

SHADOW OF THE WELL OF SOULS

A Well World Novel

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For Fritz Leiber,
who enjoyed the original Well saga
but left us before this one was done, and
likewise for my old friend Reg Bretnor,
also gone too soon, my writing opposite of sorts,
who packed more laughs into fewer words than
any science-fiction author in history.
The worst thing about growing old
is the increasing number of missing,
and missed, friends.

Preface

"Oh, No! Not Another *Trilogy!*"

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON A JOURNEY BACK TO THE WELL World . . .

The Well of Souls series was the only five-volume tril-ogy I had ever written, and I felt it was basically symmet-rical and right; I had no intention of going back to it after I finished *Twilight at the Well of Souls* in 1979. For one thing, I didn't want to be "typed" and wind up cheapening the concept or the original book(s) by ripping off Well World No. 386. I didn't get into the writing business to do that.

Still, when Del Rey came to me with the proverbial Of-fer I Couldn't Refuse, it had been ten years since I'd as much as *looked* at the series, and I had a number of other very successful books, multivolume big books, and one or two series as well. Footnote: Publishers call all multivol-ume works "series," but actually only a couple of mine are. A series is an open-ended set of tales having in common a setting, a premise, or a set of characters. Anthony's Xanth is a series; so are King's Gunslinger saga, Zelazny's Amber, and, for that matter, Mark Twain's Sawyer and Finn books.

The multivolume novel is what happens to writers who like to write novels the size of *War and Peace* in an age of computerized budgets and mass market-publishing. The writer simply outlines a single, stand-alone novel as he would any other but then is informed that there are "price points" and that he has to cut to fit the prescribed maxi^mums or, frankly, production costs on the book will push it beyond its "price point" where there is more sales resis-tance than acceptance. So you split it in two, or three, or whatever.

Tolkien's Rings books are in fact both a series and a multivolume, or "serial," novel. *The Lord of the Rings* is a serial novel; its middle volume, in fact, ends on a classic cliff-hanger (worthy of Republic film serials of the thirties) with Sam shut out of the evil dungeon and in the land of the enemy, beating his fists

The night brought a stunning surprise. The ocean was alive with light; greens and blues and reds and yellows and all sorts of in-between shades were all over the place, forming patterns just beneath the surface and giving the whole sea an almost fairy-tale glow.

"Damn! Will you look at *that!*" Gus exclaimed at the un-ending parade of lights. "What do you suppose causes it? Could it be the lights of the people who live under the wa-ter here?"

"Unlikely," Brazil responded, fascinated himself by the beauty of it. "If it was coming from intelligent creatures, we'd see more movement in the patterns, and this is a semitech hex, so there wouldn't be any real power source. The water here is fairly deep, too, so it's not something pasted on or painted on bottom structures. That range of colors means they're not too deep. My guess would be some kind of marine life that forms large colonies that float or swim a few meters below the surface, but around here you can never take anything at face value."

"Terry seems to like it. It's the first really human reac-tion I've seen her have."

"She's probably analyzing its atomic structure or some-thing equally absurd," Brazil responded grumpily. "Where is she, anyway? I can't see much in the dark, even with the glow lighting things up."

"Right there by the side rail, on the left. Easy to spot her with this light show. You've *got* to be able to see her. No-body who can grow a new eyeball can have vision *that* bad."

"No, I— Oh, wait a minute! Hold on! Damn it! Son of a bitch!"

"What?"

"She's solved your damned trick! Now I can't see *either* of you!"

"You're kiddin'! 'Course, how would *I* be able to tell? So I can see her and she can see me, but you can't see nei-ther of us unless we're talkin' to you or in your face! Ain't *that* a kick in the head!"

"Yeah, for me," Brazil sighed. "And I'm the one that could use it best right about now! More than either of you, since I'm the target."

"Yeah, well, I can't do much about that, but at least you don't exactly fit the wanted poster no more. I mean, they're bound to have the both of you on it, right? They won't ex-pect you alone, particularly when she was clearly aboard when you stole this skiff."

"Yeah, but that won't mean much. She's just an identi-fier, like me having a beard or black hair. You can lose peo-ple all sorts of ways, but my description's pretty well fixed. Still, I wish I could really get through to her, make her un-derstand what we need and persuade her to go get it. You can carry more, but she can climb and get in and out of a lot of places that you can't."

"Tried just about every which way, huh?"

"Just about. The only thing I didn't try, and I'm not sure it would do anything or not, was to try and connect on her level, body to body, mind to mind."

"Jeez! You can *do* that?"

"Of course not. But I have a suspicion that *she* could, if the will to do it was within me and if I could put myself into a trancelike state where I would not resist."

"I don't think *I* could do that."

"Yeah, well, I had some practice with such things while I was in the Orient. In a way, the state she's in and the power she has are very reminiscent of the goals of various schools of Eastern mysticism. Thing is, what I've seen or-dinary Earth humans do with their minds once they were in a mental state totally removed from the material world awed and scared even me. I think, maybe, deep down it's everybody's inheritance from the folks who built all this. The potential is there, anyway, to some degree."

"Well, why didn't you try that, then?"

He gave a wry smile. "For the same reason I stopped short in the lamasery. Because I'm not so sure if I entered that mental realm that I could get back any more than she can. What if whatever force that has this metaphysical, mental, symbiotic relationship with her were to get that same degree of control inside me? With that kind of power and lack of dependence on most things physical, I could make it to the Well easily. The question is, what sort of mind would I be bringing into it? Could I shake it off when I had to, or would I be bringing a force I don't understand into direct contact and connection with the Well and all its powers?"

"You think this thing is evil, then?"

"Not in the absolute sense, no. It would be evil to some, good to others, I think. But it, itself, is, I think, beyond that sort of definition in the same way that the Markovians, the founding race, were beyond it. I don't know, Gus, but I would have to be in a very desperate situation before I could open myself up to that kind of threat."

"I think I might take the chance at some point if I thought I might be able to become one of them good guys myself. I could stand a billion years before gettin' bored."

"Well, I don't know. I don't know if I would want that or not. God knows I've thought about it enough. And it might not be the kind of godhood anybody would want, anyway." He chuckled. "Besides, I've spent half an eternity as a crook, con man, scoundrel, rogue, and pirate. To be able to do anything you wanted or have anything you wanted by wishing for it would take all the fun out of life. And you've got to ask yourself, What would the Glathrielians want to do? And what would a race of mystics that has sworn off all material desires want, anyway?"

"Urn, yeah. I see your point."

They were silent for a while as the wind picked up and they began making some speed again. Off to the west the sky began a dramatic display of lightning, but it was still far enough away that they couldn't hear the thunder.

"Gus?"

"Yeah, Cap? I'm still here, watchin' the fireworks."

"Don't worry about that. It's not heading toward us. I've been looking at the lights, though, and I think maybe I was wrong. I think those *are* some kind of intelligent lighting system. The patterns . . . Well, don't they remind you of something? A bit more color, but don't they kind of look like what a great city might look like when you're passing over it two kilometers high in an aircraft?"

"Yeah! Now that you say it, I do see that. I'll be damned! I *thought* there was somethin' familiar about 'em. But I thought you said this was deep water."

"It is. The first impression, I think, is an optical illusion based partly on the knowledge that this is a semitech hex and they can't have an elaborate electrical grid, even water-insulated somehow."

"Yeah, so?"

"It's the fact that they live so very deep that gives us this overall impression and view. They *do* have some kind of light source, probably organic, arising from chemical means. They've lit their city, their civilization, their little world with it. And to them, we're doing exactly what the vista suggests—we're 'flying,' as it were, on the very top of their atmosphere, looking down. Now *that*, to me, is im-pressive."

"Yeah." Gus breathed deeply and continued to look at the vast rippling field of lights. He wondered what the peo-ple were like down there and whether this was a city asleep or a city alive at night, bustling with traffic and commerce and all the things a great city might offer.

There was lightning all around after a while, and some distant claps of thunder could be heard rolling hollowly over the waves. Slowly, too, the vast undersea city, if that indeed was what it was, began to trail off, the lights becom-ing fewer, and great dark patches began appearing. Still, a few lines of light continued on almost beneath their ship, as if they were lonely highways stretching out from the me-tropolis to others far distant.

Suddenly Gus realized that this was exactly what they were or at least what Brazil thought they were, and in fact their ship was following the broadest twin line of lights just as an airline pilot might follow a great road.

"It's going where we're going," Brazil assured him. "It's too bad it's so damned hot here that we get all these night storms. Otherwise this would be a dream stretch of ocean to navigate by eye alone. All you'd need would be a gen-eral destination or maybe a road map."

The captain had finally shed the last of his persona] dig-nity in reaction to the steam bath heat. His clothes were designed for a cold climate, and Dlubine was anything but that. He was a little, bony sort of guy, Gus noted, although quite hairy, and it was easy to see why he'd be a hit with the women even though the rest of him was small.

Brazil himself would have preferred at least a pair of briefs, even though he was the only Earth-human male in a vast stretch of the world and the only Earth-human female around had seen him like this many times and indeed seemed to prefer him this way. It was just part of his na-ture. He had not, however, ever found any nonhuman on the Well World who could get the crotch right.

Yet, it felt better, even if he *was* still sweating like a pig.

"Lights ahead. On—maybe above—the surface," Gus warned suddenly.

Brazil nodded. "I see them. That looks to be a lighthouse to the left, and the lanterns just right of dead ahead—see? Two on the right side, one on the left—they're channel markers. Being northbound, I've got to lay just inside the double lights to remain both in the channel and in the lane."

"Must be coming in to that island, then. Can't see nothin', though."

"You can interpolate it, Gus. Look at the underground highway. The main drag continues right along the markers, but another goes off in a Y to the left, toward the light. I'll probably swing wide before it gets

there, though, since the lighthouse is almost certainly marking reefs or shoals."

"You gonna take a chance on the harbor?"

"I don't know. I'm going to follow the markers around to it, that's for sure, and we'll take a look at it. If it's wide and deep enough, we might just slip in, do what we have to do, and slip out before morning. If it's small, active, and threatening, I might just do a go-round and see if we can find some kind of temporary anchorage well away from it. I'm going to get in, since the only thing I would like less than climbing over volcanic rocks in pitch darkness is climbing over them when they're hot enough to fry eggs."

The mountain itself, the top of which was the island, could not be seen in the darkness, only inferred, but the channel markers above and the glowing road below made it a simple matter to avoid any nastiness and move slowly around the mass toward the harbor area. Brazil couldn't help thinking, but didn't say, that it would also be simple defense by the Dlubinians to shift that road, extinguish a marker lantern or two, and pile everybody up nicely on the rocks he could hear the water slapping against all around the boat.

Damn it, though, he wished he had a cigar to calm his nerves.

"There it is!" Gus shouted. "Pretty damned small-looking, if you ask me."

"Well, the locals don't breathe air, so they've got little use for the place except as a trading center, and anybody hired to run the place would prefer it nice and compact and manageable, I'd think," the captain replied. "It's probably run by some international outfit. There's bound to be sev-eral offering services like this. Hard to say who or what might be running it, let alone what's in there."

"I make seven . . . no, eight ships, all pretty much like ours," Gus noted. "And one medium-sized thing with a smokestack parked off by itself over there."

Brazil nodded. "That's the one to worry about. Those are the cops, Gus. I'm giving the entrance a pass."

"Cops? Here? Whose?"

"Just like the trading companies and maintenance com-panies. All the hexes that have some concern with the sea or coastal security get together and maintain a multinational force run by a professional, multiracial naval authority. They didn't have anything like that the last time I was here, but I got an earful about them back in Hakazit. They've got a mean reputation. Discipline's about as ugly as a navy gets, but each crew gets a percentage of any seized contra-band or reward money. You can get rich at it if you're good, and since it's an all-or-nothing share for the whole crew, if you're not good, you're history, anyway. We can't totally avoid them, but I'd just as soon not tangle with them or answer any nasty questions. You *can* challenge them if they're wrong, but we're a long way from a Zone court here—not that I would particularly want to see what a Zone court was, either, right about now."

Gus nodded, watching as they passed the harbor entrance and continued on past the island. "I see. But you said they only had volunteers from coastal hexes and those doing trade with the water hexes."

"So I was told."

"Then there ain't likely to be no Dahirs among 'em, and in *this* hex there's also not likely to be any automatic sur-veillance cameras or electric eyes, right?"

"I see what you mean. No, I'd expect you'd be invisible to them, since they wouldn't have much call to counter crooked Dahirs around here. Don't take them or the locals for stupid or ignorant types, though. You can trip a wire or any one of a thousand other traps that don't require any high-tech stuff and be just as caught. I'm also not so sure you're going to do any better over this terrain in the dark than I would."

"I wasn't thinkin' of that. I was thinkin' it wouldn't be much of a problem to swim *this* distance. Even if you an-chor on the other side of the island, it's only gonna be a mile or so back, right? I figure I could manage a fair-sized sack and a keg or two for that distance, and I know what you two can eat and drink, havin' had some experience along them lines myself. As for findin' my way, hell, even I can follow these lights."

"You sure you're up to this?" Brazil pressed. "I have to tell you I'd rather not go in there at all if I don't have to, but it could be tricky."

"Jeez! This is a piece of cake! I mean, I got along in Hakazit for *weeks*, and they got all that electronic shit. Of course, I'm pretty fair with that kind of stuff myself, but I never saw cameras like they had or as tiny as they used, and I still never got tripped up. Man, I remember one time we was in the Congo when this riot broke out and turned into a kinda little revolution. They were shootin' anything that moved and had all the exits blocked. Me and Terry, we—"

He stopped a moment, suddenly struck once again by what Terry had become, and Brazil, realizing it, didn't press.

Finally Gus continued, but his tone was more distant, al-most sad. "We . . . well, we not only got out of there, we got out with the *pictures*. She told me we had to get the story out and sent me back with it. She insisted on staying to report the end of it. I spent four days in that muddy, crocodile-infested river in a cross

between a too-old row-boat and a raft, dodgin' crocs and patrols. But I made it. *She* wasn't so lucky that time."

Brazil was curious now both for the story's own sake and for his own information about the girl and what she'd been like. "What happened, Gus?"

"She never said for sure, but she was a mess. I think they caught her and raped the shit out of her, the bastards. I'm not even sure they knew she wasn't just one of the lo-cals or cared. And yet she *still* managed to get out, somehow, in a few days. Spent ten weeks in and out of hospitals and all. You know what was really weird about what hap-pened?"

"No, Gus."

"When she come back, she still volunteered for the same nasty jobs, and she *meant* it. It didn't even slow her down. It was almost like, well, she'd survived the worst that could happen, and if anything, she seemed to have less fear than she had had before, which wasn't much. That Campos guy I mentioned, the gangster who come to the meteor site with us? *He* tried to get in her, too. I ain't ever been sure, but I think your old girlfriend did him a favor. He'da got away with it then, more or less, but some way or another she'da killed him—*after* we had the story and after the rest of the crew was safe. If Campos turns up somewhere here, no matter if he's a poisonous spider twenty feet tall, if she re-alizes that it's him and there's any of her old self left inside there, I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for his survival."

Brazil didn't say anything for a moment but finally man-aged, "Okay, Gus. You've convinced me. You see that set of markers there? That's an inlet, a sheltered cove. It's marked so a ship that might not be able to make it into the harbor can get some protection in bad weather. Ten to one it's surrounded by sheer cliffs, but we don't need to walk if you can get there by sea. I don't see any lights in there, and I didn't expect any with the weather okay—no reason not to make the harbor—so I'm going to lower sail and an-chor inside there. *Then* you can go for a swim."

"Suits me."

The craft followed the small oil lanterns into the cove, and they were suddenly aware of high rock walls not just ahead but on both sides of the ship. It was a narrow chan-nel, and it ended in a marked area that was all red-colored little lights.

"Who lights these and turns 'em off?" Gus asked wor-riedly, pointing to all the small marker lanterns around them.

Brazil was grunting and busily maneuvering several ways at once, hitting levers and turning small deck winches, but

when he at last let go of the anchor and felt the ship lurch, then drift a bit to one side and stop, he relaxed.

"To answer your question," he said at last, "if you look closely, you'll see that they aren't oil lamps but gas. Semi-tech. With the volcano, they probably have some tap on a flammable gas supply, either natural or in a tank. They'll check them in some kind of routine, but only for mainte-nance. I wouldn't worry about anybody showing up at dawn to put them out, if that's what you mean."

"Yeah, that was what I was thinkin'." Gus sighed, a sound that was more like a soft, hollow roar. "Okay, I guess I'm ready. Anything waterproof that's likely to float that maybe I can use as a stash?"

"Yeah, here in the boat locker. This thing's got a pretty large emergency kit inside it, but if we take it out, it should give you plenty of room for what we need, and it's de-signed to be both floatable and waterproof at these seals. I won't worry about the beer supply, but we need food. Trust to the grains and veggies. They're pretty well universal among warm-blooded mammals, while meats are, well, questionable at best. Besides, she won't eat meat. She'll starve first."

"Okeydokey. Look, you may as well get some sleep while I'm gone. If anybody else comes in here, you're a sittin' duck before you can weigh anchor, turn around, and get out that narrow passage anyway, and if they take you, they'll probably bring you by the harbor, so I'll have a chance to spring you. Besides, no matter what else she is these days, I get the idea that Terry's one hell of a guard dog."

"You got that right," Brazil agreed. "Good luck!"

"Yeah, I'll do my best, like always," Gus responded, and tossed the emergency case into the water, then slid over-board himself.

Nathan Brazil sighed and sat down on the makeshift bed of spare sailcloth he'd set up for himself. He was too tired, too tense, and too worried to sleep even though he knew he was exhausted.

One of the storms was growing near, and while it didn't bother him in this sheltered area and was still distant in any event, the lightning lit up the sky and played against the rock walls, revealing the shelter in intermittent bursts of re-flected light.

It was an eerie landscape, as all volcanic areas tended to be, with no discernible vegetation. The outer rock wall, the eroded remnants of some great eruption, was at least ten meters high, almost sheer on this

side but terminating in a series of jagged spires almost like the teeth of some gigan-tic beast.

He was actually comforted by the wall. It was taller than the mainmast, and thus it meant that he was virtually invis-ible to any ship passing via the channel outside as well as extremely well protected against any violent blow.

The rest of the area was much like a bowl, perhaps a hundred meters across, ending in sheer dark brown or black rock cliffs that seemed to go up forever. Here and there all along the sheer rock walls, though, were cracks and holes from which spewed steam and other gases, showing that this was still a very active place.

When it was dark between the lightning flashes, only the sky straight overhead showed, revealing the whole upper part of the fog- and mist-shrouded mountain. It helped re-flect the lightning better, but it gave the distinct impression that one was in a room with a roof on it.

He felt a little better about the trip now that he had Gus, even if he couldn't see him half the time. At least, finally, there was somebody to *talk* to! Somebody who could speak with a frame of reference comfortable for both of them.

But, too, it was somebody else, somebody extra on the team, and in other ways he felt the Dahir a burden despite all that he was doing tonight. Maybe it was the girl, he thought. From knowing very little about her, he now knew quite a bit, perhaps more than she would have told him had she been able to do so. As much as he'd wanted, *needed* to know all that, he wasn't at all sure he liked knowing it. It was nothing about her; all the information Gus had pro-vided had shown her to be more of a strong, gutsy woman than he'd have thought. It was rather that she was becom-ing, well, distinct in his mind. Now that he knew about her past, she seemed even more a tragic figure, a real person, not a cipher, and in a crazy way ciphers were often more comfortable to live with.

He wondered if he wasn't also a little jealous of Gus. That was funny in a way—having a two-and-a-half-meter-long snakelike creature as a rival. But Gus had earned her respect and devotion, as she had earned his. Even if they weren't lovers, there was definitely a kind of relationship there that he could not have even now and never could have, or *dared* have, with anyone else. That was what he envied.

And suddenly she was with him, kneeling down, then ly-ing beside him, stroking him gently, as if she knew and un-derstood what he was feeling.

Maybe she did, at least on that empathic level. Maybe more. *That* much he wished he knew.

Gently, he returned her affection and then embraced her and held her to him, as if trying to capture this one brief moment—just the two of them, with no other problems and no other questions, reaching together for the one thing which he wanted most and which had always been denied him because life was so short for everybody else, every-body but him.

The emotions then were real, not induced, not manufac-tured or manipulated, and not just on his part but on hers as well. The energy field inside her grew bright and envel-oped them both, probing deep inside him and through every part of his being. He did not resist.

And when it hit his core, his soul, his true self, a center so strange, so alien that there were no terms of reference for it anywhere, it recoiled, unable to deal with it, power-less to go that last bit and totally absorb him.

Finally Nathan Brazil slept, a deep, intensely pleasurable sleep, the kind of sleep he needed most and rarely if ever could afford.

Gekir

the changes in julian were both subtle and dramatic, but Lori, whose high fever had been the precipitator of those changes, wasn't at all certain he liked it. One thing was clear: while she was as smart and capable as she ever had been, Julian seemed to have lost much of her past life, even though she knew that it had existed. It would probably take about ten seconds for an Earth psychiatrist to come up with a term to cover it, but to Lori it just didn't seem *nor-mal*. Not for Julian, anyway. It was as if something was missing from her, some fire or intellect that wasn't really noticed and certainly not appreciated until it was no longer there.

Lori was feeling a great deal better. The inflammation in the wrist was down, although for a while it meant that the damned thing hurt *more* as it was no longer quite so rigidly bound, but his leg seemed

completely normal. He tested it out, even ran on it for a short distance, and aside from a little stiffness it was fine. At least *one* thing was going his way, he decided.

Julian was in far worse shape. She was wan, worn out, and badly dehydrated. They put her, only half-awake, on Tony's back, tied her with the strap that had held Lori, packed up the rest of the camp, and started off toward the thick grove of tall trees about one and a half kilometers away.

There was no sign of the flying monster that had carried off the young "jackalope," as Lori had dubbed them, after a whimsical creature of the American Southwest. But it might well have a nest or den in the grove or be still feeding there, so Mavra broke out the crossbows, handing one to Tony and keeping one for herself. Anne Marie quickly but expertly assembled an obviously handmade, customized bow of great size and exotic design and removed a quiver of professionally manufactured but oversized steel-tipped arrows.

"Archery was one of the few varieties of sport a weak little woman could manage just for fun from a wheelchair," she explained, "and of course the classical favorite of centaurs from time immemorial. It *is*, too, even though the authorities have guns for serious sorts of things. *This* is the hunter's weapon of choice, though, even in Dillia. I'm afraid I'm still not very good at it, though. I have the eye and hold just fine, but I just can't get used to having this much *strength*."

Tony examined the crossbow. "Rather odd design, although I'm no expert on these things."

"You aim it just like a rifle," Mavra told him. "Align the rear notch with the front sight."

"No, no. The use is obvious. I meant this chamber in the rear behind the bolt. I'd almost swear it was for bullets."

Mavra chuckled. "Not bullets. Small compressed-gas canisters. When you pull the trigger, it works in the normal way, but if you have one of these little things in there, it gives a tremendous extra shove to the bolt, and a bit of a twist, at virtually no cost in weight or balance. Use it normally for defense; use the canister if you want to be sure you kill whatever you're firing at. It'll drill a hole through a tree thicker than your middle."

"Not very sporting."

"No, but it's damned effective even against somebody who thinks crossbows are no real threat."

Tony looked down at her. "I see that you are inserting one, but I have none."

"Double insurance. You make the first shot. If need be, I'll make the last one."

"Fair enough," the centaress agreed. "Still, it is almost disappointing somehow that even the crossbow should be turned into something so devastating."

Anne Marie nodded. "Doesn't seem *sporting* somehow," she agreed.

"When it's a sport, you're playing a game," Mavra responded. "On this sort of expedition I don't play games." She turned to Lori. "Can you scan that grove in the infra-red?"

He nodded. "I've been doing it. Lots of little stuff, nothing major. It looks normal to me. I smell water, though. Possibly a *big* watering hole. If it is, that means we can expect most anything and everything around it."

Mavra nodded back. "I know. I haven't lost three hundred years of knowledge and experience in wild terrains," she reminded him.

"Yeah." The fact was, however, that the woman beside him was so different in so many ways from even the image of the savage jungle goddess of the Amazon that he had to remind himself that it was the same person. The conversation and the sophistication were large differences, of course, but it was also other factors not so easily nailed down. She had been so dominating, so commanding back on Earth, she'd seemed far larger than her size; now she was such a very tiny creature, he had to crane his neck just to see her. Even her form no longer seemed normal and familiar somehow but rather, well, *alien*. More alien than the Dillians, whose equine parts were more like the Erdomese and whose rears seemed, well, *sexy*.

Sexier than their torsos, in fact.

He began to wonder if what had changed in Julian was changing in him, too. Wouldn't *that* please the priests! But he had no desire to forget his former life and hoped that he could remember some of the lessons from it, as distant as they now seemed to him. Still, it was *Julian* who looked normal and pretty and sexy to him, as did his own reflection. Maybe it was crazy, but he realized that somehow, at some point, his own definition of "human" had flipped. He and Julian were "human"; the twins were, well, not human but kind of distant relatives. Mavra was not human. She was something else.

The grove was large and not at all like an Erdomese oasis, no matter what its geologic and ecological similarities. The foliage was far denser than it had looked from afar and heavy with life. There were hordes of brightly colored and cleverly camouflaged insects and insectlike creatures here, more, it seemed, than in the Itun jungle. Small animals were in the trees as well, some screeching or chattering at them and others

just staring, often with huge eyes. There were things like birds, too, in that they had wings and flew, but they were more reptilian than avian, with often brightly colored but leathery skin and beaklike snouts. Even the small, pretty ones looked mean.

The group intersected a wide, well-worn trail that came in from the south, one that was adequate not just for the creatures they'd seen on the plains but for the two Dillians to walk side by side if they wanted to.

"Someone cut this wider," Tony noted, pointing a long finger at a lopped-off tree branch and to other obviously cut limbs and bushes elsewhere.

"Yeah, but why this wide?" Lori wondered. "I've got too many weird scents here to decide what might be odd, but I've sure not seen anything *this* big so far."

"Well, whatever it is, it's *very* large indeed," Anne Marie noted, gesturing toward the ground. "Those are not the droppings of a chipmunk, dog, horse, or anything else so tiny."

"Holy shit!" Mavra exclaimed, not realizing she'd made something of a joke. "I haven't seen turds that size since . . ."

Since where?

Lori stared at the droppings. "Since perhaps some sort of zoo or preserve? Or maybe a circus? Those look like elephant turds to me."

Mavra nodded. "That's it! But not a zoo or preserve or a circus, no. I saw them with soldiers on top of them in both military parades and in fierce battles."

"They're not that fresh—thank goodness," Anne Marie commented.

"And the cuttings aren't recent. Maybe a week or so old, maybe more," Tony added.

Lori looked over and down at Mavra. "Could the locals here be elephantlike? I mean, like Dillians are horselike and so on?"

"There are a couple that I know of who might qualify in that area," Mavra replied, "but none who'd mess up their own trail like that. You have to remember that we're talking intelligent races here. Out in the wild, thinking beings crap off their roads, not all over them. On the other hand, intelligent races ride elephants and use them as work animals as well. And if you ride in on something like that, there's *nothing* in this grove that's gonna argue with you, is there?"

"*We're* not atop elephants," Tony reminded them. "And there is the watering hole. The watering hole and something very much more."

It was indeed. The "hole" was a large pool or basin perhaps fifty meters across. It seemed natural, and the continuous rippling on the surface suggested that it was fed by an underground stream. Someone, however, had taken the natural pool and carved and shaped it until it was an egg-shaped oval with a two-meter-thick lip of mortared stones around it on all but its back side. That ended in a curved wall, with stairs of stone that went up on both sides to a flat stone platform above the pool. In back of it was a cone-shaped structure that seemed twisted, creating a spiral to its point.

The building, stairs, wall, and pool itself were partly overgrown with vines and creepers. A number of creatures from both the jungle grove and the vast plains were moving about the whole area. Still, it didn't seem like a ruin but rather like a place that was only seldom used but was still carefully kept intact.

"Temple?" Tony guessed.

"Maybe. Who knows?" Mavra replied. "Considering that there's something that looks a lot like a boa constrictor covered with peacock feathers and with a mouth showing more teeth than a shark snoozing on that platform, though, I don't think I'm curious enough to find out."

"I thought you were immortal," Lori noted a bit sarcastically.

"I wouldn't die, but I'd hate to waste months growing a new pair of legs."

The current rulers of the pool were two dozen small creatures whose appearance was unsettling. The largest male was only a meter high, and they all looked to be a sort of tailless ape, with thinly spread, soft, downlike hair covering their bodies except the chests, rear ends, and parts of the faces. They walked stooped over but were definitely bipeds, and for all their smallness and crudeness they looked very, very much like humans, even to the long hair on the heads. But there was just enough of the ape in their features to make them seem slightly more of an anthropological speculator's exhibit than small humans.

When the apes spotted the travelers, they didn't immediately run. Instead, the females let out loud, humanlike screams that panicked all the flying things and many of the smaller land creatures as well; the males stared at them, bared their teeth, and growled menacingly.

"Good heavens! They're Lucy's cousins!" Anne Marie exclaimed.

"Lucy?" Mavra asked.

"Doctor Leakey's fossils from Kenya. The spitting image! Claimed they were some sort of ancestor of Earth humans or some such rot."

Lori, in spite of his feelings of alienation from the race of his birth, nonetheless had that primal feeling inside and didn't much like it. "My lord! You don't suppose . . . ?"

"Prototypes or more idea stealing by the makers," Mavra reassured him, although she didn't like how familiar they looked, either. "Odd, though. The mammals we've seen are all six-limbed. They're bipeds. They don't seem to fit in here at all."

"Well, I don't care about mysteries, but some of those creatures best left sleeping are awake now. Whatever these tilings are, they don't want to move away for us."

"Oh, *pooh*!" Anne Marie said, and with barely a glance, both she and Tony reared up on hind legs, then kicked off and charged right toward the little apelike creatures.

They could see the panic in the creatures' eyes. A couple of the males gave hysterical gasps, then they all ran back into the jungle and vanished as if they'd never been there.

The centaurs pulled up, turned, and looked back at the other three.

"Poor little things!" Anne Marie commented. "I do hope we didn't scare them all *that* badly." There was a trace of a smile on her lips, though, and she added, "That was rather fun, though, I do admit."

They moved in, Lori and Mavra well aware that the feathered snake with the hundreds of teeth was now awake and looking at them from the top of the balcony platform, although it showed no intention of moving from its spot.

Even Julian was awake, looking weak and pale. Tony had forgotten that she was strapped down on her back when they'd reared and charged. Now the centaur's look changed from playful triumph to embarrassment, and Anne Marie quickly rushed over and untied the Erdomese.

"Oh, my dear! We're *so* sorry! Are you all right?" Anne Marie asked in English.

Julian stared back blankly, and Lori ran over to her. "Are you all right? *Julian!* Can you hear me?"

"Yes, my husband," she answered rather weakly and a bit uncertainly. "I—I think so. But I am so thirsty and weak . . ."

She seemed as good as she'd been, anyway. "Come, we'll get you down. When you didn't answer Anne Marie, I got very worried."

"I am gladdened that you were concerned, but I did not answer because I did not understand the speech."

Tony frowned and looked up at Anne Marie. "You *did* ask in English, didn't you? With the translator it's hard to tell."

"Oh, of course. I'd never expect any of you to speak *Dillian*."

Lori steadied Julian and asked. "Do you understand her now?"

Julian looked blank. "I know nothing but Erdoma. Why should I understand the speech of an alien?"

Mavra looked up at Lori. "You better get her a fill-up. I think you bled her dry last night."

The water in the pool seemed remarkably clear and appeared safe. Mavra risked a left little finger and decided that it felt just like lukewarm water. Still, she got out a small test tube device from the pack, added some powder, then stooped and carefully let the tube fill with water. After she brought it up and looked at it, all the powder stayed on the bottom and the water remained clear.

"Unless I miss my guess, it's plain fresh water," she told them. "Actually, it's cleaner than it should be, all things considered. I don't think anybody should get in it, but we'll fill the canteens and Julian can drink all she wants."

"Fair enough," replied Lori, still concerned about Julian's dazed mental state. They began filling canteens and handing them to the Erdomese woman, who drank them down as if she'd been in the desert for months without a drop. The amount of water she finally consumed, particularly considering her size, was nothing short of astonishing. Each canteen held a little over a liter, and she easily and quickly downed a dozen or more canteens full of water before pausing, and she wasn't through. Even with the Dillians guarding, Mavra kept checking the surroundings for anything dangerous and soon lost count of just how much water Julian finally took in.

When she was finally, truly done, she looked quite different. The color was slowly coming back into her, and as the sacs in front of and just below her rib cage filled, they actually stretched the skin, pushing out the breasts and making them appear inflated and giving her the appearance of being slightly overweight. She was, too, Mavra thought. At the very least, she'd taken in fifteen to twenty liters of water, enough to add quite a bit of weight. Idly, the lone Earth human wondered if the Erdomese would slosh when she walked.

"I am much better, husband. Now you, too, should drink, for what you drew from me was not used in ordinary ways and the fever must have drained you."

Lori had passed a lot of particularly smelly and discolored urine already, but he knew what she meant. While by no means in the kind of shape Julian had been, he *did* feel a real thirst. On the other hand, he

couldn't down more than five canteens full, and that was about as much as he'd ever taken in or needed.

While the others took turns, Julian asked him to sit so that she could clean off some of the muck still on him from falling in the muddy ditch when jumping from the train days earlier. Using her hands opened as fully as they could get, she began methodically rubbing and then brushing away the dried mud as if it were something she did all the time.

Since she seemed so much better, Lori asked her, "Jul-ian, can you understand any of what the Dillians say? Have you remembered English?"

