"Woof! You're talking money for security there, my friend. At least a thousand just for services."

Zenchur nodded. "I know. I have full credit in Malabar and I have word that the Palace survived, so that won't be a real problem once I get there. I'm under budget for Tubikosa, though—my employer gave me an extra burden I hadn't counted on, and I had to make it over here fast and on short notice."

"I see. You want to relieve your unexpected burden and enrich your coffers more than enough to make it. Well, you contacted the right organization, old friend. I have been watching and I am impressed. I'll go your five hundred right here and now."

Zenchur chuckled. "I was thinking more about fifteen hundred. You and I know the profit potential from a rare good one. I would be guilty of allowing theft even at that price."

"You take advantage of an old friendship. Seven fifty tops. There is overhead, must preparation and break-in, and I still take a risk. It might not work out and then what do I have?"

"You know what you have, you old thief. This is difficult and risky for me as it is. A sorcerer is involved. Twelve fifty."

"Who you want to work for is your affair and your funeral. We all have our problems. I'm short-handed now because half the low-life in the kingdom is out looking for two Outplane girls dropped by storm here. You want money, go find them. The word on the street says fifty thousand, but only for both. Seems only one is wanted but they don't know which one. For that kind of money I am almost tempted to go look under every scarf myself—except that I know the odds of their showing up here are less than winning the royal lottery. Knowing you, though, if it wasn't for this bit of business I'd be very suspicious of you, too. All right—final offer. A thousand, flat, cash. Take it or leave it."

"Done." They clasped hands, apparently the local form of handshake. "You are aware of the subtleties of the problem?"

"I don't need diagrams. You just go along. Well—good seeing you and a pleasure doing business with you." The man waved, then walked out the door and away from the tavern.

"Who's that?" Sam whispered, not liking this a bit. "An old friend, but one you cannot turn your back on. He was friendly enough but I do not like the way he was looking at you two. He brought up the price on your heads and it was enormous. Let us pay the bill and get back to the hotel before he starts looking

It was a knife-no, bigger than a knife. The handle looked more like a sword handle, but the blade was maybe a foot long, perfectly proportioned. She picked it up, felt it, made a few slash and jab moves. It was as if she'd always had the thing and practiced every day.

She took the time to change. There was a soft pullover top of near jet black in there, a pair of black male tights, and a loose but sturdy black leather-belt. She tried on the outfit and it fit pretty well, although the top was lifted up a little by her breasts. The body was all girl, though; she searched and found a loose leather jerkin that went over it and concealed a bit. She knew she didn't really need it with the power of the jewel working for her, but you never knew if you were coming back. Her soft leather boots would continue to be fine. The short sword's scabbard fit on the belt, so that was added. She was reasonably satisfied-it was men's clothing, although she didn't look very mannish in it. That jewel's spell had better work. She kind of liked the look, though.

She was almost ready to go when she realized she'd almost forgotten the money purse. That, too, went on the belt, and she hoped it wouldn't jingle much. Next was finding a way out. She considered risking the stairs, but the less seen the better. She went to the window, stood on the trunk, and with a real effort got it open and looked out. It was four stories down to the street below, but there were ledges and cornices all the way. The fact that she had always been scared of heights and never even climbed trees well as a kid was forgotten; her mind plotted the whole thing carefully, then she let herself out of the window and lowered herself down onto the four-inch ledge. She worked her way along it, carefully but confidently, until she reached the corner of the building, then eased herself down and let her body flow over the side until only her hands were on or held the ledge. The cornices and brickwork at points gave her only an inch to work with, but, very carefully and in fair darkness, she made her way down the side of the building without aids.

The darkness which had been a fearsome enemy was now a friend to her, and she stepped into it and drew the short sword, then allowed her eyes to grow accustomed to the murkiness and made her way along the back streets. She had made Zenchur be very precise; within ten minutes and with no real incidents except a few rats or rat-like creatures, which she ignored contemptuously, she made it to the waterfront itself and looked back on a row of warehouses, one of which in particular interested her.

She made her way completely around it, unobserved in the darkness, studying it with a professional's eye. It was bound on all sides by streets, the smallest of which was maybe fifteen feet. So much for roof to roof; without equipment it was just physically out of reach. That left the warehouse itself. It was about the same distance to the roof as it had been down from the hotel room window, but this was stone and cement block. The only possibility was the rain channels and gutter pipe, which was more of a rounded pipe than the aluminum rectangles back home. The lowest channels that were useful were a good ten or twelve feet from the street level, more than twice her height, and it wasn't clear just how they were set in. She was five-two, a hundred five-okay, a hundred and twenty. Why quibble? The gutters and mounts back home wouldn't take either weight. If these didn't, then she was screwed and there'd be a lot of banging. If these did-then what?

To hell with it, she told herself. Charley's in there and I don't see another way.

She removed her boots in an alley that separated two warehouses in back of her target, then used the sword to cut away the bottoms of the tights up to the ankles. She knew she'd be better off if she left the sword and maybe the money as well-even though the money bag also had the Jewel of Omak-but she wasn't about to leave her only weapon behind and certainly not the money or the jewel. She sized it up from every angle, calculated the timing, speed, and place, then, without considering things further, she took off, hit her mark, and leaped, arms outstretched.

Both hands grabbed the gutter pipe, but then the rest of her body slammed into the stone wall. It hurt and she almost lost her grip, but she held on. Damn! Wasn't she gonna be a sight if she lived through this?

The pipe was solid and held, and seemed to be mounted on thick steel rods embedded in the concrete of the building itself. With supreme effort and contorting more than she ever thought possible she got a leg up, then rolled into the building letting the two inches of clearance between the rods and the side of the building hold her. It took her some more time and much care and breath control as well as strength, but she managed to get up so she was standing on the two inch pipe. She worked her way down to where the vertical pipe from the roof met and merged with the horizontal one and studied it. It went all the way, right up the corner, but there wasn't much to hold on to except pipe and support pins.

Taking a deep breath and willing away the pain, she used the same arms that could not have possibly lifted one of the trunks, let alone Charley, and pulled herself up the side of the building.

The roof was a sloping affair of dirty green copper.

Cautiously she moved along it, until she reached the corner and a scary turn to cling to the side facing the water. She hoped Zenchur knew what he was talking about. It would be unendurable to find at this point that this was the wrong warehouse-or that Charley wasn't inside.

There were windows, at least-a long string of very large ones, only on this side. Some had been propped open several inches to catch the breeze, which was definitely there, although mostly blowing from the land to the water. She made her way to the nearest window and looked in, praying she was not. going to find herself looking down into the warehouse.

She wasn't. It was a room-a big room, with a polished wood floor and tons of stuff all over the place. It definitely looked like an artist's studio-there were even sculptures around on stools and stuff like that. It was definitely what was advertised. Now the only question remaining was whether or not Charley was inside. Zenchur had said that Boday wasn't the only one doing this filthy business, only the biggest name.

Further on down and out of her direct line of sight some lights were certainly on. She had come this far; she had to find out one way or the other. At least, damn it, she made the effort'

It wasn't easy opening the window more than the pins allowed without them falling back, but she managed it, wondering how the hell Boday opened them in the first place. She managed to get under, just barely squeezing through, until she was hanging, suspended inside, but still a good six or eight feet from the floor.

There was no way around it. She would have to drop and roll, and hope that the sound wouldn't be heard or would be dismissed by any who did.

She let go, falling immediately to all fours and then freezing as the short sword went thunk against the wood. Holding it up, she crawled into a dark corner and waited to see if anyone would come to investigate.

Someone did. The figure silhouetted in the far doorway was imposing, but, backlit, it was impossible to tell much more than that she was very tall and very thin and she wore very high heels.

