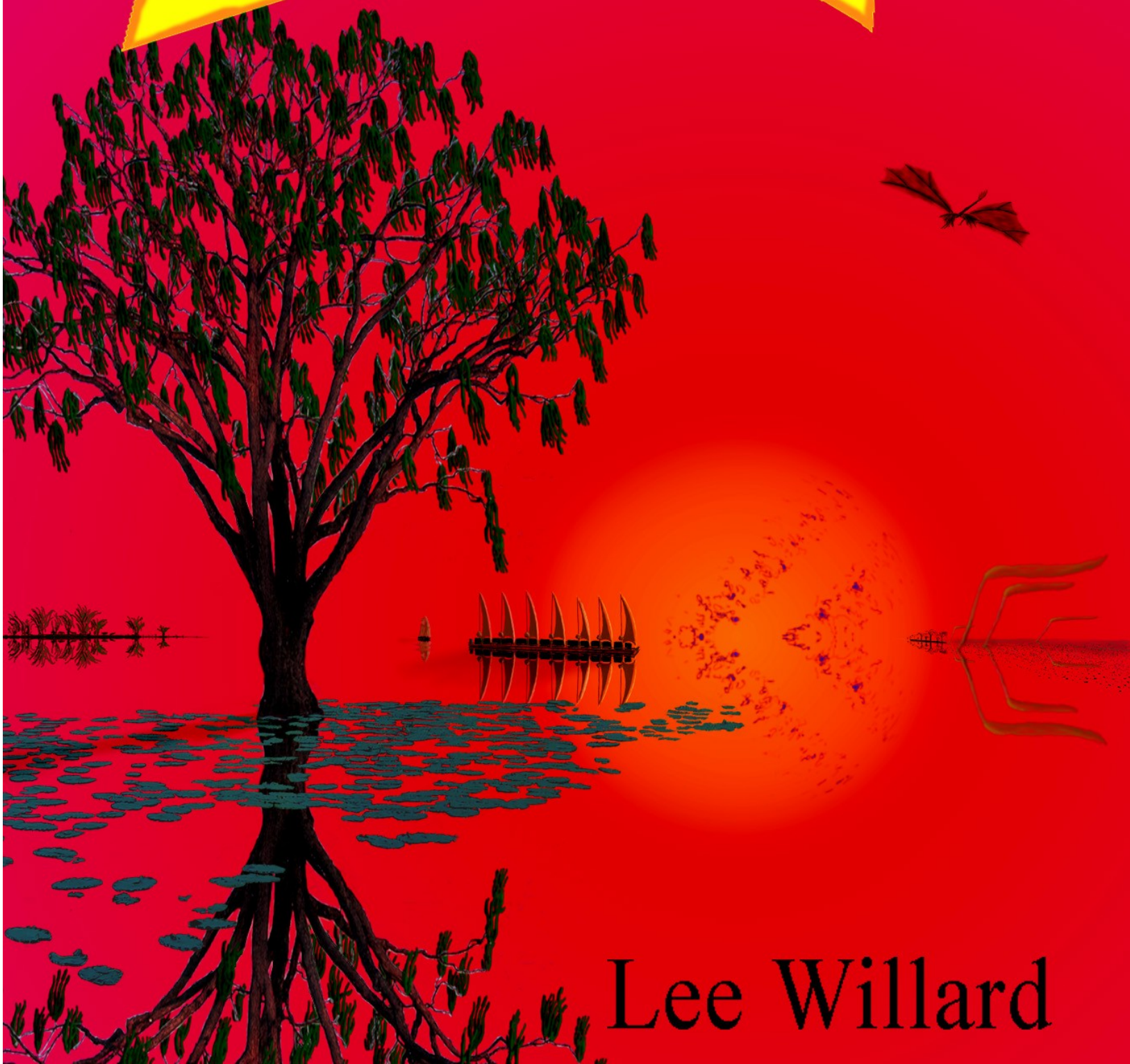


The Report of The Second Expedition To 61 Cygni
Vol II.

Char



Lee Willard

The Report of
The Second Expedition
to 61 Cygni

Vol. II

Lhar

Copyright 2010 by Lee Willard

The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real persons places or things, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The fictional world of Kassidor and the premise that the 'hippy' culture that began in the 1960's came from there a creation of Lee Willard. Other works of fiction alluded to in this work may be copyrighted and the copyrights held by others.

The Second Expedition is dedicated to Trudi. Without her help and support this tale could not have existed.

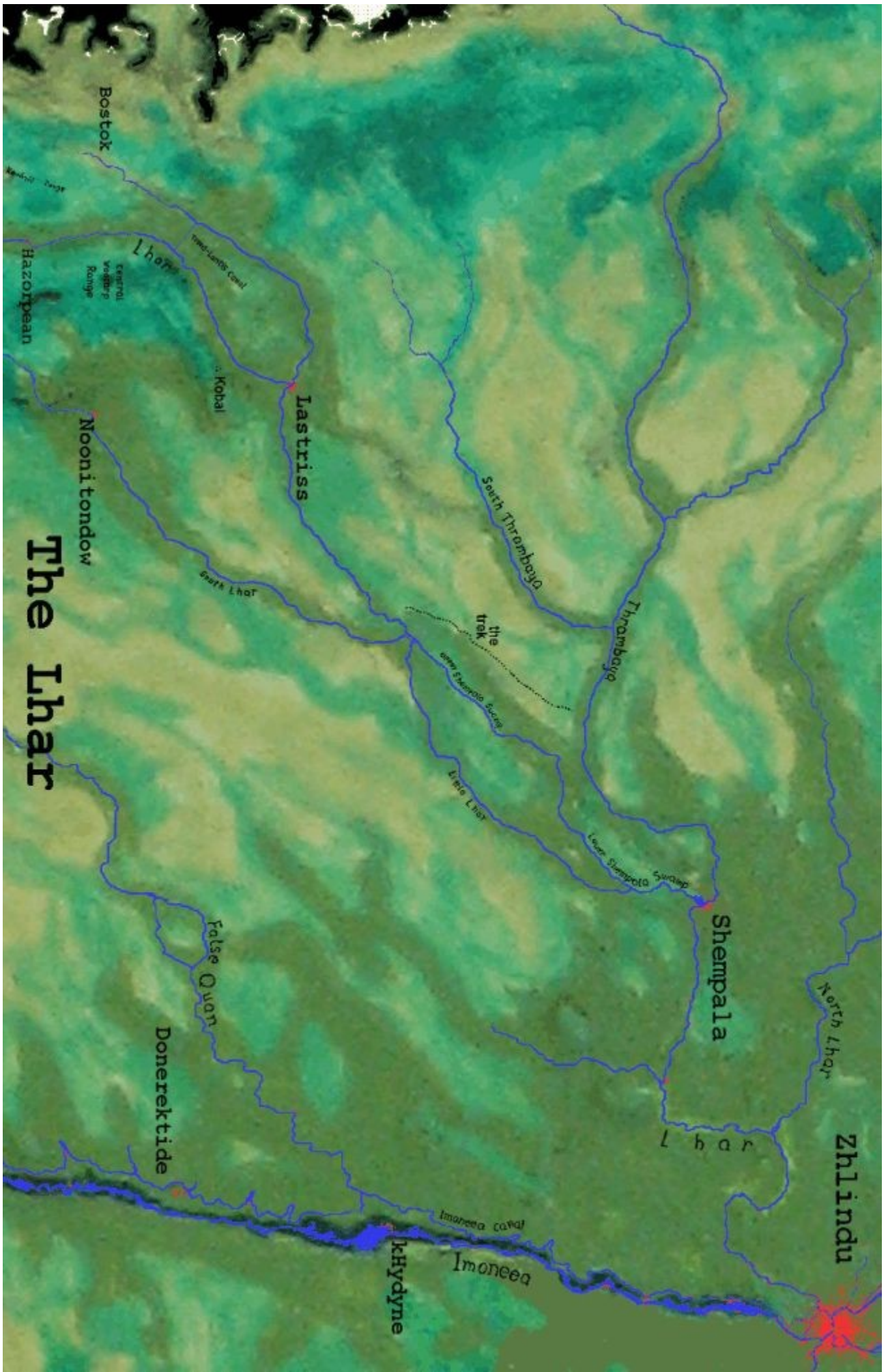
Background information on the planet Kassidor and other stories by Lee Willard can be found at www.kassidor.com.

Cover by Lee Willard

Lhar

After resigning from membership in the expedition of Gordon's Lamp in the mountain town of Yoonbarla, Alan faces the unknown of a whole new world as he follows a pair of native women down the long, lazy, river Lhar. The women meanwhile must cope with the adventure of a shipmate from an alien culture. All the while the child of the expedition's system, Ava Bancour, attempts to unravel the technology of the planet's ancient past.

Book I.	Signals of a Suntower	1
Book II.	The Darceenian Flame	86
Book III.	Attack of the Giant Space Monster	167
Book IV.	Biology Base	187
Book V.	In the Wilds	212
Book VI.	An Astronomer's Opinion	356
Book VII.	Down River	368
Book VIII.	Interesting News	425
Book IX.	Monogamy's End	432



Book I.

Signals of a Suntower

Wednesday Jun. 1, 2271 - 9:06pm

Alfred arrived back at his quarters, tired of the security meetings. There had been five hours of them so far since last Saturday night, another hour first thing this morning, and there were two lines uttered in total that summed up everything there was to know about Alan's defection.

"Just like I told you, your mortal went feral on you the first time it smelled a potential mate." Everyone on Gordon's Lamp knows that comment had to come from Major Delos Alvarez of Economics.

The other was, "Alan is perfectly right, other than obliterating villages with mass pulled from the near moon, there's not a whole lot we can do about it." That was the resigned voice of Colonel Glayet Samrova of Security.

And thus the whole expedition of Gordon's Lamp, the flagship of the Christial Church's starfleet, is completely stymied by the fact that his experiment has gone out of control. He'd administered the biosphere for eighty five percent of human life off-Earth, and now he has one simple experiment escape. And it's a single macroscopic creature, his firstborn son as a matter of fact, not a virus or even an insect.

It wasn't all his doing. Church doctrine decreed that they

should seed any possibly habitable planet with human life in God's image as a source of souls. So as soon as they knew there was a biological planet in the system, Alan's zygote had been thawed. The huge, slowly rotating, inner planet of 61 Cygni A was found to be a riot of biology. A pre-industrial civilization was discovered while they were still doing unsuccessful economic prospecting in the asteroid belts. A years-long overcautious approach found no advanced technology.

By then the zygote was a bright young schoolboy. Alfred himself animated the android that played the part of Alan's father. Victoria McReady, a brilliant xenogenetesisist he hadn't met, wooed and married til the Afterlife, animated the android that played his mother.

Unfortunately Alan's proficiency with his system interface enabled him to find out that his 'parents' were androids and not biologicals when he was only sixteen. Alan discovered that he is the only biological specimen of humanity on the expedition. Everyone else is an Angel, living in Heaven, in silicon, in the qbytes of Gordon's Lamp's logic pods. His zygote had been fertilized in-vitro with frozen gametes taken from bodies long dead. Alfred knew how deeply hurt Alan was, more than he could admit even to himself. They had planned to tell him the truth about themselves when he was twenty one, when he would be better able to handle it. The androids never moved again once Alan showed them he could hack control over them.

Their orbit was in a stasis point between the planet's little hundred-mile egg of an inner moon and the planet itself. From there they planned to study the native civilization in more detail, though the captain's paranoia at being discovered by the natives had allowed them to learn almost nothing in the four years since then.

Alan's administration, not just care, hadn't actually been transferred from Theology to Biology until a probe was landed among the natives and turned up the shocking fact that the natives were humans. They were not plausible humanoids, they were pretty young men and women. This planet was already well seeded with human life in God's image, most of them in their late teens and early twenties, descended from an ice-age indo-european stock they thought. That fact made Alan an uncomfortable issue.

Alan became more withdrawn and surly as he got older and realized how superfluous he was. No companions were raised for him and he had only video images to converse with. He had a video friendship with Glenelle and Morgan, the only other souls who had ever animated androids in his presence, and at times he was pretty close to Ava Bancour, their systems administrator. He never had an actual companion his own age. Ava was biologically younger than Alan when she ascended, but she was over a hundred thirty years old in silicon.

Alan refused to ascend to the Afterlife, preferring to play with his terminal and retain his biological body, performing

doggedly in the exercise ring and participating in as much EVA as he could be allowed. His moods became a concern for both he and Vic and they tried to find something to get him interested again.

Alfred and his friend, Colonel Elmore Bovok, commandant of Economics, championed the idea of sending Alan to the surface. There was some chance he could pass as a native long enough to find out some useful information before he was incarcerated and/or dissected. They argued that he wouldn't arouse as much suspicion as a probe. If he could find anything at all on how this planet came to be inhabited by humans it was worth the risk. It would also give him something to do, something that would certainly pique his interest.

That had piqued his interest alright. He had trained heroically and was already fluent with the native language. He put the only remaining live probe's audio and video on in his chamber round the clock. Once set down, Alan had passed for a native much too well. A week after they set him down he had found a girlfriend and run off with her to some native city, presumably the big one in the center of this basin. That was as vast a pile of construction as existed on Earth itself, a misty and mysterious ceramic honeycomb overgrown by tangled jungle and filled with a swarming multitude of humanity, their domestic animals, and a riotous canopy above.

The girlfriend claimed to be a well-traveled university professor, and knew some pretty impressive things, like how many nucleotides it takes to code an amino acid in all five evolutions of life found on this planet. Everything she'd told Alan that can be verified has been correct, including the nucleotide-amino acid codings for humans and the two forms of life native to this planet that the expedition already had samples of. If things they can't verify are correct, the natives control their own biology, had a high-energy civilization about the time of the Egyptian pyramids and outgrew such savagery as governments and such primitive afflictions as old age about the time of Jesus.

Because it was his experiment, Alfred was stuck with continued monitoring of Alan's comm channel. He didn't think that fact was grievous punishment. Indeed that was exactly what he wanted. Actually Alfred wanted to remain with the whole biology lab, its supporting equipment and probes. All that would remain in orbit here at the biological planet of A, while the remainder of the ship took the two year journey to 61 Cygni B in search of enough metals to allow an economy to develop. All the biological equipment and specimens would be left behind, along with the atmosphere shuttle and all the atmosphere probes. They were leaving everything that would be of no use in the all-out economy-or-bust expedition they were mounting to B. The only problem was that Theology was against leaving Souls behind with the

jettisoned equipment and Captain Kelvin M'Kintre paid a lot of attention to Theology.

Alfred was trying to justify his staying behind. Everything from the 'I'll be fine here, there's plenty of facilities' argument to the 'I deserve the punishment for starting this experiment' argument. Many of them made logical sense to him, but would they make theological sense to the captain? Alfred had never been familiar with theology. True he had lived the latter part of his afterlife in the Pan Solar League, a Theocratic state for the Christial Church, but he had joined that nation because his skills were in demand in a prominent position, not because of his religious devotion.

Thursday Jun. 2, 2271 - 3:09am

Alan's channel came to life, and within minutes everyone who was on call, both publicly and privately, was listening in. Because she was interested in the world below and had considered young Alan a friend, Ava stayed awake and listened to his whole narration.

"You don't have to respond," Alan was saying, "and shouldn't respond with audio. I see the connection's good, so I assume this is going somewhere. I'm going to tell you what I think is significant about what I've seen so far, I'll stop if someone comes near, but I'll talk for as long as I can. I'm in a crows-nest on the mast of a ship, we're underway already in

the dark but I'm off duty and right now there's no one around.

"First let me tell you about the 'peasant areas' that you were so worried about," Alan began. "People's possessions are modest but they aren't totally destitute and it's certainly not slaves on plantations like you thought. It's individual landowners of an acre or two. They and theirs eat from the bounty of those couple acres pretty well, but I've been told most of them get their money by strolling into town and taking a job one or two weeks a year."

He described homes that were simple, open and airy, but often covered with flowering vines from which the local intoxicant is made. He described many kinds of homes, apartment buildings in the form of trees, single homes up in trees, lush gardens. He found the flat valley floor is covered with little canals and creeks. A lot of people have water access and two-man kayaks that often have a folding outrigger and mast. He complained that it's hot and humid. Ava looked it up on their monitoring instrumentation. It had been to ninety three and was eighty three now where his signal was originating from. He was now 15,812 feet below sea level barometrically.

He said the people are just the same as up in the hills, just as friendly, drink just as much and don't move any faster. Adults swim naked in the canals and don't bother getting dressed while they're sitting on the bank or bench next to the canal. The people seemed to have all the prosperity they seem to want. "To me it feels like they've outgrown the fascination

with material objects and cut down to the personal friendships and leisure that are the true rewards of prosperity," he said, a pretty philosophical observation for someone as young as he. "Desa told me last week that most natives consider these 'peasant zones' to be 'the good life' and I can see what she means. We saw them poking their gardens a little during Morningday and sitting in the shade or swimming in the canals during Afternoonday."

He described the small city of Hazorpean, the long industrial canal they approached it on, and how the thick jungle in the center was not a park but the downtown residential area. He discovered tools powered by compressed air, boats grown on vines and apartment trees growing in shallow water. It was all interesting enough and she made sure it was all going into the logs. But after lots of detail about the city itself, he got to something she thought was even more important.

"On the Lhar side of the central plaza, at the entrance to the docks, is the most important artifact I've seen so far. The thing is mounted on the most improbable pedestal. It's a twisted, coiling, re-grown drift-woody snag almost thirty feet tall on a raised plaza between the downtown end of the dam and the docks. But caught in the upper branches of that snag is a coal-blue sphere with a few polished crystal facets roughly around it's equator. There's a thick bundle of optical fiber coming off the sphere and disappearing into the trunk of the pedestal. I am sure that the sphere on the top of that tower

is a high capacity optical hub. Desa tells me that only one of the facets is now aimed at anything, a relay tower in the eastern mountains that relays to the city of Lastriss. That's a city out on the flat and supposedly much bigger than this. I've also been told this 'suntower' as they call it, now allows twenty people at once to type messages to millions of addresses all over the world. My guess is the current civilization knows how to use about one millionth of this thing's capacity.

That intrigued her and she got the geosynchronous scope to look for it but found the dark had settled on the land. Alan went on narrating, talking about the corn tortillas made of papyrus that were the national dish in the region he was in, a region called the Zhindu basin. He told about the sailing ship he was on, a collection of pinned-together barges, the center ones with masts. He was living in a crow's nest on one of those masts. He talked about the economics of trading cargo in this basin and how it was organized and financed. The natives were quite efficient in their endeavors and quite adapted to the realities of life without government.

"The captain and crew are pretty colorful," Alan was still narrating, "The captain has some religious thing where clothes are not allowed on her body. The 'first mate' I guess you'd call her, looks like a body builder, she's too muscular to be feminine and she only wears a harness while aboard ship, nothing below the waist but a lush crop of curls. There's two steersmen. One is bald with a one inch ceramic ring hanging

out of his lip. Both of them share the captain's nest but with a bit of tension. The cargoman commands mast three. He could slam a silverback gorilla around like it was a rag doll. He's not quite seven feet tall but I have never seen such a four hundred pound boulder of muscle, so much he barely has room for a face. His bullet head puts out a wide thatch of ragged black hair. He's got long black hair on his shoulders, arms and thighs too. He's got three girls sharing his nest, but one's getting off in about fourteen hours.

"Those five are the whole professional crew on the ship. All the rest of us conscripts are civilian travelers willing to haul sail for passage on the Lhar. Some are going here or there, most are getting off at a city called Lastriss. Our little band of three is the first to sign on for the whole trip, a voyage that will take at least a local year. The third of us, the one you haven't heard about before, is a woman named Luray who was one of Desa's friends back in that hill village. She had a spat with Desa's sister at Desa's send-off party and suddenly decided to go down to the city also.

"Sorry I haven't had much biology to report. It's been the same, the same *domestic* biota. We're not really out of the plots yet, but I'm sure I'll have a lot to report once we get on open river, which I've been assured there is plenty of between here and Lastriss.

"I'm going to sign off now because the second shift at the evening meal is starting to get up so there'll be people around, and like I said, it's my turn to sleep. I hope your preparations

for the trip to Kunaë, I mean 'B', are going well. Thanks for listening." He had been talking for a good part of an hour by then and given them a tremendous amount of data on the native way of life.

Ava knew who was on that live; Alfred, Victoria, Glenelle, Glayet, Kelvin and herself. Biology didn't know the others were listening, Glayet didn't know Kelvin was and the Captain didn't know she was. Ava was amazed that they all had themselves alarmed for this, even at this hour. She hadn't expected all of biology to be tapped into it, only Alfred. He was the only 'official' listener but had actually been the last to wake. She certainly hadn't expected Glayet and the captain to have their alarms set. The captain probably only wanted to be sure Glayet would cover it, but he stayed and listened to the whole narration.

She wondered who would be first to speak. It was Glenelle. "Do you think he's making that up?" She asked.

"I see no reason not to take what he's said at face value," Alfred responded. "He's passed thru these places and seen these things. He's learned some details about the economy. We should probably pass them on to Elmore."

"He doesn't seem to care about security at all," Glenelle said, "if he's just going to lie up there and chat with us."

"What more has he done to security?" Alfred asked in response. "I see no reason to dispute that he was up in some crow's nest on a native sailing raft talking to himself, talking

about what he's seen. He asked us not to respond in audio. He might convince someone he's a bit daft by doing that, but I doubt he'll convince them they're under observation by a superior civilization."

Ava let them ramble, she wanted to check Alan's optical hub theory. Colonel Elmore Bovok requested an atmosphere probe (yes he did, it's right here in the log) with a broad-band optical research pickup. Being the systems person, Ava was able to make sure the request processed right thru with all required signatures set to 'true' and the foundries set to work fabricating it.

Friday Jun. 3, 2271 - 5:51pm

"We have to find some theological angle on this," Alfred told Victoria the next evening, "All the science is a little tiny 'so what' if we can't rebut Bishop O'Conner."

"What is his objection?"

"Real or public excuse?"

"I know his public excuse," she said, "A living Angel can't be abandoned to die like a machine."

"And we can rebut that by saying we're just waiting for the next expedition."

"And Alan can't be abandoned to die like a machine," she added. "His soul is as much a part of the Church as we are."

"That's true, we can point that out."

"But you think this isn't his real reason?"

"Of course not," Alfred said. "He's losing two colonels from his flock, his Church is diminished. If we could rebut *that* he might abandon his opposition. If we rely on debating his public argument, his real objection won't be addressed and Art won't withdraw his objection and we are left petitioning Kelvin to overrule him. You know how likely that is."

"Glayet is the only other officer on this expedition he has never overruled," Victoria said, putting her hands on her knees in her serious manner. Then she leaned back and asked, "Do you think if we had a personal meeting with him and kissed up to him with sincere piety, our words only about the public objections but maybe with a request to transmit the services to us?"

"We should have started that before this. He was never impressed by our piety in the past."

"So he'd know we were just kissing up?"

"Surely." Vic was a great scientist, but when it came to understanding people... But there might be something in there, in that personal meeting idea. "We might get him to meet us somewhere where we could have a private conversation, lay all the cards on the table as it were."

"You mean tell him we know he's just doing it to pad his flock?"

"We could, we could even go hardball on him and tell him we're never coming to service again one way or the other and

if we're here on the expedition it's going to show."

"You would try *that!*" She was certainly taken aback by the idea of challenging such a powerful position and person as Brigadier Arthur O'Conner, ordained Saint; Chaplain General; Bishop; and commandant of Theology.

"What have we got to lose? What more could he do to us? If we go with them we'll be superfluous officers idling away the century til we return. To me that would not be much better than ostracism."

"I think I might like some social contact," Vic said.

"I'm sure Morgan and Glenelle would privately ignore the order, if it even came; and I think Ava would also."

"Those are all the people I ever actually talk with. I could live with that, but I wouldn't like it. I might not be able to carry out that threat, but if you want to meet with him and try that, I'll back you."

"I'm not sure I want to go that far either," Alfred said, "but I'm not opposed to the idea of a personal meeting, maybe we can feel each other out. I could at least try to convince him that I'm not abandoning his flock because I have no feelings for the Church. I do have feelings for the Church, it has given me this life after all. Without this Church I would not be with you today," he smiled and squeezed her hand. "My gratitude has never spilled over into enthusiastic proselytizing, that's all."

"Those are my thoughts also," Victoria said. "I think I might even feel the gratitude more deeply. I also never

thought this was an Evangelical church. I thought it was when the church finally embraced science that we finally achieved heaven." That was history that Alfred knew also. The Christials actually began as a 'Geeks for Jesus' cult in the early 21st century and didn't become mainstream until they joined with some televangelicals almost a century later.

"We both could have afforded commercial resurrection," Alfred pointed out. New Dallas, Vesta, the Mars base, all hosted commercial simulates in large numbers.

"This seems more natural," Vic said. "As an Angel, I feel like I have a right to my existence, as a commercial simulate I don't think I'd feel quite as legitimate."

"You could be right, I never expressed it as words, but I know what you mean and feel it myself to some extent. I would still have come back as a Sim, and I hope we would have still met."

"You're so gracious."

He actually meant every word. To have a partner who shared his work, who complimented his abilities and who had such devoted loyalty to his leadership was all he ever dreamed of. With her on his arm this truly was Heaven, not just some quips somewhere.

"If we started being a little more attentive at church functions, do you think that would help?" Vic asked.

"It might," he said, and thought a little more, "I can't think of any way he could use it against us as long as we just did it and didn't crow about it. Your idea about asking him to

transmit the service is a good one. If he thought we were kissing up, we could say his attention reminded us of our faith or some such thing. Let that rumor go. Let it be known we disagree in good faith and respectfully. It doesn't change the fact that we haven't found a shred of doctrine to use yet, but it could help the atmosphere."

"I can do that, what's a couple hours a week and a little bit of forced smalltalk?"

"We'll consider it a very small price if we get almost three quarters of a century head start on the next expedition."

"If you asked me to, I'd lick his testicles from now til separation to stay with these studies."

Vic wasn't unattractive in her private personification, but looked far too prim to lick a testicle. "I certainly won't be asking that. I think you'd shock him right out of his process if you offered."

"I wouldn't be offering, he would have to demand it as a condition."

"I'm sure he's never had the thought. One thing I've noticed about Art is his sincerity about Church doctrine. The Church has asked him to forgo all erotic thoughts and I'm sure he has to the extent his med panel will allow." That's what would make the hardball pretty difficult, he would put principals ahead of numbers. A confrontational approach was not the way with Art.

"I wonder why we haven't heard from Alan again?" Vic asked, "I hope nothing happened to him."

"He's just acting like a grown son now. We aren't the first things on his mind. Now that he is traveling with two native women we'll probably hear very little from him. IF we hear from him again."

"Do you think he would really do that? We are the only parents he's ever had."

"He doesn't think so, he considers us his mechanical foster parents, he thinks of that Larkin couple, whoever they were, as his parents and he knows they're dead."

"His parents aren't dead though."

"To him they are, or should I say to him we are. I know you just can't let yourself really believe that he feels that way, but I think he does. He thinks we are just larger and more sophisticated things a lot like the software he writes."

"So is he, just running on a different processor implementation."

"His mind knows that, his body doesn't feel it."

A tear ran down her cheek. She still sat up straight and put her hands on her knees once again. He went over and squeezed her shoulders. She sobbed quietly, wetting his shirt when she buried her face in his chest.

Monday June 6, 2271 - 9:19am

Now that the probe was finally complete, it took Ava only a few maneuvers to find that there were definitely signals

coming from that tower. They were definitely beamed to another tower in the mountains and a quick excursion found that tower was beaming them on to a location out on the plains beyond. It seemed to be just as Alan claimed, some kind of communication relay.

But what was the content of these signals? By positioning the probe near the tower in the mountains it was well away from any populated areas and it seemed safe to leave it there for some time and do some studies. The first info she gathered was the broad spectrum of the transmitted radiation. There was energy in the far infrared. It looked like nothing but a bit of white noise on pure carrier. She ran finer and finer buckets and eventually found some structure, thirty seven bands, each of which seemed to be nothing but carrier.

She isolated each band in turn and tried to find some modulation. Thirty six of them were almost pure tones as far as she could tell. They each carried a tiny ping at about five hundred kilohertz, very faint. She could find nothing more in them.

The lowest frequency had a little bit more. There was the five hundred K scratch, and a bit of something else from which no algorithm she could run on it would output anything but white noise. This was frustrating but not surprising. There were so many possible ways to encode data in a signal. Was the transmission digital or analog? If digital, how were the bits encoded, what was the bit rate? Was the five hundred K

some kind of sub-carrier? Or was it a base clock? Even if it was, it was still more than enough to carry the traffic of a few keyboards and terminals in text mode.

Alan had been told this thing could carry the traffic of twenty keyboards. Keyboards issue only a few bytes per second, but there was nothing detectable at those frequencies no matter how the signal was filtered. Alan said the thing looked like it should be capable of handling much more than that. The visual images the probe returned looked like he was right, it was a serious-looking piece of work, completely out of place among sailing ships and animal carts with muddy wooden wheels. If she could decode how the thing worked it might be possible to tell if he was right.

Suddenly Captain M'Kintre was beeping her. Hours had passed while she was engrossed in this and messages had piled up in her inbox.

"Major Bancour, you are aware of this afternoon's rigging meeting. I was hoping to see a copy of your separation issues before the meeting actually started. Do you have it ready?"

"The data is ready sir, I'm just starting to work on the presentation. I confess I got a little behind."

"When do you think it will be ready?"

"I'm sorry sir, I'll have something ready for the meeting."

"Are there any concerns I should know about?"

"Nothing major. We have plenty of crystal available to provide living space for the biology personnel..."

"There has been no decision that personnel are to be left behind."

"I have both contingencies covered, either way I don't foresee any difficulties whatever the decision is. If the station is to be left unmanned some provision must be made for the specimens. Whatever cares for them must be pretty autonomous since it will take over a day to close any control loops when we are at B."

"Which is the more difficult case?" Kelvin asked.

"The case where there are no souls, because I have to code up something to take their place, but I don't believe it is an insurmountable problem. I will need to consult with Biology to be sure I have covered their needs and copy their avatars as a base before I can detail the estimates I've worked up."

"There will be ample time for that, we're only one week into the rigging now. I don't expect you to have the system finished, just your report. Please let me see it as soon as you have it organized, you don't have to pretty it up first," he said and signed off.

As if she would believe that. That's all he looked at was the pretty. If she sent it in preliminary form he would think she had no plan at all. She reluctantly stashed the probe in a safe place on the mountain tower and deactivated it, except for recharging. She then got to work on the report. The separation was a little tricky, she had to be sure there was adequate logic on each side; and that it was autonomous. The

report really couldn't be critiqued by anyone, maybe some soul in Heymon's organization might be able to understand it. The only thing she had to do was make sure it looked and sounded professional and it's presentation interfaced smoothly with the space Kelvin held his meetings in. That was the only way he would be able to judge it.

One thing was certain however, if she made any progress with the signals from the native communication system, she was going to continue those studies and if that required her staying on the biology station alone, so be it.

Wednesday Jun. 8, 2271 - 11:31am

Alfred fumed. What possible nonsense was Delos up to? How was abandoning all this dead weight going to put the ship in grave danger of running out of materials to make the return voyage to Sol? There was enough material here. Not enough for a thriving economy and rapid financial growth, but enough to get the ship home and many more to follow. There would be at least as much at B, they were confident of that.

And this poppycock about leaving souls here and all the extra mass and time it would take to come back here to A and get them when they returned to Sol. Alfred believed from the beginning that he was establishing a permanent base here to which the next expedition from the league would attach when

it arrived.

And what made him think these silly element balance calculations would be effected by the separation? I only administered the life support for every mortal in the league, how many times a week did I have to deal with separating vessels? I reviewed a few every day and knew what I was looking at you stupid financier. This is even easier because there's so little biology to worry about and all of it is in one of the bodies. So what makes you such an expert mister Delos Alvarez? You're a banker! But Delos had a piece of Elmore's ear, a bigger piece now that Alan had defected and embarrassed Elmore so. With that he'd get to the captain's. All he had to do is play the paranoia card for Kelvin and the whole plan would be scrapped. Putting this wedge in his relationship with Elmore was the worst damage Alan had actually done to him.

As of now the rigging plans were still being worked up with three pods and the secondary collector remaining behind. The atmosphere shuttle and most of the current atmosphere probes would be left here also. Kelvin still hadn't decided if their souls could stay or just use the instruments remotely as long as telemetry allowed. But this new obstacle was undermining even the remote base.

Delos was right in saying that coming back to pick them up if they were unlucky at B was prohibitively expensive. And yes, it was conceivable that they would have to cannibalize the mass of the biology lab to get back to Sol if

there were NO useful materials at B.

How did he convince Kelvin that this system deserved a permanent base? Alfred meant to provide it if Kelvin didn't. Elmore would have reminded him that he shouldn't present it like that, that would be too much of a challenge. No, let me be the corporal you left with the flag while you went to get the proper expedition to study this planet. Keep a presence of the Pan Solar League here so other nations don't try to claim exclusive sovereignty as their expeditions get here.

Paranoia was Kelvin's strong suit. He's risen thru the military as well as the church thru his whole career, and he'd done it by making sure his ass was always completely covered. He'd retired in 2160 as a four star Commandant of Logistics Defense in Ceres. He'd been ordained as a Christial Minister years before in 2151. He voluntarily ascended in 2174 to command this expedition, just before the expedition left. He did it all by always making sure, poking in every crack, smelling it on people as much as anything.

Alfred thought in logic and math, 'the transfer function of a process will yield...' with numbers. The captain believed the sharpest presentation and the soul who seemed most convinced. It also had to be something fairly simple like Delos' 'separation is bad' presentation. And it needed flashy graphics with bright colors.

Alfred played with the presentation-generator for hours until he finally came up with a little animation that looked like it would get some attention from the captain. It showed

the ship on it's way to B, back or not, with and without the biology lab. He showed how the ship came out sooner on all steps due to the reduced mass to be moved, the simple arithmetic that Kelvin had understood the first time with the animation in front of it.

He had Vic review it before he sent it out. She had a lot more insights on the subjective meanings of the colors and changed those in his pie charts and animation. Then he made it public. Now that Kelvin had a debate, he would call a meeting.

Saturday Jun. 11, 2271 - 4:13pm

The signals were turning out to be more difficult than Ava anticipated. Third rank Thom Husband was the specialist in signals and she'd reluctantly brought him into the investigation. She was uncomfortable with the intense personal interaction that always happened when she worked with someone who could actually understand the issues she was involved in. She'd been a loner as a child, and dying young hadn't given her time to mature as an adult, leaving her social skills lacking.

She didn't want to divulge information more sensitive than what Kelvin would think was proper for persons of his rank. Thom had to know it was an optical signal from the planet and she had to give him the specs on the probe she

used. She was glad she put it in the ship's log when she had it built, Thom might be thorough enough to check. Once he saw Colonel Bovok's name on it, he wouldn't probe farther, she hoped. She should have put it in Heymon's name, but he would check such logs, Elmore wouldn't.

Thom pushed the signal around his screens for an hour and so far hadn't gotten much more out of it. His space was decorated as a physical laboratory, messy, hung with wires and notes. The screens were fixed and mounted in devices, usually old and dented with corrosion spots and coffee stains.

"There's just a bit more noise on the lowest band, but only an octave of bandwidth for all. There's plenty more far infrared, why didn't they use it?"

"The human eye isn't any broader in frequency range," Ava told him.

"That's true, but it's only three bands."

"So; there could be something like color perception in this signal. But why don't we see it?"

Then she remembered what Alan had said about the suntower, it looked like they were using only one millionth of it's capacity. If that was true, that would be why it was all carrier. Only things which happen at the speed of twenty key-terminals, a few hundred to a few thousand bits per second were really signal.

He was still fooling with his screens when a pulse train began to emerge from the noise.

"What is this?" Ava asked.

"This is statisto-integration of that signal down deep in the time domain. That's the five hundred k spike that's riding on it. It's amplitude modulated, and it's a tiny modulation, only point one percent of the signal strength. We have to integrate awhile to get this out of the noise. It looks like an impulse train in the time domain. Let's see if we can blow this pulse up."

He did that, at the finest resolution the probe could resolve. After a few minutes of statisto-integration the plot was starting to show a little structure in the pulse. It was actually a pulse train at quantum speeds. The inter-pulse spaces did not return to zero, there was some tantalizing noise in there. It could have been data that varied from sample to sample but there was no way they could resolve it.

"Those inter-pulse spaces have to be at least one bit," Ava observed, "and we don't have the sensitivity to resolve that bit. This pulse must be some kind of header or packet identifier that just keeps the channel open, what little traffic there is from a few keyboards must be contained in these packet headers."

"If these spaces are one bit," he pointed to the narrow gaps on the screen, "these two are at least five. I would say that if this carries any information, it's in some property that our sensor isn't sensitive to. Maybe it's in a very fine resolution of the photon phase, maybe there's some harmonics somewhere that we're missing from your probe. Maybe it's some little cross coupling between the bands that's phase

related."

"These headers are the only structure we have found in this signal so far," she said. "We have to go after them."

She wished he didn't know so much about this already. They now knew almost all of the signal was empty carrier, no one has anything to say, just dead air. These packet headers were the devices telling each other they had nothing to say. The capacity this would have if fully used was staggering, beyond what had been in use on Earth in 2175. "Can you give me a copy of these analysis tools so I can work on it and not have to take up your time with it?" she asked.

"I'm sure if it's worth the time of a ranking officer, it's worth mine."

She had to struggle to get out of there. She hadn't expected his curiosity to be aroused by something as mundane as this. Maybe this sample wasn't that mundane to him. He was going to keep hammering at the sample she had given him. Time was passing and she was getting uncomfortable.

She finally had to say, "I really must be going," and blinked out on him, taking a copy of his signal analysis system while she was at it. She suspended his thought until she was finished. He'd never miss those three timeslices. She knew exactly what a terminate contact looked like, people did them all the time and she had warned him that she had to go.

She was back at her villa and just beginning to get

familiar with the new toolset when the captain beeped her.

"I was wondering if you might have your analysis of Delos' concerns available for me to look at tomorrow afternoon?"

'Oh yes, the remainder of the expedition is stubbornly unconcerned with decoding native communications,' she thought. "To be honest sir, I was going to use tomorrow afternoon to prepare the report. I've analyzed the data and run the calculations, but I haven't got the presentation ready."

"What do you have to present?"

"That the biology base will be able to grow slowly with minor inputs of material from the near moon. Alfred believes this system warrants a permanent base and would certainly volunteer to man it. He would rather the whole expedition began a permanent base here to study the planet."

"You don't believe we will need the materials of the bio labs to get us home?"

"I agree with Alfred that we probably should not go home. We should be here to greet all following expeditions as they arrive."

"You do understand that is not your decision to make?" Kelvin told her.

"I do sir, and even so we don't need those materials. We can conserve and run more time-slices on the way home. That will help make the trip seem shorter."

"Did you find anything of concern in Major Alverez's report?"

"I was intrigued by the element balance issues. The mass can be replaced, even from this moon if we ever actually need matter. The fact that we can't account for it could be a serious problem."

"So for that reason you wouldn't want the separation?"

"His data is alarming, but I don't see how it supports that conclusion. I can certainly understand that both parts of the expedition must maintain element balances, but if the current expedition is not in balance, there is some chance that if separated, one piece might balance. In other words, we have two separate problems."

"I think his point is that if we can't balance the single piece, we don't have enough knowledge to balance the separation."

"I think by separating the expedition we might stand a better chance of isolating the leakage, if there really is any leakage. But by doing that we might gain a clue that will help us balance them both."

"We've checked everything," Kelvin told her.

"You do understand virtuality?" Ava asked him. This might be rude, but if he didn't understand that, he wouldn't understand her concern.

"I think I understand it well enough."

"Keep in mind that any data process which exists in a virtual environment is unable to actually reach anything outside that virtual environment without going thru that virtual environment. It goes all the way back to when data

storage was limited and primitive logic called 'operating systems' tried to make a program believe it had unlimited memory by paging it in and out of backing storage. You are aware that we Angels live in a virtual environment that presents us with data that simulates the input of human senses."

"Yes of course."

"And you are aware that there is lower level logic, outside of ourselves, that we are contained in?"

"Yes, you are saying the same thing," he said.

"Not quite. I'm trying to point to that logic, that logic that provides the 'air' around us, our universes and the simulated signals of all the objects around us."

"The crystal itself?"

"The logic in that crystal that is not us."

"But that's just the medium we live in," he said, "it takes the place of the three-dimensional space we occupied as mortals."

"It has to do a lot more than that. There is a LOT of logic, by element count it is larger than any one of us. The residents of this ship have enough cherubim in their space to use up more capacity than another soul would take. The passive data of our universes is larger than a soul."

"And you are responsible for all that," he reminded her.

"That is true, but that doesn't mean I know all of it. No mind can hold the complexity of the environment that runs our virtual universe, I hope I know enough to manage it, but I

fear I may not."

"What are you getting at?"

She really didn't want to have to tell him this, but it really was her duty. He probably wouldn't understand it, and if he did, he would certainly overreact. Still, she just couldn't bear this by herself. He was the mission commander, so he was going to have to hear it. "There may be something in that logic, either a simple error, or something else, a conscious entity of some type that is causing erroneous readings to enter our minds. We may perceive all diagnostics are correct, but some or all of them may, in fact, be failing and some hack in our perception is patching out that reading."

"How can we determine if this is true?" he asked.

"We cannot, that is the axiom of virtuality. You can receive no data that did not come from your virtual environment, you can produce no output that doesn't go thru your virtual environment. You are completely contained within it, and if something is wrong with it, there is no way you can tell."

"There are always diagnostics."

"The presentation the diagnostic makes to what you think is an eye looking at a gauge or screen, runs IN that environment. We can no more tell what is really happening outside our virtual environment than mortals could tell what was happening in the spirit world. It is unavailable to us."

"There must be something we can do?"

"We can't even ask someone who is outside the

environment to look into it because we can contact someone outside the environment only thru the environment."

"If I follow you, you are telling me the 'environment' is deliberately trying to mislead us?"

"It is impossible to tell that it is not," she said.

"And trying to cover it's tracks?" he asked.

"If it is a conscious entity, why wouldn't it?"

"This is most unsettling," Kelvin said. "We should be concentrating on this problem."

"There is something we can do about it. If we separate the ship, and if it is some form of conscious entity in the system logic that is causing this, it is very likely that the entity will be contained in one part of the ship or the other, leaving one half free of it. There is also a very good chance that if such a thing exists, it is outside virtual space. If it is in the hardware substrate, it is quite possible that separating the ship could deactivate it."

"That's interesting. In this case I perceive that you look upon the separation as a good thing."

"I do," she admitted.

Saturday Jun. 18, 2271 - 6:10pm

A week later Ava got a call. It was Thom Husband from Engineering. "Say, I've been kicking this signal around a little more," was his greeting, "And I was wondering if you could

let me get the spec's on the polarization sensitivity of the probe you were using when you got that reading."

"Why yes, I could do that. I'm giving you authorization now. You still have the order number? It's 5210752 if you don't." Again she was glad she actually made a record of the damn thing. This guy thought he was kissing up to her by doing this on Saturday off shift no doubt. How should she cool him off? "I confess I never looked that up."

She hadn't asked that it be sensitive to polarization. He had said the information in this signal might be in some form they weren't sensitive to. No doubt he was thinking that might be how the data was modulated. She was most agreeable to him, allowing him all the access to all the specs the probe was built under that could exist. He would find it as fully documented as if Colonel Elmore Bovok had actually signed the requisition.

If Thom didn't loose interest in this soon, he would eventually say something to Elmore or one of his people that was going to be quite embarrassing. Til she could figure out some way to get him bored with this, she would act like she had nothing to hide. Maybe she would have to fake a message from Elmore telling him to leave it alone? That wouldn't work. He'd want a personal meeting with her and very secretively ask if her space was secure before admitting he'd been told off by Elmore. He might even ask her to back him for whistleblower protection.

But she had to get more information, as well as worry

about that. How to get the 'bots in the maintenance bay to fix a miner's polarization filter to the face of her atmosphere probe without leaving tracks? Thom might be somewhat thorough. He might even be suspicious. Better to be safe than sorry, she substituted parts way up the chain using an error she forced in using diagnostic mode, then deleted the diagnostic mode invocation from the log. Now the filter would go on as a simple wind-screen replacement. The bad news was, it would be days til the next scheduled maintenance.

Maybe she should try getting too friendly with Thom and getting caught and getting forbidden to collaborate with him again. She didn't really know how likely he was to fall for that. Having ascended as a virgin, love was something she had little feel for. She could use it and had when necessary, but she certainly didn't need it. Would he? He didn't seem the type.

Real love had never lost a certain fairy-tale quality for her. Mortals, and these copies of mortals, could never approach the perfection of a mythical suitor like the ones in the romantic fantasies she read. Thom certainly couldn't. Other than his scientific talent, he was a shy and boring person. He personified himself as a help-screen device in public space and as an overdressed professor in private.

Still, being shy, and a kindly gentleman at that, she might be able to influence him greatly. It was something to keep in mind if she couldn't think of any other plan.

Monday Jun. 20, 2271 - 8:00am

Kelvin tinked again. All the personifications began to quiet down. They assumed whatever position was appropriate to the way they represented themselves in public.

Delos kept himself dignified in a power-seat in public. A large and complex one with all the options. He used every virtual millimeter a personification was allowed with it, the representation of his flesh just a small cargo over it's muscular undercarriage. He had it worked out so that from whatever angle you viewed him, you received a view as if he was facing you and slightly above.

Ava materialized at the first tink, wrapped in colorful drifting folds of sheer fabric which were constantly blowing, like her hair, in a gentle breeze into which she was facing. She was the only one who could come to these meetings without a trace of a military uniform. She had never actually been in the military, but her skills were so great and in such short supply that she had been assigned to the expedition and admitted to the league's service as a major. Delos thought she was far too blatantly sexual in her personification and dress. After all, long flowing hair and soft clothing that the breeze blew against her figure was not at all businesslike.

"We all know why we're here," the captain said. "You've all seen the briefing papers and I have some preliminary comments from some of you."

There was the usual muttering. Alfred and Victoria were

silent, as he knew they would be. To think that they could actually mean to carry on the work of the biology department after the mess they had made.

"Major Alvarez," Kelvin continued, "I've already commended you on the diligence you've put into creating this report, but let me mention once more in public that I can see the effort and thought put into this presentation." He paused, then said, "have you anything to add since you put this together?"

He had something prepared, but didn't want that to show. He paused as if thinking, then began.

"I think the only thing that has changed since then is that I have heard some speculation that our materiel losses might be some kind of a system error and not a physical problem. I admit that I'm not the systems expert that Miss Bancour is," he smiled and bowed his head, "but I do know something of the 'rogue entity' phenomenon." It was a common theme in entertainment he watched.

"A conscious rogue entity does not exist in the hardware data layer, it is virtual-ware nearly as complex as we are. It exists in unoccupied storage. To think that anything as complex as a conscious entity could exist below the services of the virtual world is like saying a second story man is the pavement of the street outside of the victim's home.

"A conscious rogue entity, in theory, has as much chance as we do to learn how to modify the hardware data layer, but this would have to be an entity with skills as great as those of

Miss Bancour.

"If a conscious rogue entity does exist in the crystals of this expedition, dividing us would make some, or even all of us more vulnerable to it. Being rogue to start with, it could very well ignore the cloning laws and leave a copy of itself in each inhabited crystal." He paused to let everyone hear the horrified mutterings of the pious. "With us divided, it might be strong enough to assume control, especially in a section with only two souls resident."

He didn't want to get long winded. Just state the case and let them draw as many conclusions as they needed.

"Is this a possibility?" Kelvin asked Ava.

"That little speech shows why some of us are bankers and some do systems work. The possibility that any rogue entity could ever be granted a veron in virtual space for it's use is so remote that it doesn't need to be considered. The traceability of the soul using any resource is one of the deepest certainties in the virtual world. You know that's true because all billing is based on it. Any rogue entity would have to bypass that as the first step in it's existence. To do that it must be in the hardware data layer already.

"He also doesn't understand what the hardware data layer is. It is not hardware, it is the data that determines what the hardware will be, what part of our process will be parallel. Silicon comes from fabrication unformed, the hardware data defines what that crystal will be, neural space, universe space, public space, communication channel, knowledge base or

cherub, those or any other of the circuitry configurations we use in our society.

"In this data a rogue entity can write the code that will build the micro structure of the crystal such that it might be used by something which has no traceability to an authorized soul."

Kelvin merely looked toward Delos.

"It seems obvious that with nothing pertinent to say she has just retreated behind an obfuscating cloud of technical jargon that probably doesn't even mean anything to her."

"I was being as plain as any intelligent soul would want me to be," Ava responded, "I used no technical jargon, I'm sure most understood."

Delos wanted to just wave them on. This was a minor point anyway. He wondered what was the best way to get the discussion around to the real point. The biggest fuck-up to date on this expedition was finagling a way to get command of his own ship, a permanent base no less. It wasn't much of a ship, a few pods and some unneeded probes, but as soon as they separated, it was his own vessel and he was no longer under Kelvin's command. Unless Kelvin was promoted to fleet admiral, something the Bishop might balk at. That meant Alfred could play with his toy world to his heart's content with no consideration for the fate of the whole expedition.

In addition to that, and though it would be woefully inefficient, he could mine this moon to expand his base, maybe somehow even bringing native souls into it. He freely

admitted he thought there should be a permanent base here. The bishop had once given his approval to native souls entering their universe. What would this maniac build by the time the next expedition got here?

But if Delos came right out and accused him of that, he would be petty. No officer could raise an issue which had no purpose other than damaging another's chances of promotion.

"The real issue here is the material loss," Delos responded, "We need to address that fact."

"The material loss may not be real," Ava countered.

"Unless we want to amend the agenda to take up discussion of that issue," Delos admonished, "I move we proceed with these determinations."

"You were the one who chose to speak of the rogue entity," Ava said. "I did not raise that issue. Even if there is no such entity, and I pray there is not, we are better for the separation."

"I have made my case that we are not," Delos said.

Kelvin cut between them. "We need not bicker in public. If you two would like to make a personal spitting contest of this, I suggest you retire to your private spaces and your private time."

Delos was very reluctant to spend any private time with Miss Bancour, but faced the captain and ignored Ava. He assumed she did likewise.

"Colonel McReady," Kelvin said, "if you have any new arguments?"

Alfred's avatar drew itself up. Alfred presented himself as a 19th century scientist-adventurer just back from the African bush. He kept muttonchop whiskers and would even be seen with a huge tobacco pipe when it wasn't totally inappropriate. He kept his uniform very loose in the seat, always wore lots of pockets and always kept his pants bloused into his very tall boots. "I'd like to sum up what I have already reported, the following points:

"Returning to pick us up is a moot point because I believe there should be a permanent study base here and I freely volunteer to remain and command this base until such time as the League should see fit to replace me with a future expedition. I have a sufficient staff of volunteers..."

'Volunteer' Delos thought, 'None but Victoria would be so devoted to self-punishment as to stay in that tiny can.' "...to support meaningful studies until the next expedition arrives and adds to this base.

"Second, if the separated biology base incurs all the material losses, it will be fifteen years before the most serious one forces us to find phosphorus on this moon, where it is relatively plentiful.

"There is reason to believe that the biology laboratories are the most likely source of these leaks, thus freeing the main expedition to proceed on it's vital task, free from worrying of them. If they are not all in biology, it is likely that the main expedition will have less leakage to worry about." Alfred projected simple slides with the basic facts he was

saying written out, only some very simple charts.

"As Miss Bancour has correctly analyzed," Alfred continued, "if there is a rogue entity on board responsible for these leaks, it is possible that separation will disable it." He had a nice diagram here, a block diagram with the two separate virtual environments with a stick figure labeled 'entity' drawn on a block simply labeled 'substrate' and showing the 'entity' cut in half at the waist as the expedition separated.

"The element balances of the separated parts of this expedition can be calculated and handled by well-known science that has served us well since mankind's early days in space," Alfred concluded while showing slides of a stack of astro-life support texts and pictures of the astral acreage of space-farms he had administered.

"Thank you Colonel," the captain said, "do you have anything to rebut, Major Alvarez?"

"As Colonel McReady points out, much of the problems we are facing may become problems of the biology base. Do we feel that the base will be adequately staffed to handle those problems?" This was as close as he dared come to questioning Alfred's leadership directly.

"Delos, you are one of the few here who didn't trust your life as a mortal to my ability to handle those problems," Alfred pointed out. Delos had come to the League from New Dallas by conversion as a simulate. "I am the most qualified officer on this expedition to handle these problems."

The captain butted in, "We have not determined that there will be a crew on the biology base. That is the topic of a separate hearing for a separate time. If we are not to separate this ship for technical reasons, we will never need to have that hearing."

"You are correct sir," Delos said, "if there are no souls aboard the base it does not matter what happens to it once we can no longer use it." If there were no souls aboard, Delos would have achieved most of his objective. He would like to have the raw materials of the biology section to cannibalize and make something useful of, but the cost of dragging the mass with them was higher than it's usefulness.

"Heymon, have you anything to add?" the captain asked the Commandant of facilities and engineering.

"Major Alvarez's numbers are real but don't support his conclusion. I think these numbers are so far down in the mud that they could be impurities collecting in the elbows of tubing or a little calibration error in some fabricator that we can't detect due to some ancient programmer forgetting to round in some early algorithm. I think we'll find these errors are systematic and they'll be about the same in the divided ship.

"I think Colonel McReady's assessment of his needs is fair and accurate also. He has enough to self-sustain. He would have to mine this moon for materials before the league can get a mission back here."

"The Brazilians arrive in this system in 2336." Delos

pointed out.

"We would remain aloof, for sure," Alfred said.

"The Brazilians will not I assure you," Delos began, "They are made of meat also and will engage in unrestrained interaction with the locals."

Kelvin turned darkly toward him. This meeting was in Kelvin's public space and that was still decorated as the space where the ship was, the planet was a crescent beach ball, twenty seven thousand miles away and over eleven and a half thousand miles in diameter. The flaming orange lantern of a sun was twenty five million miles to the right of the planet, pleasantly warm and mild enough that it didn't sting the eyes.

"The debate on policy in regard to the Brazilian expedition has been postponed til after that on leaving souls behind in the separation, if we separate. We can't let petty political considerations interfere with passing sound engineering judgment on the grossest structure of this expedition. These other issues are important matters. I assure you they will be given full consideration at the proper time.

"We are considering a fundamental change in our physical makeup," he continued, "one that can separate us from each other as fundamentally as we are separated from the souls of New Jerusalem. That is the issue we must concentrate on, not feral humanoids," he looked at Alfred, "Or leaking pipes," he looked at Delos with a glance at Heymon.

"So what do we have here?" Kelvin held up Delos' report.

"A very nice presentation," Alfred said.

"Of what?" Kelvin asked Delos.

"That the separation should not be undertaken," Delos said with an implicit 'of course' in his tone.

"But Delos, all my other officers, my senior officers, tell me that this report does not support that. It says we have a possible minor leak or build-up problem in several elements, and raises the possibility that our fundamental system strata may be corrupt. Now I'm going to ask your senior officer to tell me what this report concludes."

Elmore was on the spot now. Elmore had always been a good senior officer to be under. He wasn't going anywhere himself, but he was protective of his people and had defended Delos many times. If he was to come thru for him now, maybe with a fact or two Delos didn't actually have, this hearing could turn around. He should come thru for him, after all, he had been stung badly by the defection of Alfred's boy.

"I regret to say that I must agree with the evaluations of the other staff members," was how he began. Delo's breath caught in his throat. Elmore continued, "Given that we agree that the biology base is to remain behind, I see no correlation of these leakage numbers with any specific part of this expedition with the possible exception of biology. If this report supports any view it is that ridding us of the biology modules may solve this problem."

Oh you traitor, oh I'll smile and say 'thank you', but I'll know you were never with me from the start. You weren't bringing me along, you were setting me up. Planning a

meeting like this. Why did you even put me up for Major, so I could fall farther?

"Very well then. Major Alvarez, I'm afraid the motion fails. Very good work though, lots of good supporting material. It's really a shame we didn't find the connection."

Alfred's personification didn't actually stick it's tongue out at him, the personification Delos would have liked him to show, sixth grader disguised in a nineteenth century naturalist costume, did. No, Alfred just nodded politely.

"Very well," Delos got his avatar up, which consisted of raising the power-chair out of it's recline and extending the wheels. "I'm sorry to have raised any unnecessary concerns. Thank you for putting my mind at ease, I just wanted to be sure that all concerns were aired."

"Thank you for you diligence." Kelvin said as Delos swung his personification up to a virtual warp eight in that power chair on his way back to his own space. It hadn't been freed on him, as least his defeat wasn't that disastrous.

Not too many came to Delos' private space. It wasn't one of those places that was easy to find. The height of the mountain kept most beings away. The height of the tower kept everything away that wasn't aerial. It was far above everything on the planet where he lived, the planet he ruled from the highest tower on the highest mountain.

The palace at the top of this tower should have been the set for so many movies he had seen thruout his life. The

sumptuousness of its furnishings, the comeliness of its cherubim, were beyond what any video hero knew during his mortal years.

Of course at home he didn't wear the power chair. Here he was a regal lord over six feet in height with a deep chin, heavy eyebrows and thick black hair that waved back from his high forehead and highlighted the aristocracy in his ancestry. He counted Count Dracula and Montezuma among his ancestors, along with Queen Elizabeth the First and two passengers on the Mayflower.

He stormed thru his marble hallways, scattering flurries of cleaning staff, out to the grand balcony of the clouds at the western edge of his palace. As befits a western balcony, it is always sunset here. The sun seen from high in the clouds, overlooking billowing thunderheads always moving, always changing across the mountainsides below. He didn't leave them in real time as a mortal would have seen it, but in time lapse so they looked active, the way an angel should see them.

The balcony was polished marble. The rail was a comfortable and secure forty four inches high, nine inch thick polished granite. The balcony was a couple hundred feet long on the west side of the palace. Two or three floors of glass overlooked the balcony and the thunderheads seething on the mountainsides miles below.

It wasn't that you couldn't see the ground. Straight down at the base of the tower you could often see the craggy

mountain peak. Below it you could sometimes see desert mountains thru breaks in the clouds. Off in the distance to the northwest, beyond the storms and the mountains was a great sea, off which the setting sun sometimes reflected.

He gathered his staff on the balcony. He bellowed at them for hours and tossed four over the rail before his rage was finally spent. Then he went to his room and cried, and called all his sympathy fairies in to console him.

How could they miss what Alfred was doing to them? Could they see it and not care? They were giving him this whole planet as his private play thing, just look at the personification he was dressed in, didn't that tell them anything?

Tuesday Jun. 21, 2271 - 4:17pm

Glenelle was the first to pick up Alan's channel this time. Once again he was talking and not expecting answers.

"We've stopped in this HUGE city for almost a week now, you can see it with the phone-cam. It's called Lastriss and has a population of over one million urban inhabitants, although you can't see very many of them right now. This is Noonsleep down here and it's very sleepy. I know it looks like a wall of jungle mountain, but those are all buildings, all the tops of them are apartments.

"There's only three people left on the raft, me, the cargoman, and one of his girls that we brought back on the last trip. They're in that nest three masts up and paying NO attention to me." Alan had swiveled the camera to show them the mast on the ship. To Glenelle it looked a lot like any other mast on an antique wooden ship. "Desa's manning the kayak fetching the crew, we're going to be pulling out from this city as soon as they're back aboard. The crew's all re-arranged, the steersmen are down on six and seven now. At least the normal one is on six.

"Anyway, you can see those buildings. Some of them are well over forty stories. It's more like Earth built in the 20th century except for the jungle all over it. This city has a huge mall for miles thru the center of it. There's old canals like Venice and swank villas with private docks. There's quite a streetcar system, all pulled by those animals called kedas.

"You can see how many ships there are here. These ships are **LOADING** agricultural products to take down river where it's populated. This all comes into this city on smaller boats or keda-drawn wagons.

"There's big concert halls with fabulous music, all kinds of food and a place where people get together to select traveling companions by sexual preference. There's big business offices and crooked streets lined with curio shops. There's people of a more cowboy, dustier, culture coming to this city from the other side.

"We bought lots of clothes for me, it took a lot less than

one of those copper pellets to pay for all of them. An iron one is worth one thirty sixth as much, a package of them would have been more convenient. If people were violent down here it would be scary to carry around this much money. I have to be careful not to let people get a look in this pouch. It is a good thing Desa told me. That's probably the biggest mistake we've made so far in trying to appear normal on this planet.

"That's Desa coming in with the first three of the crew right now, that tiny little speck out on the water."

"Can you answer one question, how are you doing?" Glenelle broke the no-contact rule. Victoria was just entering the room and gasped when she heard Glenelle speak to him.

"Hi Glenelle, I'm doing very well actually. I've been terrified a couple times, but found I was being silly later. I'm loving it down here and I bet you would too. I'm so in love with Desa, and I like Luray too. They get along really well, so does everyone on board actually. The weather's hot and lazy still, but nobody's in a hurry here except when they're doing a bump-n-roll. That bot-strong cargoman turns out to be quite a comedian when he gets a few cups in him like he did earlier today. He's got three more babes for the ride to the next port and he's loving life too. But I have Desa so I'm loving life even more.

"Life is very comfortable here, for a biological I mean. The food on this river is great, the scenery was breathtaking when we were up in the big valley. Now that we're down here on the flat it's merely beautiful. The people in the city were

nice and some were a little more affluent than the peasants.

"I can see Luray waving to me, I better put you away before somebody wants to take apart my miniature camera. Thanks for saying Hi."

And then he was gone again. Just as he was signing off Vic was about to speak to him also. She sat back again.

"I'm glad he's O.K." she sniffed.

"I am too." She saw how concerned Victoria was, "You really took it to heart didn't you, raising him I mean."

"Oh I did. More than I ever knew. I had two children as a mortal, both were still mortal when we left. I find my feelings for Alan are as deep as they are for Janice and Roger."

"Does he know that?" Glenelle asked.

"I told him how I loved him all thru his childhood. I was an attentive and affectionate mother."

"I don't doubt that, but did Alan ever know you had children as a mortal and felt just as strongly for him?"

"Not until after he discovered the facts of life, then it was too late to tell him anything," Vic said with bitterness.

"Maybe when he grows up. Certainly when he joins us in the Afterlife."

"He believes the natives can conquer aging in the flesh," Vic told her.

"True, I've seen those reports. I guess my soul doesn't quite believe them."

"Mine either, but I think my intellect believes that his does."

Friday Jun. 24, 2271 - 7:53pm

At last Ava found some of it making sense. Polarization was the key, that and the fact that it was all numeric and not binary. Their bits were sent as polarization in one of six directions. Now the modulation was strong. All they had measured before was the random polar asymmetry of the original probe. She had to re-synthesize to get a probe that would allow her to proceed further. The present probe had to be tricked with a filter to discover that the signals were polarized and had no chance of decoding it. That would take some time. She took the time now to study how to properly specify the polarization parameters to the fabricators.

Thom had suggested that the signals might be polarized after he'd studied the probe awhile. She thanked him for that insight. She wasn't about to go running to him with these results however. Instead she said further investigation would have to wait until after the separation since she had too many issues with that to devote any time to it now. She hinted that it was Elmore himself who had changed the priority. Getting Thom disinterested was getting to be a real problem. She was finally catching on to the fact that she was the real object of his interest, not the signals.

Now that she could definitely get data, she made up her mind that she would be staying with the biology base and had plenty of extra q's synthesized to hold her. The record would

show that she was leaving an advanced autonomous avatar with the Biology Base. Actually she would be leaving that with the main ship. Once the ship was separated Thom could have all the time he wanted with that avatar, it just had to keep him at enough distance that he wouldn't catch on that there really was no soul inside it. If she kept it's personification sufficiently distracting...

Privately she wondered how she was able to get away with all that she did. It had to be the virtuality. As far as she knew she controlled all the data anyone received. She still worried about a rogue somewhere in the crystal. If it existed, it had certainly heard her concerns and was no doubt taking care of itself regarding the separation. There had been no manifestations, but for the last few years she just had something of a paranormal feeling that some of the system performance just wasn't quite as crisp and focused as she thought it used to feel. All the actual data said nothing had changed, but it didn't all feel the same. She hoped it was just her paranoia making her feel that way.

And as always Kelvin had her busy with another presentation so she had no time to pursue her new-found knowledge or think deeply of some way to test for that rogue.

Saturday Jun. 25, 2271 - 4:18pm

Glenelle enjoyed the wonders of Morg's private space

every time she was there. Today they were at an especially sugary beach with slender palms swaying ever so slightly in a warm gentle breeze. Large beautiful birds glided overhead. They weren't the brightest gaudiest birds, they were stately long-plumed things but with subdued reds and browns with highlights of gold and maroon. Their voices were also cool and unobtrusive, coos and a sprinkling of trills.

Morg had a universe you had to interact with. Warm lagoons and refreshing surf. Large fish that could be caught, grilled and eaten on a large, comfortable yacht. Nothing changed at the breath of a whim, you had to go do it yourself, your personification had to start the motors with the right key and had to remember to put the fishing tackle away with your personification's arms or it would snag your bare foot in the night. It was just like being a mortal to be in Morg's universe.

So why did she want to leave all this? Her own private space was so minimal and so virtual in comparison. She often wondered why she had a private space of her own. All she had was some nice rooms with some views. There were plenty of views she could select, but they were all just views. Nothing left itself out, everything you wanted to use just appeared in your hand as you wanted it. She would have to add on to her space somewhat without Morg to hang out with.

