

The Report of **The Second Expedition** To 61 Cygni
Vol I.

Yoonbarla



Lee Willard

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The fictional world of modern Kassidor and the premise that the 'hippy' culture that began in the 1960's came from there is 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 trilogy is dedicated to Trudi, who has been the Desa in my life. Without her help and support this tale could not have existed. She has done so much more for this project than pose for this cover.

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

Cover by Roger Zuidema and Lee Willard

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Yoonbarla

In the 1960's a new culture invaded the planet Earth, challenging established ways of thinking and throwing parts of society into turmoil for generations to come. Three hundred years later, an expedition of simulated Angels from a space-faring Christial theocracy finds the world that culture came from.

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Book I. Knume's Dilemma

A Consultation With the Mountain

Far across the valley a morning came. The purple-banded ember that was Kortrax pulled himself together above the eastern peaks and with his rays, painted mottled patterns on the clouds below. Thru the nearer peaks the dawnwind whistled, blowing scattered rags of cloud into the emerald-jungled mountains that tumbled down into the mighty valley miles below.

Deep round brown eyes gazed forlornly over one of the finest views in central Wescarp. An elfin face peeked out from between thick ruddy-brown curls that spread across her shoulders. Little of her smooth and dusky skin showed as she huddled close in her wrap against the cold, concealing her trim figure from the dawn chill. She looked the part of a country girl, but in truth was one of the most familiar with cities of all the local people.

“I really should have known,” she sighed aloud to herself. She had known Enva long enough, knew what he was like and what he thought of her. He was such a piece that women often thru themselves at him, pretty much as she had done. Once in a while he would consent to give one a wham-bam and say ‘thanks, it’s been nice’ and shut the door against the cheeks of her ass as he shows her out. He had done it to her

before, she knew he would do it again this time before she even went home with him, so why was she so upset now?

Wasn't she angriest at herself for being like this? Why did she pursue the most beautiful guy in the room? Actually she couldn't really be that harsh with herself, she had pursued Svarloe more than a few times, but even he was content to live by himself at his camp but entertain her as a visitor any sleep of the week she cared to come up.

Wasn't she really angry at herself for settling for casual sex when what she wanted was a long-term partner? But then she could also argue, if you can't get someone to share a home with, why not settle for the best sex you can get? So with that she had followed Enva home.

But once that was over and she was hustled on her way, she was in no mood to go back to Knume's and take the chance of getting caught between him and Valla again. Knume's home wasn't as much fun as it used to be before Desa's sister-child Valla's relationship with him started to unravel. Desa also hadn't been in the mood to sit by the pond and have every yaaged-out late-Nightday wastie come bother her either.

So, in foolhardy disregard of her thin night-wrap and jersey, the trail, and the yaag, she thought it might be nice to watch the sunrise from up here. Just as the horizon glowed pregnant, she finally reached the top of east Nvednmere. The easy climb made difficult by the wan light of Cynd and the crashing buzz of that yaag.

Maybe coming up here was something about self esteem, 'I AM alive, I can accomplish something. Maybe not breakfast with Enva, but I can climb this mountain in the dark with nothing more than a hand torch. I can see more than the streets of Yoonbarla while they Dawnsleep'.

Actually she couldn't see much of the streets from here. She could see the fields and the upper house branches along all three streets of Yoonbarla village. From here one could see that the back streets existed and the early light twinkled on the globes and glass of the central houses. Other than that, Yoonbarla was just fields and trees.

The climb was worth it. Looking beyond Yoonbarla she saw the great valley of the Lhar. She drank in the beauty of the Outer Wescarp Range on the far side of the great valley. Sentinel peaks rising thru the mists, dark claws sunk in Kortrax's coalescing orb. The thread of the river blazed it's sinuous script thru cracks in the cloud below, the purple and orange light reflecting thru the thin mists rising from the Lhar. Kortrax's banding was at a maximum, the swirls of purple that slowly, so slowly, revealed themselves as the great globe of the sun swelled ever further from the shimmer of the horizon. It was enough to make her wish she'd taken another bottle up here to share this with.

It certainly was pretty here, but her life was in a rut. Living was easy, beauty abounded, family and friends were close. But it was so rural. Culturally the only contact the

village of Yoonbarla had with the rest of the world was thru movies and magazines and they were old and tattered by the time they made it out here. People liked to stay medium close, chummy, light and rowdy. The root of her discontent was the local cultural bias that said one's closest confidants should be of the same sex, while she thought her closest confidant should be her lover. So, years ago, she'd sold her house with the intention to leave for an extended stay in a city. She'd been staying in Knume's guest compartment ever since.

She thought longingly of the life and home back in Dos, fourteen decades ago. She missed that life, the fine stone houses and broad streets shaded by sprawling archwood trees. She missed the commerce and industry, the haunting harmonies of its music and the intellectual society of forty five million humans. Dos had a lifestyle where it was no problem to find men who would stay with her for decades, even a century. If it weren't for the rigors of the Kinsheeta pass, she would return there just to be assured of being able to live that lifestyle again.

But there were cities on this side of the waste. Down in the valley where the river Lhar began was Hazorpean, with prettier Bostok up a branch farther north. A hundred miles out on the flats beyond the eastern peaks, Lastriss stood. That was a real city of over a million. Far down river, beyond the wild prairie, lay even larger Shempala, and at the end of the river, Zhlindu. Zhlindu was to this basin what Dos was to her native

land, but it was a much different city. It was even a little larger than Dos, its population listed as fifty nine million. It's music was devastatingly heavy, its products more durable than stylish and it's density of habitation appalling.

She had never been to Zhindu, but she knew it well. Most movies shown in this basin were made in Zhindu, most books and magazines were published there. Where Dos had one huge University, Zhindu had about four hundred, most of them specialty, but with five leading general institutions. With some luck and some references she might get a position at one and not have to work off the boards.

From a distance Zhindu center looked like some kind of mountain, fancifully eroded, heavily jungled. The urban mountain was so big that pictures with layers of clouds working their way up thru the vangs were common in the media. Vang is a word you might not hear much outside the Zhindu basin. It's a street of so many levels, so many times over-re-developed that it begins to be a valley. There were locks moving a dozen ships at a time in each direction across one of the rivers. The tops of its crystal towers were almost three thousand feet above South Harbor.

Since she'd lived in this basin for thirteen decades now, perhaps it was time she made her pilgrimage there, as most other inhabitants of this basin had at some time in their lives. If she was to return to her homeland around the waste by commercial transport, her path took her thru Zhindu, though

it lay a year in the opposite direction. Doing the seventeen thousand miles back to Dos under sail would take at least ten years, with years on the Lake alone.

The last time she was in this mood she sold her house, planning to take the money to a city as the start of a fund for a new yandrille. A decade had passed in the lazy way a decade will in these hills, and she'd frittered away a third of that money already on little more than yaag and snacks. If she didn't get off her butt and do it, soon she would have none of it left, for she was doing nothing lately to earn any pocket change.

But she couldn't just sit here and think about this forever, she had to actually get it done, and if she didn't start moving she was going to be sick with hypothermia. By the time Kortrax fully freed himself of the horizon, it was almost thirty hours since she'd slept and Dawnsleep had given way to Morningday. It was also seven miles, one of them vertical, back to the house. She had no food or water or food and she was amazed that she could get this far while she was as stoned as he had been. Now that she her head had cleared a little, she knew it was stupid to do so.

At first the course took concentration, for it was climbing in the rocky open with nothing but ribbonleaves and the tiny buds of week leaves to cover the ground. There was a half mile of that, losing a quarter of the altitude, till she reached the bottom of the lvinch patch. This was in the saddle between the east and much more challenging west peak of

Nvednmere. Down the bottom of that clearing were a few yoon berries to dent her hunger. With something to make a fire she could have made a feast of pkattas but she had nothing to gut them with and no way to cook them. Just beyond that, in the edge of the forest, was a trickle of brook from which she drank her fill.

There was a pretty serious slope down thru the dense upland forest after that. Once half the vertical mile was done, she drank her fill at the stream again. From here it was only a long stroll between and around the mountain on a familiar logging track. It's shady and pretty, especially so early in the week when horizontal orange rays reflected off the dew. Soft moss soothed her feet and dawn lumins still called a haunting symphony in the misty woods.

Nearly two hours later, her legs were sore and probably would be for days. Advancing Morningday and the exertion warmed her enough so it was fatigue, not cold, that drew her attention now. At last she recognized the shortcut off the logging track that would take her down to the outer fields. This was another steep climb thru deep forest, but here it had seen more logging and was choked with thickets and groves. This leveled out and not all the trees were shaftwoods about half a mile before the edge of the big vedn field. The vedn wasn't quite ripe yet, the blooms had fallen but the kernels growing on small stalks in the center of each rosette were still green, at least two weeks from harvest. A careful but easy

walk a quarter mile across the ripening grain was the fence of Knume's talrin field, reaching even farther into the vedn than Nalu's keda field. Beyond them were the gardens and houses of Yoonbarla.

She found the talrins all excited, at least one was wrapped on each ankle by the time she reached the trellised-vine enclosure that held the nests. Sure enough, Knume was in there and already had an egg basket clipped to the harness and strap he was wearing. It never seemed possible that arms so heavily muscled could handle eggs, but he did it with a skillful, easy confidence.

"So there you are," his deep voice greeted, "looks like you visited somebody's camp last night." He knew that because she was approaching from the field side of the enclosure.

"No, I was up there by myself."

"Nightday's not the usual time to go on a hike?"

She thought she might as well get to the point and not make a long interrogation of this. "I wasn't thinking very practically. I went home with Enva but he threw me out as soon as he came. I was so annoyed over it that I would have kept everyone up with my whining, so I went up the east peak and watched the dawn."

"Glad you survived the climb I heard someone from Napar spotted a theirops a couple weeks back. And sorry about Enva but I thought you knew he's like that."

"Yeah, and so are a lot of other people," she said. "I've

had enough of it, I've decided to get away from here for awhile."

"Oh no, not you. I was beginning to think you might become a native. How far are you going? Not back thru that pass?"

She made an 'I'll climb a mountain in a theirops-infested forest during Dawnsleep but I won't be doing that again' face at him but said only, "No; down-river, probably go see Zhindu. If I did go back to Dos it would be from there under sail." Since they were talking anyway, she started helping pick the eggs.

"You don't have to go, you're welcome here as long as you like. I hope you know that."

"Oh I've liked it so much that this temporary stay til I get my shit together has dragged on a decade. Now seems like a good time to actually get this trip done."

"After all that hiking?" he asked. He could certainly see that she was whipped.

"I don't mean today now, I mean this year, when I can get ready."

"I want you to know I've loved having you around. It'll be a lot less comfortable around here with you gone." He paused to strap the second basket on. "I'll be alone in the house, it'll feel like it's a camp again."

"Why? Has Valla gone from stepping out to staying out?"

"Yeah, and it's Mappu this time."

"What would she want with a crude deformato like that?"

Desa asked rhetorically. Mappu was fat and sweaty and bowlegged and had a cock that wouldn't fit in a fireplace, much less a woman.

“I don't know, she's your kid, you tell me?”

“I might be able to guess why she goes out,” Desa told him, “but not why him; if I may use the sentient pronoun on such a creature.” He was a dumb, loutish, sex entertainer in a dirty, smelly, cum club.

“I think she does it just to tease me, just because she knows nothing could possibly make me madder or disgust me more.”

“Your opinions of Mappu are well known to all. Maybe she is doing it for just that reason. She hasn't told me she is, I haven't thought of it that way, but I can't argue against it.”

“She's making me be the one to throw her out,” he said.

“Your opinion of Mappu is an easy tool to use.”

“Why? Why does she want to get out?”

She had to stop and pry a talrin off her wrist. They are constrictors and in trying to protect their eggs from what look like mouths swallowing them, they go for the throat.

“Because she's never lived with anyone else,” Desa answered. “She was just-grown when we came out of that pass.”

“I let her roam. She carries on at parties almost as much as Pneika and I don't say anything.”

“Well, maybe tenth as much as Pneika.” Even that was quite a lot.

When they'd picked over all the nests they left the pen and walked down the outer field path and then thru the long narrow vegetable fields back to the house. He carried the eggs while she checked the traps as they passed by. She found a couple little yellow stripes that must have been going after their thesh.

Nothing large enough to eat had been in any of the other traps but even the small vermin could eat a lot of garden so she emptied and reset all the traps as they went by.

While they walked, she continued to try and get Knume to understand what it was like to be Valla. Valla was barely weaned when their mother left her with Desa. Knume was Valla's first adult love, she had grown up loving him. As a nubile girl she was in awe of the mighty lumberjack, captain of the party, the hearty laugh, the tall tales of olden times. Knume, on the other hand, could never remember what it was like to know the concept of remembering a first love. The centuries had piled up in his memory to a depth that they could hardly be anything but a spiral. Desa was less than one sixth his age and could remember only indirectly what her youth was like. But she remembered her guilt at her first serious breakup.

Knume's house was quite nice, old and sturdy and overgrown with larorlie. The main walls had grown to solid wood, the roof leaves had matted to a layer almost a foot thick. They passed the sunken courtyard at the back and

started down the narrow stone steps that separated his house from Nemair's. They didn't follow the steps all the way to the street, but entered the side door and took the lower half-flight of interior stairs down to the older stone level of the house that held the entryway, still, and store.

They left all but a few of the eggs and came back upstairs for a late breakfast. There were no onions in, so Desa forgot about rolls and went back to the garden for a couple lorvs while Knume wrapped some eggs to bake. She left him to clean the edible garden pests, which he really never complained about. With his strength he didn't even use two hands on the cleaver.

"These are great" Knume exclaimed after dipping a spoon into the creamy interior of the lorv a few minutes later. He still wasn't familiar with some crops common in Dos that she had brought up from the basin floor another mile and a half below.

All they needed was a little shelter in the winter darks.

"Yeah, and besides the taste, they're easy to cook." Desa liked 'pick and eat' meals.

"That's a plus," he said.

"Want another?"

"I don't want to eat them all up on you."

"It's your garden..." she began.

"But you're growing it," he interrupted.

"...and we've got plenty ripe."

She was having another, and got him one too. While they ate, Desa's thoughts wandered to the possibility of staying with him if Knume and Valla split completely. They got along well enough and he was jolly and fun most of the time. She should have come here last night, instead of getting between them, she would have had him to herself, a nice fuzzy, cuddly, lap to lie in. She wouldn't have had Enva piss her off and Knume did like to have a woman share his household. He thought there should be three or four people living in this house, at least two.

On the other hand, he was almost always awash in yaag and had no higher goal than to log one tree a year, blow the money from it on a great party and cut up the branches for abundant firewood. It was true he made a little spending money by minding the egg store, but that involved more lifting of cups and telling of tales with his customers than anything else. What he made, he spent at the nearest keg. He would mind his garden if he had to, but Desa had been the farmer since she came to the household. Valla had been a very serious thing to him for a long time. Knume, and maybe many others, would see Desa as the substitute bookworm older sister without the tits.

Intellectually they had little to share. They both loved the wilds, but he for adventure, she for beauty. She had a great passion for music, he had none. She had studied history, he had lived it, for he'd walked over fourteen centuries. Yet he knew little of the larger events that went on around him and

thought bringing the annual log down to Hazorpean was a trip to the city.

“I’m going up for a little nap to take the place of Dawnsleep,” Desa told him when they were done eating.

“I hope you’ll be over this Zhlindu idea when you wake up.”

“It’s possible, but I’ve had ten hours to think about it so far. I’m gonna do it, so why not now?”

“Well there’s the logging party coming up.”

“Yeah, that’ll be a good time to leave. If you let me catch a ride on the log I won’t have to hike all day to Hazorpean with fifty pounds of duffel.”

“Of course you can ride with me, love to have you. And that way you won’t miss the party.”

Desa just gave him a look over that, she was up the steps by now anyway, looking back thru the beads. Of course she wouldn’t miss the logging party, it would probably be next week anyway. It was already getting warm in her compartment so as soon as she threw off her clothes and lay down on top of her quilt, she was asleep.

The Empty Keg

Desa was sleeping soundly when she was awakened by the sound of a hushed argument from below. It was Valla’s voice so she had probably just returned home from

Dawnsleep.

“So what?” Valla squeaked, “If you keep this up I’ll spend the next sleep there too.”

“And I might just throw your junk after you ” Knume huffed.