"Hello! Anybody there, darlings?" she called out in a voice that was deep and rich and very female. The Akhbreed dialect was also heavily accented. She walked into the darkened studio without showing any real fear, and in the darkness various forms and colors seemed to glow, although she was barely visible. It didn't take much imagination to see that the glowing parts were shapes and highlights of her body that made the whole show obscene. In a few steps, she stopped again and was slightly illuminated by a shaft of reflected light from the lakefront outside.

The most obvious thing about her was that she was wearing tall, high-heeled leather boots and matching panties or bikini or whatever. What was anything but apparent for quite a moment was that she wasn't wearing anything else, although that realization restored Sam's confidence in fashion design. The fully lit version of the woman did not have the very obscene shapes, but it was a whole new category of obscenity.

From the top of her small, firm breasts to the top of her boots, the woman was a

power down, however. Perhaps one meter. I believe I can maintain your protective disguise for up to two more days without time to recharge, but no other functions fully operative. Last night was a heavy drain. You were warned. A meter! That was like three feet! She'd almost have to be kissing Boday to get it to work. "How long will it take you to recharge?" she barely breathed. If I am not used at all, thirty-six hours should be sufficient. She put it away. Thirty-six hours! Christ-Charley would be dead meat by then. Not to mention the fact that she herself was feeling pretty drained and achy as hell-and there was no way she was getting down the same way she got up. She was also hungry and thirsty as hell and she was going to burst if she didn't piss pretty soon. This was great. Just great.

Boday was up and about in there, too. She could hear the artist now moving around, humming an inane tune, and smell some pretty wild smells, a few of which were helpful in making Sam forget how hungry she was.

Sam sat there trying to figure out what to do. Damn it, if she didn't do anything at all Charley was gonna be history, but what could she do? The jewel was no good, and Boday was bigger and from the looks of those arms a lot stronger than she was. Sam went to the short sword which the previous night had felt so light and easy to use and found it so heavy she could hardly manage it. This wasn't fair, damn it! It just wasn't fair!

But what she had done last night, as incredible, as unbelievable, as it now seemed, was only partly magic. The gem had given her nothing but confidence and some background knowledge skills; she had done nothing she was not capable of doing, only things she would not have dreamed possible for her to do. It was getting dark and she was about to piss on the floor. The hell with it. Without Charley she just didn't want to see what this armpit world looked like, and to hell with Boolean.

Grasping the short sword for all it was worth, she crept around the corner, through the doorway, and into the laboratory, keeping behind a mound of piled up stuff on a table. She could see Charley lying kind of diagonal on a bed with an X-type adjustable frame. Boday was over at the lab counter checking on something. The two little bottles were still on the counter, too, but it was hard to say whether or not they'd been used. Sam had to believe they had not; it was just dark, and it was still not quite twenty-four hours.

Boday was in her usual state of colorful undress, although she was wearing a pair of sparkling pink panties and open-toed sandals now, and she had a bib around her to shield her in case something bubbling on her countertop might splash.

The artistic alchemist had her back to Sam, but she still looked huge. Sam felt like David and Goliath-only David had God and a slingshot. Both would be very useful right now.

Boday suddenly dropped something on the floor. "Moonstones and little fishes," she cursed a bit colorfully. She got up slightly from her work stool and leaned down to pick up whatever it was. Sam decided it was now or never.

She summoned every bit of strength she had, leaped suddenly out with sword drawn and rushed the big woman, saying "Yaaaaa!"

Boday was so completely surprised she jerked up just in time to see what was coming but not to do anything about it. Sam hit her full force with her body, and Boday, bent over and just in the process of straightening up, went back sharply when hit and her head struck against the marble side of the lab table. Her eyes opened wide, her eyeballs went up toward her eyebrows, and she sank down onto the floor in a heap.

Sam rolled off and managed to pull herself up. It was so quick and impulsive she hadn't even thought beyond the rush, but now she suddenly was aware that the big woman was lying there in a heap, like some discarded giant colorful rag doll. She stared incredulously at the sight, then thought, Oh, my God, I've killed her!

But then Boday moved and Sam realized she had only a minute, perhaps seconds, before things got different. She grabbed one of the bottles off the counter-the black one-and knelt down beside the artist, who was just returning to

consciousness, if not sense. "Here-drink this. It'll make you feel better," Sam said, sounding concerned, and put the bottle to Boday's lips.

The big woman tasted it, coughed a bit, then almost greedily drank the rest of it down. Her big eyes opened hazily and she looked at Sam, then saw the bottle, and the eyes grew suddenly wide.

"Apple cider," she mumbled. "Boday always wondered what it tasted like. How about that . . . !" She sighed, gave a sweet smile, then passed out again on the floor.

Sam had deliberately grabbed one of the potions, of course; it was the only sure way to make sure the big woman didn't come to and turn the tables fast. Now she looked at the bottle and tried to remember what it might have been.

Well, whatever it was, it had knocked the artist out again and that was plenty of breathing space. She wanted to rush to Charley, but first she spied a door at one end of the lab and a somewhat familiar object and headed to it. The piss was almost as sweet as the victory.

That done, she was able to see to Charley, and what she saw amazed her. Boday had been very busy with Charley, and if they could do this sort of thing with potions, who knew what magic might accomplish?

Charley had had Sam's old very long straight black hair, but Boday had changed that to strawberry blond with streaks of black and brown, and somehow managed to really fluff it up and thicken it, at least so it appeared. There were differences in the face, too. The lashes seemed extraordinarily long, like the most extreme false ones, and the pronounced overbite was gone, the lips a little turned out more, fuller and thicker like an almost permanent pucker, and colored a deep, rich, solid red. But most noticeable was the face painting around the eyes themselves, each a separate, delicate drawing and a mirror image of the other although they did not connect across the bridge. They were delicate, pale blue butterfly wings, one per side, coining out from the eye and curving gracefully away, yet . in the solid color were small, fine lines of white and black that gave it a fascinating look, and from the tops of the "wings" came fine black lines that curved as well and ended in small black dots.

Boday went in for eye painting. She had it on herself and the pair in the tavern had it, too. But it was so intricate, so nicely balanced, that Sam had to admit that the tall woman might be a lot of nasty things, but she was a hell of an artist.

Setting it off were large pierced earrings that would hang down to the jaw line were she standing; thick, more brass than gold but impressive all the same, they were in fact stylized butterflies flying toward the front of Charley's face. The motif continued on the body painting, although it was, as Boday had said, "understated." The butterfly, mostly in outline but subtly shaded so that it still gave the effect of a solid drawing with gossamer thin wings, used the breasts as the upper wing foundation, blue lines coming off from the wing, tips and onto the breasts, circling the nipples and making them appear perfectly round. The wings, outlined in the blue of the eyes, curved down to the navel in which was mounted a matching blue gem, then back out along the hips and back in. The "head" was the pubic hair, dyed to match the new hair color. While it seemed almost an outline, the faint solidity of the wings actually contained hints of many colors, perhaps a very complex pattern depending on how the light caught it or the angle from which it was viewed. The complexion of all the skin, even that untouched by the design, seemed almost wet, glisteny and soft and perfectly smooth. The breasts were the same C cup size, but they seemed rock hard, incredibly firm, and far more prominent. Sam's sagged and drooped, which helped with the boy disguise. There was no way to disguise these, though. They were as firm as a-statue's.

There wasn't a sign of body hair anywhere except pubic hair and even that seemed manicured, and even the duplicate of Sam's old appendix scar was gone. There wasn't a blemish on this body. Not any of Sam's freckles, not a mole or anything.