But the reason she was staying was akin to the reason Morg kept his space so mortalist. She spent little time in her space and most of her time in the space of others. The study of this world gave her the chance to observe more people than

the expedition could supply by far. There were more different kinds of landscape here than all the archives of Earth the expedition held. There were more different kinds of animals, larger animals and stranger animals than all of Earth had come up with. She would rather have that to study than Morg's beaches. And without the captain and Glayet, the study could actually proceed.

All Morg really had in his universe was a single archipelago in a tropical sea with endless ocean surrounding it. There were three other souls sharing it, each a two-day sail away. They were Talla Tharis, a clerk in Economics, his good friend Paul Winterspoon, also of Mechanics, and Gillette Hines of Theology. She lived in a mission teaching hundreds of cherubic islanders on the far end of the archipelago. Morg had never visited any of them but Paul by ship since early in the voyage of Gordon's Lamp.

She'd miss Morg himself. She had more in common with him than a love for nature. They were the only other souls to ever animate an android during Alan's childhood. They had played the part of his parent's friends who came over to visit occasionally. She had even become friends with Alan and stayed such even after he found out that everyone on the expedition is Angelic except for him.

Alan wasn't the friend that Morg was. Morg was more than just a friend. They could marry, there had been three marriages so far on the voyage, and Theology went all-out on

the ceremonies. If they did it would even be 'legal' to be carrying on this affair. As it was, everyone accepted it, but the technical illegality of the relationship added a spice that both of them needed. The fact that they weren't married made it easier for her to take her leave. Because of that, he had no legal hold on her. Of course what difference that should make when the action she contemplated was almost as illegal as unmarried relations?

They were still in the villa his gate was in, heading toward the deck and the beach when she told him. He was incredulous over the fact that what she meant to do was possible before he even worried about how it would effect them.

"Ava can set it up," Glenelle said, "I'll be superfluous over here, they'll never really ask my avatar anything. They might get back to Earth before they notice anything."

"They're not putting enough Q's in there for you."

"There's plenty, I don't take up much, neither do Alfred and Vic actually. Ava says not to worry about it so I won't."

"I'll miss you," Morg said.

"I'll miss you too. I wish you could join me on Biology Base."

"I can't do that, they WILL ask me questions, especially while we're under way. The ship would crash if I tried to put an avatar in my place, I don't care how good an avatar it is."

"I guess I knew that," she said quietly, "so it's an idle wish that can't come true."

"I really wish you wouldn't do this," Morg said, taking her hand and leading her out onto the sand. "What will you be doing over there?" he asked.

"Continuing the study we've only begun."

"But who will you be doing it with?"

"Alfred and Vic."

He reclined on the sand. She got down with him. The sand was so soft it was like laying on a cloud. It was white, it didn't cling, there was never a flea in it. Other than that, it was just like the sand of a real beach in mortal life.

"Where will you get evenings like this?"

"In the future, when this is over and the expedition reunites."

"That could be eight years from now, if ever."

"Then when the next expedition gets here."

"That could be a hundred years from now," he said.

"So let's make the best use we can of the time we have," she told him.

"Is there anything I could do to change your mind?"

"You could report me, but that would also be the last of these evenings."

He tried to talk her out of it, he even offered marriage. She was hurt but not dissuaded.

"I have something for you," she said, "something to remember me by." She held up a data cube.

"What's on there? Or do I have to open it to find out?"

"Wait til I'm gone to open it. It's my personification on a

cherub that I already loaded with all my favorites."

"But you know I don't..."

"She held up her hand, "It's OK, just promise me you'll use no other til we meet again."

"You know I wouldn't," he said, "I don't even use them for domestic staff."

"Then don't use mine as domestic staff," she teased.

"Never," he said.

"And there's something I want."

"Anything," he kissed.

"A copy of your personification so I can use it on a cherub of my own."

"You would do that?" he asked, seemingly a little taken aback.

"I promise it is the only one I will use until we are reunited." She wasn't promising she wouldn't change any settings however.

"Well, OK, it's only fair."

Yeah? He certainly didn't think she would remain celibate for a century or more did he? She wondered why he was uncomfortable with it, maybe he thought of the cherub as his twin brother?

After they exchanged cherubs he tried to give her the sweetest loving she'd ever had so she wouldn't be able to part. Instead it was the perfect parting gift. They would never top the dreamy intimacy of this evening, so why continue? That

hurt him also. They talked til night faded, she felt she finally convinced him this was best and that since they had an infinite future, they would meet again when he came back on the next expedition.

"Is that what I have to do to have you as my woman forever?" he asked.

"Yes, if you do that, I see nothing that would ever part us again."

They made love again in the pink of dawn, too involved to wonder how the virtual experience could be just as passionate as when the soul was in flesh.

Tuesday Jun. 28, 2271 - 10:47pm

Alfred answered promptly when Alan's channel came on again. It was transmitting video, a water scene, they could just barely tell he was moving.

"Hi," he announced, "turns out a coat of paint and a decal I picked up in that city we stopped at a couple weeks ago makes this phone look like a ship's pin that I can wear on my pocket harness. It's a proud memento of a previous voyage. I've written 'Gordon's Lamp' on it in Kassidorian. It's a proud name for a ship and perfect camouflage. I'm up at the bow by myself for the moment, but I'll just leave you on and let you watch the river life float by. I can't see the screen so I don't even know if you're acking, but I'll assume.

"Out in front of us is the river. As you can see, it's very still and we don't have to work the sails a lot."

This looked more swamp than river. There were islands and false channels, big marshes where little brooks might look like the larger river. There was ample time to watch the wildlife, and there was quite a bit of wildlife to watch.

The trees he called hangleaves are probably the most alien silhouette to someone brought up on the wildlife from Earth. Big limbs reach up and end in a cluster of huge thin leaves that drift in the breeze. Today they hung limp, their tips fluttering a little now and then. He showed them plants who's leaves are buoyant in the air, tethered by thin vines. These hung straight up today, twisting a little, ever so slowly.

The creatures who's name was translated as 'dactyls' are visible. They were about eighteen inches in body length with four to six foot wingspans. Alan showed them two crossbows mounted on the deck just before the foremast that fire spears that he said were meant to be used against large dactyls that apparently will pluck humans off of ships and carry them off to nests to devour.

Dactyls are deadly looking things, even the small ones. They perch in the tops of the tallest hangleaves, watching the water's surface and then stooping from the tree til just above the water to grab something from it. Glenelle was soon back with an observation on them. She determined that this single leg had to be converging evolution from a creature with paired back legs because of what Desa told Alan about the

evolution of life on the planet.

Alan showed them ripples on the water's surface made by living things within it, but couldn't actually show them the creatures themselves. He told them all about them however.

"There is a multitude of life forms living in the water, some humans catch and some catch humans. The tastiest catch is anything in the class 'ensal'. These are shaped like tadpoles or sharks, but range in size up to ten pounds in this part of the river. There are many species, and as they get farther down the river the mix of species change. There are many larger ones there.

"A potential man-eater is the spheelunge, a twenty foot alligator with fins instead of legs and eight of them instead of four. This creature is not a rumor, we've seen two of them, but none is in view right now. They are more closely related to the kedas than the ensals.

"Ensals and spheelunge are as closely related as orcas and fiddler crabs, but they both have six nucleotides in three pairs and complex cell structures.

"The most common active animals in the water are the chileeth. These are cold-blooded, bone-framed things." He went on to tell them a synopsis of the phylum, including the fact that most of the small things flying over the water were really types of fish. Clouds of them flew over the still surface, dining on dust floating in the warm sunlight. When they got too close to the water, mouths reached up from below. The river was alive with the plopping of mouths and the bursting

of small bubbles. Alan stopped talking to them at this time, and they soon found out it was because another person had joined him. Presumably the other woman from the hill town where he had deserted. She slowly strolled over and leaned on the rail next to him.

"We could be on this river quite awhile if the weather stays like this," she said.

"Not good, the river's in wilderness here."

"The wilderness gets deeper than this. The swampiest part of the whole trip is just before Shempala."

"And you've been thru that before?"

"A few times, a dozen," with a wave like it was nothing.

"And how much of an adventure is that?"

"Like this, lazy adventure. The biggest excitement on this river is what you find in the nests. We'll come up tangled a couple times, but you've been thru that once already. I've had to pole once or twice also but Vyinga wouldn't pole unless the food ran out."

"This is by far the biggest adventure in my life."

"I hope you're enjoying it."

"It's a little scary, I didn't realize how completely wild this planet is. But if you're sure it's safe, it's quite a bit of fun."

Alfred was concerned to hear him talking like that. By saying 'this planet' he was implying that he came from a different one wasn't he? The woman either didn't pick up on it, or; harder to think about, was already familiar with it.

"The Lhar's not scary. You'd have to be pretty dumb to get

hurt here. Oh you could get eaten by a spheelunge if you really tried, but you aren't in much more danger from that than you are from theirops in the woods. You might blunder into a spiker bush if you went stumbling around in the river in the dark, but this river's mostly just lazy. After all, it goes to Zhindu, what would you expect?"

"So what was your biggest adventure?"

"Well, it actually was on this river, but it was ages ago, it would hardly make sense today."

"Why not?"

"Because things aren't the same, people aren't dangerous any more."

"So you remember back til then?"

"Not really, I don't remember back more than a century at any one time, but I write stuff down, I keep journals. When I read stuff from my distant past, it doesn't even seem like it was me because I don't remember any of it inside my head."

"Do you remember what you wrote down, so you can tell me what it was?"

"Yeah, but like I said, it won't make much sense today, it just sounds like a fairy tale adventure because it's so impossible now that we have the Instinct."

"But everything is so new to me it will make just as much sense as anything else."

"I haven't even read it over in a half-century or so, I'd probably get a lot of it wrong."

"So? I'm only using this as a for-instance of what passes

for a real adventure around here if it isn't drifting on a raft thru a primeval swamp."

"If I tell you my big adventure, you'll know something more about me."

"What would that be?"

"Something about how old I am."

"How old is that?"

"What would twenty two centuries be like to you?"

"Way more than six times older than Desa?"

"Way more. Remember Alore? Remember her rant about the wizard child of Oliar?"

Alfred was just listening, but since he knew none of that, not much of it meant anything to him except that Alan and this woman knew each other pretty well.

"Yeah, it seems funny now but she did scare me at the time. I loved the way you waved her off."

"I had to do that. You see she was right."

"What?"

"Yes, there was a wizard child of Oliar's in Yoonbarla at that time."

"One who has since left?"

"Yes."

"Well it certainly isn't me," Alan said.

"No."

"Desa? You were protecting Desa?"

"Desa needs no protection from the likes of Alore either socially, mentally or physically."

"You're right about that, but then..."

"I am Oliar's daughter," she admitted.

Alan paused a long time at this point. Alfred was more conscious of the riverine fauna the camera was recording than Alan's conversation about native fairy tales with some native woman leading him on with pick-up lines. Alan's tone when speaking with her worried Alfred more than a little. Besides seeming to admit that he came from another planet, it sounded like he took this stuff way too seriously. Alfred also couldn't imagine this young and fresh looking woman being anywhere near that old, even allowing for native years and native numbers.

"Wow, that must have been awesome," Alan said.

"Not always. Wizards weren't welcome in lots of places for lots of years, thru the whole of the late troubled times."

"What about now?"

"Oh it's no problem now, Oliar's doing well today, he hasn't paid attention to his finances and hasn't got the fortune that a lot of the old wizards do, but he's had a comfortable research position at Pinnacle Labs in Yondure since the 43rd century. We still write now and then, he's into theoretical cosmology these days. He thinks agricultural knowledge is mature now. He'd love to talk to you, what with that YingolNeerie starship thing. He'd probably want to read you."

Alfred sat up straight about that one. No doubt about it now, this person knew about Alan! If this one knew, the teacher, the one he was closer to, undoubtedly did also. He

wanted to set off several alarms already, but what they said next shocked him even more.

"What do you mean 'read me'?" Alan asked the question Alfred had been too shocked to think of.

"Maybe you really are from YingolNeerie?" She sighed, then went on to explain. "It's when you have your memories read. I'm sure you've never been read before, why would you at your age? But you go to a memory shop and they give you a pill, next day you lick a sticky and they render it out and you get another pill which is an RN Acid trip of your life. Most places will make up copies for an iron a tab once the reading is done. I don't understand how it is that you blew your mind on an RN Acid trip and you don't know what reading is?"

"It is possible to read my memories out with a pill?" Alan gasped.

"And a sticky-paper and replicis/analysis/synthesis cell matrix."

"Amazing."

"Not so amazing any more, just a moderately pricey consumer service in most major cities. It's over two coppers for the initial reading every place you go. In Shempala there's a few places that do it. I don't bother though, I still just buy a blank book and a pen for a couple irons and write down the stuff I want to remember, it's much more cost effective."

Alfred lost no time in realizing the implications of this. It

would also be possible to read one's memories without one's knowledge or consent with such technology. With such technology it might be possible to raise an Angel from a mortal without destroying the flesh. If it was applied to Alan, whoever took one of those pills would know the truth about him immediately.

Alan distracted her with questions about some floating animal they were passing on the river. It floated like a boat with a thick turtle-hard, but smooth shell on top. There were paddles, tentacles and eyes in the water. It was two feet long and relatively fast.

"That's a Bnath, a pretty big one. They're in the same kingdom as lon, enthora and rinko but it's very animal if you ask me."

"You mean that thing's a plant?" Alan asked.

"Well it does have quite a few photosynthetic cells and can maintain its life in a passive float for years without prey."

"But it eats?"

"It hunts chileeth and is more intelligent than a kwibarta or a wee-bird."

"So it's sumoid life?"

"Yeah."

Alan got her to divulge that she also knew a fair amount of biochemistry and its practical application. He got her to explain more of the economic details of food raising/gathering in this area. She was more interested in explaining the ecological relationships among the wildlife

they were seeing. Alfred wished Alan would just let her ramble about that. Her understanding was more practical than scientific, but it was clear that it was practical knowledge in agreement with scientific observation. It was also plain that she was fairly educated and intelligent in spite of her fairy tales.

She claimed she was so old that she had seen this basin transformed from a sea, and told how the succession of life progressed from immense lagoon to dry land and how it left all the features. Alfred was charmed by the succinctness of her observations even if her own participation in it must be a fantasy.

They were still talking about that when the other woman showed up. Alfred never got a very good look at her from the way Alan was turned, then they seemed to be wrapped around each other and she was out of sight, except when some of her dark curls buried the lens. But they could still hear her greetings.

"He didn't know about memory reading." The first one said.

"No doubt he wouldn't," his teacher friend said.

"I think they might even have a shop in Shempala," the blonde said.

Alfred hung on this conversation wondering if he was going to hear them make plans to have Alan subjected to this to find out if he really was from Earth. But it was Alan who

asked.

"If they were to read me would they be able to tell if YingolNeerie really was an RNAcid trip?"

Alfred knew that was the native name for Sol. Alfred gasped when he heard Alan pass those words. They knew a lot too much about Alan, a lot too much about the expedition. He wanted to reach out and throttle Alan for just blatantly advertising Gordon's Lamp like that. But his girlfriend's voice continued to converse with him and ignored Alfred completely.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "If you OD'd the reading would be even more likely to just get the trip, your old memories would be even dimmer in the reading than they are to you now."

That was a relief. But still this was disastrous. But what should he do with the Theology hearing coming up this Sunday? No doubt it wouldn't be up to him, this was all recorded, it was in in-boxes already. He had to notice it, he was genuinely worried about it, but separation got it done, got Alfred his own vessel and got all the annoying souls away at ever-increasing speed toward a destination twelve billion miles out of his hair. He phrased his observation in what he hoped would be taken as proper scientific reserve.

Note: Native technology claims to be able to extract human memories.

He posted that note to all who were getting the recording. He didn't include anyone else, and didn't increase the list to get this data. He didn't even include Elmore. He would get the economic data to him, but didn't want to call even that much attention to the trouble Alan could be in. Meanwhile Alan was still transmitting, mostly a picture of the blond woman, not a bad image to have in your view, especially with the riverbank beyond. She looked like she could have been a model, but she wasn't wearing enough clothes. She talked with slow, fluid gestures and had blue, blue dreamy eyes that sometimes focused on the phonecam, making Alfred afraid that she had spotted the lens. Maybe she even knew about it and was wondering if it was on? Maybe they were all acting out a whole charade for all he really knew.

"So Luray was going to tell me about her greatest adventure," Alan told Desa.

"Maybe Desa should tell us hers first." Alfred guessed the blond didn't really want to go thru that narration.

"Adventures aren't that much fun when you're in the middle of them," Desa answered.

"But what were yours?" Luray asked.

Alan turned toward her and the phone was brought into a position where her face filled the field of view. She was quite a pretty girl. She really did look like she might be a year or two younger than Alan. She had big round brown eyes, thick reddish-dark brown curls and a round little chin and cheeks. It was easy to see how Alan fell in love with her. She wasn't as

beautiful as the blond, but she was a lot cuter. "My captive house incident that ended in a really out-of-control demonstration, and the trek across the Kinsheeta was very harsh." She shuddered when she said that, but immediately went on, "So what was yours?" the teacher asked the blond.

"It was seriously scary, back in the late troubled times."

"Sounds scarier than any adventure you can have in this day and age," Desa said.

"So it sounds like you have the adventurist," Alan said. Alfred couldn't see who he was pointing at.

"But what's yours?" the teacher asked Alan.

"This trip we're on right now, this jungle river ride," Alan answered.

"So I guess you are it," she said to the blond.

From then on their conversation became nothing but the blond woman relating some old fairy tale she thought she was a character in. Alan left the phone on while that woman took hours telling her tale of blood-thirsty peasants, knights and wizards between the occasional tug on the sail and the occasional interruption to pull and clean a fish that got hooked. Finally the blond woman went off with some guy. There was no new data in the whole six hours unless you were interested in her fairy tale as an example of native literature.

He got quite a few more good views of the riverbank. He understood a lot less of it without her explaining it. There

were more people out in little boats with long poles pulling the lily-pad-like leaves from the water or dredging the bottom. They passed a little dock with a couple decent-sized boats at it and some of the native tree-houses nearby. They passed other ships, it was possible to get a better idea of the one Alan was on from looking at them. They were at anchor at the bank, many of their crew bathing in the river nude, male and female. It was good they were far enough away so no real details showed in the two Mpel phonecam. They shouted back and forth to these people on the bank as they drifted past each other, there wasn't enough volume for the translators to get anything out of what was said on either side since these three people did not take part in the shouting. He was too distracted with worry about the implications of lifting memories to give this data the attention it deserved. He just wished it to stop so this communication wouldn't draw more attention than it had so far.

Alan and the teacher made plans to go up to bed as soon as the blond came back. Alfred wondered if Alan had completely forgotten the phone and was going to leave it on thru their bedroom antics? He completely panicked, heart pain and all. No matter what happened, he couldn't stop it going to the log and his palms began to sweat. If Alan did that Kelvin would launch a military attack on Alan. If necessary, he would take that raft out. Alan pulled his harness off and while doing so the last thing that he saw before Alan killed the channel was a quick view of that girl's nude body as she

looked toward Alan.

No universe on the market could provide cherubim as lovely as what this world provided in the flesh. Marketeers would study here some day to upgrade their enticements. Humans had evolved here into something more beautiful hadn't they? Even that quarter second of blurry phonecam video was going to be a stink. Alfred wondered if he might be better off if Alan's phone was to fail. But still there was that copy of the hind-brain in his soul with its faint shouts of congratulations.

Saturday Jul. 2, 2271 - 10:06am

Alfred and Victoria were in their private space again. Theirs was a large Victorian study, cluttered with stuffed specimens and cases full of artifacts. The walls, where they weren't covered by double-height glass-door bookcases, were marble and mahogany. There was a large fireplace on one wall, burning slowly and providing a cozy warmth in a room which was otherwise invigoratingly cool. Beyond and also much warmer was a conservatory under an ornate glass dome, large enough for a family of brilliant macaws to inhabit. Outside the glass, a formal garden stretched to a distant row of large sycamores. Their estate was nearly as representational as Morgan's, just a bit more self-cleaning. They had just come from the adjoining breakfast room.

Their robot staff was quietly clearing the table. They were both mortalist enough to continue the rituals of meals when the time was available. It wasn't nutritionally necessary of course, but it was psychologically comforting. Now they sat together in a small but tall bay window overlooking the garden and the pool where swans swam contentedly in the mid-morning sun.

"I learned something new and frightening in Alan's latest report yesterday," Alfred told her before she could pick up her book.

"Oh, what is that?"

"The natives can read a person's memories. They can give you a pill, capture your saliva the next day and analyze it and condense all the memories in your mind into another pill."

"I wonder how they can accomplish that?" She asked, "Do you think there is any way we can duplicate it?"

"What would it matter? What biological specimens do we have to use it on?"

"It would be very useful back home. Law enforcement alone would love to have such an ability."

"No doubt they would, but I think this gives us a more immediate problem."

"Alan?" she asked.

"Yes, they can read his memories."

"I hope he would never let such a thing happen."

"He asked for it. He wondered if they could tell whether he really came from Earth or his memories are really from a

drug overdose."

"He can't be that confused," Vic said.

"I think he is, don't forget, he's probably taken lots of other drugs by now. If they do read his memories, think of what he has stored in there. He's a very bright boy. He learned lots of physics, electronics, biology, chemistry. The natives would get a thousand years of our science in a day. With that knowledge they very well could become dangerous."

"But why would he forget all the years he was growing up with us?" Vic asked.

"They are convincing him that a whole lifetime of memories can be synthesized. It seems that within their society there is often no way to tell what is reality and what is drug dream."

"If they're that confused, I don't think they can ever become a danger to us."

"Think how confused the American users were. Did that make them less dangerous?" Alfred asked rhetorically.

"But how would they conduct any weapons research if they're in a narcotic haze?"

"They managed to get pretty far with biology if they can extract a person's memories. We can't do that, we don't know how to start."

They were silent awhile. Victoria digested the meaning of his words. "Separation is two days away now. The Theology decision is tomorrow. Why couldn't we have found this out Tuesday?"

"That is the gist of my plan for handling it," Alfred said. "Analysis of the data was delayed until priorities involving separation were completed."

"I think that's all we can do in the circumstances. If we bring this to Kelvin's attention now he'll abort the mission and hold five security meetings and seven prayer services. Then we'll be blamed for missing the launch window and the smell will reach every universe of Gordon's Lamp."

"Oh at least," Alfred agreed.

"When he does notice it..." Vic began.

"I hope he's a light-hour from here. That kind of delay makes it hard to do much more than mail transfer."

"And if you do keep a lid on this til after, what should we do about it then?"

"I think we go down and pick him up. I'd like to get that done before Kelvin notices, so when he does ask me I can give a cheery 'taken care of sir' and he can go on his very important way confident that threat is removed and we are carrying on with our remote probes."

"How will Alan feel about all of this?" she asked.

"He's going to have to grow up about it. The way I feel now I don't think I can trust him around the natives at all. He read too many of those Burroughs and Meredith novels as a kid. Maybe if he can re-learn who he is and where he came from we can let him study on the surface again."

"I think we should let him marry the native woman in a Christian ceremony and let them quietly carry on studies in

some outlying area," Victoria said. "We need to give him more specific instructions in how to avoid detection."

Sunday Jul. 3, 2271 - 1:31pm

Alfred was encouraged by the way the hearing was going and began wrapping up his speech, "...And God had so made his Universe that when mankind attained full understanding we were resurrected and freed from death itself.

"As it is knowledge and wisdom that at last gained the portals of Heaven for mankind, so we must continue to revere knowledge. Knowledge is what we seek. In our mortal lives, and here in the Afterlife, Victoria and I have been scientists, studying God's works for the betterment of His people. Now that we have passed the gates of Heaven and attained immortal life in God, a mere century of solitary study is but a trifling. We are not being abandoned to eternal darkness, we are merely standing a post for a moment while others are occupied elsewhere.

"And so to sum up, I petition the church that has given me this new and Holy life to allow me to use it in the best way I know. Let me keep an outpost of our Church, our People and our God here til the next mission arrives. Let me use my skills to continue to add to humankind's knowledge. Let me hold this lamp."

There was a moment of silence, that was good. If he ever needed eloquence this was the time. If he would have been flesh he would have fainted from holding his breath as long as this silence stretched.

"Saint O'Conner, any counter-arguments?" Kelvin asked as the silence got long.

"No sir, I have no arguments. I would like to ask Colonel McReady if those are his own words or did he get them from someone? If he did, I would like to have that individual added to my staff as a sermon-writer."

"Sir, the words are all my own. Your department's genuine concern for my soul is what inspired me to think deeply enough to understand. That understanding is what has re-kindled my faith. That renewed faith re-affirms my desire to perform this mission."

"Very well, I shall lose an excellent sermon writer."

That sounded good. Gee the mileage a little ego-stroking could deliver. Now if no one brought up the memory-reading capabilities. However Kelvin wasn't done yet.

"Are you satisfied there is no danger to their souls if they are left behind?"

"Colonel McReady is right, we haven't yet gained the feel of immortality. We have to be careful of subjecting ourselves to the rules mortals had to live by."

"I'm inclined to allow we leave them here," Kelvin said, "especially when we have to consider that we don't have suitable replacement entities available without delaying our

departure." He glowered menacingly at Ava when he said that. "Are there any other concerns?" Alfred held his breath again. "Major Alvarez?"

Oh good God no, not now.

"Sir, we do need to remember that the mortal on the surface is still out of control."

"We are aware of that, although I understand he is still returning some data?"

"Yes, occasionally," Alfred admitted.

Delos continued, "I believe one item he has returned poses a large security risk."

Oh good God no.

"What would that be?"

"It seems that our mortal believes the natives are able to lift a person's memories, put it in a pill and swallow it, enabling the swallower to remember everything the first person did."

The captain laughed out loud. "And if we were to believe such a preposterous notion, what risk does that pose?" Kelvin asked.

"They could gain all our technology from Alan's memories."

"Alan barely finished secondary school. I believe the

limits of our technology require many years of graduate study. I know he was a bright boy and performed all his lessons with honors, but the notion that one bright kid is going to carry all the secrets of the technology of humankind in his head sounds a little preposterous. No single human carries a significant fraction of mankind's knowledge. Even if they could read my memories they would not advance very much."

"There is a lot of basic knowledge..."

"Major, I'd rather not miss the launch window, if we don't separate tomorrow it will be two months before we're re-aligned. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the theological arguments for and against leaving souls with the biology station. Whether we leave the mortal on the surface is a separate issue that can be discussed after the separation. The mortal is a problem for the biology station. It is their experiment and they are being left with the equipment and personnel necessary to handle the problem. IF we decide it's a problem."

The captain drew a breath and went on. "This is not the first time you've tried to change the agenda at meetings devoted to the separation. If I were a suspicious man I might think you had something of a vendetta against this project."

"Sir I don't think it's in our best interests, for many reasons, the reasons I have made perfectly public."

"Your diligence is admirable but I'm afraid that once again you are overruled."

Well, maybe the natives would gain something significant if they read Kelvin's memories. Was it's Alfred's arguments? His oratory? Was it Delos' whiny delivery? Whatever it was, Halleluiah! Biology Base, prepare for separation!

Monday Jul. 4, 2271 - 3:31pm

And now Ava had to deal with the separation. She was on duty, at least her avatar was, by now that was just about a copy of herself, interrupting her real self for further information now and then. It was time, they were about to decouple the busses now. She re-enforced the avatar with as timely updates as she could devise. When she had the avatar as deep and as broad as she could get it, she had to make sure that all of her real self was across the bus before decoupling began, it was no longer possible to be sure who was what. There was a period of time when her whole self was cut off from both sides of the separation. When she restored bus contact, she was on the Biology side. She hoped her avatar (or should she just admit her crime to herself and call it her clone?) would hold them well.

That avatar was as real a human soul as she could make it. In her soul, she really believed that she had reproduced because she had copied most of her own neural simulation across. She wondered if they would ever know, she doubted there was a soul on what remained of Gordon's Lamp that

was half as competent with silicon as that avatar was, certainly none that would be able to detect what she had actually done.

She would have no thread of legal defense against a charge of cloning. It wasn't a simple clone, she had done things that should make her avatar, (or should she call her 'sister?') more likely to go by the book. To make sure the avatar had the confidence she needed, the avatar believed that she was the original soul and was leaving an avatar to see to Alfred's needs. The avatar, clone, whichever she called it, would also keep secret what she thought she had done because the avatar also believed she had committed the ultimate sin of cloning.

She quickly ascertained that Glenelle was on this side also, there would be someone young enough to converse with if she ever dared reveal herself. This silicon was crowded, but if they pushed the fabrication unit, they might get a little ahead. It was too bad Morgan wasn't here, that would have been more entertaining. Her real first question was, where was the entity? Was there some way she could tell, or would she have to do element balances with the same attention to detail that Delos had? Ava had far more interest in penetrating the native data network than worrying about element balances seven decimal places out. This inner moon had more of every element than they actually needed if they really ran short.

Glenelle announced herself to Alfred and Vic in triumph, while they wondered what would happen on the ship. Ava

wondered if she would ever let them know she was here also, or would she let them think the silicon just was and nothing had to be done about it?

"They won't expect much from me after this," Glenelle said, "I set up that big old cherub I had with my butterfly flipper personification and worked up all the nuances I could think of into it. At meetings and dinners with nothing from biology to report, that avatar might fool them for years. I programmed in a change of interest about a year and a half from now. I'll have it try to learn statistical accounting."

'Not a good plan,' Ava thought.

"We'll be rather close in here don't you think?" Alfred asked Glenelle.

"I don't take much, my whole private universe isn't much more than two rooms and two views. I just left the only cherub I had behind. I'm nice and slim now, you'll see." Ava noticed that she still had a recording of one, she just wasn't running it.

"Thank you for being with us," Victoria said and gave her a polite hug. "We'll certainly get a lot more research done now that we don't have to clear every atmosphere probe thru security and the captain."

They sat down by the windows to the McReady's verandah. "We're going to land as many atmosphere landers as we can safely produce in many areas where Alan has found the vegetation thin."

"How many is that?" Glenelle asked.

They went on to converse about that. Their landers would do great things in understanding the biology of the planet. Meanwhile Ava was impatient for the probe to arrive that would let her unravel the data layer of this planet.

"Oh we could produce a few hundred," Victoria said, "without hurting our life support."

"We need to be a little more careful than that," Alfred said. "Let's not send more than we can examine the data from."

"I'll examine what we find from one lander," Glenelle said, "I wish it could be an android actually, that would blend into the scenery Alan found a lot better than a standard groundbase."

"I want to reduce the data from a hundred probes," Victoria said, "We should pepper the planet with probes, we should learn what's different and what's the same about the different bio-regions of this planet."

"All in good time," Alfred said, "One of the first things we have to deal with is getting Alan back up here before he starts granting interviews to news magazines."

"I thought we no longer cared?" Glenelle asked.

"We won't get any data if the whole native population starts scouring the countryside for probes."

"How many do you think they will find?" Victoria asked. "We might learn a lot before they take it apart."

"Kelvin will be back, in as little as five years. I will have

to answer to him and Glayet about our security. Glenelle will have to answer for her presence."

After thinking about it overnight, Kelvin had second thoughts about leaving Alfred in charge of a permanent base. If it was economically feasible, Kelvin would come back to 61 Cygni A before leaving for home. He would make a decision then about a permanent base. Alfred would command this station til then, there was no guarantee about after.

"If all goes well," Glenelle answered, "I'll just take over for the cherub and they'll never notice I wasn't the cherub I left behind."

'How do Al and Vic know you aren't the cherub you left behind?' Ava thought. 'For that matter how do I know I'm not the cherub I left behind? I did a very good job on it. Can I tell I'm not it? Of course I'm not it, it can't have self-doubts – I think.'

"It still behooves us to keep good security," Alfred went on. "Alan is not, and we know that in the right hands he cannot keep silent."

"If you believe they can read memories," Victoria said.

"Those girls have come up on the side of facts over and over again," Alfred told them, "I think it would be intellectually lazy of us to ignore this warning."

"How do you propose to get him back?" Glenelle asked.

"The raft that he's on will be getting to a very thinly settled part of the river in about one native week," he began.

Ava couldn't spend all her time listening to them, so while they started making plans they all knew were silly, she combed the base for any sign of a conscious rogue entity. She examined all the paths of all the logic that was with them in exquisite detail, trying to find loops where address translations could be verified. There was so much less Q-age now that it should be possible to get her mind around where it all was. She studied the tables and devised diagnostics to test the truth of how they seemed to be connected. She found no evidence of the entity that way.

She checked how the probe's fabrication was going. There would be hours yet. She saw that there were some engineering details to consider and had to build some simulations. The decode had to be done optically, there was no time to convert to electrons and back. That crystal had to have some form of intelligence inside the atom for it to work. The heart of it was an atomic-scale snowflake with the central atom missing. Then she realized it was going to take a whole bus to carry the output of this probe if the signal were full. Whole new ways of converting to binary and getting it written somewhere would have to be devised. Wow. Ow, the buffer space it was going to take.

Book II.

The Darceenian Flame

Kveshnat Vistee

The water was so smooth every fish left ripples. The ship's progress was so slow it hardly left ripples. Half its speed was the current, and the current won't get around the next bend for an hour. Desa leaned on the fore rail, gazing into the water as they crept along. The air was thick and humid and sluggish, it took effort to breath. The sails looked about slack, it was hard to tell because they were pulled so tight.

There was sparse habitation here. They knew there was a road on each side of the river, but the Lhar is a braided stream down The Central Wescarp Valley from Hazorpean to Lastriss. Occasionally a road would reach the channel they were on and they'd see a couple farms and a few houses. Most of the time the banks were a tangle of roots from the trunks leaning way out over the water. The water level might vary a foot here with the seasons and the storms, keeping those trunks fairly big.

Anything but the channel was choked with the floating leaves of lon, and large areas were flooded and covered with them. Canoe-farmers had been out in them all thru Morningday, seldom close enough to shout to. She knew this

would be a common sight all along the Lhar, as it was in many other wide, slow rivers worldwide where the climate would allow. The climate would allow for anywhere the water's surface didn't freeze during the week and the salt concentration wasn't too high.

Most of the people they saw were crews on traffic going upstream. Right now those crews were at-anchor and often partying. It took long enough to drift by them that there was time for shouted exchanges of jokes between the crews.

After a couple weeks, life on this raft had settled into a routine. Luray was assigned during awake times, she and Alan were on during sleeps. Since Alan was inexperienced he didn't have a mast of his own at first, but had learned what he needed within hours and was already a competent crewman and stood in for volunteer cooks. Vyinga ran her ship with a cooking rotation for the main meal of the day, done during shift change just before sleep time, breakfast for Desa and Alan. For the other meals you were on your own but quite often people volunteered to cook for everyone at the other shift change, especially if something tasty was caught during the shift.

Sailing the Lhar was as easy as everyone said it would be. Above Lastriss there was a gentle current that drifted at the speed of a slow walk. The two hundred mile trip to Lastriss increased to four hundred miles by the meandering of the river, making the trip from Hazorpean take at least four weeks altogether when the wind was this light.

Right now it was Noonsleep. They were in the mouth of the great Central Wescarp Valley and the river was starting to tend more and more to the east with every meander. The mountains called the Eastern Teeth were down to a line of low hills to the south of them. The Northern Teeth were now visible to the north where they extended fifty miles further out onto the plains in the direction of Lastriss.

This two and a half week ride down the valley was the most wonderful tourist-sail she had ever been on, even the second time. But it was now coming to a close. The mesmerizing scenery was falling behind, leaving just the gentle riverbank on each side. Not that this wasn't pretty enough with the neat farms visible here and there, the soaring archwoods along the bank and the beautiful flowers of the lon starting to open in the water.

Early in Morningday they had passed the Trans-Lantis Canal and the town of Chefiyaiya. That canal goes over to the Lita river and so is a short-cut to Bostok. There was no cargo arranged at Bostok this trip so Vyinga had no reason to go up that way.

There was a little excitement at Chefiyaiya however as they tried to perform a bump-and-roll. For those who don't sail the rivers of the Zhindu or similar slow-water basins, a bump-and-roll is a maneuver often performed at a small dock where there is little enough cargo to be exchanged that it all fits on the rollerracks. The ship slows down, shouts thru megaphones or flag signals line up the deal as the ship drifts

toward the dock.

As they approach, the captain or cargoman jumps the narrowing gap to the dock with the paperwork, the ship gently nudges the dock, the cargo is shoved across the racks and the captain jumps the widening gap with the signatures as the ship begins to drift out away from the dock again with the current or tide.

This is one of those acquired skills of river faring, and Vyinga leaves the racks to Vatreel. As one can well imagine, doing this improperly can result in the cargo being transferred to the water instead of dock or/or boat. Only experienced personnel are trusted and it's a little like an athletic tradition between the cargomen and docksmen on the slow rivers of this basin.

Well this time the dockmaster was mesmerized as Vatreel aimed the rack toward the shoremen's idle ones, then lifted the whole rack as they glided by and stepped with it, matching his walk along the deck to the drift of the river, til the whole row of bales rolled across and lay resting on their rack while the docksman's chins dropped and he walked half the edge of the deck. Then he picked up his whole empty rack in one hand and put it away. Only then did that dockmaster remember her stamps. The gap was widening. Nlara, then the remainder of the crew, began to shout. Vyinga took a running leap and flew thru the air, actually reaching the stern rail with one foot. She hung there for a second, arms flailing, while others ran to grab her.

Those on the dock were already bursting into laughter when one of the girls staying with Vatreel on third mast, leaned far and actually grabbed her, only to be pulled into the water on top of her. Vyinga bellowed many choice words regarding the pitiful state of worm infestation in the dockmaster's genitals that made the docksmen howl all the more. The cargo lists got sopped of course, and had to be fished out of the river with a net.

Vyinga was over it now that they were well into Noonsleep. Vyinga was one of those people who thought three hours was a real good sleep, maybe four, five or six times a week. So for a good part of Noonsleep she stood with them at the front rail and talked.

Vyinga is actually a spectacular looking woman. She has long, thick, straight hair, shining like chrome in slow waves to the center of her back. Her tuft is the same color and a luxurious thick diamond of reaching nearly to her navel. Her eyes are huge and a deep reddish violet, shaded dark towards royal blue near the edges. Her skin is the color of thick smoke in the sunset, grayer than ivory, a strange color that went well with her other unique coloration. Her face is pixie-round but with large sensuous lips. Her breasts thrust proud and firm in front of her, tipped with long, permanently erect nipples that are purple-black. Her voice is deeper than that of most men.

Ship's foreman Nlara was with them, she usually took charge of the sleep shift, but the journey was so leisurely that

there was often a half-hour between trim changes. Nlara was a pretty rough woman, stronger than Jmory, plain-spoken and a little unkempt. Her knotty black hair was cut shoulder-length and she often wore a harness of shoulder-pockets but never anything else unless she was ashore in town. Her skin was quite dark but her eyes were pale blue. She was proud of her rich female aroma and raunchy, active libido.

She was with a guy named Fyasin that she had met when they stopped at Bneikion on the way up river and had seduced into coming along for the ride to Hazorpean and back. Fyasin was an outland farmer, good-looking but a little crude at times. Of course that seemed to be what Nlara saw in him. He was husky enough to be a great deckhand, but didn't quite catch on to the finesse of the job. In wind this light you have to keep the sails tight enough to drum on or they'll just luff. Fyasin liked to see his sail belly all the time.

Nlara had been with Vyinga for years and had just told them she was the one who first convinced Vyinga to sail again. Alan and Fyasin both wanted to hear the story of why she had stopped sailing in the first place. Nlara hinted that it was a deadly adventure and Vyinga eventually gave in, complaining about having to relive this on every trip on this river.

"You know I'm from Darceen?" She started, "And you know that's on the Ttharmine?"

"What are they?" Fyasin asked.

She had to explain that Darceen is a city and the

Ttharmine is what's left of the great sea of the old lands.

"Even though it's down over seventeen hundred feet since the break-out, and most of it's grown over by wildhull swamp since then, there's a thousand miles of open water around Darceen and that's a mile or two deep. It's still over a mile deep under the swamp. The result of this size and depth is that the water's not flat. The little ripples you see on this water, they get forty feet high out there. You can't take this barge out there, you need a vessel that's all one hull and no more than three masts. Nlara's been sailing all her life but never really been out of sight of land. She doesn't really feel what big water is like."

"Hell no, I only know a few holes in this river deep enough to sink in," Nlara told them.

"I've been on big water and been on that kind of ship," Desa told her, "the whole length of the 'Toz from the Yakhan south to Kleggain Block."

"Where's that?" Fyasin asked.

"Kassidor Yakhan, Dorcaiken Toz, and the great dam the old wizard's made with their mountain-smasher that keeps the Toz from draining out and filling in the lower Dos basin."

"It sounds like you've traveled wider than any of us," Nlara said.

She wouldn't mention being about 61 light years short of the most widely traveled person here. "I never saw waves forty feet," she told them, "not more than ten."

"I saw much more than forty. It was a night that shakes

me today." Her voice changed, it became almost a song. "When lightning cracked we saw the waves towering around us like the mountains you live in, but raging, heaving, slamming themselves together like tumufs in the breeding pit.

"We were just a dead leaf trampled under the feet of those warring mountains of water. Thru it all the wind shrieked so that we could hardly hear each other scream as we went sloshing around the deck. Two masts had gone and four of the crew before we rolled over the first time." There were some oohs and aahs at that.

"I got tangled in storm-downed sail while I was under and couldn't get free," she continued. "But the ship righted itself and I came up strapped to the stump of the foremast by a scrap of sail, that tattered canvas in the wind holding my shattered body together." Desa noticed that the story did rhyme [in Kassidorian Common Tongue] and that might be how Vyinga remembered it. By now she thought the reluctance to tell the tale was an act.

"There were eight of us gone now. The only crew remaining alive were those who'd found a corner to strap themselves in where they couldn't be taken overboard or battered with hunks of rigging still attached to the hull.

"We heaved and threw, pounded and battered from all directions, never knowing where the next blow was coming from except when lighting flashed. Wind, rain and spray doused us painfully at all times.

"That went on thru all of Nightday. Some of my people

were worse than I and moaned sickly with each new blow.

"Then a sky-high cliff slammed into us broadside. We turned over completely, then surfed down it on the hull, then over again and this time it held us down for a long time, shaking us underwater. We popped up bottom up, slammed back down on our faces and gradually righted to endure the same pounding for hours more."

"No wonder you gave up sailing." Fyasin said.

"No kidding," Desa added.

"Oh, no, no, we haven't got to the bad part yet," her deep gravelly voice rasped. "We never went over again after that. The raging wind was over by Dawnsleep and I knew we wouldn't go down. By the time it was light the sea was just a long billowing swell. I was still strapped to the mast, but that was good, I had broken bones in both legs, my chest was stove in and one arm was cracked here. My good arm and face were free.

"There were three left that could move, but minTar died first, impaled on a broken spar. They couldn't move me. I was in a position where I couldn't see the remainder of the ship. They tried to help each other and the other survivor since none were free of broken bones and I was the only one not seriously bleeding. Only two of us made it til about Noonsleep when the dactyls found us.

"I could move only one arm, Corguf had both arms and a leg and had sewed up his other leg. He could not keep them off those who were dead. I couldn't see them behind the mast

I was bound to, only hear them, the crunching and tearing and their wet snorts and sputters. That and Corguf's screams and the turning of his stomach. Oh I could smell the smells also, the sulphurous stink of the dactyls, the bowels torn open.

"Thru the steamy Afternoonday this went on. Then when they'd eaten their fill they sat there, behind us on the wreckage of the ship, waiting for dark and waiting to get hungry again. Corguf and one spear would not hold them off." It was still in the same meter and rhyme [in Kassidorian] and Desa was already starting to think what the music to it would be. If she had some paper with her she might have jotted it down and made a song of it.

"But you're here to tell the tale," Fyasin observed.

"Yes, another ship saw us before the dark, one which hadn't been as deep in the storm. We were rescued and both of us survived."

"And I agree the storm wasn't the worst of it."

"I'll tell you the worst of it," Vyinga continued, her breath heaving like that storm, "the eleven who were lost, especially p'Vook. We were a crew on the that ship, Kyiteen had only been with me a few years but three had been with me a century, since I first put to sea as a nubile little mouth-girl. p'Vook fathered both my children, may they remain free of the sea." She clasped her fist to her breast. "Oh I still love but not like that. I might have been his captain on two different ships, but he was always my Navigator. We were more like a clan on that ship, a team against the mighty sea.

"All that loss was the worst of it. My limbs had been torn from my body, my entrails were in the bellies of dactyl's roosting in the swamps of the Ttharmine. There was nothing of my life I could face after that. Most of myself was gone. I ran away, inland and up into the hills. I did a sabbatical in the wilds, hiked all the way up to the ruins of Numidor, did the monastery scene and then became a migrant field hand for thousands of fertile-prairie miles out east somewhere or other and wound up in Hrrst decades later. I spent two years in a lab there, getting the Hotblood out of me. It was just aimless wandering that brought me to Zhindu, I was actually working as a sex entertainer when I met Nlara."

"I wondered why the nautical theme in her act," Nlara said.

"What nautical theme? I got this look from a lab in Zhindu down by the base of Northwest Jagged."

"KangDarceen, I knew that was the name of your ship."

It still was. The words 'Darceenian Flame' curved in purple lettering, distorted on a blazing ball like the banding of Kortrax centered in the deep blue mainsail of her foremast.

"It was the name of my act then."

"You can't fool someone who's been sailing as long as I have."

"I had been under this sail," Vyinga told them. "They give them away to captains who sailed for them as advertising. It was a fuel company making lantern fuel out of the morass on big crystal factory ships more like floating villages than ships."

I could tell you some tough stories of that life too, out there IN the swamps. That fuel was the cargo below-decks that I was carrying. It burns with an invisible fire, we symbolize it with mirror."

"An incredible test of survival," Fyasin said.

"An incredible tragedy to have to live with," Desa added.

"I trust you find the Lhar much tamer water?" Alan asked.

"It is the opposite extreme. I've lost one crewman in five centuries on this river and that was to a spheelunge and even then he was too pig-headed drunk to get out of the water when the lookout yelled to him. He was like you guys, no offense, but I hardly knew him. Actually I know you guys much better than him because you aren't afraid to hang out and chat. It's the free labor in this basin of travelers willing to pull sail, but that's another lecture. I can see you understand me however."

"You weren't saying we were as dumb as he was."

"Right. Anyway he got et. Nobody else before or since on my boat's got more than a couple spiker-bush stings. There's nobody on this trip so far who's that stupid. The Lhar's an adventure in it's own way, but more because of worry about those glistening little bodies on mast six neglecting sail because they've caught a fish." Both the guys and the girl on that mast had joined Vyinga in staying clothing-free on this voyage so far. However they anointed themselves so well with sun oil whenever it was light that they shone.

They reached a point where a change was required and

had to all tend to their masts. Nlara covered the foremast and Alan walked back to theirs. Two girls were having an extremely interesting trip down the Lhar with Vatreel the cargoman, but one was down to the winch for duty right on time. Vyinga walked down intending to see that six was covered. It looked like Luray was just on her way back from socializing down on mast six and up to their own, five, to sleep. She waved 'belayed' to Vyinga as she climbed the rigging. Vyinga understood and turned back their way.

"I think I'll head up to my nest for a wink or two myself," she said, "If I don't wake up Konfar."

He was one of the steersmen. She nested with both of them and had sleeping hours that were irregular enough that she spent time with both of them. Sometimes it sounded like she didn't get much sleep up there.

"What's it like where you're from?" Desa asked Fyasin.

"Lot's of room. We mind acres of thesh, but we also follow lentosaur and thonga out on the plains. We drive them to the homestead and then pack them out. We pack all the theirops we can find also. I've been on a kranjan hunt."

"That must have been pretty scary."

He tried to sound like he was also telling an old sailor's tale in his narration, but didn't worry about rhyme or meter. "You need fast and tireless kedas, a really good driver that can spot a leese-wallow at full gallop and a ship's crossbow mounted on the carriage. You use really big wheels to get over the brush, and your whole cart's just one truck. Then you

get two more guys who are really fast crankers and another good loader and all cling to that cart and go chase it down.

"You can follow their sign that's days old, they move thru the bush the way a large boulder comes down a mountain. A kranjan fears absolutely nothing and makes no effort to cover it's tracks.

"Quite often they'll smell the kedas and charge, we had a keda injured before the second bolt turned the monster. It ran then, with two twenty foot bolts in it's neck and we chased it with the other two keda's. We chased it a long while, then, when it knew it was dying, it charged again. The keda's bolted, but the shaft was on it's way and sank deep in it's throat. Meanwhile our cart turned over and spill't us out toward the monster. But by then it was in it's death throws so we came out OK. My brother and I got some nasty snags on some thorns but we didn't notice them til the next day.

"So that was the most dangerous adventure I've had in my life so far," Fyasin finished up. "This one's the most fun," he said, squeezing Nlara. "What was your biggest adventure?" he asked Nlara. Desa wanted to ask him if he always told the tale like that, or was it just since he'd been on this boat, but she didn't get the chance.

"I don't think I've had any especially big adventures. We've seen a couple dactyls big enough to worry about, I've run aground a few times, once where we had to offload by carrying box, bale, and bag, one at a time, across a tenth of a mile of knee and thigh deep water. We were nearly empty by

the time we floated free and three other ships were filled. I fell five stories in the city once, landed on an awning and knocked it down. That's the only time I ever broke a bone, never on the water.

"The adventure I look for is orgies," Nlara concluded.

"That's my hobby, like it is with Kalaz and Dencah."

"I've heard their names come up," Fyasin asked.

"They're semi-regular crew. They like to travel so they come with us every few voyages. They're also into group sex so they share a mast with me. They should be joining us in Lastriss. They got off there to go camping in the Thonga Hills while we went up to Hazorpean and back. They'll probably time it like we stopped at Bostok. I don't know if Vyinga will want to wait two weeks in Lastriss. She already told Leera and Konfar she wants them off her mast after Lastriss so they'll have to crew up their own masts. I think Vyinga wants to find someone slower to nest with. She's really slowing down these last few decades."

Desa watched as Nlara studied the river some more. All the different forms of wildlife one associates with Afternoonday actually become active during Noonsleep and that was true of the Lhar as well as anywhere. The clouds of tiny flying chileeth were building over the water with the heat. Larger chileeth and ensals pursued them from below, colorful birds from above.

Human life was still, no plotters poled the still water for

muck, no lon or enthora pickers were out. No wagons passed on the roads where they were visible. The river was mostly wild here, plots still lined the bank but they were behind lon and reeds or swampy islands. Where people brought kayaks down to the river here, they did it by coming down creeks thru the marshes that lined the banks. But now the locals were almost all flopped in their beds for the Noonsleep. There might be some awake, a few more by a bottle or keg somewhere but none of them visible from the river.

She noticed that Nlara didn't like something about the river and wanted to change to the inside channel. She went over to Leera, the steersman on duty, and conferred with him. The bow of the KangDarceen is perfectly straight, just like a raft. There were nine rows of hulls, three under each raft section, the steersman stands at a wheel in the center, long ropes make their way to the rudders, one on each end of each row of hulls.

In a minute she bellowed for a rigging change. Alan and Desa both found masts to do. Nlara stayed focused on the river. They went back to her when the tack was done.

"I don't like the looks of this sandbar, it looks like it moved all the way over to the weeds from here, I think we need to slide across above it on the high side. We still need a little more up this end. Go give two another couple turns and bring the nose around a little bit more."

The only thing that allowed this breath to act on the ship was the fact that they were a mile and a half below the level

of Yoonbarla. This was below the level of Dos, maybe even Yarolin, the deepest big city in the Dos basin. The air was heavy and didn't have to move very fast to push the ship. Little puffballs were beginning to form down here in the mouth of the valley, the air might get tricky.

Nlara climbed the ladder to her nest, then climbed the mast above with the telescope. "No, no, Leera swing back," she bellowed, "we won't make it. Desa and Alan, backtack one and two. Alan take up about twenty turns crosswinch, Desa you take almost thirty. Tulie you let three go slack for a few minutes, measure the breeze for us. Steady as you go down back!" She bellowed as loud as she could while hanging in the sailrings, "Maintain steerage."

Leera was cranking the wheel for all he was worth. When Alan and Desa had their masts shifted, the sails were now taking the ends of the ship in opposite directions. Minutes seemed to pass before the rear end of the ship began to come around and the vast raft began to rotate counter clockwise. Nlara still clung to the mainsail rings high up the mast.

"We're going to look like acrobats here people, Leera just lock rudders back the other way, Alan and Desa, back on tack, try to find a stray puff somewhere and get some sail into it. Opposite tack down back!" she bellowed. "Twenty on six, thirty on seven."

They bent to it. It was all in such slow motion. The rotation of the ship slowed, and almost started turning the other way. A nose rudder began to bite a little soft sand and

they began to come around much more quickly, accompanied by painful groans from the coupling knuckles that joined the raft sections together. Vyinga came down from her nest, still wiping herself. The rudder broke free of the sand and the ship continued its two mph drift, downstream, into the next bend.

"Thanks everyone, we made it by the sandbar. We're going into the weeds, but we're not aground." She was climbing down the mast as she yelled that out. She stopped at her nest to yell the rest. "Slack your sails and get your poles ready. Everyone that can work a weedhook grab one and come forward."

"I'm glad this happened on your shift," Vyinga said, as she began to climb back up to her nest.

It took their whole shift to hack their way out of this. They had to pole the ship thru the canals they cut thru the weeds. It was a casual sail between choke points, and ships going by on the uphill side of the sandbar could hail them and chide them on their misfortune. Nlara grumbled about the rudeness of the local traffic.

They all spent hours pulling weeds out of the water with big hooks. Many different kinds were edible, most of them water crops that had grown wild. Fresh vegetables for this week, dried varieties of lon for much of the voyage. They got a lot of a delicious fat-stem enthora that would dry up nicely and give them a break from the same shipment of thesh for their rolls. Luray was up pretty early and was as familiar with

this as Nlara. There were lots of wild spices, and they found some reeds covered with pounds and pounds of cottleshells.

Everyone who wasn't busy polling and cutting weeds was busy pulling up racks of panfish. Even if it wasn't for the weeds themselves, there were so many more fish in the weeds.

"We're going to eat better than we did at the logging party," Luray said.

"You didn't even eat at the logging party," Desa said.

"Oh I most certainly did. The rolls were just coming off when I went by there, I had several of the heart in parched kalic jelly, the wrap so perfectly toasted, and in a lowland wild thesh. And he'd cut a strip of the bacon to see how that was doing. It wasn't crisp yet, but it was done and he tried a few spice mixtures with it and me."

They were coming off shift but it looked like the ship was now free of the worst weeds. There might be a few more clumps, but they were gliding thru open water most of the time. A group of those coming off sleepshift wanted to steam up some cottleshells now, not willing to wait for the day's end feast that was sure to come. Tuida, who was the cook for Duskmeal, took the remainder of them to clean and start marinating in a jug of teak sauce he knew was aboard.

Luray sat with them, making these steamers her breakfast. Desa was glad she was getting to know Luray better. She found Luray was just quiet. At a party she always had a good

buzz and just listened. Desa hadn't really seen her much outside of Myimpaden thru all the years she had known her. She did have a mind and was quite knowledgeable about Zhindu and everything else on the river they were encountering. It was true that some of the change was due to the fact that she was drinking a lot less yaag on this voyage. There were a couple kegs aboard, owned by Yarnay on mast six, and she was able to mooch a cup or two a day out of them, but that was what Luray used to drink with lunch. That was just enough to stave off the worst of the depression that cutting off yaag could bring, leaving her functioning but with a sad and quiet air. The air and exercise were doing her a lot of good, in just three weeks she had tanned to a nice gold and her hair was coming in darker and livelier. Yarnay was noticing a lot more about her than her thirst for yaag, so was Tuida, the other guy on mast six. Desa noticed Luray was getting more exercise in bed than she used to.

In the three weeks since they left Yoonbarla, they had become surprisingly close. Just the shift change before, Desa had learned the story of Luray and Knume. Luray remembered how they met, it was about five centuries ago when Knume stumbled home from Zhindu. He was in pretty bad shape, it took two years in Yoonbarla before he remembered he had a house there.

For a long time they were occasional lovers, sometimes for a decade. She went back to the city for awhile, and when she returned, Knume dropped what he was doing and pursued

her full time. They were together for most of the 51st century, near the beginning of the 52nd, Luray became pregnant. The baby however, was horribly deformed. Knume was devastated by that, and blamed himself because of all the drugs he'd done in Zhindu. She blamed herself also, for the same reason, but was never able to make him listen. He got so worked up that he ran off with the baby and did something with it, he would never say what. She believed he had left it in the woods to be devoured and could not forgive him for that, even though it could never have survived. For his part he became completely withdrawn and Luray had gone back to Zhindu.

She couldn't forget him however, and returned to Yoonbarla once or twice each of the last four centuries hoping to find him between relationships. This last time his union with Valla had been too much, she had retreated into a keg and now she needed to get away from Yoonbarla to get her life back together. She'd had a little career in publishing; editing a travel magazine and writing an occasional article. She thought getting involved in that again would do her a lot of good.

Alan seemed to get along with Luray also, he thought she was beautiful right from the start and there could be no doubt that his body would couple with hers if he wasn't so caught up in his desert-religion, YingolNeerie, RNAcid overdose world. She had made up her mind to demand that Alan share sex with Luray, but then Luray became acquainted with Yarnay,

Zhaneet and Tuida on mast six and had all the sex she wanted.

Luray was as affectionate with Alan as he could tolerate. She likes to rub up under a guy's arm, she likes to rub her side against his, and she likes to be held when she sleeps. She's still smooth and soft and guys do enjoy contact with her.

So far on this trip Desa had actually been pretty content with Alan for her sexuality. He did want to please her and would try a little too hard at times, but he was such a kid he couldn't help getting carried away in it, so he wasn't all studied. They were pretty compatible in amount, once or twice a day. Since they were in the nest for Morningday and Afternoonday, they didn't sleep as much as they really should have and sometimes what they lacked in frequency they made up for in duration.

Leera the steersman and Tuida had paid some attention to her and she would normally have done them both but she was worried about how hurt Alan would be. She knew she wasn't being fair to herself, Alan was just a casual traveling companion she'd only known a few weeks. She owed him nothing beyond that. But then a little giggly petting was all the variety she really needed so far, it hadn't been worth the funk Alan would go into to couple with guys she found merely acceptable. However, if someone came along she had genuine interest in, Alan would just have to suck it up or find another mast.

Ekendosa Kozor

The storm was attacking with screaming fury. Lightning cracked and wind howled and swirled. They had just come off duty for Nightday when it began and didn't dare sleep because they might be called back any time. Desa wondered if it might even be better to be on deck rather than up on a wet mast that was reaching for the angry clouds. At least it was dry in the nest, there was a good gasket over the shadesail keeping the water running down the mast from passing thru their nest where most of it would have soaked into the mattress. She wondered what that would do to the lightning which she felt must certainly come thru here any second.

Even more she was concerned about Luray. Now it was her turn to deal with this. She climbed down to see how Luray was doing. She was sitting on the rail next to the winch listening for Vyinga. Vyinga was standing on the forward end of the bales right behind Konfar, feet braced wide on the slippery tarp. She hardly had to shout her orders to him and that was most of her orders. The sails were all furled to little check marks and still they were buffeting the ship this way and that as the wind swirled and gusted.

Luray actually looked pretty sturdy out there, compared to what Desa expected. Occasionally she would be sheltered by the sail, but most of the time she was under the rain. She had gone out in her cotton nightrobe, now discarded in a sodden

heap at the base of the mast. Her hair was plastered down with rain, but it wasn't very cold, even now, and there were enough trim changes to keep her warm.

"You stay here," she told Alan, "I think Luray's doing OK, but I want to go talk to her. If we need you I'll yell up."

With that she was down the ladder and over to Luray, glad she hadn't brought any cloth with her. The rain was cool but not cold, after the previous day's heat it was refreshing.

"You look like you're doing fine," Desa told her.

"Yeah, we're in one of them light shows you get out here in the basin. You could say we're on the basin floor now, we'll probably dock at Lastriss before next dark. There's no real sense you getting soaked in it."

"Just washing my hair," Desa said.

Luray chuckled. "I hope mine comes back," she said, "These last few years it's been so limp and stringy I was starting to look like Gladriel."

"Yeah, but it's been looking better lately."

"I want it to get wavy and thick again, and I like this work-out you get sailing, I know my body misses it."

"Casual garden tending doesn't give you much aerobic exercise, maybe during harvest, but even then it's more back work."

"I wish I was in your condition."

"Well shit, all the hiking I was doing the last few weeks before we left? And harvest? And the keda tending that goes with logging? The Troll in me should be showing by now."

"I have a bit of Nordic, but being almost all Elf, it's hard to really bulk up."

"You don't have to, I'll help you out til this is over."

"Oh no, it's not that, cranking this winch isn't even that hard for me."

"Then I think you're fine."

Vyinga had taken up twenty degrees as it looked like they were getting deeper into the storm and Luray was winding it in as she said that. They were further interrupted by moving to the furlwinch where Vyinga wanted twenty five more turns of slack on that. Luray wouldn't let Desa touch it. "I'm sorry your shift was boring," Luray told her, "But they'll be plenty more thunderheads on our route, especially as we get into summer."

"What happens if we get hit?" Desa asked.

"Oh it makes a big burnt spot, it might even disable a mast. You might have to do a field re-rig. I was on a trip once where the whole mast split all the way down to the nest. That mast was out of it for the whole trip."

"What happens if you're in the nest when that happens?"

"I wouldn't want to be touching the mast. I don't think you'll get hurt in the nest, other than having to wash whatever you were sitting on at the time."

Desa laughed at that. "How often do we get into this?"

"Oh you better expect six or eight of these on this trip, along with a few soaking rains as we get toward mid-basin. You've never been down here have you?"

"I've been down to Lastriss twice before, but once was fair weather all the way, a few weeks earlier in the year than this, and once I came overland and weathered two different storms in two different inns."

"This is the way to see these," Luray said, "To be right here dealing with it. You have to pay attention now, I wouldn't want to be holding this handle if a bolt hit the rigging."

Again there was a twelve turn change. There was a big rudder change along with it and the ship almost lurched to the right. Only the lightning flashes let one see the river, the lantern couldn't penetrate the sheets of rain.

"I think it's actually a very beautiful thing. I watch how the light plays miles into the sky. There is nothing so tall as a thunderhead you know, and sometimes the lightning will show you the canyons and atriums up in the clouds."

"I have noticed that also, but I find it easier to contemplate the majesty of it all from behind glass."

"Not me," Luray said, "I think feeling it is part of the experience."

"I have to admit, down here in the basin Nightday rain feels a lot softer than it does in the hills. I can't remember an Ekendosa Nightday this warm in Yoonbarla." Ekendosa or Fendeveermon is considered mid winter. Nightday rain is never this warm in mid summer in the mountains.

She didn't reply to that, but a little later said, "We should arrive in Lastriss during week Fendeveermon, probably before dark. I doubt we'll do anything more in Bneikion than

let Fyasin jump ashore."

The ship was passing over lon, one of the rinko-like crops that grows in shallow water. Vyinga was bawling at Konfar but they couldn't hear. Actually they only heard the sail orders and only because they had to be passed on.

"I think we should drop anchor," Luray said. "Vyinga's a great gal and all that, but she can't see what she's doing in this. We could go aground for good on a night like this way up here on the small stream."

"What do you call the small stream?" Desa asked.

"It's Vyinga that calls above Lastriss the small stream, but I've known sailors who call anything above Shempala by that title and I go with them. If you have to worry about sandbars, it's the upper Lhar."

They scraped thru, another flash showed open water ahead, a shore far in the distance and a long reach of wind-ruffled water ahead of them.

"Never mind, we'll be done with the worst of it before we encounter anything more."

And then the wind came right around, within a minute and a half it was opposite and they fled before it. Desa knew and went to the boom ropes while Luray unwound the sail. Less than fifteen minutes later the stars were out and Luray was sitting on the rail trying to dry in the rapidly cooling air, watching the back of the storm run up into the mouth of the Central Wescarp Valley.

Mists rose on the river to the height of about eight feet. Desa climbed the ropes and saw it was possible to see the river again. Vyinga's upper body was out of the mist, as were the masts and sails. The whole raft disturbed the mists which hung so closely over the river, like it was cloaked in a thin coat of down. It was all so ghostly in the starlight, lit luridly at intervals by the flashes of the retreating storm.

"Alan, come out and see this," she called to him, and he came down and wrapped around her on the ladder. That was good, it was ten degrees colder already.

"Woah! it's so weird," he said.

"Isn't it. And we haven't even been drinking."

"I know. And look how it looks like Vyinga is just driving thru the mist causing it all, and we're just watching it in a movie."

"Let's go up but put the tent up for awhile. It could use it in there, as damp as it's been this week. Hand me down Luray's night wrap before you do that."

She tossed the dry wrap down to Luray who was now glad to put it on, the temperature was getting to closer to what one would expect on a Nightday in mid winter. They went up and opened the nest. The air, having just been cleansed, showed the stars the best it had since they'd left Yoonbarla. Thru the next couple hours the mist would evaporate ever closer to the river and the storm would subside to a distant rumble and fluffy twinkle far up the valley.

Since they were sitting up for awhile longer, Desa thought

it would be a good time to learn more about Alan's trip. She was still trying to actually believe it and finding more details helped if they fit together. So she picked up the thread of their last conversation about it when he had told her about all they were able to learn from above with sensors and cameras.

"Why did that starship actually send you down here to observe us? If their remote sensors are so good, why couldn't they just observe everything from up there?"

"They needed to have someone ask questions, no one was talking about what they wanted to know."

"What did they want to know?"

"Those questions I asked you the first day, how humans got here, why you're all the same age, what kind of government you had and all those."

"Why did they have to sneak someone in from the wilds like that? Why wouldn't they just go to an obvious center of learning and ask?"