“Then who’s going to clean your store and cook your meals? Don’t think Desa’s going to do it, she’s almost as lazy as you are.”

“She’s not as lazy as you, never mind me, and I survived in this house for centuries before you.”

Valla had a lot of nerve talking about lazy. Oh yeah, she did a little inside the house, but fieldwork? Desa missed what they said while in the stairway up to the shower and toilet compartment.

“...it’s all flesh, it’s got nothing to do with you or him as a person. But keep ranting at me like this and I might think less of you as a person.”

“You do have a home. I don’t have to LIKE being left alone.”

“And who was it just a few years ago put me on the porch ‘cause of Luray? And what about Desa? You never seemed to mind spending a sleep with her, or fooling around with her in the day for that matter.”

“You should be glad I get along with your sister, not jealous of her.”

“Oh I’m not. Just because I happen to like people instead of books doesn’t mean I should be jealous. Now I did miss

Dawnsleep and already had Morningday lunch, so I came up this way with an early Noonsleep in mind. Why bother now, with all the aggravation coming home has been? How ‘bout I pretend to sleep while you get back to your customers?”

They were in their bedroom by now. Theirs was large, it even had some floor and an indoor balcony overlooking the front of the main room. The indoor balcony was not separated from the bed by a window the way the outdoor balcony was.

Desa was glad to hear them call this off. She was really hurt to hear that her sister thought so little of her. Desa was the only mother Valla had known. Valla had been grown for many decades now, but she should remember. She should also know that she wasn’t doing all the work around here. Everyone else knew Valla did little more than the cooking and the sweeping. Desa tried to convince herself it was because of the situation. Breakups always hurt and Valla was just lashing out.

This was Valla’s first serious breakup. Desa was less than two centuries old and could still vaguely remember her first serious love. She remembered thinking it was going to last forever, but it hadn’t lasted as long as Knume and Valla had been together. By the end of a century she’d been thru many such pairings and knew that eventually all would end.

Valla and Knume were never the most affectionate couple she knew, but they had always been calm, steady and dependable. They’d each had a few little intimate adventures over the years, but never much more than a giggle and grunt

at a party. Knume'd been friends with Luray since long before the rest of them were born but they were at the table near the keg a lot more than they were in the back. Valla had never been that sexually motivated so Desa didn't understand why her first serious outside affair was with Mappu.

She lay there awake for awhile, an hour at least. It was after lunch so she'd had at least a few hours sleep. When she got up and found there was plenty of leftover hot water from last dark's fire, she enjoyed a thorough shower while Kortrax lit the compartment thru its large pictureglass window. After a few munches in the garden, she went down to Knume's store to see how Morningday was doing in the second half. Maybe they'd get a chance to confide in each other. By now the store was empty of customers, the occasional clatter of wagon wheels came thru the open door and the root-barred window. Most pedestrian traffic in Yoonbarla was barefoot. Knume sat silently on his stool with elbows on the counter propping up his chin.

The room wasn't all that large, about ten feet wide, almost twenty long with the counter dividing it into two squares. There was nothing in the customer half but Larneh's stool. Up to twelve people could stand around or lean on the wall or windowsill. On Knume's side there was hardly any room. There was a table behind the counter where he piled the eggs. Only a few were left over at this point. Stuffed under the table and hanging from the ceiling was an impressive array of

woodworking tools, their blades all opaque with dust. There were dusty pieces of furniture in various states of dis/assembly in the back corner behind the axe pile at the end of the counter. There was a fair collection of cups in an ancient norus-shell cabinet stuffed way up on top of the shelf-case behind the table that held his scale and volumeter, along with a fair collection of dusty, brittle scrolls from back in the days when he used to keep records.

He had a small keg up on the counter next to the window. That was usual. There was a stand for it made up of tied sticks. That keg was why there might be twelve people standing around in the customer half of the store. Today however, his great cup sat under the spigot - empty. Knume's empty eyes bored into the empty cup.

"Can you talk about it?" Desa asked while hopping up on the counter next to the keg. From here she could get her arm around his shoulders, from the stool she couldn't reach. "You are taking this spat harder than usual."

"Yeah."

"Personally I don't see why. She'll get over this in a couple weeks."

"Maybe," he said and reached over to fill his cup again, "But I don't think so. I can tell it's different this time, I'm sure you can too. Hasn't she said anything to you?"

"No. I tried to pretend not to notice until today."

"Why? It's been pretty obvious. The whole town knows about it."

“So? Relationships have ended before. If she walked out of here for good nobody’d be any different but the girls who want to take her place. You’ve been together a long time but you haven’t been wrapped up in each other all that tight.”

“Sure,” he moped, like his mind was years away. Maybe that was because the keg had been full when the day began and now was trickling out like there were only a few cups left in it. Without even asking, he passed her the cup.

She tipped it, just a few drops would be enough to light the residue of Nightday still in her head. That was another rut she could fall into if she stayed here. She wondered if Knume would respond to some other subject besides Valla. “So anyway, since I’ve decided to take my trip down to Zhlindu this year, why don’t you come along, take a vacation from this?”

For awhile it seemed like he hadn’t heard or wasn’t going to bother responding to the question. Then he shuddered like he felt his own personal quake. “Zhlindu,” rumbled out. He was silent for awhile. Finally his head raised up while he laboriously brought his mind into focus. “Zhlindu,” he repeated, feeling the name tentatively with his tongue like it was white-hot coals. “I can’t even climb out of this cup of morning yellow.” His eyes did look like he’d climbed into it. “Can you imagine what would happen to me if I ever got back down there?”

He was quiet again, staring into his cup. It was a huge old thing named Numenvadn with a blue glass bowl on a leather-

bound claw-wood stem and handle. A clip-down traveling cap hung from the side of the bowl-wrap.

“Old Numenvadn and I have been thru a lot of places,” he sighed, “but we nearly didn’t make it thru Zhlindu. I was there once you know – didn’t know what it was before I went. The city kind of happened all at once about five centuries ago and some of us old-timers went down to check it out. We got stuck there for awhile, me especially. All of my head never really made it back, so I just sit here pouring yaag over it hoping to wash some of it back in,” and with that took a couple more deep tugs off the massive cup.

“You’ve never been much of one to stand back from a cup of yaag anyway. You said you won that cup by out-draining the whole Lastriss waterfront.”

“That’s nothing next to Zhlindu. I saw three people in Zhlindu polish off a keg like this with a meal and then go out to get high.”

“Yes,” Desa said. “It’s said to be more like the Yakhan in an innocent sort of way, or like a heavy Yondure without the zonies.”

“What could they possibly have in Kassidor Yakhan that they don’t have in Zhlindu?”

“Ppppp... People trip RNACid up there like we would go to a movie. Most everything they drink with lunch is both accelerant AND addictive. The black slap is passed out like country yellow is here. You can pick up boost at any boat stop.”

“So how did you come out without getting on it?”

“I knew ahead of time, it’s no secret.”

“That don’t help in Zhindu. When those larorlie vapors start hanging in the vangs in layers you can easily forget what you know.”

Svarloe entered just then, he was a regular customer and one of the old-timers, he’d been here five centuries or so. He didn’t talk about his trip to Zhindu either. He now lived farther up this street in a young house still all saplings and tent. Physically he was big-boned and rugged with a large nose and thick brows and the thick knobby hands of a vedn picker. Because of the seasonal nature of his occupation he kept an account with Knume and settled it once a year in the form of all the grain they could eat.

“Hey Desa, good to see you down here,” he said and gave her a hug on his way to Knume. “You too old timer, I found nary a snack in the fields this forelunch.” He and Knume pressed four palms across the counter.

“How’s the crop doing?” Knume asked as he picked out a half dozen of the darkest.

“Lots of fuel potential. Bright lights thru many nights in Yoonbarla this winter.”

“Yeah, but the yaag? This is the tiredest batch I’ve ever made.”

“You’re just not letting it fester,” Desa told him. “What you called my MONSTER BREW was made from the leavings you thought were still’t out last year.”

“You’re farting in my face.”

“No, I’m telling you as sweetly as I would a student. You can’t still a brew in a sleep, I let those pods steep for five weeks in that back barrel. What you’ve been drinking for Yaag is just the washings of your larorlie.”

“Ten more to the tab,” Svarloe said as Knume handed the eggs over. “Did I hear you telling tales of Zhindu while I was walking in?”

“I was just trying to warn this young-un. She thinks she wants to go there.”

“And leave us?” Svarloe said, “No ”

“Oh you’ll get over it,” Desa said. “I don’t really contribute much to life around here.”

“Oh sure you do. You’re the brains of the whole outfit. Besides that, you help keep Knume from washing the whole town out onto the flats. Why would you want to leave here anyway?”

“Oh there’s a few reasons. Participate in some cultural events, buy a better yandrille and maybe find a guy who’ll let me wake up next to him multiple times in a row.”

He didn’t answer for himself, but looked aside with, “Well take Knume here, he’s nice and steady and it looks like Valla’s about done with him.”

“I told you the whole town knew,” Knume aimed at Desa.

“The whole town couldn’t help but notice, what with her on stage at the Bit,” Svarloe told him. He didn’t need to say ‘knowing how you’d react’ because they all knew it.

“That does it ” Knume bellowed.

“This one’s the better sister anyway,” Svarloe said as he held Desa around the shoulders.

“What would a fine lady like Desa want with an old yaag-sump like me?”

“You ain’t that straight yourself, are you?” Svarloe asked her.

He would know, they drank together more often than they shared a quilt. “Not like a rich kid’s floater pilot, no,” Desa answered, and then told Knume. “You’re not SUCH a sump either, you just binge now and then; and now and then.”

“It’s still the same one, since I was in Zhindu.” He turned to Svarloe, “She wants me to go back there with her.”

“Oh, so I see. I’m one step behind this already. Well I think it’s a GoooooD idea, but I would be a little leery of him in a big city.”

“I didn’t think you meant that invitation the way he does?”

“We’d get along well enough on the journey and he knows that,” Desa told him. “I thought you might like to go, let Valla stew awhile, maybe show me the way.”

“Hell, just get aboard ship with Vyinga, get off at Zhindu,” Knume said. “She won’t let Shempala fool you.”

“She’s due in any time,” Svarloe added.

“How’d you hear that?” Knume asked.

“The calendar. Fifty six weeks have passed since she last untied from a Hazorpean dock. She claims a thirty six week

schedule but usually stays under sixty.”

“Is that who you went with?” Desa asked Knume.

“No, she’s who brought me back. I didn’t even know my way to the harbor by that time. I remember coming-to in her nest, about a week out on the Lhar. By the time I was coherent enough to tell her I once lived out this way I was coherent enough to be told that she already knew it. She said it was on the note taped to my forehead when I was carried aboard.”

“So let’s go down and catch a ship.” Desa said, “Sharpen up your axes, have a little logging party where we can say ‘till later’ to the friends, and come on down to Zhindu for awhile.” She worried about what he said though, she might have to intervene if he got into something hard. She wasn’t real sure she could be successful if it came down to that.

“I’m afraid to do that,” Knume answered.

“So then stay here and keep ranting with and about Valla.”

“Oh I’m not ranting with her any more, not after this.”

“So what are you going to do with Valla?” Svarloe asked.

“Probably chuck her out of here. Either that or charge her rent for sleeping on the cushion. If Desa goes thru with this wild notion, Valla can rent that space after Desa leaves if she wants. Not that I’m in any hurry to see you go,” he told Desa. “She can stay down on that couch for a century if she wants. You get to stay for free too, after all, you do take care of the garden, as well as add class to the household.”

“I think you should just have Desa in with you,” Svarloe

tried to say, but Knume cut him off with...

“I’ll keep her out of my kitchen too. That’ll piss her off more than keeping her out of my bed.”

“You may be right about that,” Desa said. “I don’t think she’s all that sex-oriented, that’s why I can’t imagine her in the Borlunth environment for long.”

“Maybe she’ll take Mappu out of it?” Svarloe guessed.

“Mappu?” Desa was incredulous, “Be serious, she’s just a twitch for him. He wanted to grab some tit.” Then to Knume she said, “I don’t think you should ditch her, this will all be over by winter.”

“So what if it does blow over? After the way she taunted me with it?”

“Who will remember that a year from now?”

“I will, and I might still be rantin’ and ravin’”

“Maybe you could get back together some other time,” Svarloe said, “I have to admit you two as a pair were sort of like scenery. It just won’t be the same without you and Valla together.”

“Oh don’t worry, I won’t throw her thru your window.”

“I wasn’t worried about that, I’m more worried about who you’ll be taking out of circulation next.”

“So that’s why you’re trying to sell me Desa. Actually I should be so lucky, honored I should say, what you have to do is sell me to Desa. None of us are Rendrak.”

“I guess we’re all just kidding,” Svarloe said with a sigh, “there’s none of us that’s going to capture this fancy treasure

and we all know it, we just play pretend.” He put his arm around her and his hand on her hip.

“I’ve been hanging around for decades now asking if anyone wants me.” She gave him back his attentions, maybe with a bit of interest. Rendrak had been gone two decades, she was over him, why couldn’t they be?

“It’s not that no one wants you, it’s that everyone wants you,” he said while breaking away.

“But not for very long.”

“Some people are like that,” Svarloe said as he started for the door. He’d probably talked to Enva already today.

“Anyway, I’ve got to go get some Noonsleep, so... till later.”

“Who’s *not* like that?” she yelled after him. “I’m not like that,” she said to herself when she got no reply. Then to Knume, “He’s going to tell the whole town you threw Valla out before it gets dark.”

“Yeah, he’s like posting a note on a pondside tree. Now I won’t have to explain what’s this bulbous bitch doing in front of my house with a pile of clothes and toiletries on top of her.”

“So why did you go from moping and stewing to all this anger?”

“It’s the participating. And where does anyone put Mappu but in their mouth?”

“I don’t think she could even do that.” His cock IS a marvel of genetic engineering.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said while heaving to his feet.

“Seems like I’ve gotten up the energy, how ‘bout minding the store while I get up some momentum?”

“Now wait a minute, you don’t seriously think I’m going to mind the store while you wake my kid/sister out of a sound sleep to toss her in the street.”

“I’ll tell you what then,” he said while coming around the counter, “I won’t wake her up.”

Desa moved between him and the door. “Don’t be so upset. So you don’t approve of her latest sexual practices,” she said while placing her hands on his chest. “You don’t have to, you don’t even have to keep quiet about it. But at least take the time to think thru a rational explanation of what you’re doing. Don’t go up there shouting in random anger like a completely rotted out mess.” He had stopped pushing her backward across the room by now. “It’ll be better if you wait till she wakes up.”

He stood there, twitching slightly for a few seconds, then went back around the counter and drained the last of the yaag into the cup. “If I’m going to be called rotted out I might as well get rotted out.”

“Now you’ve killed the keg and the next one won’t be ready till next week.”

“I’ll just have to open it a little early. I’ve got to do something about that damn still, it’s not even producing a keg a day.”

“You used to ask it to produce a keg a week.”

“Well maybe after I throw super-tits out of here I won’t be

causing such a whirlpool.”

Larneh, Knume’s neighbor from across the street, came over now that it was later in Morningday. He usually sat with Knume just about every late Morningday and lifted cups with him. Today he was dressed in a harness and leathers from dragging mlaks out of the forest. Larneh was another old-timer and part-time country philosopher.

“How’d it go out there today?” Knume asked him.

“I found a couple big ones and a few babies fat enough to haul.”

“Want to work up a trade for a few weeks worth?”

“How about till the end of next year for the smaller of the big ones raw?”

Knume laughed a little, “Sure, and shall I throw in the house or just the fields?”

“You shouldn’t try to bargain while I’m still out of breath. If you ask me after Noonsleep you might find I’d clean and pack it for you.

“For you I’ll do a deal like that, but don’t tell anyone else because they won’t get it.” Larneh was reaching for the keg with one of Knume’s guest cups.

“Let me warn you that keg’s spent,” Knume said.

“What’d you go and drain it for?”

This question caused Knume to begin the story of Valla. Larneh knew already since he had heard about the show at the

'Bit last Nightday. He filled Knume in a little on the details but launched right into his usual discourse on how the only way to get what you want in a woman is to catch one young and raise her that way, as he had done with Sharni. So far he was doing alright with his plan, she was attractive, intelligent and made him a good partner. But Larneh seemed to have forgotten that Knume had nearly followed that advice when he took Valla into his life since Valla wasn't much older than Sharni when Larneh took her in. It wasn't working as well for Knume at this point in time.