The fingernails were so smooth and long and perfect they had to be artificial; they had been painted to match the blue of the eyes and the butterfly and had to be an inch or more long.

flesh. It can never matter how." "And it's permanent?"
For the first time she showed a bit of her old pride. "Of course, my sweets. When Boday creates, it is forever! Isn't it wonderful?"
Sam gestured toward Charley. "Can you wake her up- now?" She desperately needed Charley right now to help figure out what to do next.
Boday was on her feet, cat-like, engulfing Sam and kissing her, then over to the workbench. "I obey, Master. Boday lives only for you. Whip her, beat her, she will worship you all the more." She picked up a small jar and uncorked it, then held it under Charley's nose. The unconscious girl made a face, tried to turn away, then suddenly came awake, looking terrified and a little in shock. She stifled a scream.
"Charley! It's me-Sam! It's okay! It's over!"
Charley frowned for a moment, then stared at Sam. "Sam? My God, Sam!" And then she was off the table and hugging and kissing her rescuer like she couldn't believe it and crying all the time. "They were gonna-turn me-into one of them," she sobbed, and Charley let it all come out. Suddenly Charley seemed to see Boday and froze. "Her!"
"It's all right, Charley." Quickly Sam told her all that had happened up to that point, with one exception. "Uh-I think you better look at yourself in the mirror, Charley, if you're up to it, before we go any further."
Charley froze, then with Sam's help managed to get up and go cautiously over to the three-way mirror as if afraid to look in. The hair tumbled down as she got up and showed not only was it full and colored but it was somehow longer, going down to below her ass. Sam couldn't help but think that this was the first hairdresser she'd ever seen who could truly work miracles.
When she did, what she saw took her breath away. "Oh, man!" she breathed. "She did this?" She wet a finger and rubbed at the thin but colorful design. "It doesn't come off!"
"No. She thinks she's an artist. She says her creations last a lifetime." Sam paused for a moment. "For what it's worth, you are the prettiest, sexiest damned girl I ever saw. It's not really bad at all."
Charley whirled. "That's easy for you to say! You don't have a damned butterfly on your body!" She frowned, then approached Sam. "They did something to you, too. Your voice, your manner, even your hair . . . Sam-you're a guy!"
"Huh? What the hell do you mean?" She pulled up the shirt revealing her breasts which were still there and, although a bit misshapen and flabbier, every bit the size of Charley's. "Does this look like a guy?"
But Charley wasn't buying. "Your breasts-they're gone! And there's even a little hair on your chest!"
"Such a magnificent chest, my love. So clean and manly," said Boday in Akhbreed. Sam was so confused she looked down and saw the same old things she'd always seen. "What the hell . . . ?" She pulled the shirt back down and reached into her pouch and pulled out the Jewel of Omak. Sure! The disguise! It worked! Curious, she put down the jewel on the floor and stepped away.
Charley frowned again. "Huh? What the hell . . . ? You're back to normal!"
Sam nodded, reached down, picked up the jewel, and stuck it back in her pouch. "At least I know I'm not the one who's nuts. Man again, right?"
"Uh-yeah. That's like weird."
"It's an illusion, a fake. The jewel is causing it. Charley-I figured I been real lucky up to now and this is part of it. At least I think it was luck. Nobody could be that smart. Zenchujr did a job for Boolean and got this thing in payment. For hypnotizing folks for getaways and stuff like that. But he really hired Zenchur for that first one just to give him this. It's a lot more than Zenchur thought it was. It's kind'a like, well, like a computer for magic. So long as I have this thing I look like a guy-to everybody, even you. It has lots of other tricks, too; ones that Zenchur never knew. It hypnotized me into thinkin' I was the world's greatest thief and I did things I never would'a dreamed and got here. I just knew everything-includin' how to use it. It-talks to me, sort of. In my mind."
"Boolean," Charley said flatly. "That's why he didn't answer us. He already had a backup system in place-for you, anyways. And it was in something so handy, so

plot the routes and outfit the trip, but this is not cheap. A navigator for such a distance would easily cost two thousand sarkis. Particularly one who would be basically loyal and might defend his client against attack. Say twenty-five hundred just to be sure. Pilots who will just do their jobs and not ask questions are easily five hundred each, and you need-what?-seven of them. No pilots necessary for the hubs. They're all our kind, darling, and they stay the same most of the time. Now we are at six thousand. Then there are supplies. One would not wish to walk if it can be avoided, yes? Two thousand more. And then there will be expenses on the trails, and in both sectors and hubs. The more money the merrier but two thousand minimum. Let's see-that is ten thousand sarkis. I think I know where Zenchur was supposed to take you. It is where Boday was perfected! But it is southwest-add six more, you see. Another three or four thousand and another three thousand or more leegs."

"Yeah? What's so special about that place, anyway?"

"It is-university. You go there, whatever you need to learn, they teach you."

"Not whatever you want, whatever you need," Sam noted. "And who decides what you need?"

"Oh, they do, darling! And they know. Those who decide are all Akhbreed sorcerers. Those without positions, those studying further, those who have retired or do not wish positions. They know, lover. They know. Boday was an artist. A good artist. They did not teach her design. No, they teach her alchemy. The secrets of arts and potions. It is where sorcerers learn to be sorcerers, and heroes and heroines learn how to be heroes and heroines, or navigators, or Pilots, or any other great skills."

"Yeah, and what does it cost to go there?"

"Cost? Precious, it does not cost! Only a graduate or a fully ranked sorcerer can send you. Then you must do him service if and when he or she needs it."

"She? There are female sorcerers?"

"Oh, of course, darling! Not many in the hubs thanks to this foul male-dominated system, but many indeed. But why talk about it? It would take probably five thousand to get there at all. How much money do you have now?"

Sam removed the change purse and handed it to Boday, then gave a running translation of what was going on. "So how much we got?" Charley asked.

"That's what I'm finding out."

"Find out how much she's worth, too."

"You have four hundred and twelve sarkis, two ilium and seven pillux. A nice sum but it would not even get a Pilot. All that is Boday's is yours, dear one, but money has never been something she has been terribly good at keeping. The filthy pigs of art critics have always insulted her sculptures. The ones here are priceless, of course, but they would bring little money so long as Boday lives. When she dies they will discover her, though, and then they will be priceless treasures. This place is leased, paid up in advance for a year, but no refunds, and subletting a place like this would be very difficult. I have, perhaps, two thousand cash, and another thousand in jewelry and chemicals, but those would bring little if sold in haste or desperation, perhaps a quarter of their worth."

"So we're only halfway if we went to this university or whatever it is," Charley noted after hearing the translation. "And it's south and Boolean's north. So whatever they teach us, if it isn't how to fly we'll wind up dead broke with most of the distance yet to go."

"So you think we shouldn't head there? I mean, that's where Boolean wanted us but it's also not only out of the way but where Ladai might be watchin' and waitin'."

Charley sighed. "We probably should go. Somehow I feel it's bound up in all this. And he said we'd be safe there from all enemies, which would be real neat. But we don't dare go broke. Without that extra thousand then when they kick us outta there we're like up shit's creek."

Sam nodded and turned back to Boday. "Stuck again. Not enough money to go most anywhere, it seems. Five thousand for this university, ten thousand to get to Boolean, and fifteen thousand for both. It's a huge amount of money, I know. We can't go, and we can't stay here."

"Oh, piss on Kligos. Boday has many friends and an lovers among the merchant and even noble classes. Many of them would love this sort of thing but don't want to be seen down here or are just too scared to come. So we set her up in a nice apartment in a good neighborhood. Boday will decorate it just so. She has often been pressed by people who know her who are upset at enriching the likes of Kligos and his ilk to do something like this but up until now she was not interested in money or business, only art. I will teach her the Short Speech which anyone can learn. It is all they expect a courtesan to know-in speech. Kligos will probably never know, but even if he finds out he will think it is someone at the Palace's doing. And you will stay here with me and we will check on her."