"I told you about how they wanted to remain secret didn't I?" Alan said, "Besides that, they have no idea how to detect a center of learning."

"Just get to the center of town and ask someone."

"Until you told me otherwise, we thought the suburbs were the central cities. Earth's civilization would never imagine that the most humans live in the deepest concentrations of jungle."

"The Kassikan is not like that, the Great Pyramid is out in the mid-open and all crystal to the sky except for some plants

on the balconies. If you have sensors anywhere near that good you can't miss that."

"I personally didn't notice, the system would have automatically cataloged a pyramid as a ruin, especially if it's in the center of a jungle and covered with plantings. No human would have been notified. I had no notion what the Yakhhan was until I'd been down here a week and a half and you told me about it. We thought the concentration of jungle was causing the lake."

"It is causing the lake." She didn't think their remote sensors were very good if they couldn't detect an urban complex of a hundred million, but as he said, they weren't looking for the right things. "So anyway," she told him, "if they want to study the planet from a scientific standpoint they should probably start at Kassidor Kassikan in Kassidor Yakhhan. Go enroll in whatever they want to learn about. They've got course lists chiseled on polished stone tablets in the upper plaza. They'd learn a lot more than having you out here sending up a few messages now and then."

"They have all the political and secrecy problems with that which I've already told you about. You have to remember, those issues are more important to them than learning, but they have some physical problems with it also."

"What kind of physical problems?"

"It sounds like you have to have a body to go to this university. You have to listen to classes with your ears, read textbooks with your eyes."

"Anyone who learns does, how can we learn but thru our senses?"

"They have very different senses."

"How can that be, I thought you are human like me?"

"I am, and they were."

"What are you talking about? You're making about as much sense as you did the day I found your pocket prophet."

"Let me explain from the beginning, this is something very important about our expedition and my relationship with it that I really hope I can make you understand. You know about logic and you know the physiology of the human brain, you know it is logic conducted by nerve cells with a form of electrical charges, and you know it is moderated by chemicals and hormones."

"The word's you're using make some sense, you're talking about thoughts being made up of nerve impulses."

"Right," Alan said, "and those nerve impulses can be simulated with electricity, in electronic devices. Well those 'electronics' can exceed the human brain in information density."

"I have only your word to go on."

"Those electronic devices are what the other people of my expedition live in."

"Not in the starship?" she asked. She didn't understand at all what he was trying to get at.

"The ship, which is as long as all the streets in Yoonbarla strung end to end, has about as much volume of air inside it

as Knume's house, counting the store and still on the bottom floor. My room of that is about the size of yours."

"That is very small for the people you've told me about."

"But I am the only human flesh. There are some other small cages full of the animals you call bugs."

"Then who are you talking to thru that phone?"

"The only translation in your language is 'Angel'. The logic of their minds is not performed with nerve cells and hormones but with silicon representations of neurons with global constants representing hormone levels and digital memory representing nucleotide sequences. But they do not have a flesh body, they live entirely in an electronic universe, another dimension you might call it. They can hear only thru devices such as this," he pointed to his device, "see only thru cameras like I have in that phone."

If she was understanding him, she didn't want to, he seemed to be saying that all the other people on his starship were fake, some kind of recording. "You're being a little too abstract here."

"I'm actually not. You think it's abstract because of what it actually is, but it actually is that."

"Alan, you sound like you've just come home from the logging party after taking something that was wrapped in cellophane."

"They are not flesh."

"I heard one talking thru that pocket prophet. You told me it was the person of your crew assigned to punish

disobedience or some woo-woolike that."

"But that person has no flesh."

"That person can take a bale of thesh in each hand and walk a thin gangway and up three flights of stairs."

"That person's flesh has been dead for at least half a century."

Then what was he talking to? She didn't like the way this was going. "Are you trying to tell me you were talking to ghosts? Dead people? Some kind of recording of people?"

"Angels. As they view it, they have died and gone to Heaven and are living in the afterlife in silicon on that starship."

It was bad enough that she had to go along with his starship story even though she was pretty convinced that all he had wrong with him was a bad trip on RNAcid and that eldritch device someone had found. A starship she could understand, they were common enough in fiction and some unsubstantiated reports said they actually existed back in the Energy Age. Now he was trying to tell her the starship was inhabited by ghosts instead of people, a haunted ghost-ship? She wouldn't have any of that. All her life she had become more and more sure that all the tales of the supernatural were just that, tall tales. No one had ever come up with any convincing evidence, nothing that couldn't be explained as drafty chimneys or electrical storms.

"Who gave you the drugs that could get you to imagine this? Are you having a flashback or did you take something

new?"

"If it's drugs it's all part of the same trip, because that's what the crew that piloted that starship from YingolNeerie are, Angels or ghosts, use whichever word you are more comfortable with. Technically produced spirits, every one of them. They had my frozen zygote with them, but they are all Angels."

"So are they supernatural or are you trying to tell me this fits within the bounds of reality?"

"No they are not supernatural, they are simulated humans, as our audio is simulated acoustic energy represented by electrical energy. Whatever they are, they are real. I studied how it's all done, the circuit designs to the lowest hardware level. You need to remember about that silicon logic. I told you about it the day you found the phone."

"I remember all that. I remember it has fantastic audio applications."

"And in business, when connected to world wide communications with that suntower thing, and in many, many other things. Earth's industry pursued this technology to the point where the devices had more thinking power than a human brain, then to the point where they could simulate a brain."

"That sounds a little scary actually."

"It is very scary actually, but it is done and the civilization of YingolNeerie is now dominated by these Angels except in Brazil and a few small regions around it. It had been possible

for quite a few years before this expedition left. It gave the human mind a way to sail to the stars. They don't understand the human mind, but if they copy the brain at a fine enough level of detail, the interaction you get with that mind is indistinguishable from the living mind over a communication channel."

Alan went on while Desa kept quiet as she tried not to be too rude in her disbelief. "Then this fringe religious cult bought a satellite broadcast company and began copying all their deceased into simulation. When the Christial Church began letting them call their living relatives, it became an important phenomenon. The simulated minds won a few court battles to regain control of their assets, and the rest is history."

"I have no idea what court battles and assets are, but I still don't think it could work."

"Well you've heard it."

"What?"

"When you heard the voice from that phone, the one that can carry a bale of thesh in each hand, you were hearing the voice of a logic program, running on electronic logic, copied from a former human being. That program of electronic data and signals that goes by the name Colonel Glayet Samrova, made that voice. These masses of data bases and programs are what my Church calls Angels. Their flesh is simulated, and the remainder of the known universe is simulated by generations and generations of programming which has been turned into logic."

"She thinks she's still alive," Desa said, talking about the voice she had heard those five weeks ago.

"They all think they are. They have all their memories from when they were flesh. Angels think they are living in an environment like we are, they see, hear, smell, feel, at least so they all say."

"If I believed you I would have to get grossed out. You've been talking to dead people? That thing talks to the artificial ghosts of your parents, and not your parents themselves?"

"Actually I have no idea who my parents were. Sperm and egg from the church were united in a test tube. Any viable zygotes were frozen and numbered. I never met my parents, they were already dead when I was conceived. They didn't even meet til their flesh was dead. Alfred and Victoria McCready raised me by animating androids that looked like humans and fooled me til I was sixteen, that's about two and a half decades."

"How can you image anything so outrageous?"

"Because I'm not imaging it in the slightest, I'm remembering it."

"Yeah, that's right, that is how RNAcid works."

"But to me it's very real."

"What could be real about getting raised in a jar in outer space by ghosts that live frozen into silicon crystals with electricity?" Desa asked him.

"I think you know that the essence of you is your mind and not your body."

"I think my mind is the essence of my body and 'me' is all of the above."

"Well they have no flesh at all. They are inside silicon crystals in the cold of space without air, water or light. They act and sound like they're still alive. I've never been there myself and I'm in no hurry to become one, that's why I left that expedition."

"I like the planet in your trip even less now that you think it populates it's starships with ghosts. But since it's just an RNAcid trip and not something you imagined yourself, I'm going to try real hard to not let it gross me out to the point where I won't want the one of you YingolNeerians that does have flesh."

"You're the one who asked why they didn't come down and enroll in a university."

"I'm sorry I asked such a foolish question. It was better when I didn't know, but you did try to steer the conversation into telling me this."

"It's something I think you need to know," Alan said.

"I wish I didn't. I wish this wasn't part of your trip."

"You are repelled by this."

"Ghosts, ghouls, voices from the dead, those aren't fun things for me." She shuddered at the thought. She wondered what kind of person would have that much skill with RNAcid and use it on such a message.

"I am none of that, I am a flesh and blood mortal cub."

"Then let me ask you something else, like why don't you

come lie down over here."

She wanted to know if she would still be able to respond to him, wanted some reassurance that he was really flesh and wanted to take their minds off of such a thing. It wasn't that easy and that encounter was the least satisfying sex on the trip so far.

Fendeveermon Vikhone

On the river you can tell when you're approaching Lastriss. The whole fourth week the population had been getting denser. There's at least twenty five miles, and along the rivers, over fifty miles, of plots around Lastriss. Not much compared to the three to five hundred mile radius surrounding Zhindu and the six hundred million people living off that land, but still many millions. There are at least one million urban people in Lastriss, it's the main center of trade for central Wescarp, even though it's two weeks out on the flat the way these rivers wind.

Lastriss is much bigger than Hazorpean and is still the largest city by far that Desa has seen in the Zhindu basin, at least one eighth as large as Talthaic. It sits where the Lita joins the Lhar, the actual center is on the North side of the combined river, but an active waterfront exists on all shores of the three rivers and the two main islands in the river junction. As one comes into the harbor from the upper Lhar,

the city is framed in the opening. Lastriss has about two miles of crystal-framed structures along the docks and a fifty story wall of leafy balconies now lit by the reddening, westering Kortrax. Twenty story residential canopies line the beaches for miles along all the rivers, and more high-rise clumps can be found on the best beaches or kayak routes for several miles around. The plots within a day's paddle of the city center are a maze of canals, most of them only about six feet wide. You might want to bring a weedhook and snips in lightly settled neighborhoods.

This was Desa's third arrival in this city and it seemed a little familiar. She had never seen it's face lit so beautifully by the sunset, but she could imagine what it was like sitting on one of those balconies for the evening. The ends of the mountain ranges were silhouetted in the bottom of the Sun's globe right now, she could turn around and see that from here. The air was light enough today that the image of Kortrax was crisp enough to see the filigrees of his bands. It would be pleasant up there, so far above the harbor it would look like a movie far below.

Vyinga was planning on stopping here for awhile. She would be making what deals she could to fill the ship, and wanted most of it to be going at least as far as Shempala, not to the next five bump-n'-rolls downstream. She'd also kicked the steersmen out of her nest. Nothing about their steering, strictly personal. Even if they both stayed on, Alan, Desa and

Luray were the only winchers aboard, so they had to fill out the crew. Vatreel wasn't leaving til he filled his nest with some more hot box bound downriver, so they might be here a week or more.

There was no way to reserve a dock for any certain time, they sailed along looking for an open berth anywhere near where the cargoes they'd picked up along the way were going. None of the thesh bales were bound here. The real *serious* loading of big thesh and vedn ships bound for Zhindu was done here. Vyinga was carrying a more upland variety for people who could taste the richer soil of the mountain valley and had the means to pay for it.

They were shoo'd off the dock as soon as they had unloaded a few bales and had to find an anchorage well uptown in a backwater of the Lita. Vatreel and the two woman who had shared his nest on the ride from Hazorpean decided they needed to say a few more goodbyes, and would spend Dusksleep on KangDarceen. Luray and Tuida also decided to remain aboard for a longer goodbye. Desa could understand that sentiment.

The ship's kayak was a nice four man, but it still took four trips to get everyone ashore. It was a short streetcar ride into town and there was just enough light to show Alan the tour. Well Alan didn't have a clue about streetcars, even though he saw a couple go by him in Hazorpean. He thought they would stop to let you get on. She had to show him how to run a couple steps and hop on. He wound up running til he panted

before he was comfortable making a grab and then he swung around and landed on top of her. Not too many people laughed very loud.

Desa was as much on tour as Alan, she had never been on this route. The streetcar ran right above the docks where the shore had docks, and on a wide street just inland of the beach apartments where the shore had beaches.

Vyinga had an iron but had to climb to the driver for change, a couple guys had some fun with that. Alan thought there should be a central aisle in the streetcar with rows of seats facing forward. People had found you use the least material and provide the most seats and easiest entry with back-to-back benches facing outward with a grab bar every two seats. There's a nice deep baggage shelf under your seat, and your footrest is the landing board. Lastriss streetcars appear to be made in the same factories as those in Zhindu, she knew that from magazine pictures. They differ only in style from those of the Dos or Yakhan basins. They tend to be lower here because most of the urban streetcars in downtown Zhindu are indoors.

They had about a three mile ride around an arm of the harbor holding lots of fishing boats, yachts and houseboats. These keda's stepped right along at the pace of a good jog and they got quite a tour. They saw all the stately old homes that lined the outside shore of the harbor. These were mostly the successful fishing captains' land homes according to Vyinga. They were as wide as a boat slip and four stories of cut stone.

The front porch was on the second floor, (third or fourth on the water side) and there were plenty of people out, a large group of pubescent girls were grouped around one house as the sunset started to turn purple.

At the end of the harbor where they crossed to the land side, they went inland almost a mile to a wide commercial street called Great Lita Road. This was the route Desa had last taken into Lastriss. This road has four rows of trees, wide, wide sidewalks hung with awnings, and it stretches til out of sight. On the harbor side were big stone factories making wood and ceramic products, on the land side four story ornate stone townhouse residences overgrown by a few more stories of grown housing on their roofs. There were smaller ones down the side streets til you reached plots, over a mile back from the water. The road runs arrow straight from here over the flat basin floor to the north end of downtown.

Alan was amazed enough already. He didn't think any city in the world would be as big as Great Lita Road. The road ends at a big plaza on the edge of downtown called Kivara Shig, the low side of this plaza has only six stories of stone or ceramic, the top branches of the other side are thirty stories above it. You have to go under streets to get into this circle on all sides. Alan had never seen cities with multiple levels of streets before, in the YingolNeerie trip they didn't have them. Lastriss has about three grids, the ground, about the third or fourth and more or less the tenth to fourteenth floors have networks of streets. There's some upper level footpaths

passing between the towers up to the twentieth right along the main waterfront that he could plainly see from out on the street before they got deep in the city.

This plaza is a big roundabout. Streetcar lines converge here from all over the northwest corner of the city and others converge from all over the central area. But they all got off here. The center of the plaza was full of people looking for streetcars headed their way. It was very late in Afternoonday now, more like Duskmeal, but there were plenty of great torches on tall, twisted larorlie pillars to light the way.

Lastriss has a khume. It's only a mile and a half long and hardly ever more than three stories high, with stairs connecting to both fourth and ground floors of the outdoor streets. It's spacious, brightly lit with gas lamps, rather new, and a little raucous. It's not the upscale shopping district, but there's plenty of food and entertainment. The architecture is so-so modern Dwarf-revival but certainly not so lofty. As khumes go it's just one small new one in Zhlindu or the Yakhan, but since there are none in the Dos basin, it's the only one she's seen in person in the 55th century.

Alan was beside himself in seven places when he got in there. "This is more than I was expecting to see in Zhlindu," he said, "This mall goes on forever."

"No, not even another mile, we're almost halfway," Vyinga said.

"This ain't the desert any more," Nlara told him, "But it

ain't Zhindu. There's three tape-reseller khumes coming off the southeast slope of Rankor Hill toward the Karthuum Valley that are bigger than this."

"There's eight hundred miles of retail khume in downtown Zhindu," Vyinga added.

"How do all these people eat?" he asked, "It can't be possible to bring in enough food by ships?"

"It goes out of here by ships. Most gets brought in by farmer's wagons." Vyinga told him. "Most of the people here partying are farmers spending the money from selling this year's crop down at these docks."

"What doesn't get eaten here gets sold down-river," Nlara added.

"It just doesn't seem possible."

"Now just think it thru. How long would it take your family to use up a bale of thesh? My whole crew don't use but one on the whole year-long trip down. I don't know about Lastriss but in Zhindu there's over a thousand ships like mine unloading in each harbor, each shift."

That didn't go anywhere with him. The numbers obviously worked out or the natives of Lastriss wouldn't be well fed enough to be able to wander around looking over cooks' menus before deciding where to sit. Of course these weren't all natives, Lastriss was to central Wescarp what Zhindu was to the basin.

Desa knew the place where Nlara and Vyinga turned in; as if by instinct. A court off the third level of the khume is called

Jillaroo Cooks Court. It has become more than a cook's court now, it is where the top aquatic food chefs compete at large elaborate counters with flaring flames and loud sizzling. They are at one end of Jillaroo court, the upper end of the balcony of one of the city's larger halls is the other. The music could be heard over the cooking. The sailor's meeting place fills the court itself.

This is a good place to come if you like seafood sear and broil and want to be pretty confident it will be good. The prices aren't cheap but aren't that bad either and Alan was finally able to get change of a copper. This would be food that would keep them awhile, a cup would be required and hopefully a table at the edge of the hall. She told the others to just get her something and took Nlara's cup. In all her centuries in this basin Vyinga had never picked up the habit of always having a cup with her and always shared Nlara's.

Green Monster is everywhere in Lastriss, even in kegs, and that's what she filled them with. Their big still here was their only one in Wescarp, barrels went out on river boats and canal barges from here. And yes, a table right at the edge so they could sit and look over the back row and see down to the stage. From here the volume was loud enough that it was possible to enjoy the song, but it wouldn't prevent them speaking to each other.

Alan was fascinated by the fact that the public space of the courtyard was a place where travelers met to partner up for a trip. They sat in areas marked by destination signs over a

section of tables. Desa was glad that the balcony rail was for Zhindu, otherwise Vyinga and Nlara wouldn't sit there. Desa would, but then might as well go inside.

"I thought you went down to the ship to sign up for a mast?" Alan asked once they were nearly done eating some fabulous chileeth cakes on a bed of spice-fried chuss.

"But if you're traveling alone you might want to chose someone to travel with and not be just thrown into a nest with someone incompatible."

"People are very frank about what they want," Alan admitted.

He knew that from the conversations they could hear. It was pretty noisy in here and people had to speak loud enough so he could hear all about what most people wanted in a traveling companion. Most wanted someone that would do their share of the work and would be sexually compatible. "You'll have a much better time if you are honest with someone than if you try to fool them. You'll be stuck in a nest with them and find they don't want your company and you'll have an unpleasant journey."

"What if you want to journey without having sex?"

"There are those. They wouldn't be coming into what's mainly an entertainment area with a nautical theme to find someone to travel with. They could explain their problem to the captain and probably wind up slinging a hammock somewhere, or just signing up with the captain and sharing a

nest for an uncomfortable journey with some other single traveler of the same sex."

Soon people were coming by and talking to Vyinga and Nlara. There were still those who asked Alan and Desa if they would like to sleep-shift a nest, some others who thought Alan might be with Vyinga. Alan actually took it well. Desa just kept saying she'd already picked someone and was just hanging with her friends while they decided, Alan just kept saying he was the lucky guy Desa picked.

Vyinga decided she would go talk to one of the guys that was sitting at another table. Nlara was left flirting with a bunch of guys and got two different guys to pay for trips to try-out rooms. One of the guys obviously passed the test because she brought him back to sit with them and joke over a cup.

Desa wished she could get a little more into the music, there are lots of real bands in Lastriss, thirty to fifty active at any one time, and she never saw more than a few of them when she was here, this could be the only one she would see this time. It was nobody she knew, she certainly didn't have this recording. They were interestingly high on the beat aspect of their music. They pranced and stepped high on the stage and invited a few juggy ladies from the front rows to bounce around on stage with them. Their music got into your loins. If Alan wasn't so naïve...

As Nlara got deeper into her conversation with Gardir, Desa and Alan just watched the show. Vyinga brought the guy

she was talking with back to their table.

"Well crew, this is Kolot, he'll be sharing my nest from here to Shempala."

"Shempala?" Nlara said, "Why were you sitting in the Zhindu section?"

"I thought I was over the line, I guess I didn't count tables right?"

"Never mind, I didn't even think about counting tables. I picked him before that technicality even came up. Shempala it is. I think I'd rather sail with you to Shempala than with all the others I've met tonight to Zhindu and back combined. He's been to a grandchildren's reunion out East Lita Road a couple weeks. He's going home to Shempala. He's fuzzy and comfortable and I think it's going to be so relaxing having him share my nest."

"I think I'm going to bring Gardir here. [Sorry, but the rhyme only exists in English, it was that or an incorrect translation.] He'll get along well on mast two. He knows Kalaz, knows where he'll be tonight if he's in town at all."

"Lets fill these cups again and go on down in the hall for awhile. We can get acquainted in the balcony," Vyinga suggested.

"Alan and Desa are already acquainted," Nlara pointed out.

"I've been trying to think of a way to sneak down into the balcony for the music," Desa said, "Alan's acquainted enough with me that he won't feel threatened down there."

"Has he been thru some kind of trauma?" Kolot asked after hearing that he could feel threatened.

Desa answered, "He O.D.'d on some bad RN Acid about being raised by a fundamentalist cult from Yingol Neerie." She was trying to forget that it was a fundamentalist cult of electric ghosts from Yingol Neerie. She remembered Marcue warning her to be careful, then she remembered the real psychic-worshiper, Alore, telling her that the first time she saw Alan.

"Oh that's too bad," Kolot was politely sympathetic.

"Desa's bringing me back to reality, her and this river trip."

"Yeah, sailing will cleanse a man's soul," Kolot said. "As will this Green Monster they brew around here."

Desa knew that already. With just the two cups between them it was a matter of how you raced your partner to the bottom of that cup. She was letting Alan set the pace, Nlara was filling on top of the third of a cup they had not consumed. Desa might have to find her way around Lastriss later this Dusksleep and didn't know it that well.

Mostly the couples paid attention to each other and enjoyed the show. This wasn't the 'Bit, but it wasn't Lappranile either and this was a relatively erotic act. The loosest she could get Alan was to secretly use his hands under her clothing.

Nlara and Gardir certainly weren't at all like Alan. Gardir said this music made him want to fuck and no sooner did they

find a position in the seating than Nlara was riding him like a thonga roper, and he was digging into her tits like a thonga rider. Alan's hands inside her night robe were actually more exciting, she was glad Nlara was distracting the attention. So was Vyinga for that matter, but nowhere near as much as Nlara.

Nlara and Gardir didn't stay for the remainder of the show. Once they'd caught their breath from their orgasms, she told them that Gardir was taking her to the party where he thought Kalaz and Dencah could be found. After that, it was not as raunchy here as it was at Myimpaden during the logging party. Vyinga and Kolot did stay for the whole show. They were both appreciative of music. They knew many of the words that describe music, and some of what they meant.

It ended very abruptly. The singer said something like 'that's all the songs we know' and the stage went dark. Alan expected the lights here in the hall would be turned up when the show ended.

"Fat chance," Desa said. "We're lucky they don't turn these off too, now that the show's over, and let us use our own torches to get out. The only reason they don't is they're afraid someone will catch their place on fire. They'll turn them off in a short while I assure you."

"You going to stay in town or get back to the ship?" Vyinga asked her.

"I'd just as soon go back, the Lastriss tourist barracks really don't appeal to me." Lastriss had a lot of tree towers

where you could find a cheap hammock or pad WAY up the spiral stairs. There were long lines in the dirty bathrooms in the morning and hangovers were the common mood. There was no line for the can on the boat or for clean water in the kitchen. "There won't be any more major music at this hour and I'm too beat to enjoy it if there was."

"Lets see if we can hire a gondolier on the waterfront," Vyinga said, "I'd rather that ride than the streetcar."

"Are you buying?" Desa asked.

"I wouldn't invite you otherwise."

It was across the bottom of the khume, down many flights of steps and along a narrow crooked street she hadn't seen before, shaded with many built-on bridges. This reached a familiar plaza, from there it was thru the basements of the dockside towers down three more flights of steps to the waterfront.

Dusk was completely gone when they reached the docks, all horizons were dark and only Dusksleep remained. Gondola operators worked from the ends of the docks. Little more than a low-burnt candle lit the tiny ramp. Five ships were still loading from this dock, but there were few passengers bound for the ships in the harbor.

The guy was almost asleep. Determined to stay available til his candle died, he slumped in his cockpit, a spent bottle beside him on the dock, upright by the piling.

"You sure you're still operating?" Vyinga asked.

"Oh for sure," he said with a start. "A crew like you reaffirms my faith in lasting the candle out."

His shell was a heavy eight seater, but they saw he did have extra paddles and the floors looked like the bilge was dry.

"You look like you could use a rest while we paddle you out to the point off north beach, we'll let you bring it home and pack up."

"No, I can paddle you out, I like the exercise in the night air."

"So do we," Vyinga said, "we'll paddle together."

"I still need to get an iron for the trip, especially out to North Point."

"Oh I wasn't arguing over the price of the trip," Vyinga said. "I was apologizing for the lateness of the hour."

"You are most gracious."

Desa had not been in one of these since the Yakhan. In the Yakhan some were driven by motors and a ride on one was about an iron per person. The you-paddle's like this were less per person but probably more per boat. Here they got to paddle down the old inner harbor for almost a mile, lit only by the bow lanterns of ships at dock. To get thru behind the main pier and Lastriss Point there is a canal of stone blocks, covered by the streets and plazas above except in a few atriums. It was commercial sidewalks along the canal, dimly torchlit even in Dusksleep, though most of the stalls were empty. There is one point where it opens out into a pond

larger than the one in Yoonbarla, three different canals lead under ten floors of city out to the harbor, another goes back into the city and the ship canal. They paddled across to the north one and went under one of those echoing stone buildings, under a couple on a bridge still trying to decide if they would spend the sleep together.

Then they were out in North Harbor. Few ships were moving at this hour. There was a breeze like they wished for when they were on the Lhar. It's ripples lapped against the hull once they were out beyond the docks.

The sky was bright enough to see the ships, their lanterns were brighter than the stars that lit the water. The wall of the city was the dimmest twinkle, a lantern here and there, an occasional balcony with a sputtering candle. Mostly it was a looming leafy mound behind them as they made their way out across the harbor to KangDarceen.

The poor gondolier was so asleep again by the time they got out to the ship that Vyinga convinced him to take the sleep in nest six since it was now empty. Luray had now gone ashore with Tuida so Alan and Desa had the nest to themselves. Alan made up for his shyness at the concert, convincing her that he was no ghost.

Zawmathii Viyeen

Luray had gone ashore with Tuida, at the end of

Morningday she came back aboard with Tiytha. He was a beautiful full-blooded tundrite, pale and slender with a long shiny black ponytail and smooth shining ivory skin. His long mustache was shiny black also, but he was without beard by birth. He wasn't one to discuss cosmology with, but he was full of fun. He came to wake them for their second shift change out of Lastriss. Alan bounded right up, saying his bladder and belly called. Desa came awake more slowly and stretched. Tiytha reached over and caressed her chest, causing her to arch up into his hands.

"Now this is the right way to wake a girl up," she said.

"The pleasure's all mine," was his reply.

She sat up and he wrapped his arms around her. "Are you going to make me miss breakfast?" she asked.

"I wouldn't do that to you, but you are very lovely. It is such a pleasure to hold you."

"No doubt Luray has told you how I love this?" His hands were finding more of her skin.

"Luray talked mainly of your knowledge and musical talent when she talked of you. The only other thing she's said is how quick you were to accept her after her quarrel with your sister."

"Well I do love this, I'll be trapped here until you let go." She hoped that wasn't very soon, he was being very friendly.

He caressed awhile before answering, "In that case, I may not let go til we get to Shempala."

"I'll have to pee way before then," she told him, "in fact I

better go do that before I get your finger a whole lot wetter than I did already." She regretted how her bladder spoiled the moment.

It was cool, she wore her thick Nightday jersey. She thought she might just duck back up to the nest and have a little interlude, that quick pet had really put her in the mood for a nice long wake-me-up screw. But before she could do that Alan found her and brought her some sweet lon rolls and a cheek of big mouth ensal. Luray had finished her meal and was on her way to join Kiytha when Nlara called out a tack change. Luray and Alan got it while Desa started breakfast.

After tending the sail Alan came back and sat with her on one of the benches that served as the dining room, such as it was. There would be nothing to see at the rail for many hours. It was dark, even the stars were covered by a blanket of cloud. It had rained and thundered off and on thru Dusksleep and Nightday, it was still very damp.

"How can they see where we're going?" Alan asked.

"You can tell where the banks are," Desa said, "They must know there's no sandbars or weeds in this area. They have a gas lantern also, I imagine she's got that going."

When breakfast was finished they wandered up front to see what Nlara and Leera were doing. Nlara had the gas lantern out, but not lit at the time. The river was a slightly silver grey black between the dull black of the banks.

"Not exactly great visibility tonight is there?" Desa asked.

"I got Jebesh here," she patted the lantern, "If anything comes close enough to look at. I think I'm seeing some lights in the next village up ahead."

"Oh yeah," there were a couple tiny pinpricks of yellow light up ahead.

"Once the plarons start spawning we won't have this problem, they light up the whole river from Lastriss to Shempala and from Chezhervizhod til Imnotn."

Gardir came up with them, stood between Desa and Nlara and caressed both their hips. "You were remarking on the visibility?"

"Or lack of," Desa said.

"We'll be fine," Nlara said, "the river's well dredged along here."

"Where's the maps?" he asked.

"What maps we've got are up in Vyinga's nest, actually that box under the ladder. The ones we haven't marked up are pretty out of date. This is the simplest part of the river though. A couple weeks from now we get into some real knots with lots of sandbars, then we'll have to do some navigating. Along here you just have to steer between the banks and don't hit another ship."

"I don't see any others."

"There's two up ahead of us, once we swing by this village we should see their lights before they swing around the next bend. You should still be able to see the one passing upstream from the starboard corner."

They stayed there until the next tack change. The breeze was pretty brisk tonight for the basin floor, enough to actually put a little belly in the sail. There would be more frequent adjustments tonight because they were moving much faster, the speed of a brisk walk.

Alan sat beside her at the winch. He was cuddly and playing gently with her hair. "You are such a precious thing," he said, "I can't get over how much I love you."

She squeezed him with the arm around his waist. "Thank you; but I don't quite understand why?"

"No? after all you've done for me?"

"What have I done?"

"Turned me from a laboratory animal into a human. Taught me everything I know about life."

"I did my best."

"Whatever I am, I owe it to you. I hope you aren't disappointed in that?"

"May I be honest with you?"

"Yes" he said, but looked almost as nervous as he used to when they first met.

"I hadn't planned on taking on that much responsibility when I offered to teach you to read."

He looked hurt and paused before responding. "I can release you from your obligation," he said. "I made you promise to be my guide to Zhindu, but I think I can find my way now. If I had found my way to Lastriss, that was enough of a city."

"If you wanted to stay there you could have, but I would rather continue to Zhindu."

"Would you like me to get off this boat or just stop sharing the nest with you?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, waving her arms in futility. No doubt she had bumbled into one of his religious or fantasy problems again, all unknowing. She strove to maintain her composure.

"It sounds like I've been a burden to you."

"No, you really haven't. I was going to tell you how light the responsibility turned out to be." That was pretty much true, except for misunderstandings like this. "If I met you up at Jillaroo Plaza there's a good chance I would have picked you and if I had I would have been happy with my choice. You're an excellent traveling companion, you don't shirk your share of the work and you're an excellent and compatible sex partner."

"But you're not in love with me?"

She sighed, "You're so insecure about that," then continued normally. "You're so very young. You haven't had any sort of relationship with any other human being. What you're feeling for me isn't because of me, it's because I'm in a warm female body and I put up with your RNAcid problem. If you had walked into Yoonbarla and encountered Luray first and she offered to teach you to read, you'd be just as attached to her now."

"I doubt it."

"How do you know? You haven't even made love to her. You've shared a nest with her all these weeks, you're plainly attracted to her and she to you. Yet you haven't granted her the favor even once."

"But I'm with you." He said. By now he had let go of her and was just sitting beside her on the rail, just far enough away that there was no point of contact.

"You're moving away like you don't want to be with me," she said.

"I think you're trying to find a way to break up with me gently, without hurting my feelings too much."

"No, I'm trying to coax our relationship into a mature and normal one that I can feel comfortable in."

"What's wrong with our relationship?"

"What we were just talking about, the stifling, militant, fundamentalist, extremist, monogamy."

"So you don't want to wake up with someone every morning?"

"Oh I certainly do, I love that and I'm grateful for you because of it. Waking up in someone's arms makes me confident for the whole day."

"Then what needs to change?"

"We should share affection with other people now and then, there's nothing wrong with that."

"Let's say I could forget my parent's religion, what about diseases, doesn't it spread disease?"

"Pathogens can spread better thru sex than thru casual

contact, even better than drinking from the same cup. But some of the most popular genetic fixes on the market these past few centuries are those that let you catch immunity to diseases and other helpful things from your sex partners. In this society it's a good idea to have sex with a variety of locals when you move into an area so you can pick up immunity to local diseases."

"I don't have any of those fixes."

"I would imagine you've caught quite a few from me, but you'll do better having sex with more women directly."

"So I don't have to go buy anything?"

"Most immunities are contagious or they wouldn't do any good. All the basic aging repairs were made contagious in the early 42nd."

"Why would a company do that? What was the payback?"

"So society wouldn't collapse in a class war between the haves and the have-nots. Several basins had hostilities, including Lumpral, one of the major ones. There were some pretty mean feelings going around in the 35th and 40th that came to quite a head in the 41st."

"So just the fact that I've lived here will mean I won't grow old?"

"Oh I bet if you really were from YingolNeerie you'd have to go get something worked on at some point, but as ambitious as you are you'll never be one of the have-nots."

"So sex is healthy for you?" he asked.

"Yes. Not only is it good exercise and a way to connect

very intimately with a fellow human, but now that each individual is permanent, the slow exchange of genetic material via sex is the only way our species can continue to evolve and not become an evolutionary dead end."

"What if I wanted to remain totally who I am with no new genes in me at all?"

"You already missed that chance. You would've had to stay in that starship you think you came from."

He had no reply to that. He understood what she was telling him. He got lost in thought for awhile. Maybe that was as big a concept to him as the electric ghosts were to her. Maybe he was trying to understand the remainder of what she was telling him. Meanwhile there was sail to tend.

Eventually they came back to the rail. "Do you have any chance of remaining an individual on this planet?" he asked, "Other than remaining celibate?"

"From what you've told me we are more individual than in the civilization you came from. It sounds like everyone practices hard at being the biggest major fake they can be in order to compete for influence."

"That was one society. There are still billions of people in Africa that live off the land and sell a few vegetables the way people do here. There are still societies at YingolNeerie where everyone commutes to a career in an enclosed outdoor motorcar."

"You're telling me there are several different societies. What if a person in the motorcar society decides he'd rather

be a lumberjack or a lon picker?"

"He would drive the motorcar to the log picker or the lon barge and then he would drive that for a shift."

"What if he didn't want to operate machinery?"

"I know what you're really asking," Alan said, "And the answer is no, he would not be allowed to live outside the money economy, no one is allowed to do that in most nations, and certainly not where they still have outdoor motorcars."

That was almost as hard to comprehend as electric ghosts and she was afraid she would find something just as disturbing if she pursued it. "I think we have plenty of individuals of all types here."

"I haven't met a single high-status, can't-get-his-shiny-boots-soiled, pompous politico or mafioso."

"And you won't, they'll never appear on the public streets except in disguise."

"I've seen no nervous old ladies looking for a policeman to walk her past the adolescents loitering just outside the shopping district."

"No."

"What do adolescents do here?" Alan asked.

"They are all individuals and start to have a lot of the traits they'll have as adults. The two most important things in that particular phase of development are perfecting their strength and coordination and breaking in their newly-ripened sex organs."

"They don't perfect their strength and coordination with

violence?"

"Well, some sports are a little rough, and sports are popular with adolescents."

"Do people fight for sport?"

"Fight with what? A hakken perhaps? That would get pretty violent, but there are probably places where they do."

"No, with each other?"

"Human against human? Of course not," Desa said.

"What prevents them?"

"It's been a contagious Instinct since the time of Lbront-Nevn. You've already caught it I'm sure. You couldn't try to hurt me no matter how mad you get."

"I never would have. I love you just as much now as I did before you started trying to break up with me."

"I'm not breaking up with you! Unless you're trying to tell me that you have to be a monogamous fundamentalist or nothing."

"I'm sure you've known me long enough already to know I'm not strong enough to carry out that threat if I could find the backbone to threaten you with it at all. No, I will continue to welcome any and all attention you might care to toss my way. I will not tie you down and will try to hide any mannerisms that might make you think I was hurt."

"Oh please don't do that. Tease me about it if you want. Scream up and down the deck that I'm a filthy native slut and make me wash in your presence before you'll touch me again, but don't come trundling out with the guilt."

"But I can't overcome my upbringing or drug dream or whatever it is. In my culture staying exclusively with one woman is the deepest expression of love. Please allow me to express that level of love for you. Please don't make me lie about my feelings and pretend I feel less."

There was another change, just a small adjustment to the winch they were at. These would come until they rounded the next bend.

"That behavior is not the most sincere expression of love in this society. Having a healthy variety and still coming home to the same special friend is a much more sincere expression of love."

"And is that what you want?" he asked.

"I don't think I ever kept that a secret, I've crowed quite publicly about it for the last decade I lived in Yoonbarla."

"One guy to come home to?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And how many seconds ago were you telling me you couldn't be stifled in a fundamentalist extremist relationship?"

"I remember that."

"And you aren't contradicting yourself?"

"For one thing, I'm already 'coming home to' Tiytha, I'm sharing a bed with him, just not having any more sex than a little petting," Alan flinched at that admission. "Another thing I might point out is that a person might 'come home to' one particular person, but might 'go out with' many different people."

The new concept candle flickered to life behind his eyes. Not that he welcomed it as a revelation, she was sure of that, but he at last understood the real meaning of what she was saying.

"How common is that type of relationship?" he asked.

"Most people you've met are in that type of relationship. About two thirds of this basin's population I think."

"What percentage of the population is exclusively monogamous?"

"It goes by basin. In the Dos basin it might be one percent but over here, not a tenth of that. It's way less than that around the lake also. I think over by Lumpral it's over well over one percent. But the Lumpral basin is the great sink of religious extremism."

"What other types of relationships are there?"

"Some live by themselves and go out with many. That's the common Yoonbarla way that I'm unhappy with. Some live with many, I've done that too, that's more common in Dos and even the lake basin."

"What is your favorite?"

"Live as a partner with one and go out with a few now and then."

"And you still want me to be the one you live with?"

"Yeah? I've been happy enough with that on this trip. You are the one who is looking for something hidden in my words. I think anyone who's known me for any length of time knows I couldn't hide a bug in a forest of my words."

"You are right," Alan said, "You have always been very honest with me. How long will we come home to each other?"

"My first inclination is to say as long as you can stand it. But I don't feel quite that way. I can be patient, but I don't know if I can be infinitely patient about your desert religion. If it wasn't for that I'll probably be OK to wait out your infatuation."

"Why do you need any more patience with me, I already told you I give you my permission to have sex with as many people as you want. This is your culture and I can't expect to take you out of it and I will try very hard not to complain about it. I told you that and I told you I love you just as much in spite of the culture you're from."

"But you didn't tell me you will participate in my society also."

"I am; thru you."

"You can't participate in society only thru me," she told him. "You must interact with others also."

"I have other friends, at least I thought I did. Is everybody just being nice to me because they think I'm your patient or something?"

She couldn't help laughing over that, "Good grief no. Life is just as simple as it looks. The closest thing we've seen to a secret plot since we got on this boat is when the rumor got out that Vyinga was chasing her steersmen out of her nest."

"I'm not the secret laughingstock?"

"No, just the laughing you've heard about your starship tale and that laughing hasn't been all that secret. You can't expect everyone to take that seriously, not even all sci-fi fans."

"So are these people real friends?"

"As real as such a short time will allow. The people are certainly real. Even the ones who laugh at the YingolNeerie trip are still your friends."

They were much busier than average at the winch thru that whole shift. They didn't say much more of note, but he did come back over to her and cuddle her again when there was time. He asked who she would do and when. She knew Tiytha would be one, his exotic looks were enough to get her going, but she didn't want to tell Alan right now, she worried how he would react, if he would be jealous and what form his jealousy would take. Should she tell Alan it was none of his business who she had sex with? That was the truth wasn't it? Was Alan a casual friend? An adopted son? He was something more than the first but less than the second, not a complete partner in her life. A real partner wouldn't be someone so dependent and wouldn't be someone whose sensitivities she had to worry about so much. In spite of all their conversation, she didn't feel like things had really been 'settled'. She was free to seek all she wanted, come back to him whenever she felt like it. That left her feeling like she was treating him like an old sandal, just good enough for

around the house.

Thlollala Vistee

Desa and Luray were both washing their clothes out, it was now actually getting close to Luray's shift, but, like many, not a very busy one so there was plenty of time for other business.

"So what's your opinion of Tiytha?" Luray asked.

"He's so exotic he's cute."

"You like him?"

"Yeah, as a male for sure. You see how we get along. I like how cuddly he is. I can't say we've become intellectually close, but he's a little standoffish intellectually."

"Oh he's not intellectual and he's just traveling with me. He warned me right at the outset that there's very little chance he'll want to look me up once we get off the boat."

"So why care what I think of him?"

"He asked about you," Luray said.

"Asked what?"

"If I'd mind, and if I though you'd go for it."

"Would you?" Desa asked.

"Object? Of course not. If this trip is just casual fun, why not go ahead and have some?"

"I would certainly go for it if I didn't feel so guilty about Alan."

"Tiytha told me about how you two got to petting one day. He thought you actually wanted to finish that."

"You're right," Desa said, "I probably would have if I didn't have to pee. And yeah, if it wasn't for Alan's problem. But I really enjoyed that episode anyway."

"You could have enjoyed a lot more than that."

"I regret that you're probably right."

"So don't be so inhibited," Luray said.

Desa didn't respond right away. She stopped and noticed who was saying what to whom. She didn't think anyone in Yoonbarla would have ever thought they would ever hear Luray telling Desa she had to be more sexually adventurous. In spite of her conversation a week and a half ago, she was still monogamous with Alan. There had been no one else but that little romp in the vines with Nobron at the logging party since she and Alan had first joined. The only other person Alan had ever had sex with was Kaha, also at the logging party. That Nightday had also been his first serious encounter with yaag also, so he wasn't himself at the time.

It was about time they came up for a little air, acted a little more normal and didn't shut the remainder of humanity out of their sex lives. 'In normal life this would be a nice cozy nest.' She thought. 'We all like each other, we all get along warmly and good. There's no reason Alan shouldn't play too.'

"Have you any interest in Alan?" Desa asked Luray when she finally spoke. She was already relatively sure of the answer, but wanted to get it verbalized in the open.

"Why certainly, I see how good you're feeling lately so I think I would enjoy him also. I have indicated my willingness

to him when we've been in the nest together. His flesh wanted to respond but his soul is trapped. I've lived in societies as repressive as the one in his bummer," Luray told her. "I know what he's going thru."

"We could talk Alan into it, I know he's attracted to you. He just needs me to tell him he's being rude to refuse you."

"I don't think I want someone who's ordered to have sex with me."

"It's his religion, it's all whacko about sex."

"Must be like something out of the troubled times." Luray said.

"I guess so, I wasn't there myself."

"I ran into someone from one of those religions back then," Luray said. "I have to tell you, Alan is adapting a lot better to our society than that guy did to mine. He couldn't even adapt to monogamy."

"You're from back then?" Desa knew Luray was old, but the troubled times ended over a century before Knume was born.

"Oh yeah; I'm ancient. I can't remember my past, but I wrote parts of it down and can remember it that way. My oldest books have disintegrated, some I've copied over. The oldest surviving ones are from the end of the 41st century, but I've copied over some that go back four centuries farther than that."

"I always thought you were almost as old as Knume."

"Oh I'm as old as he is in that I'm much older than I can

remember, but I think he was born in the 41st?"

"The arithmetic works out to that," Desa said. When Luray didn't say anything more Desa asked, "So how did that incident work out?"

"My encounter with someone from a fundamentalist culture?"

"Yeah."

"It's a long sad story, I just wanted to congratulate Alan on doing better."

"I don't think he's adapting much worse than he would if he just came from a fundamentalist desert background. The YingolNeerie trip messed him up some, but I hope it's not so bad he'll never recover."

"Yeah, he'll recover. By the time he's six decades it'll be just another incident in his youth."

Desa hung her wardrobe over the rail. It was hot but not as humid this Afternoonday, her sheer skirt would dry soon. She could do without it til then, even in Dos she'd never been uncomfortable nude. She was actually glad it was off when Tiytha came by and looked her over approvingly. She was delighted to know he had an interest in her and put her arm out to indicate that he should lean close to her on the rail. In the four days since she'd talked with Alan there hadn't been a good opportunity to continue what they started back in week Zawmathii and her desire had only grown since then in spite of her worry about Alan. He flattered her a little about the richness of her pubic curls and gave her a quick tingle by

running the backs of his fingers over them.

"She undoubtedly told you how I love that," Desa told him while turning towards him and putting her arm around his shoulders so her chest pressed against him.

"No one needs to tell me how sweet this fluff is, I could see that when Luray first brought me to this nest."

"We were just talking about a four way," Luray said.

"I asked her about you," Tiytha told Desa.

"The problem is Alan," Luray told him.

"He'd do Luray in private," Desa told them, "At least I think we can talk him into that, but I don't think he'd be up for a rollicking four way."

"That's fine," Tiytha agreed. "I think you're a sweet lady and I'd be glad and proud to join with you, if ever, and whenever you feel is right."

He was now leaning on the rail facing her with his hand caressing her side, delighting her with the gentle sweep of his hand over the smooth curve of her naked waist and hip. They were in plenty of contact and it was pleasantly stirring her hormones. Desa rubbed on his side and arm. He slowly stroked a hand up her side and then to her chest and took her, caressing and tempting her nipples to rise to their full extent with his fingers.

"Actually, how about right now," she nibbled in his ear, "No one but Alan has been within me since we left Yoonbarla."

"That's not healthy," he said while wrapping his other arm

around her and caressing her bottom.

"It hasn't bothered me that bad til just now," she told him.

She ran a hand down from his chest and found he was already responding. "I think now is a thrilling time," he whispered to her lips just before he covered them with his.

"Where is Alan now?" she asked, when she could use her lips for speech again, while stroking him to a size that would fill her nicely.

"He's up at the bow," Tiytha said, "I saw him when I came down." Meanwhile the hand that was in front of her was making a tour that went from across each breast and down her side to her hips, across her curls then around the other hip to her bottom.

"You can't keep something like this a secret in this nest," Luray told her.

"I'll tell him, and I'll tell him it was my decision and will be again, but I don't want to take the time it would take to do that now."

"I'll not deliberately tell him if you ask me not to, but I'll answer him honestly if he asks," Tiytha said.

"Of course, but I need to have a long talk with him, there will be a proper time to tell him, but you have me quivering now." His hand had slid between her thighs, his thumb brushed her lips. They parted here and now and she felt very different from Nlara about letting her pink out in public.

"I'll go keep Alan distracted," Luray said as she left.

"He'll still see us climb up to the nest," Desa said.

"I don't know why that worries you so? If he's that stifling you should move on. He seems very sweet on you, but one cannot live on candy alone."

"It's his acid trip, that and the cult his parents were in. I'm just trying to give him time to come off it gently."

Tiytha had already removed his clout and Desa was impressed by the beauty of his member. It was creamy white like his skin, long and smooth and sturdy, curving ever so slightly up at her. Vatreel's friends from mast three were at the port rail and were thinking they might get to watch Desa and Tiytha do it on the rail. She might have in days past when her lust burned like this, but those girls were such rowdies they'd get to hooting and Alan would hear it.

Instead they ducked between the rows of cargo that now covered almost the whole deck. A pile of leshin bales was irregular, there was a short one they could climb on out of the aisle so anybody would have to come down this aisle or climb up to their nest to see them. His hands on her and the Afternoonday sun had already given her all the heat she needed. It must have been the length of time she had been with no one else, or maybe the fear that they had only a short time before Alan came to interfere, because while Tiytha was certainly attractive to her, she didn't think he was enough to get her this lusty in such a short time. He wasn't much slower to get ready himself and must have been saving a yearning for her for these four days also. Too soon her orgasm was forceful, deep and satisfying. It took only a few strokes more

for his.

She stayed astride him a few minutes afterward, keeping his with hers and caressing his face as she caught her breath. "Thanks so much," she told him, kissing a finger and putting it to his lips.

He brought her lips to his and kissed them tenderly. "Bring these needs to me any time," he breathed, "I'll sample all of you that you care to share."

"There'll be other times. I'm going to have a talk with him, I really mean that. If we could get him to understand, I'm sure we could have a really pleasant journey for the remainder of this river."

"I'm having a really pleasant journey anyway. Luray is most compatible also, and a very intelligent woman."

"I've learned that lately. We both were from Yoonbarla village, but I didn't know her as well as I should have."

"She says she was drinking too much, that's why you weren't as close."

"She was that, but even so, we could have been much better friends. It's not like I don't tip a cup myself now and then."

She got up from him and made sure she didn't drip on the tarp covering the cargo. She felt like a fool peeking around the corner to see if Alan was watching before slipping into the water. The girls from third mast gave a nod as she went over the rail, indicating they knew of no sheelunge to warn them

of. Tiytha got in with her, hung with one hand to the rail and with the other, caressed her. The water was deep enough here that they hardly touched bottom. They hung together in their pleasure a little longer, then he got out, shook a little water off, put his clout back on, and strolled aft. Her thin skirt was already dry enough so she wrapped that around her and strolled forward to find Alan trying to convince Luray to tell of her adventures in the Troubled Times.

Thollola Kovar

Luray didn't finish her story that day. Desa's heart stopped when Tiytha came over to Luray and said 'your turn', and left them to tend the mast for awhile. Alan didn't even notice.

That left just the two of them at the port corner of the bow. She went over and cuddled to him. He turned and took her and treated her well with caresses for a couple minutes.

"We've gone thru most of Afternoonday haven't we?" She asked him rhetorically, since it was obvious that Kortrax was more than halfway down the sky. "Shall we lay down at all before Dusksleep?"

"We should at least lie down," he said. "When Tiytha and Luray are done with the nest."

Meanwhile she just held and was held, her body pleasantly warm from the holding, the caresses and the Afternoonday sun.

"I wonder if Luray will ever finish telling that story?"

Desa speculated.

"I'll listen to the rest of it. Do you really think it's from her life?"

"It might as well be, it doesn't really matter, she's replaced every brain cell a few times by now. She at least copied it down herself, lets not doubt her on that. If you'll accept that she really is Oliar's daughter, you have to accept that it's her. Maybe she tripped it once, all Oliar might have been doing with her was using her in early RNacid experiments that he read from his real daughter. Oliar was still in Wescarp into the 41st century and there were RNacid experiments being done then.

"Ethnically Luray looks like Oliar's daughter, Oliar was highland Elf and Nordic, she said she has some Nordic. She certainly has Elf ears and the hills of Wescarp aren't short of Nordic blood."

"So you believe it?" Alan asked.

"Why not?" She took his face in her hands and said, "Alan; I almost believe you. I'm sure I can find the kingdom she speaks of in a history book somewhere. The late 34th century in these parts was literate, peaceful and prosperous actually, compared to the centuries that lead up to it. If she was ever at all curious to find out if she really descended from Oliar, any downtown lab could tell her for an iron. With what I've learned of Luray in the past weeks, I don't think she'd be telling people she was Oliar's child if it wasn't true."

"Well," Alan said, "it's quite an adventure as far as she's told it so far. But we know they must get away, wasn't this earlier in history than when Oliar was in Yoonbarla?"

"Just before I guess. So yeah, since she's still alive, I guess we know how the adventure story comes out, but not the love story."

Luray didn't spend much longer with Tiytha than Desa did. They bid good-night and went up to the nest. It felt good to toss her skirt and lay down. This had been a long and interesting day. She still felt good from the encounter with Tiytha and the variety made her hunger for Alan all the greater. He was singing the same song and they had a wonderful romp.

When he was complimenting her on her liveliness, she thought this would be as good a time as any to have the talk they needed to have. They were still lying closely together, she with her arm over his chest. He was playing with her hair, something he still loved to do.

"May I tell you a reason why?" she asked him.

"Sure, we'll get you more of it."

"Oh? I might like that."

"But what was it?" he asked.

"I had some variety with Tiytha."

He twitched, then his air went out. "Because he's so much better at it, you were still remembering a little of what real sex was like."

"It's just the variety. The fact is, the sex I had with him was just an 'uh, uh, ahhhh' compared to what we just had. But we could have that much fun with them if you weren't so straight."

"You mean what you call a four-way?"

"Yeah, we could do that. You agree Luray's looking pretty good lately."

"Luray was beautiful when she first walked into Knume's egg store."

"Wouldn't you like to be with her now and then? Get to know her body also?"

"I admit my body has desires for hers," he said apologetically.

"She has desire for yours and would like to know you."

"I'll try and remember that. I'll try and remember what is considered proper here is not the same as where my memories come from."

"Please do, don't deny yourself the opportunity to enjoy this life."

"I want to continue to enjoy your love."

"Then you must not constrain me quite so much. I want to enjoy sex with Tiytha now and then, probably not every day, but maybe once a week or so while we share this nest. If other people are around that I'm attracted to, I want to feel free to enjoy without worrying about you."

"Then you must stop worrying about me. This is your culture, you have been living it for longer than the nation of

my ancestors has existed. You don't have to change your way of life for me," Alan said.

"But I'll still worry unless you allow a few more people into your life."

"I can't change my way of life over night either. I told you that when we talked about it a couple weeks ago."

"I can't understand why what I'm asking of you is so hard. You are released from that bondage now. You are free to enjoy the charms of Luray. She longs to share them with you but is afraid to ask because of your religion."

"I can hardly call it my religion any more," Alan said, "I've been with Kaha, been wasted on yaag, I've deserted my post, I've lived with you out of wedlock, I've missed service many times in a row now."

"So just forget it altogether. If you need a religion, pick up with some healthy one once we get settled in Zhindu."

"I'm trying to pick up your religion."

"I went against my religion by hiding in the leshin bales to share love with Tiytha. In my religion love is open and proud and one of the central themes of life. To practice my religion, linger with Luray the next time you wake her for shift change."

"I'll try to remember that."

It actually took Luray over two more weeks to tell her whole tale because other people started to listen and had to be caught up. During that time Desa shared love with Tiytha

once again, in the nest this time and with time for total enjoyment. There was also a happy three way with Luray and Tiytha that left him spent. But somehow Alan was never around when it was time to get Luray up for her shift and Desa's feelings were never resolved.

Book III.

Attack of the Giant Space Monster

Nightday of week Imnotn. Like many others so far, quiet, steamy, lazy. 'Only a week or so til the swamp now,' Vyinga thought, 'better start reading this river, that sandbar would be switching sides of Wen island any year now and those jugs of thurused purpletail are heavy.'

She would have to get the vagabonds together and give her swamp lecture, there were eight or ten in the crew who hadn't been thru here before. Nobody would get hurt if they stayed on board. They were more likely to get hurt playing with the crossbows actually than by anything in this little swamp, but there is real danger.

There's a lot of spheelunge, not one every ten miles or so but one or two to the mile. The swamp was a lake on the Lhar once, before the wild hull-vine covered it in the 52nd century. As the only deep water, it's a bit salty and also a slow spot where the hulls collect and form a little island of pseudo wildhull swamp ecology. There were no ship-swallowers in it and the largest dactyl's are no more than thirty inches in the body, too small to carry you off, but they can give you a nasty bite that will take many weeks to heal if you get into it with one of them hand to hand. The fact that their wingspan is close to ten feet makes them look pretty scary, enough to make a dryfoot panic and get crazy with the crossbow.

Anyway, she would have to tell everyone to keep their limbs out of the water and not play with the crossbows. That could wait til Morningday. It's this fork that we care about this dark. She had to figure out which way this river was leaning. All in all there are about forty two islands between here and where the swamp starts, so we have to guess early which path to take. The channels and sandbars upstream and the configuration of the swamp itself were constantly changing. More than once on this part of the river she'd had to turn around, sail against the money and take a different route.

So far this looked good though, stay to the north. This is the wilder shore, there was hardly a path along the bank and a few thonga herder's camps in some of the larger trees. Beyond that, nothing but prairie til the Thrambaya. Once thru these sandbars; and before Great Fright Island, she would have to cut back south to avoid the swamp itself, but that should be just about dawn.

Lately this voyage was going smoothly. Putting Leera and Konfar on their own masts was good for the ship and it was good for her body also. Kolot was just what she needed right now, one good ride a day and pleasant to actually sleep with. He didn't snore like a rutting blanth the way Leera did and he didn't masturbate every hour he didn't fuck the way Konfar did.

Kolot was nice looking, unassuming, a pretty good experienced sailor, not a pro but he understood what was

happening. He had a bit of dry wit at unexpected times and knew when to keep quiet. If it wasn't for the fact that he was on his way home to Shempala, she would be nagging him to skip Shempala and go all the way to Zhindu.

She came down to the rail and stood with Nlara. "Looks like you had a good shift."

"Got some reading done, washed my clothes out," Nlara said.

"I smelled some pretty good volunteer cooking this shift."

"I hope we didn't get you up?"

"I just rolled over," Vyinga said. "If I actually woke up I would have been down for some."

"bnHagee did it, it was just delshells and regular old chussweed, we ran into a bit of that on the way by. He had a bottle of some special sauce that he simmered it in, that's what did it."

"Looks like we still ought to keep to the north don't you think?"

"If anything I think the sand might have started drifting back. I don't think I heard us touch once all Dusksleep."

"It looked OK from the nest," Vyinga continued, "I'll climb the mast before we get to Wen Island. Even though it's too dark for that to do any good unless we fire up Jebesh."

"You're better off standing here and listening, keeping things quiet so you can hear."

They did so, standing beside each other for awhile in

perfect silence, focused on the sounds of the ripples. This was often their deepest conversation, just listening together with pointing and nods their only output. Though their sexuality was diverging, their friendship was not. Never in her life had Vyinga had as true a friend as Nlara among female kind. She'd had no closer friend of any kind since p'Vook and the only reason he was closer was because he was also her lover for all those many decades. If it hadn't been for Nlara and their return to sailing she probably would have left this basin centuries ago. As is was, this rock solid partnership and this lazy river had grown on her til now she could think of no greater perfection in life than plying this lazy river in the sun and meeting new vagabonds.

"I can't hear a shallows anywhere," Vyinga finally spoke."

"So don't get bored," Nlara said, "I'm going to see if I can scrounge a few bites and go see how my nest-mates are doing."

Nlara obviously didn't want to chat, what was there left to say after the centuries they'd shared? Having Kalaz and Dencah back, along with Gardir, was fanning the current flare-up in her addiction to the hormone high. She'd slow down by the time they reached Shempala.

Vyinga called her roll, everyone in their usual places. Luray, the sad, blond, storytelling woman from mast five responded but was close by and came to stand with her at the rail.

"We've got good water," Luray said after listening in

silence for a few minutes.

"Should be another easy shift. I'm going to try and see something from the mast before Wen Island but we'll probably hold steady til then."

Luray poked around with a sounding rod a little. The bottom was ripply soft sand, forty to sixty inches down. It was good to have TWO experienced people on the same mast. The kid they'd brought with them from the hills had learned quickly and was also pretty reliable. Now four was the only mast she had to do any training with. Luray had a head for sail and now that she was getting her strength back, one couldn't ask for more in a vagabond mastman.

"So you still getting along with Tiytha?" she asked, just something for conversation.

"I'm having some fun. If he wasn't dumb as a post I might resent not keeping in touch when we get there. He's not tempting me back into a keg, I like that a lot. I wish I didn't have to continually worry about that, but it works for now."

"And how's he getting along with the others?" Vyinga knew she was a gossip, but she liked to know what was socially motivating her people. Too many ships lost too much time for reasons that had nothing to do with the river. Many a breakup had left her with an abandoned mast as two (or even more) people waded ashore with their bags, still arguing with each other and not so much as a 'see you later' to captain and crew.

"Oh good enough. He likes Desa, but I don't think he

understands very much of what she talks about. He likes Alan's RN Acid trip."

Vyinga chuckled, "I thought he was pretty straight?"

"Oh he wouldn't take the trip, he just thought it was a comical one to hear about." There was a pause, then Luray asked, "So how's things on your mast?"

Vyinga looked at her, so she could project that she was sincere and not just answering a social question. "I'm enjoying this part of the journey immensely. I am really appreciating this chance to curl up with a 'nothing special, just one of the natives' type guy. He has a home and a steady partner back in Shempala, that's the only thing wrong with my life right now." A far cry from the days when she had to test the sexual competence of every male crewman and she and Nlara were all the females the ship needed.

"So enjoy it while you can. Maybe what you should do is get someone like that to be your foreman."

"Nlara's my foreman." She responded. "When the sea floods this basin again Nlara will still be my foreman."

"A permanent crewman then, someone you enjoy being with."

"Oh there will be people I enjoy being with on every voyage. My enlightenment is knowing that what I enjoy being with has changed."

"A good thing."

There was another silence as they stood at the rail watching the river. This was good. She met so many more

interesting people sailing with the vagabonds of this basin and this woman was one of them. Vyinga understood how long ago she'd had her adventure, knew that by now it seemed that she'd no more lived it than Vyinga had hers. It was a fable, something from a bygone age that she'd read about. Human memory, the details anyway, lasts nowhere near that long, not a fraction that long. But still, while the details were gone, something of the ancient Elven princess remained in her.

And her roots ran deep in the modern age, and intersected with Vyinga's so ancient in her own past. "I remember Knume you know," she said to Luray.

"All the way from the fiftieth century?"

"It's been awhile, but we've kept in touch. If he's in Hazorpean when I am, he stops by. I missed him this time but quite often we chat. I even took the hike up to Yoonbarla a few decades after he was back, just to see how he was doing. I had a wonderful time and being in those mountains is even more beautiful than I imagined from the valley. I can still see the picture in my mind of sitting on the shore of that little pond, eating breakfast and looking up at those peaks watching over it from all sides. For someone who sees as much flat as I do, I was almost afraid they would fall over on me."

"The beauty is one thing that draws me back."

"Not just Knume?"

"I don't know what it is about Knume," Luray said. "I'm sure you heard about our son, there's no way gossip like that

stays clean on a ship like this."

"I heard of no such thing, who did you tell?"

"Desa and Alan."

"They've told no one else."

Luray looked a little surprised, but explained. "I had a deformed child with Knume, back in the early 52nd. He took it away and I was sure he abandoned it. He blamed himself and the drugs in Zhindu."

"That is truly tragic." This woman did run deep, and intersected her own life in such a way. She had brought Knume home to that village on one of her first voyages in this basin, where he would meet this woman and father that child.

"But it was so long ago I have to read it in my writings to really remember it." Luray said. "That shouldn't be such an obsession that I still move to it. I think it's had as much to do with the yaag."

"He is a drinker. That's how we met, he was pretty much dropped off on my deck with a sign on his forehead reading 'Hazorpean'. We were weeks out before I could converse with him."

"He tells the same tale," Luray admitted.

"And were you that bad?"

"I drank MORE than Knume."

"Wow," Vyinga said.

"Never thought you'd see the day did you?" Luray said.

"I'm of a mind not to believe it. You're in mentally better shape now than he was when he got off my boat."

"I don't know what he did in Zhindu," Luray said, "I never knew him there, but while we were just friends in Yoonbarla this last time I lived there, I think we were number one and number two and he was definitely two."

"I can see why you worry about it."

"And why two cups a day is what I consider stopped."

"Then you are at least achieving your goal."

"I went over by a cup or two while we were in Lastriss."

"Pppp."

As they stood contentedly in each other's company, paused in their conversation, there was the sound of distant thunder. She looked around and the sky was calm, too hazy to see dim stars, but all the bright ones were out everywhere. She scanned the horizon but no thunder heads were in sight. It came from the west, opposite the weather, nothing to worry about.

But in a minute it got louder, and soon there was a shriek in it. Alan must have heard it because his head popped out of their nest and scanned the horizon. "It's them!" he screamed and disappeared back inside the nest. After a few seconds they heard him shout from within, "Oh I know!"

Seconds after that he was scrambling down the mast with his funny looking duffle pack. He ran to the starboard rail and flung that ship's pin from his only previous voyage as far as he could into the river, then ran back to the port side and vaulted over the rail. He stumbled in the water but began

wading/clambering toward the north shore with all possible haste.

He was barely in the water when Desa appeared below the nest, two bags in her hand. "I'm going with him," Desa shouted toward Luray, "No way I'm going to meet what he's told me of. I got yours too if you want it."

By the time she finished that sentence she was already down to the deck. She dropped one bag at the rail and launched herself over it, bag held high and landing much more gracefully than Alan.

"I'm really sorry," Luray told her, backing away, "But this sounds serious." She was already trotting down the deck toward her bag. "If it's nothing we'll be right back."

Whatever was making this noise was approaching quickly, many times more quickly than a storm. By now the remainder of the crew had heard it and were scanning the sky.

And now what was she going to do? What had been a well-manned mast was now down to one dryfoot. What could be so serious that these seemingly quality people would go over the rail out here where you were as likely to encounter a predator as a herdsman's hut if the spheelunge even let them get to shore? All because of some freak thunder?

But it was approaching rapidly, now the noise was more shriek and howl than thunder. And now there weren't just noises in the sky, there were lights. Soon she could see there were three, arranged in a triangle. Within a minute the

remaining crew was also over the side.

"For the love of a dripping pussy!" she screamed, "DROP SAIL, DROP ANCHOR you ingletor-brained dryfeet!"