Larneh himself wasn't that bad in looks either. Tall, soft dark brown shoulder-length hair, broad-shouldered, but a little too deep in the chin for Desa's eye. He tended to have too dim a view of humanity also; and made too much of people's greed and laziness. Knume was usually a balancing influence on his neighbor, but when he was also down they could get together over a keg and prove that the world was ending. Sharni was his other humoring influence. She was cheerful and bouncy and a connoisseur of comedy. She didn't often visit with Knume in the store, she preferred female friends.

Desa didn't want to stay and listen in on what would surely be one of the most depressing conversations of the year, so she took the leftover eggs, officially closing the store, and went back upstairs.

The Lost Supper

The grumble of Knume and Larneh's conversation still drifted up his stairs, though the store was now closed. Desa could hear them behind her as she stood at the table late in Morningday, mixing up a big batch of sephra to use up those last eggs. The kitchen bins, basin and shelf were on her right, the main room to her left. A faded old painting from Dwarven times covered the wall she faced. From here she could see across to Larneh's balcony, into their house and see that Sharni wasn't home.

Valla came sleepily down the upper steps around the fireplace. "Hi, when did you get back?" she asked.

"About three hours after dawn," Desa answered.

The look on Valla's face announced that she had hoped Desa hadn't been home at the time of their argument. "Is he still pissed?"

"More than ever now that he knows where you were and what you were doing." Desa was done mixing and hung the cauldron in the fireplace since that was their only source of heat outside the stillroom.

"Where does he think I was?" Valla challenged.

"Sucking off Mappu on stage at the Bit."

"I was not. He never did anything more than come between my tits."

"Bloric was watching, he told Larneh about it and Larneh gave Knume the details. I don't think Knume was too pleased

to hear them.”

“So? That’s his problem.”

“If he tells you to stop living here, you’ve got a problem.”

“What ” Valla shrieked, “Over that He’s some friend if he wants to throw me out just because he doesn’t like the entertainment. Maybe he wants us to be exclusive, but he’s not anyway.”

“You’re about a hundred times less.”

“He never complained before,” Valla said.

“It wasn’t Mappu before, and it didn’t go on so long.”

“So what’s the big deal about Mappu. So he’s well known...”

“ ...in a sleazy sort of way... “

“Now why call names?”

“Oh that’s just my opinion. But you know Knume and Mappu have hated each other since long before I was born. You gotta know how you hurt him by getting on that stage, even if all you did was say ‘Oh what a nice one.’ without even touching it.”

“So instead of saying something, he’s just going to toss me?” She looked down the stairs where she could hear Knume and Larneh still swaging down in the store. Larneh must have brought his jug over from his house, she couldn’t imagine them carrying on a conversation without drinking. “I just can’t believe he’s that mean,” she sighed as she flopped on the cushion near the table.

Thus began a bewailment over all they'd been to each other and how blunt it was to chop it off in a single week. Desa paid little attention but came back to the table and a copy of Rankor Labs Research. It wasn't getting lost in production technology this year, but was deep into a well-written psycho-mathematical analysis of why least-prime-fit sound reproduction even works in the first place.

Occasionally she would have to grunt some sort of response in Valla's direction when she became too strident about Desa's lack of attention, but she didn't let it really distract her from reading. This moaning didn't really rate an audience, and Valla eventually got the message that she wasn't going to get any sappy sympathy for a love problem that she had created for herself.

Valla came over and started rummaging in the food bins before Desa was done with the article. "Has he definitely made up his mind?"

"You might be able to talk him out of it, but it will involve concessions from you."

"Why me? Why do I have to make the concessions on this?"

"Well for one thing, every old-timer in this village knows this has been Knume's house since they were kids."

She couldn't argue with that, so instead asked. "Who took all the onions?"

"This sephra'll be done in less than an hour, and you can see there's way more than enough."

“I just wanted a quick roll.”

“There’s plenty more onions outside.”

“It’s blazing noon out there now.”

“But I’m too lazy to get you more.”

Valla knew then that Desa had heard her comment and shifted to it’s defense. “I just wanted him to know you wouldn’t do everything.” Valla was unable to hide her embarrassment completely.

“I would do the garden and the cooking in exchange for living here, that’s not such a bad deal.”

“I didn’t think I was living here as a financial arrangement. Are you on his side in this by some chance?”

“No, just stuck in the middle. I have to convey messages back and forth while you try to find a way to force Knume to end this relationship. I’m trying to keep it from getting any uglier than it has to.”

“I am not trying...”

They heard Knume’s tread on the stair as Larneh bid him farewell from below. Knume responded to Larneh distractedly. The door latched as he went out. Valla vacillated between looking terrified and defiant as Knume appeared on the landing by the alleyway door. He spoke to Desa while walking up the half-flight from there.

“I did like you said, I waited till she woke up. I thought out a nice, calm, well reasoned statement of my feelings.” Then he turned toward Valla.

“It’s not what you think,” she began in panic, “I didn’t

blow him, how could I?” She opened her mouth as wide as possible to demonstrate.

“Larneh filled me in on enough details. Now my situation is this: I’m hurt, I’m furious, and I’m disgusted. You know the problem is not you having a little fun out from home, it’s who and how. I know some people think I have a narrow view of how the human sexual equipment works and what should be private, but this old mountain man personally don’t give a drop of ‘dactyl shit what they think. Now your situation is this: You have the choice of agreeing with me in these matters, or getting your ass out of my bed ”

She looked like she was going to shout something, then clamped her mouth. She twitched a couple times, then ran upstairs.

“Well, it looks like that did it,” Desa said.

“So? What could I do; I did it just like you said to. I don’t see where you have any cause to be annoyed with me.”

“I don’t and I’m not. Just looks like she wasn’t in the mood for ultimatums. Maybe she’s having an independence attack?”

“But why him?” he asked.

“Just to see how far she can go.”

“She just found out.”

“Yeah, well for her sake I hope she figures out she’s much better off here by the time she’s done packing,” Desa said.

“Oh I hope so, I don’t *really* want her out. I’m used to her, you know how it is...” he was mumbling so Desa couldn’t

really hear him. Desa let him go on, and gave the sephra a final good mixing stir before it started to gel. "...I guess I should go up and talk to her don't you think?"

"Maybe; more belligerence probably won't help. Telling her how much you'll miss her might."

But Knume didn't go upstairs, he only went out into the main room where he could look up on the balcony to see what she was doing. He must not have liked what he saw because he just came back to the table and huddled on a stool. "She's packing," he said. "I knew it."

They listened to the sounds from above. Valla was not being very orderly about how she got her things together. After a very few minutes had passed she was back down the stairs with a large sack over her shoulder. She didn't say a word, but tried to push past them. Desa still stood at the cauldron, her hopes that Valla would help eat this batch dwindling. She wanted to say something blithe like 'why don't we just have a nice sephra supper and discuss this' but knew better. Meanwhile Knume stood his ground at the end of the table, she might have to ask him to move so she could get the bag by.

"What's this?" Knume asked.

"Maybe living here isn't worth as much as you thought, not if I have to live like a possession," she said while pushing past them.

"I'm not trying to make you a possession, I just..."

Knume began.

Meanwhile Desa couldn't help but sneer, "No, you'll wind up a discard."

"You just think you own me," she snapped at Knume as she ran down the stairs, and then at Desa, "And you just think he should. You have him, you're the one of us he really cares about anyway." With that she popped thru the alley door and slammed it, leaving them looking at each other stunned.

"I really didn't expect that," Desa said.

"I guess I did. I told you it was all unraveling."

"I'm really sorry," she said, "but I still think it'll all be over by winter."

"I think it's over now, I hope I get over it by winter." Meanwhile he was rummaging in the bins. "I had a bottle of Liquid Light IV in here somewhere?"

"You split it with Danip two summers ago."

"Oh yeah." He looked bewildered for awhile. There was no yaag in the house. That was an even rarer event than no Valla resident in the house. "I guess I'll have to go down to Myimpaden, drown my sorrows or something."

Myimpaden was a little yaagatoria up the only side street in town. It had a still and Varniss had a yandrille set up there where an amateur musician might practice. Mappu's crowd was never found in there. The place was frequented by the loggers from South Street and their friends. Very few people from out of town even knew of its existence, there might be some in town who didn't.

“Oh but speaking of Danip,” Knume said on his way down the stairs, “I hope he still intends to log tomorrow. Larneh’s going to help me with that behemoth up where the ravine meets the lower logging track. We’re still gonna have a logging party and I’m not going to let this interfere. I might even talk to Chiggeed about a feast.”

“Oh good, I’d hate to see you guys throw all those plans out. But what about this food?”

But he was already out the door. With that Desa was abandoned on the fragments of three lives, tending a batch of sephra big enough for four.

Book II. Alan Reaches Land

A Specimen Released

The atmosphere shuttle's ramp eased down and Alan took his first unaided look at the surface. It was dimly lit. On the horizon downslope in front of him was a glowing turquoise band, bordered by darker blue. The blue faded to purple and then the familiar night sky above. All the varied sizes and shapes of particles and objects that made up the surface glistened with the bluish light. It looked like everything was coated with some kind of delicate crystal coating. The scene was very weird and incredibly beautiful.

He walked outside of ship or suit for the first time in his life. He walked outside in gravity for the first time in his life. The temperature was completely unregulated. It was bitter cold, and the air was moving briskly on its own with no visible ventilator duct anywhere. He quickly opened his pack and removed the sleeping bag and wrapped it around himself the way a native might wrap a quilt with a strap to make a crude vest. His instructions were to get away from the shuttle quickly, it was to remain on the surface only the briefest possible time, so he stepped out onto the planet itself at the end of the ramp. It was made of loose particles. His feet left marks in its surface. If it was all like this, wouldn't it all soon be damaged? But he saw no other marks but his own.

He was out of the shuttle now, his body, his clothes and his pack were all he had. A couple skins of water before he must drink from the study planet itself. A few pounds of dehydrated rations before he must eat from the planet itself. A change of clothes, a tiny, thin tent and a plastic mess kit. A very nice ceramic knife. His only technological device, a standard-issue disposable phone with minimal message panel.

This was it at last, the training, the study, the careful preparation and the careful attention to respect their mission were finally paying off. As the craft made it's preparations for liftoff, he dwelt on the enormity of this event. All the speculation and fiction that he read about the first interstellar contact was about to pass into history. All speculation on who would first meet a person from another world was almost over. It was happening now, and happening to him.

Never had he been so *outside* of a technological container. Never before had he worn nothing with more cognitive power than his own unaided flesh mind. He was *disconnected*. Panic tried to seize him and he fought it grimly. Now he experienced what it was to be an experimental animal, just like all the others in their cages and jars. He had been grown like them, but in a larger jar, and now he had been dropped on this planet. They put it in a larger spiritual context and gave him a list of questions to investigate, but that's what it came down to. He was being released on the surface as an experiment, to see if he could survive.

Using the speakers and mic's in the shuttle for the last

time, his ‘father’ Alfred asked him to report. He noticed a slight quaver in Alfred’s voice.

“All fine sir,” Alan said, trying to make his own sound firm. Alfred is also a Colonel in the expedition.

“Very well, son,” he said. The ramp began to rise. Alan fought the urge to dive back inside, swallowed. “I know you’ll prove our faith in you was justified,” Alfred continued. “Have a safe mission.”

As soon as the ramp latched shut, the shuttle’s rotors came to life. Its fans stirred up great clouds of choking, stinging particles from the crumbly surface. He coughed and turned, waving his hands uselessly. He started to run, trying to get out of the blast, but immediately tripped on the uneven surface. Planetary gravity grabbed him and pinned him face-down in his first close encounter with dirt.

Ok; he had intellectually studied all this, at length, all his life. He knew what to expect on this mission. He had enthusiastically volunteered for this and diligently trained for it. So now he was actually lying on a piece of geology. The moving air must be meteorology. Yes, ‘wind’ was the word. So this is what wind feels like. This is what dirt feels like. This is what gravity *really* feels like. This is what it feels like to be really alone, he thought as the shuttle thundered into the sky without him.

He struggled laboriously to his feet, still trying to get his limbs adapted to the subtle differences between rotational and gravitational weight and the fact that the floor is not

mathematically flat. The shuttle whined off into the distance, becoming a dot on the face of the cliffs before it rose above them. It would have traveled the length of the mothership in less time than it took him to get his face off the dirt. By the time the rumbles of the shuttle died away, he was left in silence, with no sound in the universe but those he made and the whistle of the thin wind from the east.

Alan stood for a long time just feeling the immensity of this overpowering space. He had heard of miles before, but had never seen any in real life except between astronomical bodies. He had seen plenty of vids before of the league worlds, even Earth, a great planet like this one with naturally occurring atmosphere and unrestrained biology. But vids, no matter how good, were not the real thing.

There was plenty of distance here. A flat expanse of sand, rocks and dirt just shrank into the distance. A few small peaks showed here and there, to the north was a group of them large enough to call a mountain range. Here and there were great boulders larger than the shuttle. It was impossible for him to judge the distance with no frame of reference.

Close by there were signs of life here also, some like little nubs of wood with what looked like green coagulated sap seeping out of them. There were tiny clumps of dry green hair and more sticks of wood with green deposits on their surface.

He was already familiar with the plants from this area. Landers had brought up enough samples to grow a whole roomful of plants from the surface. They already knew the

microbes were fairly benign, the atmosphere had enough oxygen and slightly high CO₂. Nothing was even remotely related to terrestrial life. They found two different evolutions of life in their samples, but the molecular building blocks were all the same, and the vitamin content good. There was a good chance many of the unknown compounds would later prove to be carcinogens, but the plan was to have him on the surface only a month or two, a local year at the most.

The intricacy and disorderliness impressed him also. The entire surface was strewn with grains of every size and shape piled haphazardly who knows how deep. No thought had been given to walking on them, their unevenness required him to lift his feet high. Any rock or pebble he looked at had more detail than he could see. Many were made up of smaller grains. No two were identical if he looked closely enough.

Alan knew he couldn't survive for long in this location. Sensors indicated the midday temperature here would be at least a hundred forty Fahrenheit and the midnight temperature twenty five below or lower. There was no water or food available nearby. The reason this had been chosen as the drop-off point was because it was very rarely seen by natives. He had a long walk ahead of him in this gravity and this thin air at a oxygen-barometric altitude of ten and a half thousand feet. So in spite of the near darkness and unsteady surface, he began walking down the gentle slope to the east.

Actually Alan was raised by the biology department, his whole education had been the study of this planet. When the

language of the people was decoded, he began to learn it. For the last two years the native language was all he used, and the only audio the souls in biology used with him. He now thought in the native language.

In spite of all their studies and all their probes, there were still some mysteries about the planet. The most important unanswered questions were, in order: How did humans get here? Why are all observed humans between fifteen and thirty five years of age? How can the obviously large current population be supported at such a primitive level of technology? Why is essentially the same language in use on opposite sides of the planet? Alan was to find answers to them if he could.

The sky lightened ever so slowly as he walked, the 'day' here was a week long and the thick atmosphere far ahead refracted the light around the planet for hundreds of miles. But at last the monster sun began to show on the horizon, it's breaking of the horizon marking the beginning of 'Koyahn' - Morningday. Only a few of it's flames were visible at first. The ball first appeared as an orange sliver in the middle of the turquoise straight ahead of him. So slowly, hillock by hillock as he tread the uneven plain, the flaming curve of the sun began to bulge into the purple just now turning magenta. This sun was no bright little yellow ball like Sol had been pictured, this was an enormous pumpkin-orange lantern mild enough to sit and watch, with curlicues and fringed bands of purple

swirling around it, in endlessly varying, intricate patterns. It was called Kortrax by the natives, a proper name like Henry or James. It was the only non-living thing addressed in the sentient gender. Many presumed it was their God.

He knew he was in or near a country called 'Wescarp' and a small city called 'Bostok.' He was aiming toward Bostok, where the only surviving lander was stationed. That lander was perched high in a tree above some kind of public square and farmer's market where it was able to see and listen to quite a bit of various native conversations. But he couldn't get directly there. The immediate traveling orders were taking him well east of the direct route to Bostok, on what they thought was the direct route to water. They chose Bostok as his destination because they knew the most about it, and because it seemed that the people there were peaceful and tolerant. The popular theory was that social conditions over most of the planet would be very difficult because of the grinding poverty and population density. The Bostok area seemed to be less densely populated and thus somewhat more affluent. The densely populated valley beyond it was thought to be inhabited by serfs or slaves who supported the elite of the town.