"I cannot understand their speech, my husband, if that is what you mean. I know only Erdoma. I do not know what the last word you spoke means, so I cannot answer that."

He lay down so she could work on his side and front, and this allowed him to see her face. "Have you lost all memory of the past?" *This is crazy*, he thought. *If anything, it's me who should be having memory problems after a fe-ver like that.*

She shook her head. "I remember only that I was pos-sessed of an evil spirit and that now that spirit has fled with your sickness. It would please me if you would give me an-other name, one of your choosing."

"But I *like* your name. I'm used to it."

"It is the name of the spirit, not me. It makes me feel bad, and I cannot even pronounce it as you do. *Please*, I beg you to use the name chosen at our wedding or any other that pleases you."

He didn't like this change one bit. Not any of it. Even if, damn it, it was the fantasy he'd had since they'd left Aqomb. Now that he had it, he didn't like it at all. She was too much like she'd been when they'd both been under the influence of that hypnotic drug. Too much like, well, all the other young Erdomese women. Still, it wasn't something he could do much about right now.

It was true that the "ju" sound was not in the Erdomese language, or anything else that might in English be pro-nounced with the "J" sound. Her Erdomese name, Alowi, had been given by the priest at the wedding at least partly for that reason, but they'd never used it except during the post-therapy sessions while under the drug. Ironically, al-though it wasn't a traditional Erdomese name, "Lori" had been just fine with the priests.

"Very well. For now I will use Alowi," he told her, and she seemed very pleased.

Cleaned and combed, he did feel better and certainly looked better. By this time they were packing up, and he told Julian—*Alowi*—to help but got Mavra aside for a mo-ment.

"You know anything about this change in her?" he asked.

"A little," Mavra replied. "It's not something *I* can un-derstand, and I never thought somebody with her back-ground would succumb, but you can't tell about people sometimes. Basically, Julian Beard's been fighting with the Erdomese body, feelings, customs, and conditioning, and the old personality has been more or less dominant, even when the Erdomese self occasionally peeked through. Last night, in a place alien to both sides, the only person she cared about and really needed in this world was dying, and Julian Beard couldn't save him with all the accumulated knowledge and skill of a lifetime. Beard had to face not only helplessness but repressed feelings and emotions to-ward you that the Alowi part, the native part supplied by the Well and conditioned by her new body and situation, wanted so much to express. Beard needed you for any chance of survival or reasonable happiness in this life, but only Alowi had both the knowledge and the additional mo-tivation that could save you. Unlike Tony or you, who sur-rendered on your own terms, Beard could not. It just wasn't in him not to fight. When the crisis came and he wasn't able to deal with it, something gave, and that was Julian Beard."

"But that's crazy! They're one and the same! Just as I am. It's true that I'm different; I've changed radically since being here, sometimes in directions I don't like, and I'm still trying for a balance, but it's nothing I can't handle."

"As a woman, did you ever find another woman sexually attractive? Did you ever fantasize about what it would be like to be a man?"

"Well, yeah, sure, but . . ."

"I will bet you that Julian never found another man sex-ually attractive, at least not consciously, and his fantasies were *about* women, not about being a woman. He could take tremendous stress, great pressure, and still accomplish anything he set out to do. But those same traits created an enormous ego, I think, that had a single and absolutist view of itself. What the Well did to him was, to him, so extreme that finding himself a female, she had to be locked up and drugged just to keep her from suicide. You said as much. When you came along, he tried to compromise with his fe-male self, but all that did was shift her from one extreme to the other. On this trip the male side felt in charge again, but last night the crisis was just too much. To help you, she had to put everything out of her mind that was from her male half, both attitudes and experience, and let Alowi completely take over. When that happened, all that re-pressed emotion just gushed out, suddenly no longer under restraint. Alowi then saved you by doing something Julian could never

do—by *not thinking*. By just letting that Erdomese instinct take control and never doubting if it was right or wrong. She didn't work so fanatically because she needed you, not in the sense Julian had. She did it because she loves you, and being in love with a man wasn't some-thing that Julian Beard could handle. When you push something that can't bend with a lot of force, it breaks."

"You sound like a pop psychologist," Lori noted, but wondered if she wasn't pretty well on the mark.

"I don't know exactly what a 'pop' psychologist is, but I think I understand your meaning. Yes, it's guesswork based on very long experience rather than on being a pro-fessional specialist in the mind, and it may not be stated in proper scientific terms, but I've had to read and guess right on all types of people to get anywhere at all. And you will have to trust me that I know what rigid egos can do to peo-ple."

"But—what do I do? Is Julian gone for good?"

"You live with it, that's all. All that knowledge and ex-perience is still there someplace; it's just been sealed off in the same way the person she is now was pretty well sealed off. It might not come back at all, it might partly come back if absolutely needed, or it might creep back and merge with the current personality. Only time will tell. In the meantime it's causing some trouble for all of us."

"Huh? How is it a problem for *you*?"

"Since she doesn't remember English, she can't speak to or understand the Dillians. That could be a real pain in a tight situation. Damn! I *knew* I should have sprung for the translator!"

Lori felt a double pang of guilt at the comment but said, "Well, she can still get one somewhere, can't she?"

"I think she'd fight having one now. It doesn't fit with the new personality she's trying to build and lock in."

"I think she'd do it for me," Lori told her.

"She might," Mavra agreed, "but the knowledge of En-GLISH is still in her mind somewhere, too. These mental things are tricky. A translator is a neat little device that's tuned to a part of the Well and translates speech, then feeds it back to the brain. Since the Well is everywhere, it seems instantaneous to us. But if her mental state won't allow her to accept the translation, won't transfer language except in Erdomese, the gadget is as useless as a computer would be to a Stone Age hunter. Data have to be processed, and if the mind refuses, well, it doesn't matter whether you get the data or not."

"Thanks a lot. One more thing to worry about."

Mavra turned sharply toward the wide road leading to the pool and picked up her crossbow. "We have something more pressing to worry about all of a sudden."

They could all hear it and even feel it. Something large—no, *huge*—was coming up that road with enough weight to shake the ground and once again panic all the surrounding wildlife.

"We could retreat into the jungle!" Tony called.

"All right! Move back and take cover if you can!" Mavra shouted, but Lori shook his head and said rather softly, "Too late."

Into the area strode a monstrous creature, in many ways the largest elephant any of them had ever seen, yet not an elephant, either. For one thing, it was covered in thick red-dish brown fur from its small tail to its massive head, hang-ing down like some impossible fur coat. It moved very slowly on six tree-trunk-sized feet; the creature was proba-bly unable to run or move at all quickly, but something that huge was an irresistible force that never needed to move quickly. Even its trunk was hairy, and on either side of the mouth, which was small only in relative terms, grew two very large, cream white, and dangerous-looking ivory tusks.

And riding just behind the massive head was a large or-ange and black catlike creature with a large, fierce head sporting protruding fangs, and a lower jaw and a mouth that was remarkably expressive, almost humanlike. The cat creature, too, was six-limbed, but the forward pair of arms, while fur-covered like the legs, clearly ended in some sort of hands, one of which held an ornate batonlike object. It also wore a sash that was equally ornate, from which hung a scabbard with an ornately carved ivory hilt that ob-viously led to a very large sword.

The cat creature tapped gently on its mount's head, and the beast trumpeted loudly enough to wake the dead. It was clear that the pair was leading at least a small procession, and the sight of the strangers at the pool had signaled a halt.

"Who be ye and why d' ye bear arms against the Gekir in the shadow of Basquah?" the cat challenged, the transla-tion faithfully reproducing the archaic speech pattern. The voice was deep and seemed to have an underlying menac-ing growl, but it was also unmistakably female.

"Don't do anything!" Mavra cautioned Lori and particu-larly the Dillians, who were hearing only very threatening animal noises and had their arms at the ready. "She's just asking who the hell we are and why we're here!" It was, after all, a proper question.

They had finally encountered the Gekir.

Mavra lowered her crossbow but kept the bolt ready to go. With the gas propellant loaded, she was certain it would drill even through the mammoth, although whether that would do more than annoy it was impossible to know.

"The bipeds are called Lori of Alkhaz and his wife, Lori-Alowi, of far-off Erdom," she announced. "The other two are from even more distant Dillia and are the sisters called Tony and Anne Marie Guzman. I am Mavra Chang of Glathriel. We mean neither harm nor disrespect and have not entered your building. We are travelers forced by cir-cumstance, not plan, into your nation, and we are here only to replenish our water supplies and move on."

The Gekir, whose feline face was so expressive and rub-bery, frowned and cocked her head, looking them all over. "I be Shestah Quom Daahd, elected chief of the Quobok Knights. Put thy weapons away and stand ye all by the far side of yon pool that we may enter."

It wasn't a request; it was an order. Mavra turned and told the others to move where instructed. Right now it was better to try to make friends with these people than to start a fight.

As soon as they were away from the main area, the chief of the Quobok Knights moved her huge mount in and was quickly joined by four others, filling the area rather handily. The leader's mount carried only the chief and an elabo-rate chest secured with straps. The next three, however, car-ried perhaps four or five Gekirs each, riding on top and in two basketlike carriers hanging down on either side of the animals. Another lone occupant sat atop the last beast, along with an enormous hutlike container that clearly car-ried all their supplies.

"Why does she sound like Long John Silver in drag?" Lori muttered.

Mavra frowned. "Who? Oh, you mean the archaic speech. You can get that and much worse when you're translating a language that's very different from yours. When you meet a race that clearly cannot form our sounds, particularly in a nontech hex, and it still sounds exactly right, watch out. That means the translator isn't translating, it's interpolating."

The Gekir chief was off the high mount almost as the huge creature stopped near the pool and snaked its long, hairy trunk into the water. The Gekir's motion was fluid, very feline, as if she hadn't a bone in her body. The for-ward pair of big, thick, short-fingered hands were used in this instance as if they were forelegs. But once on the ground, the Gekir chief supported herself on her four rear legs and raised her short torso and long neck in something of a centauroid fashion, although even ripples of skin under the fur gave an impression not of Dillian rigidity but almost of liquidity. The hindquarters, however, were smooth, with no hint of a tail.

The other Gekirs dismounted in similar fashion but made no effort to draw weapons or approach. Instead they simply gathered by the large animals and allowed their chief to handle the business at hand.

Although quite low to the ground, the Gekir projected a sense of bigness and strength. Certainly the creatures were large, and their hands, with the retractable claws, looked both powerful enough and sufficiently dangerous to rip one of the big mammothlike mounts to shreds. The chief came right over to them, showing no fear at all, and first the Erdomese, then the Dillians, and finally Mavra were in-spected with large catlike eyes and an enormous twitching black nose. She looked at Mavra the closest, dwarfing the small woman. Mavra was close enough to touch the pro-truding fangs, and the creature's breath was intense enough almost to cause her to pass out.

Finally the Gekir said to Mavra, "You be like a *zumbaga*. Where do ye say ye was from?"

"Glathriel, Excellency. Type 41."

"Never heard of them."

"Might I ask what a *zumbaga* is?"

"Tiny bipedal apes. Horrid little pests they be. Be a tribe of 'em here somewheres. Can't be touched because they be royal property—protected, y' know."

She nodded. "We've seen them and noted the resem-blance. They didn't look like they fit in here."

The Gekir gave a rumbling roar that the translator indi-cated was amusement. "They don't! They be brought here long ago in ancient times, and the ruler of the time, whose soul should be ever cursed for it, took a likin' to 'em and bred 'em. A royal pain in the arse, they be, but we keeps their numbers managed and limited to religious sites."

"I thought this might be a temple. That is why we did not enter it. We had no wish for anything but water before going to the coast."

"Indeed? And why be ye in Gekir at all, then, when there be all the stuff ye might like or need fifty leagues north in Bug Heaven?"

"We had no intention of coming here. Our business is far to the north and west of this whole area, and Gekir is out of our way." Briefly she explained how their train had gone the wrong way without really giving her suspicions as to why.

The chief was neither stupid nor ignorant. Both Mavra and Lori couldn't help noticing that she took the translator for granted and never once asked how it was they could be understood. "We hates all them things. They robs the soul from ye and make it impossible after a whiles t' tell the people from their machines. But the Bug machines don't go wrong, least not that we hear, and I can see the injury to that one's hand, there."

Mavra nodded, deciding to tell what she could without violating the whole detour's purpose. "Someone has been following us. We don't know who or why, but they have influence and money. They tried to kill me once, but now they seem satisfied to just keep me from going anywhere. We jumped off the train when we realized we were diverted and made for Gekir through the jungle. We spent the night on the rocks out there and hoped today to reach the coast and perhaps pay our way onto a coastal vessel or fishing boat and throw our pursuers off our scent."

The chief nodded. "Aye, we smelled yer camp and tracked you here. Been curious to see what ye might look like. Where ye be headin' to at the end of this business, and why?"

Mavra felt suddenly uncomfortable. "I—I'm sorry, your Excellency, but I cannot tell you that. The knowledge is of no great use to you, but if I told you, even in strict confidence, and you were later ordered by your government to report us or tell what we said and did, it would be your duty to do so. With all due respect, I cannot in good conscience place you in that position."

The big cat froze for a moment and glared fixedly at her, looking for all the world like an enraged lion about to pounce on a crippled antelope. But instead she said. "That big, is it?"

"Upon my honor it is."

Suddenly the chief gave an unmistakable grin, and again there was that growl of amusement. "Well, I think ye be full of shit, but I likes any little one with the gall to tell me to mind me own business and make it sound like they was doin' me some favor! Come on! We'll take ye all to a vil-lage on the seashore that might get ye out of me fur!"

The rest of the Gekirs, who'd watched all this not quite sure how their chief was going to react, now showed amusement and relaxed. The ice was broken.

Once the visitors were accepted, the Gekirs proved as pleasant and hospitable as their vague reputation to the north had them. Mavra, in fact, had a tougher time relaxing with the Dillians than she did with the Gekirs. To Tony and Anne Marie, it had been like listening to only one side of a phone call, with the Gekir growling and spitting and mak-ing, in Anne Marie's term, "*horrid* little noises." She, for one, liked her cats to be *much* smaller.

The patrol was clearly out on business unrelated to them but also unrelated to the temple and watering hole. There was a certain tit for tat, though, in that Shestah volunteered neither why they *were* out there or particularly why some-one whose position equated to provincial governor would be with them. Even so, the old girl was quite talkative about her opinions, and she had one on almost everything.

"It be too damned *civilized*," she told Mavra. "Ain't been a war, so much as a revolution, in so many lifetimes, the young 'uns know about it only from stories. Game's all managed, been peace with the neighbors since forever. Only thing what saves us from slow death by boredom be the no-technology laws. Keeps families together, keeps the good values, makes ye *earn* yer keep. That's why we still got huntin' parties and all the rights and ranks. Afore ye gets rights here, ye got to come out t' *here* or someplace like it, bare of all stuff, make yer own kill, and live the old style. Rest of it's mock battles against the neighbor guv's kids. Just last month a team of me girls got right into old Skisist's office and poured glue on the High Seat." Again the chuckle, but this time with pride. "Took 'em three days to unstick the old witch, and she'll be 'arf a year growin' back the fur it cost 'er!"

She had a lot of stories, and it was clear that she loved telling them to someone, *anyone*, who hadn't heard them so often they were known by heart. Still, it was time to move out if they were to reach the coast in any reasonable time.

Lori looked up at the chief's elephantine mount and then back at Mavra. "You're *really* going to ride up there with her?"

"Sure. It'd insult her if I didn't, and she'll get to tell me dozens more tales before we're there. I know, I know, but it's a small price to pay when you think of it. I'd sure rather have to listen to her than fight her."

Lori nodded. "Amen to that. But—maybe, if you get the chance, you can find out what's really puzzling

me."

"Yeah?"

"There are no males. None. They aren't even men-tioned."

"Yeah, I *did* notice that," Mavra admitted. "They might well be unisexual. Many races are. Or maybe here the men are home doing the dishes and minding the kids." She shrugged. "We're going to a village, anyway. We'll know soon enough. I just want you to make sure that Alowi and the Dillians behave themselves and aren't scared or pan-icked by anything they might see. This chief's smart and sophisticated. A full report on us will be on its way to higher-ups as soon as she gets the chance. My only hope is that whoever's screwing us up didn't anticipate this move and enlist the locals here just in case. If not, then that report will be quickly headed southeast to the capital and from there to Zone. By then we should be long gone." *I hope*, she added to herself.

Lori still didn't like Mavra's way of thinking. "What if she *is* in on it?"

Mavra shrugged. "Then we're really no worse off than we were, are we?"

The top of the woolly creature was a *long* way up, and it took Tony's aid from below and the chief grabbing from above to get Mavra up. Once she was there, however, it proved a very wide and relatively secure platform, and the blanket spread out and secured on top was thick enough to keep the beast's backbone from being much of a problem, particularly in the crease between the first and second pairs of the three sets of legs.

The Gekir chief looked down at Lori and grinned. "Ye be all better goin' *aside* us 'stead of in the rear. Not unless ye want t' be steppin' in a huge load of the world's greatest fertilizer!"

It was a good point, one the essentially city-bred and civ-ilized foursome who would walk or run along with the party would not have thought of until it became very obvi-ous.

"We should have one of each of us on both sides of the chief's mount," a still suspicious Tony suggested. "That way we'd have maximum speed and position if anything went wrong."

"Yes, with Chang up there and trapped between us," Lori noted. "No, it's all right. It's still her show, and she is not only unconcerned, she is in her glory right about now. She's having a *lot* of fun. Can't you tell?"

"Yes, the woman's ego is unmatched," Tony agreed, "but you will note that while so far we have been more trouble and expense than aid to her, she wants us along. Why do you think that is? Company? She is an easy one to talk to, but beyond the surface there is someone tough, nasty, and possibly ruthless inside there we aren't permitted to see. If even a tenth of what she claims about herself is close to the truth, then inside her is one of the most dangerous people any of us have ever met. Did you see how confident she was in turning down that chief, for whom being refused is obviously a new experience? Could *you* have done it? Or me? And more important, could you have gotten away with it?"

"Well, I—" he stammered. "I hadn't really thought of it that way. So why *do* you think she's taking us along, then?"

"To remove obstacles for her if need be," Tony replied. "Big obstacles she can't talk her way or think her way out of. It might be an idea to remember that she thinks herself immortal, and, true or not, she believes it. We are here to keep her from being captured or badly injured, nothing more, but *we* are not immortal. She said an attempt was made on her life by two assassins before any of us were here. She never said what happened to the two assassins or who she might have been with then. We are . . . what is the term?"

"I believe the word you want is 'expendable,' dear," Anne Marie put in cheerfully. "What Tony is saying is to worry only about yourself and your wife in the end. *That* woman can take care of herself."

Lori looked back up at Mavra Chang thoughtfully. If that was true, and it certainly rang true, why didn't she just hire tough natives rather than transformed Westerners? A Gekir, for example, would make a formidable bodyguard and would probably love the job just for its potential danger.

Anne Marie read his thoughts. "She's short of funds, dear, and we're *much* cheaper."

Alowi was concerned about Lori running. "Are you cer-tain that your leg is not going to go out again? That it is not too soon?"

"The leg is fine," he assured her. "Running on it will ac-tually help me get back into shape. What about you? You were weak as could be this morning."

"I am fine now. I simply needed replenishment. I will not be a burden."

He hugged her. "You are *never* a burden to me! Don't think that!"

"I look up at *her* and I feel a wrongness. I cannot say if the wrongness is me or her, but it is one of us. She rides the monster beast as if she has ridden one her whole life, and she treats the orange and black creatures as if they are old friends, yet she is weak and tiny and could be destroyed by one strike of those hands."

"I know. I knew the first time I met her that she was dif-ferent from anyone I ever knew, but I did not

know how very different she was. Your concern is me. I will deal with Mavra Chang."

"My lone concern is you," she said sincerely, leaving no doubt that Mavra Chang's interests were of absolutely no importance to her at all.

He wished he felt as confident as he sounded. Damn it! What *had* happened to the two assassins?

The village turned out to be of considerable size, spreading out on all sides of a spectacularly beautiful bay and climb-ing the sides of low rolling hills to the east and south.

The buildings were basically of stone or brick with thick thatched roofs for the individual one-story houses and red slate for the larger or taller structures. The market and busi-ness district was surprisingly well developed, with buildings up to a block square and rising up to six stories high. The port was on the northern side of the bay, set off a bit by it-self, including docks, piers, and warehouses. It was about as modern-looking as a nontech civilization was capable of managing. But that wasn't the startling part of the view eastward out toward the ocean; there was something else that commanded attention even more: a shimmering, odd effect, like a thin plastic wall, that seemed to go from north to south and intersected the two far points of land on either side of the bay.

"A sea hex boundary!" Lori exclaimed. "Right up to the town!"

"That be Ogadon," one of the Gekirs called down. "Ogadon takes in part of Muca Bay. The town be Port Saar."

Mavra, too, hadn't expected quite this elaborate a town or this good a port. "Ships *do* stop here, then!"

The chief nodded. "Not like up north in Itus, but that be far away from here, that port. Easier for us to have this and get what services we need direct than to wait weeks to get anything from the big port down at the Point. The wormies, who don't have much of a decent harbor down south, use it sometimes as well. That be why yer train thing be comin' so far south. See, that point of land just outside the border at the edge of the port is really in Ogadon, so they don't need no sail to come in, neither."

"No ships in now, though."

"Don't look it. We'll check the schedules when we gets down there. Don't expect ye'll want no big ships nohow, since they'd be goin' on from here to the wormies most like or south. Ye might be better makin' some deal with some smaller craft for crossin' the Great Bay to Parmiter or Awbri."

She nodded, not knowing if the gesture meant much here. "Do many smaller vessels actually come in here?"

The chief pointed. "Be a few of 'em down there now. The Ogadon, they be proper flesh eaters, so's they don't al-low no fishin' as such, but they grows and maybe mines some real strange things down there that some folk of some nations take a real likin' to. Some of it's medicinal to some races, some is used as spices by others, and some's the kind of stuff what some folks like but other folks says is evil, if you take my meanin'. Don't know which races like what, though."

Mavra knew exactly what she meant. Somewhere, deep under the seemingly placid Ogadonian surface, was an en-tire underwater civilization probably as well developed as this one, and what they ate was some sort of fish or marine animal that was the equivalent of the Gekir's jackalopes or the variety of edible animals on Earth. But deep down somebody had discovered long ago that many of the sea bottom plants and growths produced substances or were themselves substances that affected other races. Southern hemisphere races, after all, had the common bonds of carbon-based life on the whole. As with other Well races, the Ogadon had turned this knowledge to profitable trade, selling the minerals that others might want or need as well as the plant material and chemicals that might be of use elsewhere. Minerals, spices, and medicines, perhaps, but among the variety in such a landscape was bound to be at least one substance that translated to a pleasure drug to one or perhaps many races on the surface. All this would be traded for such things a semitech, undersea race might well find of use but could not make itself.

"Does the government of Ogadon officially approve, dis-approve, or ignore the stuff some call evil?" she asked care-fully.

"Oh, they *got* to go after it to save their legal trade," the chief responded. "They even got agreements with some of the shippin' hexes to allow surface policin' of the smug-glers. It be kinda hard, though, to put a real stop to it. We don't need none of it, so we just keeps out of it all."

I'll bet, Mavra thought, a sour smile on her face. This bay was tailor-made for this kind of trade. If the Gekir, and particularly the local authorities, didn't have any use for the products, smugglers would still have a great use for this area. In fact, it explained the apparent prosperity better than anything else. This was a safe haven for such ships and one that served as a convenient place to repack illegal cargo, swap it

between vessels, and transfer it ashore so that it could go by Itun train all the way to the Sea of Turigen and from there to other markets. It was a place where trade deals could be consummated with little fear of fancy eaves-dropping and where strangers would always stand out.

Such a ship would be absolutely perfect for them—with one hitch. There probably wouldn't be much of a problem talking one of the captains into taking them aboard, but there might well be a problem in convincing captain and crew to maintain their silence and thus getting back off again.

Isle of Mahguul, Dlubine

nathan brazil awoke from the deepest sleep he could ever remember in his very long life feeling energized, ex-ceptionally well, and alert. He sat up and opened his eyes and was instantly wide-awake, and he realized that it was daylight.

He sat up, got immediately to his feet, and looked around until it dawned on him how totally stupid that was. "Gus?" he called, then, getting no answer, he yelled "*Gus!*" at the top of his lungs so that the sound went around and around the volcanic bowl the ship was anchored inside.

There was no response.

There was too little sky for him to see the sun unless it was almost directly overhead, and considering that the an-chorage was on the north side of the island, that was highly unlikely.

Save for the sound of water within the little inlet lapping gently against the sides of the ship and against the rock walls around and the rush of a small waterfall pouring from a rock fissure high above to the waters of the cove below, there was only silence in return.

He half expected Gus to suddenly pop up at his elbow any second, but when, after a minute or two, that didn't happen, he had to accept the fact that the Dahir had not yet returned. That was bad news; he should have had more than enough time to get around to the harbor, get inside, steal what he could, and get back to the boat.

In other circumstances Brazil thought he'd like this place, particularly this secluded cove, but for now he saw it less as a haven than as a trap.

In daylight the passage in seemed even more narrow than it had coming through it in the darkness, so narrow in fact that it would be nearly impossible for ships of even this size to pass each other once in it and even easier for a smaller ship to block the exit. Nonetheless, he felt as if he had to wait—all day if need be, if he was patient enough to manage it.

But before nightfall he'd have to move out, and he couldn't afford to go looking for the former Earthman. He'd cut him what breaks he could, but his own fate was quite literally more important than Gus's, and if Gus could stay alive, he could do more for the fellow once inside the Well than he could in some naval prison.

It was only after he'd run through all the possible options and decided which ones were valuable that he had time to reflect on himself.

He felt—odd. "Tingly" was the best word he could come up with.

Last night, with the girl, tired and tense as he was, he'd let himself go completely. He remembered it, even felt a shiver of pleasure at the thought, but the bottom line was that all his own defenses had been down.

In a sense he was relieved to be still thinking like him-self and able to shout Gus's name. Hell, he'd been wide open last night. He tried to remember, but it was harder to remember emotion and sensation than, say, a conversation or a fight. Still, as he reconstructed it as best he could in his mind, he realized that something *had* happened. Whatever was inside her had taken the opening, had rushed to con-sume him at the very climax of passion—and for some rea-son hadn't been able to do the job completely.

In a sense that reassured him, but he was also aware that his body was subject to much of what all mortal flesh was heir to.

He suddenly realized that he hadn't once wondered where *she* was. He hadn't wondered because although she was forward and out of his sight, he *knew* where she was, knew exactly what she was doing, what she was feeling ...

Knew exactly what she was seeing!

It wasn't telepathy, not exactly. If she thought conven-tionally, it did not come through. He knew, though, that he could contact her, summon her, send a whole range of basic concepts her way if need be. She knew

he was inside her head at the same time he was still himself, and he knew beyond a doubt that she had the same experience with him. He could see, hear, feel, taste what she did, even feel the wind in her hair as if it were his own hair.

Man, this is really weird! he thought.

It was as if he suddenly had two bodies, one his old male self, the other hers, yet most peculiar of all, there was no confusion in his mind over which was which. *I almost feel like I can explain the Trinity to a Christian*, he thought with characteristic humor.

But while he now shared every single real-time experience with her, he had no direct control of that other self. As she lifted some of the little water that remained in one of the water traps to her lips, he felt the water—felt it on her lips, felt it go down—but he could not control any of her actions, only experience them. Taken together with the pre-existing empathic link, they were totally, absolutely connected as if parts of the same organism, yet at the same time still their individual selves.

It fascinated him like nothing else he could ever remember, and it troubled him only in one way.

He could not make her body do anything at all, but she had made a sailor of a totally alien race put a pistol to itself and then, when he'd yelled and made his shock clear, made that sailor jump overboard just as if he'd been some kind of puppet.

Could she now, through this linkage, manipulate *his* body?

He very much wanted to know that, but he was afraid at this moment to find out. He *knew*, without having to think any further, that she would never harm him or cause him to come to harm, but that wasn't the point.

He tried not to think of that for now and instead concentrated on other things that were only now becoming apparent to him.

Whatever she had tried to take from him, or alter, involuntarily or not, she had clearly failed to do, but she had certainly given as well.

It was hot here, almost intolerably hot. He could see evaporation even in the secluded cove, and the very air shimmered and twisted. If it had been in the high thirties Celsius well into the night, what must it be now? High forties at the very least, he knew. Certain things were constants. It *looked* that hot, and everything he could check indicated it really *was* that hot, but although stark naked, he felt comfortably warm, quite pleasant, really, as if the air were perhaps just a shade under body temperature.

That enviable protection that she'd had against all extremes of weather had finally been extended to him as well. He had a strong feeling, though, that the ability, and possibly other as yet unknown powers, did not come without some price, and he was well aware that whatever was doing it was coming from her. Something, some power or energy field, now tied them together as absolutely as if it were a great rope tied between them. He realized, *knew*, that the bonds were so tightly knit that there was no chance of one leaving the other any more than his arms could go one place and his legs somewhere else entirely. It gave a whole new meaning to the word "inseparable," he thought.

The question was, Who was binding whom?

Of course *she* had done it, whether by design, nature, or command he didn't know, but the question was one of both motive and control. She was certainly an individual, but an individual who had been reprogrammed to a remarkable degree. The fact that he knew that her total concern for him was not only benign but a matter of genuine affection was meaningless; whatever rules now governed her thinking might have quite a different interpretation of what was in his best interest than he himself might.

He wondered how the insulation worked. It had to be extremely thin and entirely energy-based. Somehow it maintained an internal fixed environment for the two of them almost like an extra layer of skin. Things felt normal to him; the wooden deck was firm and solid and appeared fully capable of giving him a splinter if he wasn't careful. He wondered if something that was boiling hot would feel that way to him or if his tongue would still freeze to a pump handle at forty below. Probably not, considering how well she'd gotten along in the snow, but he wondered what the criteria were and whether a people living in a tropical swamp next to a subtropical region had thought of every-thing. It would not be wise to take things for granted.

Terry was delighted by the new contact; he felt that as well and also felt that she was somewhat surprised by it. But as joined as they were, they still did not have an effective means of communication. To Brazil's astonishment, it was Terry, not he, who attempted a real start in that direction.

She walked back over to the water collector, almost dry and smelling less than wonderful, and just looked at it. Then she turned and looked back at the entire ship, then over again to the small waterfall on the other side. It wasn't until she repeated the pattern twice more that he realized she was "talking" to him. The message was clear and so obvious that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it himself. If that waterfall

resulted from the rain at the top of the volcano coming down through cracks rather than from some internal and probably foul source, just putting the ship under it would allow them to totally refill the containers below with fresh water. But it would be tricky in such tight quarters to weigh anchor and use the little bit of circular current inside the cove to bring the ship around to where that would be practical.

Now, how much of me got transferred as well? he wondered. It was time to find out. He walked forward until he had the anchor winch in sight, then made a turning motion with his hand, then looked back at the wheel, still in view from where he was.

She went over to the winch and stared at it but shook her head. He knew she had understood his suggestion; the problem was that she could not, or would not, compromise her hunter-gatherer principles even to that degree. He was back at the wheel, staring forward, more in her head than in his own but feeling frustrated.

Suddenly she stared down at the deck almost aimlessly and began breathing heavily, and he felt her go into what could only be described as some sort of trance. Her vision blurred; all outside sensations suddenly ceased. Curious, he leaned against the wheel and waited. There seemed to be no hurry.

He felt a sudden tremendous, powerful rush, very much like a gust of wind, only it went into him and through him. He felt sudden vertigo, and then something seemed to be pulling him, pulling him forward, even though he was not physically moving at all. Rather, it was as if his consciousness, his very inner self, were being sucked out of his body and it rushed forward, *through* the top of the cabin, *through* the mainmast, and deposited him forward, where the feelings of the body returned to him, yet the force that had reached for and grabbed him had not dissipated but rather was felt now as tension, as if he were stretched on the end of a taut rubber band. He had felt—*something*—pass him in the opposite direction during the pull and knew that it had been the girl, moving back to his own body even as he moved forward toward hers.

He was Terry.

He was in Terry's body, and it felt strange to him yet natural. When he breathed in and out, the body breathed, the head moved, the arms and legs functioned. Shocked, even dazed, he saw the winch in front of him, turned it, quickly raising the anchor about halfway, and then threw the lock switch. The moment he did it and stood away, the tension broke, and he was pulled out of her body and back into his own body still leaning on the wheel aft. Again he felt himself passing her as she was pulled back into her own body forward.

Sensation and the absence of that force or tension brought him to immediate control in his own body, and he had to make a quick turn and spin the wheel hard as the stern drifted a bit toward the rocks. Old reflexes took hold, and he coaxed the small ship bit by bit out, catching the tiny, subtle spin of the water caused by both the inrush of ocean water and the action of the waterfall, and managed to get it pointed directly for the falls. Now, moving slowly, he locked the wheel and went forward to the winch, the very same winch he'd used before without having left the wheel, unhooked a long grappling hook from its holder on the rail, and waited. As the bow went under the falls, he felt the water wash over him and then lashed out from the rail with the hook, deflecting the bow from going head on into the rock cliff. He almost slipped on the suddenly wet deck as he leaned against the hook, and he let go with perfect timing so that the bow only glanced against the rock and started moving back out, the waterfall now just behind him.

Thank heaven it was just a very small waterfall. A big one would have swamped them for sure. Even this one might.

It was warm water, but it seemed to be good water; he stood under, let it shower him, and he reached out, let his cupped hands fill, and drank it. It went down very well indeed.