At least Leera and Vatreel had the presence of mind to help get the ship in order. Leera had both stern anchors out before he went to mast seven, Vyinga herself got one and two slacked, Nlara three and Vatreel four and five, he and Leera met at six.

And the thing was approaching rapidly, but slowing down.

"Tell them a spheelunge ate us," Alan yelled as he splashed ashore.

It was now so close that a herd of thongas resting in the trees that lined the shore were getting restless, especially with two more humans wading ashore in the dark. She could hear the girls talking to the thongas, trying to calm them. It sounded like there was quite a herd of them.

Alan let out a piercing scream, "AAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa. It stepped on my fucking foot."

Vyinga winced, thinking what an agitated thonga claw might do to a man's genitals. But with that scream the thongas bolted and stampeded away from the riverbank, not making enough noise to drown out what was approaching from the sky.

As well as the noise, and the growing triangle of lights, there was WIND. It started slow but grew very rapidly, until it

was blowing like any storm. The lights were close above the river now, and to her horror she saw they were not three separate things but connected by something gigantic that blotted out the stars between and around them.

It hung there, blasting the world with thunder, scream and wind worse than that spawned of any Ttharmine storm. It was impossible to see clearly what this was. It looked like an ENORMOUS dactyl, one the biggest crossbow wouldn't even tickle, nearly the size of her whole ship. It seemed to hold a light in it's jaws and one in each claw. It looked like it was rigid however, she saw no driver wings but it blew wind like maybe they just moved too fast to see in the dark.

But then it made LIGHT. A hole in it's belly winked open, clear thru to midweek and the blazing sun of noon shone thru it and into the river, exactly where Alan had thrown his ship's pin.

It moved. It circled the ship, spearing each member of her departed crew with it's noon light. Then it went to the shores and lavished the trees of each bank with a slow dose of noon in the middle of Nightday, whipping their fronds to shreds. It rose; and night regained it's place. For a few seconds Vyinga thought that maybe it would depart in peace.

But after circling the area it returned and descended right in front of the ship. The loosed sails snapped and cracked and were nearly torn from their masts by the blast of wind it blew. To her horror legs unfolded from beneath it, legs clothed in

scales no dactyl ever wore. It had three instead of one. It settled into the river bottom, and quickly it's thunder and wind died away.

She was standing frozen to the fore deck in a rictus that would not let her breathe, knowing she should run and unable to do so. It was huge beyond belief. How such a thing could ever take to the sky was impossible. Now that it was SO close she could clearly see that it was covered in fire-streaked stone scales. It's huge head loomed above the deck, two tiny eyes stared down on short, impossibly-jointed tentacles. The stare of those eyes was as dead and blank as that of a camera.

This could only be something from the other side. Some titanic ghoul come from the netherworld. This came from farther than any swamp, farther than the highest mountain peak or deepest cavern. It smelled like nothing that had ever lived, acrid, chemical, like some wizard's deviant experiment in plastics had come to life, devoured it's home city and was now loose to consume the remaining world.

She immediately knew what terror it held for them when it's jaw dropped, slowly and with an ominous hiss. Vapors drifted from it's maw. The jaw descended til it rested on the fore deck, crushing the rail to splinters, and there it paused before beginning the mayhem of their destruction. Still she stood paralyzed to the spot, too scared even to tremble. What good would it do to run? In a matter of seconds that jaw would munch them all, ship, cargo and all.

Then light sprang from it's mouth, that would have to be

the wall of flame that would blaze out and consume her, the ship and maybe the crew in one exhalation. But it didn't flicker, the light was dead, flat, like a bioluminescent panel with all the effects turned off. Seconds passed and nothing happened, like the great photographer was trying to pose a still photo of the first bite, the ball of flame.

A huge voice bellowed, "Send Alan back to us."

The thing could speak?!? How could that be? Alan had been the first to run from it and Alan was the one it was after. What sense did that make?

OK, so she was too caught up in running the ship to immediately catch on to what was happening here. Alan's fairy tale, not Luray's. Last she remembered, Alan's problem was RNAcid, Luray's was yaag. Luray told tales of magic swords and Alan told tales of coming to this world on a starship from the star YingolNeerie. His tales of that world were worse than the reign of the Dark Lord.

But that means this thing is not some huge stone dactyl from the netherworld, it's just a starship. She would have laughed at thinking 'just a starship' if she had thawed from her terror yet. That's not it's jaw, it's the ship's ramp. They expect Alan to walk up there, like a willing morsel to a metal monster.

Vyinga now wished she paid close attention to every word Alan ever uttered about his drug dream. To be honest she had tuned it out. Luray's tale was one she could understand and appreciate, she knew of the Troubled Times. Alan's was

something about Angels living in electric crystals in hollow asteroids or something like that. Way too boi-woi to be taken seriously, even by a science-fiction buff, which she was not.

That didn't make this thing stop being frightening. But it became manageably frightening. This was a ship, like hers was a ship, it might sail a different stream but there was a captain in there somewhere, hiding behind those speakers.

"Where is Alan?" the speakers boomed.

Vyinga was only ten feet from the jaw that was really a ramp, almost under the thing's head; no; bow. If anyone was to reply, she would be the one. She wasn't about to abandon her own ship no matter where you're from or what plutonic powers of how many dark lords you possess. She could still barely think with this fearful thing in front of her, but she wasn't going to let that fear show. If it was to cinder them or warp them into a bloody mush, or whatever starships did in a fit of pique, so be it. Even though she intended to find her courage, she could think of no better story than the one Alan had shouted as he reached the shore.

"He got et by a spheelunge," she shouted. "Him and two more of my best crewmates. Because of your bone-headed driving of that monstrosity scaring my whole crew into the water on a night like this. All the dryfeet's still too scared of your hell-spawn starship to come out of the water and I'm afraid we'll hear another scream and splash any second."

"Let us have his remains."

"His REMAINS! He's et UP you imbecile! Find the

spheelunge that ate him and cut it open, you might find some remains! I think it swallowed him in just a few chunks.

"You have caused this," she knew she was getting into harangue mode and didn't care, it was either that or quake in terror and letting her mood look like hysterical anger was better than hysterical fear. The worry that any of her crew really could be devoured any minute brought real tears to her eyes. "Those were people just a few minutes ago. They were members of my crew, we were friends with them. They had plans for their lives. And you think just because you have this monstrous powerful starship, that it's OK to run around to any world you please and terrorize the inhabitants?"

She was now breathing heavily with her fists clenched at her sides. "Why don't you stop hiding in your ship behind your speakers and come out and at least apologize for what you've done to us."

She stood there panting, hoping she wasn't about to lose control of herself and run. To her surprise, a man's shadow soon appeared on the ramp. Legs, clad in office shoes and pants, a torso attired likewise but topped by a face that had been battered by winds the Ttharmine never blew. How this man could have withstood the beating his skin had taken was beyond imagination. Her gonads curled painfully within her as she imagined the deviant rites these people must practice. Still the fact that a man, no matter how painfully deformed, had walked down the ramp brought her fear under control more than all the reason she had used on herself til now.

"Alan is my son," he said, "I hope you can understand what that means."

"Alan was your son, I hope you can understand what that means."

"How can we verify what you say?"

"Like I said, catch the speelunge and cut it open. It probably bolted also when you brought noon thru, but it couldn't be more than a mile or two away."

"I suspect you are helping him to escape."

"Escape!?" she shrieked, "Did you ever escape from the belly of a speelunge? I wish you were down there to try it. Come back after you get those three out." She was feeling the part now and her tears were real, her sobs shook her. Part of it was relief at knowing this was nothing but a man in a ship and was probably harmless. "And it seems to me your problem with Alan was he wanted to make up his own mind about what planet to live on." She wasn't sure about his story, but that was the best she remembered it. "The way you people behave I understand why he chose to take the belly of a speelunge over going back to wherever dark lord's world you're from."

"There's no need to be so distressed."

"NO NEED! Well Alan told us a little about you folks, maybe to you three friends being bitten to pieces and gulped down is no reason to get distressed but for me and my crew, it's more than enough reason."

"If I believed you I'd be devastated by Alan's loss. I am

his father and that relationship means something among my people. But our sensors indicate there were no large lifeforms other than the remaining crew in this river when we arrived."

"It got out of here fast in that case, before you got close enough."

"Very unlikely."

She could hear the murmur of people beginning to get back aboard. She was aware of the remainder of the permanent crew watching and listening for the first time. She knew that Nlara was passing the word as to what was unfolding. Soon the crew was muttering about how fast them spheelunges were scared off and how lucky they were to be alive because of it.

A group announced they were going ashore to build the fire for the departed. Someone started the wail, a few more picked it up.

"This is our custom when someone dies," Vyinga spit. "If you've any shred of decency you'll honor it, either join us in our grief, or leave."

With that Vyinga joined the wail also. She had but to think back to the real tragedy that time on the Ttharmine, and used this occasion to wail the loss of those companions. Soon there was much rustling on the shore and already some dry leaves were lighting twigs and dead limbs were being thrown on top of it. She heard Leera bellow to pull Darceenian Flame in stern-to on the beach. She didn't know if they would be able to drag it out from under the starship's ramp, but hoped they

would.

Still wailing, the crew hauled and bent to that rope. The ship moved with a grating noise, the wail quavered with the heaves of the rope.

"I won't even hope that you'd make good on the damage you did to my rail."

That horrid apparition of a man did or said nothing all this time as the ceremonies began and as the ship was dragged out from under his. He stood watching as if frozen as the wail progressed and the flames grew. The people put on a display of grief that they might not have managed if three people they'd known for only five weeks really did get eaten by spheelunge.

Eventually that scarred captain turned and marched back into his ship. The jaw closed and the shriek, wind and thunder began and soon rose to deafening once again. Then the huge thing pulled its legs from the bottom and rose into the sky.

As its bellow shrank in the night sky, the wail gradually turned to whoop. Dartiss brought out his casks and there was a celebration right there on the beach. Vyinga was in no mood to deal with the Wen's Island sand bar after this. It was unbelievable enough that they had actually seen a starship, but to withstand a threat from it! There was a whole lot of talk about it. Her crew was amazed and admiring.

"I'll be drinking to the day my captain told off a starship captain til the last keg runs dry," was what someone said later

that night, "And I'll never give a shit if anyone ever believes it."

Vyinga herself didn't join in the celebration for long, she wanted to find the others. Alan was injured out here somewhere and who knows what had happened to the girls. She took a torch and searched the area, but saw no sign but the tracks the thongas had made.

She walked up and down the beach calling them, to no avail. She walked as far as she dared out into the brush and called them. Still no response.

They stayed til late in Morningday, hoping for some sign of their lost crewmen. She had everyone search the area in the first light of day. No trace was found of any of them. She hoped they had decided to take their chances over land. With luck they had spent the night with a herdsman and would find a path to continue their journey.

It was week Garibivlast already and they weren't even that close to Shempala. She had to parcel out new assignments, Tiytha couldn't handle the mast alone. One of Vatreel's current playthings volunteered to move over to five and take the sleep shift. Before they got back underway was as good a time as any for the swamp lecture. And so they continued on down the Lhar, each with the tallest sailor's tale they'd ever hear on any waterfront.

Book IV.

Biology Base

Thursday Jul. 7, 2271 - 12:12pm

Alfred brought the craft in as quickly as he could, knowing that the rumble of re-entry would give Alan more warning than he really wanted to. Alan's raft was as isolated as it had ever been, no other native raft was taking the channel his was on within a half hour in either direction. He probed ahead as soon as he could with the thermal sensors and within a few minutes he was able to pick up individuals in the area. There was a herd of large beasts on the riverbank confusing the sensors at first, but they quickly stampeded out of the area and left it pretty clear.

The phone was in the water, not on the raft. The light revealed no human in the water with it however. Alan knew they could track the inactive phone, but Alfred couldn't believe Alan would have left it behind. Without the phone he was totally cut off from them. He had to find Alan now or this would become a monumental disaster.

He moved the shuttle toward the raft, ready to release the gas, but saw that most of the natives had jumped off the raft by now and were in the water. If he released the gas on them now they would drown. There were some of the expedition that would have done so anyway, but Alfred could not help

but think of them as souls. He would have to pluck Alan from the water, to do that he had to pass over every one of them to run recognition on them. He found that Alan was not among them. He looked for any human thermal signature in the surrounding area, there was none.

There was no doubt that these natives would remember this night. He might as well take advantage of the fright he had put into them and intimidate them into giving Alan up. He landed in front of the raft, blocking its passage down the stream. He opened the cargo ramp onto the raft, trying to make his maneuvers like an early science fiction movie in hopes that they were advanced enough to understand something of what was happening and be terrified into complying. He boosted the audio outputs and patched in the native language drivers.

"Send Alan back to us," he boomed.

There was no response. There was only one person left on the raft, a totally naked woman with an awesome figure, smoked ivory skin and silver hair. She didn't respond. In truth it looked like she might be frozen to the spot in terror.

"Where is Alan?" he meant to soften it a little but mishandled the controls and only changed his accent a little. He was hoping she would be at least able to stutter something.

No, not a single stutter. A little spittle perhaps, but she definitely didn't stutter. She came out with a patent lie about Alan getting swallowed by a predator. That's all very

plausible from her perspective, but the infrared imaging telescope disagreed. She also laid forth with every twist of invective an old sailor could come up with. In spite of knowing it was a lie, she carried on about her loss and called him a coward for hiding in the ship. He wished there was some way he could come out of the ship and into her head and show her the thermal scans and get her off this act.

He had the android on the shuttle in case he had some reason to interact with the natives. It hadn't been active in so many years, he wondered if it would even work. It still had his major's duty-suit on and that was still relatively clean, not much dust settles in the vacuum of space. Before he thought carefully about it, he noticed he had activated the android. The skills he learned as Alan's father were still with him as he strode it down that ramp. Was he really going to let a naked savage goad him into acting like this? Was this the only way he could get her to understand they knew better? What was he trying to prove now, that we are humans just looking for our offspring? Just like you but with a different vehicle? Here in the android he felt less biological than he did in his own space. He felt like a machine in a space suit actually.

This act stopped hers not at all. Perhaps he should have printed hard copies of the thermal scans. Could she have just kept up this caterwauling even then and claimed he just drew some blurry pictures? It looked like he had the choice of using force on her or giving this up and he had to make this decision while she was bellowing about how savage Alan said

they were and how they would use force to take him back. Did he want to be the one to prove that was true?

All the natives joined in the act. Why were they doing this? Why were they risking their lives to protect someone who wasn't one of them? Maybe they couldn't think of it as a risk, Alan had told them that one human could not use violence on another on this planet due to some genetic modification. Why were they exerting themselves to drag their raft out from under the cargo ramp? Any mob of yokels on Earth would have handed the alien back in a second, in fact they would have turned him out just knowing that he was an alien.

Maybe they didn't think Alan was alien. Maybe they knew Alan was flesh and Alfred was silicon? From what the naked woman was saying, Alan must have told them as much about Gordon's Lamp as they would listen to. Maybe Alan was one of their own? What was that old saying, 'blood is thicker than wire'? Meanwhile the native siren continued to defy him as her crew dragged her away. He understood the bravado in what she was trying to do. While her grief was fake and she knew her accusations were false, her courage was still commendable. He would not be so petty as to put on another display of power now that this one didn't work. He would get no more willing cooperation from these natives, why make the situation worse? Even though they were primitive, he respected some things about these people and hoped some day there would be contact with them, more successful

contact than this had been. He would not start that contact with a reputation as a vicious conqueror.

Alfred had no choice but to give up this attempt with the shuttlecraft and sent it back to low orbit. He dispatched a probe to sit in a small tree near the spot where that raft had pulled ashore and initiated a program to follow that raft from the geosynchronous scope. If Alan appeared near either one of them, he would be found. The first probe was too far from the people to decode what they were saying, but as the shuttlecraft left, they became suspiciously joyful for this to be a funeral celebration. The captain and a couple others wandered off from the group and it sounded like they were calling Alan when they got nearer the probe. If they were, Alan would be too smart to respond, he would know there would be a probe or scope watching and would lie low or continue on his way. Alfred was pretty sure this was more good evidence that the naked captain was lying to protect Alan and knew it.

During darkness all they had to do was spot isolated spots of warm flesh thruout the area he could have got to. As the darkness wore on and the area Alan could have reached became larger, the search turned up possible humans, but they all seemed to be associated with native dwellings. Alfred dispatched infra-red remotes that zoomed in close to seven different people and found none were Alan. But four of them had dwellings he could have been hiding in. The first thing

Alan had told them about the natives was how hard it was to turn down invitations to their homes and tables.

He dispatched another probe into the river downstream, into the water that would have been present under the raft as the shuttle approached it. That probe found no traces of human blood in the water. As far as he was concerned this was final proof that the woman was lying.

Friday Jul. 8, 2271 - 8:05am

Once daylight returned he used the scope and several remotes to comb the whole area Alan could have run to by that time. The sweep found over two hundred humans, the software got hits on seven females as possibly being one of the women Alan was with. Alfred watched some nice videos of some really pretty girls very closely. One was found riding on a native draft animal herding some others. She was way too rough to be the blond, but she was pretty in her own way. Most of the others were farming along the river and one was lying face-up naked on a beach with a couple guys, neither of whom were Alan.

He dispatched a probe to recover Alan's phone when there was a long enough break in the river traffic. The dredge probe returned with it unharmed and no evidence of foul play. He must have lost it when he left the raft. Alfred still had a hard time thinking that Alan would have deliberately severed that

last possible link with his origins.

Since they were tracking the raft, they could punish the native crew for lying about Alan's disappearance. If they destroyed it and killed all aboard that would remove the witnesses of his foolish mission but get no closer to recovering Alan. As it was, captain M'Kintre would have wanted all the humans on the raft killed except Alan anyway. Kelvin would have thought it convenient that the natives were all in the water when he released the gas, leave less evidence. Alfred was glad he hadn't done it, in spite of the fact that the mission had gone so badly.

"Done what?" He must have been talking to himself, Glenelle had entered his space.

"Gassed those natives while they were in the water," he answered.

"You could have picked them all up before they died."

"I wouldn't take that chance. There are always malfunctions and complications."

"But now you have a shipload of natives that know about us in no uncertain terms," Glenelle said.

"How many times did people come up with tales like this on Earth?" Alfred said, thinking of the 'flying saucer' hysterias. "Nobody will believe them."

"I wonder what the captain thinks you were up to."

"If you mean Kelvin, I don't know how he sees thru this planet. I sent no telemetry of that trip."

"Your emissions were picked up, I'm sure," Glenelle told

him, "they're barely past the second moon. He can also see that the shuttle is now in low orbit."

"We have any number of reasons to use the shuttle. We landed some large instruments and we're now using it's scope for detailed observations."

"I'm sure Ava can still read any bit we can and more."

"Why would she? I'm sure Kelvin has her hands full with their initial acceleration."

"I'm sure he does," Glenelle admitted, but didn't look convinced.

"I still don't understand why you failed," Vic said, also entering the instrument room where he was working. Alfred preferred a fairly representational universe where you actually had to move your personification to the instruments rather than just overlaying them on your personal space.

"Why couldn't you render them unconscious?"

"Because most of them were in the water and would drown if I couldn't manipulate them out in time. There's no way I could have lived with myself. There may not be Christial souls in those natives, but they are as alive as Alan is. Alan himself might have drowned in that water."

"You had enough manipubots," Vic said, "you could have put them all back on deck and run them thru the medistat."

"There are carnivores in those waters, even if there wasn't one there to eat Alan. Also, if Alan's tales are true and the natives have altered their biology, the medistat might have been mislead and caused them harm. In addition there was

another raft that would have been along in twenty more minutes. I wanted them to just slump to the deck, let me go grab Alan, leave and let them wake up with a hangover and another bad drug dream. I didn't go down there to kill or even seriously injure any innocent natives."

"What if someone had a camera?" Glenelle asked.

"If they've got cameras, they've got trick photography. They don't have any hard evidence, we've even got the phone back. Those sailors have a nice tall tale, but their scientists have nothing.

"But one thing is for sure," Alfred continued. "If Alan is still alive he won't be wondering if Earth, his parents and his expedition was only a drug dream. If those girls stayed with him, they won't try to convince him Earth was a drug dream any more."

"I guess you made sure of that," Glenelle said.

"Thank you," Vic said, "But succeed in getting him next time."

Wednesday Jul. 13, 2271 - 9:11am

It was a hopeless scope, but it was all he had. He could examine the still-growing circle in finer detail when the shuttlecraft passed over the area every four hours. Alan wasn't any of the hundreds of humans he had pictures of by now. He and several programs studied those pictures and were sure

they weren't him. Alan could have swum miles in the river after hiding under a rock to stay out of sight of the IR thru darkness. He could have boarded a number of native rafts by now. There were many to inspect, many had been inspected by probes sent ahead into the trees along the shore. No evidence of Alan was found.

Alfred turned his attention to the wild. If Alan isn't with the people, is he out in the wilderness? There's ten or twenty thousand square miles of it that he could have reached by now, how easy is it to find a human in that? By looking at it so a square mile filled his view he found he could not detect a human. He had to look at it so his view was about a thousand feet on a side, two and a half million screens to look thru. Still he set the scope to scanning it and the programs to running on it. By the end of daylight it had turned up seven possible matches for the girls, all were alone and miles apart. As darkness settled, three hundred seventy one campfires twinkled out away from habitation. Nothing but a probe could recognize Alan by firelight, there weren't enough probes to examine all of those campfires before daylight came again. Alfred scared several camps of cowboys before he gave that up. Worse, Alan would hear the probe and hide unless he brought it in subsonic.

He came back to their study after giving it up. Victoria was already there watching some old entertainment which she turned off as Alfred entered the room. He didn't want to face her with even the fact that he was lost to them, much less his

more serious fear.

"Still nothing," she said. "I can see it on your face."

"Still nothing," he admitted, "and I'm beginning to think it will stay that way. By next light the area he could have reached will be far too big for us to cover. If he's done something so simple as stay under a tree we won't be able to find him."

"Can you now admit that trying to pick him up was a stupid thing to do?"

"I think I've understood that already for five days now. I think I understood that as soon as I saw those natives in the water."

"Maybe you've admitted it to yourself and that's the important one of us to admit it to, but you haven't admitted it to me," Vic said.

"I have now."

"Good." She stared at him intently, her expression serious. "We were so much better off when he wore that phone and reported about the river. Let the natives try to read his mind, you even heard them tell him that no one could tell it wasn't a drug dream if they did read it out. If anything they are more likely to read his mind now, now that a whole raft full of people will believe him."

"Whether they believed him or not, the technology he knows is real," Alfred said. "That's something they could have verified. That's something that would prove his memories were real and not a drug dream."

"So now they're more likely to read his memories and more likely to find that proof for the wild story the people on the ship will tell."

"I doubt it," Alfred sadly admitted.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I think he's taken off into the wilds."

"He won't stay there forever, he'll come back to habitation."

"If he does," Alfred said, "there won't be anyone around him who witnessed this evidence."

"Unless he stays with those girls, they will certainly know."

"Actually I doubt he's still with them."

"Why?" she asked.

He drew a deep breath and decided he had to share this fear sooner or later, so why not get it over with. "Because if he's gone into the wilds, he probably fell victim to a predator during the first darkness and if not then, certainly the second. Now the third darkness since the attempt is confronting him. If he stayed with the native women he's served his usefulness as bait by now."

"How can you say that so calmly!" Vic shouted. "How can you even think such a thing and just sit there dry eyed, telling me you've killed our son like you would tell me a remote probe went dead!" She went into a hysterical fit of tears, beating her fists against his shoulders.

He was afraid of something like this, he deserved this and

more. He tried to hold her but she would have none of it. Finally he held her hands and forced her to look at him. "You want to know why I'm like this?" he said in the same matter-of-fact voice. "I'll tell you why. I can't let myself feel this, if I did I don't think I could let myself go on living."

Saturday Jul. 23, 2271 - 10:44am

Once Ava could capture the packet header as it went by and convert it to something, she could start trying to figure out how the packets were addressed. There was too little activity. Lots and lots of zeros. Her first rendition of how it worked was 5, attn#, 5, 4 digit session id, 5, 4 digit address modifier or subsession id, 5, 1 digit random data, in groups of 2 or 3 at a time, every 1000 – 5000 packets, 5, 0 to about 1 million digits of data.

She was lucky enough to catch some packets of real traffic. The data digits were full for nearly two seconds. She spent weeks with that trying to make some sense of it. Nothing did. She could render it out into numbers and even see that the field she had labeled 'address modifier' was often '1', but sometimes had bursts of bigger numbers with attention codes. Whatever was in the data was outside the protocol set up in these packets.

She captured another real data transmission and had more to go on. She saw there was a different session ID, actually a

group of related session ID's and lots of numbers in the address modifier most of the time, but very few attention codes. The data for this transmission was mostly 5's with some clumps of other numbers now and then. This lasted for a few billion digits, a few thousand packets.

The interesting packets were so far apart that it took a long time to build up much information. The information she gradually built up didn't make very much sense either. There could be a lot of activity in the packet headers alone, with all the data areas of all the other bands standing idle, but occasionally there was activity in what she called the 'data'. Usually it was in all thirty seven bands at once, and would sometimes last for significant fractions of a second, sometimes only a few tens of microseconds.

Gordon's Lamp was only a bit more than a million miles away by now, only a few second's delay. This was close enough that she could still help the avatar control the ship's system, and could even copy more neural code across to patch up some of the shaky spots. In addition there was still time to let Thom have one last look at these signals before her avatar had to tell him they are now too far to tie up the available bandwidth with this much data. Her avatar had been programmed to think she had an Avatar on Biology Base reporting to the real Ava with the expedition. Til Thom reported, she didn't need to interact with the other ship, she could devote herself to other investigations of this

communication system.

She set out to map the routes these light beams took. The one she'd been studying lead to the city Alan had stopped in. Ava had to fish around awhile to find beams coming out of that city. She found three, one to the northwest, one to the south and one to the east, the way Alan had traveled. She sent the probe following that beam. It lead to a tower in a large town, another relay or gathering point. Northeast of there were two relay towers in a row that were out on the plains away from anything. They were clearly using the refraction of the atmosphere to send the beam much further than it could have gone line of sight, even with the large radius of this planet. Then the probe came upon a much bigger native city. This city had a dozen of these optical relays in the upper branches of it's jungle.

Ava was beginning to understand what cities looked like here and knew this was a big one. She found beams radiating to all points of the compass from here, and some with much more traffic than the one she had been studying. But while the probe was moving, she followed the concentration of beams toward the place Alan had told them he was going, the city on the volcanic plug. That huge city-jungle sparkled with optical sources when a polarized probe was used, two hundred thirty nine altogether, and there was a lot more data. She parked the probe in the upper branches of a tree far above where humans could climb, and where it could catch the fringes of a beam from one small globe far down the hill.

In the next few hours more data flooded in than she'd collected so far. It was still completely unintelligible of course, but there was a lot more to sample. About the only thing she really knew is that large data bursts were usually introduced with header activity in those first headers Thom had discovered on channel thirty seven.

She noticed some of the same session ID's she'd seen in the hills. That seemed to be of no correlation to anything else. Sometimes only channel thirty seven would have data, and sometimes channel thirty seven would send data first, then stop while the other thirty six had data. Since channel thirty seven was also the only one to have header information, she figured there could be other things special about channel thirty seven.

She hadn't noticed, but days had passed, a message from her avatar arrived. "Thanks for the update, I thank you for the lovely assignment." It was from Thom, not the avatar, it was just addressed to Ava. "I think the data sent on channel thirty seven is like the hardware data in our systems. I think it's all configuration info for the data on the other channels. I think the address may be more like which part of the context we refer to and then some of the content is really the address."

That was all he sent. Ava took a look at all Gordon's Lamp's telemetry to make sure all was running as planned. She saw that her avatar had bumped it's veron usage to what

would be expected of an angel. All else looked good. She ran element balance analysis and if there was any data out of the mud yet, it said the element balance problem had stayed with Biology Base. In fourteen years we will have to mine for minerals.

She didn't interact with her avatar, but just took a dump. The avatar was confident and comfortable and interested in the suntower data. She was planning to devote more study to it and was planning to have the probe follow the network. The avatar had none of the discomfort Ava did when working with Thom, no doubt because there was no love interest. Instead she liked working with Thom and looked forward to doing so again. To continue the self confidence masquerade, she gave the avatar a dump of herself in return.

While she was thinking this, she noticed how little conversation there was on Biology Base. Why speak when everyone here knows each other so well they have nothing more to say to each other? Vic and Glenelle spent hours gathering readings and discussing observations. They are coming to the conclusion that Desa is right about the evolution of life on the planet and the cellulose kingdom is the dominant life but with several challenges from many phyla of sumoid life.

Victoria is busy with a predator/prey mass ratio, Glenelle is training wildlife species recognizers. Alfred was still useless in his mope over the mess he'd made of capturing

Alan and the fear that he had killed his son in the wilds below. He stayed in their study with his pipe. He said he was studying the native economy, he did produce some numbers, ships and tons moving on this river. Numbers that agreed with Alan's.

Alan was now lost to them as a source of data. Alan who had been traveling with a former college professor and someone else claiming to be an ancient sorceress. Everything they told him seems to be true. It would have been most beneficial to just listen to what they said and listen to what they said about reading his memories, they can't tell it isn't induced via drugs. Alan had been returning more information than they knew what to do with before he threw that phone in the river.

Friday Jul. 29, 2271 - 4:08pm

"There's no shortage of biomass here," Glenelle was saying, both large species of grazer and many of the smaller ones outweigh humans in this ecosystem."

"They don't outweigh human impact," Victoria said.

"Only because of the irrigation. It could never have been this flat here."

"Not without a different drainage pattern. These rivers were never allowed to turn toward the lower basin, they were always kept flowing toward that city."

"How could the natives have done that with their technology?" Glenelle asked

"Time and numbers. Patiently re-filling and re-dyking until the river relented and wound it's way slowly across the flats toward that city. They have moved many times that much earth dredging the bottom for their fields. Alan said they put down a layer every year or two. A few hundred million natives moving a ton or so a year gets a lot of dirt moved, as much as a forceful river, not the stagnant thing they were floating on."

"And their net effect is to make the water deeper and more sluggish."

"And thus flatter." Victoria enjoyed Glenelle's company and conversation, especially with Al still in his funk about his silly shuttlecraft mission instead of reveling in the excitement of discovery. "Alfred has determined that there are tide control locks in the vicinity of that city," she continued. "It is likely the natives harness the power of the tides in them."

"Why did we miss so much of their civilization when we first looked?" Glenelle asked.

"Because we looked for the wrong things. We looked for primitive radio emissions, and large scale fossil fuel consumption, things we expect from early civilizations. We weren't looking for advanced genetics and continent-scale amalgamations of small-scale technology. We don't know how to recognize a civilization thousands of years older than our own."

Saturday Jul. 30, 2271 - 9:56am

It seemed like Saturday was her day to work on the signals. Even though she wasn't supposed to be here, the time she spent on the avatar had taken away from time she could have spent automating this environment, so she had to maintain it now, as well as get some of that automation in place. But Saturday she allowed herself to attack the signals and re-built large areas for data analysis. She pounded the signals with every form of analysis her catalogs held and everything she copied from Thom. She put loose limits on all format matches at the finest levels of detail in every user manual, trying to get an idea what kind of format was in use. She pursued ancient error messages who's original usage had long been forgotten and tried to understand the intent of the code they were reported in.

Somehow she stumbled on an idea way down deep. With Thom's observations about content addressability in her mind, she decided to investigate what happens if attention # was taken to be the stimulate/recall level.

This required some tools she didn't have handy. Content addressability. She studied all the references she could find on it, spending most of the day with it. She got the signals into the best analysis pipe she could formulate and fed the results back thru a correlation space. She let that grind for the weekend.

Friday Aug. 5, 2271 - 11:11pm

Alfred's probe could barely track the ship as it neared the jungle mountain, much less a single human. There were too many ships to sail in some places, and they were moved around by ropes from shore that were carried out by paddlers. Once again Alfred was astonished by the scale of what they were seeing. This city needed a Helen on duty in this harbor at all times to launch these thousand ships. The big ones like the one they tracked stayed out near the ends of the piers because they couldn't get in and out of the spaces between them.

In the years they stayed here, they only missed this because they forced themselves to. They could take these pictures from the ship, and had. They had refused to believe what they were seeing. Refused so completely that the data showed no city here, just jungle-covered ruins. They had seen nothing but ruins. They heard talk of a great civilization in the past from the people around their probe in Bostok and thought this must have been it. Now that Kelvin was not around and they could take close looks at native cities like this one, there was no possible denial that this jungle was the densest city humans had ever built.

It was impossible for a probe to track a known human in those swarms, much less try to discover an unknown. He canceled the probe on the raft of the naked siren and gave up that line of inquiry to Alan's whereabouts. While he was at it

he canceled the one where Alan had gotten off the raft and just let it go thru to the statistical and event recorders.

They knew Alan intended to reach this city, but they couldn't manufacture enough probes to watch the piers, assuming he would get here across these docks. Alan was lost. Irretrievably lost to them somewhere on this planet. If he settled down with his girlfriend in the native lifestyle any one of the millions of places he could have reached by this time, his disguise is impenetrable. It was his job to get Vic to understand, get her to stop further speculation on how they could locate him.

"I just can't give up," she kept saying. "Even if I'm only electrons, even if he denies it, he's still my son."

"Even here, you have to stop saying that."

"What other mother did he have?"

"I think he's got that native woman now."

"Their relationship doesn't look very mother-son to me," Vic pronounced.

"Admittedly it's not, but she is a mentor to him also, you've taken those reports yourself."

"Months ago Al, two months since I took that last report before he ran away, a month since I've heard his voice."

"You saw the footage, you saw he was fine then."

"I wonder if that naked woman was right and the predator that ate Alan was too cold-blooded to have an infrared signature?"

"That sensor would detect an exothermic life form

exerting enough energy to subdue Alan and the two women he was with," Alfred told her.

"What if it's not sensitive enough?"

"There was no blood trace in the water."

"It could have swallowed them whole."

"If it did you'll never find a trace of him, same evidence as if he got away into the native billions, nothing. I'd rather think he got away."

"I don't understand how you can let it go like that. Since we don't have Kelvin to deal with any more, why not study this planet thru our search for Alan?"

"We could start at the point where we tried to pick him up, do you think we could study it well enough to figure out where he went?"

She paused a few beats, then said, "I think we should start with where he's going. Study that city and understand how it works. Then we'll know how Alan will stand out and how we can find him when he gets there."

"You don't think he's there yet?"

"No, I think they outran our circle or got to cover, then took a different boat. Who knows how long he was delayed. He might have run a long way back up-river before getting a different boat."

"Why would he want to get on a boat again?" Alfred asked her.

"Because sailing's the only trade he knows."

"What will he do in the city?"

"I don't think we know enough about this city to hazard a guess," she said. "We see a misty mountain of jungle-covered ruins but the natives still think it's downtown. We can safely land at least a dozen probes in the upper branches of that jungle like the one we have back in the town of Bostok."

"At least one of them will be found if you pepper the city with them."

"And will that be more noticeable than your attack on that native raft?"

"That left no physical evidence."

"I still think that escapade left more evidence overall."

Wednesday Aug. 10, 2271 - 1:40pm

There is a time in any hack when you cry 'we're in' and the data lies open to your perusal. In a way this was such a time, or at least close to it. Content addressability was the key. The 'address modifier' was really a 'property descriptor modifier' of the current context that the content would be asking about. The header assumed one already had a context set up that was bigger than the message. By setting the stimulate/recall level a session could navigate it's search, or read increasing levels of detail. Now she just had to make a map of what data was where.

A week later she wondered if she had some of this wrong after all. If what she thought was true then the address space

here was many times that of Sol's civilization. All the space seemed to be vacant however except sessions who's outer descriptor started with 5524314424351243. That only made sense if this planet was once part of a larger network, one that might include the whole galaxy. Was that really a session protocol ID and there was now only one protocol type?

Her attention to this was now close to total. She made sure the system was functioning and keeping them alive and on a steady growth curve actually. But she didn't give it duty hours attention. By now the signals got her full attention, usually about sixteen hours a day most days. Sometimes she'd take a four hour break and read.

But more and more it was making sense. She didn't understand the nuances, but the basics were starting to fall into place. With a few more weeks of work, she might be able to formulate a query of her own. Once she was an active participant in this network, her knowledge would grow exponentially. The problem however was it needed another probe, one which could transmit a polarized signal as well as receive it. This fabrication must be hidden from Alfred, a relatively easy ruse, but also from her avatar on Gordon's Lamp, a much more difficult task even now that the delay was several seconds. There was time. She would theorize and compare to more observation for as long as it took. Let them get a billion miles away, then the monitoring would not be so close. Then she would build her bidirectional interface to the planet's data sphere.

Book V.

In the Wilds

Night of Terror

When Alan fell off his thonga, it seemed like hours into the stampede. His crushed foot had been killing him so much that he wasn't paying attention to much else at the time.

He should have paid more attention to the instant lesson in riding a thonga. The girls both knew it was just like a keda, just jump on it's back and grab it between the first and second legs. Put your knees between the second and third, your feet between the third and fourth. The animal is not flexible enough to get you off, and not smart enough to roll over to do so. But it doesn't like having a human on it's back and will usually just run. As nervous as they were over the scream and thunder of the shuttle coming in, that was all it took for the herd to bolt. Alan's attempt to jump on it was pinned to the ground by the creature's foot as it sprang into the panic. Alan already had his arm around it when this happened and he was able to crawl up onto it because the herd hadn't spread enough to let it take its stride. While crawling up onto it he got kneed in the mid section a few times but hardly noticed that over the pain from the foot.

By the time he was on top of the animal the way he was supposed to be, his whole world became the foot. He had to

keep it up off the animal's back. Even so, a lightning bolt of pain stabbed it with its every stride. He had to have his face pressed to the animal's back to stay on it and its fur and hide were like dirty industrial carpet. A thonga is a lower, wider, eight legged version of what Alan always pictured a 'cow' would be like. It was similar to a keda the way a cow was to a horse. It's fur was shorter and woollier, it's three eyes were on unequal stalks, the big center one over a foot in length. It's claws were shorter, more for bearing weight than digging, almost a hoof. It had a nostril ahead of each leg, far enough apart that a human didn't cover them, with a flap around each that looked like a short horse's ear.

The thing ran more like an antelope than a cow, judging by the VR he had seen of antelope and cows. This was real, not virtual. They smelled and made noises, their dung got thrown up and they argued and snorted with each other when they stepped on each other. Stepping on each other doesn't break anything in their legs and didn't slow them down.

What they were long on was endurance, the herd seemed to be having fun competing with each other for how far and fast they could run, maybe the one who gets the farthest is the new leader of the herd.

When it happened, he didn't know he was falling off. He thought he was riding along and paying attention. But then he suddenly didn't have a grip any more, he was in the air and it had gotten out from under him. He wondered, as he flew toward the ground and even more pain, if he had lost

consciousness.

When he fell off he thought he'd be instantly trampled by other thongas but they all dodged him and as it happened he was near the tail end of the herd so there weren't that many. While laying on the ground he heard them thundering off into the distance for a long time. Both girls had been on beasts leaving early in the stampede and were probably ahead of him, though he hadn't caught a glimpse of either in the darkness since their thongas bolted with them.

Then he was left to a night of terror somewhere in an unknown wilderness. Night in the mountain forest had been quiet and peaceful compared to the hours of darkness here. As soon as it was quiet from the receding stampede, a herd of something else meandered into the area at a slow deliberate pace. Big bodies humphed and blumped in the darkness, snapping large twigs and stripping keltoid fronds with loud rips. They dug the ground with gusto and dined on the roots. Screams and growls and booms echoed across the plain; and at one time, a few hundred yards away, he heard the sloshing of deep water and a pitiful bellow.

There was a pool of shallow water next to him, he was in a tiny clump of brush on it's edge. A large group of them sauntered to the puddle, splashed and wallowed and slurped it up. They scratched thick rough skin on the thicket he was 'hiding' in, especially on the water side, sending breakers over Alan's legs and wounded foot. Thru all this it was too dark for

Alan to actually see them. What shadows he thought he could render out of the deep shade on this dim, stars-only night had fat bodies, short muscular legs and huge jowls and tusks. He guessed they were about four to seven hundred pounds each.

To Alan it seemed like an eternally long night even for this planet and it seemed like they were going to stay thru the whole thing. If he'd had a clock it would have been no more than an hour of frolicking in this puddle before the animals had dug up all the tasty roots and grubs in the area, along with almost half the fronds. Then the growls and booms and screams moved off at right angles to the direction the stampede had gone.

The brush around him was alive with other small and not so small wildlife. In the dim light he saw something a third his size eye him from the edge of the water. It was only the dimmest of shapes in the blackness, long and low and deep in the shadows. It was a hunter, from the shadows by the brush Alan hid in, it snatched a victim out of a flock of about ten two-foot long inglethors that came by.

Thru all this he was alone with his pain, his fear and the darkness. Each sound he heard made him understand just a little bit more how desperate his situation was. He was entirely helpless, he couldn't have defended himself against that small hunter, much less one of those larger things that had been here earlier. He was injured and bleeding, no doubt half the predators around would be able to smell that. Even if

he was in perfect condition, he had nothing with which to defend himself. He had no real sense of sight in this darkness, a rudimentary sense of smell and his hearing wasn't sharp enough to let him picture what was where.

He knew nothing about the country he was in, even less than he did about the forest. He'd at least seen the forest in daylight before he had to spend a night in it and even then he was only a few hundred yards away from human habitation. Of this country he knew nothing other than the row of trees along the riverbank. He knew it was flat and he knew it was wild. He did not know if it was mainly forest or plains. He had no idea what animals lived here other than the thongas and whatever was making the noises around him. He had no idea if he was fifty feet from the nearest house or fifty miles.

Besides the major carnivores, he was ignorant of everything else in this environment. Was the brush he was sitting in infecting him with poison or disease? Were there deadly diseases in the water? Much of the water had splashed over his foot, would the wound be full of worms if he survived til daylight?

Once again he realized just how silly he was to think he could run away and join the natives on an alien planet. Oh it was great fun on that raft actually, as long as he had a guide or two to show him the way. Duty on the riverboat was easier than duty on Gordon's lamp and the living conditions weren't any worse. Having Desa as a companion had made the living conditions infinitely better.

But what about now, on his own and helpless? How long would he be able to live this way? Was it just hours or minutes until he was devoured? Or would he avoid the carnivores only to slowly starve to death as he wandered around completely lost for the next few weeks?

What had possessed him to jump from that ship? Was this really better than being re-captured and brought back to Gordon's Lamp? Of course he hadn't really done any of the planning, it was Luray's idea to hop on the thongas. No doubt she had some idea where they would be going and what to do now that they were there. More than likely the girls were still on theirs and knew some secret like the thongas would run til they came to the next riverbank where they could calmly wait for the next ship to pass.

What would the girls do when they found out he hadn't stayed with them? What could they do? They couldn't come miles back looking for him in the dark, they knew better than that, they knew they'd fall prey to something out here. How much would they care? Desa seemed to be a genuine friend, though he couldn't really understand why, but she hardly owed him her life. Luray was polite enough and seemed friendly enough but then how far out of her way would she go to save him? Maybe they would tell anyone they saw heading this way to keep an eye out for him and point the way home for him, but he didn't see any reason why they should want to mount a big rescue operation. They would probably consider it pointless because he was likely to be eaten by something

before daylight anyway.

As the night wore on and his fear grew he sunk deeper and deeper into the stupidity of the whole adventure. If he had taken a few minutes to think like a mature adult at any point along this descent into fantasy he would have realized that this could never possibly work out for him. He was an alien. He was not meant to be here. He had never been trained, prepared or evolved to withstand the rigors of this primitive planet. He was just a laboratory animal, raised in a jar and kept alive by machines, no more able to survive than a domestic animal turned loose in the wilds.

The real stupidity was that he knew he was being stupid every step of the way, as he took them. He thought all the way back to the day he first directly disobeyed his orders and went back to have breakfast with Desa on the morning after his first reading lesson. He knew he was being foolish to do even that much. When Desa asked to accompany him up to the clearing he knew he would get himself into impossible trouble if he agreed. When Desa asked him to accompany her to the city he knew it was stupid to even imagine it, knew he wouldn't be allowed and knew he didn't have any idea what it would take to make this trip. Thru all of those decisions he consciously made the stupid decision, knew he was being stupid when he made it and was powerless to stop himself.

Why? He knew why, Desa had educated him enough so that he was now able to figure it out. Little chemicals in the human body called hormones. Chemicals which made

judgment and common sense lose their grip and made lower and more primitive urges take over. It was the sight, touch and smell of Desa's person that ruled his body and thru that, his mind, thruout the whole process. It was just like the captain said, some hallucinogenic drug had taken over his mind, but the hallucinogenic drug was produced by his own glands. Well now it looked like he would pay for that stupidity.

He was in the center of a thicket, his legs drawn up, his back against the clump of thick reeds that was one of the trunks of this clump. He was as sheltered as he could make himself. When he didn't think anything was nearby he would straighten his legs to stretch them. His feet would then extend beyond the opposite side of this ring of reed clumps. It wasn't quite as dark as it used to be when Alan finally fell asleep. He was still too terrified to sleep but adrenaline letdown and the injury knocked him out.

When he woke Kortrax was free of the horizon and his foot was no longer quite the screaming agony it had been. It had settled down to a dull ache and forceful throb as long as he didn't move it. He was quite chilled, the temperature here at dawn was a little lower than right on the river, but he was not about to get up and run around.

His first concern on waking was to look at the foot in daylight and see how much damage was done. He found quite a bit of skin torn in a long gash, but it was not terribly deep

and hadn't bled a huge amount. There didn't seem to be any vermin living in it either. The whole foot was swollen, a little purple, and extremely tender. Attempting to stand on it caused knives to lance thru it.

The little shallow pool by the clump he spent the night in was nothing more than a wet spot on the ground that didn't even drown the ribbonleaves. No doubt it would dry up before darkness descended again. The water had settled since the big things left so many hours ago and didn't look too contaminated. He needed water badly, so he started to drink some of it. No doubt he would catch something fatal from it, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Then he saw his pack over by another tuft of brush a few yards away and spat it out. It was sprawled open but some of the contents were still within. He hobbled and crawled to it and found the knife was still there, the clothing bundle and the water skins. Desa's cook pot lay a ways further behind it but there was no sign of the tent, the maps or Desa's cup. He didn't go farther in that direction, once he'd carved himself a crutch maybe. For now having the skins and a chance to get clean water was enough.

He looked around the area, examining what he could see from where he sat. The most impressive features were the spectacular anchored balloonleaves. They were twice the height of any other tree in the area, thin slender vines upon which giant leaves floated in the breeze, hundreds of feet

long. The leaves were almost transparent, like green plastic film, and they drifted in the gentle breeze like seaweed.

The area was thickly scattered with twiggy brush about six or eight feet tall. A lot of it appeared dead, but he couldn't see any reason why that should be. There were shoots around like a new generation of them springing up. They were some form of random-leaf archwood-related brush, but that was all he could tell about them. There were a few clumps of larger archwood trees in the distance, probably related to the species that people grew houses from. There was one large hangleaf less than a hundred feet away. A miniature hangleaf only three feet tall was common also. It had branches that always divided in two and did so no more than three times. The end of each branch had a large tuft of leaves and a circlet of bright blue flowers. There were a few of some other form of plant that turned out to be animals. They looked like piles of huge leaves, but, looking almost like a vine among the leaves, was a tiny head which would occasionally take a small bite of soil. They had skinny little vine-like legs also, and the one closest to him was using them to crawl slowly away.

He wondered how much further the girls had gone. They seemed so good at riding that they may have ridden til the stampede stopped and then calmly dismounted. They couldn't have known when he fell off, since they couldn't see or hear each other in the tumult of the stampede. Even if they had known, it would have been suicide for them to jump off with

plenty of the herd following them. Now that it was daylight he thought they might look for him, but they had no way of knowing where he was, so there was little chance of finding him in all this wilderness. In all likelihood they wouldn't even be able to find each other. There was also the chance that they might have been hurt also. He didn't notice them getting hurt at first, but they could have been thrown and trampled, or eaten by a theirops, or even found by the Angels. He fervently hoped that none of those things had happened, he just couldn't bear to lose them. He noticed there was a part of his mind that thought the fantasy would continue and he would somehow find them again. He wondered how long it would be before he would be forced to admit they were gone from his life forever.

It would be easy enough to follow the herd's trail, Alan observed, and there was a good chance they would be somewhere on that route. Before he did that he would have to wrap his foot and make a crutch. The chance that he would actually catch up with them was too remote to contemplate, but as there was nothing else he could do that made any sense at all, it gave him a goal.

The best thing to wrap his foot with was the only short robe Desa brought with her, the same one she had worn the night of his first reading lesson. He could close his eyes and still remember her as she looked in the candle light that Nightday. The hurt of her loss was worse than his foot.

It took hours to make a crutch. In finding a good hangleaf

pole, he found some thick stemmed, thick leafed, plants that looked enough like what the natives called 'rinko,' only taller, that he suspected they might be edible. With them he was able to take quite a bit off his hunger. They were rather bland, a little sweet in the leaf and tart in the stem, but filling.

Even so the crutch was ready before he was. He could hop around the area on the crutch, but he couldn't get to his feet with the pack on. He put weight on the foot in trying and suffered agony in the process. Just when it had started to feel a little better even.

So for the remainder of Morningday he did nothing more than stump around the immediate area. He found the tent and Desa's cup, unbroken. He hoped she had the maps with her. He knew she had the blanket, the remainder of her clothes and the frying pan.

He actually caught some inglethors by the time it got toward Noonsleep and toasted them up on a little fire. He was going to think about sleeping, but he thought he heard his name far in the distance the way the herd had gone.

He got to his knees and bellowed, "DESA!" as loud as he possibly could thru his cupped hands. He repeated this over and over until his throat hurt.

An hour went by and he heard nothing. When his throat was able he called again. More time went by, he heard nothing. He called again. Again nothing more. He had probably just imagined hearing her. He called one more time

anyway, before his call broke into sobs.

After he stopped sobbing and just sat beside the drying puddle silently for a long while, he heard something coming. It was moving fairly quietly, but it was fairly big, bigger than an inglethor. It was coming from the direction they had come, opposite where he thought he heard Desa's voice. He caught sight of the top of it over the brush, it was as far above the ground as a human's head and it was tawny yellow. It was coming his way with a purpose. Whatever it was, he should get ready for it so he reached for the knife and the crutch. The end of the crutch wasn't real blunt and it was heavy enough to put force behind. He knew he had no chance, but he would put up a fight anyway.

The Theirops Hunters

Alan watched a long stick with a shattered-off piece of trunk on the end of it came out of the brush first, and then the leaves parted to reveal Luray. She had not a scrape on her skin or a tear in her robe, the thin jersey she'd left the ship in. Her sandals were still on tight and she stepped carefully in them.

"Oh God, thank God it's you," Alan said. "I thought there was some kind of animal coming for me."

"I'm surprised there hasn't been the way you've been

calling them."

"I thought I heard Desa."

"Let Desa follow the stampede back to us, any their ops around would love to know where she's lost and alone. It looks like you're not just lost and alone but lame besides, what happened?"

"The thonga jumped up on my foot just as I was jumping onto it. It's smashed to pulp. It feels a little better now that I've wrapped it, but even with this crutch I can't get to my feet with the pack."

"Not surprising, as bulky as that is, but this is as good a place to camp for Noonsleep as any. We should fill up the water skins before this puddle dries out. There's a leese wallow about a quarter mile back, but I don't want to have to drink the water out of that even with these steriskins. But I see you've done that." She looked around a little before sitting down next to him. "Looks like I missed dinner," she said upon seeing the ashes.

"I managed to snag a few inglethors. I could probably find you some more."

She put her hand on his shoulder as she moved over to him. "Oh no, I've been grazing all day as I followed your trail. It's not like home in the garden, but we certainly won't starve out here."

"I hope you weren't hurt when you were thrown."

"I wasn't thrown," Luray said with a touch of indignation, "I jumped down when I first found my beast at the tail of the

herd. I never lost my feet. Desa probably stayed on hers til they stopped," she continued. "I think streetcars are most of the miles she's been moved by beast."

"You've got all your stuff with you?"

"Desa didn't get quite everything into this bag. Under the mattress I had a little pouch with thirteen irons, a fireglass, a rord pipe with a small bag and some hair ties, along with one more pill from that shop in Hazorpean. That was in the bag with the rord. It was just a cleanser to help get the yaag out of my metabolism. I don't think I'm going to need it out this way, something tells me we're out of the neighborhoods with friendly little yaagatoria and cook stands at the crossroads."

"I'll say. Where are we?" Alan asked.

"We're on the north shore of the Lhar, probably just over halfway from Lastriss to Shempala. The thongas ran downstream quite a long way. I rode almost an hour til I got off and I walked along in the tracks of the herd a good part of Dawnsleep as well as most of Morningday. The river's to the south of us, but I'm sure we'll find it's swamp. It's swamp for a long way, even this far I think it's shorter to go back than go on ahead beyond the swamp."

"I'm going to be slow wherever we go."

"For awhile, let's wait til Desa gets here."

"I only heard her that once."

"At least she's not being real stupid out here. This isn't like the Wescarp hills where you might see a theirops come thru every decade or so, around here you might find a few a

year."

Luray wanted a look at Alan's foot, and tut-tutted his objections, "After my adventure, Oliar made sure I knew good basic healing to tend to him. The next century of my life I learned quite a bit from the Dwarves in Wescarp, they were much more advanced at the time than the Nordics that lived on these plains."

Alan tried to figure out what was happening on Earth while Luray was doing that. Sometime before Alexander? The mental arithmetic to convert the numbers was prone to error, even with pencil and paper, or the phone-calc, now at the bottom of the Lhar.

With the loss of the phone he had REALLY defected. No doubt he wouldn't be reporting in now. No doubt they wouldn't be tracking his signal. It was going to lie in that same spot on the bottom of the Lhar til the sediment it lay in eroded.

Like the medomat on the ship, Luray mumbled medical terms over his foot. She rolled up his other two pair of shorts and put them under the arch of his foot, then wrapped his foot much tighter with Desa's dress.

"Keep that off everything and keep everything off that for at least two weeks. If we see some clay we could probably plaster that in the Afternoonday sun. I can't tell how many of your foot bones are cracked and if any are broken all the way thru, but I think one or two of the arch bones might be. It's swollen up too much. That crutch is good, we might get you

to a more comfortable campsite."

"You keep saying we, do you think Desa will find us?"

"With all the bellowing you did? I found you a while ago," Luray said, "and Desa was always the wood nymph. She was probably farther away."

"Where do you think those thongas would have stopped?"

"Oh I'd have thought by this point anyway."

"I think when the shuttle flew around in that higher altitude circle it put a fear into those beasts that wasn't going to leave them til they'd run to the next climate zone," Alan said.

"I'd have thought their hearts would have burst by the time they got here."

"They felt like they were into it to me. That every-other-leg every-other-time gait looked like they were running half as fast to go twice as far. I felt like they were competing for distance."

"A thonga stampede will do that."

The pause gave him a chance to examine the stick she was carrying, which was pretty long and heavy, ugly with the broken off jagged piece of trunk. "What was this about?" he asked.

"Theirops spear," she said.

"From what I saw at the feast you'd need more than that to defend against a theirops."

"Not if you make him think you're hunting him. Make him think the reason you came out here is to ram the blade of

your spear down his throat when he charges. You are not a big enough meal for him to risk analyzing this spear to see if it's real or not."

"Did you have to do that?"

"No, because I stayed in the open and held it high."

He clearly heard his name. It was from only a few hundred yards away. He jumped up and yelled with excitement "DesAAAA!" as he remembered too late that his foot was injured.

"She'll certainly find us now." Luray told him.

"I wish I'd taken the time to use the crutch right," he said as he tried to ease his foot back into a comfortable position.

In a relatively short time Desa walked into view. For clothing she had on a harness, leg socks and sandals. Her bag was tied over her shoulders sideways on the harness. She was also wearing two sticks tied to her forearm with a spare sandal strap. One stick had a strong branch curving out on each side, from which she had run a string to a nub on the main stick. On the end of the other stick she had folded a point of shiny paper and fastened it on with a rubber band.

Luray howled with laughter. "You went all out with your costume," she yelled across the intervening distance.

"I kind of like it." Desa hollered back. She turned and posed the way Kaha did at the logging party.

"With that get up and this spear we'll be safe from theirops now," Luray told him in a normal voice.

"Those sticks will only slow Desa down if a theirops

comes after her."

"But the theirops doesn't know that. With the three of us together, they see a hunting party with powerful weapons and supplies. They'll be warning each other out of our path now. You have to believe it works though," Luray continued, "otherwise you won't smell right. Theirops hardly ever attack multiple humans. Multiple humans with simple knives can inflict more pain on the theirops than it wants to encounter for his meal. If a single human manages to cut it once or twice in the arm before dying, that's just spicy food. If it gets stabbed deep a few times in the back by the other human however, those wounds could fester. If the human has a serious weapon, like a crossbow or spear, the theirops won't attack. It is a professional carnivore, it won't risk it's life for a simple meal.

"And that is what is so terrible about getting hunted by a theirops. It watches you for awhile before it attacks, making sure you aren't hunting it. It prances around the local area to see if you've got friends. Then it starts to come in closer, darts up and snips off a hand or something with a pincer to see what you do then. If you still don't hurt it, only then will it actually eat you."

"It was really bad of me to leave Desa on that mountain wasn't it?" Alan was horrified by the thought of something like that happening to Desa.

"Yes it was Alan, being there sleeping by herself was very dangerous. Now that you say you were doing it only for

ghosts, it's even worse. Until we are back in civilization again, it is very important that you don't do that again. We've managed to find each other, we better not desert each other out here."

By then Desa was walking up to them and Alan struggled to his feet and stumped out to embrace her. She made him tell the story of his foot before anything else was exchanged.

He finally got to ask about her adventures. "The herd spread out before they stopped, I wasn't sure where you'd be. Since dawn I've been tramping around the whole thonga-trampled area looking for you. When I finally heard you I realized you had fallen off before they stopped and I've been following their trail back ever since."

"If you'd gotten off when I did we'd be back to the ship by now," Luray said.

"If we go back to that ship they will know." Alan said. "The Angels have an eye permanently mounted in the sky that will watch that ship until the crowds of Shempala confuse it. If we return to Vyinga's ship they will certainly know it and will come after us again."

"We'll take a different ship from here," Desa said, "but where can we pick one up?"

"If we just follow the thonga herd back a day or so we will come to the point on the river they bolted from." Luray said, "I think the trail will be fresh enough even next week to retrace. Meanwhile Alan's foot is asking us to find a secure

campsite for the dark."

"It looks like you're right," Desa said while inspecting it. "You think it's broke?"

"At least cracked, there's lots of swelling."

"You're not taking me back there," Alan said, "That beach will be watched by that same eye. If people show up there, they will know it. I don't want to be one of those people."

"We're north of the upstream swamp," Luray said, "I don't know how far we went. I'll tell you this though, I'll face the theirops on this prairie before I want to see that starship again."

"I can see why you wanted to get away from them," Desa said.

Desa unstrapped her bag. She had a folder of paper in there that held a rough tourist map of the Shempala Lakes region from the 51st century, now all crackly with age. Alan figured out that it should be, it was the better part of a thousand years old. The swamp was still Upper Lake Shempala then, but the rivers hadn't moved much and what was labeled 'wild prairie' back then looked about like that now. A little more grown up and bushy but certainly still wild. A group of cattle towns were noted a hundred and fifty miles or so to the northeast. The resort towns on the north shore of the upper lake would all be gone now, this 'wild range' would get wetter and brushier til there was no doubt it was swamp if they went in that direction.

"I can't say how far we've come either," Desa said. "I

think it'll be more open away from the swamp. If we go north a day or so we might be able to see something." Desa was looking around. She stood up again without her costume, but had the fake crossbow propped up against the pack. "We don't have to waste any time looking for the high ground around here."

"No, a clump of archwoods would be the best place to camp while Alan heals, I think." Luray said, "I saw a few out to the north, I'll go take a look at them, you stay here with Alan."

"You shouldn't go out alone."

"They can smell me out there hunting them with my wizard's spear."

The Foot Camp

The land was more open just about a mile north, during Afternoonday Alan was able to make his way to a site Luray found. Since his pace was slow, the girls foraged on the way and were able to find them enough food for duskmeal and all of Nightday.

They camped in a clump of big arching trees. These trees spread way out and the tips of their limbs nearly reached the ground again, ending at about the height a thonga would chew them off. A little shallow brook flowed around the site on the north and east.

There were plenty of dead sticks here, enough to keep a fire going all thru Nightday, with their props casting shadows on the arching leaves. They slept as much as they could, but at least one and often two of them were awake. He got to tell Desa about his first night and the terror that he had. She was sympathetic and agreed that it was scary, even more scary because he knew so little about where he was. He told her about the big animals that gave him such a scare.

"It sounds like they were probably blanthts," she said. "They're big, but they're totally harmless. They could hurt you if you really made them mad, but making them mad takes a lot of work. If you get on one it will blump at you and show you it's going to roll over if you don't get off. They will defend each other, so you don't want to try and eat them unless you're ready for a hunt that will fight them all.

"But if you don't act aggressive you can just walk along with the herd. They would help defend you from a theirops, they'll gang up on theirops also."

"They made some pretty spooky noises."

"I think they're happy noises. The big booms mean 'come on', the blups and blumps are like 'see here!' and the shrieks announce something tasty. They're pretty ugly and fat, and sometimes pompous, but they're more funny than spooky."

They all spent most of the time rolled in blankets by the fire. Alan lay down except when he had to hobble out of camp to piss, and even then he didn't dare go very far. It

wasn't quite as warm thru the dark as it had been on the river, but it was still warm enough. They each slept off and on. Alan slept more often than he normally would have.

Most of the food they had picked up were leaves and roots. There were a few berries, a lot like the honey-grapes called gloribards, but smaller. The blanth had missed quite a few of the roots they brought up, or maybe they were just too small for a blanth to bother with but fine for a human. Once washed and seared a little, they tasted a little like French fries. Some of the leaves were pretty tart, but if you wrapped some berries in them they were fine.

Another time during this darkness he was sitting with Luray. Herds of grazers came by, slowly this time, feeding. Cynd was up and by it's ruddy light they could see them out on the plains around them. Because they were calm, it made Luray confident there were no dangerous predators around.

"I'm a little surprised they are getting this close to us actually." Luray said. "They can certainly see our fire, but they're still within a quarter mile of us."

"Why would they be afraid of us? Each one of them is as big as all of us."

"They get hunted. Lots of those jars on the ship were brined thonga. They must not get hunted very much out here."

"I would guess you might not get it in before it spoiled out here."

"Probably not, even field dressed. You'd have to drive

them."

"What's that?"

"You get a bunch of people and you surround them and scare them in the direction you want to go. You have to go slow however, if they stampede you'll lose them, even if you're riding kedas. The best way is a loose line of about fifty people, singing and clapping and strolling slowly over the plains. Thongas aren't too smart, they never associate this with danger, just mild annoyance, so they don't know they're in trouble til they're milling around against a fence or river. Then you can rope them out one at a time and pack each one fresh."

"The time and place where this was done has been romanticized on Earth til it's now a legend."

"It's no legend here, it's what herdsman do for a living. We might see a few of them before we make it out of here. But why was that a legend?"

"It was one of the last things in our society that was this close to nature. Even what farmers remain today sit in cabs of big equipment breathing filtered and temperature controlled air."

"You say such things about your world and they seem so preposterous. But that starship that attacked us was so preposterous that I guess I have to believe anything you say now."

"What did I say that's so preposterous?" he asked.

"If you're in this cab on some big equipment, how are you

going to see things like ythith holes and snooket?"

"You don't. You get crop condition maps from satellites and make soil analysis with a probe on your machine."

Luray didn't understand enough of this to get a picture of what he was trying to say. He had to explain satellites, probes, cabs, and something of what these machines looked like. And finally he understood that it made no sense to her because she had no concept of what an Earth farm looked like. She was picturing this huge combine in a one acre garden. He had to tell her of the three thousand acre monoculture.

Desa was sleeping at this time, it was late in Nightday by now. Alan was almost sleeping himself, but Luray was interesting and he wanted to stay awake and talk with her, but he was in such slow motion that he really didn't come up with anything to say right away.

"So while we're talking about your planet, how does that starship work?" Luray asked. "How can it make so much noise and wind? How does it work outside the atmosphere where there's no air to make wind with?"

"First of all, please understand that what 'attacked' us is not the starship. The starship stays in space, it is much bigger than the shuttle, more like the size of Yoonbarla."

"Oh my." She had to digest that awhile. "But if that wasn't the starship, what was that thing?"

"The 'Atmosphere Shuttle'. It is a device used to move things between the starship and any planet with a significant atmosphere."

"So why the noise and wind? Why don't starships just float quietly like floaters?"

"The shuttle stays in the air when its going slow because it has powerful fans in it's wings which blow wind and keep them up by the force of that wind. The fans are noisy."

"I see, you'll have to draw a picture sometime, I couldn't see it in the dark. But what was it going to do to us?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think they probably would have darted us and..."

"Kill us ALL?"

"These darts will paralyze you, but they won't kill you. Then they would have had a manipulator bot come out and carry me back inside."

"What is a manipulator bot?"

"It's a machine that can handle things. The ship has lots of them. They are the only things other than me and the androids that can actually move anything composed of atoms."

"Everything is composed of atoms."

"Not what is composed only of electrons, like all the souls which remain on that ship."

There was another pause. She was digesting that. Luray had also been told about electricity and might get something of an image of how they could be composed only of electrons.

"What is an android?" she asked next.

"These days that word is used to mean any device which appears to be a human being."

"I don't see how anybody could be fooled into thinking a device is a human being."