His 'mother', Victoria McReady, had told him many stories of the mortals back on Earth. Around her childhood home, everyone was fully connected and civilized. In spite of their political status as aboriginal, they were part of a global society of mortals that functioned very much like society did

in heaven. Even so, there were killings and beatings, most of them by ‘constables’ working for the judges. There were also stories of other aboriginal Americans living hidden in the woods of the estates of the rich. Beyond that, her studies of pre-technical history had exposed her to knowledge about what *primitive* humans could be like. Victoria worried about Alan’s lack of real preparation for what he would encounter, and filled him with stories of headhunters and cannibals, the dungeons of petty tyrants and witch-burning bigots.

She needn’t have bothered. He’d filled his own head with old tales of swords and dragons and starships since he was first able to read. He liked those much better than modern space adventure, the kind he lived on Gordon’s Lamp. Stuck in claustrophobic caves of steel and fierce white electric light. Working machinery in terraforming operations, living under domes. For awhile it began to look like an oxygen atmosphere might be very rare indeed. Only three had been discovered with current instruments. This was one of them. Like in old fables, one could walk the surface of this planet without a suit. Like in old fables, there were animals here that could eat him.

Victoria worried, as did most of the crew, about their lack of understanding of the political situation. There was absolutely no talk of politics around their probe’s tree in that market square. Nor were any uniformed persons ever seen. Was this square off-limits to them, or were they just not picking up on what constituted a uniform in this society?

What would happen if he just came wandering into a town? Would his accent pass? Did he need some kind of identification? Were there records he wouldn't appear on? Nothing had ever really been said about these things. They wondered if it was forbidden to talk about the government, or if the country was ruled by some secret organization. Many churchmen thought there could be something sinister going on here and had tried to use that argument against his mission.

Kortrax wasn't yet free of the horizon when he came to the edge. The land was dropping off in a layer over a thousand feet thick. It was heavily eroded, from here he could already see he would just have to walk back along the edge a mile or so to get around it. This was the first of many detours on what became a very long walk. It was dusty and hot before long, and he spent hours trying to describe every life form he encountered well enough to suit the crew, something impossible for him without laboratory instruments and the skills to use them. As it was, they had to be satisfied with his phone cam when they made important findings like ribbonleaves and shaftwood trees.

He reported to Glenelle, as well as his mother and father, Victoria and Alfred McReady. They kept him on the phone a lot and he needed his wind for the ceaseless climbing up and down gravel mounds and thru ravines. He stumbled less after it was fully light and he'd had a few hours practice walking on natural surfaces.

When he got to a gully with more life than he could possibly report on, he tried to get them to just send a lab down, but they still worried about security, even though he was still surrounded by desolate wasteland, they assumed it could be seen by natives. So they didn't send a probe here, and he kept panning the phone-cam around the gully he was in. This gully went down quite a ways, he was now more than a mile below where they dropped him. Some of the brush down here was twenty feet high with many layers of branches.

Glenelle transmitted the audio for the observations she was making. "These plants are all related, they're related all the way back to the sap-nubs we've got in the lab. I'm sure those plants all have three replicating pairs of six different nucleotides."

"But look at how many different kinds of these ribbonleaves there are here." Alan said as he panned the phonecam over more of them. So the ship actually saw it first, since he was looking at the flowers on the ribbonleaves up the embankment that he would show them next.

"Alan go back to that path," Glenelle's voice on the phone.

"What pa...?" but then he saw it. It was under the branches. He had actually panned the cam lower than he was looking. The path was well trodden, clear of brush for a width of two feet but only one and a half high. The stony soil held

no footprints, but they knew of animals which would make such a path.

“Probably one of the larger multileggeds,” Alfred transmitted. “It would probably be no serious threat to you, but beware of the hunter that eats it. The animal that made this path might be half your weight with a body and tail length equal to your height. But you might also consider that the animal that made this path also has to drink.”

Unlike the ribbonleaves, they had samples of the tiniest of the multilegged animal form. Any larger ones were much too agile and clever to be captured by a probe. Any larger than that would be likely to mangle the probe attempting to eat it. But they figured all of them had the biochemistry of the woody plants. They had samples of other small animal forms, most of them soft bodied, sometimes with tiny stick-legs. Those had the same biochemistry as the delicate plants.

Since this might be a path to water, Alan followed it even though it did not go due east. He saw no sign of anything moving for the first hour he was on it. It ran on the high ground more than low, and a few times it ran across open areas where he was almost able to lose it. There was one incident where the ship could see it on the far side of a bare rock plain and had to talk him to it.

Then it dipped into a deep gully with some cliff in its walls and finally, after more than five hours of hiking, he did come to water. There was just a trickle seeping from puddle

to puddle in the very bottom. But there was evidence that this channel was sometimes filled with a torrent six feet wide and a foot deep. The rocks were eroded, sand bars were built up and actual trees grew side by side along the flood bank. These trees had many layers of branches with smaller ones at the top so they had a distinct conical shape. The branches were a filigreed lacework of green triangles. This was the second time Alan was gripped by the actual beauty of the scene.

Those above noticed it also, Alfred kept up a steady stream of camera directions, Glenelle offered occasional feedback on how good some of the views were and even a little feedback on what they thought some of it meant. Glayet Samrova, colonel of security, observed that natives could be hidden by the vegetation.

Alan heard some new sounds. He was spooked enough to think some of them might actually be devices in the area, so he shut the phone off. Very carefully he followed his ears to try and find sources to some of the sounds. He found the water itself was one source, the sound like a drain pipe. There was another sound, puttaputtaputtaputta like a tiny malfunctioning compressor that someone kept turning on and off. There were numerous sources of this sound, but they all turned off as he approached. Eventually he noticed that remaining in the area where it had been there was always a small colorful multilegged. A rather pretty feathertailed one hanging head-down on a tree trunk. They always stopped waving their tailplume when the noise stopped. Once he knew

what to look for he could spot them from a little more distance, before they got cautious.

He was intent on this when something shrieked in his ear, and he shrieked likewise. He turned and saw some blur of an animal flying in the air back into the brambly brush. It screeched and chattered some more once it got there, others of its kind answered from the distance.

But he was able to approach slowly and get a very good look at one of those animals, and turned the phone back on when he was good and close.

“Alan, that was excellent data” Glenelle said, “We even picked up its audio and understand why you might think it was a device.”

“I should have got you a picture and audio of what flew by my head a few minutes ago. It went by too fast for me to see what it was, but a single frame would be interesting I’m sure.”

“Yes it would. But perhaps we shouldn’t converse a lot, Glayet is right about the natives. It wouldn’t do to have one spot you carrying on a conversation with a totem.”

“For all we know they talk to their idols all the time when they’re out in the desert. Wasn’t that common on Earth at this stage?”

“It very probably still is way out here,” she said. “They might be narrow minded enough to wonder which deity it is you’re speaking with. We hear about plenty of sects in Bostok, some of them could easily have fanatics.”

Colonel Elmore Bovok's speech cut in, he currently administered the main scope. "I've granted a little time to Biology to get you some details of your area."

Alfred continued. "We find that if you follow the stream down from your position you'll find a native camp after a little more than four miles as you'll walk it. It's near where this stream emerges from this brushland onto prairie."

Glayet continued, "We have agreed that you must keep the phone out of sight of the natives. If we all remain reasonably certain we are not being watched, we may continue to let this record sight and sounds. Alan you should be careful before you speak to us, check that you are not watched or heard. If you are, pretend you're talking to yourself. Get us out of sight if you think you should."

While this conversation was going on, he was still walking along the trickle. Many of the pools were large enough to fill a water skin, but there was no emergency to fill them from the first puddles. He hoped later ones would be cleaner. The water skins were made to look like something a native would carry, but they were equipped with filters that would remove anything the size of a virus or larger. But the water was so muddy that maybe he should strain it before that?

Walking down the stream bottom on stepping stones was easy for awhile but then the banks closed in, there were big rocks and it got steep. The brush along the bank was rough, so to make any progress he climbed up out of the gully into

the brushy gravel plain with the delicate little ears growing out of gravel. From here it didn't look much different from any other gully around, so as he followed it he made frequent trips down to see that there was still water there.

Elmore had left the map of the terrain with Alfred and Glenelle and swung the scope back to looking at the asteroids of B. The main scope had to find enough metals in the asteroids around here to pay for the expedition, and that was getting dicey. They'd found a second mortal population but economically the expedition was a flop so far, and that fact was getting more attention all the time.

After more than another hour, the banks were much less steep and he was able to walk close enough to the bottom to hear the trickle. The vegetation was thicker here. They had actual wood, with stringy bark, and branches with dark green leaves of all different sizes and shapes. Some trees had all the same leaves, some had two or three different shapes and some seemed to be random. Some had bent but rugged trunks, some were straight as shafts. Right along the stream these types grew the largest, tall as a whole section of laddershaft.

The phone was picking up all this. He wasn't waving it around like a probe, but just walking along with it held in his hand and pointing forward. He would pan around now and then, also not looking like he was doing so. They all must have agreed it was too risky to transmit audio. They all knew that what was really needed were samples of all this.

But he was developing a plan that he thought would be a better use of his time on the surface. The language offered the word ‘kwanitoe’ which was literally ‘house of writing’ which he thought should probably be translated as ‘library’. He also knew there was a verb ‘lin’ which meant ‘read’. There were photographs of signs with hieroglyphics on them. It should be possible for him to learn to read native writing, he was provided with enough native money to live on for however long it took.

He had to cross the stream, and found it was now much swifter with very clear water, a good place to fill the skins. He glugged hard to finish the second one while filling the first.

Not long after moving on he came to a faint path that followed along parallel to the stream. This one was more open above, with branches broken back four feet above the ground to make it passable. He checked around very carefully, then checked with Alfred who agreed it was probably a native path.

He took a deep breath and said, “I guess I should see where it goes, I would think it goes to that settlement.”

There was a long pause before a reply. They must have consulted with each other and with the data. “We agree,” Glenelle’s voice finally answered, “But be very cautious. We want you to find a safe place to observe, even if you can’t see the dwelling yet.”

Colonel Samrova continued, “Make contact with us again

before you've gone five hundred paces. And we think you should have the phone out of sight before proceeding and keep it out of sight until you're sure it's clear. Make every effort to see them before they see you. Remember, we don't know who may live here. They could be savages with spears."

Captured By Natives

Alan began to follow the trail downstream. After less than two hundred paces it came out into a more open area covered with ribbonleaves and surrounded by beautiful trees. The stream followed along one side of this area and the path followed the stream. This was the most beautiful scene yet and he walked out along the path gawking in all directions.

"How'd you get up to Yatair's?" Someone asked him.

The voice wasn't from the phone. Alan spun around to see it was from a native. He was a rather healthy looking mortal, but with lots of hair, even a moustache. He had a robe on with a hood that was thrown back. There were sandals strapped to his feet. He was sitting on a big rock in the bank of the stream holding a piece of stick over it with a thin thread hanging from the end into the water. He was smiling and had asked in a friendly if somewhat surprised voice.

"I don't know, I'm not from around here," Alan's mouth said before he could think. He immediately realized he had

already made the stupidest possible first statement of interstellar greeting that could be made. Thruout history thousands of lines had been written about this, many important philosophers had tackled the question, conferences had been held. From pulp fiction to serious science this moment had been the subject of attention. And when the momentous occasion arrived, what did he say? ‘I dunno, I’m not from around here.’ He was so embarrassed he blushed.

“I can see that, you gotta be Lusanne who he told us is coming up this summer?”

“I’m not. I don’t know either of them, I’ve just been out prospecting.” Oh what a stupid excuse that must sound like. There’s probably mining permits required or some kind of impact statement.

“There’s nothing to dig around here.”

“I mean out in the howling desert,” Alan said nervously.

“The THIN air?”

“Right.” Alan told him. His barometric altitude was now forty two hundred feet, last time he had the phone open.

Alan was glad that he was doing so well at understanding the native and responding. What he was saying was stupid, but at least he seemed to be saying it well enough so at his accent was being accepted. Alan was glad that the first native he encountered wasn’t a hostile savage intent on spearing him for a cannibal rite. He seemed more like a 19th century mountain man from his ‘North American History’ text.

“So who you be then? Where you going?” He asked.

“My name’s Alan,” he answered. He knew the natives were in the habit of using only first names. “I’m on my way back to Bostok now that I’ve found water.”

“An urbanite I see.”

“I didn’t really think Bostok was urban?” Alan responded. He knew the planet had much larger cities. Bostok seemed to be little more than a country town where the wealthy retreated.

“Compared to these parts just about anything’s urban. You headed east?”

“At the moment, though I believe I’m well south of my destination right now.”

“Well if you follow our path east a few more minutes you’ll come to the largest settlement around here. My house is the one on the left, Vatreel owns the other one, but he don’t use it much in the summer. You might have seen him up there digging too, he’s about this tall, this wide and orange as a prellin. He’s a full blooded dwarf and got mining in his blood.”

“No, I didn’t see anyone the whole time I was out there.”

“You must have seen his diggings at least?”

“Not even that. There’s an awful lot of dirt out there. Neither one of us turned a large part of it up.”

“True. I’ve only been up to a dig once, but I did see plenty of dirt. Oh, forgive me, m’name’s Kartha by the way.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Oh? Sure, yeah” Kartha’s expression lead Alan to

believe that must not be a familiar expression. “So come have a chomp with us this midday.”

“I was hoping to make quite a bit more progress today.”

“So? Stopping by for a bite of lunch’ll be quicker at the house. Huneen might even have it ready when we get there. Most likely Zara and Niklee are staying too, they were hoping I might catch a nice ensal or two up here this forelunch.”

Alan knew his superiors were going to be dismayed by the fact that he had stumbled across a native before he got a chance to report to them. If he was to stop for lunch with the first one he met and leave them out of contact thru the whole thing, they would rattle their silicon in apoplexy. He tried to think of a polite way to decline. “Thanks anyway but you don’t have to make room and food for me.”

“Sure, we’ll put a blaze up in the courtyard if everyone’s still here. I bet it’ll be nice to see some women after being alone on that desert. How long you been out there anyway?”

“All summer.”

“I bet you could get lonely after that.”

Alan got embarrassed at this point. “Oh don’t worry about that, it’s been so long I’ll probably be back in town most of the winter before I remember how to converse with people.”

Kartha laughed, “It’s up to you. Meanwhile I’m convinced I’m not catching anything here today, lets go have some lunch.”

He pulled up the string, at the end of which was a small, tough, plastic hook. Impaled on that was a tiny soft-bodied

animal which was now dead. Kartha did not seem to be amazed at this, but casually ripped it asunder removing it from the hook and tossed its fragments on the ground.

“You are a tall one,” Kartha said as he approached. “I bet you bang your head on doors.”

“Yeah, now and then.” Alan wondered just how suspicious he really was. He didn’t seem hostile in the least. If he did suspect Alan to be an alien from outer space, he didn’t act like that was a bad thing.

“So tell me,” Kartha asked as they began walking, “How’s things in Bostok lately, I haven’t been there in years.”

Now Alan realized how completely extra-vehicular and suitless he really was. He wanted to just panic and run and probably could have explained to the crew why he had to do that or he would have been stuck out of contact for hours. But then he thought this person would figure from that, that he really was an alien and give chase and he could see himself roasting over a blaze on the courtyard. Instead of running, he nervously dredged up everything he could remember of gossip he’d heard from the produce mart, and then made up some more that sounded similar. He refrained from making up names except for one musical organization to go with the real ones he talked about. It actually seemed to go pretty well. Kartha laughed at some of the news, expected some of the other and was mildly surprised at some things that were now common knowledge in the conversations the lander recorded. He planned to buy one of the real music recordings he talked

about next time he saw one.

Kartha told him something about the local area in return. Not that it made any sense because he assumed Alan knew all about what a kufronteer was and why the fact that all the plazwrits were dead on the Numondit plain should effect the rir harvest. Singlatar and Vimpran must have been names of someone downhill of here who would buy dressed lentosaur. Alan pictured that to be something like a plastic fantasy action hero toy dressed in frilly little hand-sewn garments like they had in the handicrafts pictures from his anthropology studies.