Except he wasn't doing that. He was standing there with the hook, ready to try a push-off lest the waterfall flood the deck when the containers below were full and the collectors were backed up to topside. If a lot of water got below, inside the cabin, hold, and other parts of the hull, they could wind up sinking the ship. *He* wasn't enjoying the shower, but *she* was.

He couldn't hear much over the sound of the small falls, but he turned and watched, worried. The girl got the idea and moved out of the immediate stream of the falls, staring at the collector.

There was a sudden gurgle, and the collector filled and began overflowing right onto the deck like a bathtub with no drain. Frantically he pushed off as best he could, but it was the stern that started moving in a semicircle; the bow was getting lower in the water.

Anxiously, he ran back, trying not to slip on the wet deck. He got to the wheel, unlocked it, and tried to steer the ship out of the trap he'd put them in. *Now* he realized why he hadn't considered it. The ship moved a little but not enough.

The girl seemed to sense the problem, too, and now she stepped out of the falls and stared intently at the rock cliff. There was a sudden release of the same sort of energy he'd felt in the switch of bodies, only this

time directed straight at the cliff. The ship shuddered and Brazil was knocked off his feet, but the shuddering was the action of the ship moving back slowly out of the stream, away from the cliffside. The falls hit the rail, then actually began supplementing the backward movement.

In a moment they were free of it. He grabbed the wheel, straightened it out, and let momentum take him several meters beyond the splash zone of the falls. He locked the wheel and moved forward to drop the anchor. He would remain in the center of the cove if he could this time.

He did an immediate visual check to see how badly they'd been flooded. The only pumps below were hand pumps, and they weren't the sort one handled one at a time but only in pairs.

It didn't seem all that bad, so he went forward to the cabin and went below. There was maybe 150 millimeters of water below, but it didn't look bad and certainly not enough to use pumps on. It had been a close thing, though; a few minutes more under that stream and there would have been a couple of *meters* in there, and that would have made it very difficult indeed.

Relieved, he went back topside, then aft to the wheel. He sank down on the deck and gasped for air, shaking himself as the tension inside him was released. It was several minutes before he recovered enough to think about all that had just happened.

My God! Did she really draw me out of my body and into hers? How was that possible?

He knew somehow that it indeed had happened, though, and it was another example of power that scared him. She had the power, with no training and no background, to do at least as much as if not more than the greatest of those Oriental mystics he'd told Gus about. If all Glathrielians had this kind of power . . .

Worse, she'd made a decision and split hairs like a theologian. Rather than compromise and operate that winch, she'd worked nothing short of a miracle so that he, not she, could use her body to raise that anchor for him.

And then, having gotten him to go along with her idea before he'd had a chance to think it out, she'd used some of that same power to push a ship that had to weigh more than a stegosaurus back away from the falls and all the way to the center of the channel. The total consequence of what she'd done was that she now felt a little dizzy and lightheaded.

Where did that energy come from? How was it stored? It wasn't from the Well, or anything to do with the Well, that was for sure. Somehow it came from inside her and was stored . . . *as body fat?* It seemed ridiculous, but it was the only explanation that made sense.

It sure beat the hell out of any diet plan he could think of, and it made diets anathema for all that.

She was paying a price, perhaps for using two such blasts so close together, possibly because they hadn't eaten very much in several days; she lay down on the wet deck forward and just passed out.

This is really weird, he thought once more. *For the first time I almost think I have a crack at making it before Mavra. I've never had this kind of power on my side before, not until I was inside.*

But *she* controlled the power, he didn't.

Or did she?

He lay down, suddenly struck by an idea. If he was now connected to her so tightly, this energy must be the bond. There had to be some sort of energy field, automatically emanating from her to him, or the bond would be broken at times like this. Surely such abilities, in many ways like what the Gedemondans had been after, at least the last time he'd been there, had to be learned, suffered for, studied, and experimented with for countless years, perhaps countless generations, depriving those who sought such power of almost everything that might provide as the slightest distraction.

At least they hadn't also taken on celibacy, although that would hardly be practical in a grand experiment involving an entire population over thousands of generations.

Maybe that was where the lamas had gone wrong back in the Himalayas. They had brought themselves to the limits of individual higher mental attainments, but the emphasis had still always been on *individual* attainment, and although their belief in reincarnation gave them ample time in their own minds, in reality death had cut them off short. Even without that limitation Brazil had eventually abandoned that life when he'd suddenly realized that the attainment of the absolute, the joining with the That Which Is Behind All That, was oblivion. It was too much like being at the end of the line with the Markovians but not having had any fun getting there. It was, however, a god-awful amount of work, whether it was that traditional system of Earth's or the Glathrielian grand project.

The fact that the Glathrielians had given her the end results of this work, much as one would stick a bunch of programs on a computer mass storage device for easy access, didn't really matter. Everything he'd seen of Glathrielians indicated a total rejection of the physical ways of the world. The most they did was pick some fruit off trees. Even when doing that, he'd observed how their actions were almost hive-like, almost as if they were a collective organism even though on the surface they seemed like individuals. They

condescended to the body only in the sense of its need to eat, drink, sleep, and reproduce.

They had given Terry those powers and imposed that overculture as a kind of control program, but she'd not been born into it or brought up with it. It wasn't a natural state to her. Like him or Gus, she had more in common in her background with the Ambrezans than with the Gedemondan mystics, but she had no way of really understanding it. She had been surprised to get any sort of a link-age with him after being together so long. That was the group mind part, the impulse to co-opt those of one's own kind into the greater consciousness. But she was still too much the individual inside, and when she'd absolutely had to, she had compromised the Glathrielian programming in a way that the group mind part of the Gedemondan whole would never have even considered.

Faced with Terry's very appearance, they had done the one thing with her that such a community, insular as it was, wasn't all that used to doing.

They had improvised.

He thought he had them now, although not by any means all their powers and strengths. He doubted that *she* knew what she could do, except it was inside her, like individual programs on disks, waiting to be accessed if demanded by circumstance. A Glathrielian would know. A true Glathrielian *child* would know, would probably have fun switching bodies and moving stones and doing who knew what else. They had the experience of the group mind and were raised and trained to know. But they'd had Terry for only the shortest time. Days or weeks, perhaps.

A television professional would think of things first in visual terms. They must have seized on that as something *simpatico* with their own way of thinking. Whole chunks that made a picture, an object rather than a linear assemblage of cross-referenced information. The holographic mind with no intermediate steps, no aids, not even a linear language to slow down the process. Need? *Bang!* Entire solution. Just like that.

He could see them now, considering *him* before they had her. He'd been living very close to them for a while. They sensed his difference, sensed, perhaps, his connection to the Well. They couldn't tap or access that connection, but they understood it on their level, and they understood the potential. But what to do? Problem, even opportunity, but no solution.

Then, suddenly, Terry walks in. She's in shock, she's scared, and she's Earth-human, or close enough to Glathrielian that they recognize her as one of their own. Possibly their communal field was strong enough and she was still shocked enough from her arrival that she sensed and was perhaps even guided by the permeating group mind. They had taken her in, and they had made her one of them, or so it seemed. Compromise was necessary. In them, everything was to a purpose; in her, it had to run on automatic.

Then they sent her back with an absolute command to remain with him at all costs. Sooner or later he might let his guard down. When it happened, she was to copy everything from her mind to his. Make him Glathrielian. Then, when he entered the Well, he would be one of them. The whole of Glathriel could then be connected to the Well itself.

That was how they differed from the Gedemondans. The Gedemondans were seeking a third way, as the founding race had intended, a new way to attain power and an even greater godhood on their own.

The Glathrielians wanted to take over the damned controls!

Well, they couldn't do it, but how would they know that? It was certainly worth a shot. Worth risking one strange girl.

So last night she had made the link, made the attempt, automatically. Not even the whole of Glathriel could do it even with his cooperation, but she'd made the attempt. She'd transferred the programs and linked the two of them so that the energy that was her only tool was shared. His Earth-human body and physical brain and nervous system were still human enough for that. What they could not do, could never do, was get down to the core of his being, his "soul" for want of any better concept, and reprogram at that level. They could control every aspect of his body but not his core ego.

But the programs were still there. Perhaps not in his mind, because of their ultimate failure, but accessible from *hers* over the energy linkage. That linkage had to be physiological to some degree; she'd tapped into something inside him, perhaps inside all Earth-human brains, and activated it. Whether necessary for their plans or not, he would have to accept and accommodate the control program requirements as much as possible, but some of it could be bypassed either by force of will, as when she'd compromised for expediency, or because it was designed to filter *her* input/output, not his. He might not be able to run the whole suite of programs concurrently because of this, but maybe, just maybe, because they'd been designed to be run by someone who didn't have the owner's manual, he might run them one at a time.

He was wide-awake, even a little excited, but he remembered his own long lessons in mental discipline from long ago and relaxed, closing his eyes, clearing his mind, breathing deeply, rhythmically, letting his

consciousness roam, but not without a sense of purpose. He felt her, felt everything about her, matched her own deep breathing, thought only of the secondhand but very real existence of her own body, not his own.

This time it was very gentle, very slow. There was no rushing force, no fast-forward pull, not even disorientation. He moved toward her, into her and gently displaced her, sending her, still in a deep, deep sleep, back along the path and inserting himself fully into her body.

He opened his eyes—*her* eyes, knowing that his own body still reclined aft, now sound asleep. Carefully he sat up, then discovered that he was partly sitting on long hair and pulled it free.

He felt the body's fatigue, and there were a few aches and pains where muscles and joints pleaded for more rest, but he wasn't going to do this for very long. He got up on her feet, feeling a bit dizzy, even a little sick, but nothing he couldn't manage. A smile played across her lips.

The old adage holds true again, as always, he thought with some glee. Never try to con a con num. He'll pick your pockets while letting you believe you're stealing him blind

He began to walk forward, keeping one hand on some-thing to steady her body, and considered that it wasn't quite as similar as he'd imagined. The center of gravity was different and took a little getting used to; he was more aware of the large breasts and equally aware of the lack of male genitalia than he'd considered. Still, it was basically the same: two legs, two arms, eyes, and ears. Things *did* look a bit different, and he wondered for a moment if that was something new he was tapping. After all, he was also using her brain, even if his memories and personality were being scrolled off his own sleeping form. Then he realized that it was just that there were subtle shifts in the colors. So it was true—for purely physical reasons no two people probably saw colors exactly the same. But they weren't all *that* different—green still looked green, red looked red. They were just slightly different, often in brightness or degree, although he thought he saw more gradations of each color than he'd been aware of before. There also seemed to be a vastly wider array of smells, both good and bad, indicating that the biochemists had been right in saying that women really *could* smell a greater variety of scents than men. That explained why there were so many varieties of perfume even though most men, himself included, could barely tell the difference.

He tried to speak. "Hello, I am not Terry," he croaked. Her voice was raspy and it was almost painful to awaken those throat muscles so long silent, but it sounded like a decent voice, a nice voice, although he knew it would sound different to her, or to him as her, than it would to him as himself.

This was already more than enough for now, but he couldn't resist making his way slowly and carefully aft, then climbing the stairs and looking down at his own sleeping body.

Good lord! I really am an ugly SOB, he thought. As many times as he'd seen himself in a mirror, it was different to look upon his body through another's eyes.

Still, he'd proved his point and gotten something of a charge out of it at that. Hell, he vaguely remembered being an animal once, for some reason, the details of which totally escaped him. But he'd never been a woman.

In the distance he heard the sound of a steam whistle. Something was leaving the harbor, something with power, and that meant the naval corvette unless somebody new had shown up. Instantly he felt a pang of fear at the thought that they might have caught Gus and were now going hunting.

He had to get back in his own body and quickly. Not only would this be embarrassing, her body was too worn out to be of any real use in a fight right now, even if he could get used to it fast enough to do the quick, automatic moves that might be required.

He suddenly panicked at the thought that he might well be stuck in her body; he had not, after all, quite done it her way even if he'd used her inner knowledge and power to do it. And with thoughts suddenly coming to him about the possible implications of that steam whistle, how could he clear his mind enough to do it, anyway?

He had to, he decided. He just had to. There was no other choice.

Carefully, he lay down alongside his body, stretched out, and closed his eyes, resisting the body's impulse to lapse back into deep slumber. *Not yet, he thought, and tried to re-create the conditions he'd established when he had started the stunt, putting all sounds, all worries, out of the way, concentrating only on doing the one thing.*

Although he'd done it more gently, there still was a tiny bit of that tension there, and he was able to use it. He naturally belonged over there, and she naturally belonged here. There was a better fit, for want of a more appropriate term, when each was in the body he or she had been born to. It wasn't like what the Well did, not a bit.

A hand slid over a little and touched his, and he felt himself flow back into his body and her back into her own without any real effort or direction.

He opened his eyes, sat up, and shook his head as if to clear it, then looked down and actually felt around

himself just to make sure he was in the form he wanted to be in.

He could hear the sound of engines now, coming closer, coming their way. *Thank God they didn't let go that whistle when I was trying to get back inside*, he thought, quickly running through his options.

There wasn't any real wind; the heat and the high rock walls had created a nearly dead calm inside the cove. His mind raced through all possible combinations of sail, any-thing that might get him moving if he had to, but he finally realized that it wouldn't matter if he had an atomic engine.

If that cutter came in the passage, its cannon and small arms would be on him no matter what he tried, and it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

There was only one possible way to escape, and he didn't like it a bit. They'd have to go over the side opposite where the cutter would come in and swim for it to the rock formations beyond. Most of the cliff was sheer, but there was a small break in the outer rocks that might provide a way out through an eroded, irregular crack in the wall. If they could make it through there, they might be able to get up a bit and inland enough so that the cutter wouldn't be able to find them.

They'd be stuck on a speck of volcanic rock with the navy searching for them, but it would be a chance. At least, with the protection he now had from her energy shell, it wouldn't be immediately life-threatening and would give him a chance to figure out something.

The cutter was coming very close now, *very* close. It would be at the mouth of the narrow passage in perhaps a minute or two.

Terry was suddenly up, and he felt her momentary confusion at waking up somewhere far removed from where she'd thought she'd gone to sleep, but she dismissed it immediately. She had slept through all his clever tricks, but she'd come instantly awake when she'd felt his sense of peril.

Using sign language, he pointed in the direction of the passage, then at the water, and made swimming motions, pointing to the far end of the cove where the crack was. He had no idea if that crack was big enough for either of them, having only noted it in passing, but it was better than nothing.

She nodded, and he felt her draw on some reserve of strength and become suddenly energized in the physical sense, tense and ready to jump into the water.

The engine sounds echoed down the passage and into the cove itself; Brazil was certain that the ship would be coming down the passage, was perhaps coming down even now, and that they should wait no longer.

Still, something stopped him. Something subtle, a very slight diminution of the sound, perhaps, that rapidly grew more noticeable. He looked up over the jagged rock wall and saw a plume of white smoke proceed in an orderly fashion down the misshapen spires at the top.

The damned thing wasn't coming in! It had passed them by!

He laughed out loud in relief, grabbed Terry, and kissed her. She was somewhat startled by the action but felt his joy and relief and knew what it meant.

For a moment at least they were safe once again, and, he reflected, it was the perfect end to the business he'd been playing at. Being able to tap all that power, to do all these new things, hadn't changed the fact that he was a fugitive hiding out from the closest thing to a government this world had, stuck inside a bunch of barren and smoky rocks on a fly speck of an island in the middle of an indifferent ocean.

He signed to the girl to go back to sleep. She needed the rest almost as much as they both needed food. At least he was no longer overanxious to get under way; he wanted the navy to be well on its way to wherever it was going and well over the horizon before he ventured out. But more than ever he was determined to leave and to weather whatever the nights in this hotbox hex might bring.

There was no more game playing. While Terry slept, he pored over the charts, seeking some sort of alternative source for food. There were other islands, certainly; this was the start of a crescent-shaped chain of island volcanoes, many quite a bit larger above the surface than this little dot. The question was what, if anything, the Well would allow to take root in the rich soil. Whatever it would be would have to be consistent with the fixed ecology of the hex and not injurious to it or vegetation that would be expected to evolve on the actual planet this place represented.

He examined the topographic information, sparse as it was, on the various charts and guessed by knowing something of volcanic islands and checking elevations that one larger island about forty-five kilometers northwest was the most likely. It was kind of peanut-shaped, two volcanoes that had risen large and whose flows had merged into each other at the center, creating a single unit that appeared to be a lowland plain. He wondered for a moment why the service company hadn't put an anchorage there, but a reference to the island on the chart legend showed that flows were irregular, were not far below the surface all along both sides, and tapered off at an extremely shallow slope for a fair distance. There simply was no decent sheltered harbor available, and the only anchorage spots were marked at four or five hundred meters out

even for a ship with this draft. From that distance one would be expected to come ashore in a small boat or raft. It was marked emergency provisions only, and the only indication that there was any-thing there was the note of the locations along both coasts of the flat region—the sort of place one made for if one was shipwrecked or at least too damaged to get anywhere else. There were no habitation markers, but its position and the stations indicated that it would probably be checked on a regular basis by the company, the navy, or both.

It also would take them even closer to the Mowry border instead of toward the northern coast, but without food it would be touch and go.

Unless Gus came back, and with enough to eat, they had no choice but to try it.

The next problem was how the hell to get out of this cul-de-sac. There was a very slight gravitational tide, but with-out a clock or a means of recording it he couldn't even use *that*, meager as it was, nor did he know if it would be enough. He looked up at the rock cliff and the forbidding terrain beyond. He had used a slight wind to get in, essen-tially a land breeze or one created by the nearby storms. It would be enough to get out if it was an every-evening thing. He'd just have to wait and see. He couldn't count on the girl to move the ship again, and they sure as hell couldn't push or pull it.

If there was a breeze, anything at all he could use, he'd have to take it, whether Gus was back or not. He realized that now. Whether it came in two minutes or ten hours, that was the way it was.

For the time being there was nothing to do but lie down, stretch out, and rest. After a while he looked over at the girl and studied her features. For all the extra weight, whose purpose he now knew, she had a good body and a very pretty face. It was hard to imagine her as a hard-driving ca-reer newswoman.

That was the problem, of course, and he knew it. He didn't really want her to be any different—he wanted what they had now on the gut level to continue on and on. If he got to the Well before Mavra, or even if Mavra got there first but left his own connection intact, he would have to undo much of what had been done to her. Her future had to be her own choice, not his. He owed her that much.

But if she were restored, even with the memory of all this, what would that *other* woman, Terry, whom he'd never known, think of him? And what sort of reaction might she have seeing him not this way but as something of a monster?

As usual, he was racing to the inevitable ending of a situation that had filled him, for all that, with a sense of par-ticipation, care, even . . . love. He was more happy and content with her than he'd been or felt in his long memory, and the only thing he and fate as personified by the author-ities and the Well could do was shove him toward ending it.

He wanted the situation, and her, to remain as it was now. The only woman around with no interest in a ward-robe, jewels, makeup, or perfumes and one who never nagged or complained about anything—the perfect mate, he thought sardonically, using his usual defensive humor to mask his inner pain.

Maybe he was just being a sucker again, he thought, un-able to dispel his dark mood. He didn't *want* to get to the Well, which represented only a return to that endless exis-tence he so hated. Why not just find one of these tropical is-lands with abundant food and water to support two people, sink the damned ship, and retire, just the two of them? *Let* Mavra fix whatever was broken and go back through. If she disconnected him, then he'd just grow old with Terry and fi-nally die—and find the peace in that he'd never known.

It was terribly appealing, but he knew he'd never do it. It was this damnable sense of *obligation* he had.

Damn it! There were a million reasons why Mavra might have vanished in that long-ago time and place. But why had she never tried to find him in the two and a half thou-sand years or so since? If only to let him know, even if not to get together. Even allowing for all that, if only Gus hadn't painted a picture of a man-hating mental case . . . !

Gus had a colored view of her, of course. He might be all wrong, and Mavra might be just fine and fully capable of handling things.

She *might* be, but deep down he wasn't sure he believed it. At least, he wasn't sure enough of her to trust the fate of all those races, all those people out there, scattered, seeded among the stars. He hadn't had to take the obliga-tion or the responsibility for them, and perhaps, knowing what he did now, he would not do so again. But he *had* ac-cepted it, and even if he'd occasionally run from the responsibility, he couldn't really hide. It wasn't just hiding from the Well that was the problem; it was that he could never hide from himself.

Eventually he dozed off in spite of himself.

He awoke in the waning part of the day, feeling very good, very refreshed, but thirsty. But when he got up to go get a drink of water, he discovered that he was in her body, not his own. Her body, yes, but this time it felt natural, neither odd nor different, nor did the sights and sounds and smells seem out of place. Still, he went and got the drink and returned aft, only to see his own body at the wheel and other controls, dropping sail, bringing the little craft about in the wind.

"What are you doing?" he called out in her voice. "You don't know how to sail a ship! I wouldn't even think you'd want to!"

His body's face looked surprised and two dark eyes stared at the figure just below. "You can speak!" he heard his own voice say. "You've got speech back! That's wonderful!"

"What do you mean? It's you who have changed! We've swapped bodies, that's all, probably in our sleep. We'd best swap back so I can take her out. You'll wreck her!"

"Are you mad?" his other self asked. "I'm Nathan Bra-zil! I was captaining craft bigger and smaller than this be-fore your world was formed! What's this nonsense about body switching? You're Terry, and you've been through a lot of shocks. Let me just get us under way and we'll have some time once we get to open sea! I want out while there's still some light!"

"But—but—you're not Nathan Brazil, I'm Nathan Brazil!"

The other laughed. "This sharing of sensation has re-stored your speech but given you delusions! Look! What's the name of that sail? Where's the jib? The boom? When should you run with a spinnaker?"

"Uh—I—I—" she stammered, suddenly realizing that she had no answers to those questions. But Nathan Brazil would know, of course, and obviously did know from the way he was operating things up there. She sat down on the hatch cover and tried to think. What did she know? What did she remember? It was all fleeing, rushing out of her head even as she tried to grab on to the memories, the thoughts, the knowledge they represented.

It was all gone in a flash, leaving only the question of whether it had ever really been there. What did she know? She remembered coming into the vast chamber, reaching the place with the giant furry creatures, having met and joined with others like herself in some kind of swampy jungle, then of seeing Brazil and finding him very attractive and going with him . . .

There was no shock, only an intense if incredibly odd feel-ing of relief, of a massive weight lifted off the shoulders. Why, then, it must be true, she thought. I don't have any re-sponsibilities beyond being with him, helping him, and being happy! I'm not Nathan Brazil, I'm just Terry! I must have gotten enough from him to feel his burden and his pain, and I just wanted to take that away from him. She felt sorry for him, knowing what a burden he carried inside, and she re-solved to try to make it as easy on him as she could. She loved him so much, she'd wanted to take that burden off him and carry it herself, but the load was so overwhelming . . .

"Wake up, Cap," said Gus, shaking him.

Nathan Brazil opened his eyes and for a moment still thought he was Terry, but he wasn't. No matter his dreams, he couldn't be let off the hook that easily . . .

"What the hell took you so long, Gus?" he snapped, more irritated to be awakened than glad to see the Dahir.

"Well, they got wanted posters out on you, for one thing. Probably took 'em off a blowup of the recording when you come in. Right now all it says is that you're wanted for theft of a private vessel, and they give a pretty good de-scription of this scow, too. Good thing you decided not to go in the harbor, Cap. You'd never have stood 'em all off."

That was bad. "But what about you?"

"Well, all sorts of stuff. Best-laid plans and all that, I guess. Nobody noticed me, as usual, but when I was through pickin' up information and supplies, I found some-thing for my own belly as well, and after I eat I get groggy and sleepy for a little, and, well, I guess I just dozed off. I still feel like a stuffed turkey, but it was well into daylight when I woke up. I decided to fight off any idea of getting some more snoozin' and get back here. Fact was, I was worried that you'd cut out. Then I heard the boat whistle. All the crew of that cop ship got back aboard pretty fast, and they got up steam and pulled out. I got real nervous that they'd made you and were takin' off after you."

"Yeah, that gave us a turn as well. Went right on by, though."

"Well, I figured that, since word was that one of the small ships that come in sometime today had seen

some other ship on their wanted list a ways off to the east. Some kind of big-time smuggler craft—the way they talked, sounded like drugs or somethin' to me. Whoever it is, they want 'em as bad as they want us, and the cop captain pulled everybody out and took off as fast as he could get up steam. Seems these crooks pull the shell game at sea so you can never be sure which boat's got the goods, and they figured this one was steamin' for a pickup."

"Interesting. Well, at least it gets them off our backs for the moment, but don't think there aren't more of them around—and if the posters have hit even a little spot in the middle of nowhere like this, you can bet we're marked. Did you remember to bring the sack with the food?"

"Oh, yeah. Did better'n that, really. Come over here and look over the side. I'll need some help with it gettin' it all aboard."

Brazil was astonished to find not the meter-square aid kit container but a full-blown plastic dinghy filled with cartons. "Good lord! They let you get away with all *this!*"

"Well, they didn't stop me, anyway. Truth is, there was a lot of furry types and all in the cop crew, and this was one of the supply shipments due to go out to their boat. They left it there at the dock in their rush to pull out, so I just kinda slipped into the water and took it instead."

"Great. You're sure it's not ammo and two thousand cop-ies of my wanted poster, though?"

"It's food, Cap. Maybe not all of it's useful, but a lot is. Nothin' looks exactly like it did back home, but fruit and veggies have a habit of lookin' pretty close, and there's flour and some kinda meal like cornmeal and other stuff like that. I checked after I got out of the harbor but before I got too far away to go back. I figured I better let them cops get some distance, I didn't want 'em suddenly rememberin' that they forgot this and comin' back for it. They might not see *me* in the water, but they'd sure as hell see this raft and figure it got loose and floated away."

"Good work, Gus! And quick thinking! This is a real break in a number of ways. If they needed this enough to come back for it, they'd have turned around by now. The company people won't miss it because they'll assume it was taken aboard the cutter, and the cutter might not come back this way for weeks or even remember it if and when it does. Now, if we can only get this aboard and get enough wind to get out of this cove, we're good for the distance."

"How's that? You mean you can't get *out* of this place?"

"Not without some help from nature, or what passes for nature on the Well World. Come on—let's get started getting this aboard so if and when something comes up we don't have to dump it or get stuck until somebody finds us."

"You're ridin' a bit low in the water, ain't you? It looked kinda different."

"Yeah, we, ah, took on a little water, but I don't think it's serious. We might have to get on the pumps later if it proves a real problem, but I'm not worried about it now."

Gus slid back over the side and positioned himself on one side of the raft. "Cap, my arms can't lift their shadows, but I figure I can get under it and get it balanced, I can lift it up on my head. You'll have to grab it and pull it aboard, though. Anything that falls in, I'll try and get afterward."

"Good enough. I hope *I* can do it. I'm strong for my weight, but I'm only sixty-one kilos or so."

"Huh? What's that in pounds?"

"Old English measure? Jeez, I barely recall. About 135, I think."

"Well, you're not a ninety-eight-pound weakling, so you'll have to do. I'll help if I can. With this flat tail and a head as hard as my mother always said it was, I should be able to give it a little oomph."

The first two tries didn't make it, but they lost only one carton to the water and it floated nearby. On the third try he was aware that Terry was now awake and watching them. When Gus came up again, Nathan grabbed the rope affixed to the raft and pulled up and back with all his might. After almost getting it, he felt it start to slip away again, his arm muscles aching, but suddenly the raft and all its contents came up onto the deck almost as if they were weightless, causing him to fall over backward.

He got up, rubbing his bottom and reflecting that there certainly was no energy protection against friction burns, but he knew what had happened. Terry had seen the prob-lem and had added a bit of power to the equation through him. The whole raft was now securely on deck.

Gus retrieved the lost box in his gaping mouth and brought it aboard, then deposited it with the others. There were two very large puncture marks in the carton, and some white stuff was coming out of one of them.

"*Whooo!*" Gus gasped. "That's more heavy work than I've done since I got here! You wanna do inventory on it or what?"

"Might as well, as long as we're still becalmed," Brazil responded. "Besides, if there's anything here ready to eat, I can stand something, and so can she."

This was where the Well's data helped him, although he was barely aware of it. Among the cartons were a number of suspect items, but he instinctively seemed to know which ones to keep and which ones to discard. Gus had been right—most of it was more than useful.

"We're going to have to get this below fairly quickly," Brazil said at last. "Most of it, anyway. We'll leave these three on deck. It's a bit damp below, but I think we can keep these high enough to keep 'em out of the wet. I think I can handle individual boxes. I'd best get to it. Leave this one with the fruit open and this one with the vegetables, too, so Teiry can start eating. Watch her, though. She has a tendency to eat absolutely everything, and I need something!"

Individually, the cartons weren't all that heavy, and he quickly transferred the nine remaining ones below to the unused crew sleeping quarters, securing them with netting. The one leaking the powder from the fang marks he could do little about, but the marks were high enough that even if they leaked a fair amount of the sweet-tasting meal, there would still be enough.

The water was still ankle deep, but that reassured rather than bothered him. Nothing more was coming in, and the new load wasn't so heavy that the whole balance of the ship would be adversely affected.

When he came back on deck, Gus commented, "I gotta say, Cap, you were sure right about her appetite. She's just tearin' through that stuff like there's no tomorrow. Better get some while you can."

He nodded, opened the other carton, and found some premade and wrapped loaves of what appeared to be a kind of French bread. Inside, it had a yellowish look and contained small bits of exceptionally sweet cornlike kernels, but it tasted just fine. He was just reaching to rescue a large purplish applelike fruit the size of a small melon from the ravenous Terry when he suddenly noticed something.

"A breeze! I feel a breeze!" he almost shouted. Forgetting his hunger, he ran to the wheel. "Gus! Go forward and raise the anchor. Use the winch! Yeah, there!"

At last! he thought. Food, water, and even a little day-light left, and along comes a breeze! We're getting out of this hole!

Out, yes, a little corner of him responded. Out and away, toward harsh reality, outward to smash yet another good dream . . .

Ogadon

there was no good place to house the dillians in the Gekir coastal town of Port Saar, and since Erdomese, too, were basically unsuited for the network of steps and ladders which the catlike natives found no trouble at all, they set up a camp on the edge of town, along the road between the town proper and the port up at the Ogadon border.

The chief, in the tradition of her people, invited them all to the royal guest quarters and to a banquet, but Mavra explained some of the problems the others might have in attending. The governor seemed to understand and instead issued them something of far more value: a provincial conscription note, which was basically an account with local merchants that guaranteed that they would be paid by the local treasury.

As was common in many smaller port towns everywhere, businesses closed promptly at sunset, so they all took advantage of the conscription note in the couple of hours of sunlight remaining.

Port Saar was not the same sort of town as the big sea-ports they'd seen. Rather, it seemed more like the small rural market towns of much of Central and South America, minus electricity and modern conveniences.

Like their underwater neighbors, the Ogadon, Gekirs were basically carnivores, but nonetheless they spent a good deal of time on small- and medium-sized farms growing fresh fruits and vegetables for export to the railhead just inside Itus or by coastal ships to other nearby hexes. It was, one merchant noted, actually very practical; in the farming business the pickers and other help never ate the profits.

Although adding to and freshening their provisions was the main idea, Lori, with Mavra Chang's permission, used some of the credit on Alowi, as Julian now insisted on being called. In fact, the few times Lori had slipped and said "Julian," she hadn't even responded, convincing him that wherever she was stuffing her past had absorbed even the memory of that name. In fact, it was becoming next to impossible not to think of her as a native-born Erdomese female.

He bought her a necklace she seemed to fancy, some sweet-smelling perfumes, and a set of combs that while clearly not designed for Erdomese, worked rather well on the hair and tail and in cleaning the short fur. There were also some nice-looking and modestly priced clips that were the right size for tail clips; Lori

didn't know and didn't re-ally want to know for whom or what they were actually in-tended.

At Mavra's suggestion, they also looked at heavy coats, since they would be going into unknown climates and might well need them. There weren't too many available for non-Gekir types and none that were really great fits, but a sufficient number of races were to one degree or another humanoid that even the Erdomese found rough fits. The Dillians, it appeared, had brought their own along, and Anne Marie insisted that she could alter the new coats to some degree to make them fit better.

They also finally met a Gekir male.

He was pretty easy to spot; thin, gaunt-looking, and smaller than a female, he was a sort of faded gray color all over except for his outsized lionlike snow white mane. He had a medium-length tail that ended in an explosive puff of white fur, further contrasting him with the tailless females. He also wore matching bracelets and anklets of a golden color with ornate designs in them and a large golden oval nose ring and appeared to be perfumed.

The people had overall been quite friendly, and so Lori couldn't resist trying to strike up a conversation with him in the street.

"Your pardon, sir, but you are the first man we have seen since coming to Gekir, and I was just curious. I mean, it began to look like there were no men at all here."

The Gekir seemed amused. "Oh, yes, there be a lot of us, only not nearly in the same numbers as women. The aver-age be about fifteen women to one man. It be different where you come from, I suppose."

"In some ways, yes, in others, no. In Erdom there are ten females for every male, but as you can see from my wife here, the men are larger, and because of the hand develop-ment and upper muscle strength, men run the affairs while the women run the household and bear and raise the chil-dren."

"Huh! Think of that! Dunno if I'd like *that* or not! Got enough trouble just doin' me male duties."

It turned out that the males, smaller, far weaker, and fewer in number, ran nothing at all. They also tended to be uneducated and limited in what they could do. What they *could* do was have sex, apparently in nearly unlimited amounts, and they tended to do that essentially as a profes-sion, often doing a "circuit of me regulars" and spending their time at those "regulars' " homes. They also performed services from shopping for busy women to baby-sitting and took little interest in much outside this life. If the male they met was as typical as he said he was, they liked it that way.