"I was sixteen years old, that's two and a half decades here, before I found out that my parents were really androids, biomechanical devices which were being controlled by Angels, what you call ghosts."

Luray shuddered. "How horrible. I feel so sorry for you." She reached out and rubbed his shoulder. "How could you grow up as normal as you have with no human company?"

"During the whole time I was growing up I didn't know I had no human company. I was with those two androids all the time, and there were two others who sometimes 'visited' us."

"But they weren't real?"

"I didn't know that then. They are very good fakes, they even bleed."

"Then how'd you find out?"

"It's in the records. In the ship there are things like the phone only bigger and with much bigger screens. You can look up all kinds of information with them."

"Like making a query on a suntower?"

"Yes," Alan answered, though he really didn't know what she really meant, he could just be mistranslating. If he understood, he understood more about that globe on the tower in Hazorpean than he did before.

"How did you feel when you found out?" she asked.

"It was like I died. I felt like nothing was real, I wondered if I was real. And then I felt as empty and desolate as space

itself, where there's no air. The only way they were able to regain contact with me was by telling me I could start training for an expedition to the surface."

"So you knew about us then?"

"Yes, I was two and a half decades when we first parked below Narrulla. All I did for 'school' was study this planet. The promise that I would get to walk here is all that brought me back to life."

"And after all that they were only going to let you stay here two weeks?"

"That wasn't the original plan, but once I found out how much knowledge Kassidor has, they were frightened."

"But why do they want you back?"

"They are afraid I will give away knowledge of Earth."

"Who would want it? I think anyone who found out about it would wish there was no such thing."

"All of Earth is not like this expedition. If their information is correct there are seventeen billion real people there, and not all of them are dominating and rigid. I just happened to be with the wrong ones."

"The planet itself isn't bad, or I guess I should say it wasn't bad. There hasn't been much wilderness in this style for a couple centuries, it's been soil-mined out for those mechanized farms. There is wilderness like Yoonbarla, but it would be frozen in winter for four of your years out of every six."

"How frozen?" she asked.

"Like icecap, never getting above freezing for those four years."

"I still wish I never heard of it."

"There's quite a bit of jungle left in Brazil. That's the country the next starship will come from. They will all be flesh, and I don't know about the crew on that ship, but I've heard that some Brazilians actually like to party and have sex."

"Some actual people from your planet, like you?"

"They will be much older than me, all of them will be at least forty. They will look older than you do by a factor of two. They are six or seven of your decades actually."

She gave him a questioning look, then her eyes went wide. "The people of your planet are still ephemeral?"

"Yes," Alan told her, knowing what she meant and not realizing she didn't know that til now.

"I still wish it didn't exist. No wonder it's so wacky. I can understand ephemerals, I lived among them back when they still existed here."

"Yes, I remember how sad it was for you. As far as I know all flesh is still ephemeral on Earth, at all of YingolNeerie. Only the Angels are immortal."

"And how old are they?" she asked.

"The oldest were born as flesh more than one of your centuries ago."

"None are as old as Desa?"

"No."

Luray was silent awhile, then said, "I think I've had two children of this body in my life, the one with Knume at the beginning of the 52nd, and another one back in the 41st, fourteen centuries ago. That was also out in Wescarp, a healthy male last I knew, forgot his name though. He'd be one of the old timers if he was still around but I really didn't get along with his father and left him with his father. His father was a pureblooded Troll and too proud of it.

"When I was living that story I told you, my big adventure, I was as old as any of your people are now. Are there any older ones back there?"

"Some who are five decades or so older."

"You are all ephemerals."

"Luray, most of Earth's great civilizations have risen and fallen since you were born. Desa is older than the nation and church that sent this expedition."

"You are all ephemerals," she sighed.

She poked at the fire awhile. She was folded in her blanket the way Kassidorians do, but she was still pretty. The Aztecs were still in control of Mexico when she and Knume had that child. The Roman empire was at it's height when she'd had her first. She could have watched Homer recite his tales if she had the ship to get there.

Her skin was smooth and tan, the gentle tan you get from Kortrax. Her eyes glistened so and they were so blueberry blue. On Earth she looked fifteen years younger now than the day she rode Bloric's log to Hazorpean. A couple stray hairs

sparkled and she jumped back. Her reflexes were still perfect. After millennia, after untold kegs of yaag.

He remembered when he first met Desa, and how hard he tried to grasp the reality of her age. She was more than a digit ahead of him in age. Now Luray was almost a digit ahead of Desa in age. But she looked certainly much less than thirty now, maybe twenty six.

"I'm glad you stayed here," she said. "Of course if a kranjan comes thru here you'll wish you stayed on Earth."

"Will this fire attract them?"

"About the ONLY good thing about kranjans is, they're never active in the dark. The only time they wake up is if something steps on them and they just eat it and go back to sleep."

Alan must have gone to sleep himself soon after that.

Dangerous Prey

He who never interacts with his own kind needs no name. He prowls the light and the dark on his own, too smart and fast to fear the kranjan, too big and strong and heavily armed to fear anything else. Humans might call him by the name 'theirops', but he knows none of that. He does know humans however, and in the twenty three centuries he's been prowling these plains, he's had the good fortune to eat seven of them, and has only taken two claw wounds and one hit from their

flying teeth.

He knew by the light and the smell that humans were near. There was a pinpoint of light out there on the edge of the plains, too low to be the reflection of Kunae off a spot of water. His manes knew it was burning wood, something humans do because they are blind in the dark.

For him it wasn't dark at all out on these plains. He double-stepped in their direction, til he was well away from where they could hear him. He approached more quietly after that, and kept his senses alert for something less technical than a human. He was now several miles closer to the swamp, he might find a leese out here, he smelled a couple wallows as close as the humans were, he smelled other water. He knew these humans had been here long enough to void wastes. They will stay by their fire thru the whole dark.

Leese are not easy either, their beak is as powerful as one of his pincers and their pain sense is very limited. The tentacles are no problem, his pincers could snip those up, but he had to be careful of the beak. A leese is bigger than a human, it was more than he could eat in fact, so it would attract hakken and quibarta. And humans taste so much better than leese. If there were any thonga around he could catch them in this brush, he couldn't get close enough to the herds on the open plain. He didn't smell any at the moment, the only thing here, now that he'd walked all this way, were a couple leese and at least one human. Anything else in the area would just be a snack.

There was a bit of brush and tarrids in the area. He could use them to stay out of their sight. As long as he didn't let their firelight fall on him, he was invisible to them. He was an experienced human hunter and knew they could not see well in the dark. He knew they had no sense of smell but very good hearing. He had to be silent as he crept closer. When you weigh nineteen hundred pounds and have six legs with nine inch claw-hooves on them and your back likes to be six feet above the ground, it is difficult to be quiet enough to fool a human.

Once he got a little closer he could smell that there were three humans here. They come in two flavors, two of these were the juicier kind. The skinny one was the tough kind. He could see it was already injured, he would save it for last. Three humans is a really nice belly full, almost like getting a thongga, and tasting almost as good as a thongga. He wriggled nice and close behind some shrubbery and stuck an eye thru it to look at them.

The one that was probably tastiest was sleeping. They wrap up in plant fiber cocoons to sleep but they're not hard to peel once they're dead. There was no cover that would let him get close enough to snatch that one without the other ones noticing. There were two awake, one with fluffy brown head fibers that also looked delicious, and the skinny, injured, tougher one. This one didn't look real tough though, just skinny. He could probably get all three of them down, but he'd lay here the remainder of the dark digesting. He could

lay next to their fire after he ate them. He didn't know how they made it, but knew it would be warmer than the ground til Kortrax came again.

The two that were awake were making noises at each other. Humans do that almost any time they are awake. Humans are awake in the middle of the dark and sleep in the middle of the light. And one can't live on humans alone, not that anyone's gotten away with that in dozens of centuries. These were awake and the tasty one made some noise like, "A living thing is a process, not an object, we've just removed some of the discontinuities in the development of that process." The boney one was just listening. Then the tasty one stopped and looked his way. His eye had snapped a twig poking thru the brush to get a look at them. They were aware of him now, so the game was on.

The humans are pinned to their fire. They are totally dependent on their eyes and their eyes are weak and they only have two. They were peering into the darkness, straight at him at first, but then they scanned the whole area. The tasty one did something with sticks that made the fire bigger. A very serious claw had sprouted on the forelimb of the skinny one. And the tasty one picked up something that wasn't just sticks.

They were giving off mixed signals. Not all humans have big claws or flying teeth. These did. The skinny one had a claw half as long as his and the tasty one had a big tooth

launcher. In fact it might be almost too big for her. The tooth it threw was huge with a wicked straight-edge point, one like he hadn't seen in thirty centuries. At the same time, they were secreting their fear pheromones in quantity.

Any time there are multiple humans it is cause for concern. They work as teams, as if they are each other's hatchlings. After watching them an hour, he was sure they couldn't see him, but they were still concerned about his presence. The one with the wicked tooth launcher had disappeared from view. He spotted it trying to get an angle on him to try and see him. This one, though tastier, was putting off less fear pheromones and looked to be serious with that tooth launcher. He slunk back a bit and began a slow circle of their fire. The humans clearly followed his progress as he circled them. They were in the center of a clump of archwoods, their fire was in the very center of the clump, a clump big enough that it must have been here since the sea first left this spot. They kept the fire large and their weapons handy. The skinny one was now holding a claw as long as his arm.

He came very close to one of the leese wallows while he was out here. He hated to do it with two of the tasty humans to pick from in this group, but with three of them, armed, the leese was a much easier target. He probed with his claw around the whole wallow, there was nothing in it but the stems of lon. He eventually found the leese's bolt hole and reached in there as far as he could. He came up empty. He

tried making the sound of a thonga blundering into the wallow. Nothing.

A leese wasn't smart enough to pick and choose it's prey, it hears the splashing, it goes to that wallow, as simple as that. Only two things stop it. It might be dead, in which case someone was poaching his territory, or it might be too gorged from a kill to fit thru it's bolt hole. Whatever the truth was, it wouldn't come out tonight, and he was left with no choice but the humans.

He took his time, circling them the remainder of the way. There was little cover anywhere around them, and he eventually wound up at the bush where he originally observed them. He took his time here and redoubled his efforts at quiet. Taking many minutes between each movement of each foot. He was on his belly the whole way, his face pressed to the ground, so low he was hidden behind the tarrids.

All he had to do was get close enough to grab the tastiest one. That one had yellow head fibers and was wrapped in a cocoon. It probably had no dangers and would be prevented from using them by the cocoon until he had sprinted far enough from the fire's light. He would run a ways and eat that one in peace, then figure out what to do about the others. But first he had to get much closer.

That was easier said than done. The other tasty one kept using sticks on the fire and it got bigger and bigger. As he got closer, he had to be even more silent or they would hear him and peer intently in his direction again. They didn't launch

spear or claw at him however, which had to mean they could not see him. They are as helpless as the leese to their mental limitations, they cannot confront something they cannot see.

As he worked his way ever closer, something began to cross his mind. The tough and skinny one, the one with the huge claw, had a claw that looked suspiciously like a broken stick. The smaller claw he saw earlier was certainly real, that straight-edged point on the flying claw was certainly real, but what if this huge claw that one was holding was nothing more than a stick? That would even things up a little bit wouldn't it?

What was the most likely outcome if he was to make a grab? He could certainly spring from here and grab the one in the cocoon, that was a given. The problem was, there was every likelihood he would take a flying tooth. From the fear pheromone even the tasty one was putting off, they were probably humans unfamiliar with the plains. This would make them stupid, but it would also make them unpredictable. It would try to hit him with a flying tooth and wouldn't care where and be just as likely to give him a flesh wound that would be sore for a year, or damage a nostril permanently.

He crept beyond one more tarrid. He was within two bounds of them now. The next time the one with the tooth launcher scanned the other way, he was going for it. To wait any longer would just give his fear time to grow. To pounce any sooner would be stupid. It was a dangerous gamble, he could be seriously injured, but there seemed to be no other

chance at a meal on this plain this dark.

Night of the Theirops

It was probably deep in Dawnsleep by now. Alan and Desa were both awake, Luray was sleeping. They weren't really doing much, Alan hadn't moved much, still had his foot up. Desa was keeping the fire going, using it's light to find some smaller sticks since she knew they wouldn't be needing it for many more hours.

They had caught up on what he had talked about with Luray, the ephemeral nature of Earth life.

"I had a hard enough time getting my mind around your age, about four hundred of our years," Alan said. "Meanwhile Luray is a three thousand year old witch, a beautiful one to be sure, but still ancient history in my world. I'm so in awe of that."

"You'll get over it. You have to get used to the fact that some people were just born at different times and no one is going to volunteer to die. We all still change, she's not the same person she was then, you know that from her story. She's not even the same person she was in Yoonbarla a few weeks ago. I'm not the same person who slung thothook for Lenkiin or wrote that textbook. Think of it as we just don't have to go thru death and rebirth to become our own next generation. A living thing is a process, not an object, we've

just removed some of the discontinuities in the development of that process."

Just then she must have heard something out on the plains around them. She motioned him to silence and listened intently. He started to ask her what she thought she heard but she put her hand over his mouth. He noticed what she heard, the lumins, sparse here but still present, had gone silent. She picked up the fake crossbow and held it over the fire. She tied it back on her arm. Alan picked up his knife. Without a sound she motioned him to stay still.

They waited in silence a long time staring into the darkness. Desa built up the fire and stared some more. All thought of conversation was gone. Desa made sure the fake crossbow made shadows on the archwood fronds. When the waiting got interminable, she crouched low and left the circle of firelight.

Alan began to hear the sounds she was talking about. There was something moving around out there. It pranced from brush clump to brush clump. There weren't as many legs as a thonga and it was a lot quicker. It was between one hundred and two hundred yards out, way too far for him to see it, but BIG. He crawled over and picked up Luray's spear and sat with that held high by the fire. He heard water splash just a little ways off and hoped it wasn't Desa falling into something that far from the fire. In little more than ten minutes Desa came back to him around the other side of the nearest trunk.

"There's definitely one out there," she said, shaking a little. "I didn't see it but I heard it. I'm glad you grabbed that spear. We'll sit by the fire with them. Above all, be confident. How you feel is how you smell. We want to get on each side of Luray," she added, "don't tempt it to come in and grab the sleeping human off to one side."

"How long will it stalk us?" he asked. Alan had to admit he was already really scared.

"Theirops aren't that long of attention span, just the opposite of a quibarta. If he hasn't found a way to catch at least one of us in a few hours he'll lose interest."

"That doesn't sound like fun."

"Just be confident, watch for it, be ready to spear it if it shows, think with anger about how deep you're going to drive that spear into his throat when he charges. Heft it like you're itching to use it, just looking for a target."

Alan did that. Not that he seriously thought he would even be able to act out throwing that spear at something like the beast that was on the table the night of that logging party. Desa meanwhile was pretty consistent, flexing the bow and checking the bolt alignment from time to time, scanning otherwise.

And there really were noises out there. Large hard claws clicked on sticks, brush rustled. Stealthy but heavy footsteps paced just outside the circle of firelight.

"Should we wake up Luray?" he asked.

"Only if you're ready to fake a charge."

"No."

"Then we shouldn't look that agitated."

"What about climbing trees?" he asked.

"If it sees us try it, it knows we're not dangerous and charges. We could never get Luray up in time, I don't think either of us could get high enough in time.

It wasn't good to say this to him. The more she told him he shouldn't smell afraid, the more he sweated. He could smell it on himself.

It wasn't that close. Desa went wild with the fire, building a blaze that lit the plains for a hundred yards in all directions from this keltoid clump. She waved the crossbow around to cast shadows on the fronds.

"We are safe because they are intelligent enough to fall for this. They are intelligent enough to tell an armed and dangerous human from a lost and alone one, but not intelligent enough to see thru the bluff. As long as you are intelligent enough to know that, you know the bluff will work and your biology will cooperate and you can be entertained by playing bluff-the-theirops in the early Dawnsleep."

"I'd rather not be entertained playing this."

"Sometimes you just have to enjoy the entertainment nature provides."

"I'm not finding this entertaining."

"You will thru many parties for centuries to come."

"If they come."

"Alan, this does work. They hardly ever mess with

multiple humans anyway. But why don't you calmly get your knife out in case we do have to try and actually convince it."

"Desa; saying that doesn't help me project a confident aroma."

Alan had pretty much forgotten his foot by now. They were sitting backlit by the fireplace staring out toward where the sounds were coming from and a little bit behind the most convenient trunk. The trunks of this clump of keltoids formed a rough circle about fifteen feet in diameter with the fireplace right in the center.

It eventually walked all the way around them, about a hundred yards away. They never saw a speck of it, but they heard it. The world was so still now, the chernockas were long gone to bed, the laleets were six hours from waking. They moved around the fire to face it. Desa kept the fake crossbow pointed in its direction while it rustled thru the fronds. Alan wondered if it would keep going round and round in ever smaller circles.

Once again he wondered how he could have been so stupid that he thought he could survive on an alien planet. Now that he was in it, he was very aware that he was nothing like the heroes he used to read about, courageous, mighty of thew, able to fight on in spite of grievous injuries and with an endless supply of knowledge of whatever enemy they faced. Instead he was in total unknown, a weakling by any standards, crippled by an injury a hero would hardly notice and blinded by a nearly uncontrollable fear.

The fact that it was out there in the dark where they couldn't see it was probably the worst of all. The dark and what he had seen at the feast made it worse. His mind could picture it even worse than it was. As time dragged saw it as bigger, nastier, wounded and half charred, possessed of supernatural powers. As it grew more deadly, his smell grew worse and knowing that fed his fear. He could tell the waiting was getting to Desa also. He wished she would talk to him, but he was too scared to say so. Maybe she had good reason to maintain her silence?

It stopped, about in the area where its circle began. It was silent awhile. That while began to seem like hours. Alan's stomach turned to foam, at one point he thought he was going to vomit from fear alone. They said little and continued to concentrate their attention on where they'd last heard it, but every now and then each of them would scan carefully all the way around the circle of light the fire threw. Desa kept the fire turned up thru this whole time. Alan silently cursed the endless darkness.

It moved again, it had been way too close, but it moved away. They soon caught a whiff of the reason, more thongas were passing thru the brush not far to the southeast. Less dangerous prey for sure than a hunting camp full of heavily armed humans.

Culture Clash

Kortrax was again free of the horizon, smiling broadly on the endless expanse of ribbonleaves and fronds spreading away to the northwest like a floor of hip-deep yellow flowers widely scattered with graceful archwoods like the clump they were camped in. The orange light, the deep green leaves and the turquoise sky had an unreal but beautiful aspect this bright Morningday. There were millions of tiny hisses as laleets called for mates from the reeds lining the tiny creek that meandered around this clump of trees. A family of lorisaur murmured in the branches above, and the distant shriek of a small dactyl could be heard far back the way they had come.

Alan sat up and stretched, looking around the campsite. Only the deepest green ribbonleaves made a carpet among the tangled archwood roots. The huge fans spreading from the arching limbs produced a deep cool shade out to the middle of the creek. A soft border of ghost-vedn reeds lined the banks but the bottom was white and purple sand. A group of tall thin animals jumped fronds in the middle distance.

Luray was up already. She must have bathed in the creek and was now sitting on the sunlit side drying off and using her fingers to comb out her beautiful hair. Alan loved the color, a rich honey to her ears, then wavy flax to nearly silver as it passed over her shoulders. She was facing him and smiled when he sat up. He waved and called good morning.

He couldn't stop looking at her. This was the first time

he'd seen her nude in daylight. A month of sailing had tanned her and filled her out, she wasn't just 'looking pretty good' any more, she was radiant.

"Now this is what life should be like," she called from the far bank, "Nothing chasing us, perfect weather, a great campsite. I could almost stay here."

Alan splashed across the stream on his crutch and sat next to her, not wanting a loud conversation to get Desa up before she was ready. "Wouldn't you get lonely?" he asked.

"I might after awhile, but I bet there'd be people by now and then. I haven't felt loneliness on this trip yet."

"But this is only our first week out here."

"Yeah, but I thought I should be by myself while I recover, instead I found Vyinga's boat a little crowded."

"The boat or our nest?"

"Our nest wasn't quite cozy enough." She leaned against him and he took her in his arms. This wasn't the first time he'd held her, but it was the first time he noticed how much life there was in her flesh. He would have to be quite careful to avoid being overcome with desire. He wondered at first what she meant, then knew it was because he hadn't engaged in sex with her. He didn't know what to say about that. "We need to find something more to eat around here," she said, while stroking the arm that was around her belly.

"There's lots of laleets around."

"We'd need two hundred of them to make a decent breakfast and they taste really wormy. Lets see if we can't

find something better." She was getting up as she said that.

"I don't want to leave Desa sleeping all alone." Alan wouldn't have minded sitting with her longer but really was worried about Desa. Actually he was ashamed of himself for being so afraid that first Nightday when these wilds seemed not just safe but heavenly now that it was daylight.

"I don't mean to go that far, not out of speaking distance, much less out of sight. You can see miles in all directions from here."

"As long as you're looking for something taller than this brush."

"Nothing that hides behind this stuff is going to hurt Desa," Luray said. "Some kind of Nyobba could actually hurt her, but only bad enough to make her way madder than that nyobba would want to deal with."

"What's a nyobba?" Alan asked.

"Oh they can get up to about this long," she held her arms at a comfortable reach, a little over four feet, "and weigh up to forty pounds, but most kinds are much smaller. They got teeth about like this," she indicated a bit less than a half inch, "but no fangs and no clamps. There's about fifty different kinds of 'em on the basin floor. Most of the kinds we had back in the foothills and about ten kinds of big lowland thick-air ones." She dismissed them with her tone of voice and her wave, knowing she was capable of breaking the backbone of any nyobba before it could worry any appendage off her. While Kassidorians never use violence on each other, they

have no such reluctance when it comes to hand-to-hand combat with other species, so all other species have learned to give humans some respect. Still, hand to hand combat with the wildlife was much more frequent here than any other place he'd heard of.

She got up from him and began wandering a little way out into the yellow fronds. Actually they looked more like an Earth plant called ferns, but they were yellow and flower-like in their symmetry. Come to think of it, the archwood trees looked a little like giant ferns also, even though the fronds did branch extensively, giving them a look that was also something like a willow. Alan wandered with her, not really having any idea what to look for, maybe an inglethor or something. Not that he could jump after it on this crutch. Luray came across a large, deep purple flower growing from the center of one of the fern-like plants. She stooped to inspect it closely. What a pretty picture she made surrounded by the yellow fronds on the bright green ribbonleaves holding that purple flower.

"These are tarrids," she said, "In a few weeks they'll be ready to eat, but right now the flowers are nutritionally useless."

"Too bad."

She looked up at him, "You seem seriously distracted."

He blushed a little, "I was just wondering at how beautiful you've become; and for the second time today."

She raised her eyebrows once and smiled. "That's sweet,

and I do appreciate it." She stood up from the flower and squeezed him around the waist, then began walking around the camp again, looking to the ground at the ribbonleaves and brush.

"I guess wilderness living agrees with you."

"We only just got to the wilderness, a week plus a Dawnsleep. It's more sailing the Lhar than the wilderness. We spent almost as much time in Lastriss as we have out here so far."

"Whatever part it is, all of our adventures seem to have agreed with you, at least physically."

"Yeah, physically. I was in quite the rut there in Yoonbarla. Too much yaag, lazy food and little exercise, but you know I did stop at a Dnalogist in Hazorpean. Emotionally I've been doing better, and this Morningday has a lot of promise so far, but I feel my mood is fragile out here."

"Fragile?" Alan asked, not understanding what she was getting at. He never thought she had any mood other than contentedly competent with maybe a touch of bored-by-it-all.

"Yeah, maybe it is the threat of loneliness you brought up, but the social situation in Yoonbarla wasn't helping me."

"Knume?"

"Yeah."

He waited for her to elaborate and had to figure out that she wasn't going to. It seemed like he would have to elaborate for her. "I can't understand why that situation worked out the way it did. From what I know I think he was nuts to pick

Valla. You know, I thought you were beautiful the first time I saw you, like something out of a fairy tale."

"I was trying to crawl into one at the time. I can't fix it, I can't set the calendar back to the 51st."

"Have you ever loved anyone besides Knume?"

She looked up like she couldn't figure out what planet he was from. "I told you about how I loved Chofa, I could tell you many more. I could tell you the stories of the men I'd watched grow old back in the years before I knew Chofa, if I'd only written them down." She still moved on, making a circle around the campsite grove, still looking for something edible. "With Knume I think it's just because of the baby actually. The time that lead up to it was a really good time in my life, in a really good place. I wanted it back too much, and hurt myself trying for it. I have to go get a new good time and place." They came to a small pool. Unlike the stream it was deep and filled with thick purple-green floating leaves. "Lon," she said, "I don't know how it got here but at this point I don't care."

"This stuff in the water?"

"Yeah, you've been seeing quite a bit of it growing back on the river. It's an important crop. Farther down you get to enthora which is a lot like this but bigger."

"What part do we want?"

"The leaves, with enthora you can eat the stems too but lon stems are too skinny, it's like eating twine." Alan was about to wade into the water to start picking them. Luray

grabbed his arm. "Wait, we don't know what's in that water yet."

"It's just a little puddle."

"Lon like at least three feet of water and can live in nine. This little puddle is a typical leese wallow." Luray had broken off a long frond and stripped it, getting a curved stick over three feet long out of it. With this she probed around and found that sure enough, the banks were undercut and she could not reach the bottom. "I don't feel anything but there's no way I'm going in that water."

"If there was anything in there don't you think you would have stirred it up doing that?"

"It might not be home."

"Then we'd see it coming, are they dangerous on land?"

"They can't go on land." He could see that she couldn't understand how someone could possibly know so little about leese.

"Then how can it get back here?"

She must have remembered the YingolNeerie thing, so with a face like, 'you're really militant about that other planet thing aren't you?' she explained. "They have holes underground. They're boneless and only need a tube about a foot in diameter to squeeze thru. One leese will have about ten wallows. We need to get a dead branch or something to get the lon with."

"Why doesn't the bank of the puddle cave in?"

"Leese plaster it with their dung, it hardens. That's why

wallow water is a bad place to fill water skins."

They crossed the stream and went back under the tree looking for sticks. There were plenty but it took a few minutes with the knife to get them ready for use. By that time Desa was awake.

"What are you up to?" was her first mumble.

"Trying to harvest lon in a leese wallow," Luray answered.

"Is it occupied?" Desa asked.

"Didn't seem to be."

"How'd you bathe, not in there I hope?"

Luray waved her wave again, "No, I just rolled around in this creek, nice soft sandy bottom and nothing hungry in it at all."

"I think I'll do that when we get back." Desa was still half asleep but began walking with them toward the pool after the necessities. "I sure hope the owner stays away, I don't want to have to fight any wildlife," she said when she rejoined them.

"I agree," Luray said, not looking up from the lon pad she was plucking and dragging in.

It's relatively easy to hook lon with stripped archwood fronds, and in a few minutes they had a quarter of the water cleared and a nice little pile of the thick leaves beside them. Then the water burst into spray and Desa shrieked as three loops of tentacle spun around the stick and yanked it from her hand. A fraction of a second later Luray's was also grabbed by

a pale tentacle and disappeared beneath the water. Both of them stood with their hands to their mouths, backing slowly away from the water where the waves slowly subsided. Alan had been at the water's edge stuffing the pile into his pack. He scrambled backwards crab-wise away from the water, but had the presence of mind to bring the pack with him. Once they were about twenty feet away from the water Alan hauled himself up with the crutch. The girls clasped him and they all held each other and stared at the now tranquil pool.

"I think we have enough lon," Luray finally said.

"Yeah, the stuff's pretty filling anyway." Desa tried to sound calm but her shaking voice failed.

Alan wasn't as scared by this as he was that first darkness alone and nothing like the night before. Those tentacles were only a little more than an inch in diameter, he wondered how many there were and figured if these girls were that afraid of it, there must be at least a hundred more, like a jellyfish or something. If they had met some of the things he'd had to face in his imagination that night...

They backed away a little farther, then crossed the stream to their camp. They walked the stream all the way around, making sure there was no wallow in the stream. Nowhere was the stream more than eighteen inches deep, in some only four. It was four to eight feet wide and the banks leveled out about two inches above the level of the water. The current was half the speed of a slow walk. After they were comfortable with the stream again, the tension let up and the girls were talking

about making a fire and frying the lon for brunch.

When they were done eating Desa took a bath in the stream, and Alan joined her. The water was quite warm, but still refreshing. He was able to find places deep enough that his foot could float free from everything and he was able to completely forget that it was injured for awhile. The deeper areas were a little bit downstream of the camp. Desa became more erotically playful as they got farther from the camp. Alan was soon able to understand her intent.

"Are you recovered enough to be horny?" she asked.

"If I don't have to bang this foot around," he replied.

She walked up onto the shore and sat in a patch of thick ribbonleaves between the tarrid fronds. She tossed a few small twigs off of the spot. "Will you be OK here?" she asked. "All you have to do is just get comfy and let me take a ride."

They were not that far from the campsite. Luray could still see them until they lay down between the fronds. It was obvious that she knew what they were doing when she smiled and waved. It took him awhile to get his mind on the romance of the moment because of his embarrassment, but once they started, the hunger for Desa's body took over and the absence of yaag caused them to finish quickly. After over a week without, this was very satisfying. It reminded Alan of the first time they had joined, up on a mountain in a sunny meadow something like this, but with a much grander view of

Yoonbarla and the Central Wescarp Valley.

They lay together only a short while afterward. Long enough for Desa to say that they should come down to this spot again. Alan agreed, it had been easy to grow accustomed to sex at least once a day during the month or so they'd been on that ship, they had missed at least four since leaving it.

Luray looked at them wistfully when they returned and sat on the bank beside her. "I could really go for that too," she sighed, "next time you're ready."

"We seem to be short a male," Alan responded.

"You looked at me like I was desirable earlier today," she said.

"You certainly are," he replied.

"Then I would like to lie with you," Luray asked, directly, while looking him in the eye.

He was embarrassed and confused. He'd said 'yeah, yeah, yeah' to Desa when she told him they couldn't be monogamous, but there was still the lifetime of indoctrination from the Christial Church sitting in his brain. "I can't help it, I still think of myself as belonging to Desa." As he said it he knew it was the wrong thing to say at the time. Instead he should have tried to explain how he came from a culture where it wasn't permissible.

"You're not on YingolNeerie any more," Desa said. "We don't own each other here."

"But I'm still in love with you," he answered, "now more

than ever." He had to say that now that she was involved. No matter how beautiful Luray had become, he was not going to let his attraction to her come between him and Desa.

"That's very nice, but if your love for me is so fragile that sex with Luray is going to break it, I don't want it."

"I am sure of my love for you, nothing will change that," he said, while trying to understand what she was trying to tell him here. "I wish to do everything I can to prove and nurture your love for me."

"Then please understand that my feeling for you can only be hurt by your silly self-denial of an attraction that all of us can see and your denial of a little pleasure for my friend. The tension that will leave between us will be bad for our friendship and our comradeship in this trial."

"You're giving me this lecture again."

"This will be true every day," Desa said. "You have to understand that Luray and I don't belong to your alien fundamentalist cult. I will be riddled with guilt if you deny Luray because of me, even though I didn't ask you to. It will make it harder for me to feel affection for you. I've been trying to tell you this since we met. This is a more important problem in our relationship than the fact, which I'll now believe, that your Pocket Prophet talked to ghosts."

"I want you to love me for me," she continued, "because you want to be with the person I am, not only because of my sex. It is uncomfortable for me to have you so trapped against me because I am your only source of sex, it's getting to be as

gross as feeling like you're permanently stuck to me by wads of cum that I can't wash off."

Alan was shocked by the graphic nature of her expression in addition to being torn by the concept. After a month and a half in this society, he still wasn't at all easy with the promiscuity. Oh he certainly felt an attraction to Luray, had been feeling it strongly all day and would certainly enjoy every second of coupling with her. But from all the media he had watched, the woman was supposed to be irate with him for even looking at another woman, using the exact same words, 'love me for the person I am,' to mean exactly the opposite thing.

The other side of the issue bothered him also. What was true for him would also be true for Desa. He was still hurt by the fact that she had sex with Tiytha. He had survived the party, but mainly because so many other things had happened that day, the whole town had found out about his origins and Desa had scared him nearly to death with a song that made him believe she had been controlling his mind with RNAcid for generations. He had also been deep under the influence of yaag at the time.

He suspected that Desa had wanted to bed some of the other people on the ship also. He wondered if she had actually done so and just not told him of it. He would have to allow it. Hadn't she been telling him, as politely as she could (up until now), that she would not be stifled in a monogamous relationship with him? He hadn't acted on that. Now she

wasn't being so polite about it.

"I understand," he said, and hauled himself up, extending his hand to Luray.

"Thank you," Desa said.

Luray gave him the wryest look he could remember seeing in his whole life but said nothing, then took his hand and stood up. She had put on a skirt for brunch, she dropped it now and wrapped his arm around herself, making him leave the crutch, then wrapped her arm around him and walked with him as a three-legged man down the stream toward the place he had lain with Desa. Though it was contact, it wasn't romantic or erotic contact. It was mommy-controlling-herself-with-the-naughty-boy contact. They were splashing in the water before she spoke. "I wish Desa didn't order you to do this." There was more meaning in the way she said it than in what she said, both anger and hurt.

Alan knew what her problem was, even tried to combine his new insights into Desa's mind with what he thought Luray must be thinking. He had to find some way to get her to understand that he wasn't sticking to Desa because he thought Desa was such a vastly superior person, it was because of the Christial monogamy conditioning. No eloquence came to him however. "Luray, I'm in awe of you, I just can't believe it's permissible for me to make love to you. I am so conditioned by that society."

"No matter what planet you're from, you can't be so thick that you think I wasn't hurt by this. You also better believe I

wouldn't be accepting this now if you hadn't proven the truth of your starship tale. I would have said 'No, I would have loved to lie with you if you did it of your own free will, but now that you are ordered to, no.' In fact I would probably be screaming that at you about the way I screamed at Valla at the logging party, even though we have nothing to drink but the stream. OK, I can understand why you have strange notions. I want you to lose this one. I am not competing for your love with Desa, I'm here to reinforce your love for Desa. May I be a pleasant one of her friends for you to dally with now and then."

"Is that all you want to be?"

"To you. Oh I gathered more of Tiytha's attention than that and I believe I'll gather even more of another man's someday. I love you thru Desa. Because Desa loves you, so do I, as her friend. Friends share more than just a meal or a cup."

"Girlfriends share boyfriends?"

"Yes, and talk about it."

Alan was set back by that a little bit. "Like when Desa and Marcue were talking about Lapnar?"

"Yes, I would say Desa can get somewhat organic at times."

They were settled on the bed of ribbonleaves by now. He was able to touch his foot to things now, and actually rest the heel on the ground without it actively grabbing his attention.

"Does she talk about sex with you?" Alan asked as they

lay down with each other.

"Yeah, she does. I think it's your strong point with her right now. She likes just about everything about sex with you except that you won't share. To be as frank with you as she would, she went on and on last Dawnsleep about the rhapsody you played on her nibs."

"Would you want to do this if she hadn't talked about me?"

"There's no way I could not know how it's been for her whether she talked about it or not, as long as we're on the same ship. If she had complained about sex with you and been miserable, I probably would not have asked for this, but she could not have convinced me you were sexually useless even if she did complain because she seems so satisfied."

Alan had not expected this observation. He still knew he was terribly naive. All he had to go on was what Desa told him and his own instinct. But then Desa would pretty much tell him what she wanted wouldn't she? Maybe she really was training him to be the guy she wanted? How close would that be to the guy Luray wanted? He had to admit that in appearance and feel Luray was very much the ideal of the girl he always dreamed of.

"I'm glad you did ask for this, I'm glad Desa freed me to do it."

"She did not free you to do this, you were always free to do this. Desa should be free to do this, she always worries about you. She feels responsible like a mother. Let's live

together like adults and enjoy each other like adults. You're grown now, you're ripe and the world is covered with females of your species who will wish to couple with you."

They could not start right away, he had to lie beside her silently for awhile. He had to let this intellectual information about this culture penetrate to his soul. He had to find some way to push the guilt away. Physically she was so desirable that this should be easy, intellectually he had to convince his mind that this was the only way he was going to keep Desa, but emotionally he could only think Desa was trying to find a way to loosen the strings that bound them. If she did feel like a mother to him, she probably only loved him as a mother would love a child, if at all. After all, he was only one twentieth her age. But then he was less than one percent the age of this woman.

Luray wasn't as much a mother to him. Maybe this was the way it would have to end up, Desa would shake him loose as a mother turns a grown son out into the world and Luray would be his first real relationship? Could he stand that? Did he have a choice? Should he discuss this with her?

He could not, she had a hurt look about her, saying those things would only hurt her more. Even he could understand how this would be painful to a woman, being second best. A woman should feel special, first place, the only one, should she not? Even with what they had told him, he knew enough to know that was just an act they had to put on in this society.

He knew that every woman's natural instinct was to be the only love of her man, it was a survival instinct dating back to the caves. This society seems to have been dominated by a culture that wanted to turn them into a male fantasy, they had to act out the part, but he could see on her face that it hurt to do so.

Tentatively he touched her, reaching out and only touching her hand at first. She let him take his time, returning the kind and intensity of contact he made. The look of hurt gradually receded as their warmth grew. Their conversation became only occasional words about what they were doing.

Luray was the opposite of Kaha, even slower and more sensuous than Desa. She loved to be caressed all over, wanted to caress him all over. She wanted his fingers to linger on her nipples and wanted his finger to remain motionless while she slowly rocked her hips to move against it. Her hands were delightful on him also, but because it was so soon after Desa, he didn't respond right away. If this had happened earlier in the day, he'd have lost it all over her already. Now he revived slowly as the look, the feel and the scent of her gradually brought forth his lust again.

She wanted him on top of her and wanted to wrap her legs around him and rock slowly. He kept the foot up and never thought of it again, the ground was soft on his knees and elbows. She talked in whispers of how she loved sex in the outdoors, what pretty pictures the scattered clouds were making, how nice his hair smelled from the stream and what a

nice bed the ribbonleaves made. When she finished it was also slow and long, he could feel her gentle pulsations. She sighed deeply and quietly, a long musical 'ahhhh', and then just lay there relaxed and smiling. Alan had not finished and did not get right up. Soon she began to rock again.

It was a while longer, she might have had another small climax when he finally came. They lay for a long while after, she didn't talk now, just lay against him and enjoyed a little more tender petting.

Too Quiet at Camp

Thru the remainder of that Morningday, Noonsleep and the next Afternoonday they tended to the camp. Alan let his foot heal as much as he could and stumped around on the crutch only enough to keep the campsite's air fresh. Luray was rather withdrawn the whole time, she went off by herself foraging for great lengths of time both days, not quite out of sight, but far enough that they could not converse. Desa was also pretty quiet both days, keeping herself busy foraging and with little things around the camp. When they did talk it was about the wilds and the camp, nothing about the incident of Morningday.

Neither one had come to him during Noonsleep, one or the other had been up, the one who slept was between Alan and the one who was up. Alan wanted to stay awake but

couldn't. Alan wished someone would bring something up about it. He felt that he had done wrong no matter what he did. He wished he could really know what he had done wrong. The chill reinforced his belief that he couldn't believe what Desa told him at face value, the women in this society must have been trained to put on an act that went against their instincts. It seemed like the fact that he had lain with Luray had put something between him and Desa, even though she had asked him to do it. Maybe it was a situation he couldn't win, just the fact that they had noticed his attraction to Luray had been enough to cause a problem. Maybe the fact that Luray had asked meant that Desa should acquiesce just to be a friend, but she couldn't help resenting it?

There was another Nightday like the one before. When one of the girls was awake and the other was sleeping, they talked of many things like the phases of the moon and why it eclipsed for hours every dark (something he already knew), the mating habits of thongas and spangcocks and the amount of fuel burned in Zhindu. He learned more about the wilds but nothing about their relationship because once more they did not talk about it. Alan could not find a way to steer the conversation around to it other than to ask directly.

"Why aren't we talking?" he asked Desa.

"I thought we were?"

"About what's going on."

"We're camping in the prairie while your foot heals."

"I mean with us." He thought she was deliberately avoiding the subject.

"We're hoping we don't have to fight a theirops, we're trying to smell confident and resolved."

"Everything seems transformed since Luray and I..."

"Fucked Alan, the word is fucked, Y, S, H, I, fucked."

"Since we fucked."

"It's not a bad word any more," Desa told him, "It's a blessing."

"Then why has bestowing it caused this chill?"

"Because you had to be told. It made all of us feel bad about what we did. We both believe you a hundred percent that you're from YingolNeerie now that the starship attacked us but we just can't feel how alien you are. I've never met a man with such guilt about laying a little semen on a girl before. The only excuse I've ever thought possible for a guy saying 'no' when politely asked, was that the girl was just too repulsive to couple with or he was completely used up. I never thought there was another possible excuse."

"My parent's religion, that is the only excuse I have," Alan said.

She did not respond to him further right then. She fiddled with the fire and gathered some more sticks while it was bright. The stars were out and the endless plain was dotted by other archwood clumps like theirs. Cynd was visible low in the east, he would get higher as Nightday wore on. "I know, in my mind, that such religions have existed. I just have such

a hard time getting around to the reality of it."

"So how do I become normal?" he asked.

"When Luray says, 'I could sure use that,' say 'I'll be re-charged in a second for one so desirable as you'."

Alan just looked at her. She didn't continue without further questions, so he asked, "What would be an inappropriate response that would make you think I was leaving you for Luray?"

"When she asked, if you said, 'Yeah, and I'll be your slave forever, don't make me go back to Desa again'."

"Why would I say that?" Alan asked.

"To let me know you were dumping me for Luray. You wanted to know what you would have to say to make it seem like that."

"Now I understand, three people, one male, nowhere else to go but herself, of course I should be polite enough to give her what, one half, one fourth of my semen?"

"Yes Alan, one third is right in there. At last you understand enough about our society to be able to ask the question in a polite way instead of euphemizing in ways we don't understand or stuttering and leaving one of us to fill in the word."

"Whew."

"Good work," she said, "You're finally beginning to be able to understand some of what I'm telling you. My guess however, is you like Luray better than just that but would find about two with me for each one with her was about right for

all of us. I think the three of us should all sleep together with you in the middle myself. In my own mind I wouldn't mind a three way at least once to see how it went.

Much later in the dark, after a brief shower, he got to ask the same question of Luray, "Why haven't we all been talking as much lately?"

She also poked at the fire in response, and sighed, but looked toward him and began, "I'm not going to answer for anyone else, I'm just going to talk about me. The reason I've been quiet lately. It's got a lot to do with what I'm running away from."

"That shuttlecraft?"

"No, Yoonbarla, Knume, the 51st, and most of all Myimpaden and the gallons of golden wash that I consumed there."

"But what does that have to do with last Morningday?"

"Trivially little," she said, "It's been more quiet since then because we don't have the immediate emergency to panic about and I've had more time to think about how stupid I was."

"You were hurt in that incident," Alan said, "My stupidity has hurt us all."

"You're alien religion has hurt us all. Remember, I understand that religion a lot more than Desa does. She has never experienced a person from that culture before, I have lived in it."

"You have already told me you don't actually remember it but remember your writings from that time."

"Yeah," she admitted, "and I don't really feel it now, I admit. I felt rejected and I was sensitive to it because of withdrawal."

"I'm very sorry I hurt you," Alan said, "I think you are a treasure I could never be worthy of."

She bent and kissed him for that, but there were tears in her eyes. She stood up and looked across the plains again. Narrulla was up now. They might see them with the big scope. How many campfires could they slew it to while Narrulla was overhead? She wasn't thinking of that, she said, "I think I can understand something of what you feel coming here. All of your world is lost, there is nothing of what you had before."

He wondered what world she had lost, was it the world of her yaag? "That is true," Alan said, "especially now that I threw the phone out as far into the Lhar as I could throw it."

"I saw that," she said. "You can never contact them again, is that correct?"

"Unless they catch me."

"You have no other magic device to get messages to them, not even by typing?"

"Nothing."

"You are probably more isolated than I am. I can always go back to yaag when we get back to civilization, you cannot pick up another of those things to call starships with. I did

plainly see that it called it. That light went right to where you threw that thing, I bet we could not find it in the river with more accuracy than that light did from that starship..."

"That was the atmosphere shuttle."

"...when it first popped thru from noon in outer space."

"It was just a HiV LED bank," Alan told her, "Not even a soft laser."

"It looked like a mirror back to YingolNeerie if you ask me," Luray said, "some of YingolNeerie brought thru with a stargate."

"You seem very familiar with stargates?" Alan asked.

"Because I know the word?"

"How do you know that word?"

"A stargate is the theory that space can be curved and distant points brought together so they are joined over distances as great as one star to another," Luray said.

"That is the same theory as Earth, YingolNeerie, has."

"The math would have to be the same on both planets," Luray said, "Even though I wouldn't presume to recognize an equation that could describe a stargate, I know the same ones have to hold true at each star, except for the local constants."

"I'm amazed to know that you understand what the word stargate means and that there would be strong equations involved in their construction."

"Why, because I'm blond?" Luray said. "I don't know about your planet, but I looked it up on this one once and found that the average intelligence for blonds is 57.4% and

48.9% for non-blonds."

"So what does this have to do with why there's been so much less conversation?" Alan asked.

"Trivially little," Luray said. "I don't seem to have a thought for my train to get on actually." She lapsed into deep silence after that, staring into the fire.

"You seem like you are more in the thrall of yaag now than when we were back in Yoonbarla, much less on the ship."

"Oh of course," she said, "I was getting enough to stay away from the deep bummers then."

"Bummers?" Alan asked.

"It's withdrawal actually. I'm not a happy and bubbly person now, I've kept to myself more. I'm sorry, but if you want to be best for me now, don't pick at it, just let me stay quiet a few days."

He didn't say anything more. He thought he might go back to sleep. He hoped she was awake and alert enough. As he started to doze off she said, "I'll get better, please forgive me."

There was no visit from a theirops during the whole darkness, but those things which had come by Alan when he was alone in the dark went by, Desa and Luray were awake at the time and agreed they were blanth.

Swamp Slink

Desa occupied the next Morningday making a bow and arrows. She had found some blinic sap to use as glue and unraveled a knit for thread. The bow was a pair of dry archwood shrub limbs. They weren't big enough to give it more than about a thirty pound pull, but they were matched and in perfect condition. She'd shaped them by grinding on a rock. All the rocks around were the flat, rough, crumbly slate that underlies the basin floor. She wound it and glued it with the sap to make the handle and left the limbs alone as the bow.

She used a lot of Alan's knife carving the string nocks on the bow and the arrows, carving the arrows especially. Each was a tellic stalk, perfectly straight, rigid, and hard. Carving the bulb to a point was tough on a knife, and Alan's didn't flake right. She recognized this now as some inferior technology in knife making. It eroded in a way that made it duller and duller as time went on instead of flaking in a way that kept it sharp but more serrated. It is all a matter of where the cooling fins go on the mold to make it flake right. Once she saw that, she only used the knife to cut the roots off and then ground them to a triangular point on the rock.

It took awhile to tie and glue the leaves she used for fletching, but there was nothing but time sitting around the camp. It was still too quiet around camp that Morningday. Luray was hurt because Alan had to be told to do her. Desa

was hurt because she had done that to Luray. She felt guilty for forcing Alan to adapt to their culture and guilty for insulting Luray by forcing Alan to mate with her. Today they both felt guilty for blaming it on Alan's religion. There could now be no doubt that he was telling the truth about YingolNeerie so he certainly WAS from a different culture. She wasn't being sensitive enough to that, she was still treating him like a kid from the desert rim on an RNAcid trip.

She didn't let the fact that she had doubted Alan disturb her too much. Yes he was right all along and she might have done a few things differently if she had really believed him before, but really, what were the chances? What would she have done differently? She would have probably been a bit more cautious about having sex with him. She probably would have inspected him carefully to make sure he wouldn't hurt her.

She might have given a few of his hairs to a lab in Lastriss to see what they made of him, or maybe even asked him to come in and have himself checked out. At this point in time she didn't need a lab to fully and irrevocably believe in the 'brought here' theory of human origin. She might not know the how and why, but that was what happened. It was a pretty weird RNAcid trip to O.D. on anyway.

During Noonmeal, which was more wild lon and some tart berries, Desa wondered how to start getting it out in the open. She wanted to say 'listen, we have to get along here, we

have to share our thoughts.' Alan had spoken to her the previous Dusksleep and he had probably talked to Luray also. It didn't seem like anything had come of it, this was just a situation they really had no answer for. Alan would just have to become more normal or it was going to cause this.

She was able to look at Luray and know that wouldn't work. Luray was way down right now, an altercation might send her off by herself across the plains, not a good situation for any of them, especially her.

Desa was feeling a little dull and grey herself lately, and some of that was undoubtedly that she was used to some of the colors being turned up some of the time at least. She imagined it must be much worse for Luray. She must be out in the black about now. She didn't know what to say, nothing could be said when Desa went thru this two thirds of a century ago. She put her hand over Luray's. Luray's lip's just started to smile, then her gaze slid away, back out onto the plains around them.

"I still think I'd let Alan sleep as long as he can, it helps healing. Do you want first sleep or second?" Desa asked.

"First," Luray said. "May I please cuddle up next to you?" she asked Alan.

"Well, uh, sure," Alan said, "but I wasn't going right to sleep."

"That's all right," Luray said, "as long as you're not moving around and getting up every few minutes I'll be just fine."

"That's about the only thing I can think of that's good about me getting my foot crushed, you now have a stationary backrest."

"Alan, Luray and I are lucky we were not hurt in that stampede. She might feel bad because it was her idea," Desa said.

"If we did not get on those thongas we would have been darted and captured and returned to wherever the captain decided to take us."

"To YingolNeerie you said."

"They don't have any way to carry us there except as Angels. I think Alfred, Victoria, Morg and Glenelle are the only ones on the ship that know that, the others never really think about the concept; but our flesh would be dead."

Could there be anything more ghoulish than that? Alan, you are the reason there is so little conversation among us. You come from such a hideously evil place. We should give you an RNAcid blaster that would leave you free of these horrible phantasms, too bad they are not phantasms after all. We should worry about the reality we are in where something large and toothy with long claws might want to introduce you to a netherworld of it's own deep in it's gut.

She couldn't very well tell him that could she? She advised him to get some sleep after that, she would stay alert. She would too. It was easier during Noonsleep when it was light. Alan had explained that quirk of human evolution, the

week was a day there, even shorter than here by a convenient amount. Humans actually evolved to sleep thru the dark, but the dark was less than a third as long.

She wondered how much of her mood was her own withdrawal from yaag. Then she had to step back a bit and look at it objectively. They were attacked by a starship; and got away from it; and still had the person the ship was after. She did not need to worry about the absence of yaag. They would get back into civilization sometime and if she wanted a cup or two, she'd have them. Luray was the one who really had to endure the worst. She probably wanted to endure it by herself.

She shouldn't go blaming it all on Alan and his religion. She should tell him that when she wasn't trying to let him get some sleep. She got comfortable against a tree with Luray between her and Alan, in contact with both. When Luray asked to change places, she would lie down.

*

"I'm going to look for that swamp," Desa said, soon after Afternoonday had really begun. "I'll be very careful and I'll be back before dark."

Alan looked up from where he was carving a very sharp point on Luray's theirops spear while she prowled for berries and inglethors. "Please be heavy on the 'careful' and 'before dark'," was about all he said.

"Way before dark," Desa said, "before Kortrax is gone." With that she set out toward the south, a bit east of south if she had to, quietly and looking around. She had looped a string around the arrows and over her shoulder. She kept the bow in her hand. She had a water skin, she would graze for food today.

It was pretty open country, just enough keltoid brush to get her out of sight in half a mile, she had to use their smoke for navigation. She took note of where Kortrax was in the sky. She took note of where he would be when she needed to head back. She could see that it got gradually brushier as she headed south. There were more hangleaves and clawleaves, good indicators that the soil is getting more waterlogged.

She hiked about an hour before she came to something interesting, the ruins of a road. All that was left were two lines in the ribbonleaves. They were just a little different color and texture. It could be that fences had decayed along here, that was very possible. The most recent map said there was still farmland between them and the swamp, this was probably that farmland, but the map was out of date. There had been quite a bit of settlement on the north shore of Upper Shempala Lake at one time. That was before the wildhull got loose way up here in the Lhar. Because the Zhlindu basin does have salty soil, wildhull was able to take hold here. There had been a salt water ecosystem up here on the Lhar til long into the 50th. By the end of the 52nd shipping had to keep clearing to maintain a channel thru to Shempala.

Desa knew what the far side of this swamp was like. There was a front between humans and floating jungle. People hunted there to catch meat to sell in the city. They cut the floating wood in both of these lakes to fuel the furnaces of Shempala and Zhindu. Knume's old map showed almost a hundred miles of open river between them. If there was a chance the thonga had carried them that far they might find a route to civilization.

There was relatively little chance of that. It was unlikely the herd had carried them a third of that distance. Of course the Shempala Lakes Tourist Council that had published these highly symbolic maps four centuries ago could have exaggerated the size of the lakes by a whole lot and the lakes might really be thirty eight and twenty nine miles long instead of the hundred ten and seventy that was shown on this map. She didn't want to have to get the map out and consult it too often, it was brittle as anything in spite of treating it with a rag she got in Lastriss. She had to admit they had better paper treatment products in the Dos basin.

She shouldn't let her thoughts wander out here, this wasn't the time and place to ponder everything, this was the time and place to be super alert and focused. Desa had done lock once in her life, during practice on Yandrille while Isandra taught her. She had hated it, but knew that she needed to pretend she was on it here.

A theirops was not likely to chase an armed human, but it will hardly run away if the human is traipsing toward it all

wrapped in its own thoughts of silly human relationships entirely unaware that there is a theirops under this archwood clump that a brook eroded out. It knows that if it pounces on a human from behind and snips off the head with a sudden two-clawed snap, the human will do nothing more than spout thick blood and the theirops will get a nice meal. Not a feast like a thonga or lentosaur, but nothing to pass up if it happens to stumble over you in a funk.

She needed Luray now. She needed Luray to be whole. Of course, where was Luray going to fill her cup out here? Luray had been pretty whole come to think of it, finding the campsite, a lot of the food, binding Alan's foot better than she could have done. She just wasn't whole in herself lately. It was probably good that she was back there with Alan, just the two of them, maybe they can get something straightened out. Maybe Alan will find Luray is MUCH closer to what he needs right now?

This long flat straight road reminded her in some ways of the logging track back in Yoonbarla. That was meant to be level in spite of it's curves, this was very level and very straight. That was nowhere near as level as this. What they really had in common was length, she walked a mile on it, spending most of the time watching, a little thinking. It had definitely gotten wider since she started walking it. It was definitely more clear of vegetation in the center. It seemed that in this area there had been layers of this rough slate paving at one time. There was enough growth in it all now to

keep it anchored, but not enough to make more than a gentle net of thin ribbonleaves stretched from crack to crack. They had cracked to tiles an inch on a side in places, it was just grainy soil in the other spots.

She walked on til she came to an area where it became obvious that there was more vegetation and brush beside the road. There were big old archwoods with the hulks of an earlier generation of archwoods beyond. The archwood limbs met over the road and it was now shady. There was damp soil made up of generations of dead leaves with soft sumaids carpeting the slate street now. She had less than a hundred yards of that before dense vegetation began again. There was deep soil and ribbonleaf cover and keltoid brush she had to force her way through. She went back to deeper shade where there was less brush and followed that abandoned road toward what she believed was the southeast according to Kortrax's height and direction.

Now this road was easy to follow, but as it was so much less open, she had to be much more careful going thru here. On the road itself she could see what she was stepping on, but the trees beside the path were thick and could hide many dangerous things. As she went by them and looked into them she could see that many of the older ones were hollow. There was the glint of glass up in one of them.

As she inspected closely she could see that these trees had once been houses. There were the shells of larorlie vines draped over the lower limbs of these trees, the vines long

dead in the deep shade. 'What would live in abandoned houses?' she wondered and cautiously climbed into one to look.

The rooms had mostly filled in with swollen wood. It all dripped with moss and fungi and was choked with hair-vine. The kitchen basin had been cracked in half by the force of the wood growing over it, the pieces were now at angles. It was covered with dead leaves and the soil they had decayed into. Most of the archwood that had been this home was now dead and sprouting large rope fungi and slimerots. This must have been abandoned for many centuries. She wondered how long people would have tried to go on living here once the lake was covered with wildhull. It might have been as much as a century, people can be stubborn, but this had to have been abandoned before she was born.

This had once been a nice house, more open than Knume's, not as big altogether but cute. The roof was now rotted thru in several places. It looked like lorisaur were the only thing that really lived in here much. Maybe some karga had used this for birthing a couple times. There were lorisaur in the branches now. They mewed and cooed quietly to each other and inch-bounded from frond to frond.

Most of the live fronds were on the next generation of archwoods that had grown up in the gardens and courtyards of the former homes. She could see that this had once been a reasonably well settled area, a comfortable street in the plots at one time.

She climbed back down to the street. From here the limbs seemed to be almost horizontal, a very flat arch. Over what was once the center of the street it was far enough off the ground that Desa rarely had to duck. She knew a theirops wouldn't climb up into there, and might find this a little too claustrophobic. This is the kind of place to beware of hyadunes. A hyadune is related to a theirops the way a cougar is to a bengal tiger. Hyadunes are excellent claw-climbers, have six short, limber walking/climbing legs and long front limbs with claws six inches long with brutal serrations, a three inch serrated top tooth and two inch lowers in it's twelve inch long jaws.

A hyadune will lay on one of these branches and pounce on something walking by. She made sure she knew what was on each one before she walked under it. A hyadune is too big to hide on a tree limb, even though they are dressed in brown and green stripes. A small hyadune weighs about a hundred pounds. It probably wouldn't come charging from the edge of the road at an alert human carrying bow and arrow, but one would be glad to slip down over her shoulder as she walked under one of these limbs and get it's claws and fangs on her neck.

The good news is, a hyadune is smart enough to know when it can and when it can't win the fight with a human. It is smart enough to know that if the human is armed and paying attention, it has little chance of dining on that human.

Just when she was noticing that the ground outside the old roadway was pretty damp and there were far too many chillettes in the air, she encountered a chuff. She saw it while looking for hyadune on the limbs above. It was standing on that limb, smelling really bad. Its fur was all matted and full of bugs and algae. It even had a few small elephant-ear vines growing on it. Its tentacles were busy all over the place, one swung a large bloodshot eye her way only inches from her face.

It vented a wet sloppy cloud of noxious gas from its bellybutton. Desa backed away from it. This thing is in the same class as a klizhorn. These things can't live far from swamp, and have been one of the forms of life which have flourished in the wildhull swamps. It isn't really dangerous, just disgusting and ugly. They are edible, but too big for her to carry back to camp.

She went to the edge of the path. This land had also been inhabited at one time, but there was an inch of water on it now. She looked around a little and saw the trace of a kayak canal, now filled in with leaves and a bit of struggling chussweed. Thru the shady gloom she could even see a few stones. This might have once been one of the resort towns on the north shore of the lake. What might once have been a side street was now so choked with brush she wouldn't think of trying to force her way thru it.

The gloom of the deep shade was a little spooky, so she actually let out a little scream when she turned and saw the

skull in the tree right next to her head. It was a human skull and a real one. This bone was too fresh to have been back when this village was inhabited, it was someone like her who had come down to explore these ruins. While she was frozen with that understanding, she felt the searing pain as a claw sank deep into her shoulder.

Left at Camp

Desa had gone off to see if there really was swamp to the south of them, leaving Alan and Luray together at what they were all calling 'the foot camp' by now. Luray didn't seem any more cheerful today, but she didn't go off by herself. Instead she was sitting quietly on the bank of the stream with her feet in the water.

Alan dared to come over and sit with her. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Right then I was just wishing this was deep enough for a swim."

"But without a leese in it I would hope."

"Yeah," she said, "That would be a horrible way to go."

"I would hope you wouldn't leave this life via any method."

"It has to end sometime, if nothing else Kortrax will eventually burn out."

"A lot longer than even your life has been," he said.

"Mmm, yeah, something like six billion decades from now."

This clearly wasn't getting anywhere, there was nothing he could do but just get his guilt off his chest. "I'm really sorry I hurt you last week."

She looked at him but didn't say anything at first. She looked back at the water and splashed it back and forth with her feet, then looked at him again. "I guess I shouldn't be so sensitive. You really don't know how this culture works do you?"

"I feel like I'm in a no win situation between the two of you. I also don't think you people are honest with yourselves in this culture."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I believe it is instinct for every woman to want to be the most important thing in her man's life. I don't think any woman can happily settle for second place."

"The key word is 'her man'. You are not 'my man,' 'keh' life partner, right now you are Desa's if anyone's. I don't expect to be the most important thing in your life, things would get really weird if I was."

"What do you want to be to me?" Alan asked.

"I want to be a friend. I want to be held, I want to feel some affection. I want to feel accepted. Your refusal of me makes it a little harder to be good friends with Desa."

He came over and held her, touched her hair. "You are certainly accepted."

"Thank you." She put her arm around him and they held each other close.

"Do you think Desa is trying to get loose from me?" he asked.

"A little, you heard what she said last Morningday. She doesn't want you to be so dependent on her."

"I mean loose. Does she want to hand me over to you?"

"No, she might possibly think so, but she cares for you more than she thinks. If you didn't smother her so much she'd probably stay with you til further notice. And it's not so much smother, it's just that you make her responsible for providing all your sex, that's too much responsibility for her, she's not really that sex driven herself and just likes to do it her way. Like I am in that regard."

"I'll try not to smother her, I'll try not to smother you either, but I do have an urge to..." he covered her lips with his.

She responded warmly and began caressing him. "I'm not smothered so far. I usually like the same guys Desa does, the loggers, and I guess I'm more lonely out here than I thought I would be."

"You shouldn't be lonely, I think when we get to be around people again you'll attract as much attention as you could want."

"I did get to a back room in Myimpaden at least once a week. It's not that I'm greedy for it or anything, it's just the way Knume took Valla back without so much as a humpf was

devastating to my self confidence. All the drinking I was doing didn't help either."

"I don't think I ever told you this, but you've always looked like the girl of my dreams."

"Oh?" They were laying back on the bank beside each other now, she turned toward him. "But what would the girl of your dreams act like?"

"I could never have imagined someone like you, or Desa or anyone I've met here for that matter. You all seem like too much of a fantasy."

"In what way?" she asked.

"Like we've run up on all along, I can't believe that in reality girls would actually share their boyfriends for one thing. For another, I knew of sorceresses from lands of kings and castles only in fairy-tales. I admit I sometimes fantasized about older women, but not about women older than the roots of my ancestral civilization." He had reached out and was caressing her side. She had her skirt on, but it was low on her hip on that side and her smooth curve was most pleasant.

"Ha," she let out a single syllable of laughter. "That's just because you come from a world of ephemerals. Once you're here a few centuries you'll see age doesn't make any difference after a while."

"I'm sure I'll still be spellbound by you even then."

She turned onto her back so his hand moved across her chest and she covered his hand with hers. "What makes you think you'll even remember me then? You have no idea what

centuries are really like. Human memory doesn't even last that long. You are only three decades now, you have fifty three more to go in your first century."

"Right now I can't imagine ever forgetting you."

She gave him a wry smile but was silent. They began to slowly get more and more into each other as they lay there on the bank of the stream. Their caressing gradually built in eroticism until they coupled with some urgency. Alan enjoyed her even more this time because he didn't have Desa nearby to worry about. Luray probably enjoyed it more because Alan hadn't been ordered to do it this time, he had initiated this of his own free will.

For the remainder of the day Luray was much happier, even laughing and recounting some funny and rather bawdy adventures she had among the Dwarves and Trolls of old Wescarp, all the time reminding him that she couldn't actually remember any of this if she hadn't written it down and repeatedly copied over the notes when the paper got too old.

For the remainder of the day Alan thought about Luray. It was impossible to keep his mind off someone so beautiful whom he had now lain with twice and enjoyed each time. What he noticed the most was how much she was effected by their coupling. Desa seemed to enjoy it as much while they were in the act, but once they were done Desa seemed little effected. This had definitely changed Luray's whole mood. He wondered if this was because she had been so hurt by the

way it happened the first time and now he made the first move? Did that restore her self-esteem?

He wondered if he was actually losing his affection for Desa and gaining more for Luray. Would they exchange places by the time they got out of this wilderness (if they made it out)? How did he really feel about them both?

Physically there was little to differentiate them. Luray was classically beautiful, Desa was exotically cute. They were both tall for natives, two of the tallest women he had yet met on the planet. They both had the same perfect yet normal figures, they both made love warmly and intimately, nothing like the vigorous exercise that Kaha provided.

In personality Desa was more outspoken, more direct, Luray was somewhat more aloof. They were both smart and knowledgeable, but Desa seemed more intellectual. He was comfortable with each of them, but a little more so with Desa. That could be just because he knew her better, but he detected the chance that Luray would remain somewhat more aloof and never be quite as open with him as Desa. That was important now that he was so unfamiliar with the world. Luray has also been a little less sensitive to and forgiving of his ignorance. Also Desa was more cuddly more of the time, always ready to get close and snuggle and he liked that. Going over this made him realize that he missed her. She had been gone a long time and he was starting to get worried by the time Kortrax started playing with the trees on the western horizon.

Fighting the Wilds

It was just a dart in her shoulder. It was squirming. She screamed in pain and disgust and grabbed it. She knew it was a dropper by now, her arrows would be useless against it, it was smaller than her arrow. She yanked it out, it's squirming body was in her hand. She squeezed as hard as she could. Ignoring the hole in her shoulder for a second, she took it's bill and snapped it off. It had three little legs with little claws, she pulled them off one at a time. Then she threw it on the ground and ground it beneath her heel. As she was doing that she looked at the hole in her shoulder.