The path beyond this clearing was back thru the brush again. Kartha called this forest, but Alan knew there were places on this planet where the vegetation was two hundred fifty feet thick. This path came close to the stream now and then and when it did there was actually shade. Kortrax was actually starting to get hot by now and that nagging wind had begun to abate.

Kartha talked of wrestling survival from these wilds. It seemed he had been hoping some larger creature, worthy of cooking for a family over a wood fire in the center of camp, would have attached itself to that hook he was dangling in the water. With everything Alan had been taught about the struggle for survival in the wilds, he could not guess why even a creature stupid enough to live in the stream would be stupid enough to do that. Especially once that tiny one got stuck on there to give you a clue as to how much that must

hurt. Kartha still had good humor in spite of the fact that nothing big enough to eat felt like attaching itself to that hook.

“So what do you have to eat then?”

“Oh I’m afraid I can’t be much of a host to one from a town with gourmet restaurants, but there’s plenty of wild thesh all over. It’s tougher than you’re used to, but I can fill a sack with it any day I want to. Huneen’s getting pretty good at rolling it, you just let it soak since breakfast with a cover on the jar. I’ve still got plenty of yellow-stripe, you can catch all you want of them up here around Chezhervizhod and Iymnotn. I keep ‘em in thurus-brine jars so they’re spicy enough.”

“You don’t need me eating up your food, I’ve got plenty of rations with me.”

“You must have some pretty fine trail rations if you’re going to choose them over thurused yellow-stripe in wild thesh.”

“Are you sure you have enough?”

“Oh there’s plenty of it, there’s miles of it in all directions. It’s just camp food, but you didn’t have to catch it and clean it. Why not help eat it? Do you have some religious ritual with your food or something?”

Alan was still casting about in his mind for some way to decline. Maybe he should say yes to that and all our food has to be blessed by a bishop or something. But then he thought about the warnings of how that could get him into trouble for

being of the wrong sect to be in this area, and that question had been rather pointed hadn't it? "No, I just don't want to feel like a beggar."

"I'm the one asking you, you didn't ask me for food," he said with a questioning face.

"As any generous person would to one in need I'm sure."

"To any traveler, even though we live way out here, Huneen and I are like most people in Bostok I'm sure, we like company for meals but we get damn little out this way. It's quite the treat for us to have someone come by."

It would be convenient to accept this offer of a meal. His stomach was already telling him it was way past lunch time. He would have to eat native food soon enough, and as long as it wasn't live worms it shouldn't be worse than his rations of synthetic substitutes in plain cellophane.

He worried about committing some grievous error of table manners which would make these people turn on him. He knew people this isolated could be clannish and cruel to outsiders. Kartha didn't seem to be, he seemed to be a member of the same type of society they found hanging around the square in Bostok. A little more rough and rural but certainly of the same tribe or nation or whatever they were. It seemed like the custom was that of course Kartha would be hospitable and of course Alan would accept. Alan's real worry was what the souls above were thinking, but then he also knew that his first order was to pose as a native and not

arouse suspicion. Now that he was convinced the most suspicious thing he could do was run away, he was pretty much stuck. He just hoped there was some way he could make the souls above understand his reasoning when he figured this out.

Their way opened out onto a wide rolling valley that was entirely carpeted with dark green ribbonleaves. There were fairly large hills visible on each side of the valley, straight ahead it opened out to a vast plain miles wide. Beyond that he could see the tops of mountains in the distance. Right near the center of the near valley was a small clump of trees, among them were two structures made of sawn pieces of tree. He could see a tiny spot of water between them, and a row of bushes leading out across the plains beyond like there was a spring with a trickle leading from it.

“There it is, the largest settlement in these parts.” Kartha told him.

“I guess Bostok is urban next to this.” Alan answered.

“Right. You won’t find anything else but single houses till you’re below the plains.”

“You can see quite a ways from here.” Alan was once again mesmerized by the view.

“Yeah, that’s Zubonkonlombii right there, one of the great peaks of Wescarp.” He pointed to the largest peak. “You must have seen it to your south as you went out?”

“Well yeah?” Alan guessed, “I didn’t realize I’d prospected this far south.”

“That’s a hundred miles north of us. Somewhere out there, you crossed the Kendaidis,” Kartha said with some awe in his voice.

Alan let that sound of wonder pass and hoped it wouldn’t be a mistake he’d regret any second. “At least the air is clear,” he said, getting back to the view itself.

“As thin as it is up here? You’ll almost never find balloonleaves up this high.” Alan had no idea what a balloonleaf was, but gathered it was normal for the air to be this clear. “I don’t see Zara’s keda here, they must’ve headed home.”

Alan was worried about those above and how they would feel about this. They probably would not have suggested that he walk right into the nearest camp and sit down to lunch and chat. They wanted him to observe them from a distance for awhile like the natives were dangerous wildlife. Kartha certainly seemed safe enough, friendlier than most of the crew actually. They would be concerned that he had the phone out of sight for so long. It was a cheap disposable and once it was without daylight for more than a few minutes it ran down and could not transmit even audio. They had no idea what was going on down here. Alan’s stomach churned with the knowledge that there would be meetings going on right now and rumors circulating.

If they swung the main scope back around they could probably watch Alan and Kartha walking across this open plain toward the camp. The ship was near the inner moon,

Narrulla, and it was swinging low toward the east now but they could probably still positively identify Alan thru the atmosphere if they were looking at him and integrated a little while. If so, they could probably guess what was happening.

They approached from behind Kartha's hut. It wasn't really such a bad hut considering the privacy offered by the location. It was larger than his cabin, about twenty feet square. It was little more than a plank floor raised above the ground on short posts with a roof above it. It was entirely constructed of sawn pieces of tree and some live bushes tied together around the poles that held up the roof. It was of some age because there were some replaced pieces and the brush had obviously grown since it was tied together. In the center of the floor was a stone area suitable for building a fire, with a cone-shaped glass hood above it to collect the smoke and guide it out thru the roof. Up under the roof were a couple net platforms with enough cloth hanging over the edge to give Alan the idea that they might be intended for sleeping. There was a curtain in the corner that could be drawn around a seat with a hole in it. There were two hoses hanging from the ceiling, one over a large bowl on legs that had another hose leading out the bottom and down thru the floor, another over a cleared and slanted section of the floor on the east side, toward the remaining plain. There were large curtains or mats rolled up under the eaves, the ones on the west were let down. It looked like the south wall was a permanent collection of

storage crates covered with padded, patched canvas.

There were a few pieces of furniture, a table with three stools near it, a hippopotamus-sized leather pillow and the shelves and boxes on the other side of the table near the bowl, another stool by those boxes. There were various tools hanging from the ceiling, most of them made of glass or wood, but a couple appeared to be made of plastic. There were sturdy ceramic cooking implements, other ceramic implements seemed to be for hunting or digging. Of the furniture and tools there were no examples of home or hand made. There were a few stick handles tied on with heavy elastic bands, but even on them the blades were obviously of a different technology.

Had these implements been made of metal they would have classified this as being 19th century technology. Maybe the planet was more on that level but without metal or electricity. That made the natives less likely to be total savages, but still without serious military capability. This couple at least seemed to be without firearms but there was a very potent-looking crossbow hanging among the tools.

Even so Alan was impressed by the primitiveness of it all. He knew the planet was primitive, maybe not as primitive as they thought, but absolutely everything here was still definitely low technology. No motors, no electrons in motion. Some of the top boxes on the south wall held printed material. This seemed like a camp established by a civilization at the dawn of industry. Something like a gold rush camp. He

looked across the small cleared area between the two houses and saw that the other wasn't any more advanced. It had some walls, but he could still see inside. It was furnished about the same, a few more boxes and another table. What looked like crates of parts were strewn across the floor near the fireplace in that house.

There was already a fire going on the hearth, and Kartha's wife Huneen was busy at it preparing a meal. Once Alan got close to the house, this fact occupied all his attention. He had never seen a young female human being in the flesh before, and never seen even a *picture* of a woman with such a revealing outfit on, except for scientific papers about journeys to Africa in the late 19th century and clandestine peeks he'd taken at some of the data from the planet. He had also never seen humans engage in as public a display of sexual affection as they did when Kartha reached the house.

Huneen was tall, blond, more shapely than was politically fashionable, with a pleasant but not spectacular face featuring large, dark, almond eyes. Her skin was quite dark but she didn't look African. She wore a long robe-like blanket which was open at the top. Alan turned his head, thinking it must be taboo to watch.

"This is Alan," Kartha told her, "I found him upstream working his way down off prospecting."

"Welcome," she said, "Have you been out there long?"

"All summer. I left Bostok before Kortrax cleared the equator."

“You never told me if you had any luck?” Kartha asked.

“A little, but not enough to pay expenses. You can see I had to leave most of my gear once the cart wheel broke. There’s some cliffs way up there that look like ores at the top, but the air’s already too thin at the bottom.”

“The edge of black,” Kartha said. “Vatreel’s told me about those cliffs. You did well to turn back. Vatreel didn’t till he saw the bones of another prospector, and barely lived to tell about it. The noons are blistering and the darks are frigid at that altitude.”

“How well I know,” Alan admitted.

Alan couldn’t completely keep his eyes off Huneen, but she didn’t seem to mind. She smiled and kept herself in his field of view. “Were you alone out there all this time?” She asked.

“Yes, but I’m used to it.”

“You must be pretty good at survival,” she said, looking up from the cooking pot on a rack in the fireplace.

“I brought a cartload of rations, and there’s nothing much to bother you.”

“Theirops cub’s’ll go up there, you must’a had something to fight them off with?” Kartha asked.

“Just my knife. I never ran across one though.”

“What’s this?” Kartha asked Huneen, noticing what was in the pot over the fire.

“I found it down past the pool rocks. It’s another wild thesh I think. It’s tougher than the other but tastes a lot better,

at least raw. Too bad we don't have more time to let it soak, we'll have to do a stew. I see you didn't catch anything."

"No, I should have set traps instead. I'll have to do some hunting next Nightday."

"We'll have to do something, there's not even a swap crossing out here."

"Yeah, yeah." He paused a couple seconds, then asked, "So how's the water?"

"Low," she answered.

Kartha climbed up into the roof of the dwelling. Alan soon heard water going into a tank somewhere in the darkness above the hammocks.

"I guess you can tell we're not really from around here." She seemed to be trying to soften her sharpness with Kartha.

"Well, no, I don't know anyone from around here either."

"Most of the people that make it out here are the real hermit types. There's cabins up half the washes coming down onto the plain but they're all by themselves. A lot of people out here don't really talk. Vatreel's the first one who would share his valley with us and that's just in the winter. As warm as this fall's been he might not be down till Knmonawweep."

"You're not the real hermit type?" Alan asked.

"Oh no, that's been my difficult adaptation out here. I think I adapted to the weather better than he did, but I miss my social life."

"Why come here? And where did you come from?"

"We're from Lastriss, well, a little plot about seven miles

from downtown but only two blocks from the beach a quarter mile upstream of a little bump-and-roll called Bneikion.”

“How was life there?” Alan asked. He had no idea what Lastriss was or where it might be.

“Pretty urban, the beach houses don’t have gardens at all. But our garden was big enough and we had a back field we kept Nunda in. He’s our keda. He’s a big black ten but you probably didn’t see him because he goes ranging every dawn. He loves it out here.”

“Is that why you’re out here?” Alan knew that ‘keda’ was the word for the native draft animal.

“Yep. We both love the big fuzzy’s but Kartha wants to raise a herd. This IS the best place for it.”

“Why is that?”

“A herd takes lots of land and land is free out here. All it costs is the fence and we brought that with us.”

“So you can just come out here and call this land yours?”

“If we fence it and use it. It isn’t anybody else’s yet is it?”

“I guess not?” Alan had to admit to himself that he didn’t understand the concept but he didn’t want to appear ignorant.

Humeen looked past him. “How’d you like to get me that jar over there on the second shelf down,” she pointed. It was hard to look where she was pointing and not at her, the way that made the quilt swing open. “And that red one under it. I feel like celebrating having company for lunch.”

“Please don’t put yourself to any trouble on my account.”

“Oh no no, didn’t I just tell you it’s lonely out here?”

Please let me enjoy your passing thru. We'll be eating it too you know. If I have to make a stew, let me give it some flavor." Alan was glad to help. She pulled some strips from the jars, cut them into smaller pieces and threw them in the caldron. With an "Oh what the hell" she asked for the jar of little black seeds also and dumped half of those in. "The wild tutha'll be out in three weeks anyway."

Kartha came down out of the roof, breathing a little hard.

"Once again, I'm glad we brought that pump with us," he panted.

"What would you do otherwise?" Alan asked.

"Vatreel just fills his pans and gourds in the pool all winter, even chips the Nightday ice," Huneen answered. "I just put some spices in," Huneen told Kartha, "why don't we share a bottle while they fester?"

"There's only nine left," Kartha said.

"So? I'll take a ride down this winter," Huneen said.

"And pay with what?"

"I'll get a job for a week or two somewhere. Nunda can get me to Hazorpean in the light of a week, easy, and I could run into one of those old Dwarf hill towns closer than that. There's no way we're making it thru the winter without a supply trip, you know that as well as I do." She turned to Alan, "We've got some Liquid Light and some Green Monster, what's your preference?"

He knew they were brands of intoxicating beverages, "Oh no thank you," He said, "I've got to keep traveling. I'll just

have water if that's OK?"

"You don't party?" Huneen asked.

"Not like that. Not now."

"An industrious young man you'd have to be to go on an expedition like you have." Kartha said, "You're right that either one will slow your progress."

Huneen went on and tried to convince him to hang out for Noonsleep, he had to convince her he really needed to make the lowlands before Nightday. Kartha stayed out of it, but it still took Alan awhile to talk his way out of drinking from that bottle. It didn't stop Huneen and Kartha, they went to work on a bottle of that Liquid Light stuff.

Alan learned a lot of detail about this part of native society in the next half hour. He learned that they spent most of their time looking for enough to eat and hadn't made anywhere near as much progress on their ranch plans as they had hoped. They complained that Nunda had not cooperated by accepting an egg from any of the kedas they brought to him. He learned that native food, even what these settlers thought was rough gruel, was tastier than anything he had ever had. He had to disguise his enthusiasm by saying it was just such a welcome change from trail rations.

They talked and laughed with each other, a lot of reminiscing. Their talk let him know more about life in native cities on the plain. It sounded like the same society but with some kind of industry. They talked about lots of different day jobs, lines like, 'Remember that day we both worked at

Djinzuk Tackle...'. They talked of canoes for rent, produce markets, and lots of public cooks set up in plazas everywhere. They chided each other for coming here. It was seemingly in fun, but he thought that might just be politeness because company was present.

He also learned that once the husband went out to the porch for a little nap after the meal and the bottle, the wife might make startlingly direct invitations to sex. She was embarrassed by his embarrassment, and seemed insulted by his refusal. He just could not go that far, and begged his leave in a near panic.

Trolls

When Alan was well down the valley away from Kartha's cabin, he brought out the phone and called the ship. Alfred answered the call while Alan was still halfway thru the 'H' in Hello. This in spite of the fact that it was nearly midnight up there.

“I say? What happened to you?”

“I ran into some natives and they made me stay for lunch.”

“You did what?”

“I had lunch with some natives in a little hut.”

“By what authority?” Alfred barked.

“They convinced me it would be impolite to refuse. Since

my highest priority is to keep secret the truth of my origin, I tried my best to act like I really am a native and accepted their invitation.”

“I see.” He was silent for a few seconds, probably consulting with others of the crew.

“You ate their food?” he asked when he came back.

“Yes sir, I will have to anyway to survive. In this instance I had natives present to volunteer to show me what native plants are edible and how to prepare them. Taste testers if you will.”

“Any ill effects yet?”

“Not in the least. It was delicious, hearty and undoubtedly nourishing. They need good fuel to withstand a rugged lifestyle.”

“All that notwithstanding, stopping for lunch with them was probably not a good idea. Nevertheless, that is done. Please tell us exactly what happened.”

Alan did so, using even more time than the events had taken in the first place. There was relative consternation over Huneen’s outfit, so he left out some details of her behavior. Maybe that would set back the progress of science, but he just didn’t want to deal with the flak.

After that was all done, they issued some new orders. Act like a native enough to not be spotted from a distance. Observe from a distance, then find a place to achieve secure communication. Continue on the present course but keep alert for natives and native habitation. Continue to leave the phone

out of sight until there is secure communication. Report hourly at least.