"See, all the time they likes us around, and once a month they needs us, so they keeps us pretty happy," the Gekir male told him. The general feeling among the women, he explained in a low voice, was that men were stupid and in-competent except at the one thing they were needed for, and the men had a vested interest in maintaining those at-titudes. "They even cook for us," he told Lori. "Think we don't know how."

The male begged off further talk, since he had a "real important appointment just after sunset," but he'd revealed enough.

In Gekir, the women ruled and the men were small and weak, considered inferior, and used entirely as sex objects. It was even more extreme than Erdom by a great deal, and it disturbed *Lori* almost as much as the reverse would have. It answered one of those nagging questions in a way he hadn't wanted it answered.

The parallel seemed to be with many Earth insects. The black widow was obvious, but many male spiders existed only for one purpose and then died, not to mention male bees and many other examples. A lot of women he'd known back on Earth would have loved this kind of ar-rangement, but he wasn't so sure. Was his distaste, though, just because he was now a man himself, or was it because the same offenses committed in reverse felt no more moral?

It was a question he pondered as they went back to the camp and set up to cook dinner as the sun went down. Af-ter determining that there were quite a number of things both Erdomese and Dillians could eat in common, Lori did not object to Alowi and Anne Marie preparing the meal, with him translating as needed. It did not in fact come out bad at all.

Mavra had remained in town, she said to talk to some people before her official dinner later that night. She told them that they should not wait for her and that they should get some sleep.

Alowi did the cleanup, then insisted on using her new combs and brushes to get the last vestiges of grime from Lori's fur and tail, and he even allowed a little perfume to be used to cover the mild but remaining swamp odor.

The Dillians excused themselves and went off into the shorter, greener grass nearby and eventually seemed to lock themselves for sleep.

With his hand still bandaged and saying by occasional aches and sharp pains that it should remain so for a while longer, there wasn't much for the Erdomese to do but try to sleep themselves. Alowi cuddled up close to him and was soon out cold; after the previous night with so little sleep she had to be exhausted. Still, Lori

would have liked to have discussed the oddly different sexual balance of Gekir and perhaps talked about the old days, as they always had, but he couldn't. Those conversations had been with Julian, and Julian, it appeared, no longer existed for all practical purposes.

He felt doubly guilty for that somehow. He'd treated her as less than a partner, all along driving home the division that must have raged within her no matter how much she suppressed it, and it had been his own stupid injuries that had caused the final break.

Nobody else had gotten even a scratch. Not even Jul— Alowi. Mister Macho had to leap before he looked, jump too fast, not notice an embankment. *He* had to be out first, since *he* was going to look out for the others. The poor, de-fenseless others. *The girls.*

Yeah, right.

Damn it! he thought, furious with himself. *When the hell did I turn into every guy I ever loathed in high school?*

It was not exactly the kind of grand commercial vessel that both the Dillians and the Erdomese had used to reach Itus. It was in fact small, low but with big masts, and had a cen-tral funnel so that it could be used under steam where pos-sible. It was built for silence and speed, not for comfort and convenience, and for its ability to run with a minimal crew.

It was also painted a dull black, and even the sails and ropes had been dyed to a very dark gray hue. The bridge was actually exposed as in the ancient sailing ships of Earth, but there was a small secondary cabin between the main wheel and the funnel with a duplicate wheel that could be engaged and that had some very exotic-looking, if now totally turned off, electronic gear.

The captain was from Stulz, far off to the south and west across the great Ocean of Shadows, farther from his own hex than the travelers were from theirs. He was in many ways a fearsome sight, with a dark gray foxlike face filled with sharp little teeth. His beady, reddish brown eyes seemed to dart this way and that without ever settling on any one thing or person, and he had great furry wings that formed almost a cape and a hairy pair of arms terminating in fingers with very long, sharp claws. His bowlegs termi-nated in prehensile feet that essentially duplicated the hands, while from his back came a long whiplike leathery tail that seemed to be always under total control.

The trouble with Captain Hjarza, Mavra decided, was that he looked exactly like a drug-running scoundrel in this part of the world should look.

The first mate was from Zhonzhorp and resembled noth-ing so much as a bipedal crocodile with long, thin arms and rubbery four-fingered hands that terminated in what ap-peared to be suckers or suction cups. The fact that he wore britches, a sash, a vest, and a tricorn hat with a feather in it did nothing to make him look less fearsome.

The five other crew members did little to reassure by their appearance. Two were giant hairy spiderlike creatures that seemed to be able to use any combination of their eight legs almost as tentacles. Two more were short and squat but looked as if they were humanoid caricatures carved out of very ugly rocks. The fifth was a purple and red creature with a somewhat humanoid face and torso, forelegs resem-bling a goat's, and a main body that the two legs dragged around, much like a sea lion.

Only the captain and mate had translators, so for most of the passengers it was going to be a pretty nervous trip.

Alowi was horrified at the menacing menagerie, and Tony and Anne Marie hardly looked thrilled, but Lori was concerned only when she sensed that even Mavra Chang was nervous.

The Zhonzhorpian, "Just call me Zitz," was the one who was to get them squared away.

"Could be a rough trip," he warned them.

"Are you expecting trouble?" Mavra asked nervously.

"Oh, no, not *that* kind. The captain knows what he's doing, and we've been at this a long time. Your Dillians, though, will have to sleep up top on the afterdeck, since they just won't fit below, and if we get into a bit of bad weather, it can be pretty nerve-wracking up here, not to mention cold and wet."

"I've briefed them as much as I could about such things," she assured the mate. "I think we'll lash them down if we get into rough seas." She looked aft. "The way you're rigged, we might also be able to set up some kind of tent or at least a shelter if you have some sailcloth to spare. They can rig it themselves if they have the materials and a few tools. If we stretch it between the afterdeck and the main deck, it will have extra support while being out of the way of the mainmast."

Zitz was impressed by her knowledge. "All right. I think we can manage that. You've sailed before, I

think, and not as a mere passenger."

She nodded. "A very long time ago, though. If you need an extra hand in weather, let me know. I'm not that good at hauling sails, but I know the basics and I can handle whatever's needed if it doesn't take a lot of strength."

"Very good! I may take you up on that. Weather's been less than great of late, particularly in the northern ocean. We tend to use sail whenever possible regardless of the hex properties and save the steam for weather when we can use it or if the wind's too much against us."

"You're going with cargo full?"

"Not quite, but heavy enough. We'll top it off with a stop at sea. The only nonweather problems we might encounter are in Kzuco, which we can't really bypass. Other-wise we'll be staying on the northern side, which means all nontech and semitech hexes."

She nodded. "That's all right with us. The less attention we get, the better for our own purposes. We have no inter-est in your cargo or activities so long as this is yet another trip when you have no problems. In fact, I'd prefer not to meet any authorities at all."

The Erdomese and Marva followed Zitz down into the ship. It stank and had that "lived in too long by pigs" look and feel about it. The few cabins were small and narrow, but they would do. Two small cabins that might have been used for storage had been cleared out and were essentially bare; the bedrolls would have to serve both for the Erdomese in one room and for Mavra across the corridor. When Zitz left to go topside, Mavra came over to the Erdomese.

"Not exactly first class," she commented a bit apologetically, "but it will do. It'll have to."

"I wouldn't feel comfortable with this crew if they were carrying Bibles," Lori said nervously. "How long will we be cooped up on this tub?"

"With a decent wind they can make twenty knots, I'd say. Under steam, probably half that. Assuming some foul wind and allowing for the usual lousy conditions for at least some part of the trip, that probably means an average of a day and a half to two days to cross a hex depending if we're going along a single edge or across the center. That's four, maybe five days to Agon, but since they're headed past there to Lilblod or even Clopta, it might well be a week if we don't get off at some place along the way. Call it a week."

"A week! I'll never stand it! And the others . . ."

"We'll do what we have to do. If we can bypass Agon and land in Lilblod near the Clopta border, we'll not only save several days' walking, we might be able to bypass the high-tech hexes and their communications systems almost entirely."

"What about the crew? Can we trust them?"

Mavra grinned. "Not one bit. Not that I'd trust a crew looking like angels, singing like a choir, and carrying that load of Bibles you mentioned, either. In fact, watch out for the Bible carriers more than anybody. Every slave ship that ever sailed back when I knew them carried Bibles on the outbound trip; the crew all had prayer meetings and thought themselves holy and got blessed by the priests, some of whom came along. Give me a good crew of honest crooks any day. You're never surprised, and they're usually honor-able if you're not worth the trouble, and the profits these guys turn in one trip make us not worth the trouble."

"Yeah? Then how did you get them to take us at all? We're really in the way."

"Well, if they're stopped, the fact they have multiracial passengers will make them seem legit, since the kind of cops who go after these types know that they wouldn't jeopardize an illegal, high-profit cargo by having innocents aboard. Also, we're not known in the region and so are un-likely to be crooks. That's one reason. The other reason is that they've been highly paid, but in order to keep that pay-ment, they have to deliver us."

"Huh? What are you talking about? And where did you get anything valuable enough to make them consider us as precious as their cargo?"

Mavra chuckled. "It was nice to see how it all came back to me. My original profession and one I always loved. It's paid off quite a bit over the years when I needed it. Of course, I felt bad about doing that to the chief when she was so nice, but not being able to return to Gekir for a few generations is a small price to pay."

"What in the *world* are you talking about?" Lori wanted to know.

"My original profession and first love, learned out of ne-cessity and refined to a fine art before I ever left the planet where I grew up, let alone heard of the Well World. I was the best damned jewel and art thief in the whole galaxy, I'll have you know!"

Lori laughed, finding it hard to believe. "You? A profes-sional thief?"

She nodded, grinning with pride. "That's the third rea-son. These kind of folks can *sense* when they're dealing with one of their own."

"But—what did you steal?"

"Basically, some of the lesser state jewels kept in the governor's vaults. Not a big deal, but the few I picked were whoppers. They won't discover it for another month or two, though, when their big religious festival comes up and they need to take the things out. By then this business will be done."

"But you said they had to make sure they delivered us! If they've got the jewels . . ."

Mavra nodded. "I know, but they are also aware that I sent a sealed and secured packet with a courier into the Gekir capital and from there to Zone. The package is to be held for my pickup by the Glathrielian delegation, and if I don't pick it up in six months, it'll be opened and *these* boys will be fingered to the Gekir as the thieves. Simple, really."

"Um, yeah, except I thought that the Glathrielians didn't—"

Mavra put her hand up to his mouth, then put a finger to her lips. "*Shhhh!* What they don't know won't hurt us."

Lori decided to let it drop, but he wasn't at all thrilled with the news. If something went wrong and the Gekir somehow discovered the theft before they were out of the country, then nothing could save them.

"I see now why you were a little nervous coming aboard," he said.

She shook her head from side to side. "Uh uh. No prob-lem with that. It's just that I've never had good luck on ships, and even worse on the Well World, so I'm always a little spooked when I'm on them, that's all." She turned to leave. "I'm going topside and help the Dillians. Come on up when you want to."

"Um—Mavra?"

"Yes, Lori?"

"Just out of curiosity—you said you'd been in the Bra-zilian jungles something like three hundred years or more. How did you get there way back then?"

"I was sold to a Portuguese ship's captain in Macao for a beat-up old musket. The captain took a fancy to me when I was loaned out to him for some hospitality. He wanted something to relieve the tedium of a Pacific crossing. When he grew bored with me, he gave me to the mate. I went down in rank rapidly. I think if he'd been a couple of years older, I would have been with the cabin boy by the time we rounded the Horn and reached Brazil."

"How *horrible!*"

"Yeah, I thought he was going to Africa. Pretty hard to escape when you're in the middle of the Pacific. By the time we reached Brazil, I was so flipped out, I couldn't even think. They painted me up, stripped me naked, claimed I was an Indian, and sold me to a sugar plantation for a couple of bottles of private-stock rum, I think. I wasn't in any shape to pay much attention. For the next several years I cut cane and planted and harvested rice along with hundreds of black and Indian slaves. Slowly I absorbed the local languages, and some of it came back to me. It was okay, but the ownership changed and the new people were pretty vicious; they decided we should be whipped and worked into the ground until we dropped dead. There was a revolt—I don't know the details be-cause the men didn't exactly take us women into their confidence—but somehow I wound up in the middle of it. I got picked up, and they decided to have some fun with me. I flipped out—it was as if the ship's crew had suddenly reappeared. *This* time I fought, but it was hopeless. When they were done with me, they had revenge for my fighting and threats. They cut out my tongue, cut off my hands, and threw me in a swamp to die slowly."

"My God!" he said.

"Instead, of course, I survived, made my way into the jungle, and managed on my own somehow, with no voice and just stumps for hands, until I was discovered by some hunters from a local Indian tribe. They took pity on me and took me in even though I was nothing but a burden on them; by their traditions they should have left me to die. It really wasn't bad, and I was getting to like them, when, of course, I began regenerating, slowly, until it became appar-ent that I was growing new hands and a new tongue. It frightened the hell out of them. They decided I was some evil spirit and came to kill me, but I escaped back into the jungle, which by that time I knew very well."

She paused for a moment, and Lori said, "You don't have to say any more if you don't want to. I understand."

"No, that's all right. You're one of the few people who has a right to hear this out. Anyway, I lost all track of time, so I can't say how long I lived alone in that jungle, but eventually I came across two Indian girls fleeing from an-other tribe who'd captured them in an intertribal squabble. We never asked each other questions and just sort of banded together to survive. Those two were the start of my own little tribe. They never asked who I was or *what* I was or anything, even later. Of course, as they continued to age and I did

not, and particularly after I lost another limb out of carelessness to a crocodile and *it* grew back, they decided I wasn't human but some kind of goddess. I spent some time long ago in Athens at its peak and in Sparta, and I remembered the legend of the Amazons, and it just seemed fitting. After that we searched out girls who'd been cast out. Centuries later we were still doing it. Frankly, you're the first sentient male I've had any sort of conversation with, let alone friendship, in all that time."

Lori sighed. "I see. You certainly make immortality sound positively repugnant."

"Oh, it has its moments. I think I did some good in that jungle or I wouldn't have stayed, but how long do you think I would have survived there without my special situation? Why did a tribe that threw out its deformed and maimed suddenly take pity on me and take me in? And there were some brief decent periods. Greece was pretty good, and Rome was really even better than its reputation. Sheba was pretty nice, too, and some of the early Hindu Kush tribal groups were okay. It wasn't *all* bad, but I tell you, if you have to live through the history of Earth, make sure that you're a man. It won't guarantee a pleasant trip, but it's a damned sight more fun than being a woman." She paused, then said, "I think I better get up on deck. It feels like they're getting under way, and I want the Dillians settled."

She went off, and Lori looked at Alowi. "You heard and understood all that?"

"Yes, my husband."

"What do you think of it?"

"I heard, but I could not completely understand it. The nearest I could follow was that she has lived a very long time, and many of our lifetimes ago she left her husband and went out on her own in the world. She was thus without status or protection, and bad things happened to her for still more lifetimes. Then she took up with some other wild females, living with them in a wild place, and she blames all men for her misfortune."

He shrugged. "I suppose that summarizes it. But he wasn't her husband. As far as I can tell, she never had one. I'm not sure what the relationship with this man was, but he, too, is here, and they are no longer friends but enemies. Still, you seem to be blaming her for leaving him when we don't know the reason. We don't even know if she left him or some accident separated them and they never again found one another."

"All I can see is that she wants to be a man and cannot accept the idea that she is not. She has the same kind of demon that made my life so horrible, and she will stay miserable, unstable, perhaps dangerous, until she accepts what she is as I did and casts that demon out."

"She doesn't want to be a man," Lori responded. "If she did, she might well have become one, if the powers of that Well are what she claims, and she didn't. She simply wants to be self-sufficient and have the same degree of independence, the same choices and respect, that the man had."

"Perhaps."

He was irritated. "Remember, she came from a civilization we would think of as far advanced, a civilization with ships that sailed between the stars and one that did not have the same attitudes that we have. She was unprepared for the primitive early history of Earth." He paused. Did Alowi even *remember* Earth?

She didn't seem to, but she answered. "I know only that their race is much like ours. There are males and females. They have different bodies and lives and each can do things the other cannot, but they need each other to do those things. I can cure your ills and bear and raise your children. You cannot do these things, but you protect me from the evil that is everywhere and you provide for my own needs. When each does what he or she does best, there is contentment. When each tries to do the other's role, there is no contentment, and no one can really perform another's role. You did not make yourself, your role, or this way of life. Neither did I mine, nor do we truly have the choices we might like. But to pretend that you are what you cannot be leads to madness. This I believe."

Lori started to continue the argument, then realized it was useless to do so. Even Julian might have thought along those lines, although perhaps a bit more sophisticatedly. He'd never been an Earth-human woman.

Still, Alowi had made a practical point he'd been wrestling with all along. Here at least, as an Erdomese, on this world, did he really have that many choices in how to act, how to live, and what he could do? The priests, the whole culture, wanted stasis. Everyone and everything in its proper place. Biology was stacked against the Erdomese, too, almost forcing on them the ancient traditional roles. What was it Tony had told him? She could adjust to being a woman, but she could never become what Anne Marie wanted. She couldn't still be Tony, the gentleman pilot from Brazil; to avoid madness, she had to accept and become what she now was. Hell, Lori Ann had never wanted to be a man. Never. And yet, now that she was a he, there were more basic differences than Lori Ann would have thought, yet few practical differences in day-to-day terms. When one became a different species of animal, the sexual differences seemed even

more trivial, anyway.

The *practical* differences, the ones that crossed from the old species *Homo sapiens* to the new, were in social terms: the ability to walk freely down strange streets without more than pragmatic caution, for example. A whole level of *fear* was removed from the simplest social interactions, as well as the constant uncertainty of whether the strangers one met were seeing one as another person or as an object. That far outweighed the physiological differences, and it mattered. He was quickly becoming accustomed to the physiological change, as was Tony, but it was the sociological change that had made him feel somehow free. There was much about being a man he didn't like; in its own way it was as con-fining and restrictive a role as the female's. Yet he wouldn't want to trade this absence of a massive layer of tension for anything.

Maybe that was it, he thought. Compromise. Fully accept what one now was and the role and situation one was now locked into but never forget the values and achievements of who one once had been. Tony still had those skills and that knowledge from the past and maybe could appreciate things more because she'd been on both sides of the coin. She could retain her kind heart, too, and the love of Anne Ma-rie's spirit and inner strength that she masked with that little old lady act. Tony wasn't his old self, and she wasn't Anne Marie, either, no matter how identical they were; she was compromising, no, *synthesizing* into a whole new person. Maybe Lori had to finally do that, too. Accept, become Lori of Alkhaz, an Erdomese male and husband, keeping what was valuable and universal but not letting Lori Ann torture him every time he did something that she might disapprove of. Julian couldn't synthesize, and so she broke instead, retaining only the pragmatic part.

Might that, in the end, be the problem of the two immor-tals? To go so long, through so many lifetimes and cultures, not only unchanging but unable to change. Somehow he suspected that if somehow ancient folk long dead could be resurrected and taken to either this Brazil or Chang, they would instantly recognize them and find them much the same. Even growing up a person changed, often radically— from helpless infant to dependent child, through rebellious teen years and hopeful twenties and thirties, into middle age, when life's course had been set and for the first time death became a reality as the years passed subjectively at a faster and faster clip, and finally into the combined wisdom and resignation of old age. Just as pictures in the photo al-bum showing the same person at all those stages somehow also showed completely different people, life was a con-stant series of radical changes.

But not for these immortals. They hadn't changed in so long, they could remember being no other way. Endless, unchanging life—probably passing at breakneck speed to them but never getting them anywhere—had made even the chance of new experiences slim. They could fight against the system as Chang had and suffer, or they could roll with it and drift as this Solomon, or Brazil, apparently did. Eventually, even Mavra Chang had stopped fighting and had withdrawn to the most basic of all human existences. Now she was racing the fellow with an idea to making the next time different.

But would it be?

Just the little he'd seen of the Well World—and his un-derstanding of it as a laboratory for founding new races and seeding the vast numbers of worlds in the universe—had convinced him that those Ancient Ones had probably thought of just about all the themes and variations that could be imagined. In Gekir, women ruled and the men were bimbos. He hadn't yet seen one, but he'd heard that there were asexual and unisexual races here, and other races with more than two sexes. Dillian society sounded as if it was like the better places on Earth, but Tony could never be regarded as "one of the boys" and there would always be a social-sexual separation no matter how equal the opportu-nities and how safe the roads.

There were 1,560 races here, from the radically different to the fairly similar, and who knew how many had been de-veloped before this final batch was left at the end? And after all this time, had any of them developed the true Utopia? If so, he hadn't heard of it.

Mavra might well be able to radically change the race of Earth. But if she did it too much, would it still be human or just another experiment? And if but little, would it make a difference? One might well be able to program all sorts of physiological stuff, but who was smart enough to pro-gram social development, attitudes, and cultures over the life span of a race of people? Maybe even this Brazil still believed deep down that there must be a better way but knew he wasn't omnipotent enough to create and maintain it. Greece, Rome, but also the Mongol hordes and the Van-dals and Visigoths. Jesus and Buddha and Mohammed, but also Attila the Hun, Napoleon, Stalin, and Hitler.

One might well get something different, but how would one ensure that it was superior when even a race that was close to godhood as evolution could produce couldn't figure that out?

Could it be that the dark side of the human soul was just as essential to the evolutionary development and growth of a race as the beautiful side? Depressing thought, but other-wise why did the Ancient Ones leave it in?

And if *he* could think of this, why hadn't Mavra Chang? Perhaps confusing immortality with wisdom wasn't a smart thing to do. He began to get the eerie feeling that he was better qualified to play god than she was, and *he* had no real desire to take on that awesome and impossible responsibility. He knew he just wasn't smart enough to do it. No-body was.

Maybe this Brazil knew that, which was why he always remade things the same. The fact that Mavra Chang apparently *didn't* see this trap was unsettling. She wasn't really out to correct humanity; she was out to avenge herself against the forces that had hurt her.

And *that* was the most uncomfortable feeling of all. When push came to shove, as it inevitably would if they got to this Well, on which side of this strange race should his sword fall?

He looked at Alowi. "I think I'd like to go on deck. I can hear all sorts of noises up there, and I'd like to see what's going on. Do you want to go or stay here?"

"I will do as you wish."

"No, this is not one of those kind of decisions. Do *you* want to go up there or remain here?"

"I do not like those creatures above," she admitted, "but if it is my choice, I will go where you go."

"For the record, I don't like them much, either, but come on. We're going to have to live with them for a while, it seems."

Darkness had fallen, and the lights of the city market area were still very close, but they had definitely pulled away from the small private dock and were in the process of turning the ship toward the channel. The two spiderlike beings were up in the twin masts, and the rest of the small crew were tending ropes on the starboard side of the ship. Lori stayed as far from the action as possible and peered over the side. There, in the darkness, two huge longboats filled with very large Gekirs pulling on oars were guiding the ship like tugs in a big harbor. The captain, barely visible in the darkness, was on top of the wheelhouse getting a view of the entire area. Clearly the creature was basically nocturnal by nature and saw well in just the starlight and the reflected glow from the city. The crocodilelike mate was at the wheel, looking at some basic instruments and taking cryptic cues from the captain and the crew on the lines.

"Away all lines!" the captain shouted. "Clear ship!" The commands were repeated even louder by the crew on the lines, and the ropes, expertly tied, were loosened and thrown into the water to be reeled in by the longboats. "Engage rudder! All hands to embarkation stations!" Now the mate turned and began winding hard and fast on a wooden wheel, which went around and around for a while and then held firm. The mate checked something, pulled up a large lever, then turned back to the main wheel, which had been essentially free but which now seemed to have a mind of its own. The rest of the crew scurried to positions on either side of the sails. Only one small sail was dropped, but the wind caught it and the ship slowly began moving out of the harbor at a crawl, following what appeared to be small oil-fed lamps floating in the water. Just ahead, on spits of land on either side, twin lighthouses gave off amazingly bright beams, easily marking the limits of the entrance to the bay.

The port area was going by on the right-hand side, the buildings suddenly changing in character from dark, closed shops to a small harbor filled with activity just ahead. At the moment where there seemed to be nothing on the shore, between the dark buildings and the lighted dock or warehouse beyond, Lori felt a sudden tingling sensation and started. It felt as if something incredibly thin had brushed against his full body. It was gone in a moment, but suddenly the wind shifted direction and picked up considerably, and the temperature dropped from a tropical twenty-six degrees Celsius to perhaps no more than ten or twelve. Summer had turned to spring in an instant, and the wind did not help the feeling at all.

He looked at Alowi, who was clearly uncomfortable. "Do you wish to go below or perhaps get one of the jack-ets?" he asked her.

"I am all right," she told him, but she didn't look it.

Mavra came over to them, still dressed only in the thin black clothing and boots she favored and appearing not at all uncomfortable.

"It's pretty impressive when you think about it," the Earth woman commented. "The Well World has no moon and so very little in the way of a tide. That's hell for a sailing ship and cuts off a lot of harbors as too shallow. Magnetic compasses are useless, too, since there's no magnetic pole. The instruments they were using to get out of there are incredibly clever but unique to these conditions. *Now*, however, they've got full instrumentation. That's a computerized compass that always points to true north in the wheelhouse, and they've got something similar to, but much better than, mere radar. It may look like just water, but it's high-tech water now."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Lori responded. "Still, all that fancy navigation equipment only helps in a third of the hexes they sail."

"True, but a good sailor has a hundred means of setting course and position and only needs those instruments in familiar waters to confirm things. You'll note they're going in steps to full sail, even though they could use the main engines. When you have this kind of wind and it's in your favor, you take it." She looked up as the crew made a series of by-the-numbers calls, and there were sudden loud, deep crackling and rippling sounds. "Yep. There come the main-sails."

The ship was clearly at sea now, the water choppy and causing significant spray forward, some of it reaching the deck. There was a pitching motion now as well, often in more directions than one, and Lori found he had to hold on tight to the railing with both hands.

Mavra grinned. "Yeah, I'm having to get used to sea legs as well. It's been a *long* time. You'll find the motion a lot more pronounced aboard this small ship than on that giant you came up to Itus on." She turned and gestured. "See those ropes? They're well secured with steel clips, and they run all around the deck. Use them to keep yourself steady in rough seas." She grinned. "Don't worry. You'll get used to it. Promise."

Lori wasn't so sure. "That's a lot easier to say, built like you are, but hooves designed for sand and rough ground don't do all that well on slick hardwood decks. I think for now we'll be better off below."

Mavra nodded. "Suit yourselves. The Dillians have things fairly well set up back there, but they're also going to have to get used to balance."

"Yeah, well, they've got four feet! I think if I had four, I might at least be able to stay upright." And with that he gestured to a very relieved Alowi, and hand over hand, using the ropes, they made their way below.

For Mavra Chang, however, it was something else, something quite different. Looking aft at the rapidly receding lights, feeling the lurch of the ship, the smell of salt air, the rustling canvas above, and the strong breeze pushing them on, two sets of opposing thoughts and emotions rose within her.

In a positive way she felt *home* somehow, alive once more. The only thing that would have made it better would be if this were *her* ship and *she* was in the wheelhouse charting courses and giving commands. In some ways, perhaps, she would prefer that even to commanding the bridge of a starship, where one was in command of a vast but lonely structure in which the crew was wholly automated and the silence and stillness were ever-present.

But there were darker memories as well, of other ocean voyages where she had been not in charge or even a passenger but *cargo*, and disposable cargo at that, where the days were full of pain and the nights full of horror.

They would never do that to her again. She would see to that.

Dlubine, Moving Toward the Fahomma Border

there was a dramatic scene anywhere one looked after dark in Dlubine. All around, at different very specific locations, one could see lightning illuminate large cloud masses or occasionally but spectacularly snake down to the sea and play along it, often for several seconds, looking like some mad scientist's laboratory experiment. Yet overhead there would be frequent breaks in the clouds, giving windows into the magnificent and colorful night sky of the Well World, while below varicolored lights crisscrossed and weaved intricate patterns, sometimes exploding into huge complex patterns for a while, although nothing on the scale of what they'd seen the first night. And now and then the winds would bring whiffs of sulfur or the rotten-egg smell of hydrogen sulfide. At least once they'd sailed past an island perhaps two or three kilometers distant that, while invisible in the darkness, betrayed itself by showing streams of red running tendrillike down dark self-made mountains to the sea and ending in great plumes of steam. Where hot lava met the sea, the combination created its own very local thunderstorms.

"You could make a million bucks selling cruises through here," Gus noted, just staring out at the amazing sights.

"Well, I suppose the inhabitants would have something to say about that," Brazil responded, taking advantage of the conflicting winds from the surrounding turbulence and making reasonably good time. "Still, what would you do with the money, Gus? What's the top of the real estate market in Dahir?"

Gus laughed. "Not that great. Oh, it's comfortable enough, but, well, this might sound funny, but they're just too much like the small town in northern Minnesota that I got out of."

"Like *what*?" Brazil chuckled. "*This* I got to hear."

"Well, the place is pretty damned dull, frankly, just like home. Nothin' much happens, and what little that does isn't important but it becomes the biggest thing around 'cause it's *something*. Everybody's into everybody else's business 'cause they don't have much else to do, the life's routine, and the pleasure for them is simple. On top of it all it's dominated by a straitlaced church that's gonna make sure you behave and go to heaven, or wherever they think Dahirs go. No imagination, no curiosity. Even the weather's borin'. And I mean, think about this kinda invisibility thing. Even that's a drag there. I mean, so you decide to rough it and hunt your own food down 'cause it's fun, right? Only nothin' can see you comin', so where's the sport? Even back home the deer could see you and make a break for it or hide out, and even the fish had a *little* bit of a chance. Nothing's even really wild in Dahir. It's all carefully man-aged. I couldn't stand it no longer than I did."

"Urn, I see what you mean. You couldn't just find an at-tractive female and go off and buy your own swamp or something?"

"Not likely. Hell, it's the *women* who run the damn place. They're the bigger ones, they got the muscles, and they're all kinda muddy brown. It's us guys who have all the color and are supposed to attract a female. They lay the eggs, but the guys hatch 'em. I know I'm supposed to have been made comfortable with bein' a Dahir and all that, but that's just the physical part. I mean, the swimmin', the eatin' the way I eat and what I eat, stuff like that, no prob-lem, but in my head I'm still the same guy. I been him too long to be somebody else. And that arrangement just don't seem *natural* to me."

"I know some women who'd like that arrangement just fine." Brazil laughed. "It's not as uncommon among either animals or sentient species as you think, but I can see your point. Some people handle the cultural differences fine, but others find things just too topsy-turvy to adjust in that de-partment. Tell me, what *would* you do if you had your pick? You've seen a bit of this world and its denizens. Would you be something else? Or would you go back if you could?"

Gus thought about it. "I dunno. I guess I ain't seen enough of this place to really decide if there's somethin' neat to be. I sure wouldn't be no Earth-human type, not if it meant havin' done to me what was done to Terry. Go back? Yeah, maybe. I loved the job, no question. That's what I miss most. But I also had started thinkin' that I was gettin' older too fast and slowin' down and the odds were gonna catch up to me sooner or later. You know the worst thing, though? The one thing I dreaded, really hated? And it wasn't bein' shot at or bombed or nothin' like that."

"I couldn't guess."

"Comin' home. Thing was, I didn't really have one. My folks are dead; the rest of my family's as happy not to see me as I am not to see them. Got one sister who married a career navy guy and she's got a couple of neat kids, but I always felt like a stranger when I visited, like I didn't really belong there no matter how much she said she liked me visitin' her. I dunno. You get to a point in life, you don't want to stop what you love doin', but you also want some-thing else, something more . . . permanent, I guess. And I just wouldn't feel right keepin' on doin' what I'm doin' if I had a wife and kids, particularly kids. Be worse than bein' a navy wife. Sort of like bein' a cop's wife, wonderin' if I was gettin' my ass blown off someplace and only coming home between revolutions and massacres. There's some that do it, but I couldn't, and takin' a job runnin' around to the latest drug bust or bank heist or whatever isn't the same thing."

"Permanence but with a lot of action and variety—that's a pretty tall order," Brazil commented.

"Yeah, I know. I guess I'll never find what I'm lookin' for. Kinda like the sign I once saw in a shop. 'Quality! Ser-vice! Price!' it read. Then underneath it added, 'Pick any two.' Still, I'd love to go back if I could keep this invisibility or whatever it is. You could still get caught by a ran-dom bullet and nobody'd notice you sinkin' in the quicksand, but you could walk right into the rebel camp and film away. Speaking of which, how come you ain't been spooked once since I got back? I really didn't think about it until just now, but you've had no problems seem' me, have you?"

"No," Brazil admitted. He hadn't told Gus about all that had transpired, and he wanted to keep most of it that way. What Gus didn't know he couldn't reveal if he really got captured later on. Besides, who knew how he'd feel about Brazil having that kind of bond with Terry? But a few things had to be addressed.

"I picked up her second sight, sort of," he told the Dahir. "I don't know how, but somehow she gave it to me. At least, when I woke up, I had no more problems seeing you or her just like I'd expect to."

"Yeah? You also got the power to blank out other folks?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Brazil replied honestly. "Unfortunately, at some point in this trip I'm almost sure to find out. I wouldn't be surprised, though. After all this time I tend not to be surprised at very

amazing things happening when I need them."

"You sure got the luck, all right," Gus noted. "I mean, bad as it is for Terry, she's been a real plus for you this trip, right? Then I'm here as a Dahir with this crazy, built-in disappearin' act, and she figures it out and then gives it to you when they got your picture splattered all over creation. What are the odds of *that*?"