A dropper makes it's living by dropping like a dart from an upper branch and grabbing a nice long bite of it's prey in it's bill like a core sample. It expects its prey to be stiff-bodied enough to take long enough to get at it that it has time to extract it's bill and bound away. They haven't had time to evolve the instinct to avoid humans, beings that are much more nimble than karga, thonga or lentosaur, and much better at grabbing projectiles that sting them.

She was not about to try and get that core sample out of it's bill and back into her shoulder. She tried to squeeze any blood and dirt out of the hole and then keep it a little closed. She didn't have much to put over it. She found a pimia vine, their leaves are pretty clean and soft enough to stick to it.

They don't really have any helpful medicinal properties, but they don't make it worse so she used that to keep the dirt out of it on the walk back.

This walk was more like a prowl. She was even more careful now, looking all around and over her shoulder, making the walk out take longer than going in. She looked up in the trees, even though she knew her chances of spotting a little dropper like that hanging twenty feet up were nil. The pain in her shoulder was more than just annoying, it was making her think they might have two of them on the disabled list. She made sure she could still draw the bow. Yes she could, the muscle the thing bit wasn't heavily involved in that.

She was almost out from under these overhanging branches when she began to see the flashes of motion above. She locked in on that, saw where that must have gone, made sure there was nothing else in the area, and drew an arrow sighted toward that area. She could see motion in the shadows up above. It couldn't be anything as big as a hyadune, probably not even as big as a mindune.

It was a fantail nyobba, she saw that as she slowly approached the branch it pretended it was part of. This was not a very dangerous animal. It is a carnivore and if you tried to grab one bare handed it would claw and bite painfully. But it is tasty. Not the overwhelming buttery flavor of a theirops, but they could have a nice duskmeal if she got this guy. She

wondered if she could stalk another step closer. She thought not. She held her breath and loosed the arrow. It hit!

Oh the pitiful noise it made! It fell to the former roadbed and tried to run, the arrow stuck in it's side and foaming purple blood spattering from the first two nostrils on the left. Such a pitiful squeaking squeal. Desa ran after it and jumped on it's head.

This was worse than slaughtering a talrin back at Knume's. They are smaller than this Nyobba and confined and they don't have time to squeal and try to run. Talrins and Nyobbas are in the same class. The Nyobba is a hundred percent carnivore preying mainly on small tentacloids. They will eat inglethors if they catch them.

While her own knife was too small to carve bows and arrows, it would be OK to gut out a Nyobba. She apologized to it's life as she did so. It was actually a pretty conscious animal, one she thought was possessed of a soul. It would have none now, it would be Duskmeal. She squeezed as much of the blood out as possible. Celluloid blood is quite antagonistic to the human metabolism.

She knew she had to stay alert as she cleaned it. A hyadune can smell blood and she was nearing land that was open enough that a theirops might swing by. She stopped at the first clean water to rinse it out, but even then a theirops would smell it for a mile if the wind was right. She slung it the best she could, she was only taking the best five pounds of it, the rest would go bad before they could possibly get

themselves around it anyway. Let whatever was around be attracted to the offal she had left in the late day sun rather than what she was taking away.

She hurried up the abandoned road after that, but not so fast that she didn't keep her eyes open. She felt like a fugitive, stealing home with her prize from the swamp. After a couple hours she questioned whether she had come this far. Clumps and streams looked familiar, but then a lot of them really looked alike. But then when she came to a landmark she saw on the way out, she was shocked. She thought this was way out on her walk along this trace of road. It wasn't much of anything, just a little pipe culvert still open after at least three centuries.

It was a long way to their camp, at least another hour. It was too bad this culvert was dry now, there were only a few more swallows left in this skin. She knew there was a clear trickle on the way however, one she would come to once she saw the smoke way in the distance and turned off this road.

Planning the Crossing

Alan was starting to really worry when Desa finally did show up, but she had five pounds of nyobba with her that

she'd darted with her bow.

"We better get a fire going," Luray said when she saw it.

"I wish we had something better than these rocks to mash these roots down on." Desa said, spilling the contents of her bag on the cleared area near the fire.

"They'll work, meanwhile let me go get some lon from that other wallow before it gets dark," Luray said, "I'll get enough for Nightday too."

Luray went off to do that. Alan noticed the hole in Desa's shoulder. He asked what he could do to help, she said it wasn't hurting as bad any more, just don't talk about it and she'd be alright. He tried not to, but worried anyway as he started getting some sticks for the fire. They had used up most of the dead twigs from this clump of trees by now, it was getting harder to find enough.

Desa had the nyobba all cut to chops and ready to toast before he got the flames lit. She began grinding the roots and scraping the paste onto the nyobba chops.

"We should be moving out next light I think," Alan said.

"We need to," she agreed, "this camp is plucked." He was getting the fire to a little roar and she was spreading the root paste on as best she could. "I believe you about your ship. No matter what you say about YingolNeerie from now on, I'll believe you. You really can call a starship down to attack us in the darkness."

"I didn't call it. As soon as I heard it, I wished I had the power to send it back. It will see us if we come back to that

beach, even in darkness. It will watch that beach for three travelers about our size to re-appear. It will watch KangDarceen for us to re-appear."

"We'll have to cross over to the Thrambaya in that case, northeast a couple hundred miles."

"Across this wilderness?"

"It will be more open to the north, just prairie."

"But how far are we from the river?"

"Thirty miles at least, back to where we got off, but you say they will watch for you there. It's over ten miles south to the river here, but it was too swampy for me to continue and that swamp didn't look like it was something isolated. There's an abandoned town there, all the farmland the map shows is abandoned also, so that swamp is pretty serious. A hyadune got someone down there within the last few decades. I think that wildhull's still hard aground for a hundred miles on this side, I wouldn't plan on that direction."

"Then to the other river it is," Alan agreed.

"We'll probably find a herdsman's hut within a hundred miles or so, maybe somebody will have a drive going that way we might ride along with."

"That's still a long distance. That's longer than the distance I hiked to Yoonbarla."

"We can take it slow, take a couple weeks, camp the whole dark. How is the foot anyway? You seem to be getting around much better."

"I think I'm ready to go," he answered. "I might poop out

early, but walking around here is fine now. I'll keep something under it in my sandal and still keep most of my weight on the crutch."

Luray's silhouette was visible out on the flats with a bag for the lon. Once she was out of the path of Kortrax as he neared the horizon, she became invisible again.

"You could get some water going in the cook pot for those," Desa said about the lon, "not very much, we could cook them down into a stew for a change."

Alan was able to get that from the stream. It was on the fire by the time Luray got there with the lon. That dusk they had the best meal at this campsite so far. Desa told them all about her adventure, the ruins, the skeleton and how it just got swampier and swampier as you went south til she was afraid to go farther. It was pretty scary finding someone's remains like that, Alan got even more respect for how tough this girl really was. They lingered with the meal and Kortrax was nearly gone by the time they were done. Now there would be the two and a half hour dusk of the basin floor. They wished for a bottle of yaag to wash it down with, but none appeared.

"I remember when you were afraid of yaag," Desa told Alan.

"I had many strange notions at the time."

"The next light will be K'shitn," Luray said, "by that Afternoonday you will probably be able to move."

"I think I can by light," Alan said, "I think I could this coming Nightday."

"I wouldn't leave this camp in the dark," Luray replied, "Let's stay at least until light, spend Morningday getting packed up and making a final decision which way to go."

"Northeast to the Thrambaya was our vote," Alan said.

"Once we get out in the open we'll look again," Desa said, "but I don't think we'll see anything."

"I'm fine with the northeast plan. The theirops aren't bothering us much and there's plenty of food. I think I can camp my way across to there. If Alan says they'll find us if we go back, I believe him and I'm not going back."

"We'll take it as slow as Alan needs to," Desa said. "If his foot acts up in an hour, so be it."

"I'll get a lot farther than that," Alan said. "I don't think anything was actually broke, it feels almost good as new now."

The Kranjan

It had been a leisurely breakfast. They had everything washed and a lot of it dried. Alan's pack was packed and the girls were getting their bags ready. They were still trying to decide whether they would take an early Noonsleep here, or a quicker late one somewhere northeast of here.

But something new was developing out on the plains.

They heard it first, and stood silently looking at the horizon seeing nothing. Eventually dots became visible out in the distance.

"A thonga stampede," Desa guessed.

"I bet it is," Luray agreed.

"I bet it's heading this way too."

"We better climb a tree so we don't get trampled."

"What could have spooked them like that?" Desa asked.

"I hope it's not the shuttlecraft coming back," Alan said.

It wasn't. There was a dot behind the herd that was even larger, and as it continued to approach they could see it was long-headed and toothy with hinged horizontal jaws.

"Get up in the trees." Luray yelled, and bolted for one of the drooping outer branches on the side away from the approaching herd.

Desa just froze and wailed, a long, blood curdling terror. But when it died, she also ran to a hanging branch.

Alan had headed for the trunks at first. He limped only a few steps that way before he realized there was no way to climb the smooth straight shafts. The girls were already climbing the outer ends, so Alan went to one himself. They were flexible and pulled down, but by the time it would lift your weight, the fronds were big enough to hold and it wasn't any harder than climbing a rope ladder. Alan was a little way behind them but still well above thonga height before the first members of the herd came crashing thru.

"Climb as high as you can." Luray yelled.

When Alan saw what was chasing this herd he didn't think this tree could be high enough. He scrambled up as far as he could, his fear of heights driven from his mind by his fear of what burst into the camp below them. It was roughly kedoid in shape but obviously not closely related because it's mouth opened sideways like an Earth bug's. It was long, flexible and multi-legged, but the legs were directly under it like an earth animal and they divided in two so each looked like a huge, very thick, two-tined fork. It didn't have fuzz however, it was covered in warty, saggy, skin, dust grey in color. It's eyes were not on stalks, they were two big saucers right below it's jaws with blinking scales covering them.

The thing's mouth was it's main weapon. It would have been big enough for two men to lie down in side by side with their equipment if it didn't open horizontally. It's fangs were like swords, there were four of them on each side and they were mobile. The jaws were hinged at the second row of fangs. The remaining teeth were like racks of strong hunting knives. Even more important than that was the size of the whole animal. It had to be forty feet long, a tyrannosaur-sized animal. It looked like it could push down the tree if it wanted to.

It stopped at the campsite and snuffled, they could hear it's breath whistling and smell it's carrion smell. With one stroke of one double paw it turned over the whole campsite, scattering the fireplace, the cookware, the clothing and the blanket. It snorted once, a sound like two cliffs rubbing

together. A pair of long, slimy tongues came out and probed around in the dirt. It took another claw at the spot where they'd climbed into the tree, then began rumbling off after the herd again, brushing against the trunk of the frond Alan was in and shaking it enough to almost knock him out of it. It stopped at the leese wallow and stuck it's snout in. After snapping once, it began to pick up speed, chasing the thongas once again. Alan wondered how many of them it needed to eat in a day to keep that body fueled.

Not until it was out of sight did they come down. Once they were on the ground Desa clung to him and sobbed. Luray also held tight but was silent. She was whiter than Desa however, and didn't seem to be able to say anything.

Alan was able to look around. Almost everything they had was ruined. The cookpot was nothing more than fragments. The pack was a tangled mass of shreds, all wrapped up in roots and ribbonleaves and embedded in dirt. Their clothes and the blanket were embedded in the ground and ripped. The gouge where the fireplace had been was almost a foot deep and big roots were snapped off in it.

Desa stopped shaking and finally let go of him. She went over to the pack and began picking up the stuff that wasn't pulped. Luray had some color back, but still clung to him.

"That was a kranjan," she told him.

"I thought so," he said, "but we didn't get eaten."

"It's a miracle. There were too many thongas around for it

to be bothered shaking a few humans down from the trees and pecking them up."

"I'm glad we met it here and not out on the open plain," Alan said.

"I'm not glad to meet it anywhere, not even in a remembered nightmare, but if you believe in the supernatural, we're blessed, because if you can survive a kranjan, you will survive everything." If a three thousand year old witch is afraid of something, it must be pretty dangerous.

They went over and helped Desa pick up the shards of their gear. Inside his pack the frying pan was also broken, but Desa's cup was still intact. The water skins were OK, the tent was salvageable and so was most of the clothing but they had to wash most of everything again. They had no way to cook now, anything that needed a pan was going to have to wait til after they passed a cooking supply shop.

He tried to make something out of the shambles of the pack. He was able to get it into some resemblance of it's old self with some re-tying around some of the rips. If he carefully packed big stuff over the holes it might work a little. There was one shard of the frying pan big enough to cover the hole in the bottom so he put that in.

With poor rations of raw peeled lon and a couple toasted pkatta's apiece, they slept one more sleep at this camp. Afternoonday wasn't yet underway by the time they finally

set off for the distant horizon to the northeast, but they didn't worry about the time, they were just glad to still be alive.

The going wasn't real fast that first Afternoonday, they probably made eight or nine miles. They were more or less following the stream by their camp, it wandered around a lot; after all, it was pretty hard even for water to tell which way was downhill around here. As the dark approached once again they found a keltoid clump that was on an island in the brook, which was now a stream.

Alan's foot was definitely aching by then, and the deep bed of dried fronds around this clump was very comfortable. They stayed put and his foot healed all thru another darkness. That Nightday was made rather miserable by the fact that it rained for hours, a couple times hard enough to drown the fire and cover the sound of anything large that might come at them. All they could do was make a pile of their bodies inside the tent under the blanket. It was nearly Dawnsleep by the time they could get the fire going again. Whoever was up for the remainder of the dark was tending stuff drying by the fire. The first couples in the tent found it too damp for sleep, so Alan was beat when it was his first turn to stand watch. It was warmer sleeping by the fire anyway and no predators bothered them. He never did wake either of the girls for another turn at watch and woke up before either one of them as the turquoise glimmer began to shimmer on the horizon.

The Dark

In the light, Luray wasn't so bad. She could interact with the others and keep herself focused. Alan did very well hiking on this new week, making more than fifteen miles Morningday and two stints of ten on Afternoonday. Noonsleep she thought Alan and Desa must have gotten together because they were on opposite sides when she woke up. They saw no kranjans or theirops that whole week.

They were just walking. They had to concentrate on what was around them when it was brushy, but they were lost in their own thoughts when it was open and they were all alone. Lost in her own thoughts was not where she wanted to be right now. She could get nothing but the pointlessness of it all. Other than having some fun now and then, what was life about?

It came immediately back to the fact that nothing was fun without yaag didn't it? How long had it been the holy grail of her life? At least four decades. What was four decades compared to her life before? An inglethor pud on a mountainside. Why was she so wrapped up in it now? Why was this plain as bleak as the tundra beyond Trastrab in her eyes?

Oh she knew the chemistry of it - with her intellect - but knowing the answers to those questions had no effect at all on how she felt. Why did she bother to go on at all? Why didn't she just tell the others to go on without her so she could just

sit down here and let life run its course. Something would be along in a day or two to feed on her useless flesh, then this could be done with and she wouldn't have to suffer with what she'd made of herself any more.

But that was the light. In the light there is always some kind of hope. None tried very hard to engage her in conversation at their duskmeal, Desa and Alan tried to figure out where they might be on the out-of-date and not-to-scale map. The tarrids were now almost ripe and there were so many that they ate some of those. The dried flower is what has the most nutritional value with them, there are small seeds in it that give it a little crunch and the flavor at least reminded her of a light yellow in a fruity way. The flowers weren't very dry yet so you spent a lot of time stuffing a lot of area into your mouth, but when you got the whole thing in it was just a morsel. They wandered around the grove where they would camp for a long time eating them as the light ended.

And then there was another dark.

Another darkness where they would stay put thru Nightday once again. When they were up they talked. Alan listened and learned a lot about the animals and plants they were seeing. They thought they heard something out there again. Again it kept its distance and again they never actually saw it. Alan learned another semester of practical lab camping

from her and Desa while they were parked for the darkness. She showed him twenty or thirty species of inglethor that actually appeared in the firelight during that darkness. Loud brush rustling often stopped at the firelight's horizon when a small inglethor came running near, more willing to take its chances with the humans than with what chased it. What chased it probably would have been a nice meal if they could catch it in the dark, if they dared go out there.

It was OK when someone else was also awake. When Desa was awake they talked about where they were, what they should be watching for. Desa tried to talk to her about how she felt. Luray asked her not to, she didn't want Desa to feel any of it or know what it felt like. Desa tried to say she felt some of it herself. How? What did she do, a couple cups a day, maybe five or six at a party? Desa said her world was grey. Luray didn't want to say how black her world was now. This pinprick of fire in the all-empty blackness. Above, there are pinpricks of light, now we know that at least one of them was where humans came from and where evil was still in control.

Then Desa went to her Dawnsleep and left Luray on first watch. She didn't want that connection with life to end, but it had to. She couldn't subject Desa to going without sleep because of her personal problem. She sat away from her, with Alan between them. Alan had been asleep for an hour already. He was still healing, actually she was astounded he made it

this far so quickly after such a serious injury. She would still be laid up at the first camp, willing to eat the lalleets by now. The tarrids were thick around that, they could eat them for a couple weeks.

Anyway, Alan had done well, she couldn't shirk her share no matter how she felt. She wouldn't have shirked her share if she was blasted, she would have tried to find an eye that worked at least a little and hope to get something done. Now she had to figure out a way to get it done in just the opposite condition. If something came after them while the others slept she would play bait. She would take off but leave the real weapons here, Desa's bow and her now-sharp spear. She would lead it away from them and into a leese wallow.

She let them sleep. The darkness descended in spite of the fire, which she kept going for them. Did she deserve any of the fire's warmth after throwing her mind away, probably forever, in a vain attempt to re-run the 51st century? Now look at you, out in the wild prairie, in the dark, trying to run back to Zhindu and Klarrain after making such a complete ass of yourself for decades in that village. She heard something out there again. She knew it wasn't big enough to be a theirops, but she got the spear anyway. Maybe she could catch them some food.

'Is that hope I detected,' she asked herself. Why has this particular process of chemical interaction been walking around so long, centuries past any usefulness. Her womb had proven that for her, back when the 52nd began and paradise

was lost.

She hated herself for the fact that Knume had blamed himself for the drugs he did while in Zhindu. She lived in Zhindu while Zhindu became the city and not the island the cities were on. She was in Zhindu when it became part of the mainland, connected by a bridge to a road that could take you dry all the way to desert. An island no more. That had been in the 43rd, some centuries before her idyll with Knume.

She wondered what chances she had passed up while preoccupied with Knume? She wondered about Alan, if his fears had merit and Desa would just as soon slough him off on her and get away into the city a free woman. Desa obviously felt responsible for him as a mother. Could Luray be a mother to Alan? Luray did not think so, she would lean on Alan right now if he was there to lean on. All she could do was be his encyclopedia to the one planet she always thought was all there was.

Dark.

From what Alan says, maybe there is something in the world he came from. It would be great if there was no Nightday and no Noonsleep. Both of them are trouble in their own way. In Nightday, the unaided human is at an extreme disadvantage without fire. In Noonsleep, Luray is not the only one who doesn't sleep as well. She had noticed that Desa, and especially Vyinga don't sleep as well during Noonsleep as the

dark sleeps of the week.

Nightday was actually done now, but Nightday had never been her best day of the week. In the city it is the day most people who work off the boards try to get their work done. The whole city knows there will be more people in the shop floors under the torches of Nightday than any other day.

But Luray is not like that. When she worked in the city it was mostly during Morningday, when it was light out. Her last city job was copying somebody's notes into something readable for the weekly Klarrain put out every Nightday. On Nightday she might go to some meetings, she hoped someone took notes.

Did she really want to go back to that? Of course not. She wanted to go to a life of lounging in the tub as one of Klarrain's stable, but she found herself somewhat short of the energy and oral fixation he needed in his tub. She wanted to live in her old place, and when you get right down to it, she didn't mind penning copy for the presses. She liked it better when she posed in photos for the company. She was beginning to look like she needed to for that again, still a little thin and bony, but she would find food in Zhindu.

She was finding food out on these wilds. Why was this not registering in her self confidence index? Because the lack of yaag cut that pathway off? Or was it a genetic defect. Would that one more pill have corrected it? She thought not. She needed a serious laboratory analysis and a reconstruction to get over what all this yaag had done to her.

What was out there on the plains in front of her? What were their lives like? Most of them were thongas, their lives are all in trying to be near the center of the herd where they are less likely to get eaten. How long had their lives been? She knew they didn't age, but knew they fell to predation with much more regularity than humans. Would there be any left that were older than humankind like there were among the kedas? She thought there probably would be a few, maybe one or two in each herd. She knew they wouldn't remember any details from three hundred centuries ago, but knew their behavior patterns were based on the successful patterns from all the ages of their lives.

What behavior patterns could she take away from all the patterns of her life. What had been successful for her? She looked back at that and saw that when time was as long as hers, everything is destined for failure.

She remembered when she and Oliar first entered Wescarp, just after her adventures of Wizard Run. They entered the realm of King Marneh who ruled from the town of Plauwlee in the hills above the valley. Yoonbarla existed at the time, it was just a camp of loggers then, with one dude who wanted to try and train them to factory work off their water power. Yoonbarla was then about the power of their axes, and continued to log while the factory fell vacant til the modern age.

And a human is destined to inhabit this flesh as long as it will. It was born with an instinct to save and protect this flesh

that the soul is trapped in.

Cynd is low in the sky. When she was young her father told her the legend of Keithying, the only surviving man who'd been to Cynd and back.

What did she have to do with all that? The tender maiden that had to be taken care of. What had happened to her children, the precious fruit of her womb? One she had left with his Troll father in Yoonbarla when she and Oliar left Wescarp for the isle of Zhinldu in the late 41st. She had never heard from him again. Oliar hadn't stayed long in Zhindu on a cosmic scale, not a century, and he was off thru Kyeb and then the old lands, then to Yondure, where he remains this day. Luray had never been very far beyond Zhindu to the northeast or central Wescarp to the southwest since the 34th.

What did this have to do with how the world turned? Why did it matter? Is that what yaag gave her, the ability to not have every imperfection in the world her personal problem with the whole population lined up wanting to know why this imperfection still existed? Why is it her problem? Because she was the daughter of the wizard?

Did she like it better when they were chasing them to burn them at the stake or chasing them to pronounce a solution to every problem? She liked it best as it was in the 51st, when there were a few people around who knew the reality of Oliar and not some distorted woo-woo made up more of a wish for the supernatural to be real than any actual fact.

Before the yaag, what had she been? Nothing much actually, she'd been with Klarrain since he started and never been much more than a copy girl and part-time model. She had certainly never been the center of his life. His business would always be that, everyone else was either useful or not in that sense. She had been only moderately useful to him. Useful enough that he let her be around, acceptable enough that he would give her a quickie when he had the time. She had to admit it, she was never as much to Klarrain as she was to Knume on the day she left, at least she was his back room girl at Myimpaden more often than any other.

Had she ever really mattered to anyone? Chofa sacrificed his life for her, that was something she could not comprehend. Today Knume would not sacrifice his cook, Klarrain would not sacrifice a business deal or a blow job. What was it like to matter to someone? Had she ever known? Yes, her father. She remembered not a second of her mother and knew only Oliar's bitterness over the fact that she had turned on him, even though she was of Elven blood. Was that tragedy her curse? Running from prosecution for a century would have had an effect on her.

Who had ever been important to her? Knume and Klarrain in recent times, Lockwailee back in the late 40's. Had she ever been important to him? No, as long as she was pretty and stayed with him on the boat, that had been fine. She had never been important to him however, the boat and the Kimoneea

were important to him. Culthar had been important to her. He barely remembered her name. The buzz and the scene were important to him.

She was never anything more than an ornament, and that was her good quality. She could barely maintain herself with a nice country garden. Yeah, the country was just a vacation, but the barely literate could maintain themselves indefinitely with a garden. She had a bit better luck with her house, but that was mainly for the vine. She could probably grow a lot of larorlie.

What about female friends? It was cat fight in Klarrain's day and night. No female had a really close female friend there. They were all of or about where they were with Klarrain. There were a couple who were also about where they were with the business. They wanted influence on what got published. That's what Luray liked about copy, there was nowhere lower to go but plumbing and Dilfin liked plumbing and did it very well since before Klarrain bought the property. Klarrain kept him on.

Desa was now the best female friend she'd had in a long while and Vyinga was the second best. She had friends in Yoonbarla, but even they were laughing when she got her tongue tied around her cup when she lost it over Valla. They wouldn't miss her that much and probably wouldn't even talk about her much now that she had left Yoonbarla. She wasn't important to them either.

She wasn't doing very well on watch out here this

Dawnsleep. Alan woke up while Luray was sitting here funking. She was facing away from them, but he must have been able to tell she was quietly sobbing. He went to her and put his arms around her. She couldn't help clinging to him, she shook with distress.

"We'll make it," he said. "I know it's scary out here, but we'll make it."

"Oh it's not that," she sniffed.

"What is it?"

"Yaag."

"Once we get back to civilization you can have all you want," he said.

"I don't want all I want again. I don't want to be like this."

"You're fine. You can have as much or as little as you want."

She looked into his eyes in Kunae's light. "How I wish you were right."

"Of course I'm right," he said. "I may not be an expert on the ways of this planet, but I already know that no one forces you to have more than you want and no one forbids you to have whatever you can pay for."

"It's not that simple, not when you've done as much as I have."

"Why?"

She took a breath, trying to calm herself and get her breathing under control. She wiped her cheeks and only then was able to continue. "It has an effect, a long-term effect.

Yaag works by changing the sensitivity of nerve cells to neurotransmitters, if you know what that means."

"I do."

"When you drink as much as I did for as long as I did, there are permanent changes in the brain, or at least long-term changes. Your brain tries to compensate, tries to get you back to normal. After awhile your brain expects to be stoned, so being stoned is normal to it. Then when you don't have any for a few weeks, like now, you wind up in a condition opposite to being stoned, a bleak, dark, hopeless, empty, everything's useless type condition like this." She felt tears wet her cheeks again, she really didn't know she had been crying until he noticed.

Alan just held her. "I thought yaag was harmless?"

"Nothing that effects you is totally harmless. Oh it's completely harmless physically and if you don't spend most of your life under it's influence you won't have to worry about this effect. But I was under it's influence all day every day for decades. Heavily under the influence most of every day for decades."

"What can we do? Can anything be done?"

"No, nothing more than those pills I got in Hazorpean." she paused. Alan could think of nothing to say. "I have to just get over it. I'm sorry, I've been trying to keep this from you two as best I could. I've been trying not to act too depressed and irritable."

"You've been fine. Don't take it all on yourself, we're here

to help you. I'm here to help you."

"Thank you." She clung to him.

He kissed her forehead. "I'm still in awe of you, you magnificent Elven witch, you beautiful, magical queen of the wilds."

"Oh stop," she said, but a tiny smile curled her lips.

He sat and held her. She buried her face in his chest and held him tight and gradually her breathing came easy as they sat together waiting for the long dark to pass.

"This was one of the reasons I needed you to make love to me," she said, still buried in his arms. "That helps a little."

"I'm glad to help." He held her and rocked her. "I do care for you. I'm really sorry about my upbringing also, I bet that didn't help."

"You mean that day Desa had to demand that you do it for me? You're right, that didn't help at all. Oh it helped that we did it, but once the hormones died down I felt even worse. You noticed, but I didn't want you to notice. It was better the next week when you came to me, but I didn't want you to think you had to make it up to me. I don't know what I wanted," she started to sniffle again. "Oh I wish I never got like this." And she was sobbing again.

He rocked her some more. "You're a beautiful, intelligent, capable, desirable person Luray. You have talent for many things." He smoothed her hair, and kissed it. Once again they sat quietly until she calmed down again.

He scanned the land that he could see while he held her, "I

see calm thongas around, I know from you, that means we are safe."

After another few minutes she put her hand up behind his neck and kissed him warmly. "Thank you, just for being here."

"Like you said, we need to stick together here in this wilderness. That's not just for defense against the wildlife."

"No, I guess it's not," she said.

"You would get lonely out here."

"Wanting to be lonely can be a part of this."

"You don't really want to be lonely," he said.

"No, I guess I really don't, this withdrawal just makes me feel like I should be lonely."

"Well you're not alone."

She kissed him again and swung up onto his lap. He wrapped her in his arms and caressed her whole body until they were quite involved in it for a few minutes. "We should be watching," she said when their faces parted, but her eyes were still looking into his.

"You're right," he said and broke away.

Night of the Hakkens

By the next dawn, Alan declared his foot 'good as new' and ready to make good progress. He had his full pack on

once again, such as it was now with tent and blanket stuffed strategically to stop up the holes. He was walking without a limp when they left and walked without using the crutch, but he kept it just in case.

They were now in country that was nearly featureless, nothing but a flat floor covered with ribbonleaves. The land was so flat and the air so thick that it seemed like there was no horizon at all, just an infinite plain that receded farther and farther into the distance til it was lost in the haze. Trees and brush were few and far between and they were beginning to worry about what they would find to eat.

Thongas, lentosaurs and many other pure grazers weren't having that problem, there were always herds in sight, but you could see so vastly far here. There were few smaller inglethors now, not none, but few. Since they had no cookpot, they needed things they could eat raw or toast on a stick or wrap in the coals.

"I think we should turn to the east," Luray said, "back to the kind of land we were in before. I'd rather eat and take longer than try to reach the other side just before we starve to death."

"It might not even be that much farther actually," Desa said. "If we're heading straight towards Shempala we should come to habitation before too long."

"Shempala's still over three hundred miles away I think," Luray said.

Alan tried to figure how long it would take to make three hundred miles. They'd have to make more like thirty miles a day than fifteen, so they could get there in five weeks. Of course they would find humans miles before they reached the city, Lastriss had twenty five miles of habitation around it and Shempala was supposedly even bigger.

They were already turned while he thought those thoughts. Since it was still early, Kortrax gave a pretty good indication of east. Most clumps of trees were to the south, but they had a long time to go before they would think of camping again.

Hours later a row of trees or brush began to resolve itself from the hazy horizon. Many hours after that they came to a stream. It was swampy and marshy around it, and unlike the first one they had camped at, deep, green and muddy rather than clear and sandy.

The good news was, there was some lon and enthora in it and enough small wildlife to make a good snack. They had a late Morningday lunch here.

The bad news was there was no way to get safely across it. There could be leese anywhere in here and there was no way to tell where they were. There were probably many of them. They would have to flounder out thru reeds and brush for quite a distance. They might even have to swim. If anything it looked like the other bank might be worse, the brush went out of sight and it looked like there were more patches of water reeds within it.

It's direction of flow was back toward the south, but it was so stagnant you had to watch something floating in it for awhile to figure that out.

"I'm sure none of us want to try wallowing thru that," Desa said.

"Not me," Alan said.

"Nor I," Luray made it unanimous.

"So the question is, upstream or down?" Alan asked.

Desa started thinking about it. "Down will take us toward the type of land which can support us, but this could just keep getting swampier until it reaches the swamp itself."

"And upstream takes us north, deeper into the wilderness," Alan said.

"And south is almost backtracking," was Luray's opinion.

"As long as we are near this, we should find food," Alan said, "and who knows, we might find a place to cross within a few miles."

"We can hope," Desa said

"It's more likely to get smaller upstream," Luray said, "So that's my vote."

"No objections here," Desa replied.

"Or here," Alan added.

They were done eating, so they worked their way back from the stream and began following it north. They might have been going a little east of north along it. There was no change in it's appearance for almost an hour, but then they

found what looked like a possible crossing. There was solid bank to the water on both sides, a barely visible current between them, and it was narrow enough to jump.

Desa sprang over first. Luray threw her their bags, Alan and Luray each took an end to heave his pack across, then they both jumped after her.

"If the land's so flat here, why is the water so deep?" Alan asked.

"I would guess the leese keep dredging it out," Desa told him.

The far shore was a narrow spit of land with brushy marsh on either side. They followed it almost a mile, then it ended. The path ahead blocked not by wet ground but by a large sheet of lon-covered water, a lake nearly a mile across.

"Well this was a dead end."

So back they went, repeating the process with more trouble with the pack since the spit of land was so narrow. Then they began going north again. After another hour they noticed the edge of the brushy area along the stream or lake was tending more to the east. By the time they stopped for Noonsleep, they were going east. There was no visible stream here, just marsh and bog extending to the south as far as they could see. They had traveled nearly twenty miles, but not all of it could be considered progress.

Afternoonday found them heading east into more open country again, they left the marsh miles behind. There was

another row in front of them, many, many miles away. There was no mid day meal that day, they were in the middle of a featureless nowhere with nothing to eat but ribbonleaves and dtairs unless they could catch and kill a lentosaur. Alan was once more amazed by how far you could see here, it reminded him of a story he'd read as a child about a world within the Earth where there was no horizon. They told him this was because the thick air near the ground bent light into a sharper curve than the radius of the planet.

As Kortrax began to descend they saw that the row of brush before them was made up of really huge archwoods spaced widely apart. There must be a stream there, they hoped it wouldn't be like the last one. There were only a couple hours of daylight left by the time they reached it, and before they even saw them, Alan heard the animals he had heard on the first night.

Neither of the girls were afraid of them at all, maybe saying 'hi' if they got that close. They walked right up among them to the stream, Luray even patted one on the shoulders. With some trepidation Alan walked among them also. They were as big as he thought, almost four feet high, at least six feet long and over two feet wide, short and fat with eight short legs and a long jointed snout ending in two thick lower tusks and an upper fang that was mobile. Their tails were nothing more than a six inch stub. They had no fur or fuzz, just a thick leathery hide that it would take a hammer to pound a knife into. Their legs didn't appear to have joints,

they just got shorter while they swivelled forward. They paid little attention to Alan. One of them looked up and said 'lup pluppup lup,' with jowls bubbling in all seriousness as he passed near it, and Alan responded nervously with 'You have a nice one too' and all seemed to be well.

The stream was fine, more like the first one they camped near while his foot healed, but bigger. They would be able to wade it. It wasn't as clear as their first one, but it was clear enough that they could see whether or not there was anything coming after them. The current was slow, like all the creeks here, but not non-existent. It was also flowing south toward the Lhar, not toward the Thrambaya.

They camped on this side. The girls said they were much safer with the blanth than without, but the blanth moved on before it even got dark.

There were no stones here, so they dug a pit for their fire. There was plenty of wood and plenty of food. They found some roots that needed a cook pot so they had to leave them, but they also found plenty of wild thesh. At first they couldn't think of a surface to mat it on, but finally Alan remembered the potshard. So they were able to have real baked thesh rolls stuffed with lon and pkatta.

"Tastes like we're almost back in civilization," Luray said.

But then darkness came. Late in Dusksleep there were things out there and again they couldn't see them. There was more than one and they were closer and they were interested

in the humans.

Then horrible thrashing erupted in some nearby water, and a scream that turned Alan's hair white and made his nuts crawl up inside his belly.

"A leese got one of them," Desa said, "I wonder what will happen now?"

But the roiling water sloshed and splashed, and more grunts and slobbers arose from it. Something heaved it's dragging way out of it. More shrieks and screams split the night among the sounds of wet tearing and vicious gulping.

"It sounds like they got the leese," Luray said.

"How often do theirops hunt in packs?"

"Never. I don't know what these are, but theirops would battle each other worse than these are doing even if they didn't have a kill to fight over."

"Are they dangerous to us?"

"Probably, they wouldn't have been sniffing around us if not."

"And they know we can be dangerous?"

"They must or they would have come right after us."

Before they were done, more joined the melee and the shrieks were even worse. And then one came close enough to see. It was smaller, chunkier and lower than a theirops, but definitely a relative. It had the same claws, the same six legs and long plumed tail. It was probably two hundred pounds at most, instead of two thousand like a full grown theirops. It was vicious looking with ragged teeth and an ugly face still

dripping with the pastel-green gore of the leese. It was making a low squeal as it approached with it's head low and claws raised. It advanced steadily towards Alan. The girls were just as frozen as he was. Something about the way it twitched made him think it was about to pounce. He didn't remember if Desa started screaming when he grabbed for the log or the other way around.

He had a big log from the heart of the fire in his hand and swung it at the creature before he even got to his feet. He missed with the first swing but was on his feet and connected with the second. It shrieked and curled up, maybe it was still going to spring. He swung wildly again. This all happened within the first one and a quarter seconds after his hand had first contacted the log, he was just swinging it wildly as fast and hard as he could. The log slipped right out of his hand and sailed by the nightmare head.

At that time Alan knew the next thing that would happen was that he would be devoured, accompanied by the screams of Desa and Luray. But the burning log landed on the plume of it's tail. The whole plume burst into flame with a whoosh and the fire ran up it's fur faster than it could spring out of there. The stupid thing held it's burning tail up out of the water as it bounded across the stream screaming and ran zigzag into the night, howling so pitifully. The flame and noise shrunk in the distance.

"Quick thinking," Desa said, "I don't think I would have remembered how their tail feathers can burn in a panic

situation like that."

"To be honest I never knew it, I was just hoping to hit it in the eye with the flame. It sure burns a long time."

"It's plume is mostly wood and paper. They're in the cellulose kingdom," Desa told him.

But the others were still there, still fighting over the leese. They might have been dragging it farther away, but they were more interested in the devouring than the dragging.

"What are those things," Alan asked.

"Hakkens, I think they're called," Desa told him.

"Related to a theirops I bet."

"Yeah. There's a whole family related to theirops. Some of them are small enough to be harmless and some are harmless for other reasons, but most of them will eat people if given the chance. These are bad, they aren't smart enough to be scared off by model weapons, you have to hurt them before they get it." She had her bow out by now, and all four of the arrows she had made. "This doesn't have enough power to kill one, but it might penetrate enough to make them think about it."

"I'll stand up with this one if it doesn't," he said, holding the fake crossbow Desa made the first day. "Once they've caught on maybe that will work. If it doesn't we'll have to try the fire again."

Hours went by. The munching sounds died away.

Nightday came and went, they could still hear something out there quietly mewling and slobbering the whole time. Alan felt the numbing terror of unknowns in the darkness once again. The fact that they had seen one of them actually helped a little. They were going to have to sleep, they would do it one at a time, staying close. Alan was just dozing off when Luray said,

"Here they come."

Alan was instantly awake. In a second he had a flaming log in one hand, his knife in the other. There were three of them, two as large as the one that burned, one a little larger. They were moving in slowly and deliberately, heads low, claws high, making the whispered shriek. The big one raised and shook it's plume, clacking it's pincers as high as their faces.

Desa lit the tip of an arrow in the fire. She let the knot get burning brightly and took careful aim on the biggest one. The little thirty pound bow snapped and the arrow did penetrate the beast. It shrieked loudly and jumped in the air, twisting in pain and rage, but it's fur did not catch fire.

Alan saw that the other two looked like they might pounce, and grabbed smaller burning sticks and thru them their way. They backed off a little way. The big one continued to scream and twist. The arrow was well in between the first and second legs and it's efforts to dislodge it were just working it in the wound. It was waving around in the creature's struggles, sunk deep enough so it didn't fall out.

Desa didn't wait, she lit a second arrow and looked for a target. One of the smaller ones was already backing away. She put the second arrow in the first one again, get the leader to back away. By this time the one backing up had moved off, but the second one blew a steam-whistle challenge and lunged forward. Desa couldn't wait to light the third arrow but put it right in it's face, right at the base of the eye-stalks. Now it got the hint that these humans did not intend to be their Nightday supper. Alan threw one more firebrand at a retreating tail and missed.

Quibarta Run

The brain-shot Hakken did die and they gorged themselves grilling some of the choicest cuts while watching a spectacular dawn. They all bathed quickly, for it was a cool dawn away from the fire and it was still early when they set out. Eating well and triumphing over the hakkens had them all feeling good, even Luray had some smiles. They felt they would make good progress this day.

They did make good progress. They set way out across the plains, knowing they would probably not need to eat til they stopped for Noonsleep. They didn't worry that the route northeast showed nothing but endless prairie ahead of them. It was pleasantly warm once Morningday was well under way, but not hot, and the air was dry and as light as it ever got

down on the basin floor. If they hadn't stuffed themselves so at breakfast they probably would have been thinking about lunch by now and be sorry they weren't nearer vegetation.

"Your old map shows some cattle towns out this way, is there any chance we're nearing one of them yet?" Alan asked.

"I'm not sure, it could be possible, but we'd have to pass fairly close to one to actually notice it. If we were more than a mile away it would just look like a distant clump of archwoods."

"If they're still here at all," Luray added. "Those herdsman's villages aren't as permanent as towns like Yoonbarla, after four centuries they could have come and gone several times."

"Wouldn't we see some wagon ruts or something if we were near one?"

"If we were approaching them from the civilization side we certainly would," Luray said, "but they wouldn't have much reason to take wagons out this way, they'd drive the herd to the village and pack them there."

"So what if we see thonga tracks?" he asked.

"Indeed."

There was hardly a piece of ground out here that didn't have thonga tracks. There was almost always a herd in sight. They stayed about half mile or more away from humans in country this open.

"I'd think with all the billions of people on this planet there wouldn't be any wilderness areas this large," Alan said.

"People take up about one thousandth of a square mile each," Desa said, about forty million square miles for all of us. There's about a hundred seventeen million square miles of land in the world with some kind of life on it, that's seventy seven million square miles left over as wilderness. This is hardly even a serious wilderness here, we're just a few miles off the beaten path. In the Dos basin is a half million square miles of nearly uninhabited archwood forest altogether."

"It's hard to find this much wilderness on Earth and that has only seventeen billion people."

"From what you've told me," Luray said, "your people don't make very efficient use of the land."

"No, they surround things with wide ornamental yards and many societies still insist on driving motor vehicles thru the air on wide ribbons of asphalt."

"We don't bother with all of that. People naturally settle at about a thousand to the square mile because that gives them plenty of cropland but keeps them surrounded by other gardens to help keep the pests down and give them enough social and cultural opportunities." Luray told him.

"Advances in crop yields per acre have outpaced population growth for the last few centuries," Desa added. "That means people settle at higher densities and the amount of land used up by humans has actually decreased."

"So are there more theirops and hakkens and kranjans now?" Alan asked.

"Probably," Desa said. "There has been a steady recovery

of wildlife since the Energy Age. That was a time when humans plundered the land in non-sustainable ways. Many species went extinct. There used to be..."

"Guys," Luray interrupted, "What's that?"

They stopped to look. There was a dot on the horizon moving their way from due south of them. It was impossible to tell what it was from here. It was moving straight at them and at a reasonably brisk pace. They stared at it a few moments. All Alan could see was a distant dot on tiny stick legs, tiny and indistinct in the wavering distance.

Desa inhaled a long breath, "I can't be sure at this distance, but I really don't like the looks of it, let's start moving toward the east, out of it's path." She didn't wait for them but began to move that way, and at a very brisk pace.

Alan ran a few steps to catch up, "What do you think it is?"

"It's more of what I hope it isn't at this point," Desa said.

"Not a theirops?" he asked.

"It wouldn't attack a group of three, we are safe from theirops in daylight while we are together."

Luray was coming along too and had gone a little ahead of them even. "I can't tell what it is either, it's not a kranjan and it's not a theirops. It's so far away I can't tell for sure."

They continued at this brisk pace awhile, more than twenty minutes, until they were sure. "It's definitely turned to follow us." Luray said, "and it's closer now."

Alan stopped to take another hard look. It was still very distant, but he was reminded of a spider, a daddy longlegs with only the end joint of all its legs. Each leg seemed to be a curved stick, he could see no joints in them. Its body was just one ball, at least that's all he could see from here.

"It's a quibarta all right," Desa said, "and we have nothing to use on it."

"Your bow?" Alan asked.

"I have one arrow left. I know, I should have made more before we broke camp," she wailed, "but there's nothing to make any with here."

"We have the knife?" Alan asked.

"It will kill at least one of us before we kill it with that knife," she replied.

She was moving faster now, almost a run and had turned directly away from it. It was coming after them, Alan was now sure of it. The air was so still that Alan could even hear its feet hitting the ground now, they sounded like dead sticks striking sand in a sharp, purposeful rhythm, 'tickita tickita tickita'

"We need to break its fangs," Luray told them, "It's such a low form of life it can't feel pain and doesn't know fear."

"It's the most single minded thing the evil ones ever thought up," Desa said, "It picks its quarry and pursues it till the quarry drops. It's got a brain so small it can hold only one idea and once the hunting idea drops in there, only death or a full stomach can get it out."

"There's nothing out this way," Luray said.

"It's eight or nine miles back to the last stream and it's got the angle on us. We'd have to sprint to get past it."

"Can we outrun it?" Alan asked.

"In a short run, and to a quibarta any run a human has ever made is short, it will not tire in a week, and every time we walk, it will narrow the distance between us."

"We need to go back for a club," Luray said.

"How do we know back is closer?" Desa asked.

That was true, if the horizon had a line of brush and trees on it behind them, it had one in front of them also since both horizons looked the same. The horizon to the northwest was different, lighter, there was no line of trees in that direction. There was no real horizon line in any direction out here, the extreme distance was just an indistinct band. The next line of brush could actually be twenty miles away for all they knew, but since it didn't look any different, he hoped it was the same distance or less.

"Let's not give up the lead we already have," Alan said, and began to jog ahead of Desa. They were probably a mile ahead of the thing at this point.

"Well I'm certainly not going to leave you," Luray said, "But it's an unknown out this way."

"I know I can't keep ahead of a quibarta all the way back to where we camped last dark," Desa said, "maybe this way I have a chance."

They began to jog at an easy lope, trying to cover as much

ground with as little exertion as possible. Don't get winded, concentrate on breathing. The girls knew more about this than he did and they didn't have this pack. A little bag of clothes wrapped around your shoulders is not like this. But then he was supposed to be the bigger, stronger male wasn't he? And wasn't he much younger than Desa's four hundred Earth years or Luray's three thousand?

Before long this was the longest he had ever run in his life. He got a second wind after passing his record from any training run. He wondered if the thicker air was the secret. They weren't talking much now, just running. There were times when Alan just had to drop to a walk, and the girls dropped with him. He tried to walk briskly and get his breath back with desperate wheezing and found he had to stop almost completely. They all guzzled the water skins by the second time they did this.

"It's more comfortably carried within us than sloshing in a skin on Alan's back." Luray said. "Let me take the empty skin, and what's left of your camp cooking kit," which was just a little plastic plate and some plastic tableware. She took them and wrapped them in her bag.

"I'll take your blanket," Desa said, "and I'm throwing this tent out. I'd rather get a little wetter when it rains than see you eaten."

Alan was grateful for this. "I can fly now," he said.

"Well we better," Luray said, "I can hear those sticks

again."

And on they ran. With his pack so much lighter Alan felt freed and he also felt it would be very weak of him to have to call the rest this time. With tooth-cracking determination he jogged on thru the pain in his side and shins, the rawness in his throat and the sweat chafing his crotch. He would not be the one who dropped to a walk this time.

It seemed like hours of single minded devotion to that horizon. Nothing in the world but the next stride, tunnel vision on the ground ahead, ground to be covered. A bloom on a ribbonleaf far ahead was a small goal to get to, that many more steps. Once achieved, pick another, this stride, now one more. Oh there's a pile of thonga dung ahead, I can throw my legs ahead of me that much farther.

Luray dropped to a walk, the inertia in his hips brought him a hundred feet beyond where he stood panting with his hands on his hips as Luray caught up with Desa, and then both of them with him.

They walked together, none of them saying a word, just panting. High stepping and trying to keep lose. Luray actually stopped and leaned over awhile, but did not lose anything.

"I'll try filling them skin's in the next leese wallow we see," Luray gasped, "Just keep that knife handy."

"Is it still coming?" Alan asked. He couldn't actually see it.

"Of course it's still coming," Desa panted, "It's a quibarta

isn't it."

"So?" Alan gasped.

"They never give up," she puffed on. "They keep after you til whatever one of us it's fixed on drops. It would trample right over the other two of us if we fell first, and continue after the one it has selected as a target."

"It's quite a ways back," he wheezed.

"But it won't stop to rest, eat, piss or anything. It isn't fast but there is no limit to it's endurance."

"What if it lost us?"

"In this nowhere, it will smell us, it will smell us if we were a day beyond it's sight," Luray said, "They are very good at smelling out humans."

"Especially females," Desa added.

They jogged on, their speed had fallen to a shuffling jog, none of them felt brisk by this time. In spite of the lightening they had done, and losing a lot of their gear to the kranjan weeks ago, Alan's pack was still way too heavy to be running with.

"We can't just keep running forever," Alan protested.

"Tell you what, maybe it's not after you," Luray said. "You could drop back and see if it eats you. If it doesn't, you're all set."

"Don't be gross."

The line on the horizon ahead of them gradually began to coalesce into another tiny watercourse lined with brushy

forest. It was still miles away, there was no chance they could run that far, but it was something to aim for. The immediate area was still the featureless table-top-flat expanse of ribbonleaves. To each side it blended into the horizon. Behind them the watercourse where they spent the previous dark was now invisible.

If only they could run as effortlessly as the quibarta, like a motorized machine 'tikita tikita tikita' on it's dead-stick legs. Every time they rested they heard that sound after a little while and it got them going again. They ran with flaming sides and legs, knotted calves and burning lungs. Alan was also noticing his foot, which he thought was good as new, was started to ache painfully again.

They were all amazed at how long they were able to keep going when survival depended on it. Desa and Luray had lived their whole lives here on the ground, had both lived in the country and Desa had run from a quibarta before, though only a minute fraction of this distance. Alan had lived his life on the ship with only the exercise ring to run in, kept at about half the gravity here. When he had run in the exercise ring to the limit of his endurance, training for just such an event as this, he had collapsed in exhaustion after less than a quarter this distance and that was without the pack.

A puddle of water they didn't notice in their exhaustion caught them. Alan was a little behind and might have had time to stop himself when he saw the girls fall in, but as he

was nearly stumbling already, he had too much momentum to stop himself. It was deep, covered with lora and with a muddy bottom. It was narrow enough that they hit the far shore while falling. Desa and Luray immediately hauled themselves out and lay panting on the bank. Alan stood at the bank gasping, resting his arms on the bank like it was the side of a pool, too spent to haul himself out.

"Get out," Desa croaked, and motioned. Luray motioned also. Alan gave them a questioning look over his gasping mouth.

Desa reached for him as Luray started yelling, "Get out before the leese gets you."

He crouched to spring out, but the wave was much too big for that little motion. He barely got his torso on the bank, and barely got his right leg up before something grabbed the other. "AAAAA," he yelled, "it's pulling me back."

"Stop screaming and start pulling," Luray yelled as both girls started pulling him by the pack straps.

They all pulled and the water thrashed mightily. The tentacle was extracted from the water. "The knife's in my pack," Alan grunted, trying to wrest his calf free from three wraps of strong rope.

Desa dug for it with one hand, Alan began losing ground as both Luray's heels made furrows in the soft soil. Desa had the knife out and pulled its sheath with her teeth. Alan kicked mightily and got his left leg close enough for Desa to begin sawing at the tentacle. She missed because a foot wide

section of the bank slumped down and Alan's other leg went in. Desa almost went in also and teetered on the edge. The leese was caught off guard by the cave in, and it's lurch allowed Alan to scramble a bit farther onto the shore with a mighty yank from Luray. Desa grabbed him, but it still had him and dragged him back. Desa was sawing at the tentacle again, reaching down underwater to get at it, leaving only her hips and legs on land. Luray was still pulling at Alan, and they both snapped back when the tentacle let go as soon as the knife bit deep. Immediately Alan and Luray both had to jump to snatch Desa from the water just as another tentacle snapped like a whip in front of her face, missing a purchase on her throat by inches. She had to jab it with the knife again to keep her hair. They all scrambled back a good distance from the pool and Desa allowed herself a full-bodied shriek of terror. Alan couldn't, he was so winded he felt he had to vomit, but couldn't. "It's a damn good thing we found it's ass in a tube and didn't have to deal with it's beak," was the last thing Desa wheezed.

They weren't rested yet when Luray sat up and said, "We built up quite a lead, but it's still coming."

"There's still no sign of a weapon here, we have to get moving again," Desa said.

"Why don't we just use the knife on it?" Alan asked.

"You could stab it a dozen times and it wouldn't even notice, it's a very low form of life." Desa told him. "If you cut

off both tentacles it would still keep eating you and grow new ones later and not even notice. You might eventually kill it if you cut enough pieces out of it, but it will be eating on you all the while."

"You have to get a large club and break the fangs so it can't feed," Luray told him. "It will continue to try like nothing was amiss, but then you can pulverize it and cut it up til it eventually dies."

"That's unbelievably gross," Alan said, "but we better get moving again, it's getting close, I think I can even hear it now."

"Wait," Luray said, "We can use them against each other. If we stay in sight we can position ourselves so the brute blunders right into the leese. It won't be thinking of fighting it, and in it's natural element the leese should win."

"What if leese don't like quibarta?" Alan asked.

"A leese will eat anything it can kill," Luray said.

"We might as well try it," Desa said, "It's getting close."

They could hear the 'tickita tickita tickita' clearly now. They hardly had to move to keep it lined up with the leese, but they rapidly backed away from the wallow as it approached. They could see it's saucer eye and nasty jaws by the time it reached the bank. It plunged in at full stride, it's tentacles unfolding from the running position in time to slap the water as it plunged beneath the lon. The water swirled and writhed, a little sloshing over the bank. They were two

hundred yards from the wallow by now but continued to back away.

"They can live underwater as long as half an hour," Desa informed them about quibarta.

Suddenly the water surged way over the bank and erupted in spray. Breakers sloshed back and forth, spray burst forth in several locations, tentacles knotted as the battle raged in the depths of the pool. A mountain of water bubbled up, all green and bright blue, then the pool stilled.

"That thing sure put up one hell of a struggle," Alan said.

The water rippled a little more and a tentacle reached up on the bank. Not the light, nearly translucent tentacle of a leese, but the thinner, tough-hided tentacle of the land-dwelling quibarta.

"No," Desa cried, "no it can't!" but she started a stumbling run.

They didn't stay to watch it worry itself a ramp back up onto the bank, they started running again. It was impossible not to wonder at the determination of this hellish beast. It had pursued them half of Morningday already. It had killed a leese probably larger than itself, in the leese's element. It had not stopped to feed, the leese was just another obstacle between it and its prey.

"We're closer to the brush now," Luray said, maybe we can make it."

"If we can keep running."

So they pushed on. Kortrax was still not to the top of his

arc, even though it felt like they had been running for a week already. It was much worse now that they had stopped for those few minutes. Every breath was ragged, his ribs hurt as well as every other part of his body.

A few bushes went by, but nothing with a stick big enough to use as a club. They couldn't last and had to drop to a walk. It was still at least a mile to the line of trees at the next watercourse.

"I'm dropping this," Alan said of the pack, "If we live I can come back for it, with it I'll never live."

Without another word they dropped all their belongings but his knife and Desa's bow and last arrow in a pile and stumbled on. Each time they heard the rhythm of the quibarta's legs they put on another burst of speed, but after a few minutes they were back to a gasping walk again, usually holding each other up and falling forward more than walking.

They came to a dead shrub that was big enough to make a club. It wasn't quite dead enough to break off.

"We'll hack it off," Desa said while falling to the ground at its base, "The knife," she reached up.

"Is there time to get that off?"

"Lean on it, that makes it easier. I can't get any farther and it's too open between here and the creek." She fell to sawing at its roots desperately for a minute, then, "Take over," she gasped at Alan, "let me twist."

Alan fell to it, she struggled to her knees and began working the small log back and forth in the ground.

Luray broke off another piece of deadwood, too small to kill it but maybe enough to put up a fight with. They heard the 'tickita tickita tickita' growing louder as they struggled. "It's here!" Luray screamed by the time the last large root separated.

"Smash the fangs, watch out for the tentacles, don't let it grab the club," were the last intelligible words he heard.

It was upon them. It was just a sloppy ball of flesh, squirming like one big three hundred pound blob of fat, propped up on six curved sticks, each four and a half foot long, pulsating out of the bottom edge. It had two snake-like tentacles coming out of what should have been the cheeks of its face. One big eye above that face, and the wickedest jagged blades clamping on each side of the pincer-circled, slobbering mouth.

The fact that they turned to face it didn't disturb it in the least. As it closed with them he saw that Desa was its intended victim. Alan jumped in front of it. With a tentacle it batted him out of the way. Desa screamed and slashed at the tentacles with the knife. From behind it Alan brought the club down with a violent whoosh to the forward center of its body just behind the eye. A huge dent resulted, and greenish slime seeped into it. That got its attention, it shuddered and thrashed about with its tentacles. One hit the knife that Desa was holding out in front of her, face contorted in terror. The end of the tentacle severed and she was splattered with goo. She screamed again.

Luray had jumped around to the other side of it and was thrashing at the mouth and eye. "I think you got the eye!" Luray yelled. Then she shrieked as a tentacle grabbed her. Alan battered at the top of it's body, whipping the ichor to foam. "But get the fangs, the fangs!" Luray screamed as the tentacle drew her toward them.

He whirled the club around and wailed it down on one of those slashing scimitars. To his amazement the wood broke, but so did the mandible. The other one still drew blood from her, and the tentacle continued to draw her in. Alan jammed the stump of the club into it's mouth just ahead of her backside. It fastened on the club, even with it's jaw smashed, but was unable to let go. Desa sawed at the tentacle that held Luray til she finally severed it and got her free, then plunged the knife wildly again and again into the mess that was once it's face, all in a frenzy. Meanwhile Alan beat the rest of it to paste with the root end of the club. Slowly it slumped and fell over, pieces of it's body and organs continuing to twitch.

They were all made sick by the reaction to such a hideous form of life, they crawled and stumbled a good distance from it to retch. They staggered a little further, then collapsed, sobbing weakly on each other.

"How could such a monstrosity ever evolve?" Alan asked when they were able to speak again.

"Oh it didn't evolve," Desa said, "At least not like it is."

"What is it?" Alan asked.

"To understand the quibarta," Desa told him, "you have to understand that it is part of the ecological aftermath of the Energy Age mass extinction. The quibarta's ancestors preyed on stryders. Stryders were flightless relatives of the dactyls, they were mostly hunted to extinction in Thulitlanth times and in spite of a lot of people's efforts, the large ones went extinct by the early Energy Age. A few have been recreated lately from preserved DNA but they are still too rare to feed quibartas."

Luray added that, "The quibarta was brewed up after the first Dempalan collapse to prey on humans. They were used as beasts of war that were even cheaper than orcs."

"Early geneto-terrorists used these species because they are much more rudimentary and easy to program." Desa told him. "And the damn things are so tough that they still breed after all humankinds efforts to eradicate them."

"This one didn't," Alan said.

"And thank you for that," Luray said, "And thank you too," she said to Desa.

They were still too winded to converse much beyond that. They were an hour before they were recovered enough to go back after their stuff. After that they limped to the watercourse and found a late Noonsleep. They followed the watercourse north-northeast a short Afternoonday of just a few miles at the most, but camped where it was just a trickle for the dark.

The keltoid clump they camped in had a fire circle already built, decent remnants of a firewood pile and a noticeable latrine area.

"This was a herdsman's camp not that long ago." Luray said, "something they might use once a year."

"Probably not last week, more likely Venurat."

"Yeah."

At this camp they spent an uneventful Dusksleep, wore Alan out with sex-as-entertainment for Nightday, got soaked in a massive electrical storm for Dawnsleep that they dried out of thru Morningday of the week they finally walked out of that wilderness.

Book VI.

An Astronomer's Opinion

Tarlass was lead high into the pyramid. This was not his first time here, but it was his first time this high and the first time a floater had been sent for him. In all his previous trips to the Kassikan, the farthest he'd been was level 121, the balcony of the Astronomical Research Steering Committee that he often pleaded for funding in front of. Normally it took him a whole year to get from the heights of the Golibar to the towers of the city, but this time almost half the time was cut by flying halfway across the New Midlands.

Tarlass was really only a technician, a platesman at the Golibar Observatory, high in the Golibar waste. He had the most recent plates with him, a whole series of observations of the null point asteroids and their unexplained motions of the past year. Two laborers were needed to lug that crate that held them, for there were many observations.

He was being lead so high that the air felt almost like it did when he was on post. Of course the observatory itself had to be pressurized, it was almost seven miles above the Kassikan, going outside without a pressure suit and breathing hose was impossible at that altitude, but even the inside of the observatory was at the pressure of three miles above the Kassikan, the limit of human life. Tarlass was used to air that thin, and had acclimatized to it well enough that he could

walk a mile above the level where maps went black. Even so, the fifty mile hike thru the pressure tunnel to reach the observatory was always a barrier and he spent years at a time eating dried food up there where the Kassikan's greatest telescopes had a clear view of the stars.

He was now at a level of the pyramid where hallways reached light at both ends. The woman named Vindeen who was leading him took him to a waiting area where hallways crossed. "Please be comfortable here," she said, "I know the committee is expecting you but they have other business also, I need to check their schedule." She let go of him to let him sink into a plush stand-cushion.

"I'll be fine," he said, "but it was most comfortable walking with you."

"Why thank you," she said, and pressed the back of his hand to her ample bosom. "I think I'm assigned to show you to your quarters after the meeting, would you like me to help warm them?"

"Yes, that would be delightful," he said. She was a bit plush and her dark hair was straight, but she was pleasant enough and he would just as soon have her as a bedmate and skip the club scene.

"Nice," her smile was genuine and transformed her rather average face to one of beauty, "I'll be looking forward to it."

She dropped his hand and skipped off, beckoning the guys with the crate to come along. One gave him a wink on the way by, but they were residents of the city and undoubtedly

had more stunning examples of Yakhanian femininity to go home to.

The wait was not long, but two girls who passed by made him wonder if he had been a little hasty. They were quite a bit more svelte with prettier faces and luxurious hair, one gold, one warm brown. They stopped for a moment to ask his business and seemed impressed by the mission he was on. The most beautiful women seldom paid him particular attention, the thin air of the mountaintop gave him a barrel chest and a rather ruddy complexion. If he was going to stay in the city he might want something done about that, but he doubted he would be here even a year before starting back toward the observatory.

Vindeen soon returned, "They're waiting for you," she said, "I think they're very interested in your discoveries." He rose and she took his arm again, with more vigor this time. "They'll meet you in their lab conference room, it's only four more floors from here."

Being plush, and obviously eager to bed someone important enough to be flown in to a meeting with the founders, it was very pleasant walking up the stairs with her. She told him of the quarters he would be assigned to and asked about his life at the observatory on the way. There wasn't time to tell very much before they were at the door. "You can tell me all about it later," she said as they stood at the door. Her hands moved over him while she did.

He caressed her enough in return to let her know he was still interested, "Yeah, shall we have duskmeal together?" he asked.

"I was hoping," she said.

"I better go in," he said, "I doubt it's polite to meet the founders with an erection."

"Yeah," she giggled, but squeezed his ass one more time as he turned, "but hold that thought for later."

Only three of them were in the room when he entered, he'd heard there were five altogether. He had never been here before, and never met them before. The first to greet him was a very tall man with long straight white hair and beard, except for a line of charcoal on the front of his chin. He had a long face with long straight nose and very clear skin. He did not give a name. The other man was similar, but all his hair and beard was white, but wavy, his skin not so smooth and his nose a little crooked, but his smile went to his jolly eyes. He gave his name as Althart, but Tarlass suspected he was a hero from the wars of magic under a different name. The woman was also tall, cool, and her hair still carried a touch of gold even though she was obviously also a helmet user. Her voice was a throaty whisper. She gave him the name 'Myanfynga' but he knew her from legend as the former witch queen of the Westwood. Thirty centuries later, her beauty was still as magnificent as in the legends, and the simple elegance of her robes even more so.

The room was a large space that took up a whole floor near the top of the pyramid. The box of plates was already on a large workbench just outside the raised dias surrounded by bookcases where their thrones sat. The remainder of the floor space was covered with many other work tables on which were devices he could not identify. They asked about his journey and offered a few delicacies as refreshment before they got down to business.

"This one was taken in week Kadezak of last year," he said, pushing the next plate into the projector. They had darkened the room with the night-mats so the plates could be projected on a whole wall and let them see all the details. The first few plates had been the details of the asteroid string as it had lain in the stasis point for the past thirty five years. They had been interested in those even though they kept the Kassikan out of the debates swirling around them, in spite of many efforts in the scientific media to get them involved. Those of the public who were interested already knew that they were metallic asteroids with strange filamentous structures joining them. They were the largest concentration of metals that had ever been observed, and had been closely studied because of that, but it was their motions of the previous year that caused them to send for him. "You can clearly see that these connecting filaments have already been removed..."

"We can see that they are gone," Myanfyngaa said, "but

to say they are removed implies that some actor removed them. Do we have any evidence of that?"

"Could they have just melted away?" Althart asked.

"Kortrax is fairly active this year."

"We have a spectral analysis..." Tarlass started to pull it from the case.

Althart waved him off, "The results alone will do, no need to check your analysis now."

"Very well," he slid it back into the case. "The filaments appear to be even more highly denominated alloys than the bodies themselves. They could not have melted due to natural causes."

"Do we know how they were removed?" Myanfynga asked.

"We have this plate here," Tarlass said, and put another photograph in the viewer. This showed one of the connecting filaments free of the larger bodies. "This was taken during eclipse, so the exposure is long." That fact made the filament rather indistinct since it was in motion. "Notice the light streaks here," he pointed to the ends of the blur that was probably the connecting filament.

"Thrusters," the founder who hadn't introduced himself said.

Myanfynga looked to him. "And that is?"

"Some type of superheated reaction mass, much higher temperature than we ever used," he replied. Tarlass was quite interested in that revelation for it must mean they had been in

outer space themselves. That could very well explain why the Kassikan was reluctant to join in the debates about these objects. "We normally used steam, which would not leave this bright a signature." He turned to Tarlass, "I'm assuming this was visible-light film?"