He had been walking thru all this. He was now way out on the huge meadow beyond Kartha's cabin. This must be the Numondit Plains he had talked about. At least walking was easy here. The atmosphere was delightful and the view spectacular. Many of the ribbonleaves here had ruffles of flowers along their edges. Majestic mountain peaks loomed far to the north. A herd of animals nosed the ground in the mid-distance, he couldn't tell their size because the land was so featureless. They had eight long legs, short active tails with tufts on the end and large wide flexible muzzles on the ends of their long heads. They saw him and looked his way. He was worried, but Victoria made him narrate every detail of their appearance and behavior, then assured him the animals were herbivores and would be more likely to run than charge. It made sense, Kartha would be hunting something when he went out here.

The plains ended at a wide valley with low hills beyond, miles closer than the distant mountains. The valley rim was rather steep, but the valley itself was wide and flat with a good sized stream at the bottom that lead to the east into a vast forested wilderness.

He climbed on open mountainside for awhile, but after another hour he was in real forest for the first time. The trees had the same forms as he had seen previously, but were larger

and straighter and of many more varieties, more than he could count. Along small feeder streams was a type of life with polyps of leaves in pillars of limestone. There were knotted old claw-rooted vines pumping up into the canopy above, where they spread purple elephant-ear leaves. It was dark and cool, even as the great sun got higher. His footsteps were hushed by the deep layers of spongy substance that Victoria told him was many years build-up of dead leaves.

A brook carved fanciful shapes into the rock, and he was admiring it from its mossy bank when he came to a thick plank spanning it. A worn path crossed here. He could see the larger stream was just ahead. It was slow and wide at this point, and the path was following along the top of its bank. He followed that. The forest was pretty thick so he couldn't see far, and the path wound thru the trees. As the stream curved there was a sandbar, making an actual beach, and a very lush meadow in the middle with large fruity plants. Alan was looking at that when he noticed the row of tree-houses *right* beside him on the path, all in a row, overlooking this meadow and beach. The path was passing right under their front porches. The trees they were in were big and old and had thick roots that Alan had to step over. The roots held stone that had been brought in to anchor the bank. The tree-houses seemed to be held together by vines, but there was definitely a door that looked like it lead into the trunk of the tree. The door had an oval window with a dark blue photograph of a fish etched into it.

A pair of guys sat on one of the porches, and, given the décor, Alan first thought of Trolls. They were big, but their bushy black hair and beards, coupled with generous body hair, made them look bigger. Both were wearing loincloths, one also wore a harness with a small shoulder pack. They had wide noses and dark eyes. They were drinking.

“Howdy, where you headed at such a pace?” one asked.

Alan thought this would be the end. They would put down their mugs and reach for huge double-bladed axes and that would be the end of Alan’s expedition to the surface. Somehow he managed to get out a few words over the pounding in his chest. “Just on my way back to Bostok,” he said, trying to sound casual as he picked his way over the roots in front of their tree-house.

They both chuckled deeply, “Well I guess you’re living it,” the guy answered, and waved.

Alan waved and kept on walking. He forced himself not to look back and just keep walking calmly. Fifty feet beyond the last house his eyes forced their way around to see what the natives had done. The one who hadn’t spoken was waving the bottle at the meadow, pointing at something out by the river and looking at right angles to Alan’s path. The other was looking where his friend was pointing. They were just as harmless as Kartha and more harmless than Huneen.

Two bends farther down, about a mile and a half, the stream was uninhabited. Fifty yards off the path was a natural

clump of brush with some rocks around it, making it impossible to see from the path. It was probably the most secure place to camp around here. He was so sore from the pack, the walking and the tension in this twenty-hour day that he put everything down before calling in. He was sure they would want him to observe this settlement anyway, so of course he would camp here.

They had a problem. They couldn't detect the settlement. They couldn't see it or sense it. Why would they? Everything there was natural materials. They would confer. Alan had spread his gear to sleep. It was too warm for the tent, even in the shade, so he used only the vermin-net. Then Victoria called him. They would like to press on to a site where the ship's sensors could be used to better advantage. He was dead exhausted and wound up having to beg for permission to sleep. He now knew why the natives had to make their day into a week.

Book III. In the Garden

When Desa woke from Noonsleep she was still alone in the house. Knume had probably spent half the sleep down at Myimpaden complaining about Valla or campaigning for the lumber party. Right now he was probably still passed out over a table down there. Valla was probably with Mappu again, unless he'd already tossed her. It would no longer feed his ego to have her around now that she was no longer with Knume. If Valla and Mappu were still together, they were probably still down at the 'Bit. That place never seemed to close, and Mappu only slept twice a week anyway.

She could see this was earlier than she really wanted to be up, but she was rested and hungry. Kortrax was past due north, so she called it Afternoonday and got out of bed. She only splashed thru the bathroom, there wasn't any hot water anyway. She curled a thin blue wrapskirt about her hips and headed for the garden. While having her breakfast she got started on the chores and decided to spend the day with it.

It was hours later, halfway to lunch time of Afternoonday and about when she wanted to call the chores 'done,' when Desa found the nest of ytith in the outer rinko patch. Ytith are tiny pests that bore into soft plant stems. This was the hard and skinny, tiny yellow-line kind, the size of a fingernail clipping. They're particularly troublesome because the

klizhorn can't get at them. She had to go into the stems after them, a messy job with rinko as you all know. You have to sacrifice the plant to get them, but if you don't, you sacrifice the garden. This kind is so tough you have to pinch one with your fingernails to kill it. They're pretty fast for their size and will bite if they get in your clothes.

It was then that Knume wandered thru the garden with Luray following, nearly invisible behind him and the ax collection slung over his shoulders. Luray was a pale, thin, wispy-haired girl, very slow moving, slow talking, and slow thinking. She was probably the most passive person around, being yaaged-out most of the time. She might take whatever interests the people around her had, but always in a half-hearted way. Desa knew she was quite old, and maybe too wasted for way too long.

Knume did all right with her, he was even able to get her to laugh occasionally, and once or twice she had even taken the initiative to come and see him. They had a common interest in yaag. Nobody knew very much about her background, she's lived here on and off since who knows when, even the old timers didn't know when she'd first come to town, or if she'd been born here. No doubt this was because she attracted so little notice. She should have attracted more, if you took the time to actually look at her you could see she could be quite pretty if she took care of herself.

"Ytith I see," Knume said, and bent to help. He had a different method of exterminating them. He just crushed the

plant to pulp, ytith and all, getting them stuck in the sap and snapping them at leisure.

“Thanks for helping,” she said, taking the opportunity to stand and stretch. “So? You’ve been hanging with Luray?”

“We’ve always been friends.”

“So what happened to you this Noonsleep?” Desa asked.

“It took me quite a while to get my sorrows drowned, the whole sleep in fact.”

“He was face down on the table opposite the kegs when I came in this wakeup,” Luray drawled.

“I think she brought me to.”

“Just so I’d have someone to drink with,” Luray said.

Luray would do that, she spent the better part of her life stashed away in Myimpaden. Where some might visit a caffeinery on waking, Luray would shuffle over and fill a cup, mug-sized, not a real flagon till lunch time at least. Then she might float on down toward the caffeinery to hang out and chat.

“We just had one ‘good morning’ cup,” Knume said, “and then I came up here to wait for Larneh.”

“Though it does seem a shame you can’t have a lumbering party without the actual lumbering,” Desa said.

“No other way to pay for it. By the way, we saw Marcue ‘fore-sleep and I told her about you I think.”

“What about me?” Desa asked.

“Zhlindu of course, or has that all changed since yesterday?”

“It hasn’t changed, but she’s been to Zhindu lots of times, it’s no big deal for her.”

“She seemed to think it was, I’m a little surprised she didn’t come out here and get you up.”

“She probably would have had to stick me with a shot of lvinch, I was quite inert this sleep.”

“Maybe she tried then? She’s going down to Hazorpean I think, so she might have been by early.”

There was a bit of silence as she got back to inspecting more of the plants for the tiny bore-holes.

“When’d you sharpen up?” Desa asked about his axes.

“Last Nightday.” She’d been down at Myimpaden before her hike to the mountain. After another pause he asked, “You haven’t seen Valla have you?”

“Not a sight or a rumor, I ate as much as I could of our Noonmeal, then waddled up to bed.”

“You must have made up for missing Dawnsleep,” Knume said.

“Does that mean you might be rested enough to come down with us after they get back from the woods?” Luray asked.

“For another Dusksleep-Nightday swig-fest?” she asked.

“Something like that,” Luray answered.

“I was thinking of going thru your old maps and architectural survey?” she answered Luray while asking Knume.

“Those maps are way out of date now,” Luray said. “and

that won't take you long anyway.”

“Don't worry, you won't miss me. The crowd builds up in there before dusk fades.” It would take her a while, Luray didn't know how carefully Desa might study a map, even one centuries old. “I might take a lap around the pond and see if any of the magazine guys might have some newer ones and if I'm still up I'll study those this evening.” Desa could wait for the logging party before getting as hearty into partying as they did.

They heard someone else coming up the path. The only billow of black curls like that in these parts was Marcue.

“I think she'll want to talk to you about the city,” Knume said.

“Good, I want her to tell me about neighborhoods and stuff.”

“Before you fly into that, let me ask her if Danip's gonna log.”

“I heard you're going off to the city,” Marcue called from the bottom of the slope.

“I decided it's this year,” Desa yelled back.

At this time Marcue was probably Desa's closest friend, with the possible exception of Klegnif but only because of music. They had known each other since Desa arrived in Yoonbarla. For eleven decades Desa had lived with Rendrak in the pointed-roofed house next to Marcue's. They didn't share any passions, but Marcue was moderately fond of music and had one of the best tape players in town. She knew little

of the technical details and couldn't really play an instrument, though she could sing decently. Her most serious interest was probably her garden, but she wasn't obsessed with that either.

“So just what city?” she asked when she was close enough to shout comfortably.

“I intend on making this the trip and get all the way down to Zhindu, but I could chicken out and stop at Lastriss again.”

“I heard you might be going back to Dos via commercial transportation.”

“If I did go back, it would be commercial.” She'd rather wait till someone breeds a dactyl she could fly before tackling that pass again. “Both Zhindu and Dorcaikin Toz would be on my route back to Dos if I was to go.”

“Some people might have blown a rumor out of something like that, I'm not worried about it.” Marcue stared at Knume with that comment.

“I'm not too worried about it, I don't think the Lhar's that arduous a journey.”

By this time Marcue had reached them, noticed what they were doing and started to help. Luray felt left out then, and also began looking at the plants. Marcue told her how easy and lazy the work was sailing the Lhar, even heading upstream, and how good the eating could be from the fish in the river.

“I don't mean she couldn't get back, I mean she might not want to.” Knume said about his rumor, when Marcue finished

her narration.

“Yeah,” Marcue said, “I can picture you not making it back; you might like Zhindu.”

“But before you discuss that, what about Danip?” Knume asked.

“He’s not going anywhere but the woods. He’s not even going to Hazorpean after his wheels. I’m going down after them.”

“So he’s going to cut?”

“Duh? I’m going down after his wheels ‘cause he’s up in the woods?” Marcue said. It must be that ‘good morning’ cup, Desa thought. “So after you went to sleep,” Marcue continued, talking to Knume, “the guys got up a little collection for me to thump around for a band for this party while I was down in Hazorpean after the wheels. They got fourteen irons in it now. Lets see that’s those guys from west street and everybody that was sitting with them last lateday. Some of them are already back from logging, some more have cut but not hauled. Even a couple East Street guys said they might cut and put in an iron anyway.”

“That’s pretty impressive,” Knume said, “Especially when you think about the food and yaag next Nightday.”

“That much again I bet,” Desa said.

“But they’re saying that’s up to you guys, those that weren’t in on the band fund are paying for the feast and kegs,” Marcue added.

“Speaking of wheels,” Knume remembered. Desa could

see that Marcue knew this was coming. “I’ll need a couple of the biggest trucks you can find, if you can find a way to get them up here.”

“Danip’s renting a company team so I’ll hitch ‘em up behind his. That still won’t be as long as the log will be.”

“You know how to caterpillar-hitch them right?”

“I *do* live in Yoonbarla,” Marcue answered.

“So you’ll be spending Nightday in Hazorpean?” Desa asked.

“Right, I thought I’d just hit some clubs and ask the bands I like if they want to trundle up here for the party, it won’t take me but an hour each way at the millyard.” And maybe an hour to pry the yardsmen off, Desa thought. “Want to come help?” Marcue asked.

“I was just going to ask you to see if Vyinga’s in and see if you can sign me up a nest. I want to study up for my own trip. I wanted to look at maps and talk about neighborhoods in Zhlindu. This shopping trip could be very distracting, especially if we were going to pick up a cask or two while we were there.”

“There you go,” Luray noticed.

“Understanding the neighborhoods in Zhlindu is simple,” Marcue said, “it’s basically all vertical. The more light you got, the higher the price. You could have something small and rickety for a cheap price on an upper floor, or something huge and gloomy on a lower floor for cheap. If you go down deeper you get retail and entertainment, then commercial then

wholesale then the industrial levels.”

“Where’s the music district?”

“In the retail and entertainment levels mostly. Most of the bands you like are from the Rankor Hill neighborhood. They play a lot of tower and crystal up there. You’ll meet a lot of people from Wescarp around there. Some music is on towers and some is in factories. The levels aren’t level either, but you’ve seen pictures.”

“No particular area?”

“The city’s in one big pile. There’s twenty million people in the area of a few hours walk. I’m sure I’ve told you all this.”

“You told me about the Conchidenabla, the Hyadrain Image, the beaches, but mostly about the men, the drugs and the music. You never said much about how the city is laid out.”

“Oh just remember paths you know, it’s too complicated to ever try and figure out. You can take a walk somewhere you’ve never been every day of your life, especially in the Central Fastness. If you ever think you’ve figured out the map, go out the back door of the next factory you’re in, then see if you still think so.”

“I thought it was all changed every day,” Knume said, “I lost two apartments by not being able to actually find them again.”

“Haven’t you done that three times here in Yoonbarla?” Marcue asked him.

“Have some mercy on me woman.” Chiding Knume about his loose brain was one of Marcue’s favorite sports and it would eventually get him a bit raw.

Desa was now convinced that every plant had been examined and all the offenders dealt with, and stood up and looked over the house. The valley of Yoonbarla was steep enough that she could see the fields behind Larneh and Eknar’s houses thru the branches. They were bright, being on the east side of the street their Afternoonday light was more direct.

“So do you have to change ships on the way?” Desa asked.

“I wound up changing at every city,” Marcue said, “because I usually miss the boat. Even at Chesenvyaiya I was able to get one the next day. At Shempala there’s several leaving every hour for wherever you want to go. Shempala’s big enough you might think you got to Zhindu when you get there.”

“You never told me about Chesenvyaiya.”

“It’s no big deal. Some docks, some markets, some apartment towers, lots of plotters and produce wholesalers. It’s so close to Zhindu you never really get into the country between them, even though it’s another week on the river to downtown. I could have taken streetcars in less time but a lot more cost. Every bend of the river’s got a bump n’ roll like that once you get down there.”

Sharni came bouncing up their path with Larneh dragging along behind her lugging a clump of axes.

“Where you been?” Knume called to Larneh with an air that implied he had been here hours instead of a few minutes.

“Oh I got down to the ‘Bit again last night and took too big a chunk out of Noonsleep,” Larneh answered.

“Are you fit to swing an ax?”

“Oh yeah, I just got to get woke up a little more.”

“What was doing down there?” Knume started to ask him.

Meanwhile Sharni asked Desa, “I heard you’re moving to Zhlindu?”

“Not moving, just going down for a few years, maybe a decade. That trip I sold my house for.”

“Oh yeah, but that was a while back. We thought you forgot all about that.”

“No, I just took awhile deciding that it’s time.”

Sharni wanted to know all the details, which was hard because Desa hadn’t thought of any details yet. Sharni had a list she just ‘had to get’ in fashions, music and magazines. She didn’t really think about the twelve-year time lag in pop culture between Zhlindu and Yoonbarla. Meanwhile Larneh had been telling Knume what Valla was doing in last night’s show and he was getting madder by the minute.

“I don’t think it’s even entertaining down there any more,” Knume was saying, “Nuvee ought to get Mappu off his stage.”