"Very low, Gus, but that's my point. It's not luck. It's the Well—the master computer. I'm just a glorified serviceman, like I said, but I have to be able to be there at the very in-frequent times it needs me. So it kind of watches over me, like a guardian angel. It can manipulate probability, make a chain of events happen that serve its interests, although it doesn't do that for much of anything or anybody except me—and Mavra Chang. That doesn't mean that bad things don't happen to me. Sometimes nasty things happen in spades. I got sloppy this time around, didn't remember ev-erything, and wound up spending a year and a half in Auschwitz for my trouble during World War II. It just means that nothing permanent happens. I suffered, I starved, I was treated lower than an animal there, but I sur-vided. Barely, but I survived. That's what it does, Gus. It makes sure I survive."

"Jeez! I keep forgettin' you don't age. But what did you mean by gettin' sloppy 'this time around'? You talk like you lived through the Nazis before."

"I did—but in Ireland last time, I think. That's the scary part of it all, Gus. Inside there, inside the Well, among other routine things, is something I can't really explain but which is, for all intents and purposes, a reset button. It's a last gasp thing, something only I, not the Well, can decide to push. What it does is—complicated. Now *there's* an un-derstatement for you! But anyway, it resets. Not completely, of course. The universe still continues to expand, the *basics* don't change, but all life out there is essentially canceled out. All people, all history, everything pretty much. Time and space become objects of manipulation. In some cases it can use the same planet and solar system again; in other times it has to find material from somewhere else that pretty well matches what existed before and re-create from scratch. Each of the worlds goes through the whole process of development, of evolution, you name it. From the van-tage point of the Well World, it happens in the wink of an eye, but it can be a few billion years or more out there. Don't ask me how that's possible. I'm just the guy who has to push the button sometimes, not the ones who built or de-signed it or the computer capable of such godlike things."

"Jesus! And you've actually *done* this?"

"Twice. The memory of doing *that* is something that's always stored somewhere inside me. I might forget it for a while, but when I get here, I remember. Hitler, Stalin, all the mass murderers of Earth history are pikers compared to me, Gus. I've killed *trillions* with one decision, and worse, I erased all signs of their existence. All their history, cul-ture, everything. Gone. But then I brought them back, in real time. The Well is a master of matching probabilities. Everything repeats as closely as possible. Maybe not an ab-solute one hundred percent, but it repeats so eerily that you wind up seeing the same people, the same empires, the same dreams, the same wars, the same nations and ideolo-gies."

"Jeez! You mean you killed *me* at some time in the past? Or another me? And another Terry, and all the rest?"

"Well, no. You two were long dead by the time I did it the last time. The time before—I only remember that I did it, that's all. But I was still a captain both times, I'm pretty sure of that. Not of some ship like this, though, or even the big supertanker I was skipping back on Earth. Spaceships, Gus. Mavra, too. She had her own ship. She wasn't even *born* on Earth and might not even have heard of it until she fell in with me here. We moved a lot of cargo and occa-sional passengers between stars over a third of the Milky Way galaxy. God! How I loved that job! That's my equiva-lent of your photojournalism, Gus."

"Spaceships. Wow, that's neat!"

"Yeah, only the Well never inserts me at a point where I can do my job. This last time it inserted us, oh, I think maybe 50,000 b.c. or so. Since that time Mavra and I have both been, well, surviving, waiting until Earth once again headed for the stars. This time we didn't make it."

"Holy smoke! You mean you got to reset that thing again? *That's* what this is all about?"

"Maybe. I hope not. I don't know if I can do it again. I can't imagine why I'm here, but I've been here in between for other things. Somebody once was actually smart enough to figure out the mechanics of the Well and some Markovian mathematics. The Well was alarmed, not be-cause he could do anything major but because he had the potential to do some damage right here. Events got manip-ulated so I fell through a Well Gate shortly after, and it was up to me to solve the problem. No damage done in the end, and I just went back to doing what I'd been doing. The Well doesn't let you stick around to get the universe into real trouble when it doesn't need you anymore. I *can* tell you that something's off kilter and may need adjustment. Something happened, maybe recently, maybe back as far as the last reset, but the tiny differences have accumulated to the point where, over thousands of years, they made a big change or a

series of big changes. I noticed that when the Soviet Union collapsed so suddenly. I knew the consequences were terrible for later history that it did, but I kind of hoped it was just the result of a local aberration, just Earth, in other words. There're a lot more worlds and races than that out there."

"Hey! Hold it! That was *great* news, not bad news!"

"Was it? Yeah, I suppose, from your local point of view. From *my* point of view it was awful. Without the tension, the pressure, the competition, discoveries that would eventually spread humanity to the stars were set back by centuries at the very least, maybe even forever unless another such power arose."

"Huh? What? We was sendin' up space shuttles all the time!"

Nathan Brazil sighed. "Gus, you come from the most bi-zarre nation on Earth. It looks and feels like a European culture or cultures, but its root culture is more alien to the rest of the world than the Chinese or anybody else Western-ers think are inscrutable. You invented violent anticolonial-ist revolution and sponsored it for decades, then you turned around and acted like an imperial power and couldn't figure out why everybody else didn't do the same. A bunch of your people, half of them devoted slaveholders and at least half virulent racists, wrote the world's greatest statement on individual liberty and protecting minority rights. You continue to create and dream up most of the vital inventions and scientific principles of the industrial revolution, and then you let everybody else put them into practice better than you do, so that the only thing you wind up being absolute masters of is varying ways to destroy all life on Earth. One of your people invented the principles of rocketry and couldn't *give* it away, so the Germans copied his patents and used it to bomb London. Then you import the same Germans to make rockets for you, but you don't care even about them until the Russians use *their* captured Germans and create the first satellite. *Then* you decide you got to go to the moon before them to show them up, and you do. But they don't go, and you lose interest, and thirty years later, nobody's close to going back."

"Jeez! You're sure not givin' us credit for much, are you?"

"Well, I credit you with an awful lot, Gus, but you Americans were only masters of one specialty, and that was war. The rest you let go, and when you let the rest go, like space, you become a hollow nation without ideals, a bunch of folks doing research and development for other nations, and you lose that restless creativity that made all those advancements possible. You were rotting, Gus. Drugs, crime, poverty, and an economy mostly based on exporting raw materials and importing finished goods—right back where you started from before the revolution. A service economy isn't an energetic, growing one, it's a nation doing each other's cooking and dry cleaning."

"And the *Russians* stayin' whole would have changed that?"

"Well, it did the last time. Your people need an enemy they think is an equal, Gus. They see the world as a sports contest. Not much fun playing soccer when you're the only team on the field. The Soviets were going to assemble a big, grand space station, Gus. One *hell* of a platform up there, under the control of the Red Army. You know what would happen in your country if that became real. And then they were going to the moon and eventually Mars. Things would turn around. The game would be on again. Instead, their totalitarian regime collapsed, they fragmented, discovered the rest of us weren't so bad and that they really lived at a Third World level, and all the grandiose dreams fell apart as the money and resources got diverted to doing things like producing toilet paper and decent indoor plumbing. Fine for them, but it keeps humanity pretty much stuck on its ball with the only question being whether it'll run out of resources, choke to death on pollution, destroy its atmosphere, or just fall apart in food riots and general anarchy. Don't blame me. It was *your* people who couldn't do a thing without an archenemy. And don't look so downcast. We came from a great era for bang-bang on-the-spot news, didn't we?"

"If you think I'm gonna argue about how shitty the situation on Earth is, you're nuts," Gus responded.

"You said it—you remember what I did for a livin'. But you know, I bet you saw worse, experienced worse, during all that time. Kids dyin' of no reason but ignorance or maybe sacrificed to some sun god someplace. You said you was in that concentration camp, saw the worst people can do to each other. Did you ever look up the survivors? Did you ever cry for the ones that went into the ovens? Or did you just sit there, like you was in purgatory, endurin' the hunger and the punishment and the pain and maybe feelin' sorry and disgusted that you got yourself into that fix, but unlike all them other people, them millions, you *knew* you was gonna walk out. You *knew* the Nazis would lose. Hell, you knew that even if they whipped you, even if they pulled out your toenails, cut your fingers off, tore out your tongue, you'd not only pull through, somehow, but all that would grow back. In the end it'd be just one more bad experience and the nightmares would stop and you'd do okay. Not like all them others. You like to pretend that you care, and maybe you do for one person or another right here and now, but you don't really. Not deep down. And the only thing you're *really* pissed off about is the wrong people got a good break and even though it might be better for everybody else, it slowed down what *you* wanted. *Slowed it down!* What the hell's a hundred years to you,

anyway? Don't lecture me about my people and my world, good, bad, or whatever. You push a button and we all go away, but while we're here, we're *alive*. You didn't need to see a Dahir's invisible tricks. You ain't noticed the whole course of human civilization except when one comes up and shouts in your face!"

Brazil didn't respond immediately. He felt bad about what he'd said about Gus's native country and history; re-ally, in the long course of things, it was far better than most. But Gus's accusations had hit a bit too close to him at his drifting best to remain totally unchallenged.

"You're right, Gus," he said at last. "About some of it, anyway. The cause, though, is one you should understand as well as anybody. How many people have you seen die? How many corpses have you counted on bloody streets and in killing fields? How many starving kids in some revolution or drought-stricken land have you walked past? A lot, I'd guess, in your short life."

"Yeah? So?"

"What was your reaction the *first* time you saw kids you liked getting blown away or lying in agony? The *first* time you saw a whole village die of starvation, a living death? I think you cried, Gus. If not outside, then inside. I think after you saw a village of kids who looked like walking skeletons and could barely raise their heads, you got so up-set, so sick to your stomach, you puked your guts out someplace and maybe cried again. But you had a job to do. Without your pictures, nobody else would know. Nobody who could help would know where to help. A few news-reels of Auschwitz and it would have ceased to exist. The whole rest of the world would have fought like demons. Nobody made it into those camps and back out with those pictures then. That's your job, Gus, and that's part of why you do it. Part of it is a thrill ride, living on the edge, but nobody walks through the starvation in east Africa, say, because they want to see the world."

"I still don't see your point."

"The point's simple. After a while you still believe in the job, but you don't puke anymore. The ten-thousandth kid dying before your eyes of starvation isn't like the first one or even the first ten. The hundredth soldier you capture on film falling in battle isn't like the first one, either. Ask any soldier. Ask any survivor of those camps. You never like it, but you get hardened, you get immunized to a degree, because you have to survive and live with yourself. Pretty soon *you* don't have nightmares about it, either. You just get—detached. Not only to save your sanity but also because you accept that you can't feed those starving people yourself, you can't save the kid looking up at you, you can't call back that bullet to that young soldier's heart. You know it happened to you; otherwise you couldn't still do it. Some people can't. They go nuts or they quit and do some-thing else. You can and you did. I think they call that being 'tough,' or maybe just being a 'professional.' Terry was a tough professional. You admired that a lot in her."

"Well . . ."

"So why condemn me for being the same way? When the ice sheets came down and killed off the crops and moved the people in great migrations southward, I was there. When the first temples were built to long-forgotten gods, I was in the crowd that watched the sacrifice of the children to them. When the Persians and Medes and Baby-lonians and Greeks marched and leveled whole cities and sowed their enemies' lands with salt, I was there. When Roman emperors threw people to the lions to the cheers of the crowd in the coliseums of the world, I was selling tick-ets and souvenirs or picking the spectators' purses. When they crucified thousands every few meters of the Appian Way as examples, I ran the dice game for their effects. When the Vandals vandalized and the Goths and Visigoths crushed the Romans, I sold them street maps. Then the Celts, then the Germans, then the Slavs, then the Moslem hordes, as they were called by the Christians. The Chil-dren's Crusade—that was a good one! All those kids, some not even in their teens, slaughtered as they made their way to the Holy Land singing hymns only to be finished off facing a professional army also convinced that God was on their side. The Inquisition—they actually felt *horrible* after they tortured you to death in the name of God. Wept for your lost soul. Want me to go on?"

"I get your point. But you *knew* better. Couldn't you have done *something* more than be an audience?"

"What? One guy? You can't buck the worst in humanity because sometimes you throw out the best, too. See, you have an advantage I don't have. I could at least hide out from the worst of that, I suppose, but I *can't* quit, I can't go home. I can't even go permanently nuts. I can't even *die* with them. After a while you just get too frustrated. After a while you just stop fighting the tide of history and just survive as best you can."

"Yeah, I guess I see, sorta. I still ain't sure how we got on this track. Maybe boredom or tiredness or somethin'. Can you answer me one thing, though?"

"If I can."

"What were you in the last go-round? I mean, maybe this machine god won't let you play really funny stuff, but you got some choice over you, don't you?"

The question actually surprised him. "I—well, yeah, I do. I have a good deal of *local* power over what

happens here, on the Well World, while I'm in there, even if I can't mess with the Earth's program. I never really did much with myself, though. Every time I'm in there, I say at least I'm gonna make myself 185 centimeters tall with a face and body to die for, and I never do. It's not a Well prohibition, it's just, well, I'm generally so preoccupied with other folks and other things when I'm there, I never really think of myself. Maybe I'm just so used to being me now, I can't think of myself any other way."

"Jeez! So you're kinda the master of this world of all these races and forms and stuff and you *never* wind up anything or anybody else? You got all them other planets out there and you stick with relivin' Earth history over and over? You're right about not bein' able to go nuts. You *are* nuts!"

This new point struck him even harder than the earlier argument had because there really *was* no defense. He'd always been Nathan Brazil since—well, since this job had begun, anyway. At least he hadn't the slightest, vaguest memory of *not* being just this way. He alone knew why he'd stuck with Earth, or at least Earth humans, but even there he didn't really *have* to. It made no difference in the end to damned near anything.

Sure, he'd been—memory somewhere vaguely said a deer at one time in the past and a Pegasus for a brief time—but those had been *here* and for emergency purposes. He'd become himself again as quickly as he could.

He'd always loved the Dillians, also for good reason, but he'd never considered becoming one of them, living as one of them through *their* history, which was something of a mystery to him. They were fighters, too, and even with far more limited resources they'd managed, as he knew, to attain space consistently ahead of Earth. There were others, too, equally attractive and advanced, yet he'd ignored them all. It seemed stupid on the face of it. No rerun of history and events, new experiences, new people and capabilities . . . Even Mavra, with her own personal traveling version of the Markovian computer, had gone to many other worlds and become many other creatures, he remembered now.

"I've got no answer or explanation, Gus," he told the Dahir. "The only thing I can think of, and I'm not at all sure if it's the real reason or not, is that maybe I needed something that was absolutely fixed, unchanging, always comfortable and familiar, that couldn't be taken away from me."

Gus stared back out at the colorful scenes in the darkness and tried to imagine what it would be like to be Nathan Brazil. Maybe he'd be just as loopy after all this time, he thought, but he wouldn't mind giving it a try.

They were passing another area of active volcanic activity in the distance, and it was a sight he found impossible to tire of. Suddenly his two huge eyes focused on a single spot in the distance, off to the left of the lava flow. At first he thought they were just reflections of some of the lights from under the sea or perhaps lights or markers on the islands, but now, as he stared fixedly at the spot, he saw what had drawn his attention to the spot.

"Cap! Off here, just left of the lava. Those lights *moved*!"

"Could be just an illusion with all the heat and distance," Brazil responded, not terribly concerned. "Or it might well be another ship. There's a lot out here, you know."

"Yeah, well, I been lookin' at it, and those lights are sure not illusions and they're on somethin' pretty big movin' our way."

Brazil looked over at where Gus was already staring, and after a minute or so he saw them, too. "Yeah, Gus. They're running lights for sure. Something pretty big, I'd say. I can't make out much in the dark, though. There's a storm moving almost parallel over there. If it kicks up some lightning, you might be able to tell what it is."

"You want me to douse our running lights?" Gus asked him worriedly. "You never know."

"Maybe. Hold on a minute and try to make sure it's heading for us and not just coming out and going somewhere else. The sea-lanes we're on here run mostly south-east to northwest. If he's legitimate and coming from that direction, he should turn parallel to us in a little bit and head off in the opposite direction. I don't like it, though. What's a ship doing that close to those islands? They're marked as too active and dangerous for landings on the charts."

"He's comin' on toward us! *Whoops!* There was a big flash. Couldn't make out much, though, but it sure looked like a big bunch of smoke. Man! He's comin' on fast and steady! He *can't* be a sailboat and move like *that*, can he? I mean, the wind's against him, right? Yeah! There's another flash. Still can't make out the ship, but that's a steamer all right!"

"Douse the running lights, Gus, quick as you can! I think we're in trouble!"

The sudden rise in Brazil's adrenaline roused Terry, who got up, watched Gus put out the lights so that the ship fell into total darkness, and immediately looked around for the danger she was already directly sensing.

She went through a whole series of spectrum shifts until she spotted the oncoming vessel, and inside of it

she sensed danger in numbers beyond theirs by quite a bit. There were a lot of creatures on that ship, and all seemed to be of one mind, to catch and board *this* ship and take them.

A whole range of actions came into her mind, but none of them were useful. She could make it very hard for them to see, or notice, both her mate and herself, but they would still take the ship and sooner or later they would certainly have a means of detecting them. And there were so *many* of them.

There was a sound like thunder off toward the oncoming lights, and suddenly the sea seemed to explode just forward and off to the left of the tiny sailing ship.

Brazil spun the wheel and then began taking down sail, using the levers and pulleys nearby.

"What the hell you doin', Cap! You're headin' right for 'em!" Gus cried.

"We won't be for long, but they had our course and speed damned good there, and I needed to throw them off in the dark. They've got no radar here."

"Yeah, well, they don't *need* radar at this distance! I mean, we must be blockin' off the undersea light show just like they are to us by now!"

Brazil cursed under his breath. He hadn't thought of that! And those guys were surely using just that technique on them. They were used to these waters; he was not.

He took a deep breath, then shouted, "Okay, then, we're gonna have to open range and sail where they can't do that!" as he put out full sail and turned for maximum wind.

"Hey! Them dark places could be *islands*, Cap!" Gus pointed out. "And you're gonna go right into the edge of that storm, too!"

"Just what I want to do!" he yelled back as a second shot landed forward and just to the right. "Damn! Straddled us with two shots at two kilometers! Those boys are *good*!"

They were making very good speed, getting up to fifteen, maybe twenty knots, but they were no match for the steamer still closing on them, particularly considering the angle.

A third shot landed perhaps twenty meters ahead of their bow, and its message was very, very clear. They could hit them any time they felt like it.

They were past the undersea fairyland lights, though, at least, and it was still water at this point. Suddenly, with very loud *splats* like buckshot falling on the deck, the rain swept over them.

The captain of the patrol boat knew exactly what his quarry was doing, and, worse, with the storm and the dark-ness, he actually risked losing them now that he had them cold. He couldn't wait and take that chance; there were too many reefs and shallows in there for him to follow closely with his craft. "If you can still get it, fire to hit!" he com-manded, and the gun crew, also very experienced, made mental calculations, slightly adjusted the forward cannon, waited for a possible last sighting with a lightning flash, and fired a blast.

The shot struck the little sailing ship almost in the stern, and all three aboard were thrown to the deck as their world lurched and shook. One of the smaller masts came loose and dangled, caught in its own rigging.

"Everybody okay?" Brazil shouted in the fury of the wind and rain and thunder.

"Yeah! Terry almost fell on top of me!" Gus called back. "You?"

Brazil got back up, grabbed the madly spinning wheel, and found that it was spinning freely. "Damn! They took out my rudder!" He looked up at the sails and saw the dan-gling mast hanging precariously, fouling lines, heard the slow rip of canvas, and knew instantly that there was no hope of steering by sail alone.

He made his way to the other two. "I hear breakers not far off, *that* way!" he pointed, a position perhaps half a kilometer away in the darkness from their current position and what looked to be a good three or more kilometers from where the lava flow should be. "We're gonna have to abandon ship and swim for it! The quicker the better, too! We could go down like a shot in this sea if enough water gets in the hole in the stern or we hit a reef!"

"Okay! I'll make it! How about if we split up, we ren-dezvous this side of the lava near the beach?" Gus sug-gested. "Hey! You want to throw over the raft?"

At that point the ship seemed to almost stop, and Brazil could feel the bow coming up.

"No time! Just go! *Now*! If she goes down when any of us are close, she could take us with her!"

Gus hesitated, then leapt into the dark waves. Brazil, knowing at least that he and Terry would not be separated but nonetheless concerned for her life, had no choice but to follow. Terry did not hesitate.

Terry had been a fair swimmer in swimming pools and such, but she had never had to swim in seas like this and for a very long moment she was convinced that she was going under for good and was certain to drown.

Then the discipline and control of the Glathrielian mind snapped fully in, and she calmed down, sensed Brazil and what he was doing, and made her way to the surface and toward her mate. Brazil had recovered as best he could but was acting instinctively; later there would be time to think about how much worse he'd

been through and reflect on it.

He struggled against the waves to make his way to Terry and finally reached her. Now she would have to pretty well stay with him and trust him absolutely with her life. Her Glathrielian mind understood that sort of logic and did not resist, having no better plan itself.

Using the waves, letting them carry the pair where they willed, Brazil managed to get them both relatively stabilized in the rough sea. At least it was no longer raining, although they could hardly tell, but Brazil was able to get at least a gut-level feeling of where they were headed and even got something of a look in that direction.

They appeared to be heading toward the lava flow and the huge plume of steam offshore.

He doubted if even Terry's bag of tricks could protect her from molten lava, but the Well would protect *him* from it somehow. If he could just stay close to her, linked to her, he might well be able to have her share *his* unique protection for a change. He *felt* her absolute trust in him and felt that she had accepted dependence for this period. She was not doing so well against the waves, though, and that terrified him. In a move as instinctive as his swimming actions, he reached out to her, first grasping her hand, then mind to mind, soul to soul. She did not resist, and now he was part of her and partly still within himself, as was she. They became as one mind, one organism, with Terry surrendering almost total control to him.

They managed for what seemed like a very long time, then, suddenly, there was a large wave that came along and picked them both up and almost threw them against a beach.

It was a granular black sand beach of the sort that new volcanoes built; it *hurt* when they hit it, but it didn't knock them out. Dizzy, disoriented, unable to stand, waves still crashing over them, they crawled as one on hands and knees back beyond the breakers, the black sand sticking to and covering their wet bodies. It took a tremendous force of his will to get them back far enough that there was relative safety. Then, with his inner voice telling him that he was safe at least for the moment, both bodies turned, gasped for air, then passed out cold on the beach.

The sun was high in the sky when Nathan Brazil awoke in a bizarre and yet beautiful landscape.

Terry awoke at the same time, the linkage between them as strong as or stronger than ever, and together the two of them got up on their feet and looked around. Both were battered and bruised and covered in thick black sand that seemed to be stuck everywhere. Brazil, seeing nothing on the horizon, decided that they could risk getting into the much calmer surf and wash it off, and Terry followed. In spite of the energy shell, it was almost like bathing in a Jacuzzi, but it woke them completely and cleaned off the sand.

The bruises were par for the course of what they had gone through, and muscles and joints seemed extraordinarily achy, but both were basically all right considering what they had survived, and that was enough. When you could notice the tangles in your hair and be irritated by them, you weren't in that bad shape.

There was no sign of the ship, not even wreckage, but it was impossible to say how long they'd been in the water or just where they'd gone down compared to where they'd come ashore. There were no other ships to be seen on the horizon, either; if the cutter had searched for survivors, it hadn't found them, but that didn't mean it wasn't still in the area.

Even so, that left the two of them stark naked with no tools, supplies, or anything else, standing on the beach, essentially marooned very much as in his personal fantasy. The trouble was, in a fantasy it was easy to conjure up what you needed, while in reality you had to find it, if anything was available.

The black sand beach stretched in both directions as far as the eye could see. About a hundred meters beyond where they'd come ashore there was a slight rise, and not far beyond that he could see nearly constant plumes of white smoke. While the lava flow itself was invisible to him in the daylight, the lava having hardened a bit on top and flowing downhill in its own thin self-made cocoon, it was clearly still expanding the island from beneath the waves. The muffled sounds of explosions could be heard from the direction of the steam as the molten rock continued to flow into the sea and react with the cooler waters.

Looking inland, it was a long way to anything interesting. The beach extended back for a kilometer or so, then turned into cracked and jagged rock in a fairyland of shapes formed when molten rock had cooled, solidified, and fragmented. It was easily another kilometer or more beyond that to where the older island missed by the most recent flows remained, with thick junglelike vegetation starting abruptly from where the flow stopped.

In back of it all and dominating the entire scene was the massive volcano itself, rising up like a huge lump several kilometers above the water, its top masked by a ring of clouds.

There was no getting around it; they would have to make their way back into the jungle and see whether the island contained enough to sustain them for now. Food and water were the first priorities.

He thought about Gus. He hadn't seen the Dahir since he'd gone overboard, and he wondered how well

this kind of place could sustain such a creature. Large animals were unlikely in this isolated environment, fresh water would be more likely inland than anywhere along the coast, and that body wasn't really built for walking or even slithering over this kind of terrain.

Still, Gus had shouted to meet near the lava flow and on this side of it, fortunately, and he owed it to the creature to check before heading inland. He set off across the sands toward the billowing steam, Terry following.

The sight from the top of the rise was spectacular, probably even more so at night, with the lava steaming just below the surface in front of him and then the monstrous, churning, seething, bubbling region creating the steam just beyond.

There was no sign of Gus, nor had he expected any, but he'd done his duty. They could hardly stay there and wait in the expectation that the Dahir would suddenly appear; they'd need the daylight to explore the island. Brazil also didn't have anything he could leave to indicate their survival and presence, nor was there much he could use to create anything. The black sand wasn't even conducive to writing a message in English that only Gus would understand, and even if he could haul some rocks from the lava field inland and build something, a feat hardly possible considering how much he ached, anything small enough to escape the notice of pursuers would be overlooked by Gus and anything conspicuous enough to get noticed might well attract the wrong people.

It was Terry, either by chance or by design, who came up with the somewhat gross but only logical means of leaving Gus any sort of message.

She took a crap in the sand.

Hardly permanent, but a hunter species might well notice such a thing and Gus would recognize the species of origin, possibly the specific scent. Others might do the same, but they would first have to know to come to this specific area of the beach.

That taken care of, it was time to make their way inland to the jungle. If possible, they'd check back at this spot on a regular basis, if only to see if anything had either been disturbed or something else had been left to give them a sign.

I feel like Tarzan playing Robinson Crusoe, he thought. Friday was even the silent type, as always, although he suspected that the old shipwrecked sailor would have preferred *this* kind of Friday to the one he'd gotten.

Walking through the sand wasn't much of a problem, but the sand ended well short of the jungle, and it was a dangerous and slow journey through masses of rock that had flowed, cooled, and frozen, often shattering into huge lumps or collapsing into deep holes. It was a boulder field, but of black rock that was twisted into bizarre forms, some looking like taffy, others looking like frozen rippling rivers. It wouldn't take much of a misstep in that field to twist or even break an ankle, and so it was a slow process of trial and error to get through it, and it took them several precious hours to reach the edge of the jungle.

Volcanic areas were always fascinating for their contrasts. Where they had come ashore had probably been ocean only weeks earlier; now, here, where not much older flows had come, it might have been anything from beach to jungle, but the lava had burned and scoured all in its path, leaving no sign of anything. Yet the wet green jungle had resisted where it could, and just meters from where the flow ended it was as if nothing had happened at all.

There appeared to be no birds or animals, large or small, but somehow insects, or the equivalent of insects, had made their way here on air currents and were the dominant species. Some looked pretty fearsome, huge creatures that flew on multiple wings and were the size of hummingbirds and strange translucent creatures the size of a man's head that made their way up and down trees and vines shooting out long, creamy white tendrils.

To Terry, the jungle gave a sense not of real danger or strangeness but of an odd familiarity. She had spent some time in jungles like this, and while the individual plant and insect life was different, this jungle was no more bizarre than the Amazon had been. She felt almost as if she were in her own element, a cross between the swampy jungle of Glathriel and the dense yet protective Amazon rain forest. Terry the American television producer would have found the region creepy and threatening, but somehow that Terry seemed like another person, someone she barely knew. That Terry would have found the comforts of Hakazit to her liking, while the new Terry had felt only its sense of wrongness and had been relieved when they'd left it.

For all intents and purposes Theresa Perez was dead and had been for quite some time, save for some of the knowledge from her past that might be useful. She hadn't realized it and did not do so now; the Glathrielian way did not allow for reflection and introspection on that level, but that did not change the truth of it. She hadn't even been conscious of when it had happened; it had been quite late, though, when she'd

made the decision to be the diversion for the others to get through the Well Gate. Even when she'd told Lori that she would remain in the Amazon until finally she could make her way to civilization, she'd known that she had no intention of doing so. She hadn't known until it was snatched away how much she really had hated her life or how much pressure she'd been under until it had been removed. It had long ago ceased to be anything more than a job, and that job had been the only thing she'd had, the only reason to wake up and exist every morning. She had no personal life, no friends outside the business, and she hadn't even had the glamour of being on camera. It had been over since that horror on the Congo, but she'd had no place else to go and her work was the only thing that she did better than almost anybody else.

She had hid it well, but the rock-hard woman Gus so admired had been terrified to walk alone to her car in an Atlanta parking lot.

Overcoming the initial fear, shock, and terror of the jungle and having been accepted into the Amazon tribe, she'd found a closeness and a sense of herself she'd never been aware of before. She had not thought twice about seducing those guards or felt guilt or recrimination. It had, rather, been the culmination of her transformation before she'd ever seen the Well World; it had been the act of someone who had found an element where life, where action, was a challenge rather than a reaction to fear. Even then, on some subconscious level, she knew she didn't want to be Terry again.

She had followed the others into the Well Gate almost on impulse but partly because she knew that the restrictions on the life of the People were not for her and that her friends, those she had felt closest to of any for a long time, had gone through the Gate. It had been Teysi's impulse, not Terry's. Nor could Terry have walked naked and alone into that alien swamp that was Glathriel, but Teysi could and did. And the Glathrielians, for whatever purpose, had given her the last required links to make the change complete.

They had given her the freedom from all dependency on *things*, leaving the focus only on what really counted—people—and with that the power to survive almost any conditions. They had given her protection against most of the forces of civilization and nature. And in a sense they had given her the ability to accept herself just the way she was, with no pretense or artifice.

So now it was Teysi's persona who was in this strange new jungle with her mate, and Teysi was far better qualified to be there than either Terry Perez or Nathan Brazil.

Brazil was content to let her take the lead, sensing her confidence. Food and water were the first priority, and somehow he was confident she could find them even though he wasn't sure how. On Earth a good although not totally infallible rule of thumb was to watch what the animals ate. Here the only animals were insects of a different evolution.

He watched her examine trees, vines, shrubs, and growths of all sorts and was not even aware that she was comparing them not to anything she knew directly but to elements in the vast Well database she could slightly access through her links to him. Finally, she picked up a thing that looked to him like a purple cabbage, peeled away the outer leaves to reveal a smooth oval inside skin, and bit into it. The deep red pulpy interior was kind of messy, but she kept eating rather than falling down in fits. He shrugged, picked up another—they must be falling from some of the higher trees, he decided—and did the same.

The stuff was disappointingly tasteless, with just a hint of a grapelike flavor, and the inside proved to have the consistency more of mashed potatoes than of oranges or grape-fruit, but it went down easy, was filling, and had a high water content to boot.

He hoped they'd find something better and tastier, but unless they both came down with galloping stomachaches later, it was proof that they wouldn't starve here. They could at least survive.

Farther in they found a number of shallow streams that provided welcome fresh water. It tasted strongly of minerals with just a hint of sulfur, but it would do.

They did find a few more palatable things to eat as well, including something that resembled a pink tennis-ball size grape, both in looks and taste, and a thick green vine that tasted a lot like celery with a slight onionlike tang, before the light began to fail. By that time the aches and pains had gotten a bit too much for him, anyway, and she found an area near a huge tree carpeted with a light brown, spongy moss and lay down on it. It would soon be dark as pitch in the volcanic jungle, anyway; not the sort of conditions for exploring.

He lay down next to her on the soft natural matting and found it surprisingly comfortable. Still, as the last light faded and the world was enveloped in total darkness, he couldn't help but feel every ache and pain and consider the absurdity of the situation. There was no way around the fact that they were now shipwrecked on a small island in the middle of nowhere, alone, cut off from continental land by 190 kilometers or more of open sea they had no way to cross, with no means to get off and little hope of rescue by anyone save perhaps their enemies and the final objective, the equatorial barrier and its gateway into the Well of Souls, more unobtainable than ever.

She felt his pain, both physical and mental, and all she wanted to do was help him as he had helped her in the surf. To Terry, the current situation was not bad at all but almost her own concept of how life should be. All that they needed was here, and there seemed little that could threaten them in any way. It seemed as if all the fates had conspired to bring them here, and she could not conceive of it being more ideal. It was his old ways, old life thinking that kept him unhappy, forever searching for what he did not know. He had helped her when she had needed help; now it was her duty to do it for him.

She began by easing his physical pain, both by damping down the pain centers and by applying healing energies to those parts that were badly bruised. She began by massag-ing him, and as he felt the effects, he did not protest but rather relaxed and enjoyed it. With his pain substantially eased or gone, the massage turned slowly into far more than that, and as passion took control, she offered a unique new experience, a sharing of bodily pleasures that subtly became a sharing of minds and souls as well, in which her own will became dominant. Now, in rhythm with the pas-sion, waves of conceptual objects of her will washed through them, through him, and as they had no words, their significance and purpose could not be divined by him, yet they were unresistingly accepted and understood by his mind as seductive, hypnotic commands in a way quite sim-ilar to what the Glathrielians had done to her, but in this case entirely of her own origin and out of her own desires.

Forget the past . . . Wall it off . . . The past does not exist . . . There is no past, there is no future, there is only now . . .

Enter my mind, my body . . . Within is all that you re-quire, all that you will ever need . . . Take from my body, my mind all that you need . . . Leave all else behind . . . See, know, that there is only good inside me, take it as your own, renounce all else . . .