Sam, grudgingly, told all this to Charley, adding, "But you'd be a prisoner in this place. You'd be there, night and day, for months, and I don't think they invented TV here even if you could understand it. And we can check on you and keep you supplied but for safety's sake we'd have to be here, not there. You'd be alone and not even able to call me for help."

"I'll survive," Charley responded. "It's better if we separate. No ideas putting us together. And the time we need should work out, too. Nobody keeps a roadblock and teams of searchers on for months. They'll figure we got out by them somehow and the search will be elsewhere. It's the only way, Sam, considering the circumstances."

Sam sighed. "All right, but I got a bad feeling about all this. Damn it, it's me they want. I feel like it should be me doin' this if anybody does. Go back to bein' a woman and let Boday do her thing on me."

Charley smiled. "You're just jealous. No, Sam, it's because they want you that it's gotta be me. And if I'm ever gonna get home again, or even back to me again, then I got to get to that sorcerer, too. This isn't just for you, Sam. It's my only way out."

The next few days seemed more unreal than real to Sam, although she spent much of it sleeping and regaining strength. The knot on the head went down, until there was only a slight scar from the sapping on the street, and the Jewel of Omak reported that its power was back up to strength, which gave her a real sense of security. Just where it was getting its power from she never thought to ask.

Boday continually attempted to seduce her as well, and she was a pretty easy mark for it considering how she felt. The mad alchemical artist was in fact an artist in all things, including that, although some of the things Boday came up with were more bizarre than anything Sam had imagined. She simply gave up and gave in, partly out of guilt over Charley and partly because she just needed somebody. She was getting to be fairly experienced in sex, though, and she still had never had a man and had no idea what it was like. She wondered if she might be gay, but she reserved judgment until the opportunity arose, if ever, to find out if she was or not. She certainly hadn't met very many sexy or attractive men so far.

Watching Boday work was also fascinating. The range of miracles that she could either lay her hands on or concoct in her lab seemed beyond belief, but it wasn't hard after a while to understand how she could make hair grow and change color and even self-streak in a matter of hours, or create an environment where the very bone structure could be expertly manipulated and altered-such as she'd done in altering Charley's overbite to make it sexy rather than intrusive.

Sam had instructed Boday specifically to do nothing more to Charley that was irreversible. That is, that couldn't be undone and Charley brought back to her normal old self. Boday noted that all of the commercially available formulas had absolute antidotes; it was only her special blends that conferred permanency by altering the standard formulas. Thus Sam watched, fascinated, as Boday did to Charley exactly what Sam had gone to so much trouble to prevent, only this time with antidotes available. The result was the same, of course; failing those antidotes, Charley would remain Boday's remade creation.

First was the potion that wiped out all memory, anxiety, inhibition, and fear. She became a wide-eyed, staring, baby-like blank, but she was eager to learn and all that she was taught she grasped quickly. Boday began by teaching her the

Short Speech, which was actually a soft and very primitive subset of Akhbreed with certain clever alterations and a lack of any tonalities or subtleties. More interesting, it had only the present tense and mostly second person at that, so that one who thought only in it would have an ego that was always the reflection of another. Charley learned what she was taught while under the potion's influence, but exhibited no curiosity to learn any more than she was given. Without a conscious, repetitive effort to teach, she simply did not learn at all no matter how obvious something was.

By the end of three long days it seemed impossible to Sam that Charley would ever become more than a wooden, childlike puppet. Sam couldn't stand it much anymore, and, following Boday's leads and contacts and with Boday's money, she spent some time exploring the city and ultimately finding an apartment in one of the tall downtown towers with a fine view of the palace, Government House, Royal Gardens, and the rest. As a male, she had considerable freedom to roam and see what the place really looked like, and it was impressive.

There were shops, large stores, bazaars, you name it, there, including many specializing in things from the sectors, the "nonhuman" regions of Akahlar. Many were practical items, some were particular kinds of clothing and materials, perfumes, luxury items of all kinds. The shopping district was divided into single product neighborhoods where everyone sold much the same thing in hot competition. Sam bought a great deal of material at Boday's request to form Charley's outfits, and also discovered that there was a whole industry devoted to very sexy and risqué woman's fashions-"for home and husband," of course. There was even a small street selling magical things-amulets, charms, potions, you name it. Some magicians advertised that they could weave practical spells "for business and industry alike," or so the pitchmen proclaimed.

Remembering the jewel's caution about the illusion and magical powers, she had shopped for and bought several comfortable but concealing male outfits before venturing onto that street.

By now she was known to the watchmen as "Boday's new sex interest" and had no problems going in or out, even with bundles, although she discovered that men do not help other men who are overburdened with packages like they help women. Men, in fact, treated each other far differently than they had treated her even back home, and she also found by discussions with the guards that men's talk covered a very different range than the sort when women got together, most of it very boring and of no interest to the listener.

Charley had still been mostly a dull-eyed automaton by the end of the third day, so it was a shock to see her near dark at the end of the fourth day. She stood there in the studio, a vision of ethereal beauty, dressed in a flowing blue dress of wispy material that showed her entire perfect body through the gauze. She seemed alive-full of life, and almost supernaturally gorgeous, the eyes lively and attentive, all of the moves so damned sexy it was turning Sam on just to watch her.

Charley gave Sam a sexy smile and bowed slightly, hands in the prayer position. "We greet you, our lord," she said in a soft, seductive whisper. "How may Shari serve?"

Sam dropped the whole bundle of stuff and then heard Boday's joyous cackle. "Darling!" she cried and ran to Sam, hugging and kissing her and picking her up almost off the floor. "Isn't she wonderful? Isn't she just simply marvelous? Boday knew she would be good but even she had no idea how simply stunning it would turn out! Tomorrow she will learn the technical fine points and then she will be ready! Boday took the liberty of giving a decorator her sketches, so the day after tomorrow we can be in business!"

Sam just stared at Charley, all sorts of thoughts and emotions jumbled up together inside her, many in conflict with each other. One, however, was very personal and more than a little jealous. That's my body she did that with! I could look like that! Still, another part, from the guilt corner, snuck in and snapped her back a bit. She was both fascinated and awed by the process, but there was still a strong part of her deep down that made her feel like a common pimp and degrader of

women.

"You're gonna keep her like that? So she don't even remember she's Charley?"

"Oh, darling, but of course! Any other way would be a crime, not only because it would of necessity spoil the creation but also because it would not be a mercy to her. Right now, she will do what she must do willingly, with no guilt, no regrets, no afterthoughts, no reservations. All of her day will be spent preparing for her evenings, and she will get better as she goes along. The more clients, the more perfect she will become, and single-mindedly, to the exclusion of everything else. Look at her now-she barely exists. She exists only through interacting with another. She exists to give pleasure, whatever is required. We will move her in and complete the training there-a few days at best. Then we will look for art lovers."

Sam was feeling pretty queasy about all this, even though Charley had asked for it and she'd argued against it. "You're sure it can be reversed? That we can bring her mind back?"

"But, of course! Do not worry, Boday's sweet Sower! Did you not command it? Did we not discuss it with her? It is arranged. In a month it wears off and she will remember everything. Then she decides. To take the potion some more or to come running back here. Every month after she will decide again. It is a pity if she ruins it, though. She is so perfect. Well, no matter what, Boday owes you even more for kicking her into this. Never before has she also designed the setting as well as the jewel. It is a new challenge!"