“Why would he do that? Mappu and his swinging cronies

account for about half the entertainment in there.” Sharni overheard their conversation and was drawn into it. They argued for awhile about ways to get it closed down, but these were old rants that never lead anywhere. They progressed to how Yoonbarla was turning into a city and the same dreams of a smaller town they chewed over whenever they got together. This crowd could hardly get together without it.

When they’d been at it nearly a half an hour, Luray said, “We can’t figure this out today, especially if you guys are ever going to use those axes.” She pointed to Kortrax, now well west of North.

“You’re right, we gotta to get going,” Knume said, “It’ll be lunch time before we get up there and dark before we get that lunker down.”

“True,” Luray continued, “So go log and stop worrying about the fate of Yoonbarla and society.”

Desa was still thinking they could look for a good spot to live anywhere in Wescarp, maybe on a hillside closer to the valley, maybe over closer to Bostok. Somewhere within an easy hike of a town a little bigger than Yoonbarla, but on a living plot of land. Maybe not in a village, or just a small village of their own group. Desa would love to stay in this mountain scenery, but it would be nice to have a couple acres of bottom land and a slow stream. If that stream could float a log down to the Lhar, they could still lumberjack. Desa could buy such a place herself if she saved her money in the city.

Lastriss was more like the size of city she wanted to live

in, but Lastriss was out on the basin floor, two weeks from the mountains. All the large cities of Wescarp were actually out on the plains where the mountains could barely be seen in the distance. Her thoughts wandered even farther afield, Bordzvek was a huge city, the size of Dos or Zhindu, in mountains almost as rugged as Wescarp. But it was many years journey to the northeast, even further from Dos.

Why did she keep worrying how far things were from Dos? Even if she ever were to return there, she would never find anyone she ever knew in her past. She knew from visiting Kassidor Yakhan that other great cities had as much to offer or more. Still she found Dos somehow more comfortable than the all-out pace of the Yakhan. Maybe she was afraid she would never find a place that appealed to her as much. She would have to see what she thought of Zhindu once she had seen it. If that was acceptable, she could be content to live in this basin in the future.

The guys were walking up the hill, Sharni was still walking with them, and still trying to convince them that society in Yoonbarla wasn't broken just because Mappu and the Bit were in it.

“She really worries about his moods,” Luray said.

“She should,” Desa answered, “If it wasn't for her I think he'd crawl so far up into the woods he'd never see anyone except maybe Knume.”

“Knume mellows him out most of the time.”

“Not when he's like he is about Valla,” Desa told her. She

was afraid Luray might be hurt, especially if she thought she was moving into the spot Valla had just vacated.

Maybe she was, because after a pause she said, “You know all this work reminds me of how bad my own garden is.”

She drifted away slowly, probably hoping Desa or even Marcue would talk her into postponing it a little while longer. Marcue only piped up to say goodbye. They shouldn’t detain her, Luray already got too high a proportion of her calories from yaag. If her garden failed, she might end up like a city burn-out.

Marcue, who had been so quiet while they argued about Mappu, now spoke up. “I really can’t stay longer either. The guys will be upset if I don’t get down and get a group lined up.”

“Please don’t forget Vyinga,” Desa requested. “You better worry about the wheels too, there’s none in this town that can hold the wood they’re cutting.”

“If they get it down.”

“With both of them working on it they will. They’ll push each other.”

They began walking down past the onions when Desa spotted a hkyiitn under the thick evet foliage. This was mostly luck since they are well camouflaged crawling under undergrowth. A hkyiitn isn’t very dangerous to an adult human, but they love to eat klizhorn. These distant relatives

of the kranjan may be as long as a human including the tail and weigh a quarter as much. They are extremely slow moving because they have lots of very tiny legs. They have nasty teeth however, and their snap is fast if you get close enough.

She pulled back some leaves to get a better look, making sure she knew where the tail was. It began moving away as she told Marcue to stand back, so she made a grab for it. It was a big one, large enough so Marcue grunted when it appeared. It was holding plants in about five of its numerous little claws, and its long horizontal jaws were open and twisting around, emitting the noise from which it gets its name.

“Do you want it?” Desa asked. “We have enough coming out of this garden.”

“I don’t know, it’s pretty big. Maybe one of the cooks would want it. I’ll take it by on my way down.”

“Yeah, but hurry up and get a rock or something to mash its head with, it’s struggling.”

Just as she said that, the tail slipped from her grasp, and it curled up in the path, horizontal jaws agape at her. Desa knew better than to attack it from the tooth side if it wasn’t absolutely necessary, it looked just like a miniature kranjan from here. Now that she wasn’t holding most of its legs off the ground, it was mobile again.

“It got away, you’ll have to get it from your side.”

“Let’s just get a stick and chase it out of here.”

It was beginning to move up the slope already, no chasing required. It kept its head turned around and its open jaws hissed like keen blades. Soon, its tiny legs vibrating rapidly, it crawled over the fence at the far end of the vegetable field and was lost to sight in the orchard. Knume might be disappointed in her, to him a hkyiitn was just something to drop into a sack. To Desa it was a big animal and heavily armed, even the little legs that covered its entire belly were one third claw.

Sharni was now on her way back from seeing the men off.

“There’s a big hkyiitn coming up your way,” Desa called to her, “probably in a foul mood. Grab it if you want it.”

“I see it,” she called back, “It’s bigger than I want to deal with.”

“I’m not too sorry it got away, I wasn’t in any mood to fight with the thing,” she said to Marcue.

“Well,” Marcue sighed, “I’ve had enough excitement for today.”

“I know. What a big one. If I would have seen all of him I might have thought it was easier to take the klizhorn in for awhile.”

“Hope he didn’t already eat it. Anyway, I have to get going. Thalgren took Noonsleep here with his coach and I have a reservation on it for after brunch. I’ll be spending Nightday of Kyebenwae in Hazorpean, but we’ll talk before you sail. I don’t want Thalgren to take off on me or it would be the middle of Dusksleep before I’d drag into Hazorpean.

Besides, maybe I can spend the sleep with him and save renting a room.”

“And you’ll be back when?”

“Probably for a late Noonsleep next week.”

“See you in a week in that case.”

Marcue went skipping off down the path. Desa wasn’t sure a sleep with Thalgren was worth saving an iron, he was so formal and stuffy, but Marcue had a talent for getting along with everyone.

Desa took a minute getting her breath back after the tussle with the hkyiitn, and waited for Sharni to make it back down.

“Them guys just want to camp,” Sharni said, “Just them, their women, and maybe a few other guys like them.”

“We could name five or six more.”

“Yeah I know. The place would be nothing but a lumber camp. They’d have their gardens, and there has to be a still, but I don’t want to live in a place like that.”

“If it was three hours to get to a town this size could you stand it?” Desa asked her.

“Maybe, but probably not. If it was that far to get here I wouldn’t bother going out, I’d just sit around the still with them and get bored.”

“What if it was a three hour walk to Hazorpean?”

“I’d probably go every Nightday.”

Sharnie lived a rather urban lifestyle for these parts, spinning lots of yarn in the weaving barn and spending the proceeds on cooks and cups around the pond.

“We could find a place like that on the east side of the Valley where the guys could probably still log,” Desa said.

“It would be all random cuts though, they aren’t up for that much effort.”

“Yeah,” Desa said. “This’ll all die down in a few weeks and we’ll all be here in Yoonbarla for centuries.”

“You think you’ll really come back here?”

“I think the odds are high, or at least near here. If I buy another house it might be something closer to Hazorpean. This town is laid out nice for socializing, but the gardens are so long. I want some bottom land, and closer to the house, a place with some still water around. I think I can find that only a few hours hike from here.”

“Yeah, you probably can, a few hours, a day, but we're a mile and a half above the nearest still water. I hope you do come back, I’d miss you if you turned out to be too much of a city girl.”

Desa and Sharnie really didn’t have more to talk about, so Desa saw her off, then tackled the last of the garden chores. By the time she finished it was well after Afternoonday lunch, but the effort was worth it because she had managed to get most of the fall drudgery done and get a good start on harvest. The garden would need little attention till the heavy harvest, which would probably get pushed back into Iyosaign and left to Knume. Now she would have almost half the day to study Knume's old maps of Zhlindu.

She was still dredging them out of the cases down in the egg store when she heard Lapnar calling at the door. Lapnar is the youngest of the lumberjacks, only five decades old, about the same age as her son Dara, so they had been childhood friends. He was husky and tall, but his nose and ears were a little bigger than Desa would like. He was a nice guy, but wouldn't be winning any science awards. He had his cup with him, filled with his home brew. She led them up stairs to the cushion and he snapped back the lid and passed the cup. His brew was a decent yellow, a little earthy in flavor but granting a decent buzz when consumed in any quantity.

“I heard you're going to leave us,” he said.

“For awhile. I think it's time I made my ‘pilgrimage to Zhindu’,” she said, like it was a religious ritual everyone had to partake in.

“What brought this on?” he asked after taking a good glug himself.

“I've been planning to go for years,” she said.

“But why now?”

“Did you see the stupid thing I did last Nightday?”

“No,” he said. “If it was something you screwed up during the jam I never noticed.”

“After that.”

He passed the cup back to her. “You didn't stay long after that.”

“Right,” she said. “I left with Enva.”

“Woo, so who'd you make jealous?” he asked, hoping to

hear some juicy girl-hissing gossip.

“No one I hope,” she said and passed the cup back to him. “No one should be.”

“The girls all think he’s hot,” Lapnar said.

“I’m not looking for that. He sent me home as soon as we came.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a busy guy.” He slid his arm around her shoulders. “You could have picked me you know.”

“Were you interested?” she asked. “Would you have let me stay the night?” she stroked his thigh, enough attention for the time and place. He was someone attractive enough to get close to if he wanted, but not someone she had a special need to pursue. She knew already that he did not want to live with her, and to be honest she thought he was a little too young for a permanent relationship anyway.

“Would you want to stay in my camp?” he asked.

“Well, maybe not for Dawnsleep. I could have brought you here.”

“Knume went home alone that sleep. He wouldn’t have wanted to listen to us.”

“I didn’t know that at the time,” she said.

“Neither did I, but once we got here I would have been uncomfortable.”

“He seems to have settled with Luray for the time being.”

Lapnar only chuckled at that. Knume and Luray were well known drinking buddies. They passed the cup back and forth once more. He asked what she was going to do in Zhlindu

and she told the story about being a tourist and looking for a new yandrille if she could come up with the money. He had never been there, had never been beyond Hazorpean in fact, so he was no help in planning the trip. Once that story was done, so was his cup and she did have a little buzz, enough to cuddle with him and enjoy a little gentle body music. He didn't seem to have the time to make anything more of it however.

“Want to come down to Myimpaden?” he asked.

“Not today, I'm going to study these old maps.”

“I'll buy you a cup and a roll.”

“No please, I just brought in way too much food out of this garden today, I've got to eat some of it up. Why don't you come back up here for supper?”

“Yeah? And shall I keep you from Enva's clutches this sleep?”

“If you'd like,” she said. “I wouldn't mind.”

“Then let's call it a plan, dinner and Dusksleep, sounds great. I'll bring another cupful for supper, something a little darker. See you soon after dark?”

“Yeah, see you then.”

With a quick kiss and a little squeeze, he was off. She wondered if he would remember, he wasn't the most reliable person around. But if he did come over, he probably would stay for the whole sleep, mainly because he would want more sex when they woke up. He was a little more energetic about it than she, but that was probably because of his age.

She spent the late Afternoonday spreading the old maps of Zhlindu all over the table and getting wrapped up in them. The day was starting to get late when she heard Pneika call her from the front. As she went to the porch to answer she hoped this interruption would be quick since she noticed it was late and she still hadn't prepared for her evening with Lapnar.

Book IV. In the Mountains

The Threatening Peaks

Alan didn't know how long he slept, or if he actually did. The sun had moved from one side of a large tree to the other. There were lots of noises out here, animals, a few people going by on the path, even a wagon drawn by animals. It made him think about how little he knew about predatory beasts in this area, anywhere on the planet for that matter. He knew they existed and knew people worried about them, especially something called a theirops. Actually there was a whole class of animals like the theirops, varying in size, shape and color. He had seen them since the first remote probe to the surface, but he didn't have the instinct to worry about them, having grown up on Gordon's Lamp, but he knew he should be worried.

Of course what could he do if he was awake? Spit at it? Wave his little glass knife?

When he called up to the ship, he raised Elmore Bovok, Colonel of Economics. He thought it was a little strange that someone from that department would have that duty.

“You're getting up rather late,” was his first comment.

“The days are different here and I have no way to tell time. From the position of the primary I would say the period of daylight is barely more than half over.”

“It’s 10:15 here. I guess I don’t see any orders saying you have to follow ship's time, and since the native’s divide the planet’s rotation into three parts, I guess we can let you do the same.”

“Thank you, it will make things a lot easier.” Alan wondered if he was supposed to consider this an example of the amount of initiative he could get away with.

“You’ll miss a day every week you know.”

“I don’t see how it can be helped.”

“It’s all right. Now; our task for the day is to get you back on the right path. As you know you are far to the south of your intended course. That was allowed because you needed to reach water as soon as possible, and it was closer that way. We should have tried to recover somewhat yesterday, but since you spent so much time out of communication, we missed that opportunity. The thing for you to do now is travel just about due north, directly at the primary.”

“Can you see what the country is like between here and there?” Alan asked.

“Yes, I have a display right in front of me.”

“Can you see those mountains?”

“Yes, I can. You really shouldn’t have let yourself get on the wrong side of them. You have about a ninety five hundred foot climb up, and about as much down on the far side. I bet they look pretty rough, but I think we can talk you thru.”

“Is there no way around?”

He was silent for a bit. Given a Colonel’s time-slice, and

his control of the main scope, he probably did quite a bit of research. “Yes, you could go back up to the desert, but that is too hot already. The other way is quite the long way around. If you keep on the way you’re going you’ll come to a river that joins the river Bostok is on. It’s a lot more distance, but it would be physically easier than climbing the mountains.”

“It has to be. I got a good look at those mountains yesterday and the main thing I saw was a lot of vertical walls. There’s quite a bit of snow up there, I’m sure you can see that, and there is pretty thick forest on the sides, you can see that too.”

“True, I’m not going to tell you the crossing won’t be rough. In fact I think the side you can see is the easier.”

“Then lets take the long way around,” Alan requested.

“That route is much more populated.”

“But the whole object of this journey is to get to Bostok, which is a city.”

“True, but we’ve done detailed studies of the valley along that river. The data is coming in now. The average population density there is about like the plains of India. Do you realize what India would be like without even pipelines or sewers? You would be traveling for over two hundred fifty miles among the peasants that support the elite of Bostok. You might die of the smell alone. The trail you are on probably leads to another city out on the valley floor that might be even larger than Bostok, one we know nothing about.

“You won’t have to climb any cliffs,” Elmore continued,

“We can lead you along watercourses at very gentle inclines. You’ll come to the mountains after going about the same distance you’ve traveled so far. From there you’ll be within a hundred fifty miles of Bostok.”

“What if I just walk around the mountains thru these hills?” Alan asked.

“We don’t want you blundering around in areas we know nothing about. We know enough to suspect that the society in Bostok might be tolerant enough for you to return some useful information before you are found out. We don’t have any idea what conditions are like in any of the regions in between.”

“Have my recent observations been considered?”

“You haven’t observed the peasant areas,” Elmore said.

“I’ve observed up to here, and I’ve found the people to be just about the same as the people in Bostok. We had a couple days data from way over on the other side of the planet and found that was much the same as it is here.”

“There is some evidence that there may be a global society here, but that seems so improbable with the technology available. We think it is likely that you have seen things typical of rural areas, and we have seen and heard things typical of two cities. But you would have to pass thru miles of peasant land just to reach the unfamiliar city. We have no reason to believe that other city would be anything like Bostok since it is immersed in that peasant area.”

“I wouldn’t think there would be any need to continue to

Bostok if I reached a larger city,” Alan said.

“None, that is true.”

“And if I get into an inhabited area I might find out what we want to know a long time before I get to Bostok. If I’m going to die of germs, which some of you seem to think, I should try and find the information we want as soon as possible.”

“You must remember that there are many things more important than asking a few questions of the natives,” Colonel Bovok told him, “You are on a planet inhabited by intelligent, possibly hostile natives. The security of this expedition is one of them.”

“I feel more secure with a direct route to a population I can investigate than tackling those mountains.”