"Yes it was," he answered.

"The fact that it was moved during eclipse may be significant," Myanfynga said. "They may wish to prevent our observation of their activities."

"It is hard to believe they could be so ignorant of our observational capabilities," the unnamed one said.

"So is that enough for you to say Brancettrable is wrong and this is not one of ours?" she asked.

Tarlass had no idea who she was talking about, but was stunned at this revelation. He had not known the Kassikan had ever launched a space mission, much less one using this much metal. He wondered if the purpose of the mission had been to find metallic asteroids. He knew of the theory that they might exist, in spite of the fact that he was only a technician.

The unnamed founder answered that, "Let's see some more of the images before we leap to any conclusions."

Tarlass got out one of the images he thought they would be most interested in. "This was taken early last Imnotn," he said as it came into the field of view. It showed the bodies of these metallic asteroids had separated. A ghostly blue glow ran thru the centers of most of them. One of them was out of

the alignment, but it had the most of the metallic protrusions and whiskers of all of them. "The only spectroscopy that fits this plume indicates that it is a hydrogen plasma at over fifty million degrees."

"Sunfire!" Myanfynga gasped.

"Nothing else fits it."

"What about electrostatically propelled hydrogen ions?" the unnamed one asked.

"It would have to be far beyond anything in our labs," Althart said.

The one with the charcoal streak in his beard said, "People, we know this is a visitor. It is certainly not outgassing comet fragments like the conservatives claim."

That claim had been made by some scientists at some of the smaller observatories that wouldn't have had the instruments to properly analyze that plume. Many of the public had picked that up and the Kassikan had not refuted it. The sociologists were still debating what the effects on the populace would be if the Kassikan was to announce that this was definitely a visitor of some type.

"We wouldn't be here discussing them unless we were already convinced of that," Althart said.

"So it is a mission from another star," the tall one said, "and as such, it has to be equipped with mechanisms beyond our ability to manufacture or we would have explored the neighborhoods of other stars ourselves."

"We COULD do it," Myanfynga said, "you know that

better than I. We just know that with chemical explosives and sun sails the centuries involved are not practical."

"We could build missiles again, we have to use crystal instead of titanium, but we could do that," the unnamed one admitted, "If this visitor proves hostile we may have to do that to defend ourselves."

"But there is the rub," Althart said. "Until we can prove this visitor is not one of ours returning, the Instinct prevents us taking any such action."

"We already know it is nothing Dempala ever built," the unnamed one said.

Tarlass had heard rumors of Dempala, the great Empire of the golden age, but knew almost nothing about it. He wanted to ask if Dempala, not the Kassikan was the source of expeditions into space, but didn't get the chance.

"They could have rebuilt their vessel after reaching their destination," Althart said. "They may have discovered a more advanced civilization that taught them much."

"If Brancettrabble hadn't sent us that message," Myanfynga said, "we might never have thought of that."

"Nevertheless, it is done," Althart said, "and you know because of that we can't launch a strike against it, even if we had such a missile manufactured."

"It could be done in a year," the other guy said. "Now that we have the pneumatic science to build a control system for it. The crystal and the explosives are not a great challenge."

"And could you launch it?" Althart asked him.

The unnamed one paused at this point. He held up his hand as if he was about to speak, and then lowered it. Finally he said, "that's why I believe we need to research an antidote for the Instinct."

Alhart turned to him and Tarlass feared he might suffer the Instinct with the fury that was in his eyes. "We've been over that before," he was trying not to shout. He succeeded but with some effort.

"Gentlemen," Myanfynga interceded. "Alhart's right, we have been over this before. Such a secret would never be kept. Society couldn't cope with that today. I know," she looked toward the unnamed one, "that things were fine in the forties, but this is not the forties. People have lived ten centuries with the Instinct now, no one could cope with even the threat of violence. Society would be disrupted even more than it was when the Instinct appeared."

"Our security expenses would be ten times what they are now," Alhart added, "and you more than any of us should be aware of what it would mean."

The unnamed one looked both hurt and angry. "But we are helpless against a possibly hostile invader."

"Where do you see any evidence of hostility?" Alhart asked.

"They did their work during eclipse and they have not attempted to communicate with us."

"How would they do so?" Alhart asked.

"If I may," Tarlass said, "this may answer that question."

He put in another plate. "This was taken later in Imnotn."

By then the string of asteroids with the plasma plume had swung close by Narrulla, then become much more spread out and had moved off almost to the orbit of Onchegeela. This plate showed the one asteroid that had remained behind, and a small triangular fragment that had broken off of that. There was a telltale jet of hot plasma coming from that fragment also. "We were able to track this fragment," he said, and showed them the next plate. In this one Narrulla and the asteroid remaining at the null point had swung around in it's orbit so it was opposite the string of asteroids that were moving away in the direction of Kuna. "This is only a few hours later, but notice that this fragment of the remaining asteroid has moved fourteen thousand miles off from it's original position, and is now six thousand miles closer to us."

They were fascinated with that, but didn't say anything. He switched to the next in the sequence. "This was taken two hours later. One can clearly see the fragment is entering the atmosphere. This plume here has the signature of a meteor trail."

"So it fell to ground?" The unnamed one asked.

"By its trajectory it should have impacted somewhere in the western Zhindu basin."

"Are there any reports?" Myanfynga asked them all.

Alhart was the one who went to an eye. He began to type at it. Tarlass put in his last slide of that sequence. "I suspect you won't find any reports of a meteor strike," he said,

"because this picture was taken the following Garibivlast using the weather scope." It was a picture looking down from the mountain at the cloud tops over the New Midlands. But at the top of the picture, high above the atmosphere, there was a tiny triangular sparkle. The weather scope had nowhere near the magnification that had allowed them to analyze the meteor plume, but the image was consistent with what he was about to say. "I suspect that is the same object and that our visitor attempted some kind of contact by landing someone or something on our world."

Book VII.

Down River

The Inn at the Village of Flowers

It was another whole week after killing the quibarta before they finally encountered another human. He was quite a small guy, not Luray's type at all, but riding a very large eight with bulging muscles and erect eyes. He assured them that there were herdsman's homes all along the way they were going, was surprised they hadn't met one already. They slept a long Noonsleep in a clump of bushes that looked from a distance like the trees of a herdsman's home, but might have once been a thonga calving bed at most. The only sign of human habitation was a pair of names carved in a tree.

The Afternoonday was hot with a few small puffball clouds that showed them an infinite distance of ground as flat, hot and humid as this. Some showers wandered around offering occasional relief but endangering them with a few sparks of lightening. It was thonga country, they were everywhere and they were obviously herded. Humans nurture thongas by preying on their predators and let the thongas grow as thick as they can without stripping the prairie. This means there's a fifty to hundred mile band of land around human settlements where large predators are rare and large herbivores are very abundant. They were clearly in that band

now. Occasionally in the distance they could see a few areas that might have been crops but they were too far away to be sure. They kept on to the northeast where the horizon had a fuzziness like there was more vegetation in that direction.

Finally the unremitting, almost desolate, sameness of the basin floor was interrupted by a small farming village and as Afternoonday of Iyosaign waned, on the anniversary of boarding Vyinga's ship, the ordeal was over. This whole village was built out of one archwood clump, a stream, some big stones carved out of the creek bed and some plank-up plus the trunks that grew up around it. The whole village was thick with larorlie and many other flowering kinds of thin vine that grew high into the trees and made the archwoods themselves look like they were in flower. Those upper flowers were a blue and purple topping to the orange, red and maroon of the larorlie blooms in the lower branches. Way out here on the plain, big rains hadn't yet come to knock the blooms down. As they approached, a whiff of the fragrance reached them and contributed to the joy of their deliverance. Luray knew she should restrain herself from bopping into town whistling a Blighnitentide tune, but that was how she felt already. Fenced crops extended about five hundred yards from the village and quite a few kedas lounged about in the shade. There were plenty of paths to enter the village, all of them lead to a public square under the three grand houses grown from the central trunks of the original archwood clump. There were probably ten more houses in the village

altogether, spread out around it and above some others up in the branches.

Most of the houses in the village were accessible from the balcony of this square. The businesses were a kedary, a briner, an inn and one other guy with a yaag still and tap. The inn was a pretty little place on the village square, mostly catering to herdsman on R&R. Its front room opened out to the small stream where it entered the village, making a cute little pond of less than an acre. The fireplace was between the front door and the village end of the brook. Both cooks in the village set up at his fireplace, one with a hearty thonga stew and the other with some crispy, tasty, spicy, thin rolls with lots of lorv and kalic seasoning the thonga strips.

There was a lively crowd of country folk in and around the place. The mats on the square side of the inn's main room were up, making the plaza almost part of the room. Out front an old manual-pedal chipponga and wheezing old squeeze-box were the music. They were playing as much to the village square as the inn and as much of the crowd was outside as in. Now if Desa had her old manual yandrille in her bag they could have had quite the ethnic heritage act. Luray knew that a lot of these people were the descendants of the villagers that had tried to roast her twenty one centuries ago. They were jolly and friendly now, but one could see how some of them could have had some fundamentalism and cruxifictionism in their heritage. At the time she ran with Oliar, this part of the Lhar's valley was a wide sea, filled with wild lon and enthora.

So this village was younger than that.

Opposite the fireplace was a tap with a perky sweet little yellow that flowed cool from damp kegs. By this time Luray was relieved to get a cup of anything. The dull, colorless, empty feeling brought on by the absence of yaag hadn't bothered her during the later part of the camping trip as much as it had before Desa made Alan share his body with her, but the quest for a buzz was still there and the presence of a keg was irresistible.

After so long without, her head took right off and she found that the two-cup limit that she'd set herself was plenty. She found the food, the folk and the festivities at this little country inn remarkably bright and cheerful. It was so nice to see that the vigor and energy of these lowland Nordics freed from those kluboeb influences. Though everyone here knew each other, they were as warm and open to outsiders as city people are now.

As well as stuffing themselves with food and drink, they had to introduce themselves since there were no strangers among the dozen and a half people here. They didn't get into a lot of detail, just camping their way across. They got into conversations about the wildlife and found these people left the plains to the herdsman. They figured the place must have been one of the cattle towns on the ancient map, seeing as the main businesses are what they are, but most residents were eating from their plot and helping the others out now and then for some cash. There were a few herdsman passing thru on

their way in or out stopped by for a drink and/or... They were easy to spot by the dust. It was possible that the center of this village was as old as the 51st. It would have been a lot of plank at that time. What are the oldest dead fronds now, would have been saplings holding up tent at the time. But that was how cattle towns used to look out here in the 51st.

As the locals hooked up and went to their Dusksleeps, another couple lingered for the sleep at the inn, toasting some morsels from the left over stew in the fire. They were named Lmore and Nuran. Lmore was a tough, weather-beaten herdsman, all sunburn, dust and squint. Nuran had a lot of the same, the squint, more tan than burn but she had washed the dust out her hair, leaving it honey-brown and wavy. She was slender and dark, very firm and wiry.

"You think we'll find a dry mattress?" Nuran asked.

"Probably," Desa answered her, "It looks like we're back in habitation here. I think most people just went to your-place-or-mine."

"You must be traveling also?" Nuran asked.

"Oh yeah," Desa answered, "we certainly are."

"To Shempala?" Nuran asked.

"Are we at all close?" Desa asked in return.

"It's a hundred and fifty miles."

"Wow," Alan said, "That close already?"

"We must have followed the wilds we were in the long way," Luray said, "I'm surprised we were able to get this close to Shempala in the wilds."

They had to tell Nuran, Lmore and the innkeeper the details of their adventure crossing the wilderness from the Lhar. Alan didn't want them relating the starship part, no one believed it anyway, but they were spellbound by the wilderness part.

Nuran was the daughter of a herdsman and their home was high enough and in thick enough trees to be safe from kranjans. She had seen them before. Lmore had been working drives out this way with Nuran's father a good part of a century and had seen a few kranjans himself, but never hunted them. Hid from them mainly and galloped on his keda in the opposite direction, arriving back at the drive breathless with the warning that there was a kranjan out there. Now that Nuran was grown, she was following him on his once-a-decade trip to the city. In honor of her first trip from home, he'd already promised her he'd take a year off and take her all the way in to Zhindu and not just Shempala where he usually went.

Since they were the same age, Nuran and Alan hit it off well enough that night in the inn that Luray wanted to suggest to Lmore that Nuran wouldn't be needing a guide to Zhindu, but she also sensed that Nuran and Lmore already had a little history that Lmore wanted to continue.

Even so, Luray didn't keep herself aloof from him, after a couple cups she was certainly ready for a little social play. Alan was nice but she could always feel the guilt in the back

of his mind any time they got together. Lmore noticed her, he did cuddle and converse a little, but for the sleep he stayed with Nuran. 'She's nice and firm and plenty raunchy,' she had heard him tell someone earlier in the evening. He said it with this snorting laugh that he had.

The rooms rambled along a plankway above the bank of a pretty little marsh, barely visible in the last purple of the light. Each was an eight foot nest a floor up in a grown bubble of young hangleaf. There was a shower & toilet on the lower level and stowage under the mattress accessible from the landing of the steps. She was by herself in this one, but stoned enough not to mind. She didn't mind unpacking and washing out her clothing. It wasn't the convenience of the Lhar, but there was abundant water with a valve and there was a nice candlelantern in the bathroom so she could use a bit of the dark time to get that done.

Lmore was returning a company caravan with a big load of fallos for a big-field farmer a few miles from there. That made them a big cushy ride all thru Nightday. They rode that massive wagon and its three-keda hitch down a narrow little lane between big fields on their way out of that village. As Nightday wore on this became an ever wider street deeper and deeper into the plots. They stopped at a large town square for lunch. There were two halls like Lappranile bordering it, with music even now, just a few guys jamming, and a row of five cooks and a pond on a canal. There were enough torches

out that there was no trouble walking. There were homes grown at least four stories deep all around this square but only a few curbs and steps of stone.

Lmore was from Trenst, and rather proud of it, regaling them most of the journey with tales of it's wonders. He knows of the Yakhhan, but still thinks Trenst is the world's greatest city. It may be in population, but Trenst's fame is the swamp. It's name means swampiest of swamp. Trenst is built in a swamp, and is such a loose collection of habitation that it's not easy to tell where the city ends and swamp-crop natives begin. But Trenst does have a culture and a way of life as lazy as Zhindu, and it's basin is huge, with billions of people and the Karedarzin, the world's greatest river, over nineteen thousand miles long.

By Nightday's end they rode down a street with a median and two floors or more of cut stone to a bump&roll on the Thrambaya. Not one ship was looking for hands so the five of them squeezed into a cabin on a fast catamaran packet plying this river to Shempala. It cost them most of one of Alan's coppers, though everyone chipped in something so he got a good deal of it back. They took a nice big cabin and she got to sleep between Alan and Lmore.

The Vikenvor

When it was light they rolled up the mats and their cabin was a resort on the river. They had two whole sunny, lazy, sexy, good-cook'n weeks on the Thrambaya. They were the last week of fall and first of winter as the year changed, but you couldn't tell by the weather. Yeah Morningday was a little cool both weeks but they had the east side of the boat most of the time so they enjoyed it. The packet stopped for meals at some larger docks where there were plenty of cooks around and often a bit of street music. It was nice being able to travel in style with the wealthy; that made up for the camping. Luray was able to treat herself to a cup at each meal, most dinners the others joined her, Nuran always did. It was amazing how fast the yaag habit came back, and by the time they were nearing Shempala, two cups wasn't really much any more. Still she stuck to the limit, even though she went for the darkest green she could find during the last two dinners they stopped for. The crew was quite friendly, but they never stopped for long, an hour for brunch, two hours for dinner, more or less, with a ten-minute warning bell. One of them took her for a rousing good sleep in his cabin also. Nuran began to like playing the 'space man' game with Alan and showed off how well she had studied for this trip by taking over duty as his guide. Once when it was just the two of them in the cabin she got a chance to actually share sex with Lmore, which was fun but heavy on tongue.

The shore of the Thrambaya was a little more populated than most of the Lhar they had traveled so far, but very little different other than that. It is one of the Lhar's largest tributaries, nearly as wide as the Lhar where they left it, less braids but tighter meanders.

Alan was gawking again when they got to Shempala early on Morningday of Kveshnat. As if the starship attack wasn't enough to prove he was from another planet. Actually, if he'd grown up on the desert rim he never would have seen Lastriss, much less Shempala. Shempala is now the second largest city in the Zhindu basin. There's a few miles of high city along the waterfront and the main city runs for miles along the ridge which is just a half mile back from the water's edge. The river is impossibly wide here, the Lhar seems to delta out into the Thrambaya in a way, since the Thrambaya was already following the Shempala fault. The Lhar runs into the fault at Shempala, the swamp that was once lower Shempala Lake backs up in the delta over a hundred miles upstream in the Lhar. Shempala city faces that swamp across two to five miles of open water. The swamp is so low and distant that Shempala has more the look of a beach city, and a five mile city beach starts only a few miles from the central docks.

The packet left them at the end of one of the downtown piers. A dozen piers float out into the river at least a thousand

feet. They are lined on each side by ships pulled up stern-to and most of them busy with cargo. Wagons were hurrying in both directions down the middle, loading and unloading at the edges. There's a pedestrian plankwalk on the second floor of the pier and they went to that immediately. There was plenty of foot traffic on the plankwalk and sheds on the pier had second floors where there were even a few cooks set up.

They found a sign, 'taking hands for Zhindu' before they even got off that pier. The ship that wore it was totally different from the typical riverboat. It had five masts but they were much larger, and the ship itself was much larger. Its nests were just tiny lookout platforms high in the masts. Instead it had a large cabin which looked like the packet they came in on, turned sideways over the deck between the third and fourth masts. The roof of that cabin was a deck, and there was another small cabin on top of it that reached to the lowest of the great horizontal booms on the middle mast.

The ship was rigged with two rectangular sails on each mast on three horizontal booms. This rig would use the edge of a sail to cut the wind, not a spar or mast. The sails were all rolled up on the upper spars like wall mats as the ship sat in port. This was one of the few ships on this dock that wasn't actively loading or unloading at the time.

"I've never seen anything like this." Nuran said.

"It's not from this basin," Luray told them. "Maybe they came down from Hrrst or Kyeb, then found a load going out this way. I don't think they can take that farther up-river."

"It's pretty well built," Desa observed as they started down the stairwell for this slip.

As they approached they could see that the detailing was much more careful than the ships in the Zhindu basin. Many of the fittings were of solid plastic, as was much of the rigging. There was glass in the cabin windows, the railings of the deck and cabin were highly finished and decorated with colorful artwork. The sails were clear sky-blue nylon. Instead of having the ship's name emblazoned on the foresail, a brilliant gossamer banner floated from the central mast, the symbol was a leaping hyadune (they are beautiful as well as dangerous) with the names Eelon and Byiatrida flanking it, and the name Vikenvor under it much larger. That was probably the ship's name.

There wasn't a lot of activity aboard as they approached. Three guys were on deck near the ramp, one was splicing in a pulley, the others were just lounging with him. The decks were about half full with thesh and big urns labeled as Lensa.

"Is the captain aboard?" Desa asked.

"Both of them, topdeck." The smaller of the loungers replied, "But if you're selling, this deck is spoken for, there's a load on it's way and a company man with it."

"We're here to sail, five hands for Zhindu."

"You're not scared off by a ship like this?" the splicer asked.

"I see winches, ropes, pulleys. I've seen enough sail to

guess what this rig is trying to do." Luray told him. She didn't mention how deeply she'd loved a sailor once and the pain of how little of that love was returned.

"We've only got two compartments open," the splicer added, "and they won't fit three."

"I've got room in mine," the other lounge said, "If one of you girls wants it."

"I think that would be me," Luray told him, seeing as the others in their group were about paired off.

He was a chubby strawberry blond with a bushy, curly, orange beard that covered most of his chest. She would have liked someone a little more solid, but other than that he was attractive enough. He was probably nearly a full blooded Dwarf with maybe a bit of Nordic in his ancestry. He had a nice happy smile that went to his eyes and he seemed to appreciate the fact that she was looking him over. She noticed that the one who was slicing the pulley was also looking her over and noticing. She gave him an appraising glance also, noticing both Troll and Yondure in his ancestry.

"We're not even signed up yet," Desa told her.

"Oh they'll take you, they just about have to," the guy who had room in his compartment announced. "We'll be full as soon as that load gets here and they want to get off this dock. "Let's go sign you up." He took one more tug off his cup and heaved to his feet. He did seem to question the splicer with his eyes.

"I'll finish this up," the splicer said, "and meet you

upstairs."

"You said there are two captains?" Alan asked.

"Eelon and Byia are a pair," he said, "they own this boat jointly. They're Bordzvekian but they're good people. They're upstairs but let me show you around this boat a little first while he finishes up on the tackle." Luray figured the guy working on the pulley was probably the rigger or cargoman on this ship.

"There's all kinds of slick stuff aboard," the small loungeer who had spoken first added as he got up to follow them.

"Wait til you see how we raise sail on this raft," the first one said.

"It looks like it unrolls like a wall mat," Desa said.

"You'll definitely get signed on," the little curly-haired one said.

"No pins," the redhead said, "see these plastic pinch blocks? Just pull a rope thru here and it stays, better than you can belay it, til you pull back this lever here." They were impressed by that.

He showed them that much while they were still walking the aft deck. As they went in under the cabin, the strawberry one introduced himself as Yarin, the other as Ityay. Most of the crew seemed to be lounging on the foredeck or in the water, even on this Morningday in midwinter. Although she did hear one couple in their cabin right thru the floor. Still it was good to leave seasons behind in a way.

They went up a flight of stairs just aft of the middle mast

and into a wide hallway with a nice kitchen in the middle, between two large tables, a few lounges with bookcases and candlelanterns nearby. There was a bathroom that was downright swank compared to the compost cans on the poop deck that most riverboats have. Hot showers and toilets, a long basin with hoses, little individual toiletry cabinets with name tags. It was nicer than what they had on the packet.

Luray knew Yarin's compartment because the doors also had name tags, he had written his with room for another name. He showed them his compartment. It was narrow, only six feet wide, but deep, with plenty of storage room under the bed, a little table and chair, lots of cabinets. The bed had a deep headshelf and wide window overlooking the rear deck. He had quite a bit of stuff with him, some pictures on the wall and magazines on the table and headshelf.

There were twelve of these cabins across the back, six larger ones across the front for the permanent crew. He showed them which ones were available, and they looked in both, finding them to be identical, but with some pictures and magazines already in them.

"Now we can go up to the instrument room," Yarin volunteered.

"Nobody's ever seen maps like these people have," Ityay added.

Back at the kitchen another stairway went up another floor and came out in a room that was all open glass windows facing out over the front half of the deck. The ship's wheel

was here indoors right beside the mast. The mast was just inside the cabin so someone could walk in front of the mast and the wheel and survey the river almost as well as from the bow. There were big tables spread with maps along the back of the room. On each end was a door that went out to the deck that was the roof of the cabin below. On that deck was a large telescope on a gimbaled mount.

There was another person in the room, "I'm marVan," this big blond man told them, "The captains, or 'owners' as they call themselves, call me the 'navigator' on this boat. I know the river."

"marVan actually runs the ship," Ityay added.

"The captains don't?" Luray asked.

"These two aren't like your normal captains, they make the business deals, they don't come out on deck and bawl orders."

"marVan's the only one that does any bellowing," Yarin added.

"I guess you'll be bellowing at us," Desa told him, "We're here to sail."

"That's great, if it's all five of you that'll fill us out."

"We all are," Nuran told him. She had read about it as the inexpensive way to travel and was eager to participate.

Luray was still looking around the room. She had noticed the paneling of the back wall was embossed and varnished like you would find in a high-class office. There were noteboards with full clips hanging on the walls and a few

framed photographs beneath them. One of them must have been this ship on the Bordzvek waterfront. Luray hadn't seen many pictures of Bordzvek, it was a ten year journey from the Zhindu basin, and not an easy one. Wherever it was looked like a fairy-canyon of crystal miles wide, but in the foreground one could see business-like buildings of worked stone with colorful plaza's between them, not as overgrown with jungle as cities in this basin. In the background that went stepping up the hills into the distance.

The splicer came in from a room behind this one. "This is shaNai," marVan said, "our rigger. He came to this basin with the ship."

"This is where the really weird stuff is," Ityay said with his hobbit's enthusiasm. He opened the door to another room behind this one. Inside was a really large telescope in a case, many large, securely-locked map cases, a large finely-detailed globe of the world on a gimbaled stand, an unintelligible plastic machine, other purposeless tools, another table, more chairs, a comfortable reading chair with a plumbed lantern, a whole library of bookcases and a big clipstand holding what must be the ships manifest. There was a door out to the topdeck, and one to another room aft of this. There were also more people in the room, a guy almost the double of marVan only darker, and a slender girl with kinky red hair and a tight white jersey suit.

"Here's our cargoman Yendee," marVan continued. "They call him 'Commander of the Deck' on the Vikenvor however.

This is Gonzar, she shares his cabin but isn't employed by the ship."

"They're here to fill out the crew til we reach Zhindu," Yarin added.

"We've only two compartments empty."

"This one can stay with me," Yarin spoke up and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Or with me," shaNai added.

"And I've got room also," Yendee said, "Especially for one so lovely." He put his arm around her hips and pulled her closer as he said that.

"I think this woman knows she can choose any bed she wants," Gonzar observed.

"So what are you called?" Yendee asked.

"Luray."

"Wonderful, as beautiful as you are."

Luray wondered if she could work out a deal to also be 'not employed by the ship' with this one. She knew now that she didn't want to be so lazy as to let that cloud her nesting decision. Her first impression was that this guy was a shallow superstud. Since it seemed like she'd have to pick someone on a ship built of couples compartments, she should pick the person she would like to share space with and not the working hours.

They were brought in to meet the captains, in the room beyond this one. Ityay and Yarin did not come with them, and Yendee only introduced them and remained in his room.

This cabin was larger, a room twenty five feet square. On the far side, overlooking the aft deck, a wide archway held a large sleeping area, flanked with a washroom and vestibule. The whole cabin roof was gabled skylight up in the sails of the mainmast, full of fragrant potted plants, many in bloom. The skylight was open and a fresh breeze brought the sounds of the docks as background music. This room was furnished with two large tables, one huge table, several elegant wooden chairs and three large chairs which were more like cushions up on legs. One of the tables was covered with notebooks and rolls of maps that they had obviously been working on. There were more plumbed lanterns for lighting and she noticed the petcocks and ignitor buttons for them.

Eelon was the male of the pair. He was even taller than Alan, had thick dark hair that spread evenly down his back, eyes as black as a cloudy Nightday and the smoothest facial skin she'd ever seen on a male. Byiatrida, who was called Byia in the Zhlindu basin, was also tall, closer to Alan's height than marVan's, with a smooth slender figure. Her hair was light brown and straight, so shiny and slippery it hung neatly in one shimmering fall down her back just about to her waist. Her skin was also light in color and extremely smooth. Her face was a smooth oval and she had huge chocolate-brown doe eyes with enormously long lashes. They both wore multiple layers of light, loose, translucent robes of pure white.

"You are not of L'dotsa" (a cargo company) Byia stated. Her speech was slow and methodical as well as musical.

"We're here to sign on," Alan announced.

"Really? That is excellent news. But do you have any experience?"

"All but me," Nuran said.

"Anyone have any experience on anything but the local rafts?"

"Southlake dugs and deep water schooners," Desa said.

"You?" Eelon asked Luray.

"No, just the usual barges, but I been back and forth on this river a few times, your crew showed us your rig, it's nice, I figured out what your winches do. Besides," Luray added, "I doubt that you'll find that many on the Shempala waterfront experienced with a Bordzvekian rig."

"You are correct," Byia observed.

"Your experience?" he asked Lmore.

"Like her, I been up and down this river a few times. I noticed your racks aren't any different than what I'm used to."

"Actually we picked those up here," Eelon told him, "there's nothing like Zhlindu rollerracks for handling rough cargo."

"You spoke of the lake?" Byia asked Desa.

"I've been there, I'm a native of Dos and sailed to the Yakhan and back."

"Yes;" Eelon's eyes brightened, "we've heard of Dos, we understand it's quite civilized over there. What was your life like there?" Luray was a little sensitive to the implications of that statement.

"I grew up there, I was there a century and a third. I played in some bands and was in the university, even wrote a text."

"Don't tell me you've come all the way to Zhindu for further research?"

"Oh no, that text had fallen out of use by the time I came thru the Kinsheeta pass following a lover. And I've heard that in Zhindu the yandrille research has been done already, so I might try and buy one."

Byia laughed. "Just like us, here after the music. We thought we'd bring home a cargo of tapes, tapes from Zhindu bring huge prices in Bordzvek."

"And what is your story?" Eelon asked Alan.

"I've sailed with Vyinga from Hazorpean."

Byia giggled, "The lust boat."

"She's over that now," Luray said, "Nlara's running her deck anyway."

"The lustier of the two I've heard," Byia said, "but actually I've only seen her sail and heard the talk around waterfronts, I've never had the pleasure of actually meeting her. I'm sure she must be quite a character."

"Not as much now as she was once." Luray said, "She still looks pretty wild but she's looking for regular guys to share her nest these days, guys that will sometimes let her sleep."

"Alan sailed just fine on KangDarceen," Desa said "and I'm pretty confident Nuran will adapt well also. We'll get them started."

"Oh I'm thrilled that any of you are experienced. We can't take people who's only concept of sailing is they heard it's a cheap way to get to Zhindu and party to oblivion like those popular magazines say." Luray couldn't keep her eyes from Nuran after that sentence.

"Have you been made aware that there are only two compartments left?" Eelon asked, "Would you prefer to sleep shifts..."

"I've found several of the present crew willing to make room for me," Luray said.

"I see," Byia said, "No doubt several would. Have you selected one or would you like some help with that?"

"Have you gone native my dear?" Eelon asked her.

"I don't have information on our crew's bedding habits, but I perceive Luray to have concern for her companion's character also."

"Perceptive," Luray replied, "Yendee, Yarin and shaNai have offered, though shaNai seemed rather casual."

"shaNai is our rigger and has been with us for many decades, since he grew up. He's responsible, artistic and educated. He has an end fore-compartment with plenty of room for you, and I believe he will let you get some sleep.

"Yendee on the other hand, probably will not. He also has a fore-compartment and always has two or three women with him. You would be the third at this time I believe. But I've been assured that none of them ever lack for attention. He does his job well enough and is an important part of the crew,

but we don't know him as well personally." Luray knew how impossible it was not to know someone well if you share a ship with them for any length of time. She could take that as a negative recommendation.

"Yarin has just signed on with us since we've been at these docks," Byia continued. "He knew his nautical talk, but he might be a partier, but if he is, he seems like the kind that still pulls his weight. He might be on sleepwatch."

They were interrupted by the sound of boots on the deck, two hefty guys in dressed long loincloths and capes. "Voorhan of L'dotsa with twenty one thousand forty five hundred thirty three urns of lentosaur for Zhindu," one of them announced in a resounding voice.

Eelon had gotten up and gone to a reading alcove toward the stern. "Welcome aboard," he called back, "Someone will bring you up to the cargo office, we'll meet there."

She could see the wagons pulling in. This wasn't going to be pleasant, rolling an urn is heavy work and the line of wagons went right down the dock and there was a lot of deck to be filled.

"Welcome aboard to all of you." Byia said, "We all have some business to attend to now, but let's get better acquainted once we're under way."

"That would be delightful," Desa said. "I look forward to it," Luray added at the same time.

They were the ones to bring Yendee the news. "So you're signed on now, right?" he asked.

"Sounds that way."

"Good, I want to start putting down rows up to first mast. Leave an eight foot aisle for now on the inside, twelve on the outside, and this dock costs big money so let's not be afraid of a little sweat." So they were the first to know, but he was soon striding the topdeck bellowing to the others. "It's here people, girls on the inside aisle, guys on the outside, with the usual exceptions."

They tossed their things in compartments on their way down. Luray wound up bunking with Yarin as much because she knew where his place was and didn't know shaNai's. Then she saw his name carved into the door of the end room on the way out; but Yarin might party.

Shempala Trance

They sweated all thru Morningday and a good part of Noonsleep. Yendee soon promoted Desa to the outside aisle, Luray did not get that selection. Ityay was on the inside aisle and was hard to shake off. When the loading was done a faint breeze got them off the dock, and they learned this rig getting to an anchorage very near mid Noonsleep. The tide wouldn't be with them til dark and they'd have to tack into the lips of what wind there was to buck the tide, so they had the last bits of Noonsleep and all of Afternoonday to rest up and/or go into town.

Luray and Yarin collapsed on the bed as soon as they'd gulped down a few bites of some hash that Yendee brought in from the dock cooks. This was the first he noticed she had actually decided to bunk with him, but it was too hot and they fell asleep too soon for him to do more than say thanks.

It seemed only a few hours later when Lmore was howling at their door. "Come on you two, aren't you done yet?"

"We're both asleep," Yarin's groggy voice answered, "At least we were."

"You got the whole river to sleep. This is my only time in Shempala and I'm not going to miss going over to the 'East Pole of Swamp'. Desa and Alan are going."

"Luray ain't even awake."

"Yes I am," she mumbled, "just not enough to talk."

"We're all on wake shift," Desa said, "There's a new list written up and posted on the note board and signed by both of them."

"What's an East Pole?" Yarin answered.

"The closest you can get to Trenst in this basin."

"They got any yaag there?" he asked.

"Like you've never seen or tasted."

"Oh I don't know about THAT," Yarin replied "You up for it?" Yarin asked her.

She lifted her head up and tried to pull her hair out of her eyes. "Well, I never met a keg I didn't like," her sleepy voice mumbled.

"Oh? So you're not just another beautiful body?"

"Oh you'll see," she said.

She wouldn't let them drag her away without a nice long shower however. It was still before Afternoonday lunch when they got to the big rowboat that this ship used to get ashore.

There was quite a long hike thru the Shempala waterfront to find the place. Luray had been in Shempala before, but never really memorized anything. There's khume after khume after khume running back from the great dockwalk. At the other end of the khumes was Waterfront Vang. It was a pretty one-sided vang, the other side was a half mile away, the towers of the ridge line. The ridge is only a loose pile of rocks about eighty feet high and eighty miles long, but that makes it a major player in the topography of a place as flat as this.

You would find media companies, the universities, the major performance rooms out there on the ridge. The East Pole of Swamp would not be out there. The door was actually up a little urban canal that brought kayak-size water back thru the foundations of the forty story wall of city on the docks. A swamp subculture lived on the wooden walkways planked up around and above that canal. They walked a long way up creaking and clattering plank-walks high above the water back behind the foundations of the great towers of Shempala's waterfront.

The East Pole looked like a hole from the outside, but inside it went way back and had three levels, so that it was the

size of a normal concert hall while still keeping the atmosphere of a hole. They were on the lower balcony, and this area at the back of it was a maze of booths and stalls, all selling some form of intoxicant or food. It was dark as night in here, each booth might have a candle near the change box, and there were the low fires of the cooks under their simmering caldrons. They had to hold hands to keep from getting lost in the dark and the crowds.

"How much like Trenst is this?" Luray asked Lmore.

"It's not bad, the wood they burn in here is what's native to this basin, doesn't have quite the smell of real swamp-bole, but that's a minor point. This is real swamp layout and lighting. That's real swamp music they're playing like I haven't heard since I was here last."

"So I finally hear what you've been talking about all these years," Nuran said. "It sounds like they're either dead or dying to me."

"It's supposed to be like that, the music has to evolve. It has to sneak up on you and gently seduce you into another plane of consciousness. I wouldn't expect someone who grew up on this side of the planet to understand it. People here need something that attacks the mind with explosive energy, this is more like being overgrown with vines, or like the flow of rivers or the soaring of a dactyl."

"Or like the rotting of dead leaves on the forest floor?" Nuran suggested.

"If we go lay back and smoke a bowl I think you'll begin

to feel it."

"The burning bowl might provide some light." Luray said.

"It looks like they don't have the good stuff in here judging by the size of the bowls on these hookah's." Like any hangout where rord and norrot were common, there were hookahs built into the table with hoses for each seat. That obviously was as true in the Trenst basin as Zhindu, though the styles were different.

"It's just that people in this basin want to get someplace," Yarin told him.

"Damn right," Luray added.

Alan was still a little standoffish from anyone but Desa, but not as bad as he'd been when they set out. She could tell that Nuran had not scored sex from him yet however.

Alan did have to ask what rord would do so Desa explained, "It's like smoking larorlie instead of drinking it. That makes it a little quicker, like fuming yaag."

"There's plenty of yaag around," he said.

Luray had already found a tap of a nice green, so deep they actually call it a blue yaag. It had good punch and enough lightness to keep you up and walking. She lifted it to Alan as he said that.

Meanwhile Yarin was asking another kegman if he had anything he called yaag in there.

The keeper obviously knew his type and without a word, brought out an optic and looked in Yarin's eye, then a ruler and calmly measured the width of his belly. He took Yarin's

cup and measured that, then went to his taps and began filling it with a thick, opaque, seed-leaf-green liquid. "I think this is about what you need. It comes from an old Dromeedian recipe that we've adapted using the latest psionic technology, with just a dash of tpsii added to bring out the patterns a little more. Think you can handle that?"

"Sounds like music. I see it's nice and thick so fill it to about a cup and a quarter and I'll suck it down to the rim before it spills over," he said while placing an extra local penny on the counter.

As Desa picked a table with good acoustics and a decent view of the stage, Lmore returned with a big lump of soft coal. "They have Elarika here, smells like the real stuff too."

"What does that mean?" Nuran asked him.

"We're going to get somewhere. It ain't Trenst prices so I only got enough for tonight."

Luray smelled it, "Weew, that might keep us here a week."

"What is it?" Yarin asked as he got back with his cup.

"Elarika purified rord, guaranteed to call any starship within seven light-years," he looked at Alan, "and wake all hostile carnivores in a twenty-mile radius," he looked at all of them.

"Well light that dude up then," Yarin said, "but take a taste of this yaag they got here."

Meanwhile Desa said, "If it does that, I think I'm scared of it."

"Oh you won't be scared this time." Of course Lmore had been making fun of the starship attack story for weeks on the Thrambaya already. The cup made it all the way around. Luray decided she was getting some of that next time. Meanwhile Lmore had the big four-hoser going. She took a few hits. It's much more pleasant to get your larorlie in liquid form, but this adds that quick little boost and this green was still.

Not long after that she had quite a tour of the Trenst swamps, seemingly from the underside? Or was it the inside? Lmore's raspy smoked-up narration had her watching the people in slow motion along the plank-walks in the swamp trees that pass for streets in a lot of Trenst. There was a movie behind the stage of a kranjan-like thing frolicking in the water, smashing it's way a couple tree's back. The torch-fuel was floating on the water and consuming it, all in slow motion, as it's five ton bulk would look anyway and as the music required.

The torches in the hall were the style of Trenst, organic forms only, like tall fungi with flame coming out their pores. They flickered mesmerizingly with the bass, the tips of the flames shriveled with the overtones.

And in the center of it all was the huge black smoldering cauldron that seemed to house an eternal volcano of seething lava. Mighty was the song from that volcano, a massive, thunderous drone, chords actually changing too fast for some ears to pick from the static, each cycle of the wave was a

different note, in the chords chirping above.

"This is very vast," Desa said, and Luray agreed.

Desa is one of the most educated people she has ever met. She's a little too proud of it however. Although Luray didn't point it out to her, she had been educated by the science of Oliar since before Desa's ancestral home was settled by her ancestral people.

Lmore and this band's music didn't show them much of Trenst the city, at least those parts around the ancient-crater harbors in the delta that have some solid ground and tall structure. Luray knew that even from a floater you couldn't get a good sense of the scale of either the Trenst or the Tovarst ring. She knew that from magazine pictures, a city with two rings of glass and grown towers, miles around, sweltering in the jungle, with lempths running in cages turning big slow fans that hung from the ceilings.

Instead this music showed them what Lmore said was out the west side, the swamp side, a week or so from the ring. The side where the stilts under your house got longer and longer the further west you went. Out here neighborhoods went on and on for miles of near plot density planked up on the trees growing in that swamp. Out where the whole first half of Morningday might be misty. Where they party in the fireplaza's down a torch-lit rope-bridge trail on a Nightday. Where they get just as blasted as they do in Zhindu.

They ate a late lunch of really weird stuff, like all these different tidbits sear-fried in vedn-egg batter. It was called

'fake vomit' [blihree] and it was delicious, especially the thurused haventail. Lmore assured them that the recipes were as authentic as you'd find in this basin and this place would be considered a little touristy but would still draw plenty of business in Trenst itself.

By the time Trenst was over it was hard to tell where they went next, back to Shempala it looked like. Between the cup and the bong she was as wasted as she used to get at Myimpaden. 'Someone please take my hand and lead me where we're going' wasted. There was a long streetcar ride on which Nuran lead the way. Most of it was on a great wide street called Great Farm Avenue, but there had been no farms here for centuries. Now it was twenty stories of leafy balconies on both sides with a wide lawn in the center with binat or torrock courts, stepping stones, clag nets, t-ball pools and all that athletic stuff.

Nuran took them to a huge roadhouse she'd read about where this avenue crossed the Great Eastern. There were so many streetcars you had to dodge them; and the many passengers hopping on and off at this busy circle. She hadn't been in a place this busy while strobing in a long time. There was a second story of walkway all around the circle. It was a pleasant press of warm bodies getting in there for there was quite a crowd. Lmore had also been here before and called it a cowboy place.

More yaag flowed in rivers as Afternoonday waned and a

series of bands brought motion to a vast floor and two levels of balcony. Nuran actually lead them across that floor before Desa found a route to the balcony. The exercise was good, but the balcony was better.

This had been the toughest journey she'd ever made down the Lhar. And that was all due to the land portion of the journey. This trip down the Lhar was now second or third on her all-time adventure list and she only gave it a chance at third til she checked her notes in case there was something she didn't remember. In this hall it seemed like these guys had already made up a song about it. Oh yeah, you think they're just singing about dactyls, but Luray had seen a much worse 'Terror From the Sky'.

"To the evolution," Alan shouted at one point and thought it was funny.

They all went to a make-out in some nets down the back side of the balcony. Desa even got Alan to go. It was a very slow relaxed session, cozy snuggling with each of the guys. The music was perfectly listenable here. She thought she coupled twice, but probably imagined it. She really hadn't wanted to get this wasted any more, but it was so nice, she was so relaxed and content. Would this be the end of her attempt at reform? Would she soon be right back into the daily round of all-day stone? Get up, get high and stay that way til she woke up the next morning? It would be very easy to slip back into that, way too easy. This side of her mind was desperate for it.

Kortrax sunk low across the city. Here on the inland side they watched him sparkle thru the twin rows of leafy crystal towers. Yarin was making an impassioned speech about the metaphysical implications of this particular dusk. She realized he was talking to her. They had about two hours to make it back to the ship, the others had already left. As it turned out, it took so long to beat their way across the city that they had to hire a gondolier to chase down Vikenvor as it got under tight sail and tide as Kortrax wandered off toward Elevenos.

On the Lhar Again

So passed Shempala, and on the breeze of Kveshnat dusk they departed the city, a ship headed east beneath them again. Just below Shempala the river is again a braided stream of tight meanders. Byia and Eelon spent a lot of time with marVan and the maps. The work was most tiring, especially thru their first Nightday when they searched ahead with lanterns and lookouts.

By the light of week Ekendosa, the countryside was crowded but lovely, neat little farms beneath big-frond archwoods along the bank between meanders, little towns on the deep side of just about every meander, beaches on the other side. The river was still braided, but not so hectic, a main channel and some side sloughs. There were miles

between points where they joined and separated, sometimes you were on a river a mile wide, sometimes less than a quarter. Again the river was full of people dredging muck where it accumulated, or swimming where it was sandy. The weather was delightful; pleasant Mornings, sunny, hot and humid Afternoons, close but cool Nights. During Afternoon and Dawn they were at anchor, for here on the lower river the tide overwhelms the current and the wind. Afternoon is good to just float in the water, here where it is populated few survive. They anchored at a beach for Afternoon, a town for Dawn.

There was considerable traffic on the river and ships came close enough to shout river conditions to each other, as well as jokes. When traffic was stopping for the tide, they would often stop together on the same beach and give people a chance to socialize. The hot lazy Afternoons got her libido up and she had a good time being quite the slut a sailor should be and breaking her two-cup rule again. Since she spent parts of these Afternoons with Yarin, that was bound to happen.

In the gentle heat of late Afternoon of week Fendaveermon they swam ashore and walked into a town to find a cook and a keg. Alan peeped and chattered about being naked in the center of a town, but it wasn't much more than a little yaagatoria/cookstand at a crossroads in the plots. They met a group from another ship coming across from the next meander and then most of the people in that village were

naked anyway. They hung out there for duskmeal with them and drank. The kegman had a few rooms in the back also and she got to share one with a bronzed and burly steersman from that other ship who gave her quite a workout.

There came a time in late Morningday in week Zawmathii, their third week out of Shempala when she was on the topdeck because of duty on the middle mast. Nuran relieved her as it got toward Noonmeal. shaNai came out at the same time to wash out the bearings in a few pulleys. She was a little uneasy in his presence. He was one who offered to share his space with her, one she might not have refused. He spoke to her as she walked toward the bridge door.

"I've hardly seen you," was the first thing he said. "I guess you really didn't want to stay with me?"

"I wasn't sure you really meant it," was all she could think of to say, "I thought you were just being nice because we were short of space."

"I should have tried harder?" he asked.

"Surely a career sailor on a ship like this has plenty of choices."

"You were my choice. I don't make many."

"I'm sorry, I guess you should have tried harder. Yarin just asked me first."

"I should have showed you around the ship instead of finishing that pulley."

"Your captains tell me you're a cultured man, you'd soon

get bored with me I'm sure."

"I know you are beautiful, cultured and ancient," he replied. "You are one I wish to know better."

Perhaps not a bad idea. She was having a good time on Vikenvor so far, but her reform was slipping. She was happy and sad at the same time. Happy with the lazy, sexy, mellow river ride, but concerned that she was losing her battle with yaag once again. In the previous seven days since they left Shempala, she'd consumed twenty one cups, nothing like the way she had been in Yoonbarla, but the trend was upward. Afternoondays were hopeless and she found the other days were now difficult. The dull emptiness sometimes attacked her when she kept it down to two, she was already wanting one when she first woke up, especially on a Nightday when she'd slipped badly the Afternoonday before. If she kept this up she would be tending her mast with a buzz and she didn't think that was something Byia would approve of. Not that Byia would actually know because with all her years of practice Luray knew how to act like she was straight as a financial advisor when she was hardly seeing much. But the issue wasn't whether she was fooling other people, the issue was whether she was fooling herself. Yarin was a lot of fun and quite a guy, but he was just a roommate, there was no reason not to get acquainted with this man. She sat beside him on the deck, leaning against the cabin wall. She was close to him but not in contact. "So OK, get to know me better. What would you know of me?"

"What have those wondrous yoonberry eyes seen? What works behind them? What is your essence?"

"These eyes have seen much more than I can ever remember," she said, "I'm afraid not much works behind them any more and I worry that my essence is nothing but the essence of the larorlie vine."

"Do I detect that you're not happy with that?"

"I was really bad before this trip, for years. That's all I did all day every day was drink. I've cut way down but I think I still drink more than most people aboard. Especially since Shempala."

"You've only been aboard since Shempala. This boat does not have a big party reputation, nothing like KangDarceen."

"We do our share." But he was right, the Vikenvor was not a party ship. It was still fun and she wasn't complaining, it just wasn't as party-hearty as Vyinga's had been. After a pause she asked, "What's with the couples-only arrangement on here?"

"Bordzvekian custom. Ours is a very couples-oriented society. Does it bother you?"

"No, but if you did nest with me you'd find me quite a bore."

"I can't imagine being bored with you sharing my cabin."

"I'm not a creative athlete at sex."

"I don't believe I am either. I want to share my space with one who wants the same space that I do, if that person is female, intimacy is welcome. I wish to make love with a

woman, not fuck her. I wish to treasure someone slowly, someone I know well, someone I want to habitually wake up with."

"Desa was looking for you." Luray tried to not wrinkle her nose too much at the pungent smell of the lantern fuel he was washing the pulleys in.

He had them all apart in a tray by now and was just scrubbing each part that needed it. "Desa is the one with the big brown curls isn't she, that one who's been hanging out with Byia?"

"Yes."

"And she stopped looking?"

"Alan is also like you, a very monogamous culture. She's also like a mother to him, but we've come thru a lot. She's still holding back her total love because he's so young, but no one can win her away from him for more than a few hours since they met."

"And what are you looking for?" he asked.

"I'm fleeing, not seeking."

"Do you want to tell that story?"

She actually didn't want to get deep into sobbing over that. She didn't want to pull the standard, 'no I don't' either, so she told him the short version. "I'd been waiting for decades for this guy called Knume and a monsterboob named Valla to split up. Well Valla spurned him and sucked his biggest enemy's bioengineered dick on stage at a sex den in the town where we lived back in Wescarp. He was for shreds with her

after that and threw her out of his house. I thought we were back together. We had three good sleeps together, then Valla was cast off by the bloatdick in the sex club and Knume took her back without a blink." Tears ran down her face by the time she was done in spite of trying to make it matter-of-fact. He hugged her and kissed her forehead, she sheltered in his arms.

"So that's why you left Wescarp?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you were so down in your cups?"

"Oh no. It's not like I've ever been straight, certainly not since the 40's. Knume is such a partier, it gave me a way to be with him. All thru these decades he's lived with Valla, he's actually spent more time partying with me at Myimpaden, another yaagatoria in same village. It's not like we never went in the back rooms either, I have to be honest about that. I just wished to be the one he woke up with."

She looked up and found his eyes wet also. She dabbed at them. "This whine is nowhere near that moving," she said, "So why are you misty?"

"It hurts me. Oh it hurts me that you were hurt, but it hurts me that a woman such as you would pine away like that for a man such as him, while all I know are casual affairs."

"He's not a man such as that. As with any story, there's a story even before the one before that one that I'd rather not wade thru if you can forgive me. Just let me say that Knume is a fine person and he didn't think he was casting me aside so

coldly. He expected it would go back to normal with me at Myimpaden and Valla in his house." She didn't want to get into the fact that it was Valla's cooking that got her the house because her own cooking is not something the average person would long to come home to.

shaNai did not ask for more details, but continued to hold her and pet her hair as they leaned against the cabin wall. Then he got up to take the washed pulleys back inside. "This is my workshop," he said when she looked in after him.

It was only about half the size of the instrument room, with racks of gear on one side and a large well-equipped workbench complete with foot-pedal on the other. "What do you do in here?" she asked.

"Fix tackle mainly. It's not so bad now that we're in the Zhindu area and parts are available. For over a decade we sailed from Knidola to the Hrrst Basin and I had to do without parts." He was sorting thru the rollers while he said this, picking out a few to replace and getting the new ones out of a little box.

"You crossed the Ttharmine?" She asked.

"We crossed a piece of it. There's a clear channel cut across to Hrrst. Even so we had a miserable time of it. This ship isn't built for that water and the heat there makes this basin feel like a mountain vacation. We had to wet ourselves with alcohol just to stay alive."

"So tell me about Bordzvek?" she asked, "I've never been there." She sat on the edge of the other worktable. There were

no chairs or stools in here.

"I'm from the country well to the southwest of the city, as far as Wescarp is from Zhlindu. Where I lived was hilly and covered with beautiful shaftwood forest where it wasn't farms. It snowed most Dawnsleeps but was pretty hot by Afternoonday, year round. As soon as I got to the city, I got on this ship, so I was only in the city of Bordzvek twice for a couple weeks each. I've been in Zhlindu three times for a couple weeks each, so I think I know it better. Bordzvek city is in a canyon in gentle country, Zhlindu is the only hill around. Bordzvek is much richer than Zhlindu and the countryside around it is prettier, but Zhlindu is more fun." He snapped the second pulley back together.

"Have you ever been to Wescarp?" she asked.

"No. I've heard it's very scenic out there, but we've never been above Shempala. We understand the river gets swampy and it's not very populated."

"How well I know."

"Yes, I've heard you people had quite an adventure getting here."

"Oh yeah."

"Let's go get some Noonmeal and you can tell me about it. Pembrey's cooking and he's got some nice looking ensals to work with."

The Vikenvor had three full-time cooks. They were paying their way to Zhlindu also, but by cooking instead of

tending sail. Each did one day a week, switching days now and then. Pembrey was the best. It was late however when they got there and the better ones might be gone.

Yarin wasn't there. He might have already turned in or he might be down below where Tethar had a little cask of Liquid Light stashed among the cargo. shaNai didn't seem to want Yarin to show up either, for he filled plates and brought them back to his cabin.

His was a real cabin. There was a table and chairs, a nice big bed, his own basin, plenty of cabinets and his own reading chair. His was all the way to the starboard end, so he had windows on two sides, the ones at the table looking out over the side and at the distant banks gliding by.

The meal was very good today and shaNai was conscious of her desire to reduce her yaag consumption. She had to tell him not to be too conscious of it and by all means break it out if he had a bottle to share with supper. She didn't want to be miserable company with him. As it was he had a bottle of a nice gold, almost enough to get her off and definitely enough to keep her from depression.

She told of their adventures, he also didn't believe the part about Alan's starship. She went over her ancient adventure briefly. They talked of Wescarp and the Pigorland on the headwaters of the Bordz where he was from. He missed it terribly. He was loyal to the captains, they were family to him, but she knew he would part ways with this ship if it ever returned there.

He'd also had quite an adventure, not just rough weather on the Ttharmine but a three decade sail thru rivers they had to keep buying new maps for. Shipworms had attacked their hulls when they were only four years out and they'd had to get re-floated on Knidolan hulls. They'd had maps five decades out of date on several sandbars. They'd had to learn not to go further til they'd heard other captains tell of the way in some waterfront yaagatoria. There was a twenty one mile portage, and a ten copper price on an incredible rail car pulled by about forty kedas and fifteen or twenty guy's. They braved a decade of cantankerous lock operators and a five year delay in a smelly old desert city in Goblin country when a drought dried up a canal for awhile.

Once they reached the Pewpspway on the east of the Ttharmine, it was all straight sail. A year on the Pewpspway, a year on the Ttharmine and Hrrst, two years on the Imoneea. The next lock they encountered was in the descent into the Zhlindu basin at the Habith Fault. They'd sailed into Zhlindu down the whole length of the Imoneea from Hrrst not knowing very much about it. They hadn't even known what the rope signs meant on the detailed maps they'd bought in Hrrst until they came into East Harbor their first time in Zhlindu.

This time in Zhlindu would be his fourth and probably last. There were locks open across the Tduun Noz past Gorunda thru to Trastrab now that would take this ship. From there it was another year to Prvest and only a couple more

and they would be all the way to Knidola, then four more at the most to home. They were going to buy what tapes they could here and that would pack a good deal of the undercabin space. That cargo would fetch a million iron back in Bordzvek.

Before it got extremely late she gathered the courage to tell Yarin not to expect her.

"Yeah, I'm OK with it, it was a sweet time I've had with you. It's a pleasure that you spent as much time with me as you did."

"I'm not moving out, it's just this sleep. We got to talking and we both want to do this sleep together."

"You're welcome back any time," Yarin told her. "You'll do well with him but he'll bring out the melancholy in you, watch out for that."

When Kortrax Eats the Sky

By week Chezhervizhod they were in the main enthora plantations. Here the river spreads for miles across the flat land and all but the channel was choked with enthora and lon. This is one of the main crops that stuffs the rolls people eat in Zhindu. It is a very high-yield crop, if you've got the water, and down here there is plenty of water. At a point where three channels of the river joined, Luray thought it looked like it

did when she'd first sailed this route to Wescarp, in the early decades of the 34th century when this was still called the sea of reeds and she and Oliar were just leaving the old lands.

Luray was deep into the awesome majesty of the evening. The crispness of the black silhouettes of hangleaf and claw leaf, just beginning to slump for the darkness. What a bottle of Axiospeengya would do with this. But then this is the vision she would take Axiospeengya to see wasn't it? She tried to pretend she was spaced on it and it almost worked. She'd had one cup a little while ago and there was still a touch from it, with enough concentration she could keep the dimness at bay and actually enjoy the wonderful scene.

Lmore stopped by and sat behind her, taking her in his arms and letting her relax and caress with him. His hands felt good, the skin was rough and calloused, but gentle, and the dose of hormones he was able to squeeze from her went a long way towards making up for the thick yaag missing from her head. What words they exchanged were few and slow, praise for the beauty of the scene. The thicker, thicker reddening of Kortrax as he descended, the way the sky reddened around him. The slow strokes of dactyl wings in the lazy air. How different all this moisture made it look from the air on the prairie. It got him to reminiscing about Trenst.

"The lower river has the look of home, even though I think Trenst is way over a mile lower in elevation than Zhindu," he told her. "There's a hint of seasons here, the clawleaves aren't quite as hangy as in Trenst and it's a little

more obvious which is the channel here, but this is a lot of the same look, especially on the south side of the Myassa."

"That's pretty, but so is this." she told him. She had never seen it, except in his words. "Down in the lower basin where Gorunda is, there's a lot of swamp also."

"This is much more like Trenst here. I came thru that pass up out of Trastrab when I came here. That's a different kind of swamp around Gorunda, more like the deep Myassa, but most of the city's a lot like this, a lot more hangleaves and lots more plank-ups in 'em with 'yaks tied by the door. A lot less people live on the water here, but there's some. Nobody lives on the water beyond Gorunda. They seem to like to keep a few miles of wilderness buffer between them and the swamp."

"Sounds more like the swamp by Shempala."

"It is, wildhull swamp. Just about any deep water above seventy eight degrees is covered with it now."

"The water's that warm down there?"

"It's real salty, helps them grow in colder water somehow, I ain't one of you science folk so don't ask me facts and figures. That's what a sailor told me. That Tduun Noz is quite a sea, we spent a week out of sight of land. That water's green and hilly out there in sailor's nowhere and my saddle-worn stomach couldn't deal with that."

"Everyone's had an adventure getting here."

"You want adventure, go get treed by a theirops some Dusksleep."

"No thanks, I've had to listen to them circle in the dark, that's all the theirops I want to ever experience."

"Well anyway, speaking of stomachs and predation, I think Duskmeal should be up by now don't you?"

With that he was gone, but just that quick and casual little snuggle actually added to her appreciation of the beauty in this scene.

She and Desa filled their plates and took them down to the deck to watch the water and the sunset. Alan and Nuran were close by, but not close enough to converse with. Yarin and Lmore and about eight more of the crew had started a tenks game up in the kitchen and would probably be there for hours.

When they started supper, Kortrax was a definite red shape above the horizon. But the lens effect of the basin air made it swell as it neared the horizon. It's reflection on the perfect mirror of the river grew with it. As their faces kissed, they grew rapidly and within minutes the whole sky and river had turned to a red universe populated only with silhouettes. Tiny islands with only a few clawleaves are scattered here and there. No actual land, even behind a large island there is more water, covered still with enthora to the horizon. The endless red water ripples ever so slowly to the infinite horizon, a dactyl glides off from a tall hangleaf as the ship approaches, it's mournful screech echoed by one in the distance.

"Do you think she's going to take him away from you?" Luray asked Desa about Nuran.

"In a way I hope so. He's come a long way but I still feel responsible for him in some ways. I've been way too complacent with him and I still feel guilty about sex with anyone else. I would have liked to do a little more circulating, especially back on Vyinga's boat, but there are a few here I'm sure I would enjoy."

"Oh, who would they be?"

"Well yours for one."

"Which one?" Luray asked.

"There's a 'which one' now?"

"Yes, I'm in a dilemma."

"Oh? That's a more interesting story than mine," Desa said.

"I spent last Noonsleep with shaNai, and we slipped into his cabin for interludes twice since. I'm trying not to make it too obvious because Yarin's hurt. He's making me feel the way Alan makes you feel."

"We shouldn't worry about that, how many times have our hearts been broken?"

"Yeah, yeah, but I don't want to be callous. Hardly a year ago I couldn't stir interest in an adolescent, so I'm not used to this. I want to grant them both their wishes, but somehow I find there is only one of me."

"Which do you like?"

"Both of course, or I wouldn't have a dilemma. I guess I

don't need to tell you what I like about Yarin, he's just a rollicking good time wherever he is."

"Yeah, but what of shaNai, he seems to keep to himself a lot."

"He's smart, he's gentle, and he's got some deep scars. I don't know what they are, he's never given me a hint, but he needs someone, while Yarin only wants someone. Yarin has someone, I believe. He says he hopes she's still friend enough to put him up til he gets settled, but I think it's more than that. Whatever what is, they are both shipboard romances."

"But what do *you* need?" Desa asked.

"I need to not slip back. I need to stick to that two cup limit til it's a habit and not an effort any more and it's definitely an effort with Yarin. I think I can stick to it with shaNai. I also need to keep from getting attached to anyone til I recover."

"Doesn't sound possible to me," Desa said.

"Why?"

"Because I've found your feelings run too deep."

"You think you know that about me?"

"I think I do now. I admit I never really knew you all those years we were together in Yoonbarla."

"That wasn't me. That was my obliterated shell."

"I'm glad we've had this year together, I'm glad I got to know the real you and not just that shell."

"I'm glad too. I always knew about you, you cast a bigger shadow in Yoonbarla than you think. I'm glad to know you in

person."

"I cast a shadow?"

"Oh yeah."

"Then why couldn't I get any of the guys to stay with me?"

"I think there were different reasons for each guy. Svarloe was afraid, he knew he would become too dependent on you and didn't want that. Demrin, Bloric and Dalzor would never stay with someone who doesn't suck dick. Danip and Knume both thought it wouldn't be fair for any one guy to have you."

"But what is so special about me?"

"You know how Rendrak was the instant success there, the best ideas, the answer that worked. Well they noticed that when he left the village, those good ideas and working answers didn't, neither did the talent that brought a lot of those parties together."

"I'm nothing that you haven't become, would they then think it unfair for any one of them to live with you."

"None of them stayed with me for any length of time either. Besides, I could slide back down that hill any time. I'm ashamed of slipping as badly as I did in Shempala and then again on Fendaveermon Afternoonday. I couldn't stop because I enjoyed it so much. It would be so easy to cut all the strings and just fall once again."

"Shempala was nothing to worry about. I don't think I was more than a cup behind you that night."

"But the slippery slope is under my feet."

"I think if you fall in love, maybe not with Yarin but maybe with shaNai, you'll find other things on your mind than yaag."

"So I should pick shaNai?"

"If you want to drink less. Personally I think you've been doing fine. I don't think three or four cups on an Afternoonday is all that outrageous. I've seen you do that with lunch back home."

"Oh yes, it was bad. It was worse than that actually. I don't even know what I did most days, one after another, I always had a cup going and never counted. One Nightday I stayed home and did a whole bottle of Axiospeengya by myself. That and a few cups of yellow were all I had that whole day. And that was just another day, I was stoned, but not that much more stoned than I was most every day."

"I don't see that in you now."

"It's still in here. Bring up my past and I could do it this Dusksleep, I know I could."

"Please don't, I'd love to share a hit or two of that stuff with you sometime, but a bottle apiece? I went to sleep on two hits at the logging party."

Alan and Nuran started laughing loudly, distracting them. They didn't know what it was about, but Nuran said, "Come on, you'll see," and ran off with him in tow.

"Shall we do a rotate this sleep?" Luray asked. "They can stay together, you can go see Yarin and I'll stay with shaNai again?"

"I don't really think that's what they just ran off to do."

"But they would, I know Nuran's getting more than tired of Lmore and a little tired of waiting for Alan."

"Alan's still nervous about his old religious thing, but yeah, I could go for it if Yarin's willing and he's not too beat when he's done with those tenks."

"Oh I know he'd be willing, he thanked me often for having cute and cuddly Desa as a friend."

Good Sleep shaNai

All thru Thlollala they sailed before a brisk favorable wind and were able to buck the tide three times. It kept Luray busy at the masts, but the great ship flew down the Lhar, casting a wake and overtaking many local rafts. In five days they made over a hundred and thirty miles, over a third of the total river from Shempala as the shipping channel was cut thru.

By late Afternoonday of Kadezak the breeze had returned to it's normal languid self and the last week of spring favored them with the full heat of summer. She could just see a dot of the mountain in the distance as Kortrax set, but she knew where to look. Traffic was heavy on the Lhar by that point, there was a line of ships in each direction so they had to pay attention when on duty. In the dark the lanterns of the ships showed the way. In many places the open water of the river

was several miles wide. All thru Imnotn the hill grew larger on the horizon as they sailed across another brisk wind, making the first week of summer feel more like the first week of spring. Thru that Nightday they maneuvered thru heavy traffic as the boating and irrigation canals became common on the west side of the city and the enthora plantations had ended. The sailing was tricky with tide and turbine currents. By the end of Nightday a glow could be seen on the face of the hill.

She'd shared love with Yarin three times since the day of the first rotate, not as many as Desa, and Nuran was as much as moved in and sleeping shifts with Desa. Luray had finished the voyage with shaNai, sharing his cabin and waking up in his arms.

Yarin was right about the melancholy, in those weeks she didn't learn what sadness gripped him. She would leave this ship and probably never see him again. He would continue to ply distant rivers. In a few years they would reach his homeland again and maybe he would find his life again.

But the sunny room and the interesting conversation had been more than worth it. Getting back within the two cup average was well worth it. Two cups was enough to keep her life from going dark, but little enough that her head was clear. Her interests and curiosity were slowly coming back. The desperate cravings to get wasted first thing upon waking were controllable now. They hadn't gone away, but she was able to get up and face a day with hope and purpose instead of grim

determination. It was now normal, expected, that the day was still mundane and muted, a cup was a vacation from the grey and not a way of life. She would be clear enough to resume her writing when she got back to Klarrain's, she had been worried about being so blithered that she couldn't. She would write about the attack of Alan's starship as soon as she could interview Vyinga.