Sam just stared at Charley and licked her lips. And will you be sickened when it wears off? she wondered. And will you hate me and yourself for it?

With the year-long apartment lease, the decorating, the clothes for Charley and for Sam, and the supplies, they'd blown all of Boday's two thousand, and most of the change purse as well. If this unpleasant idea did not make money, they were in a hell of a fix. Charley, damn it all, had to start earning their keep.

8

Of Decadence, Demons, and Brassieres

The problem with decadence is that it is based on decay.

The last of the money went to set up a payment mechanism that would distance both Sam and Boday from Charley just in case anybody in the district thought to check on the new competition, and to arrange for various supplies and services-Charley might well be expected to cook for clients (Boday had taught her three meals which she did exceptionally well), which meant food and beverage had to be provided, and there would be the laundry and cleaning bill. The services were easy to arrange but they could only scrape up enough to prepay ten days' worth. If more money wasn't coming in by then, it would be all for nothing.

Boday did manage to use her contacts to start the ball rolling, but there were only three customers the first week, then five the second. As word of mouth spread, though, and Charley gained practice, things picked up. Still, most of the income was plowed back into the services, leaving little for Sam and Boday. Neither of them had any real business sense, and they had underestimated the start-up costs of even this sort of business and with all the intermediaries doing the work it left them broke and with nothing at all to do for a solid month. Not that they starved, but they wound up buying food that was cheap and easily spiced to disguise its cheapness and they ate a lot of fat and starch. Sam literally had nothing to do and no place to go. The city offered plenty of diversions but almost none of it was free and Boday was rather limited in the circles she could travel in. With no TV, no radio, no money to go out, no reading material she could read, Sam found herself basically trapped in the loft with Boday who similarly had nothing to do, since Sam, honoring Charley's wishes, had forbade the artist to take any more live commissions and Boday wasn't much interested in the old forms which she dismissed as "dull" and "passe." Not that Boday minded; anything she did was fine so long as it was near Sam. That potion was potent.

By the end of a week Sam was willing to do most anything for a diversion, if only to keep from thinking of Charley over there in that apartment, and Boday had an almost infinite mind for diversions. Sam resisted, though, figuring that

if Charley could make this kind of sacrifice she owed it to tough it out for a month after which she was convinced that Charley would be coming back. That left baking and eating the sweet breads and confections that were the easiest to make from their limited grocery budget, and, eventually, letting Boday play out her perversities, which seemed infinite. Boday, after all, was a master teacher of courtesans-and consorts, too-and she knew everything. At first Sam was nervous, then repelled, but eventually she found herself drawn to it by sheer boredom and Boday's persistence.

And, after a while, Sam just didn't have reservations anymore.

It was Boday who'd taken the love potion, but that did nothing to dim her dominant personality or to change any of her ways. In the hands of a love object who was equally strong she could have been curbed, restrained, even radically changed, but in this case her love object was a confused, lost, lonely, bored seventeen-year-old girl with little experience and waning self-confidence while the potion-obsessed lover was strong, domineering, experienced in many ways, including the manipulation of others. It wasn't like the fairy tales where the taker of the potion became the submissive love-slave of another, in this case, the tables were turned as the single-minded lover more and more dominated the object of that artificial love.

It wasn't quick; it was a slow, bit by bit breakdown of Sam's old morality, her self-image, her attitudes and behavior. Charley could have stopped it, but when the month passed and the runner informed them that the little vial had been accepted and later picked up empty and that Charley was still there and still the same, it all crumbled. Sam had hoped at least that Charley would have sent word before taking the potion again, that they could have seen each other, talked. When that didn't happen, and she faced months of unremitting boredom in the loft with Boday, all resistance crumbled. She even gave in to Boday's pleas and allowed the artistic alchemist to begin doing commissions again, even eventually helping out.

But now the money rolled in. Boday was delighted to get an accounting, and drew some of it for fine food and new fashions and a bit of celebration. Their standard of living improved and they even went out a bit, although Boday was clever enough to understand that Sam was best kept on a tight leash, with bright little magical toys a nice reward and diversion, and new clothes for both in the loft and outside for Sam, who no longer even cared what she looked like or how much she ate. At the start she'd tried some diversions like asking Boday to teach her to read the Akhbreed language, but after only a couple of weeks she'd given up. It was like ancient Chinese-almost a character for every word in the rich and colorful language- and she'd never been much good at memorizing anything. She tried art and sculpture but she was awful and she knew it and again quickly lost heart, and any attempt to figure out more than the bottom line basics of alchemy just made her dizzy. She finally simply gave up, and it was the last crushing blow to her ego.

With one day looking much like another and one week looking much like another, Sam lost track of time completely. There was supposed to be an end to it, but the end never seemed to come, one day looking exactly like the next. Boday, quite satisfied, was arranging things, and Sam, so that such an ending might never come and this could go on indefinitely.

Only the nightmares and visions remained uncontrolled. They were infrequent and came at odd times, but they were particularly virulent during times of storms on the waterfront. Twice more she saw the horror of the changewind in remote places far different from Tubikosa, and many more times she was back with the Horned One again, this time watching dark armies grow secretly composed of hordes of mostly nonhuman creatures, some of which were horrible indeed just to look upon. They were secretive, training in small groups all over Akahlar, but for what she did not know.

But every time she had such dreams Boday would be there, soothing, calming, often with a dream of elixir that induced sweet dreams without thought.

It was late one night when Sam awoke and struggled sleepily into the bathroom. She was having a very bad period, with the worst cramps and heaviest flow she could remember, in spite of Boday's potions that were supposed to keep it from

noticeably happening. She made her way to the sink and turned on the small light, then looked at herself in the mirror as something twinkling caught her eye.

It was the Jewel of Omak, and it was shining. It was such a startling, unexpected thing that she frowned and stared at its reflection-and was caught by its beam. Suddenly she was immobile, unable to move or react, and the magic jewel spoke to her mind.

You are now pursuing a course contrary to the interests of Boolean as well as yourself, the jewel told her. As per my instructions in this eventuality, I must take independent rectification actions. Henceforth you will see yourself clearly as you have made yourself. Henceforth, the drug action will be negated. I will take the appropriate biochemical measures to insure that this brings clear thinking and not suicidal depression but you will not like yourself. What you do for your own appearance and self is not my concern, but I will now intervene. You now have the means. You have had the means for some time. You will proceed to carry out Boolean's wishes. The trip to the university is optional, but you will no longer be permitted to act in a manner not calculated to bring you eventually to Boolean's presence. If you do not do this then I will take command. Boolean requires only your body, not your soul. Protection of the body and its delivery to Boolean alive is the only directive. Demonstration. She suddenly felt as if she were falling down a deep well, swirling around in the water, falling, falling. . . .

And then she saw again, but not as she had ever seen before. The image was low, somehow, and it was two-dimensional, slightly distorted, with the middle of things seeming close up and then everything else going away in the distance on both sides. It was a washed-out, strange-looking, ugly Vision of herself in the mirror, but she could still see her face, distorted by the contorted lens, if she looked up. It was all she could do. She felt disembodied, a mind without a body, only a single, imperfect eye. There was no pain, no pleasure, no sensation at all.

"Now you see," said a strange, horrible, lifeless voice from her own lips. "My energy comes from the soul and the spirit of the bearer. I do not take much; you never miss it, but it bonds us together. The jewel and the bearer are one." There was a dizzying sensation as her body turned and the single image whirled for a moment before stabilizing, although it was a bit shaky an image. Now they were in the apartment, now the lab. She turned and walked up to the three-way mirror and her entire body was reflected back to her.