He reached out for what was promised and found within her a shining kernel of something overwhelming, something beyond anything he had ever experienced before. Pure, un-diluted, unconditional love; total, absolute, unconditional trust. There, inside her, was what he had never been able to witness or feel, that which he'd been incapable of believing even *existed* anywhere, at any time, on any plane.

Let it in, let it in . . . Let it displace all the darkness . . .

A moment he knew at some deep level would never come again had arrived, and he could not turn it away. His resistance melted; he let it flood into him, not displacing that which could not be displaced but pushing it away, sealing it off from consciousness, not permitting it to interfere . . .

The waves washed through him, overwhelming, sealing off all those things that could intrude or interfere, and once that was done, he returned them until what remained active in his own mind matched the pattern in her mind. The yin and yang merged, the puzzle pieces, shorn of all that was not relevant, fit perfectly and without flaw . . .

They awoke before dawn, the jungle no longer dark to them but seething with the varying colors and patterns of life. They took care of bodily functions, washed in a nearby stream, then started through the jungle, not with any real purpose but because it was so pretty and so alive and was to be enjoyed. Along the way to nowhere in particular they found some of the fruits and vegetables that were good to eat and they ate, feeding themselves and each other and giggling like two young people in the dawn of first love.

After a while they started off again, going deeper, fol-lowing the trails of some of the larger insects just to see what made them and where they were going. They were hardly aware of the fact that they were also moving uphill, nor did they care, all places and destinations being the same to them. They were Adam and Eve in the Garden before the Fall, and they were more than that. They did not speak because such an act was totally unnecessary. Each felt what the other felt, each knew what the other knew, both thought the same thoughts at the same moment because they were as one. Each existed solely for the other and for the mo-ment.

When they broke clear of the jungle, they were amazed and thrilled at the great sight that was before them. Still rel-atively far down on the great mountainside, they could still look out from its slope and see the vast colorful seascape beyond, even more beautiful when blended as it was with all the colors of life below.

Then they watched the sun come up and dramatically change the view, not to one of ugliness but to one almost completely different from the night scene. They stayed there for some time, until the sun was well up in the sky, then made their way back down into the jungle for some more to eat and drink.

He found a vine filled with pretty multicolored flowers that had become broken, possibly in the wind or by insects, and picked it up and made a flower garland out of it for her hair. She wanted to see it and so saw it through his eyes, then decided to take the flowers and place them on him, and he looked at himself through her eyes. And when they were done, they put the flowers back where they'd been found and went off in search of more wonders.

And when the thunderstorms came after dark, they did not seek cover but rather stood in the rain and the

mud and watched, as if the sound and light show were being put on just for them. Everything was a wonder of a game, and ev-erything was eternally new.

He remembered nothing of his past, his origins, or his unique nature, but he neither wondered about such things nor let them enter his mind. There was only here, and now, and *her*, and that was more than enough. She felt exactly the same, experiencing only the here and now and *him*. Neither remembered or bothered to consider that this had come about only the previous night. There was no concept of time, only the now and the other. So closely linked were they that he was not even certain that he was the *he* and she was the *she*; either could effortlessly become the other, and so such a question was without meaning and thus not even asked.

The food and water were ample for the two of them for an indefinite time. The ship had gone down without a trace, and there was no real sign that they had ever made this or any other island. All their defenses were perma-nently on; any searchers or landing parties would not even notice their existence, and since they built nothing, created nothing outside of themselves, there were no signs of their existence for anyone to find.

It had not been the intention of the Glathrielian elders, but Nathan Brazil, for all appearances, had been taken out of the game. Terry had allowed for all external factors, it seemed.

All but one, and she could not know about that, even though it was everywhere, not many kilometers beneath their feet.

KzucO

three day out from gekir, while still inside ogadon waters, the small ship its passengers discovered was called the *Star Runner* met up with its transfer ship.

Whatever illegal cargoes were involved in this mysteri-ous underworld, they were both valuable and dangerous, and it was nearly impossible for those paid to find out about such shipments that were in fact taking place. Even deep beneath the ocean waters in Ogadon, where this par-ticular trade originated, there were civilization, law, and ef-fective agencies trying to stay on top of things. The one thing the authorities could not do was fully determine the when and the where across a hex that was, after all, almost four hundred kilometers wide, such activity took place, but it was always a battle of wits.

Even though it would be sheer luck to locate and stop a transfer in progress, once it had been passed off to a surface vessel, the fact became known. The *Star Runner's* job wasn't to pick up the cargo but rather to meet the pickup boat, which was a relatively local one well known as legit-imate to the authorities, and then take aboard the contra-band at sea. Ships like the *Runner* were built to all the latest specifications but were particularly intended for speed, speed, speed. As a vessel legally registered to handle charter and consignment jobs, it always had some specific legal mission of its own, although nobody was particularly fooled about its true purpose.

The smugglers' defense was a variation on the shell game; several ships like the *Runner* would take off from various ports on seemingly legitimate missions at roughly the same time. Each would head for a different place, but only one or possibly two would actually pick up transfer loads of contraband. Consistently stopping and boarding the wrong ones could prove embarrassing for the interhex au-thorities, who were in many ways privateers not much dif-ferent from the crooks they chased except that they'd chosen a lesser return in exchange for doing things the le-gal way.

Several large waterproof containers had been taken aboard by the *Runner* from what appeared to be a small and seedy trawler, although it was hard to say just what the other ship really looked like in the nearly total darkness in which it was done. It was now the *Runner's* job to get those containers to another ordinary and familiar coastal vessel that would take a detour at some secluded part of the coast and transfer them once more to small boats to go into shore and from there to a distribution point.

Mavra Chang was fascinated by the process. Once they were under way under full steam, she went over to Zitz, the friendly mate who'd always liked to chat, and commented, "I don't see how you manage it."

"Eh? What?"

"Linking up with a specific small boat in open ocean, in either direction. I don't see how you can find her unless she sits there like a sitting duck waiting for you, and I'm sure she doesn't."

"You're right," the Zhonzhorpian admitted. "It's actually quite simple. No state secret except for the specifics of ev-ery operation. Before we set out, we get a very fine cus-tomized grid of the entire hex.

Thousands of tiny little squares. The rendezvous ship is a scheduled carrier; we know its route in advance, and we know in which of a range of squares along its route the pickup will be made. She doesn't stop, not even, you'll notice, for the transfer. We just find her and match her course and speed."

"It was impressive—and quick," Mavra admitted. "Then we proceed to our destination hex, which has an-other hex map, another customized grid, and another series of scheduled local carriers. We plot them at all times. Once I'm there, I determine where the best one is located, head for it, and reverse the process. Unlike the pickup, I will al-ways have a choice of two or three ships, and even they won't know which one of them will receive the goods from us, so there can't be any leaks ahead of time. Similarly, there were several ships similar to this one, any one of which might have picked up the cargo from the first vessel. They didn't know it would be us, and it might not have been. If anything went wrong, if someone else got there ahead of us, or if they were being shadowed, they would al-ter their course slightly from the grid and we wouldn't have seen her."

"I see," she commented. "Very slick."

"There are so many spies and agencies out there that it's impossible to keep them from infiltrating one ship or an-other on the two ends," Zitz told her. "What *is* possible is, since not even the captain knows if he's the one until he passes the pickup point, we control access to the goods. They pick *up*; they transfer to one of a number of similar vessels. What does the spy report when he, she, or it finally makes port? And most of the next ports are nontech hexes, too, by design. *My* crew stays with me, so I know them all. Our rendezvous ship even now does not know it will be the one, so there's no rumors or leaks from its crew. When we do the transfer, same rules applying, they will take it on and proceed immediately to a point offshore in a nontech or semitech hex and transfer it again, being met by crews who pick the position themselves, then proceed into port on schedule. By the time anyone aboard can get the word out, the cargo and pickup people are long gone. As soon as I make the transfer, I destroy the grid maps. My counterparts will eventually intersect the pickup freighter back there, by the way, see that there is no coded sign that anything is to be picked up, and proceed on as if they had picked up something anyway."

"So this is your point of maximum vulnerability," she noted. "You have the cargo and maps aboard."

"True, but for all of that we have ways of dropping the cargo even under pursuit. The captain only needs to re-member one grid position and the code number of the grid map no matter where along the route we might be forced to drop it. *We* would not then bring it in, but once he trans-ferred the grid location and grid code upon making port, someone else eventually would."

"Sounds almost foolproof."

"It's very good," he admitted. "I think it might not be improved upon. It is, however, still a risky business, partic-ularly in high-tech water hexes like Kzuco. We try and stay out of them as much as possible, but it's not possible on this run. That makes the money much better, but the risks are far greater. That's why we're running the short side of Kzuco along the Awbri coast. Awbri's nontech, not the best vantage point, and once we're across the border into Dlubine, we're back in semitech and safer. From that point we can remain in non- and semitech water hexes. I *do* worry about Dlubine, but not as much as here."

"Dlubine has local conditions that create problems?"

"Several. For one thing, it's crawling with patrols, sand-wiched between a high-tech land and a high-tech water hex and with a lot of islands with small harbors and hidden coves. Also, in Dlubine it's easier to run by day than by night. You'll see what I mean the first night we're there. The water's lit up like a high-tech city, making it easy to spot you. Easier by day, yes, but murder on us."

"Huh?"

"You can almost make soup with the water, it's that warm, and the air temperature in the middle of the day is close to lethal for many life-forms. It averages more than half the point to boiling. Even the islands seem like water kettles. Still, it is a lot of sea to find us in, and we do it all the time. Each hex has its problems, so I don't want to min-imize any dangers, but we are used to them. You are not."

She nodded. "We'll stay out of your way. If it comes to a flight, though, you well know I have no stake in being ar-ested and returned to Gekir."

"Yes. You understand, though, that none of you can be allowed to leave this vessel until after the transfer has taken place and we are well away."

"We understand," she assured him. She did not press him on the nature of the cargo; in truth, she already knew what at least some of it was just from overheard conversations among the crew. It was a drug, an extremely addictive drug, that worked on a large variety of warm-blooded creatures. Called by many names in many hexes, it was apparently some kind of deep underwater fungal growth. Alive, one could actually eat it without harm, although it supposedly had a terrible taste. Out of the water, though, it died in min-utes and dried out quickly, causing its natural internal fluids to undergo a chemical change, crystallize, and become a

very sweet and addicting drug that could be eaten, injected, or who knew what else? Tolerances varied, but apparently for some races one ingestion could be enough to hook a user.

Lori had come up to get some night air, finding it difficult to sleep below, and had been listening to the conversation. When it was over and Mavra had moved away toward the rail to stare out at the black sea, he went over and stood beside her.

He'd found this business with the *Runner* both disgusting and unpleasantly familiar. "It's the same here as back on Earth," he growled. "It's as if there's no way and nowhere to escape drugs and the predators who sell them."

"The universe is composed of predators and prey," Mavra responded, not sounding cynical but rather as if she were reciting the obvious. "Everyone is one or the other, sometimes both in a lifetime."

Lori's realization that this was a ship in that sort of business and that all the crew were the same sort of creatures as the ones who ran and guarded Don Francisco Campos's jungle operation, which now seemed not merely a million light-years but also a million real years away. He couldn't help but wonder if Juan Campos hadn't already found his niche in this sort of operation here. It was a natural for him.

He often wondered what had become of Campos. How he'd like to meet the little weasel *now*, not rat to woman but rat to man. They said that when a sexual change was done, nine out of ten times it was to a female, to which poor Alowi and Tony, too, attested. He'd often thought how he'd love to discover that Juan Campos had become an Erdomese female. It would be real justice, but while Mavra said that the Well was sometimes perceived to have a sense of humor even though it shouldn't and theoretically couldn't, both Julian and Tony were proof that there wasn't a whole lot of justice as he would think of it built into the system. The bastard was probably nine feet tall with four arms and sharp teeth and more rotten than ever as befitted his personality.

He still wondered about Campos, and not just him. Where was poor Gus, for example? Had he even survived the transfer and transformation? He'd been such a gentle, quiet soul, it was hard to see him outside his element, his cameras and video equipment and other high-tech toys.

He also wondered about Terry quite often. What was she doing now? Still back there with the People in that rain forest? He *knew* when she'd decided to be the diversion that she would get the worst of it. Such a bright, educated career woman, highly competent, courageous . . . There were few superlatives for Terry that he didn't think she deserved. To be shut off for good in the jungle would be *intolerable* to her, he was convinced. But to emerge, tattooed all over, with bone jewelry threaded through her ears and nose . . . She'd be a freak. A news story herself for a while, then just a freak. There was no way she could ever lead a normal life like that, and the amount of removal and the cosmetic surgery on her beautiful brown skin would give her a choice between being a painted freak or looking like a burn victim. What kind of a life could she have like *that*?

In the end, she'd probably stay in the jungle, perhaps leaving the People and joining a true tribe but remaining anonymous otherwise, or she'd find a convent, become a nun, and remain cloistered for life. Damn it, it wasn't fair! Terry would have *loved* this place no matter *what* she wound up as!

He finally talked it out with Mavra. "I know it's a hell of a thing she did for us. I owe her, that's for sure. When we get into the Well, I'll see what, if anything, can be done about her. There's got to be *some* way to influence it, even though the only direct controls available that I know of from last time are on people here. Funny, though. You jogged a memory. When I got information on Brazil and his party from Zone, there was mention of someone coming in alone who appeared from the pictures to be of our race—or so they said; I never saw them. Somebody who came in after us, snuck by them all, and went through the hex gate before they even knew anyone was there. They said the other one resembled us."

Lori was excited at the idea. "You think maybe she—?"

"Don't get your hopes up. She was diverting the guards, and I know just how they planned to do that. The Well Gate would have closed and self-destructed after I—we— came through because Nathan and the other two had arrived long before. I don't think there'd be time. No, what I've wondered is whether one of the other women, one of the perimeter guards, might have watched us go through and decided to follow her goddess. It would be just like Utra or maybe Rhama to do just that. Poor darlings! What if one of *them* wound up in a high-tech hex? It'd be bad enough for them to turn into *anything* else, but a nontech hex they might handle with a lot of work. Still, there was no word of anybody else being reported, so it's hard to say anything for sure. I *do* think that if Teysi had come through, she'd have gotten word to us somehow." She sighed. "No, I'm sure she's still back on Earth, and I'm *pretty* sure she's still in the jungle. Unlike you, she found something in the jungle that she loved. I think she didn't want to come because she'd already found her version of the Well World. I think she really *wanted* to stay just as she was."

"You didn't know her. She'd go nuts living in there like that forever."

Mavra smiled. "Maybe *you* didn't know her. I looked at you over a period of a week or two, and I saw somebody willing to play jungle Amazon and go along because that was better than death, but you were always playing at it. Once you got over your fear and your natural feeling that rescue was at hand, you got into it, but it was always a game with you. You didn't ever belong there. I looked at her, though, and I saw somebody hiding one hell of a lot of inner pain. I don't know what it came from, but it was there. And once she got over the same two hurdles you did, she didn't accept things like you did, she embraced them. I've seen the same thing in countless girls who came to us over the years. Like some kind of horrible burden had been lifted, removed from inside them. You fell into a trap; she escaped one. I wouldn't be surprised if she went totally, completely native."

"We saw totally different people," Lori said, shaking his head. "I wonder which one of us saw the right one."

Mavra sighed. "Well, you've seen it happen with Alowi, and I would have bet you that Julian Beard would never have flipped out like that. We'll probably never know for sure about her. At least I'll try to find out once I'm inside. If I can, and she's still alive, where and what she is back there will kind of settle it and what I do for her—if I can do much. That jungle was already disappearing at a horrendous rate. I wish I knew how long any of those tribes can continue to exist as they want to exist. It's a real shame, but it's the way that whole planet went. Right from ancient times they called it 'progress.' I guess it is—if you're doing the chopping and not being chopped."

That brought Lori back to his original train of thought. "What about this drug trade right here? It makes me feel sleazy. Worse than that, it depresses me. Here, all this time, all this civilization, and they wind up like we were going in *my* old corner of civilization. The whole damned *world* seemed to be falling into the hands of the Camposes and their ilk."

"Well, having used drugs of a sort in the jungle, and earlier in other places, and having done a little smuggling in my time, I can't be too judgmental about these people. In a sense, they're the kind of people I was born and raised with. And I can't really say I'm surprised that this exists here; rather, I'm surprised that it didn't seem to exist when I was here last. At least not in anything that wasn't species-specific and too localized to notice. The biggest problem you have if you're born and raised on the Well World is that you have to face the fact that it's meaningless. I mean, what can you hope to do? These are the descendants of the leftovers, the last races tested out here. They're managed from on high—or, rather, from on low—and on the whole, things don't change very much. That's why they don't keep a lot of the kind of history here that we do, on the whole. Even the Erdomese, on their own planet, *might* discover electricity, *might* discover radio and video and research biology, and *might* even figure out a way to get to the stars. They just have less to work with, and it might take them longer. They might not, but it's possible. Not here."

"Well, yeah, but it's not *that* bad, I don't think."

"No? You were a scientist. I'll bet you know enough to create a small renaissance in scientific knowledge in most hexes here, including Erdom. But it's all useless knowl-edge, isn't it? Useless because nothing except muscle and some water and wind power works there, and even then, if you generate a current, it'll die before it reaches anything that might use it. That was Julian's problem. Just about ev-ery bit of the knowledge she has and the talents she pos-sesses are useless in Erdom. Permanently. She can't even swagger around and be Senor or Senora Macha. Everything in Julian Beard's life was denied him as an Erdomese by it-self and by being an Erdomese woman in particular. Build things? Paint? With rock-hard mittens for hands? In a land and culture where anything she *might* do intellectually is considered deviant behavior and women are virtual property—forget it. On top of that he had a ton of guilt over being less than a wonderful human being by his own lights. And his mind-set was so much Mister Macho that he was finally faced with the ultimate problem and it tore him to bits."

"You mean he just couldn't handle being a woman?"

"No, he couldn't handle falling in love with a *man*, you idiot! Even if it was with a man who used to be a woman and still has, I think, a woman's soul."

"Julian? In *love* with me? I mean, *really* in love?"

"Sure. Plain as day. But Julian couldn't be in love with a guy, just couldn't handle it, and Julian wasn't useful in any meaningful way from this point on. So Julian goes, Alowi enters. Call it a split personality if you want, but one of them won. The one who could be in love with you and be of use to you and not go bonkers because of what she could no longer be or do."

Lori sighed. "Well, ain't that a kick in the head. Mavra, I swear to you, even though I never thought it for real until just now, I really *did* fall in love myself! But with Julian, not Alowi. Not that I'm not still, but, well, it's not the same."

Mavra shrugged. "Well, you have a problem maybe unique in romance, don't you? I seem to attract the

unique in that department. The thing is, though, you've got the Julian problem kind of the way *he* had it."

"What? Now you've lost me again."

"The Well World changes *bodies* around. That's not unique, you know. It's technology. The same principle as the matter transmitter. I once knew somebody who's a distant ghost to me now who discovered the same principle on his own. An Earth-human type. It's not magic. It's physics and mathematics, and enough of an energy source to do it and enough of a computer to manage all that information. It also does some physiological adjustment so you don't fall over trying to walk on those legs of yours or upchuck when you wake up as a creature that eats live prey or the like. But the process doesn't really change the mind, the personality, the soul, as it were. You can't keep the memories and such and wipe out the rest. You lived too long as Lori Sutton. Some-where here Juan Campos is still a slimy son of a bitch. Julian completed her own transformation. She became a woman to the soul. Tony—well, that's a different personal-ity. I think he was a tough guy but very gentle underneath. With all he'd gone through and his double suicide plans for himself and Anne Marie, I think he considered himself dead, anyway. He got an easier break in a better culture to be a woman, even though that one, too, has its sexual divisions and problems. Still, in spite of cultural hang-ups, I think he was one of those rare guys who really liked and respected women. At least he doesn't see it as a negative. I think he feels he lived a full and decent life as a man and now he's got a chance to live a second life as a woman. That's the attitude to take. Like the Hindu belief that we're reincarnated alternately male and female. To her it's a whole new life. I'm afraid Anne Marie's more a problem than a continuing love story for him."

"Makes sense." Lori nodded. "But what about me? You said I still had a woman's soul. I sure haven't felt much like it; even my thoughts sometimes would have made the old me *very* mad."

"Oh, you're obvious. You—just like in the jungle—never got to that point. You're having a lot of guilty fun *playing* at being a man. But you're not. Physically, yes, but not deep down. It's always easier for women to adjust to other roles and accept them than it is for men."

He thought about it. "Well, it's true that when you see two guys kissing, you have a whole set of reactions, maybe depending on your own feelings about sexuality, but *every-body* has reactions because it's not done. Women kiss each other all the time, and nobody thinks anything of it. And I *know* women dress more for each other than for men. I can't remember a boyfriend I ever had who ever noticed that I had had my hair redone, and most of them didn't notice new clothes or perfume or whatever until I pointed it out to them."

"But *you* still notice. Even in Erdom."

"Yeah, I guess I do. But a lot of that is how they're brought up, too, isn't it? I mean, competitive sports, competitive grades, competitive businesses, everything's competition. Even in Erdom that's true." He thought of the sword fighting and other such activities. "I wasn't brought up like that. What competition I did was on a different level. All appearances and comparing possessions. Men fight or they get the crap beat out of them. Women try to reach a consensus, and a fight between two girls, when it happens, is real scandal or real news. Yeah, I see what you mean, I guess. I stopped seriously competing real early. I was always the consolation prize, if I ever got invited to the dance in the first place, and the kind of life a business career offered never appealed to me. I just wanted to be a scientist. I wanted to find out how things worked and *why* they worked. I was good at math, and girls weren't supposed to be good at math. I loved computers, and girls were supposed to hate them. I guess I figured that so long as I was already a social geek, I might as well be a total one. I just decided to do what I loved doing. I'd love to do it here, too."

Mavra nodded. "Yeah, I understand that. That's another problem with coming through the Well. The high-tech types already know what you know, and more. The others either don't or can't use it. Coming from the tech level you do and the occupation you do, you not only would have to learn from scratch, you'd have to unlearn half of what you learned as gospel. The very fact that you stand here as an Erdomesian man says that better than I could. The same went double for Julian. Pilots of any sort, and particularly jet and space pilots—well, they're useless here, aren't they? So it decided you were useless and dumped you in low-tech. You'd have had a better shot at high-tech if you hadn't been as smart, frankly. Doesn't take brains to learn how to push buttons. Same goes for Tony—airline pilot. I think somewhere there was a theory built into the Well that said that if your skills were useless, you should be put in a spot where they couldn't be used so that you might adjust and use that brain power where it would do some good. Just a hunch—no inside information there. But it kinda holds, doesn't it?"

"Could be. But in Erdom the knowledge that might be useful is held by that damned priesthood and the price is *much* too high, and the guilds leave me out of most of the other trades that might be of any interest. It seemed like the best I could be would be some kind of glorified night watchman or street sweeper or something else menial. I mean, like much of the population there, even though I know seven languages and

have a universal translator im-planted, I'm still a total illiterate in Erdom, and having looked at that language, I probably will remain so. I think that's why I jumped at your note even though I was under that hypnotic drug's spell at the time. Cut off or not, I knew when I had an opportunity for something better rather than facing my alternatives there."

"Well, I never figured on the hypnotic drugs, but I kind of hoped that either curiosity or ambition or both would bring you. Just a few days more and we'll be ashore in un-charted realms for both of us. I need you. Do the job for me and I'll make sure you have a future you'll like. If we lose this race, you'll have seen something of the world and won't be any worse off. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. But thinking about those priests' drugs brings me back to what kicked off this talk. I still feel un-comfortable with all this. Did you *really* do this yourself once?"

"Sure. Okay, that shocks you, but as I said, this is a place with 1,560 tiny worldlets with no future and no past, more or less. They're kinda stuck here. They know there's a possibility that their kids might be worse off than they are but won't be better off. Mostly it'll be hard to tell one stagnant age from another. Deep down most know that or at least feel or sense it. It's why life can be cheap here, and it's lit-tle wonder some turn to chemical escapes. You mean you *never* tried some drugs out of curiosity or boredom or de-pression or whatever?"

"Me? Not much. Some marijuana now and then—I did it heavy in college, I admit, but less once I got a job—and some alcohol but nothing hard. I tried cocaine once at a party and darn near choked. Never touched it or anything else again. Why?"

"And these were all legal substances?"

"No. Alcoholic drinks, yes, but not marijuana or cocaine. Not in *my* lifetime, anyway. But it's not the same."

"It *is* the same. Even legal, it's used for the same pur-poses. Illegal just feeds the whole business. The same ones who got your illegal drugs in also brought in the rest, of which you disapproved. Your money went to help them fi-nance the ships and men like this one. I've not only been with them on this level, I've fought the ugly side of the business, too, against the thoroughly rotten people at the top. You might say that far back in the distant past I saw the future of this as well, and nothing you see here can compare to the depravity of what lies ahead."

"But it's a matter of degree. Some is harmful, some not."

Mavra Chang sighed. "I remember a people once in east Africa. Two tribes, same ancestry, all that, but one of them lived by a great river and tilled the land and mined gold and such from the nearby mountains that served as a barrier separating them from the others. Those others, they lived on the other side, a lot of the same geography and possibil-ities, but their home was in a virtual cannabis forest. They were a far happier tribe and more content, but for genera-tions they remained no more advanced than the People of the upper Amazon. I don't judge. The tribe that remained in the forest was probably happier than the other one that built a great city, but the happy ones were stagnant, stuck, just like the Well World."

"You're one to talk!"

Mavra shrugged. "We used some drugs from the native forest, you know, and not always as a practical thing. What can I say? After being kicked around for a few thousand years I called a halt. I didn't *like* Earth much, Lori. I didn't like it much at all. It was uglier and more primitive than I could have imagined in ways I never dreamed it could be. I'm sorry, but that is my perspective. I left it. I escaped where it wasn't so ugly, and I remained there rather than come out to face more ugliness. One day things would be different. There would be what *I* considered real progress and advancement, and they would discover interstellar travel. By that time the rain forest would be cut down, and I'd be able to get *off* that miserable planet. I do know that I'm not going back there. Or if the Well somehow forces me back there, I am not going back as Mavra Chang or anything remotely like her. If I can, I'm going to be some-thing else."

"Yes? What, if I may ask?"

"I don't know. If what I believe is true, I won't have to face that problem. If not—I don't know, but I'll think of something."

Since Mavra was in a talkative mood, there being little else to do aboard the ship, Lori was about to go into just what Mavra thought of men—at least, men who hadn't been changed into women and vice versa. It seemed to him as if she hated them in general, on a gut emotional level, even if accepting them intellectually. That Portuguese ship and crew must have been a holy horror, but had it, after so much experience elsewhere and even before, in some former lifetime, driven her over an edge she hadn't been over before? Or had she *never* liked men? Why had she separated from this Brazil guy so long ago, and why did she seem to both hate and fear him now? According to Tony and Anne Marie, this Nathan Brazil sounded like a pretty nice guy. He'd saved two lives out of clear compas-sion; Mavra had put lives in

jeopardy, ruined one or two maybe, and waxed nostalgic for the days when she'd been a drug runner.

He never got the chance. "*Ship! Port, fifty-one degrees, distance nine kilometers and closing at flank speed!*" came a sharp shout from the bridge, where, in this high-tech hex, all the technological gear was active.

The captain was in the wheelhouse in moments, looking at the scope. "I don't like this. It's got the size and speed to be a privateer. How far is it to the Dlubine border?"

"Twenty kilometers, sir!"

"Damn! So close and yet so far! Any attempt at communications?"

"None yet, sir. Instructions?"

Captain Hjarza thought for a brief moment. "Zitz! Hail them, then. Ask them who they are and why they are bear-ing down on us. Warn them that we are an armed ship and that we deal mercilessly with pirates."

The Zhonzhorian was on the radio immediately, barking a challenge and sounding doubly mean. With that crocodilelike throat and mouth, he could make it sound very menacing indeed.

"No reply, sir!"

"They're stalling! Okay, we've given them a legitimate reason for us to turn and run! Kill all lights! Starboard thirty degrees! All ahead full! Zitz! Man the weapons board! Others to arms stations! If they get in range, give 'em all you got! If they call us now, you know the routine!"

"Aye, sir!"

Lori looked alarmed. "I think we better clear out and give them some room," he said nervously.

Mavra returned a wry smile. "Just don't get in their way. These are pros."

The captain kept looking at his scopes. "They're closing a little, but they're only a hair faster than we are. At this heading and speed, we should still have a good two kilometers on them when we cross the border. As soon as we cross it, I'm going to give a sharp turn to starboard and full speed into whatever's there. We'll still be out of visual and off their instruments. When I do, I want everybody at their sailing positions. Engines, I want full until I tell you, then I want a dead stop. We will put on sail the moment after I order an engine stop. Understand?"

There was a chorus of "Ayes," and the crew went to station.

"They're calling us now, sir!" Zitz reported.

The captain gave a low chuckle. "They've just figured out they won't catch us this side of the border. You know what to say."

Zitz, however, was already saying it. "If you were truly legal authorities, you would have responded to our first call with an identification signal," he told the pursuing ship sharply. "We've been suckered by pirate ploys before. No, sir, we would be derelict in our duties if we yielded to you now."

They could hear only one side of the conversation, but it was clear that the gunboat had issued an ultimatum and a threat.

"Well, sir, if you can catch us, then do so. If you are a legitimate naval vessel, we will lodge charges against your captain for failure to respond to a legitimate identification check. If you are not, we will have to fight. If we are fired upon, however, we will take that as confirmation that you are pirates and will respond accordingly and without hesitation."

The captain was just looking at his scopes, throttle wide open. Suddenly he snapped, "Engines, we've just had two guided torpedoes launched against us. I will probably have to turn if they don't both buy the decoy. Be ready." He leaned out the open window. "Torpedoes! Let go aft decoys!"

One of the spider creatures hit some levers, and there were loud splashes behind them in the water. A minute or so later, well in back of their wake, there was a tremendous bright flash and the sound of an explosion.

"One of 'em bought it; the other's still coming," the captain reported. "Launch antitorpedo from aft tube and reload as quick as you can!"

There was the sound like that of a torpedo being fired, and then the spider creature opened a hatch and went half-way down into it, clearly doing something with its forelegs out of sight of the deck. Before it was finished, there was another bright flash and explosion behind them, much, much closer to them than the first one had been.

"Got it!" the captain called with satisfaction. "Zitz, give 'em two rockets! I don't care if you hit them or not, but it'll keep 'em back and make 'em think twice about us!"

Lori's sense of boredom had vanished, but it was replaced with a little bit of fear and concern. Still, all of it seemed somehow unreal, distant. *I feel like I'm in the middle of a cheap thriller*, he thought wonderingly.

The two rockets went away with a twin *thump! thump!* sound, and they saw them quickly rise on small

jets of flame and disappear into the darkness behind them.

"I hope the folks who live in the water here aren't the kind to get too pissed off at people blowing up things," Mavra commented dryly.

"One minute!" the captain shouted. "Everybody brace yourselves and be ready to alter course!" He paused, watch-ing the scopes carefully as the stack billowed black smoke and the wind seemed even chillier.

Lori looked forward and thought he could see some lights off in the distance, but everything looked hazy and distorted. Almost as they reached it, he realized that he'd been looking through a hex barrier at night.

They could feel the tingle of the hex barrier as they crossed it, and suddenly all the electronic gear on the bridge failed as if someone had pulled the plug, and the heated air of the new hex hit them like a solid, hot wet car-pet, causing some momentary disorientation. The ship, however, continued at full steam.

Without further warning, the captain brought the *Runner* around hard right, so hard that loose things on deck shifted left and Lori felt himself being thrown against the rail, then pitched back, falling to the deck.

It seemed as if the ship would never stop its turn, that it would go on forever, but after a while the vessel, which had itself been leaning to the right, steadied itself and came back to a straight-on course. The captain was counting qui-etly, estimating the speed of the pursuit and the amount of time it had taken them to make the dramatic turn.

Suddenly he shouted, "Sail crew aloft!"

Expertly, the two great spiders scuttled up the masts vir-tually to the top, and long tentaclelike legs adjusted the holding straps, while Zitz left his dead command console aft, where the two centaresses were watching the show with a mixture of awe and concern, and moved forward to the sail control position.

There was another long pause, then the captain shouted, "All engines dead stop! Boilers to standby! Disengage en-gines from drive shaft! Lower center board and deploy mainsails!"

There was a sudden, almost deathly quiet save for the noise of the sails being squeakily lowered and fixed into position.

"Rig full, no jibs," the captain commanded, and first the topsails and then various subordinate sails sprouted, making the transformation to quiet sailing vessel almost complete. The boilers were not out, but since they had been disen-gaged from the drive shafts, there was a sudden cessation of the steady rhythmic vibration that the engines had sent through the ship.

Mavra went over to Lori and offered a hand. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. Probably gonna have a hell of a bruise on my hip, but it's no big deal. The hardest part is getting back on my feet." He made it with her help but needed to lurch forward and hold on to something. "Great body for running, particularly in sand or gravel, but it's just not good with the casual stuff." He was calming down now and took stock of the surroundings. "Wow! Feels like home, only worse! This is *really* hot!"

"It's at least as hot as Erdom," Mavra agreed, "but with an ocean's humidity. Will you be all right here? I want to check on the girls in the back."

"Yeah, sure, I'll be okay. I'm just trying to get steady enough to go down and check on Alowi." He gave a long, relieved exhale. "At least we made it!"

"Don't feel so confident yet," Mavra warned him. "They're still back there, and they're close. If we don't lose them, we'll have to fight, and we'll be well within their gun range here. This is semitech, remember, not nontech. Can-nons do their usual nasty job here."