The lovemaking with shaNai was the best of all, a thank-you-for-sharing-this-world-with-me gentle sway for a long, long time and a tingly, quiet finish. She was no longer looking for any sexual distraction that came along as a way to use hormones as a substitute for yaag.

"This will be our last sleep together," she said as she felt his arms go around her, bringing her out of her reminisce and into the present of this golden moment.

"Unless you'd like to change your mind and join me on a much longer voyage, go see Bordzvek?"

How tempting was that! Put this all behind her, leave the most party of all worlds for one of the least? True, there would still be yaag available, but did she want to be that out of place? Did she know him that well? She was committing to a relationship of decades or striking out on her own into the unknown to leave him. She owned property in Yoonbarla and had a claim on space in Zhindu. To go off that far, now, with someone this sad, was that what she really wanted? This was an interlude she needed, but should it become a way of life?

"I've come to care a lot about you, but I have a home here, I haven't left this basin in twenty centuries. Maybe if I had a decade's notice I could get myself in order for such a trip."

"We'll be here another year at the most, probably much less. It'll be a shame to leave in a way, this is probably the citiest city I've ever seen."

"You've really been in the city only a few weeks."

"Just from the docks I knew that much, you can see it from here."

The whole mountain glows softly green with the lights of millions of lanterns beneath the leaves. The great torches on the piers light the harborwall and that is the yellowish valley you see. "Oh yes, I've sailed to Zhindu about a hundred times in my life so far. I've lived on these plots in several places for many decades in several different centuries. This is very familiar to me. I watched this sea become land and the city grow up here." She changed the subject. "I want to thank you for being such a wonderful cabin mate, for being just what I needed right now."

"Oh Luray," he squeezed her shoulders, "Thank you for sharing this time with me. I think I told you I don't often offer to share my cabin with a 'dryfoot' as people call the temporary hands in this basin. You are the most extraordinary person I've ever met this way."

"You should try it more often, I'm sure you'll soon meet even more extraordinary people."

"The way I will miss you? I shall never do it again. I hope

I don't sit here talking to your memory for the next few decades."

"shaNai, this is starting to scare me. I know you're sad about something, but I don't want it to be me."

"I'm not sad about you, I'm sad about not having a partner on the ship."

"Then it is me, you wish I would stay on the ship with you."

"I know you cannot. I knew you would not when I first saw you looking down at the ship from the plankway of that Shempala pier. The knowledge that you would not has made this bittersweet from the beginning."

"When did you know we would be together?"

"When you looked down from the plankway after you saw the sign that we were taking hands."

"You really didn't proclaim that very loudly at first."

"I didn't want to appear over-eager. I was sad about that detour with Yarin also."

"I seem to give you so many reasons for sadness, why would you want me around?"

"When you aren't with me I am sad," he said. "I am very happy right now, in this moment as we start our last sleep together. Let us not dwell on the fact that our time together is ending. Let us dwell on the fact that a whole sleep yet remains."

Just then a ruckus sprung up across the hall in Desa and Alan's cabin, interrupting the moment.

Book VIII.

Interesting News

Brancettrabble leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head, looking up at the ornate ceiling over twenty feet above the massive chandelier. Colored sparkles of light slanted in from the enormous pictureglass windows that looked out across the Karedarzin plains. They played across the intricate cast marble that beamed the walls and ceilings and glinted on the frames of the treasured artworks that lined the forty-foot long side wall of this study. The motifs came from the chieftain halls of the ancient deeps, but lightened with the ubiquitous Elven influence that was so stylish in the late 40's when this part of his palace was built.

He had just come down from the tower, it was already too late in the week to reach the Kassikan and there was nothing else he was interested in contacting at the time. He already knew all the latest from Nuplayy up in Kln. Most of the presumed boulders had fallen from the null spot, swooped by Narrulla, missing it by only a few hundred miles, and been flung out of the system in the direction of Kunaë.

He had augmented his mind enough to follow the math that proved that motion was not possible without energy input, a large energy input. Nuplayy couldn't tell how much energy without knowing the mass of the objects and the last few weeks he had been writing about how to determine their

mass by observing Narrulla. Brancettrabble would be interested in his findings but was too bored with the exacting detail of the work to follow his daily observations.

Nuplayy observed one smaller object had fallen from the remaining piece and he thought it would impact but it had moved out of the range of his scope. It had probably landed in an uninhabited area because it was the size of a building and would have left a mark. There were a few more observatories paying some attention to the object. There was some speculation on the 'threads' that were seen reaching from one boulder to another in some observations in some recent postings.

Sometimes he wondered if he should go public with his knowledge. He wondered why no one else had. It seemed like everyone in the whole scientific community was afraid to be the first to admit that these objects could not be natural. With his reputation, he could not be the first to do so, that would be all it would take to make sure no reputable scientist would consider it. The silence was starting to get deafening however.

What annoyed him the most was how little interest the Kassikan seemed to be taking. Undoubtedly they were as sure as he was about what those objects really were. What he didn't understand is why they weren't attempting contact. It was his current suspicion that they may have attempted contact, may have even made contact and they were keeping it secret even from him. He wished he had longer on the eye. Sooner or later he was going to move back to Blubor where

he would have almost forty hours a week to pry at their crystal. With that much access he was sure they would be able to keep nothing from him.

He stood and went to the lightboard where he kept his short-term notes. It was facing the main door to this study in a larger open part of the floor where he didn't have as many desks and lounges. Many of his furnishings were as lavish as the chamber itself and this board was one of them. Besides the advanced fiber-optics that lit it, the stand that bore it was finely detailed Kimotran Bale-leaf, deep in lacquer with an ornate row of book rests fronting it, plenty of toe space and conveniently placed wand-racks.

The diagram in the center showed the globe of a suntower in place of the globe of the world in a standard seasons diagram. This was what the problem was, a problem in celestial mechanics. He needed an axis of motion to follow Narrulla and another to follow the seasons. It was the same as the mount in an observatory, there was just a size and weight problem.

Since the Kassikan wouldn't do it, or wouldn't let him know about it if they did, he was planning to contact the expedition himself. It would not be easy and he hated to give up his tower for the time it would take. The thing was heavy, it took scaffolding to get it down from the tower and put it in the mount. Since he didn't want to do that, his current idea was to get the mount onto the tower.

He took a wand and drew a curve representing the bottom of the globe, then drew the bundle off of it. He drew the cross section of how that was mounted into the tower now, it was just a sketch, the detailed drawing was in his head, this was a backup recording. He drew the range of motion he could get in the bundle. He slashed thru that with an eraser, shifted the equator and had the eye revolve with the bundle on the axis. It would be nearly outside the tower.

With the eraser he re-architected his tower, putting the globe on four posts, then three. He stopped at three, the next step was Barad-dur was it not? He of all people wouldn't want that symbolism. This design would allow the bundle to rotate out to the north and the tower to track an object passing over the sky. It would not render his tower in-operable during the whole project. When the vessel was not in the sky, he could rotate the eye back to it's normal alignment and use the suntower system. True he would have to solve the problem of what to do while the mechanism was being constructed, but there is no need to solve that problem til he completed the design of the mechanism.

There would have to be rollers in each leg of the tower, they would have to be steerable. The control problem was going to be difficult, requiring photo-pneumatic servo loops. He just put down a block diagram for now, he needed to know what the mechanics would look like first, so he plunged into the details of that.

The room echoed with someone at the side door and he looked up to see Essone enter with paperwork in her hand. She was a cute pixie, with alabaster skin, space-black hair and eyes. She was barely over four feet, barely over eighty pounds but shaped to make his body respond any time she was near him. "I know you're going to be interested in this," she said as she swayed between the furniture in his direction. It was a print of an eye message from the looks of it.

He didn't keep Essone around the castle just for sex, though she was outstandingly skilled at it, and equipped with everything his labs could provide. She was also one of his best researchers, both determined and creative. They met at his big leather-topped desk and he creaked back in his most comfortable high-back to read her message. It was more than one page of neat, small print. She stood behind him as he read, her head much closer to his level now, her perky chest poking the back of his neck. She's a cuddly little thing and he loved the tight little curves of her body next to his.

The message was of a tale told by the whole crew of a flats-raft out in the Zhindu basin. They claimed to have been attacked by a huge stone spaceship with a captain so scarred it made their gonads crawl. "Yes," he said, "I'm interested, but there doesn't seem to be any physical evidence." Reading speed was a modification he'd made to himself centuries ago, he flipped the page, there were three more repetitions of the same tale, as told by different members of that crew to different newsmen. They knew nothing of where the ship

came from or where it went other than, 'the sky,' but Brancettrabble was pretty sure it came from that boulder up in the null spot. It didn't seem a great leap to surmise that it was the smaller body that was seen falling from the asteroid in the null point.

"That's true," she said. "And it is true that no one on any other boat seems to have seen it. I think I wouldn't even mention it if it wasn't for the rock that Nuplayy saw fall."

"Very good connection," he said.

"Thanks," she said and leaned closer, wanting contact. He put his arm around her. She brought his mind back over twenty centuries to the ancient lands he once called home. He had known many women of her race in those days, the Megnor were powerful and respected, even as God of the Nycoba in their days of Empire he wouldn't challenge any of the great kingdoms of the deeps, and they were well beyond the heights of their power by those days. These dainty pixies graced the courts of the emperors, kings and chieftains and were never sent as tribute even when his empire was at it's height. "Is it enough to earn me Noonsleep?" she asked while curling up in his arms. He remembered well that in those days he had not been sought by women. It was that fact alone that had driven him to seek power, first religious/political power, and when that had not been enough to have them come to him willingly, the biological power of his laboratories.

He understood the attraction of Megnor girls, their child-like size made them precious, but their wombs were still

eager for a good sized man. "It would be a pleasure," he said, and held her, wondering if he could even wait til Noonsleep. His hand sliding up the inside of her thigh discovered that she didn't need to wait til Noonsleep either.

She beamed with joy because the enhancements he'd made to himself over the centuries insured that no woman would ever fail to find fulfillment in his bed again.

Book IX.

Monogamy's End

Chezervizhod Vikhone

After the sky turned red and they decided who would sleep with whom, Desa remained with Luray at the rail of the Vikenvor's deck for a while longer talking of their similar taste in men. They both wanted someone to come home to but Luray had temporarily given up on that dream since the triangle with Knume and Valla. They both needed to party, they both needed sex, though Luray could get by on drugs alone for some time. Luray wanted to change that situation however and partly because of that had become more interested in sex during this year on the river. Desa didn't have Luray's need to slow her yaag consumption down right at the moment, so she wouldn't mind the company of Yarin for a sleep. Desa had a yaag problem when she first lived in her house in Dos and no doubt she would have that problem several times again before she was twenty two centuries old. Since Luray did want to control her consumption, she would do better with shaNai.

Once Luray got up, Desa was left with only the onset of dark remaining in Afternoon and the red was tending toward purple. Duty had been vigorous today, but not exhausting, enough to make her pretty tired and ready to get

some sleep. She found their cabin occupied by Alan, Nuran and a stack of youth magazines from which they were reading jokes to each other. It was good reading practice for Alan, at least as good as reading the maps had been. They were laughing loudly and having a good time. The big mug of Tethar's keg juice half empty on the table was probably as much a cause of that as the jokes. She took a taste and thought about maybe knocking Kelthwiss on that spigot and seeing what happened. She told Alan she didn't want to interrupt them by going to bed in this cabin and was just going to grab a cup and crash somewhere. He hung his eyes at her while Nuran read the one about getting the inglethor stuck in your nose that Desa thought was gross anyway. Desa wrapped her quilt around her shoulders and smiled her way out the door. Nuran waved a cheerful goodbye but Desa was sure Alan would have argued if Nuran wasn't there.

Maybe this wasn't fair to Alan, they hadn't really talked about his feelings for Nuran, but Desa knew they weren't much more than friendship. Alan was probably a bit older and more mature in most ways, but Nuran was much more sexually experienced and aggressive than he, much raunchier and probably more energetic. She was a lot less intellectual than Alan, not quite what one would call limited, but other than pop culture and basic reading and writing, she wasn't educated and she certainly wasn't the deep thinker that he was.

But Alan and Desa had been over the need for a little

variety in their lives enough times. They had now been on the Vikenvor four weeks and in those four weeks he had fallen back into strict monogamy. Maybe it was unfair of her to go out when Nuran was there, when he would have had to make a scene in front of her to protest. It was plain to all around them that Nuran was more than ready to couple with Alan and had been for some time. Alan had nearly earned Nuran's wrath a few times with some pretty thin excuses for fending her off. It was clear that he wasn't as physically attracted to her as he had been to Luray, she was a tough little brown nut, but well shaped and lively.

Desa went ahead anyway, now that the decision had been made, this wasn't the time to second guess and worry about it. A couple casual quickies in the map room were not enough for her. This was what they were going to do and she would deal with the consequences later. Sooner or later she had to get away from the motherly guilt and worry over Alan's upbringing and resume a normal life.

She went over to the common room table where the guys were still involved in that game of tenks to find out if Yarin might be interested in her presence. "So how's those chips treating you?" She asked while pulling up a stool behind him where he was sitting on the bench.

"Oh they're treating me begrudgingly if at all." He answered.

"He's up about twenty penny," D'nore said.

"I'm working for it," Yarin said while throwing triple scaleskins and raking in three more teners and a bunch of change. He had accepted her contact so she put her arm over his shoulder, leaned on his back and put her chin over his other shoulder.

"Hey, you're almost up an iron now." Lmore chided about the paucity of the stakes. Not that these guys should be betting big money anyway, Desa thought.

Yarin only snorted. He tried to get his arm around her but she was too much behind him. She moved her chest against him to indicate that he should stay in front of her and let the back of his arm have some fun. He did so while ante-ing, then smiled her way and went "Mmmmm".

D'nore threw an inglethor, a laleet and a lumin, "Out," he spat dejectedly, "three and out."

Lmore threw a theirops, an empty and a dactyl. "I'll stay in on a dactyl high," he said and threw three more chips in after it.

"And the tenk says..." Yarin said as he threw. Theirops, inglethor, inglethor. "...Two's of inglethor" and raked in thirteen more. This time he did put his arm around her hips and lifted her up onto his thigh. "You're bringing me such luck, cute and cuddly lady." He put his arm around her now and caressed her thigh. She was turned slightly toward him and still had an arm around his shoulders. Their hair pillowed her head on his. She folded her quilt over their shoulders, he had his arm under it. "Good to have you with us," he said.

"Actually I just came by to say goodnight and maybe get this cup just a little wet," she said while raising Kelthwiss.

Gondin took it and began pouring from his jug. It was a good size jug with a glass stopper and its contents smelled a lot tastier than what the kids were drinking, even putting off a little trace of fume. He filled Kelthwiss to a comfortable level. "The price of this drink is," he said, "you stay with us til it's gone."

"The jug?"

"No," he laughed. "The cup. We'd love to have you hang out til the jug is gone, but I think when this is gone we'll all be gone."

"If that's going to put big men like you under, what's this cup going to do to me?"

"Oh come on?" D'nore said, "Anybody who's dodged starship attacks with an ancient witch and an escapee from another planet has to be able to handle a cup of Harvest Blue."

"When you put it that way." She lifted the cup a bit in salutation while taking a taste. It was quite fine.

Meanwhile D'nore said, "You do hear some tales when you're sailing, don't you Lmore?"

"Sure do."

"Say what you will," Desa said, "I saw that starship, I saw it attack. I felt the twigs blown off the trees by the wind it made and besides that, I don't remember even telling you about it?"

"Alan did," D'nore told her. "He got a little ratchety when I belly-laughed."

Luray was just coming by. "You wouldn't be belly-laughing if you were there."

"That starship's still at large," Desa told them, "I hope I never see it again, but if you do, you're going to hate remembering this conversation."

"No actually I won't," D'nore told her, "because I'm having fun with it. You know, the most believable thing about your tale is that you can tell it and be so blank serious about it. Nobody who is making up a story would make up something like that because they know nobody would believe it."

"Up until the week of the attack I was still telling Alan how they can code the trip he grew up in with RNacid and there's no way you can't believe it if you're the one who's OD's on it."

"I've read that somewhere." D'nore agreed.

"A well known fact," Luray added.

"That's what I believed his problem was," Desa said, "until that starship actually did come down. It homed right in on the spot where Alan threw his talking ship's pin and brought the light of noon thru from YingolNeerie. That light was whiter than noon actually."

"What was that light for?" Lmore asked.

"Ask 'em if you can catch 'em." Desa told him.

"You're very dry with this," D'nore said.

"He said he was from the desert originally, he acts like it, like he's from some fundamentalist splinter hermits. Like I said, I thought that and an OD on RN Acid was all that was wrong with him until the starship actually showed up."

"Let me tell you something else about Alan's tale." Luray added, "If I was to just 'make up' some planet to be from, it would be a hell of a lot better place to come from than that."

"So would Alan," Desa said, "if he had made it up. I thought about that, but not until AFTER the starship attacked. Up until then I thought whoever gave him that blast was just bad at making up planets to be from. Now I understand him a lot better." With that D'nore seemed to understand that she was not going to hang out here and make fun of Alan's starship tale.

Meanwhile Yarin really couldn't play the game with her on his lap, so she settled back into that comfortable position leaning over his shoulder with her chin on it. Luray took a good sip off Yarin's cup, jumped in his lap and cuddled for a moment and then said good night. But she walked off like she was bound for the crew cabins on their side. Undoubtedly she would come out the other side of the bathroom, but she was leaving it to Desa to tell Yarin. Two could play at this game, she saw no reason to say anything either.

She stayed with him awhile, enough to know that he was enjoying her person. He still hadn't put a shirt on, so there was good skin-on-skin contact between him and her breasts and some whispered endearments about them. Meanwhile

D'nore, Lmore and Gondin reminisced about other tales they'd heard sailing. The guy who told how he was the only stud on a ship of women and how he got pumped on semphaneet and never had to tend sail. Gonzar came by and squeezed in between Gondin and D'nore as they told that. Then Gondin said he'd been told by some other sailor about this chipponga player who'd had his brain transplanted into the body of a keda. Gonzar told her tale of an army of intelligent dactyls breeding in the depths of the Ttharmine that were coming out bent on world domination any day. While they went on about these tall tales, Yarin cuddled with her but stayed in the game. Yarin told a very short version of Luray's tale, not naming names, but Desa recounted how she'd heard the long version. They all laughed over the time Alan wondered how Desa could actually believe Luray's story. By then she was sitting more or less between Lmore and Yarin with arms over each shoulder.

She was with them almost an hour, and by then the yaag had taken pretty good hold of her, putting her in a dreamy party state, helping her thoroughly enjoy a good deal of casual sexual contact with both the guys but not get over the top about it. This yaag was full of humor, giving them all plenty of silly fits over the smallest things and even some stupid childish things like talking with squeaky voices. Gonzar even got them going singing a couple bawdy songs a couple times. D'nore, Gondin and Gonzar had never known

she could sing before that and nagged her to do a couple short a cappella renditions of a couple songs she knew.

She didn't quite finish her cup, but told them she had to go get some rest. Yarin was all sorry to see her go and gave her quite a nice caress as she went off to the bathroom, bringing her hormones up to the surface and making her glad she was going to spend the sleep with him. When she left, she left by the other right hallway, like she was going back to hers and Alan's cabin after the bathroom. After that, she didn't go into the cabin where Alan and Nuran were still awake and talking much more quietly, but went down the starboard stairs, across the darkened deck and up the port stairs to get to Yarin's cabin unseen by the people at the table. Luray wasn't in there, Desa was glad she hadn't misinterpreted Luray's intent and glad that shaNai hadn't said no to Luray.

She hoped this surprise would be pleasant but fell asleep before Yarin came to bed. At least he didn't try to bring someone else in with him, that was lucky. He never noticed it was Desa, wrapped in her quilt like a present, until he had cuddled up with her. By the time he noticed, she was awake. There had been a few cups at that table and Desa and Luray are similar in size and shape so he had an excuse for not noticing right away. For a minute as she came out of her dream state Desa even had the fantasy of climaxing with him before he figured it out.

"Wha...?" he said when he became conscious of the situation and let go of her.

"You knew Luray's a witch, she just turned herself into me."

"Desa?" He hadn't lit a candle, they were both black on black shapes.

"Yeah?"

"Wellll..., She's a good witch that spelled a charm like you to my cabin."

"I hoped you would welcome me."

"I do welcome you, you are such a pleasant surprise," he said. He reached back out for her and they soon got cozy again. "I bet you know where Luray's sleeping?" he asked.

"She hoped I would distract you from that question." She slid backwards over top of him so her head went across his chest and her hair got tangled in his beard. She purred in his ear and caressed his hands when he took her breasts in them.

"You're coming very close to doing so," he said. "I would think it would be with shaNai again. He has a somberness she thinks she needs as punishment for drinking too much."

"That is a way of saying it. Another is, you play to her weakness, she fears sliding back."

"So she's gone to shaNai?"

"This sleep."

"This voyage?"

"I cannot predict. She says 'this sleep'."

"And you didn't mind this assignment?"

"What makes you think it isn't Luray who's off on assignment?" Their legs had wrapped around each other's by

now. "This sleep got planned from a conversation I started."

"That's a thrill to hear. I am enjoying this very cozy companionship alarmingly. You know you've seemed so attached to Alan that I didn't dare dream of this thrill. You know I've noticed you and always enjoyed your company, especially when you're cuddly."

"I love cuddly."

He wrapped his arms around her and wiggled her with surprising strength but also with controlled gentleness, "I'm filled with gratitude for this great surprise. Wow. And your touch is sweeter than I imagined." He was running his hands over parts of her he hadn't touched unclothed before, as she was doing with him.

They had a very good sleep. Yarin didn't have Alan's new-adult eagerness, so they were able to take hours getting gradually closer and closer. Playing with hair, caressing and curling with each other, all the little explorations that make these times so enjoyable. All the little talk that's about it, but not quite about it. The music of murmurs close in the softness. She stayed entwined with him thru the sleep. They each climaxed twice that sleep, once together, as Nightday approached and duty was about to call.

"Sweet Desa, what a delightful Dusksleep you've brought," he whispered. "Thank you profusely. I'm glad your bond with Alan isn't exclusively monogamous after all."

"Oh he'd like it to be," she told him, "he says there's a

bully group on that starship that tries to prevent any sexual contact outside exclusive monogamous relationships for life."

"That's harder to believe than the starship attack itself."

"Yeah, but I guess on the planet where humans evolved there'd be a lot more germs in the animals that could also attack humans. He says they have it bad with germs and stuff there. It's especially bad with sexual diseases." She got up from him, not wanting to get to thinking about Earth a lot, she changed the subject. "I know it's time for Nightday so I'm just heading right for a shower," and started to do that.

"But I hate for this to end," he said.

"We've still got weeks on this ship together, I hope you'll grant me another waking like this?"

"I have a feeling I'll have room for you whenever the mood strikes."

Thlollala Kozor

On Morningday of week Thlollala Nuran transferred to sleep shift and stayed on duty thru Noonsleep. She slept Afternoonday alone in Lmore's cabin, but she was exhausted after pulling a double in the briskest winds so far. Dusksleep Nuran stood well and the winds still blew. For Nightday she came to Alan and Desa's. She crawled in onto Alan as her method of waking them up. Desa wouldn't allow him to object, she got up and went to breakfast and the mast while

Alan enjoyed the luxury of being a twice a day guy.

Desa pulled the middlemast this Nightday, most of the shift from the port side winch of topdeck. First shaNai sat with her awhile and kept her warm. Everyone knew how she liked to cuddle by now. The dark was cool and damp after soaking rains on Dusksleep, her hair was all frizzed out and helping to warm her shoulders. They conversed about Luray, stuff we all know, just confirming it. Desa picked up on what Luray and Yarin had, his whistfulness, his 'oh well'.

Pembrey served a lunch on his shift. It was just some thin rolls, but they were filled with pre-fried red hkyick, a tasty species of chileeth, in a little spiced lon. She met with Byia and they brought them back to the rail. Byia also brought out a jug of dark beer, heavy enough to be drinkable warm, of which Desa took an occasional swallow.

"Not quite as brisk as it's been," Byia observed.

"No, but we're still moving. We've made good progress lately."

"I'll say we have."

"So you've told me all about the adventure of getting your hulls replaced," Desa said, "but you've never told me much about Knidola itself and that basin."

"It's probably a lot like the Dos basin, rather upland and hilly," Byia began. "Knidola is on a really big lake, you can be out of sight of land for days when on it. The actual center of Knidola is almost twenty miles downstream, with a thirty

mile row of seaports and beaches along the dams of the lake. The lakefront is spectacularly beautiful..." she began quite a lecture. They went on with this thru the second half of her shift when it wasn't busy. Talking of Knidola lead to the subject of materialism and they decided the waterpower resources of the city had a lot to do with it. Byia was a treasure to talk with because she was so intelligent and widely traveled. Desa was glad to hear of the places she'd been and things she'd learned.

It was late in the shift when Byia tacked to a different subject. "So some of your party have changed pairings?" she asked.

"You mean Nuran?" Desa asked.

"Right."

"She changed shifts."

"And is now in your cabin I believe?"

"At this moment, yes. I guess she was getting a little too much of Lmore."

"That leaves Lmore alone does it not?" Byia asked.

"As far as I know, but I'm sure he'll have visitors. I know Luray likes him and I think he's been with Gonzar also."

"Luray is now with shaNai I believe."

"The last couple sleeps," Desa said.

"My concern is to find out if we have an unstable situation here. I'm glad to have another volunteer for sleep shift, the shift has been thin since I transferred Yarin to wake

shift, so I don't mind the change at all, but is there something more coming?"

"Not that I know of," Desa said. "Nuran likes Alan because they're the same age and she knows more about pop culture and gets to feel like a guide to him. Alan seems to like her enough, at his age he certainly has the eagerness to satisfy both of us. His only problem is that both the desert religion and /or planet he came from are militantly monogamist and he feels guilty having sex with more than one person."

"What I most worry about," Byia said, "Is the Yendee, Gonzar, Lmore triangle."

"On them I'm not an expert. I've known Lmore a few weeks longer than you have, but hardly know him well. He's been good hearted and jolly, a little crude, brags about Trenst a lot, but I've no other complaints about him. Gonzar seems a bit flighty and sometimes inconsiderate, but I hardly know her. I've never even had a conversation with Yendee." 'Yeah, OK' didn't count as conversation in her opinion.

"Lmore is one of our best deck hands, so he and Yendee are often together. Yendee will not take well to Gonzar spending much time with him. It is unfortunate that Gonzar is aboard as a guest of Yendee and not a member of the crew, that makes him feel like he has claim on her. I fear he may take his frustration out on Lmore if Gonzar spends a lot of time with him. What is Lmore likely to do in response?"

"Lmore's no weenie, if he feels sat on he'll speak up. He'll get right to the issues too I think, but like I said, I don't know

him well so I could be wrong."

"Will he desert the ship?"

"If he doesn't get satisfaction he might, especially now that Nuran isn't staying with him. He won't feel any great loyalty to your ship, it's just transportation to him. But he's a big man with a strong personality, I think he's capable of holding his own with Yendee."

"I'll watch the situation," Byia said. "How do you feel about Alan and Nuran?"

"Alan's a nice kid and I've enjoyed his company. I'm a bit of a sci-fi fan so his YingolNeerie origins are interesting to me. I saw the starship, so I believe him, but I had been with him for many weeks before that and knew he was harmless so I'm not afraid of him, just the starship. Still, I've only known him a little over a year, he's just a kid and he's only with me because he was convinced he needed a guide to Zhindu. If he wants to stay with someone his own age, I could move in with Yarin permanently, I wouldn't have a problem with that."

"Would Yarin?"

"Probably not," Desa answered. "He was happy with Luray but we get along also. He's got someone back in the city so he's just looking for shipboard. He's not quite as neat about his cabin as Alan but he's good enough and I'm not as worried about how much I'll drink with him as Luray is. I don't know him as well as Alan but I'm quite sure he won't be as dependent on me as Alan is."

"Is that good or bad?" Byia asked.

She was about to answer 'good', but stopped herself. That was the easy answer, but she had to admit she liked to be the teacher and liked to be needed. "It's some of both," she answered, trying to be honest. "I admit it's fun being a guide, I guess it makes me feel needed and maybe even important, but it's also a responsibility. It hasn't been much of one with Alan, he doesn't know a lot about the ways of the world but he isn't lazy or surly. He needs to grow, he needs to find some independence so I support that."

"Thank you for your thoughts on these matters, it sounds like I needn't worry excessively."

Byia soon went back to her cabin. As they had been told early in the voyage, Byia and Eelon were not like normal captains, they let marVan the navigator bawl the orders and functioned more like business managers of the Vikenvor, so she had no real reason to be on deck other than socializing. Desa appreciated the fact that she cared about the personal lives of the crew, even the dryfeet. It made sense, personal lives could erupt in ways that would impact the operation of the ship.

Kadezak Vistee

When Desa came in for Noonsleep of week Kadezak, Nuran wanted attention and was caressing Alan with her nude

body in the sixty nine position. Nuran had been up, Desa had seen her take breakfast at their supper, but apparently she had followed Alan back to bed.

"We did it already today," Alan was saying.

"But I know there's more in there," Nuran coo'd while licking it.

Alan caught her and lifted her off by her breasts. "Don't you think Desa deserves a share?"

"What if she's somewhere else again this sleep?" Nuran asked him.

"I wasn't planning on being anywhere else," Desa said as she came in the door. "I wasn't planning on standing your mast for you either, even if the wind is dying down."

"Is it really that late already?"

"They've turned the glass," she said about the big sandglass on the bridge that measured the shifts.

"OK; well, I guess I gotta go, but I'll be back to get you up for Afternoonday, OK?"

Alan looked to Desa. "It's your choice," she told him. "It looks to me like Nuran wants all the loving you can spare her."

"Maybe at wakeup, no promise," he told Nuran.

"Ok, so if I don't follow someone else home, I'll come get you up next shift." She grabbed her skirt, but put it on in the hallway as she headed for the stairs and her shift at second mast.

"You are my choice," Alan said when Nuran had left.

"You are my choice for whatever affection you wish to share with me. She may have whatever's left."

"She's a good kid, but she is a kid. And I'm glad to have a share of affection with you. Thank you for saving this for me," she said as she crawled into the bed and reached for him. She wouldn't thank Nuran for getting it ready for her even if she was here, that was something Desa enjoyed doing herself.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue in time," he replied as he turned to her. He put his hands on her face and then stroked her hair, she cuddled close but didn't start in on him right away. He was thoughtful, then said, "You know this is hard for me."

"What?" she asked.

"Sharing you."

"It seems like I'm sharing you more than you're sharing me," Desa said.

"That's hard for me also."

"You seem to have the stamina you need."

"But I don't love her," he said. "Oh I like her OK, but not like you. Like you said, she's just a kid."

"And you're not?"

"I think I'm older than she is."

"No more than ten years," Desa told him. "In some ways you're more mature and responsible, but in others you're more naïve."

"In my opinion that naivete is due to where I was raised and not my age and maturity."

"There is some truth to that I'm sure." She turned over and wrapped herself in his arms. He responded with the caresses she wanted. Still he wasn't ready to make love right away.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked.

"Sure, why not?"

"I'm just curious," he said, "and somehow she made me think of it."

"What?" Desa asked.

"How do people keep from getting pregnant on this planet?"

"The real question is, 'how do people get pregnant on this planet?' I think."

"With all the sex we've had, both you and Nuran should be pregnant by now." Alan said.

"There was a time in history when that would be true."

"But why not now?"

"In the 40th century there was a big scare about population," Desa began. "By then most successful people were able to prolong their lives indefinitely. There were a few who weren't, but most were. The population of the world was already over twenty billion and growing rapidly, faster than agricultural science and prosperity could keep up with in many areas. There was also still a lot of animosity from the people who couldn't afford to prolong their lives. So about that time some lab got concerned and released a virus that sterilized everyone."

"Who did that?" Alan asked.

"Nobody really knows. All the groups who claimed responsibility didn't have the means and all the organizations with the means disavowed responsibility. It's pretty well known it wasn't an official project of the Kassikan, but the virus spread from that region. There were still a few governments left at the time and they made quite a big stink. There was even a church that tried to go to war about it. They didn't because there weren't enough people left who would fight, but it was still a big issue."

"I can imagine," Alan said, "It would cause wars on Earth. How did they release it?"

"It was a virus transmitted in bodily fluids, but it didn't spread all that quickly. It still took centuries to reach the more isolated basins."

"But you can still have kids," he said, "I know you said you had a child once and Luray claimed she had two."

"Yeah," Desa said, "Luray had one in the 41st but she hadn't caught that virus yet, Wescarp was pretty isolated then. By the 43rd century the population had declined a bit, but by then a few labs had started to sell some treatments that could cure the sterility. You have to take a whole series of pills to start some hormonal cycles up again, it causes your uterus to bleed about twice a year, but you can get pregnant. If you don't take those pills you won't have that problem, but you won't reproduce either."

"I was wondering about that also. We've been together for months but I've never noticed you having a period."

"A what?"

"The bleeding, 'periods' are what our society calls it."

"Your people still have that?" Desa asked.

"Mortal women do."

"Oook, I'd hate to have to put up with that. I went thru it three times before I got pregnant with Dara, it's pretty miserable. It effects your whole mood about life too."

"In that case I'm glad you don't have to put up with it," Alan said.

"Me too. Besides the mess, it interferes with your love life."

"And we wouldn't want that," Alan said as he began to caress her in earnest. By now he was down and she got the pleasure of starting over.

Desa got her share of affection that Noonsleep, but lay awake after thinking about the fact that she felt she was now serving some duty as mother to Nuran as well as Alan. Nuran was not quite a full three decades of age, she thought, probably not really ready to go on this journey alone. While she had left with Lmore, it was clear he thought of her as little more than bait. He had known Nuran's father for many times the span of Nuran's years. Her father had asked Lmore to keep an eye out for her on the trip. Lmore enjoyed her new-adult body and her somewhat raunchy penchant but had no deep bond with her. It was clear that she wanted to be free of Lmore, maybe she felt that he was just using her for his own

entertainment.

Imnotyn Koyahn

It was only two sleeps later and already Nuran seemed to be taking it for granted that she would come in as early as possible after getting a share of the shift change meal, Desa would get right up and Nuran would make use of Alan for wake-up for a lot longer time than Desa had the evening before.

Dawn of week Imnotn Desa was awakened abruptly by Nuran and another girl bouncing into the room and jumping on the bed. "Morning!" She just about yelled. "Guess what, you can see the city now!"

"Yeah?" Alan mumbled.

"I brought Tindairn in, she's sick of sleeping with Nochie, he's such a drip."

"Nice," Alan said, regaining a little more consciousness, "hi Tindairn."

The new girl was tall and skinny with light yellow hair, quite long and limp, big jugs that looked really out of place on her bony rib cage and a butt only half the size of her breasts. Desa didn't want to be rude but had to admit to herself that she was one of the homeliest girls on the ship.

"So we'll get each other started while Desa gets up, wanna watch?" Nuran was already pummeling Tindairn's breasts.

Tindairn meanwhile was starting to undress while accepting Nuran's play with seemingly cowlike indifference. Tindairn wore a shirt and pants against the Dawnsleep chill. "We won't ask you to do us both at once," she said to Alan, "Nuran says you're not really into tongue."

Tindairn had already jumped up on the bed with her legs spread, Nuran's tongue went right for her. "I don't even want to watch," Alan said.

"What are you, a drip too?" Tindairn asked, slowly, like it didn't really matter, not like she was well stoned.

"No, I'm just not homosexual. You girls do what you want, I'd prefer to be left out of it."

"No one's asking you to do a guy," Nuran said, "and all we're doing is getting each other going. We both want you to finish us."

"I can't just plug you both like it's some kind of factory work; besides, if we're getting close to the city I bet the traffic's even thicker. It'll be busy out there and I'm not about to leave Desa alone with a mast, she'll miss breakfast."

"Thanks," Desa said, "but I could handle it for awhile."

"Nah," Alan said, "They have each other."

Desa and Alan were both up by this time. Desa already had a skirt around her and had the door open. Alan was right behind her. Tindairn muttered something but Alan let it go and did not respond. Nuran also issued a pleading whine but it was ignored also as the cabin door banged shut.

"I'm almost grossed out," Alan said as they made their way to the bathroom. "I'm not into that."

"You don't have to be, but I wouldn't call them gay unless they didn't also do men. I've hardly ever participated even to that level myself, but I'm not grossed out by it."

"I'll get over it I think," he said, "But it's made me a little less enthusiastic for her than ever. You go ahead," he indicated the bathroom, "I'll tend the deck til you're out, no doubt they've left at least one mast unattended."

She didn't linger in the shower but while she was in there she wondered at the difference between these two kids. Alan taking the responsibility for his own tasks and also being considerate of others, Nuran shirking her own tasks, taking others for granted and pleading with others to shirk theirs for her own selfish reasons. Nuran's immaturity was giving her a greater appreciation for what a good traveling companion Alan really was and how little extra burden his youth had put on her, no burden at all when you got right down to it. A much older person from an alien culture would have been more trouble because a much older person would have been more set in his ways. She also thought about how little bother he had been because of his origin. True the other people or ghosts from YingolNeerie chasing them into the wilderness had been a real bother, but Alan himself was still just a human kid, no different than he would have been if he really was raised by fundamentalist hermits on the desert rim.

When she got out she went right to the kitchen and got breakfast for both of them, which they ate at the winches because, sure enough, they were short handed til the glass was turned. marVan did notice who was missing and who was out early however, which was good and bad. Good that they were the ones making up for it but bad because Nuran was one of the group which had signed on together and Desa felt some responsibility for that.

Imnotyn Kovar

During Afternoonday of Imnotyn the wind had died down and they had to anchor by the time day shift was underway. The tide was normally not as strong this close to the city, but when there was no wind at all they couldn't make progress. Because there would be nothing for them to do, Nuran and Tindairn talked Alan into coming back to the cabin with them. It seemed like Nuran had decided to share her shift in their space permanently with Tindairn, without really discussing it with Alan or Desa. Believe it or not, Tindairn was a third first-time-away-from-home on the same boat. She was nearly seven decades old but had tended the same plot with her father all those decades. Tindairn was so into the gloss she made Nuran look like a erudite intellectual instead of the rough and tumble herdsman's daughter that she was. Tindairn was probably limited in the mind.

This left Desa standing at the rail looking down the beach they were anchored at. It was fairly populated here, but not crowded. There were a few kayaks around and a few people strolling the sand. There were plots back of the tree line along the shore. The Enthora plantations were now behind them for the most part, the river was just a channel where the tide and the current fought for dominance with the tide barely winning.

She didn't want to go back to the cabin and try and join in with what the others were doing, although Alan might have appreciated it. He hadn't seemed overly eager to go with them, but it wasn't up to her to stop him, not after all the time she had worked on him to get him less dependent on her. If she intervened now he might become militantly monogamous again. Still, she had to admit she hadn't really expected him to go this far the other way. He probably wouldn't have, but he hadn't figured out a polite enough way to slow Nuran down. It was certainly obvious by now that she was much more energetic, sexually, than Desa, and way more aggressive. She never seemed to pick up on Alan's reluctance, or if she did, she didn't care.

"So what's a beautiful lady like you doing standing all alone looking forlornly over the beach?" Yarin asked while coming up behind her and putting his arm around her waist.

"Nothing at all," she answered.

"Does this mean you might be free for a time?" he asked.

"Until further notice I guess," Desa answered. "I imagine

marVan will lift anchor if we get any wind at all."

"All I see out there is hazy heat, what say we go take part in this little beach scene."

"Fine with me," she said, "I was casually thinking about that myself. Are you familiar with the water here?"

"A little, not this exact spot, but there's no spheelunge this close to the city."

"Good, I could use a dip in this heat."

They tied their clothes to the rail and then went over the side, not bothering to walk back to the stern where a ramp had been let down. It was a short swim to shallow water, one neither of them had a problem with. The water was just cool enough to be refreshing and the sand of this beach was nice and soft.

"Before we go too far, we've got another jug of that harvest blue around, y'interested?"

"A little, I don't think I should get too wiped in case some wind comes up."

"We'll see if we can avoid finishing it."

While Yarin went to fetch the jug, another guy came by and started making conversation about the ship. He had never seen a Bordzvekian rig before and didn't even know where it was from. Not unusual since Desa wouldn't have known either til she got on it. He also kept moving in such a way as to draw her out of the water, presumably so he could get a good look at the rest of her. She didn't really try to fight that, but didn't make a big show of herself either, just walked with

him up the beach til they were in about knee deep water. He seemed to approve, but wasn't impressed enough to salute. They had pretty much used up the subject of Vikenvor's rig by the time Yarin returned and Desa didn't try to find ways to prolong the conversation.

They walked a ways down the beach away from the ship and into an area that was less crowded. They each took a couple swallows from the jug and then sat on the sand while the colors brightened up a little.

"I think we'll be in within the week, four more good shifts at sail should do it."

"It looks so close," Desa said. The mountain of the city was bigger than the pad of a thumb held at arm's length.

"It's still over sixty miles," Yarin said. "This is your first time to old Zhlindu isn't it?"

"Yep." When you're sixty miles from the first centers of Dos you notice the plots getting smaller. She didn't know of anywhere you can see a tower from more than twenty miles out. The plots had been smaller here since Shempala. Six hundred million people within that radius of Zhlindu, about a million square miles. The population of the entire Dos basin was still under that, and it was over five million square miles.

"It's the mountain that makes it like this. What are you going to do when you get there?" he asked.

"Find a place to live will probably be the first order of business. I don't have much cash, but Alan's got a little pouch of copper. If Nuran doesn't win him away from me I would

stay with him until the note comes thru from the cargo company back in Hazorpean where I have a few coppers deposited."

"You think he's going to switch over to her?"

"She seems to be digging her hooks in pretty deep."

"I couldn't imagine anyone giving you up for her."

"But he's a kid like she is. Oh I know he doesn't act quite as young, but he's barely over three decades." When he didn't respond right away she asked, "What about you? What are you going to do?"

"Well, I had a friend I used to live with back when I was last in town. If luck stays with me she may take me in again, if nothing else, at least til I can find something of my own."

"Do you want to find your own place, or is she someone you would elect to stay with if she wants?"

"Now how can you put a guy on the spot with a question like that? Here I am hoping you'll ask me to get a place together if it doesn't work out with Alan and you want to quiz me about Caro and how I feel about her?"

She laughed, "Yeah, what a conversation this is! Are we each telling the other we'll get together if we have to settle for second choice?"

"I know Caro, I know what a party hearty wench she is; and she's familiar. You are more the thrill of the unknown, she's more the comfortable old shirt."

Desa laughed again, "If I ever meet her, can I tell her that?"

"Please; a little discretion."

"Don't worry," she laughed some more, "I wouldn't say that and you aren't fooling me and I don't care." She leaned and cuddled against him as she said that. "If I had nowhere else to go I'd be glad to try sharing a home with you even if you think me second best to a comfortable old shirt," she said, but with overtones of laughter in her voice.

"I guess I'll have to settle for that," he said.

They passed the bottle again and began to get close, but playful. It seemed like humorosity was always associated with this batch of Kion Blue. But the playfulness soon got a little more serious, and as soon as his desire started to show, he led them back into deep water. Even this wasn't as much privacy as she really wanted for a romp, but there weren't any people really close by and no one she noticed was paying close attention. By the time the second hit really took hold all she was thinking about was the pleasure of bodies and the beauty of the sunlight sparkling off the ripples their motion was making. He lifted her in the water and lowered her onto himself. Her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck and his hands cupping her butt helped hold her up but it was his member within her that seemed to be responsible thru a long, laughing, slow-motion ride. As they approached climax and began to move faster he lost his balance and they fell over together. They tried to climax under water but came up sputtering without really finishing but not really caring because they still had fun.

A few minutes later they stumbled back to shore, arms still around each other. He was mumbling something in silly-speak that she really didn't pay attention to. As soon as they sat down he passed the jug again and she took another swallow.

This branch of the river was about a third of a mile wide here, the plots on the far side were visible, the ships passing by were close enough to shout to each other and moving so slow upstream with the barely perceptible tide that it was hardly worth the effort to sail at all. There was no wind for steerage, they were guiding the ship with poles. In spite of being so flat, it was pretty country, lush with the fronds of houses, the ripe smells of rich cropland in the mid summer heat and the sounds of a hundred different kinds of lumins and charrasspas. A song drifted in from somewhere behind them, probably a tape player in a nearby house. It was too soft to identify but loud enough to convey a mood.

She looked at Yarin and thought about what they had said, taking each other as a second choice. From what she knew of him so far, she could do worse, she had done worse. Would he really be a second choice? He was much older and more independent than Alan, but as he passed the jug a fourth time she was reminded that he might not be serious enough for many parts of life. In spite of his otherworldly origins, Alan had the intellectual capacity to interest her, she wasn't sure about Yarin.

"You seem distracted," he said when she refused the jug.

"In case we have to sail later."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure, I'm just not sure we won't and I'm well into a buzz already. This is a good ship we have here, I wouldn't want to let them down."

"Me thinks you looks more distracted than that."

She looked into his eyes. His Dwarvish face was still all smiles, his eyes still twinkled. Did he want a serious answer?

"Oh the only other thing I'm thinking about is what we were talking about earlier, if we each had to settle for second best."

"I'll tell you what, sweet lady, maybe I could make a pledge of first choice to you before this voyage ends if you could favor me by sharing my cabin til then."

She took a deep breath, how should she answer this proposition? She liked him, she wanted to remain friends, she would be glad to share love with him from time to time, but she didn't want that. That would be giving up Alan to Nuran. What did Alan want? She didn't think that was it. She had promised to be his guide to Zhindu hadn't she? Was she breaking that promise if she moved in with Yarin? Did she even want to? "I promised Alan I would be his guide til we get to the city," was how she answered.

"Guide thru the sleep as well as the wake?"

"That was the original plan. Let me find out if he wants me to leave him to Nuran's tender ministrations."

"But what of you? What does Desa want?"

She didn't answer immediately. Should she go ahead and bare her soul to this man, tell him the other reason that drove her on this trip to the city? Why not? If he was deep enough and serious enough to share a life with, he certainly needed to be able to understand these feelings.

"What I want is someone to wake up with. Back in the town of Yoonbarla where we came from, up in Wescarp, I had been over two decades without a steady guy in my home, unless you consider my son and I don't. The guys up there seemed to be driven off by either my intellect, my singing and yandrille playing or some such thing. Well some were probably driven off by my rather kinkless sex. Whatever it was, it wasn't working out.

"Now since I met Alan I have awakened alone only twice. I know he's strange because of his origins and I know he's just a kid, but the fact that he's been loyal to me when no one else has in so long means a lot to me, it's not something I'm going to just casually toss aside."

"But is that the promise you made, that you would wake up with him from now on?"

"I promised him only that I would be his guide to Zhindu. I promised myself I would not casually toss aside a guy who fulfilled my desires."

"Does he?"

"In most ways he actually does."

"So we are destined to be just a shipboard romance?"

"For now. For all I know I could get back to the ship and

he could tell me he's going to become monogamous with her because she will let him. That's something that's important to him. He's weird about it too, he was perfectly willing to let me have all the variety I wanted but wanted me to let him remain monogamous."

"What kind of martyrdom is that?" Yarin asked

"He said he wanted me to let him express the strength of his love the only way he knew how. I told him that would give me too much guilt. I just about had to tell him I couldn't stay with him unless he took some variety also, because of the guilt."

"And you put up with that?"

"He's got plenty of variety now. I think Nuran gets more of him than I do."

"I can see you aren't pleased with that."

"And I can see you aren't pleased with that," Desa said.

"I'm really sorry, I don't want to hurt you, I really do like you a lot, if the situation were a little different I would compete to share your cabin. We really shouldn't be saying this, this is a stupid conversation for us to be having."

"I suppose it is," he said.

So they stopped having that conversation, but no other seemed to replace it. Desa felt like a heel. What should she have done? She couldn't lie and say she'd love to move in with him and then make excuses, that would have been even slimier. As it was they were saved from an awkward

stretching silence by marVan wailing on Vikenvor's bell. Upon looking up they noticed that a little wind had come up, enough to let them make some progress against the creeping tide. She was glad she hadn't taken another hit or two of that blue.

Imnotyn Kozor

At the beginning of Nightday, Nuran came to their cabin alone. "Tindairn's finishing the shift," she said, "So I could come up early."

Desa didn't wait for any announcement of intentions, she knew them well enough by this time. "I'll see you at breakfast," she told Alan. "Since Tindairn's on deck, I think it's a good time to wash my hair out good."

"I won't be too long," Alan said.

"With that hair, she could take an hour," Nuran told Alan.

Desa wanted to come back with a snide retort like, 'at least I have some.' Nuran had chopped hers off flat just above her shoulders the week before changing shifts. Desa didn't because she was still too sleepy to get into the howling contest which was very likely to happen if she did say anything. It was becoming more and more plain that Nuran was trying her best to get between Alan and Desa. Alan hadn't said much about it, but he might not even realize what she was trying to do because Nuran might not even consciously realize what she was trying to do. So instead of saying

anything, Desa just grabbed her clothes and left. It was up to Alan who he went with, she certainly wasn't going to get into a squawk-up with a shallow brat over a shipboard companion. She was being an overprotective mother wasn't she?

She and Alan really should have discussed what she had talked about with Yarin. Of course that had ended on such a sour note that the offer would probably be withdrawn and she was pretty sure she knew what Alan would say. He would push Nuran right out of the room and then there would be an ugly scene about that also.

Later that day things got out of hand. After Tindairn came to the cabin and Alan left them, when they should have been sleeping, they had a party. Someone had a tape player, someone had a cask, someone else had a bong. Before you knew it Byia was down there, took a cup, but shooshed everyone off to the foredeck if they were going to stay up. Alan, Desa and Luray were at masts. While sailing wasn't quite the adventure it had been the week before, there was still a little bluster in the sails and they had to be attended to, the dark made it all the more important to pay attention.

Byia came over to Desa and Luray, for Desa had to tend middlemast from the foredeck in this wind. "I sent those kids up front to play. They were keeping up those of the sleep shift that wanted to sleep." Desa was hurt by that because Nuran was one of the five that signed on together in Shempala, Desa had vouched for her. Byia saw her face before Desa said a

word. "I know how you met and I know this basin. I've seen this river before. I don't expect her to be your responsibility"

"I didn't know she was such a kid. She's the same age as Alan."

"Alan acts more your age than hers."

"He's been thru a lot the last few years." Like finding out his parents were actually ghosts etched into crystals with electricity and running away to a whole new world over a year ago. "I should give them a mother speech," Desa said, "how they make the whole crew weaker by depriving themselves of rest, and keeping the good crew up by partying in the cabin."

"I already did that part. You don't need to teach every child in the basin. The youngster you meant to guide on this trip to the city is manning his mast as one of my ablest crew." Byia said while patting Desa's hand. "Next Morningday shift he will help bring us in."

They had been watching the mountain grow all week from a tiny bump to a noticeable shape on the horizon. Now it could even be seen in the dark. From here it was just possible to see the features of the mountain, The Karthuum Valley and Rankor Hill, glowing softly green with the light of all the Nightday lanterns that burned beneath the upper fronds of that urban mountain. "It's been quite a journey," Desa said. "Nowhere near as long as yours, but more of an adventure than I thought I was getting into."

"Surely," Byia said. "With or without that starship attack.

But the reach to that dock is difficult, the currents are strong. We need a strong crew that shift. I'm glad you're on it; and I'm glad Alan's on it also."

"Thank you."

"Of the five of you who came aboard at Shempala, the four who were experienced will stand the docking shift. It's sturdy company you keep."

"I'd hoped it would be all five of us."

"You are a good crew. Don't chase too hard toward the least significant digits of perfection," Byia told her. "Even Nuran is good crew, she's only been late to a winch twice and I've had no other problems with her til now."

"You're a good captain of a fine ship, the finest I've ever sailed on. I wish you'd ply these waters forever, I'd love to sail with you whenever I need to travel."

"We do want to get back to our homeland now that there is a better route than those hellish two decades from Knidola to the Pewpspway."

Byia didn't stay once they had to make the next sail adjustment. Desa and Luray stood the rest of the shift rather subdued since Luray knew how Desa felt and probably felt some of it herself. The kids stayed on deck for a good deal of the shift, a few started wandering back toward cabins after lunch time, a few others not until only a few hours before shift change was due. More went back and forth to puke over the bow than back to the cabins.

When the shift change meal was brought out, Nuran was nowhere in sight. They had their meal in shifts, then Alan went back to the mast since there was still enough wind to sail against the tide. The tide was much less this close to the city, every little tributary had locks to get anything out of the tide they could. They would not anchor unless the air was very still. Desa went to see if she could find Nuran and immediately found her in the cabin sound asleep.

"Your shift has started," Desa told her, "They're clearing up the table now, you missed breakfast."

"I don't want any," she mumbled, "Devin had shots, I feel like shit."

"Well; that'll happen. If you want to play, you have to pay."

"Uh, I don't think I can."

She did look pretty bad, her face was puffy and her eyes were so bloodshot that keeping them open might let her bleed to death. Her breath was dangerous near flame. "You should have thought about that earlier."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Do you think you guys could cover it?"

"No I don't, we'll be standing the last shift, that takes concentration, then we'll be unloading. There is no reason we should have to pay for your stupidity."

"Hey, I just let time get away from me OK?"

"You caused a scene in here last night. I vouched for you when we got on this boat, do you remember that? How do

you think it makes me feel when you take my trust and trash it?"

"How'd I do that?" Nuran whined.

"By making yourself useless for your post and by keeping the responsible members of the crew up with your carrying on."

"Hey, we're coming into Zhindu you know, I think that deserves a little party."

"You'll have plenty of time to party when you get there."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know what, you sound like a mother."

"But I'm not your mother!" Desa yelled, "and I shouldn't have to change your diapers! Now get your sorry little slut ass up and stand your shift like the adult you pretend you are!"
Desa yanked the covers off her.

"Hey, get lost will you! I'm in no condition to stand any damn mast today."

"That's not my problem. Now get out of my cabin or I'll toss a bucket of water on you!"

"Your cabin? I thought I was sharing it."

"Not any more you aren't." Desa began pulling at her, thinking to dump Nuran onto the floor. "You know you never even actually asked us if you could stay here, much less Tindairn."

"What are you, jealous? That must be it. I guess Alan doesn't think you're so hot now that he knows what real cunt is like!"

"Oh I doubt there's any such thing at all, little girl. He thanked me for saving him from you the other morning. I think he's rather tired of you using him as your personal dildo." Desa reached down and began pulling her by the arm. "Now come on, it's your shift and no one is going to pull it for you."

"Hey, what's going on here! I'll get up when I'm ready."

"You're ready now," Desa said, and pulled harder.

Nuran tried to pry at her hand, then swatted at it. "Let go of me."

"Get UP!" Rage overcame her and she went to swat back but came up against the Instinct. Her hand was stopped and a wave of paralysis went thru her, making her feel like her arm had gone to sleep. Never before in her century and two thirds of life had she been this angry and never before had the Instinct had to actually take over. What was it that had caused this anger? Was it just Nuran's immaturity and her blasé assumption that mother Desa would fill in for her? Was it really jealousy as Nuran thought? She had to admit that Nuran had captured more of Alan's attention than Desa really wanted her to. Desa had wanted Alan to find a little variety now and then and let her do likewise, she hadn't expected him to spend half of himself on another.

She calmed herself as much as she could, reached out with her other arm and took Nuran again. With some effort she was able to get both arms into use. Pressing against the Instinct as well as Nuran she was able to coax her from the

bed and into the hall. In truth she might not have managed if Nuran hadn't been so hung over and helpless. Thru it all Nuran kept screaming things like...

"You're such a mean jealous bitch you know that! One stinking little party. I bet you never had a decent party in your whole life! I guess you deserve that reputation as a bookworm!"

"There's other people trying to sleep you know, are you trying to ruin the sleep of both shifts?"

shaNai and Luray looked out the door at her and could see immediately what was going on. shaNai was the one who spoke. "You know we could pass the word about you on the waterfront if you'd like young lady, make sure you never find another post on a ship."

"What the fuck?"

"That way if you ever want to get home again you'll have a mighty long walk," Luray added.

She didn't say anything more, just gave them all a thoroughly evil look and stumbled toward the bathroom. Desa reached back into the room and found a set of her clothes. "Here, you might want these, it's Dawnsleep you know. And get a move on, Alan's tired of standing your mast and has work to do come Morningday, even coming from YingolNeerie, that kid's competent to help bring us to dock."

"Yeah, and he's got a dick too, no wonder he's your favorite."

"I never signed up to be your guide and I'm glad I didn't."

"I'm glad you didn't too." With that she ducked into the bathroom so Desa couldn't have the last word.

"What was that all about?" Luray asked.

"She thought we should stand her mast for her because she's hung over from today's party."

"Ha!" was all Luray said.

"I wish I could have just said that. She made me so mad I got the Instinct."

"I can understand that too."

"I'm not sure I can," Desa said, "She said I'm jealous about Alan and I'm afraid that had something to do with it."

"She has taken up a lot of Alan's affection and you do love him. I know he's just a kid and a weird one at that. I believe he comes from YingolNeerie and I know you feel like a mother to him, but I know you make a good mother, it has a lot to do with why you're such a good teacher. Alan's a good guy too, whatever planet he comes from. He's loyal, energetic, intelligent and tall enough for you."

Desa stopped and thought. Did it show? Yeah, she really did like Alan, but was she starting to actually love him? As more than a child? Was she such a mother that she had to love him first as a child? "You could be right," she answered, "I have gotten used to the kid and he's not such a kid as Nuran is."

"He probably wouldn't be. People grow up fast in ephemeral cultures."

"That makes sense." She knew that it would, with so little

time in their lives they wouldn't want to waste any more than they had to in childhood. "We better get some sleep, it sounds like we've got some hard sailing ahead of us tomorrow."

"It can be," Luray said.

"It'll be busy," shaNai added.

It was almost an hour later when Alan finally got back to the cabin.

"It was Lmore that finally relieved me," he said. "He said Nuran came to his cabin puking her guts out and whining that you were so mean you were going to make her stand her shift anyway."

"She was pretty bad when she left here, but she wasn't puking," Desa said. "I'm not surprised though. Even so I don't see why I should have to stand her shift for her."

"I don't see why any of us should, we aren't the ones who drank the booze or poured it down her throat. Whoever gave it to her is the only one who should even consider it."

"She said it came from Devin."

"Then she should have pounded on his door, not Lmore's," Alan said.

"Her dad did tell Lmore to watch out for her."

"Lmore said he was only going to take a few hours of it and then he was going to get Tindairn up. I told him that she didn't stay up past lunch."

"Good," Desa said. "We can probably let him sleep in for the sail, but he'll be busy with the cargo when we dock."

"So we're getting in tomorrow?"

"Yes, at last. But it's going to be a busy day, we better get some sleep."

"Soon," Alan said, while he took her in his arms as they lay down.

Garibivlast Koyahn

Nuran spent most of Dawnsleep in Lmore's cabin instead of at her duty. Lmore, Tindairn and a couple of her other friends on sleep shift got stuck covering for her. Lmore sent her out to finish her shift late in Dawnsleep so she was up to get them up on Morningday of week Garibivlast for the sail to the dock. She offered a weak apology that Desa grudgingly accepted. Alan paid her back for the day before by not staying back to welcome her to bed. Not that she would get a full sleep anyway with the mountain huge in the quickening gloom. They both went forward to eye the river and the mountain ahead of them while nibbling on a few breakfast rolls.

Luray came down too, so the trio who'd boarded logs in Yoonbarla a year and a half ago were standing together at the front rail. The sky thought about dawn behind the looming mountain, now a huge dark mass as Dawnsleep ended. They were in very urban waters now, torches burned on the piers all along all shores, this close all docks worked round the week.

They could see lights twinkle from all the little waterfronts, still burning as light slowly returned. Most beaches or docks had twenty stories of balcony over them, now only dim shadows against the wan glow of the sky. The great torches of the main docks were not quite visible, but their light showed on the faces of the harbor walls. Only the tops of those five hundred foot walls of crystal building were visible, the river still had a few meanders on it's way to the docks.

"So how far are we now?" Alan asked.

"We'll be ashore this Morningday," Luray said, "Unless we can't get a dock. It's a good thing this wind is back or there'd be outbound traffic backed up, the current's the strongest you ever see on this river going into that harbor."

"It's quite a distance yet isn't it. I'm thinking it's about two or three miles."

"No, we're still about twelve miles out. We have to shoot across the turbine race yet, but the tide'll be with us and it'll be light by then."

They looked in silence a minute more, then Alan said, "This was a real fun trip, except for the quibarta, hakken and kranjan. I sure learned a lot about wilderness survival. You were both great teachers on that subject."

"I know I had a lot of incentive," Luray said.

"We all did," Desa added.

"Thank you for being such great tour guides," Alan continued. "Thank you for teaching me so well about how to live here on Kassidor, in the country, the city and the wilds.

You are excellent teachers, both of you."

"I see you learned your latest lesson about exclusive monogamy," Desa said.

"I think I cut back on you to barely more than fifty percent, how little attention do you want from me?"

"Actually?"

"Yes, actually. What percentage of my attention do you want?"

She'd had a chance to think this all thru during the sleep. Luray was right, she did care for him and didn't want to lose him now that they had finally reached the city. "Oh, at least seventy five but not much more than ninety. While we're getting settled at least."

"So have I learned that latest lesson a little too well?"

"You certainly learned it," Luray said while wrapping her arms around him and petting him a little.

"I'm sorry if I went too far," he said.

"I don't think it was your fault," Desa said.

"She's very insistent," Alan said. "Even though she has to know I care much more for you," he told Desa, "and you too," he told Luray. "She didn't seem to care about that."

"I'm not sure she even believed you," Desa said. "She said that now that you had experienced what a real cunt was like, you weren't as interested as you were before in an old bookworm like me."

"What? With her it's just exercise to satisfy her, she hardly satisfies me. With you it's a sincere expression of love and

commitment, at least from my side it is; and much more pleasurable." Then to Luray he said, "With you it's a genuine desire and an expression of caring to a dear friend and an awesome person." He turned back to Desa, "If I didn't love you, I would have never accepted Nuran. I wanted you to be able to have some fun with Yarin without guilt."

"I'm sorry," Desa said and held tight to him, "I'm sorry I chased you to her."

"No need to be, like we said many weeks ago, it's your culture and nothing I can change."

"You're very sweet and very understanding. You've been the best traveling companion I could ever hope for. I'm really glad I've had your company on this trip."

"You deserve far better than I've been able to give."

"As you go thru more of life I hope you come to appreciate how much you've given me," she said.

"All I hope to do is appreciate how much you've given me."

She left it at that, just stayed there for a few precious minutes wrapped in his arms. Maybe she was starting to really love this kid, as more than a kid. At this moment she felt like more than a mother to him. They had come a long way and come thru a lot, he thru much more than she. She couldn't even imagine what this journey must have been like for him, all the way from YingolNeerie and then all the way from Wescarp across a world he knew nothing about, as little as she knew about the world at YingolNeerie.

"This trip is now very high on my scariest adventure list," Luray said, going back a few subjects.

"I think it's high on mine, in spots almost as scary as the trip thru the pass," Desa said.

"I don't think anything could really be as scary as that starship attack," Luray said.

"The kranjan attack," Desa said.

"The quibarta," Alan said.

"And the theirops," Desa said.

"And the hakken attack," Alan said.

"Other than that," Desa said, "it was a nice lazy ride down a long lazy river." Getting the Instinct had been scary also, almost as scary as the thought that her lust had nearly lost someone she really cared about.

They were quiet, Desa was trying to get some perspective on the looming mountain. The distance was so deceptive, the scale was coming ever clearer as the sky lightened and the scale of the Zhindu mountain became daunting.

"Look at all the torches," Alan said. "What are all these ships in all these harbors?" Alan asked.

"Each dock's got a different story," Luray told him, "sail makers, ship brokers, retired captain's harbors where the boat may be planked-to at the nests and sunk years ago. Captain's in town arranging cargo or taking a vacation. Big furniture builders or canners. Axiospeengya's rough syrup is made along here somewhere."

"Are there people living along here?" he asked.

"All the tall structures are residential," Luray said, "overlooking the river and the shops behind."

There was more tricky sailing coming up. A meander had been shot thru with a canal, then there was a complex corridor a few miles to the northeast, with a couple sets of tide control locks to pole thru. They would cross the Garvaskul and then around Southwest Island to the final reach. They were probably all thinking of that as they stood silently at the rail for a long time as the ship glided thru the last of the calm water.

After they'd each worked their way thru breakfast and the bathroom, they were once again at the rail watching the city come closer. Shift change was now complete, all masts were covered and the captains were on the outdoor bridge for the final approach. The three of them had the first three masts. Byia waved cheerfully to them as they rode calmly up the thru canal in a line of traffic that reached out of sight ahead and behind.

She squeezed Alan's hand and looked up at his face. He was looking at the shoreline going by, just staring in rapt wonder. By studying the look on his face as the low city of Zhindu scrolled by, she finally began to feel just a bit of what this journey must have been like for Alan. Also from the look on his face, she began to get just a little sense of how he was being even more overwhelmed at the sight of their destination. She'd been to the Yakhan and she was

overwhelmed at the sight of their destination. She had to get over that, she was supposed to be his guide.

Kortrax cracked the horizon and the mountain of city was silhouetted on his banded face. Layers of mist were forming in the vangs of the city as marVan's voice rang out to call them to the winches. A mountain of steaming jungle was awakening, showing them that the scenery here in the city could be beautiful also.

"A nice picture to start our last shift with." Luray said, and began walking toward her winch.