Seeing herself clearly and objectively for the first time in a long while was a shock. Not that she didn't know; until now, it somehow hadn't been something she cared about. Her hair had grown back in well; it was still short but it was now substantial and more or less at an asexual length for this culture. Still, it seemed a lot longer than it should have considering how long it took hair to grow out.

But, lord! Was she fat! She hadn't really looked in this mirror in a very long time. Mostly, she hadn't wanted to. Her . grossly fat-swollen breasts hung down over a massive beer belly; her arms and legs were very thick, and she had an ass the size of Chicago. Her face, too, showed the weight, and she didn't have to look down much to show a double chin. And this had started with the same body that had created Charley.

It was as if everything within her that was pretty and gentle and nice had gone with Charley, leaving her with the grotesque remains.

"See what you have made of yourself," her body said in that same inhuman whisper. "The same body that your friend has kept beauteous beyond compare. The same body that made three-meter jumps to sneak in here that night and was agile and strong enough to climb drains and move silently across a sloped roof. You are the same one hundred and fifty-seven centimeters, but you weigh one hundred and eleven kilograms. This body grows weary climbing the stairs."

The figures were a shock. One hundred and eleven kilograms-let's see, each was two point two pounds. . . . My God! I weigh over two hundred and forty pounds and I'm just five-two!

"No, I weigh that. You weigh under four hundred grams," said her body.

I-I'm in the Jewel of Omak! she suddenly realized. I'm in the jewel, and whatever thing that dwelled here is now in my body!

"Yes, quite correct," responded the image. "You thought of me as a computer, which was all right, so long as everything went well. I influenced you and your friends as needed to accomplish the primary mission. I am no computer, Samantha Buell. That is of your world, not of mine or my master's. I am what you would call a demon."

Oh, God! A demon! Visions of Hell and creatures with horns appeared in her mind from her old upbringing. What have I done? Have I lost my soul? Suddenly she felt anger. You! You convinced Charley to do what she did-because it was the only way to get the money!

"She might have done it anyway. She was inclined that way. I think you know your friend less well than you think. I merely made it easier for her to decide. Just as I used what little strength I had for your charge at Boday, so it would strike perfectly to knock her down. Just as I put the idea in your head for the love potion, since we needed an ally. Just as I put how to do it in Boday's mind. I did not mind your lapse into decadence so long as there was nothing else to do, so long as resources were building up. I fear we demons have rather a taste for decadence. But I am bound to enforce my master's will. That is why I am in the jewel and he is sitting comfortably in Masalur. I do not even particularly like him, but greater power always commands lesser power in all things. I am a lesser power to him and so must obey. You are a lesser power to me. Just as I find being in a human body but with such restrictions repugnant-but if I must possess you, then I must. But I would rather we had an understanding."

You-you have been controlling all of this?

"Naturally, up to a point. Did you think under the circumstances that you could have even survived unaided here for long? I made certain mat, when he discussed betraying you, Zenchur spoke Akhbreed, to warn you. When you proved too immature and nervous to act or even plan a course of action, I waited. Do you really believe that one of Zenchur's experience would use the jewel while facing a mirror unless he somehow was prevented from considering that possibility? Do you think you would have had the presence of mind to duck?"

But you let him betray Charley and kidnap her! You could have stopped it!

"Yes, but I have no interest or instructions on Charley. She was not anticipated. Zenchur was a sincere hope, and so long as he did not betray you there was no reason to act. When he did, I intervened. Now I must intervene again. Do you like your body now?"

You know I don't! I'm huge! Ugly!

"The outside merely manifests the inside. You have let Boday take over and dominate your mind. You have become complacent with perversity, you have lost your sense of self and purpose. You have betrayed your friend who sacrificed for you. You did not lose your soul. You gave it away."

It was Boday!

"Boday can do nothing that you do not allow her to do. This time could have been put to productive use. You started to do so, but you did not really want to, and at the first sign that learning was work or the first mistake in learning you seized as an excuse to give it up. It was incomprehensible to me that one who would risk everything and sacrifice all to save a friend would have so little sense of self-worth. Your friend was willing to voluntarily lie and be servile to a hundred men or more because she understood that it was the only way to her own goal, to reach Boolean, to get out. To attain something worth attaining, one must sacrifice, do whatever is necessary. She understands that. But you! You never had any goals. You never really succeeded in anything. Charley was the only backbone you ever had, and you used her and wound up dragging her here. Without her, you switched to Boday. Only one thing keeps me from taking complete command, imprisoning you in that bauble and remaining here, possessing your body. Just once, in your whole life, did you have a real goal that did not concern yourself. Just once, you put aside all thoughts of self and risked everything for someone else. I provided the physical stamina and the knowledge

and skills needed, but it was your will that used it. I did not send you to save Charley from Boday. That is not my affair. I provided the resources, but you provided the will."

Sam felt very ashamed of herself right then and there. She wanted to cry, but jewels don't cry, or feel any sensations at all. What would you have me do? she asked the demon. "The object was to gain the financial resources to undertake the journey and perhaps acquire some of the skills needed. You have it. In spite of Boday's lavish attempts at spending it down. How long do you think it has been since you abandoned your friend?"

Total confusion. I-I don't know. Four or five months, I guess. I suppose the way you talk it's a year.

"It has been a year. Exactly a year today. Boday in fact is in the process of renewing the lease and taking more rooms for more girls. You may not be able to read those papers, but I can read Boday. She has plans to make this permanent. She is the one whose elixirs kept you pleasant but which also induce a massive appetite for sweets. At this weight you will take no other lovers, nor have much energy for ambition. You sleep half the time and the rest you lie around eating and doing whatever she desires. You do not vegetate, you have become a vegetable. You have not left this loft in five weeks, partly because, deep down, you do not want others to see you this way. Boday prepares now for her final coup. She is signing the final papers and leasing a grandiose suite near the Palace into which she will move Charley and the last two girls she did here, which were procured for her use, not as commissions. She is confident now. Then your friend's position will be made-permanent. She will teach the others and all the ones who come after her. Soon there will be so much money and power she will be able to eliminate Kligos and the rest."

No! She can't! I wouldn't permit it! I told her about Charley!

"Indeed, you have been very naive. What do you think a love potion does? It directs all of the emotional needs, primitive lusts, whatever, toward a single individual. You fall madly in love with that person-but nothing else changes unless that person changes her. You, instead, have given her a free hand. She is protecting you, even from yourself. Do not lovers lie to one another? Do not lovers do something against the other's wishes for what they really believe is the good of the other? That is why I must step in. She must not be allowed to do this thing. This must end now. Either you must end it, or I will. The enemy gathers strength. It builds in secret now, so as not to frighten and unite the Kings of Akahlar, but it builds. When it is strong enough it will move, and millions will suffer, and the fate of all worlds will be decided. You are a player in this matter no matter if you wish to be or not. Many of the soldiers and victims in wars are unwilling and even uncomprehending or uncaring, but they still fight and suffer and die. You are a chess piece in this game. Whether pawn or queen I do not know, but you are none the less important, for even a pawn may capture a king."

I will handle it! I will stop it! I swear to you! I'll kill that bitch!

"No. If you handle it, if you stop it and redirect it, it must be with thought, not emotion. How will you bring Charley back without Boday? How will you access the funds and find the personnel needed and chart the course? She is corrupt. Use her, and prevent her from using you." The demon sighed. "I sense you need some incentives of your own to match your friend's. If you do not act now, your friend is lost. That is the first incentive. Once you recover her you must not be turned again from the objective." Her own brown eyes surveyed her body in the mirror.