He stared after Mavra as she went aft to check on the Dillians, then said aloud, under his breath, "Yeah, thanks for telling me that cheery set of facts."

The air felt wet and sticky, and there seemed to be a light rain or mist falling that did nothing to cool things off. He looked to the right of the ship and thought he saw some kind of shimmering, a distortion even of the night fog and mist.

The captain was running directly down the hex barrier, just inside the Dlubine side.

He shook his head and decided ne'd better put his trust in the ones who knew what they were doing and tend to his own business, which was going below.

It was a mess there; the turn had spilled more down there than up on deck, but Alowi seemed all right and relieved to see him.

"I—I was afraid something happened to you up there," she told him.

"I fell. Hip's gonna feel like hell later, but I'm all right. What about you?"

"I rolled over, but once things straightened out, I was all right. Everything was flying or rolling around . . . I just did not know what was happening. Come—let me heal your pain."

"I'm all right for now."

"Please! Now is the best time. The last time you almost died from a bad bruise. Let me give you what you need to keep it from happening again!"

It suddenly struck him. The key to the entire Erdomese way and why things were more dangerous for him than he'd realized.

The male Erdomese's weakness, its Achilles' heel, was that he and all the rest of them had a kind of hemophilia. The females, in that second set of breasts, carried more than spare water; they carried a clotting factor. The wom-en's nearly total dependence on the men for most things was counterbalanced by the men's absolute need to have that which only the women could make readily available. They hadn't told him or warned him about it. Why would they? Between their customs and their beliefs, and with such a huge proportion of females to males, they took it for granted. No *wonder* the men traveled with as many wives as they could afford to support!

For the first time he realized just how vulnerable he actually was to things that others took for granted. Even with-out cultural codes or his feelings for her, he would have to protect Alowi with every ounce of his strength and life. If anything happened to her, if they were even separated, out here, so many miles from Erdom, he was dead meat.

"My, that was positively *thrilling*," Anne Marie gushed. "Almost like one of those James Bond thrillers."

"I could do with a little less of that, particularly out here," Tony responded. Although Dillians had a natural ability to swim, it took a lot of muscle power to do so, and they wouldn't have much of a chance out here in the middle of the ocean, any more than a common horse might have. Sufficient to keep them from drowning in a river or enabling them to make a quick swim to shore or a raft, but considering their forward center of gravity, out here they'd be dead ducks.

"Well, I'm glad to see that you two are all right," Mavra told them. "They're slick, these guys. We're outside any capability the gunboat might have to spot us electronically and out of range of any of his fancy weapons, too. Hugging this hex boundary, we're in the natural mist and fog that's usually at such a border, and under sail, there's little noise."

Tony didn't feel as confident. "Wouldn't *they* know that, too? And couldn't they really bear down on us if it were steam against sail in this little wind?"

"They do, and yeah, they could overtake us, but they have 180 degrees of possibility. They'll overshoot coming in and have to turn when they see they lost us, and they'll do it gently. It takes time. Then they have to decide which way to turn. They'll have to cut their engines and run slowly to see if they can hear us, and when they don't, they'll know we're under sail. From that point they'll be farther behind and have a fifty-fifty chance of tracking us or missing us entirely. If they don't fire up their boilers, they'll be slower than we are in this slight wind, since they're a heavier boat, and if they do, we'll hear them and have a straight free shot at their bow from the stern gun. I don't think they'll risk that. They'll pick a direction and run slowly along it until dawn, which is still many hours away. By that time the captain will have slipped away."

The captain in fact was waiting until they ran into the edge of one of the local storms, and when the first one was spotted, not too far from the border position, he took a chance and eased out of the cover of the boundary mist and, when nothing was obviously in sight, headed for it.

It made for a rough introduction to Dlubine, but they were alive, the ship was in good shape, and they were free of pursuit by dawn and able to engage the boilers once more and proceed in the heat regardless of the wind.

By midday there was some debate among both passengers and crew as to whether it was worse up top or below. Most chose to be on deck and relaxed under whatever cover they could rig up. Ultimately, it became too hot for anyone to even handle the boilers, and they went to sail and more or less just drifted along, taking four-hour shifts at the wheel.

All five of the passengers remained under the makeshift canvas shelter of the centaresses on the afterdeck. All had removed whatever clothing they'd had on; it was too hot to be wearing *anything* if one didn't have to.

It was a particular shock for the two Erdomese, who were used to extreme heat, but theirs had been basically a desert environment and their bodies were designed to retain and recycle moisture. Both were as miserable as could be.

"I got a reading from the wheelhouse thermometer when I went forward for some water," Lori managed. "Doing a rough conversion, assuming that the top of the mark with the big line is boiling and the black line

on the bottom is freezing, I'd say well over 50 degrees Celsius—somewhere over 120 Fahrenheit, Anne Marie."

"Goodness! How do people *survive* here?" she re-sponded. Dillians at least could perspire over most of their huge bodies, but they required a lot of water.

"Because the *people* are a mile or so straight down," Mavra reminded her. "Down there it's probably a nice, comfortable day, although from what I can tell they're noc-turnals, like the captain."

"I wish I was," Lori groaned.

There wasn't much more conversation after that. It was too hot to do just about anything.

Still, there was a moderate breeze, which helped slightly, taking them almost due west. Again, it was the short leg about twenty kilometers off the Agon coast, a bit too close to avoid the risk of more intercostal patrols but comfortably far enough out not to be seen or detected from shore. The only hope was to make full speed once night fell and be out of this boiling hotbox by sunup the next day. For all any of them cared at this point, Fahomma would be welcome even if it had icebergs and blowing snows.

Several times in the distance one ship or another would be sighted, but none of them ever closed with them, and such traffic was to be expected in this region. Some were even under steam, demonstrating clearly that whatever was stoking their fires might possibly have Satan as a relative but definitely bore little genetic kinship with anybody on the *Star Runner*.

Who was doing what became moot after a while as all of them drifted into varying degrees of uncomfortable sleep.

Nightfall wasn't exactly cool, but it definitely had a psy-chological effect on everyone. The captain took the wheel, and the weird creature who usually took care of everything below decided it was cool enough to fire up the engines. The job wasn't physically taxing—whatever fuel they used appeared to be a syrupy liquid stored in large tanks deep in the hull and moved to the engines by some sort of vacuum system—but the boilers got hot, and steam was always dan-gerous and needed constant monitoring and occasional re-lease and regulation.

Captain Hjarza wasn't very friendly or communicative, but Mavra had managed to establish at least a working re-lationship with the vicious-looking Stulz, who reminded her of nothing more than a gigantic fruit bat although she doubted he could ever fly no matter what the leathery wing material might do otherwise.

"How long to the border?" she asked him.

"Dawn. Perhaps a bit longer if nothing happens to delay us. There are always patrols about in these waters, and a full day is long enough for word to have been passed along a pretty good chain, I'd suspect. Still, I expected if we were going to be chased it would have been during the day, when we'd have no chance of running, boilers down, and everyone at their worst. No, I'd say at this point our most probable roadblock would be a series of storms. It *always* rains at night here. All that ocean went up during the day and has to come back down."

"What's this Fahomma like, then?"

"Oh, not too bad. Nontech, which really helps us. Under sail there's nothing that can catch us that might be able to hurt us. Warm, but cooler and more comfortable than this, but it tends to rain steadily for weeks at a time over parts of it. We will transfer our cargo there if all goes well and thus be free of patrol worries."

"Off Agon? They're smuggling into a high-tech hex?"

"Who knows? It goes to another freighter, and it's off here. Where it goes from there is not my concern."

"Well, it can't be soon enough for us, either. I think ev-erybody except me is ready for dry land at this point."

Everyone, from Mavra to Lori, Alowi, and the Dillians, was entranced by the colorful underwater lights that be-came quickly clear as darkness fell.

"Those can't be electric- or nuclear-powered, can they?" Lori asked, as always as curious about how things worked as about how pretty they looked.

"Not likely," Tony responded. "I rather think they are chemical. Still, the layout, like a vast city-state deep under the water, makes you wonder what kind of creatures they are and what their lives must be like, does it not? I have tended to just regard the ocean as ocean very much like back on Earth. I suspect most of us have. But it takes something like this to remind us that there is an entire al-ternative set of people, species, and cultures down there. How sad that much of the contact between us up here and those down there involves drugs and crooked elements."

"Well, we know there are centaurs here, don't we, dear? One must wonder if there are also, somewhere, mermaids."

The night was still hot but bearable to a degree, although nobody felt all that energetic. At least there

were some very pretty things to look at and a few impressive if less than welcome thunderstorms as well. Still, both captain and crew seemed well satisfied with the progress and also with the fact that the only thing that really was approaching them was dawn.

It was heating up pretty quickly when they reached the Fahomma border, and the captain ordered all steam shut down and shifted entirely to sail. The area ahead, through the hex barrier, looked somewhat forbidding, dark and gray, in sharp contrast to the brightness of Dlubine. As they passed through, the temperature dropped but the humidity got even worse—it was raining steadily, although not the hard driving rain and high winds of a Dlubinian storm.

Late that night, while under full sail, they passed a small trawler that gave the correct recognition sign. Captain Hjarza was both puzzled and alarmed at this break with procedure and somewhat suspicious of it, but he turned and paralleled the trawler's course. From the deck of the other ship, something big and barely seen in the rain and darkness threw a spear attached to a long rope to the deck of the *Runner*. Zitz ran to it, removed the small attached tube, and then pried the spear from the deck and tossed it over-board so that the other ship could retrieve it. The mate then brought the tube to the captain, who frowned and opened it, pulled out a sheet of paper, read it, then put it with his grids and had Zitz toss the tube, both ends open, into the sea, where it would fill with water and sink.

"Trouble, Captain?" Zitz asked a bit nervously.

"New orders. Don't like 'em. Not at all happy about 'em, but orders are orders. They will owe us all for this, though, Zitz. They will owe us a *lot*. Cost us a damned for-tune, this will. Take a look at it when you get the chance and then very quietly pass it on to the crew. I'll need you all tomorrow night, but if anybody spills the beans, they're dead meat."

When Zitz did get the opportunity to look at it, he saw just what the captain meant and liked it even less. It was a new, local grid, a very specific and specialized one, for a new job. Still, there was no question of not doing it. They followed the grids only for a rendezvous, yet the trawler had shown no problems at all finding them in this weather in a nontech hex. Even the authorities had failed to do that except by chance. You didn't mess with the kind of people who could pull off *that* trick if you wanted to keep on living.

The next day, the ocean was relatively smooth, although it continued to rain. The steady, light rain didn't cause any real problems for a sailing ship, and there was always something of a wind but rarely more than you wanted. The air temperature felt almost chilly, although in fact it was twenty-six degrees Celsius or better. The contrast, however, with the neighboring hotbox was dramatic.

Mavra sensed a little difference, perhaps a bit more cold-ness from the crew, but it wasn't much and could have been put down to a number of things. She knew they'd gotten a message the previous night, and clearly the message had given them some nerves, but they didn't really want to dis-cuss what was in it.

About two hours after nightfall Captain Hjarza swung in more toward the coast, almost without anyone noticing until they were too close to ignore it. They were still off Agon, a high-tech hex, and there were automated lights and elec-trically illuminated small settlements within view. Sensing that something wasn't all that right, considering the offi-cers' aversion to getting in close to high-tech coastlines, Tony walked forward and alerted Mavra and the Erdomese, who were below staying dry. Mavra immediately came up on deck and saw that Tony was quite correct. She went to the captain.

"What's this all about? I thought we weren't stopping until Lilblod."

"Change in orders. Special drop just up here," the captain responded. "Stick around. You may find this interesting."

They came in close, perhaps a hundred meters from shore, no more—close enough to see the hex barrier and the illuminated buoy that was just inside Agon. It was a rel-atively desolate part of the coast; there were a couple of in-dividual lights atop what might have been high cliffs but nothing approaching a pier or settlement.

Two fairly good-sized black launches came out of the darkness just at the hex barrier, then turned so that the *Star Runner* could come alongside. Zitz and one of the spiders threw down ropes that tied the launches to the larger ship, then lowered rope ladders. Soon four heavily armed creatures climbed slowly up and onto the deck. All four resembled nothing so much as human-sized turtles without shells, wear-ing black outfits, and they carried what looked like a stylized futuristic automatic rifles over their shoulders and nasty-looking crossbows of equally advanced design in their hands.

Two of them walked over toward the bridge and spotted Mavra. The nasty-looking crossbows lowered and pointed straight at her.

"What *is* this?" she asked the captain, suddenly realizing that *she* was the drop.

"Sorry. Orders. Call the Erdomese man up on deck, very naturally. Try anything funny and I'll kill his wife and the two Dillians. Be nice, no tricks, and I swear that I'll deliver them to safety."

"You swore you'd deliver *me* to safety," she noted acidly.

"Quickly now. Just the man. And I didn't give my word on that to you. I was paid to do it."

"Yeah, and you'll lose that fortune, too."

"I hate the idea like the plague, but I'm ordered to give all the stuff back and report that we disposed of the thieves. A fortune's no use at all to a dead man. Now—call him! Very pleasantly, since there's nowhere he can go down there and all you can do by pulling anything is get your people killed. Don't expect the Dillians to the rescue. Zitz and the other Agonese have them covered."

She sighed. There wasn't anything to do, and she didn't doubt for an instant that he'd kill the others with hardly a thought even if she managed an escape. She'd gotten them into this; she couldn't very well lead them to such an un-necessary doom. But why Lori?

She opened the door. "Lori? Can you come on deck for a minute? Got a problem here I think you can help with."

"Yeah, sure," the Erdomese replied from below. She heard him come out of the cabin and come slowly up the stairs, and it wasn't until he'd squeezed out onto the main deck that he saw the situation and froze.

"What the hell is this?" He paused and had that sinking feeling. "They caught us."

"Yeah, but I don't think these guys have anything at all to do with any government on this planet."

"Move out into the open, hands up," one of the Agonite gunmen hissed. "You! Big man! Bend over against the rail! Yes, that's it!"

Mavra started forward, but large, extremely powerful hands seized her from behind and put a foul-smelling mask over her face. *Gas!* She barely had time to struggle and just saw two of them doing the same to Lori before she blacked out.

Dlubine

ever since gus had slid into the water, he'd had no contact with anyone for several days. He had looked on some of the islands for Brazil and Terry but hadn't found any sign of them and wondered if, in fact, those were the same islands they'd wrecked on or if he'd been carried along far-ther in the chain before managing to make shore.

At any rate, he'd been unable to find the one with the lava coming down the side in that pattern, and that sug-gested that he was in the wrong place or at the very best on the wrong side.

It didn't take him long to discover as well that the is-lands bore no sign of anything a Dahir could eat. Some of the insects were large enough, but they not only didn't smell right, they smelled very much all wrong, and since being out on his own in this world he'd learned to trust his nose beyond all else. In any event, someone of his size couldn't expect to sustain himself on those things for very long.

That meant getting off, and the nearest mainland was at least fifty, maybe a hundred kilometers away—there was no way of telling for sure, but even if he set off in the right direction, he'd be dead of exhaustion long before he ar-rived. He was already all in.

He was not, however, the only one who'd lost Brazil and Terry, as he discovered the second day on the island while weighing what few options he had. He heard it first, then saw it—a patrol boat, a big steamer with metal plates on its hull not unlike the one back at the island harbor. Maybe—no, *probably*—the one that had caught and sunk them!

He was angry at them, but clearly they hadn't found any-body, either, or they wouldn't be poking around like that. In any event, with this black volcanic sand not taking much in the way of footprints or other signs, they had the same sort of problem he did and had to send a few of the crew over in small rowboats to look around and check for any signs of anything.

It was a pretty clear way out. If they continued searching and found them, he'd be there to help them out. If they failed, at least they'd head for some place to resupply, and that was the kind of place that might well have decent Dahir eating and he could figure out what to do next.

Besides, the idea of sitting right on the deck of a police launch and having nobody notice him was irresistible.

He worked his way up the island just beyond the beach, then out across some fresh lava rock that

extended right down almost to the water, and slid in, swimming to the launch before the men were back. He waited there until the shore party did return so that they'd discount any extra weight or water when he came aboard on the same side.

They went from island to island, beach to beach, looking for any signs of wreckage or of anyone coming ashore, but found nothing. One time they did in fact come right around to a daylight version of what Gus *thought* he'd seen at night, only there wasn't any lava visible. It was only when he realized that the stuff was in fact coming down and dumping into the ocean and that this was what was causing the massive steam eruption over to one side that he under-stood his mistake. The lava hadn't been out in the open but had formed lava tubes, the rock hitting the air getting solid and forming a kind of roof for the rest. At night it looked like red-hot streams of the stuff, but by day it was a lot less obvious.

And that presented a real problem. If they *had* gotten on the beach and *were* on that island, what help would he be? No food, and instead of two of them being stuck, all three of them would be stuck. If it was the same as the island he'd been on, and he had no reason to think it wasn't, they could eat some of the fruit even if he could not, and there'd been water on the other island, which was much smaller, so there was likely to be water here. The way he'd seen Ter-ry's powers in action, too, he knew they could hold out there a damned long time.

He would do more good to try to find the location some-where and then come back for them when he could. It wasn't what his heart told him to do, but him dead and them alive and stranded didn't equal all three alive in any reasonable book. He just wished he'd realized his mistake on the volcano, when there had been time to get ashore, look by himself, and still catch the boat.

That night, after the last methodical search, near dusk, the launch gave up and headed out toward open sea. Gus just relaxed and snoozed on the bow and hoped that they were headed some place useful.

Within a few hours they were approaching land, and from the darkness Gus saw that wherever it was was defi-nitely more civilized than he'd like. It looked like the coast-line of Oregon or northern California, densely populated and brightly and artificially lit.

After they had slipped into an official naval dock facility and tied up, he waited until all but the watch and maintenance personnel were off and then just walked ashore.

Beyond the buildings, piers, and guards, though, was a kind of lunatic's seaside resort, at least to his mind. All the houses, hell, all the buildings, big and small, seemed like they'd been poured by a five-year-old out of some play-dough set. They looked, well, kind of weird, not at all sym-metrical or standard but solid, colorful, and well built out of some synthetic material.

And by bright streetlights he found himself in what he thought of as the Land of the Ninja Turtles.

Well, not exactly, but they *did* sort of remind him of the cartoon characters. No shells, though, and no Ninja gear. And some of them had beards, of all things, and some of them wore what looked like Scotch plaid kilts, but most of them wore ugly, serviceable form-fitting plastic-type clothing.

There were big bipedal turtles and little ones and in-between ones, and except for the occasional oddball in kilts or other nonstandard clothing and the few with little goa-tees, they all looked just exactly alike to him.

Well, they seemed warm-blooded by their actions, in spite of looking like reptiles, and that made them somewhat akin to him, however different they really were. Maybe, just maybe, what they ate *he* could eat.

For a while he feared they were all herbivores, but then he discovered the refrigerated warehouses and lots and lots of meat. It was all dead, of course, and some of it might take a while to thaw out, although he wondered how long it would take *anything* to thaw in the waters just beyond the breakwater in superhot Dlubine. Rather than be piggy, he picked a half dozen smaller cuts, a mere six or seven pounds of meat of some kind, went down to the shore just beyond the town and waded, then floated out until he was in the warmest water he'd ever known.

The answer was about an hour a pound.

It didn't taste the same, not without the warm blood and all the nice mushy insides and skin and all, but it wasn't the time to be a gourmet or look gift horses in the mouth. He'd eaten a lot worse on this trip, and natural taste and instinct didn't fill an empty gullet. All in all, it was a quite satisfac-tory beach picnic, even if the company didn't show up.

The next day he tried to find out a little information about where the hell he was and what he might be able to do next.

This, it appeared, was a seaside resort in Agon, so even if the other two had failed to make the northern continent, he had, and he was the only one who didn't give a damn if he ever saw the place or not.

He knew he didn't like the place. It wasn't the locals, or the climate, or even the food so much as it was the fact that it was a high-tech hex. He'd had to bypass several security systems the previous night, and

even so, he knew they knew somebody had broken in. In fact, a whole damned busload of uniformed turtle cops had shown up by dawn and were busily going over the place. He decided that they must have found something, because one of the cops lit out for the naval station on a crazy kind of vehicle that seemed to float just off the ground on nothing in particular but had handlebars and a hand accelerator and a hand brake kind of like a motorbike's. He decided to follow, mostly to see if there was any suspicion of a Dahir being involved.

The little fellow on the flying surfboard beat him there by a bit, of course, but he was there with several navy types of various races spouting off a storm. Gus moved closer to overhear.

". . . definitely no race on our local registry. It *has* to be something from one of your crews! You had a patrol come in just last night!"

One of the crew, who looked like a five-foot-tall version of Rocky the Flying Squirrel sans goggles to Gus, who was, after all, a television person, responded, "Now, calm down. What did you say was stolen again?"

"*Zlabruk!* Eight prime filets! Highest quality, too!"

"I assure you we feed our men well," responded another, who looked like a giant frog in full uniform.

"And they earn more than enough to not go off after a very hot and difficult mission, break into a place, and steal a bunch of— *steaks.*"

"*Zlabruk!* That's imported, you know! Expensive!"

"Well, I don't think—" began the squirrel, then stopped and thought a moment. "Steaks . . . Who in the world would break in and steal slabs of meat? I wonder . . . Wait here a moment. I want you to speak to someone else."

The giant walking squirrel vanished into a nearby build-ing and was gone for two or three minutes while the others fiddled around and the Agonite cop kept muttering about imported filets. Finally the big gray lump of fur emerged, but he was not alone. Following him was a much more amorphous creature, a creature Gus had seen before, and when it spoke through an orifice it formed within itself, it was unmistakably the *same* one as well.

"I am Colonel Lunderman," said the Leeming. "Now, what's this about someone coming in and stealing a bunch of steaks?"

Gus wasn't at all sure whether to be relieved or fearful at the colonel's appearance on this side of the ocean. As much as he needed an ally, he felt he could trust this character about as far as he could throw him.

Just great! he thought to himself. *So now what the hell do I do?*

Agon

they awoke, chained to a wall by efficient shackles, unable to move any of their limbs more than a very short way.

It was a surprisingly modern room with a glowing ultra-modern ceiling providing more than enough light and vents feeding in air-conditioning at a reasonable level of comfort. Lori hung to the right of the entrance, Mavra to his left. Along the other walls were built-in work tables and fancy computer screens, and in the center were a number of benches with all sorts of science equipment on them, giving the place the look of a college chemistry lab.

Mavra groaned and looked around. "Lori? Are you all right?"

"I—well, if you call this all right, I guess so," Lori groaned, then looked around and tested the chains. "Now what happens?"

"Nothing good," Mavra responded. "You remember that I said you'd never really come face-to-face with what fu-ture technology could and would do for criminals? Well, welcome to the future. I'm just *devastated* to see this kind of setup here."

"Yeah, but I thought the equivalent of the UN or some-thing wanted you. This sure isn't them—and why us, too?"

"Well, why don't you just hang around and find out?" Mavra snapped with heavy irony.

Lori sighed, "I guess it doesn't really matter much, for me, anyway. Without Alowi I'm a dead man, anyway."

They did not have long to wait, but the creature who walked through the door was beyond anything they expected.

My god! Lori thought. *It's Daisy Duck with tits!*

In fact, the body appeared more humanoid than duck-like, although it was completely covered by tiny white feathers wherever it was exposed, and the legs, slightly bowed, were of a tough-looking ribbed yellow-orange texture, and while the feet could not be seen, it was not beyond the bounds of imagination to think of two thick webbed feet somehow crammed into a pair of vastly over-sized black pumps.

The arms seemed extremely thin, extending a bit out from the shoulders, with a ball-like elbow joint in the middle and ending in two huge mittlike hands, each with three nearly equal-sized webbed fingers and an opposing thumb, without any sign of nails, claws, or whatever. Extending from the underside of the impossibly thin arms was a row of feathers that might have been what remained of vestigial wings but that were now nothing more than decoration. The entire body, which stood perhaps 165 centimeters discounting the heels, was curvaceous and sported two rather ample mammallike breasts that were easily seen thanks to the rather slinky black dress the creature wore.

The head sat atop what appeared to be a very thin, short neck; it was large enough to match the body and began with long, straight black hair parted in the middle and going down to the shoulders on either side; the eyes were huge and oval-shaped, with the longest points vertical rather than horizontal as on Earth-human eyes, and contained large, round jet black pupils. These sat atop a long, curved ducklike orange-colored bill that extended a good twenty centimeters out from the head and was wide enough to be hinged on the sides of the lower face. Two small black slits atop the bill served as the nostrils; no ears were obvious.

Not Daisy Duck, Lori decided. More like Donald's wet dream. Even so, the effect was comical enough that somehow the figure did not seem threatening.

The bill proved amazingly malleable, almost like a human mouth at its front, and helped the creature shape its words. These words, however, came after it stood there for a very long time and just stared at each of them in turn, but particularly at Mavra, to whom the huge black eyes kept coming back.

Finally it said in a deep, throaty feminine voice that seemed to come from somewhere far back in the head, "This is a surprise I hoped for but one that I did not really expect to catch. In fact, I was actually not expecting to catch up with you at all. The net was basically out for Brazil and still is, but you will do nicely. Very nicely." That last was said with just enough menace to chill them.

"Who are you?" Mavra asked in as confident a voice as she could muster. "What is this place, and what do you want with us?"

One of the oversized fingers came up and gently stroked under the beak. "Who am I? I am hurt at the question, but I will answer it in due course. *What* I am is a Cloptan. It is not far. Right now you are in an underground laboratory on the border with Lilblod. *It* is in Agon, but above there is something more—ordinary. To get in and out one must go through a tunnel into Lilblod. It solves not only the technical but the *jurisdictional* problems rather nicely. You might have guessed that what is processed and packaged here is not exactly popular among most of the world's governments."

"Drugs," Lori sniffed.

"Yes, drugs. Specifically, two types. One is of little interest to you, but the other is the one you knew was in those containers aboard the ship that brought you to us. It has many names, but in the form we process it here we call it 'rhapsody.' It has different effects on different species. In fact, for a number it is lethal, for others it causes brain and nervous system damage, while to yet others it is simply a tasty spice. When processed into slightly different forms, however, for those races that are similar enough in brain chemistry and share some common enzymes in the cells, it is a drug. A *wonderful* drug, in fact. You take it, and all of your pain goes away. All of your physical pain, if any, and much of your *mental* pain as well. All the bad, negative things, the psychological scars of a lifetime, they all have little effect on you. It's all there, but it can't hurt you. I am told that the initial effects are like nothing else imaginable, but as your body gets used to it, you just sort of settle down into a situation where life is—simpler. The effects last for varying periods, the average being eight to ten hours before it gets down to where you'll need some more—but slowly, very slowly."

"I'm sure you'll spell it out in excruciating detail for us," Mavra commented dryly.

The Cloptan ignored the comment. "First the little aches and pains start returning, then full physical awareness, and looming on the horizon is every single horrible thing in your mind, all your worst fears and nightmares. You can feel them, almost see them coming. Fear turns to desperation, desperation to terror. There is nothing at all you can do. The only way is, of course, to take more rhapsody. Eventually, of course, your system gets used to it, and you level out, becoming more normal on a regular basis and with only one big overriding fear—that the supply will stop and you will face the horrors of your own mind."

"How horrible," Lori muttered. The bitch was enjoying this!

"Even the strongest minds cannot withstand it forever. Some can fight it off for hours, a few for days, but

they tell me no one succeeds in breaking it completely. The depression becomes so absolute, you will kill yourself first. It keeps the business—profitable." She walked over and stood right in front of Mavra.

"They say you are possibly immortal, that you cannot be killed. I am not certain I believe that *anyone* can't be killed, but I think it will not make much difference. It *would* be a nice experiment, though, to see just how long you could go without it. If you could not even kill yourself, would your mind crack? What form would the insanity take? I wonder . . . It *is* tempting, but I think I have other plans in the end. Oh, yes, the blood tests say that one form of it will work *quite* nicely on you. Sutton, on the other hand, is sufficiently different from you to require a different formula-tion, but the science folks say that it will work on him as well."

"For God's sake!" Lori cried. "What do you *want!* What are you *doing* this to us for? We're thousands of miles from home and surely can't be of any use to you here!"

"I should think it would be obvious to you by now," the Cloptan replied. "Because of *this*," she said, gesturing down her body with her hands. "*She* made me like this!" she snapped, pointing to Mavra. "And *you*—you went along, Doctor Lori Sutton. And *you*—*you* became the man! The big macho hunter with his little devoted four-titted bitch! I do this for *revenge!* Venganza! Revenge for daring to drag into hell Juan Alfonso Campos de la Montoya!"

"Oh, God!" Lori sighed, feeling all hope vanish.

"So that's why they wanted only the two of us," Mavra said.

"The Dillians are nothing to me and too large to have handled in any case. What are they going to do? It will take them days just to find their way out of Lilblod. Then what? Report to the authorities? They are already looking for you and would find you now if they could. As for Sutton's crazy little bitch, she, too, was nothing to me and just so much excess baggage. Do not worry, *Doctor* Sutton. The computers here are excellent. We know of the deficiency in your system, and we have the means to fix it. If I had wanted you dead, I would have just had them kill you."

Lori shook his head in wonder, unable to understand this kind of thinking. "What is it with you? I didn't pick this body any more than you picked that one. I'd trade you if I could. There are times I would have *killed* for a shape like that. But look at you! Is it so *awful* being a woman? You're young, probably very pretty by the standards of your race, and in an incredibly short time you've managed to get this far up in the drug trade. Some new start, but I guess it's what you know. I'm broke and helpless in a backward me-dieval desert, for god's sake!"

"Being a woman is bad enough," Campos responded an-grily. "It is *hell* to me! And yes, I am *very* beautiful by Cloptan standards. Do you know how hard it was to adjust to that? To have every lecherous Cloptan man *pawing* you? Do you know what I had to *lower* myself to do to get to this? I do not own this lab, nor do I control it. Finding the Cloptan underworld was not difficult, and they were inter-ested in me because I came from the same business but on a different world. No, getting inside was not difficult, but once there I was just another girl, just another piece of *fur-niture* to them! *Me!* The son of the greatest patriot of mod-ern Peru, the man who could strike and corrupt and bring down the most evil and powerful oppressor of all Latin peoples with a weapon as simple and impossible to fight as common coca! I had to *defile* myself! To swallow all pride and self-respect and put myself in the *gutter!* I am *nothing* in this organization except a powerful man's current favor-ite toy! But now, now, it is all worthwhile. Here you are. If I can get the others, too, it will be complete. Brazil and that other bitch. Even if fortune does not smile, however, it has smiled enough. For a while yet we will play games so that I may have the satisfaction to repay my humiliation! Then, when the time is right, *you*, 'goddess of the trees,' will will-ingly and cheerfully *beg* to let me let you put things right. It may take weeks or months yet, I hope not years, but one day you will put things right for me and repay all the suf-fering that you have caused! Once you are under the drug's spell, you will willingly tell me anything and everything. If you *are* what some say you are, then one day we will take a trip, just us girls, and you will go inside this world and *put me right!*"

So that was it, Mavra thought. One more horror to en-dure, one more long torment, but the direction that damned Machiavellian Well was taking was now clear. It was sad that Lori yet again had been dragged into this. Mavra had mostly wanted to help them. Well, if he stayed alive, maybe someday she still could. There was certainly nothing to be done now. She just wished she'd listened to them and left Juan Campos back on Earth or finished him off. *Damn* her sense of fair play! One could totally change such as him, but he remained as evil as ever. He had already changed more than he knew or wanted to recognize, judging from what he'd done as a female and even how she now spoke and moved. But the Well did nothing to change that inner self, and Juan Campos had been an insane, evil, power-mad egomaniac in his former life, and the new persona had done nothing to change that but had reinforced it.

Sooner or later, though, no matter what was to come, she'd be taken to the Well. There was no question

that such a sophisticated operation could get the truth out of her. It could only be hoped that Campos was so insane she believed that inside the Well, in a Markovian body, she could still dictate to Mavra Chang.

Campos stood back and looked at both of them with satisfaction. "Do the shackles hurt? Well, soon you will be free of them, I promise. And the medical teams here, freed of such stupidities as government oversight and ethical colleagues, can do absolute *wonders*. Even though you are one of the most wanted people on this planet, these people specialize in making wanted fugitives unrecognizable, although in most cases they do not have the level of freedom they have in *your* case. You, Sutton, might be quite useful as a courier once we give you some motivation for making appointments on time. But not *you*, 'goddess.' You are *mine*. From you they will carve a work of art. *Then*, as my *dear* boyfriend Giquazo, who I will definitely kill someday, promised, you will go home with me. You will be my pet, my toy. Oh, we will have a *fun* time, I promise you!"

Mavra's heart sank as one of her bitterest Well World memories surfaced: living all those years with those donkeylike legs, always looking down . . .

But she had survived that and worse, and she would survive this for as long as it took, until opportunity knocked. And if Nathan was having the same kind of luck, she might yet be first to the Well.

"Some technicians will be in shortly to inaugurate you both into our widening family," Campos told them. "I go first to speak with those who will see you next, and then I will see you once more before leaving. But do not worry, my little goddess. I shall be back for you." With that, the Cloptan turned and left the room.

"I think I *would* rather die than go through this," Lori told Mavra.

"Don't! *Never* give up! She's too insane to have them mutilate me so much that I won't be able to speak to her and she to me. To that type, life is all about power. Every-thing else—drugs, money, you name it—is to gain power. That's what she really hates about being female now. She's lost power, and I'm the only way for her to get it back. There are only two more hexes after Clopta to the equator and an avenue in. So long as Brazil isn't also caught and trapped, he's as much a threat to Campos as to me. If I can just convince her, no matter what I look like, to get me to the Well before Brazil, we win. Stay alive. Even now, hope's not gone."