"It is fitting, even useful," the demon said, mostly to itself. "The male illusion was for the purposes of disguise but it would not have held up on the trail in any event. It has taken some of my intervention to hold this long. But no one, _ absolutely no one, would recognize you now. I give you back your body, until such time as you give me cause to seize it again. But I also give you my curse. I cannot in any way alter your true body and part of my charge is to prevent that from happening, but this is your body, and so it will stay, regardless of spell or potion or three weeks in the wastes without food. If need

gone for Sam and Boday's food, clothing, living expenses, Boday's materials, and close to five for a deposit and decorating on the new place. The cash on hand actually amounted to a bit under fourteen thousand two hundred sarkis.

"I can't believe it!" Sam exclaimed. "One whole fucking year and we're still short? Not just short-way short! Can't we at least get the deposit back on the new place? That'd add another two thousand."

Boday shook her head. "Sorry, darling. Once the decoration and furnishings were done there was no way out."

"I could always take the two girls in there and run them with me in the new place for a little while," Charley suggested. "If we ran seven days and all got booked we'd have it in another month. After a year, what's another month?"

Sam sighed. "Yeah, and so we take in eight grand and we spend three on expenses. That makes it two months. But in two months we owe two more grand in rent. Three months. My demon will have shit fits by then, and so will I."

More delay is unacceptable, the demon agreed. Money or not, you have enough to start. I will give you thirty days to do so. Every day you are in Tubikosa beyond that you will gain another kilogram. With your height, weight, and frame, another thirty kilograms and you will be unable to walk or get up on your awn. She was close to tears. "But, damn it, we don't have enough! Besides, it's counterproductive. What does it gain you if Boday has to pull me in a rickshaw or whatever-if she could? Besides, I bet I eat fifty sarkis a day worth. That adds to the cost."

You eat whatever would otherwise be spoilage, but your weight will be maintained if you eat relatively normally. I will suppress hunger until necessary. You are giving up again. Giving up before you even try.

Sam tried to repeat the conversation but gave up and just broke down and sobbed. "I'm so miserable!" she cried. "I'd kill myself if they'd let me!"

Charley sat back and thought. Finally she said, "Look, we can probably scrounge up enough stuff by liquidating the new place's furnishings and what has value here. And we can't afford to be fussy about this navigator and these Pilots. We take what we can get for the money, that's all. Calm down and ask Boday what ways we can do this on the cheap."

The artist thought it over. "The old price was for our own navigator and secure Pilots. If we just sign on with someone else's trip and take it as far as it is going, then found another and so on, and were not fussy about the company or the accommodations, it would be much cheaper."

"I understood her," Charley said, quieting Sam's translation. "I'm getting pretty good at it. Can't speak it worth a damn, though, except some single words and the Short Speech. I just play mute and communicate real fine. Okay, that's a lot, and we got your demon jewel to help out, too. If it's the one in the all-fired hurry, it should be ready and willing to help pull the weight. So will we, wherever we can. And if we get stuck and broke real close to the goal line, then we can find some kind of work or other. Hell, Boday's an alchemist and you could stomp grapes if you had to, and as for me, I kind'a think that if we're in human territory my special skills are universal. Maybe old Boolean will get antsy and break his tails and come get us or send help if he really wants you, particularly if we get close and no cigar. Cheer up. We may still be on the wanted list but ain't nobody gonna finger us as the ones, and after this long they probably wrote us off."

Sam stared at her. "Yon make it sound so easy."

"No. It's gonna be hard and nasty and probably real unpleasant, but if it wasn't possible Boolean wouldn't'a stuck you with that demon. Too bad we can't afford to go to that university, though. I bet they could figure out a thing or two and tell us what all this is about, too. I figure I just been to graduate school. I think maybe I want to see a little bit of this world and what's out there."

Sam sighed. "You're not only beautiful, you got the guts I wish I had and the brains to use 'em. God, I feel miserable."

"Hey! I'm scared shitless by this. That apartment-that was safe after one hell of a series of scares nobody should have to go through. But I grew up a whole lot this past year and I know you can't keep hiding and feeling miserable for

seemed almost anticlimactic, but neither Sam nor Charley nor Boday could say they felt disappointed. So far so good. Over four hundred miles and the worst that had happened overall was a good drenching.

The end of Bi'ihqua was not like the beginning. The road did not just end; only the land changed just beyond the border posts. The change was dramatic, but there was nothing to suggest anything odd or magical here. The road did not end; it continued on past a border control post and fort, and a few hundred yards beyond, the volcanic terrain simply ceased and was replaced by a thick, northern-style forest. The road changed at that point, too, from the rich black hard-packed earth of Bi'ihqua to a hard, unrutted red clay. The road seemed better maintained on the other side for all the soldier's remarks about Mashtopol, even to having drainage cuts on either side. There was a small border post there, too, with far fewer soldiers wearing blue, not black, uniforms and colored epaulets on their shoulders.

They disembarked and set up for the night on the Tubikosan side, just outside the border fort. Sam couldn't help noticing that while the Tubikosa border was heavily double-fenced as far as you could see in both directions, the Mastopol one was not. After getting set up, she wandered over to the Serkosh family wagon and found Rini. "That is the Kudaan Wastes?" she asked mem. "It looks pretty nice to me!"

Rini laughed, "Oh, not That's Kwei, I think. It's hard to keep track but I thought I heard the Pilot say so. I wish we were going that way, but few trains do. Kwei wood goes almost entirely to the rest of Mashtopol; little is exported. Unfortunately, the international trains coming back almost always go through the worst and ugliest sectors. That's because it's cheaper to get them to pick up the dangerous or heavy cargo and bring it in for free in lieu of transit fees. If we'd known someplace like Kwei would be up when we got here we would have arranged a special transfer through to it, but there's no way of knowing what you'll get when you come here and it's too late now." She sighed. "Too bad, too. I'd much rather pick up some nice wood furnishings cheap than go through a damned desert."

Sam felt disappointed. The land in front of her looked so pleasant. "Then that's why they call it the Wastes? Because it's a desert?"

Rini nodded. "They'll take on a water wagon here, I bet, and maybe more. I've heard the Wastes are pretty, though. It's just that down this end they're pretty dangerous. The land is so rugged it's a perfect hideout for anyone who, well, needs to hide out and can somehow get there. Ten armies wouldn't blast you out of there if you didn't want to be blasted out, so they don't try. There's a wonderful lot of books written set in the Kudaan Wastes. It's very romantic. They just quarantine the area and have a military escort the first hundred and fifty leegs. Nobody usually bothers the inbound trains anyway, though; not much to steal. So they only pick up the ores inbound. See? Oh, it'll be exotic but I don't think we'll be molested. If we thought there was a real danger we'd never go through there with the kids. There's a number of spots like Kudaan, and most of these navigators have deals, anyway. We might even see some of the accursed or changelings."

Sam wasn't sure she was too excited about seeing anybody called accursed or a changeling but she let that pass. Charley seemed genuinely excited by the description; it sounded much like her own native desert southwest. Boday seemed interested only in the artistic possibilities, but she did explain two terms.

"Changelings are those poor unfortunates caught in a changewind who manage to make it to such places," she told them. "They are often horrible or grotesque, and not all were Akhbreed to begin with. Some are partly changed--only a part of them received exposure and the result was able to live--and they are the halflings. The accursed--they may look similar or look ordinary, but their troubles are due to more deliberate magic. The changewinds are random; the accursed are truly that. Often they change in the dark or under special conditions from normal to quite mad, or from man or woman to beast. The others--criminals, malcontents, political refugees, zealots. Boday thinks most will keep well out of sight, particularly if we have troops with us. Most are there because they do not wish to be seen."

men, "and particularly mine. As you can see, no troops, no nothing, and I cannot maintain this synchronicity for very long, certainly no more than an hour. Any thoughts?" Donnah, one of the older hands and the cargomaster, spat, then said, "Hell, boss, if we could drop the passengers I'd say go for it, but I wouldn't go in there with paying customers for nothin' if I could avoid it. 'Course, I'll do what you order." "You know better, Donnah. We drop the passengers and make it, we're goona have to refund their whole damned passage and send a safe special back for 'em. Might be penalties, too. I ain't old enough to retire yet, let alone get kicked out on that account. Either we all stay or we all go. How say you?"