Lori very much wanted to believe that.

Juan Campos, or Wahna as her name was pronounced by the Cloptan tongue, made her way through the labyrinthine underground complex to the medical section. There she met with Nuoak, a giant creature resembling a huge brown-furred slug with countless long, tiny tendrils that in combination could perform the most delicate operations, and Drinh, an Agonite resembling a human-sized shell-less turtle with long powerful hands and fingers.

"They are yours any time you want them," she told the medics. "Now that you have their scans, have you decided what you will do?"

"Well, the Erdomite is not difficult," Drinh commented.

"He must be castrated!" *Like I was* . . . "But he must not die! I wish him to work for us, becoming what he most fears and helping, even promoting our own interest which he hates so much! And the rest of what I asked as well, so he will always be reminded of me."

"We have not had either of these species before, but they seem to represent no serious challenges. We believe that we can adapt your Erdomite to become a courier for us over possibly difficult terrain. We have noted the lack of proper clotting factor in his blood, but the gland that aids in its production is merely immature, not missing, and so that problem is easily dealt with. Do not worry. He shall be fit to do only what is useful to us, and all that you request be done to him will be a part of it."

"Perfect! Do it! But what about the other? *That* one requires *very* special treatment."

"There's not as much to work with," the master surgeon noted. "Still, the small size and lack of major features and your own requirements make it obvious that the best way to ensure that no one who ever knew her or saw her picture recognizes her is to create from her an animal. It can be a unique animal, since with the countless varieties of the Well World there is nobody who knows them all or will question a convincing appearance. *This* is what we came up with after much study." He pushed a few buttons on a console, and a hologram of a figure appeared.

Campos laughed in delight. "Oh, that is *wonderful*! Perfect! But—can you *do* such a radical thing?"

"It's not as radical as it looks. Mostly a matter of adding a lot of fatty body mass, moving the knees, implanting the natural feathers, that sort of thing. Then reinforcing it with a *pictin*—an artificial virus tailor-made to her and her alone. It will methodically go from cell to cell and manipulate the stock DNA

chains that will make the change permanent. Internally there's not much changed, so she'll still have to eat what she normally would and such, you understand."

"That is all right. Appearance is everything. *Delicious!* And her speaking? She must be able to speak to me, and I to her, but with limits."

"Much simpler. We will simply remove her translator and replace it with a synthetic one. As you may or may not know, we've never successfully created a translator crystal, but we do have ones that are very limited. We can tune this one not only to one language but to the specific harmonics of your translator. When she speaks, it will be instantly translated into a preset, encoded binary sequence which can be received and decoded only by your translator. To anyone else it will sound like meaningless squawks and screeches. Similarly, since that code will be fed to your translator alone, she will understand you as if you were speaking normally no matter what language you use, while all other speech will be picked up by her translator, which will overload trying to decode what isn't there and produce meaningless random sounds. No one but you will even think that she is a sentient being. Is that satisfactory, madame?"

"Perfect." Juan Campos sighed. "How long will it be before I can bring her home?"

"Not long. Two, three weeks tops."

"Do it, then. Do it as quickly as you can, but do it *right*."

The Erdomese constitution handled the drug a bit differently but just as effectively from the point of view of the dealers. There was not any massive high but rather a continuous feeling of being just a bit isolated from reality, a "slight buzz" as Lori thought of it. It was when it was withdrawn that its full power and potency revealed itself; the pain, the horrors, the hallucinations were beyond anyone's endurance. He knew he could not exist without the drug but was not so insulated that he did not hate them for doing it to him. That, and the way they treated him, half the time as some sort of interesting lab specimen and the other half as no better than a slave, he thought, the worst possible existence imaginable.

But that was before he met the duo he began thinking of as Mengele Turtle and Frankenstein's Slug. He knew by their detached and clinical discussions that they were going to do something more to him, something awful, but he had no way of knowing what.

Then, shortly afterward, the keepers came for him and gave him an injection, and he remembered no more.

The first realization that he was waking up from a sustained anesthetic-induced sleep was an awareness that he was on all fours. *That* was odd; Erdomese men were *never* on all fours. He opened his eyes, but they refused to focus very well, as if still mostly asleep, but he reached out and tried to stand—and found that he could not.

His first thought was that they'd taken his fingers, and then he managed to put his head down close to his arms and saw hooves.

Not even the kind of hooves Alowi had—real hooves, like on his feet.

But his feet, too, were on the floor. How could that be without him being at an angle or on his knees? It was as if his legs had been shortened and his hips turned so that he was now a four-legged, four-hoofed beast a mere three and a half feet off the ground!

With a sinking feeling he realized that it was exactly what they had done. He still had his tail, but it was down and dragged on the floor, trailing between his—hind legs.

And with less shock than he might have thought, he realized that the tail was the *only* thing between those legs, in far too short a time he had gone from female to male to—nothing. There weren't even any internal muscles there to feel or flex.

You didn't have to go to med school to figure out Campos, did you?

Still, even with blurry vision, he could see that there was *something* in back of his—well, forelegs. He not only could see the shapes in a somewhat blurry way, he could *feel* the dead weight hanging down.

Breasts? Four breasts on a eunuch? What on earth for? Particularly such a large and heavy set, which cleared the floor only by several inches. Sensing something else, a wrongness, he flexed his back a bit so that they did touch the floor, then straightened again. If they had nipples, there was no sensation in them.

He wondered why he hadn't bled to death during their butchery and then realized what the breasts really were. Not just more Campos humor—they had placed in him, or activated by hormones, the internal engine of the female, the healing factors. No nipples, because whatever function they served they did so for his benefit, and he was one of a kind.

The neck was very long and supple. He could look forward or down, although his vision seemed to be

limited to about two feet clearly, three before almost everything was lost. Still, he could see very close, and it almost looked to him as if he had some sort of muzzle on, as if he could see part of his nose and jaw.

Then the door opened, and he smelled Mengele Turtle enter. The doctor—if that was what he could be called—began making a lot of very stupid silly noises at him, until finally he heard, "One . . . two . . . three. Ah! I see you can hear me now! Very good! We, of course, removed your translator, among, ah, other things. It has been replaced with an artificial device that interpolates speech both in and out. You can speak, but to be understood you will have to be heard by someone with the same sort of device set to the same frequency. Similarly, you must hear something through the same conditions to understand it. Otherwise, even your native tongue will sound like nothing more than a noise pattern. It is quite useful for couriers such as you will be trained to become. It can't be removed or bypassed without causing permanent damage to the speech centers of the brain, and it can be reset to any frequency we choose or even reprogrammed with a whole new code by remote control. You see how handy that is. You can convey the most sensitive message, but only one who has both the de-vice and your code and frequency can retrieve it. You, on the other hand, sound like an animal making random noises. If anyone attempts to play random sequences and hits it but does not give the code header, it erases, cutting you off completely. Absolutely secure."

"Very clever," he admitted sourly. "But what sort of courier would *this* body make? And what makes you so sure that I'll transfer the right information?"

"Well, you will be trained, of course, both in the uses of the body and in courier technique. You will be used locally, basically between Agon and Clopta through Lilblod. The system itself is simple. There is a specific version of the drug you are on. To survive, you will have to make your assignments, for only they will have it. If any of them find out later that you gave false or incorrect or even incomplete information, they will notify someone and they might well forget your dose. As for finding your way, it will take practice, but you will find that your senses of smell and hearing are incredibly acute. You will learn to follow days-old scents and interpret a vast number of sounds. As most of your route will be through dense forest at night, sight is of little use anyway. The drug will motivate you and ease your pain and exhaustion. Your digestive system can handle most of the ground-level plants of Lilblod. Save for an insignificant amount of the drug you need, you are, shall we say, cost-free and maintenance-free labor."

"Yeah, well these breasts are going to cause no end of trouble in the woods."

"They are tough, and you will get used to them. In addition to supplying your absent clotting factor, they can carry enough food in the form of fat and water to allow you, if need be, to exist for a week or more eating and drinking nothing, so if something happens and you fall behind, you can skip food and water to make up time. You also have a small pouch of which I'm quite proud. It will hold small microencoded materials and even carry the receiving code and frequency for you. It will, however, dissolve such material in gastric juices if you are very late getting your dosage. Withdrawal, in other words, triggers it, so even if you are captured, nothing will be learned."

"You must have studied hard to think up things like this."

The doctor ignored the comment. "Food and drink will be necessities, but they consist of raw leaves and grasses and water—only water will really do—and they'll taste pretty much like what they are. Anything else will make you sick. You won't have much in the way of conversations or companionship, obviously, and you are as asexual as a machine. We were able to locate and neutralize the actual sexual center in your brain. You can't have sex, do not and will not want it, won't even fantasize about it; indeed, if we've done it properly, you won't even be able to figure out why you or anyone else liked it in the first place. It boils down to this: The only thing, the absolute *only* thing that can and will stimulate your pleasure center is our little cube. Over time, as brain and body adjust, it will become your sole reason for existence and our sole expense. Perfect, are you not?"

"Yeah. Perfect." *Drug or not, I'll kill myself at the first opportunity rather than live like that.*

He seemed to anticipate the thought, "If you think of suicide, be sure you do it, because otherwise we'll give you no cube at all for one full cycle . . ."

That was too much. He knew he'd never go through with it, *couldn't* kill himself with *that* kind of threat. They had won. All this way and the bad guys had won!

For the other captive it was possibly even worse.

At one time or another Mavra Chang had been put on or tried an enormous number of drugs, but nothing like rhapsody. Within minutes it seemed as if every pleasure center in her brain and body exploded in

continuous delight while all else, *everything* else, faded into total insignificance. She knew she was still chained to the wall, but it just didn't seem important, nor did it when they released her and she dropped to the floor. Everything, every touch, every move, was a new delight.

She was aware of others, of being asked questions and answering them, but it was of so little consequence, she didn't even remember the specifics of the conversations. Darkness, light, colors, sounds, creatures moving around, all had their wonders and delights. She was being poked and probed and moved here and there, but none of it really *mattered* to her.

It was hard to say how long this lasted, but the coming down was very, very slow. Awareness outside of herself re-turned in dribs and drabs, shapes and creatures took on more realistic appearances, and things began to seem more logical. Even so, she remained high and knew she was, able to function but still somewhat bathed in a nice, soft, com-fortable cocoon. Things being done seemed peculiar or even hilarious but caused no alarm.

By the time real rationality had returned and there was just a glow and slight lack of coordination, they had put her in a small padded cell. Her feet were free, but her hands were cuffed behind her back. Overcome at that point with a seemingly insatiable hunger and thirst, she found a pot of some cold liquid and three very large varicolored loaves of different things, what she couldn't guess. The urge to eat and drink was just irresistible, even if she had to do it on her knees or prone, biting into the loaves as best she could and manipulating the container of liquid with only her mouth and neck. It tasted sweet and heavy with a kind of creamy aftertaste, something like buttermilk, and she managed to drink most of it while spilling only about a quarter, and that she found herself lapping up with her tongue. She had left nothing when she was done.

She now felt sleepy but tried to shake it off and think. That rhapsody was the most dangerous drug she'd seen since sponge. In fact, it might be an ancestor of just that for all she knew. She *did* know that she would be mentally incapable of turning it down if it were offered again, and that brought forth the first and primary fear. They *had* to give more to her! Nothing, absolutely nothing was of more importance to her than that. She'd kill her own friends and betray any trust to get it.

She knew she was hooked, on the line completely, but as much as she hated the thought and those who'd done it to her, she knew they'd accomplished what they had set out to do.

Why keep me locked up and shackled like this? There is no way I can leave this place. Not now.

But she was a new species for them, she realized, and they couldn't be sure of her compliance or even positive that they'd gotten the dosage right. And they were probably scared of her, scared of the rumors about her possible powers. They would make very sure.

Within a few more hours she was in tears, hysterically banging her head against the padded door and begging, pleading, promising anything if they would just give her more and stop the torment. She hated them, hated their cold, callous way of treating her in this, hated Campos for what she'd done to her, hated herself for being so damned vulnerable, but it was horrible, awful . . . Far worse than heroin, which she'd managed to kick more than once. But the withdrawal pains hadn't been nearly at this level. The waking nightmares, the hallucinations of every horror she'd ever lived through, the onrush of all the fear and pain she had ever endured . . .

She was descending into madness with the speed of a spaceliner when they'd finally come and given her some more. Within a minute, maybe two, it was all receding, all going away, things were wonderful once more . . .

After several cycles, as her system became accustomed to having the drug in it, they were ready for the next phase.

She was put under for the bulk of it. She had almost no memories of it or who did it or where or how long it took or how the hell they did it at all. Nor was there any real sense of how much time had passed, only that it had. By the time she was able once again to awaken and move about on her own, it was done.

She felt—odd—beyond the high and knew that Campos had accomplished her total threat. They had done something to her. Something major. It was only a question of what.

She had no feeling at all in her arms. They'd never let her use her arms or hands, not since the beginning, and so it wasn't totally surprising, but it bothered her. She was walking oddly, too, as if she couldn't bend her legs. *Nothing* felt right.

She was in a small but ordinary room furnished only with a thick pillow, but one wall seemed extra polished and she made her way laboriously over to it. Then, seeing the ghostly reflection, she looked down at herself to confirm the worst.

She was almost completely covered in feathers. Tiny little feathers that made a second skin, feathers of bright colors: gold and emerald and crimson and deep, rich blue, making intricate random designs. She

couldn't feel her arms because she no longer had arms, or shoulders, for that matter. Somehow they'd managed to transplant some of the muscle tissue, though, because she still had breasts, fatter and larger than before and also feathered right down to the nipples.

But for those she was shaped pretty much like a turnip. She had a large, rotund, feathered stomach and rear end, and they'd widened her hips. That had been done as much for balance as for design, since they'd taken her knee joints and placed them just below those widened hips, as if the upper calves and thighs had been turned upside down, and these terminated in a pair of very wide leathery feet that were more like pads with a flat extension both forward and rear. She did not walk so much as slowly *waddle*. It would take some practice, and she wasn't sure how she'd get up again if she fell over.

She had to get very close to the reflection to see her face. They'd done something to the skin to make it look very dark brown and leathery, extending her nose until it was virtually a hawk-nosed bill of the same consistency as the face. They'd brought in the mouth to almost a pucker and replaced the lips with a short curved birdlike bill. Only the eyes seemed familiar, but even there they'd done some-thing, or maybe it was the drug. She saw quite well but only to maybe one and a half, two meters. After that every-thing was a blur, even in the small room.

They've made me into a human owl, she thought, more in shock than in disgust. In fact, while the overall effect was somewhat comical in the same way a penguin was comical, the combination of colors and the fluidity of the design were quite attractive. It was also true that she could appear like this in public and no one, not Lori, not the Dillians, not even Brazil, would recognize her.

It was also true that she was now more helpless and more dependent than a captive songbird with clipped wings. She could waddle, first one side forward, then the other, like a penguin, but not very far or very fast. Climbing or getting her own food was out of the question. She might manage a little something with her head and mouth—beak—but not a lot. She was totally defenseless. She couldn't run, fly, or grab or use a weapon or tool, and even her bright colors were a problem, making concealment difficult. That was if the enemy came within two meters so she could see it.

Even her hearing seemed off. True, they'd recessed the ears into the head and covered them with feathers so it appeared she had none, but even so, she thought it odd that all she heard from the corridor outside were what sounded like snorts, clicks, and silly noises.

She suddenly felt foolish. That drug *did* make one stupider, she thought. Of *course* they would have removed the translator. Did they do more? She opened her mouth and called "Hey, out there! Shut up!" but the only thing that came out was a series of awful-sounding squawks. They'd altered her vocal chords or replaced them. And she couldn't even form words with her lips. Not with this rigid beak.

Helpless, dependent, no ability to talk or understand, no way to form words silently or use sign language . . . they'd really cut her off. To literally everyone else, even those she knew and who knew her—save only the ones who had done this with masterful skill and a technology far beyond expectation, and Campos, of course—she'd be seen as—she *was*—the world's first exotic animal junkie.

Well, she'd kept Campos around, a captive, drugged and hauled about through the jungle, and had wound up making him into the world's sexiest duck creature. Now Campos had in her own twisted mind attained the perfect revenge.

What was odd was how she was taking it. She herself noticed this, but only as a curiosity, not because it really bothered her. She just *accepted* it fatalistically as something that was. She knew it was the drug, placing a soft, pleasant haze between herself and reality, but she did not want that haze to disappear. So long as it was there, she could accept almost anything. It was her only friend, her only protector.

Still, there was the practical, pragmatic need to get used to it. She waddled over in the direction of the door, blurry though it was, and the usual food cakes and drink were there. Although a little nervous about it, she discovered that they'd set the balance and center of gravity exactly right. These doctors were geniuses with the souls of mon-sters. She could bend completely forward on those knee joints, and the bill, serrated a bit, was perfect to break into the loaves and get pieces she could mush and break up inside her mouth proper and swallow without difficulty by raising her head a bit while keeping bent over. Drinking was harder to master and amounted to using the tongue or a back part of her mouth to get some suction through the tiny bill if it was immersed, but it, too, was manageable.

The only real problem was with the breasts, which amounted to dead weight tumbling down when she bent over and which, with no arms and true shoulder muscles to stabilize them, went every which way, pulling on her neck and throwing her slightly off balance. She'd never had large breasts as a human, and they could well have dispensed with them as they did with other parts of her, but instead they'd enlarged them and created a problem. More of Campos's revenge, she understood. She would learn to live with them with practice, she decided.

A technician or guard or whatever who looked like an underdressed turtle gave her the drug regularly, in the form of a solid soft cube. It was far slower to take effect when eaten, but the creature was never late with it. Campos, she worried, might not be so punctual.

And finally the Cloptan came for her. Campos seemed absolutely enthralled by the redesign, and Mavra was again taken aback to discover that thanks to the legs, she was now even shorter, no more than a meter or so tall. She had always been small and mostly looked up to see other faces, but this meant craning her neck.

"Oh, but this is *so* excellent!" Campos gushed. "Revenge is seldom so perfect! Can you understand me?"

To her surprise, Mavra *could*. "Yes, I can."

"*Wonderful!* You see, the little device inside you is tuned *only* to me. It even blocks out other people's translators from your mind. And what it transmits, only *I* have been given the ability to translate and understand. And all I have to do is *think* about it and I can turn it off, or on, at will. So you will communicate, and understand, only to me and when I wish. What you send is a computer code that sounds to all others like the noise of a bird. You will truly be my pet, and you will *act* like it. You will guard me and protect me at all costs if you can, and the rest of the time you will be a nice little trained birdie and do *everything* I say, because *I* and I alone have those nice little red cubes. You will exist to please me and never to displease me, now, won't you?"

"Yes," she replied resignedly.

"Oh, no! We begin right here. It will from now on be 'Yes, *master*.' Not even 'mistress,' not 'madame.' *Master*. Understand?"

"Yes—master."

"And you can spend your time thinking of ways to sing my praises. How beautiful I am, how intelligent, how simply *wonderful* I am. You will spend your time thinking of new ways to praise, flatter, *worship* me as your one and only god, and you will do it with *conviction*, with *enthusiasm*; you will *convince* me that you believe it. And in the same breaths you will do the opposite to yourself. Remind me and yourself how low you are, how dependent, how miserable and undeserving a creature you are and how lucky you are to be my property, and you will say *those* things, too, with the same fervor. And any time I find either part unconvincing, I might just forget your little cube for a while. Maybe a very *long* while, until you are totally believable. *Understand?*"

One pang of true abject fear pierced the insulating haze. "*Yes*, my most wonderful master, from whose great kind-ness all blessings flow. Please forgive this most miserable of helpless wretches who is nothing without you!"

Campos smiled. "It is a start. We shall have many, many long conversations together, and all of them, even the ones that matter, will be partially tests. Practice it in your mind. You will come to believe that what you say is true so that it becomes second nature to use it. Now, come. I have a travel cage for you, and we must catch the return steamer for Buckgrud, the city where I live in Clopta. There, in my flat, I have a nice little place provided for you."

"As you command, most powerful and magnificent mas-ter."

The worst part of it was, the words weren't even sticking in her throat.

Still, now would begin the trial, until one day Campos would decide for whatever reason that she'd had enough or wanted more. Then Mavra would be the only means by which Campos could have her revenge on just about every-thing and everybody she hated, and that was almost the en-tire universe now. The Cloptan had already thought ahead on this; that was why they could still speak to one another, and she was conditioning her "pet" to think like an obedi-ent slave to ensure complete control. Otherwise, when Juan Campos had the burning desire to get her hands on the Well World controls, how could she make Mavra let her do it? The worst part was, as she was, Mavra didn't even care.

Lilblod

"YOU SEPARATED ME FROM MY HUSBAND! I WILL *KILL* YOU FOR that!"

"Now, calm down, I tell you," Zitz soothed. "There was nothing I could do. They'd have killed you anyway if you made a fuss."

"They might as well have killed us both!" Alowi cried. "My husband cannot *survive* without me!"

"Nothing to do with love, I'm afraid," Tony explained. "She produces something inside her that heals his

injuries. We've seen it in action."

"Well, it's done, and that's that. I can't even give you a clue as to where they took 'em. I don't know nothin' about the land part of this, and I don't wanna know. I'll tell you, though, that either we did what they said or they'd have took 'em anyways and blown *all* of us out of the water the moment we dropped the load. Blown all three of you away as it was. Think we liked it? We're gonna lose a *fortune* be-cause we gotta give back them stolen jewels! And it'd have been easier for us to just knock all three of you off and dump you in the ocean. We're droppin' you here instead. That over there's Lilblod. It's not a real nice place, but you take care and keep to the trails and keep your nose out of where it don't belong and you'll make it. About fifty kilo-meters north is Clopta, a high-tech coastal hex where you can get a ride into a Zone Gate and a quick pass back home. South maybe sixty, seventy kilometers is Agon, same deal. Don't think you can go down there and stir up stuff and find them. They probably never made shore there. Got picked up by some other ship and are maybe anywhere or heading anywheres else by now. Go home. It's over."

"Come, come dear!" Anne Marie said sympathetically. "Let's get off this terrible ship first and be on our own. *Then* we can decide what to do next."

With neither the Dillians nor Alowi having a translator, it was up to Zitz to interject.

There was no purpose now to further protests, and Alowi nodded and tried to calm down. "All right," *But I will feed the name of this accursed ship and all of its crew to my people back in Erdom. Such an assault on our honor can-not go unavenged.*

"This *is* going to be a problem, though," Tony commented. "We really can't speak to or understand her, nor she us."

"Sister, if she's nuts enough to go off tramping in that crazy forest by herself, let her," Zitz responded. "You won't find much with a translator in *there*, but it's easy in either Clopta or Agon. Just get everybody out, huh?" He turned to Alowi.

"Okay, lady, here's the way it is. They're gonna head for one or another of these places where you can get home and they'll take you. Maybe you can't talk to each other, but you'll make do. You ain't cut out to be an avenger. You just ain't built for it. Relax. Take it easy. Tell the authorities if you want to once you get there. It's no big deal to us. But one way or another you're gettin' off this ship as soon as we get in a little more. Either you *get* off with all your gear or we shoot you and shove you off and keep it. Your choice."

"We'll go, curse your black heart," Anne Marie responded acidly.

"Oh, yeah, one more thing," the Zhonzhorian said. "You *can* report this and this ship, but remember that all three of you are wanted in Gekir for jewel theft. And even though they'll still check it out, we'll show that this ship, under an alternative name and registry, was thousands of kilometers away at the time. You're out of your league here. Forget it. You won't find them—hell, the authorities couldn't anyway, could they, or you wouldn'ta been aboard in the first place. All you'll do by stirring up trouble is to make sure you all get sent back to Gekir, where you'll be blinded and sent out for life to work in the salt mines until you die. *Nobody* wins on this one. Sometimes it happens."

It wasn't much of an answer, but it was a collection of hard truths that was impossible to ignore.

The *Star Runner* came close enough to the shore to scrape bottom, and that was as far as it dared. Anne Marie picked up the sobbing Alowi and put her on Tony's back, where she clung as hard as she could, and Anne Marie hefted the saddlebags and packs, and they jumped the short distance from the rails down into the water and quickly struck mud. It was a little tough to get some footing, but finally both of them managed to force their way up and onto the shore, Alowi still clinging to Tony's back, looking wet and disheveled but otherwise none the worse for the wear.

It was very dark and very quiet on the shore; there were no lights to be seen anywhere.

"*Now* what?" Anne Marie asked, trying to see something other than forbidding swampy forest in the thick gloom of the night.

"We camp as soon as we can find a dry place, of course," Tony responded. "We still have some matches in a waterproof container, and we might try a fire, if only to scare away anything unwelcome. When we get some light, we'll see about finding a road."

"Which way?"

"It really doesn't matter, does it? I should think, though, if we have any real chance of tracing them, it should be south. At least they'll have communications, possibly enough to get word to the embassy in Zone. Then we might be able to arrange to get this poor girl home and maybe be out of this and home ourselves. I've had quite enough of discomfort and double crosses. We did our duty as best we could. Now we deserve a chance to live our own lives."

"Duty! *Bah!*" Anne Marie almost spit. "This poor dear won't go home willingly. She'll try to find her husband, even if that's impossible, because it's *her* duty and because she's in love. You heard what they

said about that dreadful culture. She'd be married off to some old bum she didn't know and die of a broken heart!"

"Anne Marie, this is not a romance novel."

"Tony Guzman! What in the *world* has gotten into you? It's not like we are innocent bystanders in all this! Nor entirely without some responsibility, too, simply because we weren't all that honest with them, either."

"We didn't *ask* to go along on this adventure!" Tony argued. "We were *drafted*!"

"Nonsense! That nice young man from the Zone embassy came along and *asked* us to do it. To go and link up with this Mavra Chang and find out as much as we could. And we found out a great deal, I think! We were also to get off a report to the ambassador if they lost track of the party. Thank *goodness* we didn't have to do *that*. I would have felt just *dreadful* about it!"

"But it's *over*, Anne Marie! *We're* the party now. The only satisfaction we might have is rubbing it in that smug drug runner's face after he discovers we were not fugitives but shadows."

"Spies, you mean. Spies for our government."

Tony sighed. "Anne Marie, spies are professionals. Espionage is a highly regarded art. We were rank amateurs dropped into a situation where we might have been hurt or killed by a government that wouldn't have really cared, and now we got out with our lives and whole skins. I don't *want* to be blinded or crippled. Not again. Now we have a second chance. I want to go home before something *does* happen. We were very nearly killed back there, you know. Anne Marie, we're sixteen years old again, only this time we're sexy blond bombshells that had the men of Dillia already making fools of themselves around us. I've *been* on that side. I want to find out if it's any more fun on *this* side."

"Well, then, you go home," she told the other centauress. "I suppose I should have seen it coming long before this, but I didn't want to. You've *had* a good life. You were handsome, from a well-to-do and well-connected family, skilled, educated, a pilot and world traveler. I never did *any* of those things. I couldn't. I was homely and plain and stuck mostly in a broken body. I made the best of it, but it wasn't fun, let me tell you! Your coming along, your love, was the one truly wonderful thing that happened to me. I shall always cherish it, and I shall always love that inner part of you, but surely you must have known from the moment we woke up like *this* that it could never be again. In a sense, this is our afterlife, mortal though we remain, goodness knows. I faced it more and more as we went on this trip. I shall always love that memory of you, and I shall continue to love you, but as a sister. This is after the 'death do us part' as surely as if we'd done away with ourselves, and you know it if you'd just face it."

Tony laughed.

"What's so amusing? I'm deadly serious."

"Anne Marie, I've rehearsed almost that identical speech a thousand times in my mind, and up to now I never had the nerve to give it. I was afraid of *hurting* you. And I thought we shared one another's thoughts to a degree!"

Anne Marie laughed in return, then finally said, "I guess not. I suppose it's what we thought we would think if the situations were reversed or some such. Or, since we actually *were* thinking the same, maybe it's true. Maybe we just didn't believe we were." She sighed. "Well, then, I guess this is what we'd call a divorce by mutual consent. Who would have *dreamed* we two would ever say those words?"

"We'll always be closer than any other two women of our race," Tony noted, taking her hand and squeezing it. "But no matter that we see each other in a living mirror, we are two different people who will lead at least slightly different lives."

"Agreed. And if you want to go back and have all those silly fools swoon over you, be my guest. I suppose, if all else comes out in the end, I'll wind up doing it, too, but I'm not so eager to start as you."

"Anne Marie! What can you *do*? It is like the man said—it is *over* for us!"

"For you. Go on, I understand completely. But I know how skin-deep those lusting fools are, and they certainly weren't there when I needed them, going off chasing some—some dumb blond like you. I'm having *fun*, dear! For the first time in my life I'm *living* it instead of watching life go by! I very much *hope* that I'll come through in one piece, but, in the end it really doesn't matter to me. Perhaps it was because I was so devoted, to charities, to the unfortunate, to you. Perhaps it's just divine grace. But God gave me, at the end of my half life, a chance to live a *full* one, at least for a little bit. I shall probably give up in disgust and go home after a few days, but if there is *anything* perhaps I can do, if there's just one little thing I can add, I'll stick it out." She looked around at Alowi. "Oh my! The poor dear's cried herself to sleep!"

"Exhausted, probably. She's been throwing a tantrum for three days now."

"We should stop chattering and build that fire, then."

The next day proved tough going through the thick and ancient trees of Lilblod, but with no sign of who or what was the dominant race there or why they were feared.

Still, before midday they reached a road that, while di-rect, seemed very well traveled by the depth of the wheel grooves and the marks of all sorts of feet in the clay.

"Runs pretty much straight, northwest to southeast," Tony noted. "I guess this is the main highway to civiliza-tion. He said that place—Clopta or some such—was clos-est, which would mean we might well make it at a trot before dark."

Anne Marie raised an eyebrow. "But Agon is where they took the pair of them. If nothing ate us last night except the bugs—goodness! I itch all over!—then I doubt if anything will eat me if I spend one more night by this road. Give me the poor little darling and we'll head south."

Tony stared at her. "So this is it? Already?"

"I suppose so. It had to come sometime. It might jolly well be now." She gestured with her arms to Alowi to get off Tony and climb up somewhere on her back.

After a few moments' confusion Alowi figured it out enough to act, slid off, and managed, with a little help from Anne Marie, to get up on the other twin.

"Good-bye, Tony," said Anne Marie. "I'll see you in a few weeks, I suppose, unless we have a lot more luck than we have had in this matter so far." And without another word she started off southwest, toward Agon, at a brisk trot.

Tony stood there and watched her go until she was al-most out of sight, then muttered, "Oh, hell," and trotted off southwest after them.

Just Off the Crab Nebula

the kraang was not at all pleased. what had looked from the start to be a fairly straightforward affair had now turned into a series of Gordian knots that threatened all its plans.

Nathan Brazil, happily and stupidly diverted making flower garlands for his girlfriend on a desert island well re-moved from the action, was nicely out of the game, al-though the Kraang understood the Well sufficiently to know that this would not, could not be allowed to become a per-manent condition. Still, thanks to a race playing with pow-ers it was not capable of handling or comprehending, the first job had been accomplished.

The Watcher had been diverted from the Well.

That should have provided more than enough time for the other to reach it first, but instead that mad, sick inter-loper had captured her and placed her in a situation where she, too, was no longer in control of events but which, in-stead of representing the Kraang's interests, now threatened to do horrible, irrecoverable harm.

Not that the Kraang didn't have a grudging admiration for Campos. If the vengeful cutthroat succeeded in destroy-ing Mavra Chang's last vestiges of ego and will, she would open the entrance for him but be unable or unwilling to in-terface with the master control center. That would leave Campos free to roam those vast corridors unhindered, and after realizing that he could not comprehend, much less ac-tivate anything inside, he might well do terrible harm in his inevitable rage. Once he was inside its bowels, the Well would be helpless to control events concerning its own wel-fare.

And because she could still draw on the Well database to the limits of that primitive ape brain, she might even be able to tell him how to do some simple things that even so limited a creature could manage.

Probability was too complex to allow that. As a tiny stone in a pond made great ripples, even a very minute al-teration of the basic matrix might, just might, create a series of alternatives that would take the whole universe into un-charted and unpredictable realms. Without one capable of handling and manipulating such power, like the Kraang it-self, the results could be disastrous.

Even the Watcher, whom the Well would undoubtedly summon with great urgency if such a thing occurred, might not be able to fully straighten things out.

And yet without Mavra Chang to open the way, the Kraang could not reach those controls itself.

Why hadn't they simply hibernated, as the Kraang had, until they were needed? What could possibly be gained by a Watcher, or even two, living out meaningless lives on some distant dirt ball until rather crudely summoned in time of need?

Perhaps, it reflected, the judgment of eons had been wrong, after all. It had always thought of the Others as wrongheaded and foolish, but until now their competency had not been called into question.

Something would have to be done, and quickly. It was not used to thinking in such terms, but this was

clearly not the time to ponder but to act.

But how?

Accessing Chang or even Brazil was out. It had managed a brief access while she was in transition, but once on the Well World, access to either her or Brazil was blocked. As for the rest, so far they were accessible only as viewers, strictly one-way communication. They were neither men-tally strong enough to be used nor tied into the Well matrix.

There had to be *some* way, somehow, to break this apart, to create a flood from the logjam. Options had to be weighed, possibilities explored if they existed, and risks taken, even if it used up precious energy it could ill afford to squander if things didn't go just exactly right.

It was a question of divine intervention in a situation where there was no god.

More than ever, though, it was convinced that it was right, that it had been right all along.

This universe required a god and was instead stuck with two incompetent repair technicians.

There *had* to be a way. There had to be *something* that could be done.

But after four billion years of meaningless existence driv-ing to and fro among the stars, finding even vast blocks of time meaningless, it wasn't used to thinking that time, any time, was quickly running out.