It was Crindil who spoke for most of them. "You know we're game for it, boss. Been kind'a dull lately. I haven't been through here in six, seven months, but I didn't have much trouble with Sanglar and I don't expect none with you. Seems to me we go and we got a real club to hold to Mashtopol's head. Still, there's too many women and children this trip for me to just bravo it. I say we ask them." Everybody else gave their advice as well, but much of it was conflicting and contradictory. Still, the consensus was to go. Jahoort was asking for advice, though, not a vote. He was an absolute monarch in the end and the final choice was his. "No," he said. "I'll not have the blood of a child on my hands because her father was a damn fool." He took out a pocket watch and looked at it. "Forty-nine minutes. If them troopers get here within that time we'll move in. If not, we'll try again tomorrow and the day after that until we get sick and tired of it and go someplace civilized."

He would have liked the option of simply defaulting to a better sector, but he really didn't have it. Those border posts that were staffed would not let them through if their papers said otherwise, and those that were not staffed were as bad as this one.

They held in position, as instructed by the outriders, waiting for Jahoort to signal go ahead or abort. Sam waited impatiently, the reins in her hands, and scanned the terrain with her binoculars. Nothing much to see. Time dragged, and even the nargas grew bored and restless.

Jahoort, too, sat atop his horse scanning the road, as immobile as a statue, except that every once in a while he'd take out his watch again and look at it. He was just about to give up and tell everybody to return to camp formation when he gave one last look down the road. There, in the distance, he could see riders coming toward him, kicking up a bit of dust, definitely in formation. They had four minutes really to cross, and he had a split second to decide. He turned and made the call of "Ahead at full speed," and they began very suddenly and quickly to move, the outriders screaming at them to hurry up and cross and never mind the formation or the road. They'd fix it later.

They were through the border before anyone even had time to wonder what would happen if they didn't make it-or, worse, made it halfway. Later they were reassured to learn that that simply did not happen, although the shift could occur the instant you were across.

Jahoort wasted no time in reforming the train, and everyone was so busy that they could pay attention only to themselves. It was Charley, looking out of the back of the wagon, who wondered idly where some of the riders had gone and worried for a moment that some of the crew might have missed the crossing, but she dismissed the thought. She could not, after all, see everything, and nobody else seemed concerned. As soon as everyone was formed up and ready to go another reality hit them that began to occupy their attention.

It was hotter than hell here, and so dry that perspiration seemed to evaporate as it formed on the skin. It bothered them all almost immediately, but it didn't seem to concern Jahoort, who had to be broiling in those buckskins. His attention was entirely on the oncoming riders.

In back of them, the landscape was now tall, seemingly impenetrable mountains rising up through clouds. It was as barren a landscape as this one, but it looked a lot cooler. Wherever Bi'ihqua now was, it wasn't connected to them anymore.

Jahoort waited for the riders, letting them come to him. There were ten men, in

of the stretch pullover tops and that had come through fairly well, but when she'd contorted to get the boots off she'd also slipped off the pair of work pants that threatened to drag her down with their extra waterlogged weight. She was naked from the waist down, a rather odd feeling. She slipped off the top and wrung it out as best she could, then went over to lay it out on one of the bushes to dry. Better something than nothing with this sun. She was about to stretch it out when she suddenly saw a hand and gasped. She cleared away as much as she could and found a man there.

He was dead; no question about that. It was Fromick, one of the quieter crew, who had been one of the men who'd set out after the two surviving raiders. His clothes were bloodstained and ripped to shreds-he must have hit the rocks and not much use, but, oddly, his gunbelt was still on and the twin pistols still in their holsters. She didn't like touching dead men, but if she could have made use of the shirt or pants she'd have done so. She undid the belt and managed to get it off him. Most crew kept their personal stuff in the crew wagon, but these belts often had compartments, pouches, whatever, for practical stuff.

It was well worn; a veteran's gunbelt, but it was also very well made. She examined it, felt it-it felt heavy and looked a bit too thick. There were also some pouches which she opened and checked, knowing that they were supposedly waterproof.

Some money-the hell with that. What good would it be here, anyway? A silver-plated cigarette case containing fifteen cigarettes and a small flint-activated lighting stick. That might come in handy. The cigarettes were dry; the odds were she could build a fire if she had to. A partly eaten bar of dark chocolate-that was a godsend. A tiny, toy-like penknife. And, all along the lining in a clever series of folds, bullets.

She examined the pistols. They were nicely balanced, if a bit strange to look at. No barrel. Somebody could make machine guns with thirty-caliber copper-clad ammunition, but nobody official had more than a single-shot weapon. Weird. Surely these people could figure out the principles involved. It was like there was a law against repeaters or something.

And, of course, she realized that this must be it. It must be, in fact, the explanation for a lot of crazy things like people with flush toilets, electric ranges, and elevators, who didn't have cars or trains or telephones or even telegraphs and whose guns had single shots so their swords wouldn't be obsolete. It was like a code. If the Akhbreed controlled everything, they also controlled what knowledge was permitted to get out and what could be made in the colonial factories. No repeaters. Not honorable or something.

But you didn't make fancy machine guns and the kind of ammunition they used without big factories, machine tools, standardized parts, lots of supplies. Either some king himself was with the opposition, which seemed improbable, or else that gun came from the same kind of place she did- somewhere else. If people dropped down now and again, then maybe machine guns did, too. But with bullets? Enough to make it worth toting around and using? It was still not making sense.

She ejected the bullet in the chamber, then stuck a dry one in and snapped it closed. Not bad, she thought. The shells were man-stoppers, more like forty-fours than police specials, but it was nicely balanced. She had-let's see-twenty-four bullets now. When the leather dried out, she had at least a weapon and one she felt she could shoot. Just like on Cousin Harry's ranch back home.

That sun was really mean, so she went back a bit until she had some shade from the canyon wall itself. The evaporation was so intense she felt like she was trapped in a steamer, but there was nothing to do except wait it out and try not to cook. She settled back in the shade, put the pistols beside her, and worked with the penknife on the gunbelt until she had a little if not very neat-looking hole where she wanted it. She tried it with the belt buckle-one of those fancy green stones that looked like a design cut to oval shape and mounted in a big, fancy brass setting sort of like the truck drivers wore back home-and it fit and seemed to hold. She got up and tried it on and it worked, although, of course,

didn't like it, though. He didn't like it at all. He continued walking and went into the Council chamber, unable to shake this new and, for now, merely unpleasant chill. "Alert all agents and commands," he ordered crisply.

"Something very odd just happened and I don't know what. Until I do and we remedy it, spare no effort in finding and isolating it. And triple the magical guard on Boolean. If he scratches his ass I want to know it."

"At once, sir," responded the Captain General. "Uh-sir? Any idea what we are looking for?"

He shook his head. "A random equation seeking a definite solution. It floats, seeking its own answer. I prefer not to solve it." He went over to a blackboard and picked up a small object. "The easiest path is to erase it. Find it, Captain General. Find it and erase it before we all catch our death of cold."

The Changewinds saga continues with Riders of the Winds.