“We’ll consider this. If we didn’t have your safety in mind we could just let you blithely walk out into what is likely to be twenty million slaves and let them ask for your pass off the plantation.”

“Even if I was dragged ‘back’ to slavery on a plantation,” Alan said, “I’ll still find ways to return information. What good would my corpse at the bottom of some cliff do you? I’ve already found out some important things here, and one of them is, I don’t know a whole lot about survival in the wilderness. I can barely walk on this uneven ground without stumbling and falling. This is the real thing and it’s a very different wilderness than what was in those training files.”

“There is merit in what you say, though your delivery is a

bit unprofessional. Have your breakfast and break camp, we'll survey your route thru the foothills while you get ready.”

Forest Beauty

Alan decided that this morning he would get out some of his canned rations and attempt to cook them up. It was still pretty pale stuff compared to yesterday's feast, but it was fuel and the stomach had it's demands.

Since self-heating rations weren't part of native technology, he had not been given any, so to cook them he had to make a fire. This was something he'd never practiced in training. He'd seen survival training video of it, and been thru all the theory. But now he had to actually find a few rocks to make a circle, some dry leaves or grass, some tiny dry sticks, some bigger dry sticks. He knew that there may be species of each that wouldn't burn well. He found there were also some that were hard to break into convenient lengths.

The natives had lighters and torches, ceramic versions of worldwar-age flintwheel and wick things, so he had one also that was as good an imitation as the probe's eye could give them. He had been able to test the lighter on the ship and it worked as well on the planet. The fire lit, and slowly grew. Alan poked more little twigs into it, and flames began to come from them. Soon the bigger twigs started, little by little.

It was fascinating to watch, and it was a fulfilling triumph to be able to do it. This made him feel like he might be able to survive this wilderness after all.

This was something he had created with his own mind and flesh. No computer had been involved, no robots, no suit servos, not even a power tool. His own hands had moved the rocks, broke the twigs, lit the spark. He felt the atavistic call of the flames. It wasn't any big thing he had built to be sure, just a little self-sustaining chemical reaction of oxygen and carbon, but come to think of it, so was he.

Alan was done with breakfast by the time Elmore came back on. They had decided he could continue losing altitude to the east and northeast. He was close to Earth's sea level now, but the route they allowed him didn't get much deeper in the atmosphere. They would see what he encountered by the end of daylight. Alan thanked them profusely for the favor.

In spite of all his years of training in the exercise ring, he was sore as all get-out when he hiked out of his little camp. The pack had grown enormously in weight during the 'night', no, 'Vistee'-'Noonsleep' as the natives would call it. It was warmer than ever and even a little humid. He downed almost a whole water skin during breakfast and had to fill up another before setting out. There was no way he was in condition to tackle a major mountain range. Maybe if he really was a hero in one of those old tales, but not in real life.

The path soon joined another, one that seemed to be capable of carrying wagon traffic. It ran generally northeast and was much easier walking, so he followed it. It wound thru real forest, beautiful, pleasant and shady, with whispering breezes above. This path went downhill, usually gently, often leveled with a log rail and fill in some spots, some rocks pried around in a few other spots. It had seen many years of very light wagon traffic but more foot traffic, though there was not a lot of that either, because it was carpeted with ribbonleaves.

Along the way he encountered the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, even in pictures, even the ones Morg secretly let him see. She wasn't dressed as revealingly as Huneen, but in a one-piece knitted sheath that covered her whole body to the middle of her thighs with elbow-length sleeves, much like a duty-suit. Unlike a duty-suit it did nothing to conceal any detail of her shape. She had long, thick, flowing brown hair and was carrying a bag over her shoulder. She turned when she heard him behind her, showing him a face of such radiant beauty that he was nearly moved to tears.

“You're new around here,” she said, “are you touring?”

“Yes,” he answered, that allowed him to be unfamiliar with the area.

“Have you come from Talthaic?”

“No.” He had no idea where or what that was, and hoped it wasn't the name of the desert. “Why do you ask?”

“You have a slight accent. But then you couldn't have come out of the pass this early. Where are you headed?”

“Bostok,” he replied.

She emitted a small laugh. “You must have turned around a little somewhere, this is the wrong side of the Kendaidis for a path to Bostok.”

“I admit I’m not familiar with this part of the country.”

“If you keep on this road another couple weeks you’ll be able to pick up the Lhar at Hazorpean, that’s a couple weeks upstream of the trans-lantis canal. Just book passage if you’ve got coin or haul sail if you don’t. That’s your best route to Bostok from here I think, unless you’re an adventurer and want to cross the Kendaidis.”

Alan figured that must be the name of those mountains, “No, I think I’ll take the low road. I’ve had enough climbing getting in and out of the desert.”

“Are you from Bostok?”

“Yes,” he said with some trepidation. She might be from there herself, if so, he was sunk. He might as well find out before digging too deep a hole. A little inner voice which sounded a lot like Colonel Glayet Samrova of security was telling him he should stop this conversation, but for some reason he wasn’t able to hear it well enough. “Are you from there also?”

“Oh no, I live less than a mile down this way.”

Alan breathed a little easier knowing that. “You certainly have some pretty country to have a home in.” He stopped himself from saying how pretty the inhabitants are also.

“It’s just like any other southwood in Wescarp, certainly

not much different than you have around Bostok.”

Alan knew something of that from pictures taken by the probe. “The mountains are prettier here, and quite a bit bigger.”

“I guess, I haven’t even been there actually. I thought all the country was the same until you get to the valley. You can still see the mountains until you’re almost to Lastriss.”

“That’s someplace I’ve never been.”

“It’s a city a couple weeks out on the flat and way too populated for me to stay there for any length of time.”

They talked of where Alan had been (the desert); and that she lived as a hunter/gatherer with a little subsistence farming, that her house was fifteen feet up in a tree in case of theirops and that she liked to paint and mountain climb for recreation. She had been a few thousand feet up into the Kendaidis. She told him there were six women and five guys close enough to visit with. She was friendly and talkative but did not make him an offer for a sexual encounter. Even so, Alan walked on air just from the fact that she had talked with him and allowed him to look at her.

Delos Alvarez took his call when he reported in. Delos was not one of his favorite souls. He was one who thought the whole notion of biology was hopelessly outdated. He was Elmore’s deputy, and had drawn the duty because of it. Alan reported his encounter with this native while Delos got bored, then annoyed.

“I don’t think there was any pertinent scientific data gathered here. What make’s you think you can just strike up a conversation with whomever you please?”

“We were traveling in the same direction on the same path.”

“You were on the same path,” Delos dripped with sarcasm. “You could have come up with some excuse to change direction for a time. Or pretended you had a stone in your boot. Why would you want to needlessly expose yourself to that much danger?”

“We are talking about an unarmed girl about five foot four and a hundred ten pounds. I think she was in more danger from me than I was from her.”

“Don’t you dare make preposterous statements like that, this conversation is mission data. You don’t know what the natives use for armament.”

“They have crossbows, she didn’t.”

“You don’t know what friends she had nearby.”

“She was alone. We were the only people in an uninhabited area. Maybe she was glad to have a man share her path thru the wilderness.”

Delos kept lecturing him for quite a while longer. He obviously did not think it worth bringing anyone else in to hear more evidence that the society was peaceful and civilized. It was both primitive in the way she made her living and advanced in that she had time for hobbies and visiting doing it. Admittedly there was some truth to what Delos said.

He had volunteered a lot more than he should have in the conversation, but he had just finished a grueling day of studying the desert, if anything he was helping his credibility by describing something of the planet he knew. The fact that he had something he could talk about kept the conversation going and allowed him to learn more about her. He also had to admit that the girl's beauty had definitely influenced his judgement. He knew it was happening at the time, and he was powerless to do anything about it. Eventually Delos got tired of trying to teach Alan to make his investigations while lurking behind bushes. He broke contact, and Alan was left alone with the forest again.

The forest was quite beautiful, huge straight trunks rose to a canopy of tiny leaves far above. The greenery was so thick only an occasional glimmer of orange reached his eyes. There were plenty of animals, most of the same general multi-legged lizard shape in all sizes, colors and patterns. He was kept busy narrating and phone camming. There were crystalline things that flew, most had two large fixed wings and at least four small ones that propelled them. There were things that climbed in the trees with furry tentacles and lots of little jointed snakes with hooks at the joints that inch-wormed thru the trees. When he reported in about the wildlife, he was turned over to biology again. It was nice to be able to talk once more to people as people and not official machines. Of course they got frustrated all over again that they weren't

down there with a lab.

He had gone below Earth's sea level when the main path turned to the south, directly away from where he wanted to go. He followed smaller paths for awhile, but eventually lost all traces of them. It didn't matter, the forest was deep enough that there was little undergrowth, the ground was soft and damp with a few small rock outcrops. The rocks were sometimes covered with small plants, their texture told him they were related to the little soft-bodied ones from the desert.

He continued on, a little north of east, up one hill and down another. Occasionally he would catch a glimpse of the mountains to the northwest. Blue snow-capped peaks riding walls of jagged rock. Sometimes he saw other peaks to his right, much closer and milder, covered with soaring trees. He wouldn't have wanted to attempt climbing even those.

He encountered a valley that went his way for awhile and had the opportunity to walk down the middle of a pebble-strewn stream that gurgled thru a shallow cleft of beautifully-eroded rock. It came out into a meadow brilliant with orange flowers. A cobalt bowl of sky arched over him, clipped on with the teeth of distant mountains. That halloween lantern of a sun hung high above it and puffs of purple cloud leaked in around the edge. This valley was so beautiful he wanted to share it with the ship, but just as he reached for the phone he saw a camp nestled in the shade where the forest reached a bend in the stream and a native couple within conversational

range on this side of the stream who seemed to be sitting in the field picking and eating some of the flowers. They noticed him about the same time he noticed them, and greeted him with cheerful hello's and a wide wave, so he had to respond. He definitely shouldn't be calling the ship.

There was something funny about the way they talked, it was very slow and dream-like, as if they had just awaked from deep sleep. Their motions as they harvested the flowers had much of the same quality about it. They were attractive people though, and seemingly harmless in spite of the woman's immoral costume. She was wearing only a very short colorful skirt, the man, only a small clout. They seemed to find friendly mirth in anything he said. They didn't make much sense themselves, their sentences seemed to change subject in the middle and they acted like he was also part of some conspiracy they were in on.

He came away knowing the stream he was following was called Minok, the flowers they were picking were called orangenarc, and that this week of the year was called Kyebenwae so he knew the date of the year, Kyebenwae Kovar. They offered him some drink that he refused, and wished him luck on his travels. They told him to say hello to Pongi once he got to Hazorpean and hoped he wouldn't be disappointed with the thesh rolls at Prakentoil. He said he wouldn't be, which they thought was hilarious, but they were laughing at the ripples in the water too so he didn't let that upset him.

When he reported this incident, Elmore took the call, and Alan was glad to find that he thought Alan had handled the encounter correctly. Elmore had no more notion than Alan over what caused their strange behavior. Delos joined in and thought they might be under the influence of some narcotic, he'd seen it portrayed in the crime-dramas he watched. Alan didn't think so because they had been quite friendly and civil, not at all anti-social. Alan suspected Delos would always think the worst of any soul inhabiting flesh anyway.

Neither one of them thought they were worth stopping to investigate, so they had him press on. He continued to the northeast following the stream until it also took a sharp turn toward the south. Alan began to climb back into the forest again into the foothills of the Kendaid range.

Two small ridges later, his thighs insisted he stop for lunch. Kortrax was beginning to move noticeably down the sky. After lunch and some more long reports to the Angels, Alan continued on thru more of the mountain forest, continuing to the northeast, continuing to lose altitude till he was well below sea level. The first routine report of off shift Glenelle was on and told him he should be even more careful about when he called in because he might be approaching more populated areas. He didn't mind that, he'd just as soon wait till he found something he thought was interesting and not worry about reporting in all the time. They agreed on that.

There were more signs of habitation here. More paths,

more cut trees, and even a house. This house was completely grown out of trained trees, not the straight kind with horizontal branches, but a supple, arching kind that could be trained to grow enormously fat and then hollowed out. It was easy to see from the outer surface and the color and texture and veining pattern on the leaves that these weren't at all related to the tall ones. As closely related as a pine and a weeping willow.

There was a large clearing in front of it with liquid-yellow sunlight slanting down into a fairly large garden. A couple paths led away into the forest. Though there seemed to be no one around, Alan didn't dare report in from this close, so he had to find a secure point to report from and spend another twenty minutes listening to griping about the phone-cam.

A time came when he had to climb a fairly steep hill to continue making progress to the northeast. He saw that he was climbing thru a pass between some fairly impressive peaks. There was a bit of a path here, tracks that looked like they could have been made by wheels. He made it back up to within half a mile of sea level in this pass.

When he came over the pass Alan stopped, overwhelmed by the view. He was out in the open on a steep rocky hillside covered with berry bushes and hundreds of different kinds of ribbonleaves, many with orange berries growing in bunches above them, some with short brown seed stalks, some with flower stalks, and some with flowers along the edges of their

leaves. Down the mountain in the near distance was the forest like he had seen before, two hundred foot trunks growing straight as launch tubes for the sky with flat horizontal branches looking like feathered fans or green frost crystals.

In the little valley a few miles away were clearings, and in the center of those, other trees had arching branches and long sprays of leaves swaying in the breeze. Some of these looked like gigantic branching ferns, some like fountains of green spray, softly frozen.

In the far distance was a huge valley with a flat floor with air so thick it was hard to see details. Beyond that were the bright peaks of another range of mountains. A turquoise band of sky hung beyond that, indicating the thick atmosphere of the oceanic basin beyond those far peaks. The colors of it all were breathtaking and a little eerie. The orange light of Kortrax gave the colors a softer, warmer feel than such a scene would have had on Earth.

He had seen many pictures of the most spectacular scenery on Earth, but this would match anything that planet could offer, and those were merely images on a screen. He was actually in this. He sank to a rock and just gaped. No picture had prepared him for this, nothing anyone told him prepared him for the magnitude of what he saw. He knew in his mind that the distance and scope of what he saw in the night sky or out the ship's viewports was greater than this, but here he had the greatest feeling of vastness he had ever encountered.

The mountains on the far side of the great valley were clear, while three rows of little puffball clouds were trapped between the mountain ranges. A hint of fields and colors were detectable in the nearer parts of the valley floor. The mountains on the far side had to be farther from where he sat than he had come on the surface so far.

He couldn't see water down there, but figured that must be the valley of the Lhar people had talked about and the ship saw from space. He guessed that the city of Hazorpean was down there somewhere also, but he couldn't see it. It would have to be quite a large city to be visible from here.

There was no one around, so he called the ship again and got Glenelle this time.

“So how's things in the forest?” She asked.

“Beautiful, I wish I could show you better what I'm looking at right now. This phone-cam does less for this view than it does for showing distant wildlife.”

“It does look lovely.”

“You could send down an eye to photograph it.”

“I'll do that, but it isn't really the same. What you're experiencing isn't just with the eyes, you're feeling the breeze and the gravity, smelling the trees, hearing the wind sigh thru the branches and the wildlife rustle thru the brush. We'd need an artist's experience probe to do it justice. Even we angels are just looking at a picture if all that's recorded is video.”

“So what's new up there?” he asked when they were done

with the biology reports.

“Economics is trying to get us moved over to B’s environs to see if there’s anything worth mining in those asteroid swarms.”

“Do they have a chance?”

“I think so,” Glenelle told him.

“It would take months to get there.”

“At least. I wonder if they’ll bring you back up or leave you down there for the duration.”

“If they want to go soon, they’ll have to leave me here or scrub this mission,” Alan said.

“We can’t leave you, if you get in trouble there won’t be anything we can do about it.”

“I don’t think they would do anything about it if I did. Besides, I don’t think I’m going to get in trouble down here.”

“I hope not, but I’ve heard you have a pretty loose lip.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear from Delos,” Alan said.

“Oh I don’t, but all you’ve told me about are the animals, you haven’t told me what’s really going on with the natives.”

“I’ll tell you. I don’t know this for sure because it’s impossible to tell, but I think I could get away with just about anything down here. I don’t think anyone would believe me if I shouted out the truth. I haven’t seen or heard of any way to get in trouble down here. I’ve had a few conversations with a few people and they seem so normal I can’t believe it. They’re just regular people in different scenery. It’s just like

talking to you, except they have their own agenda of things to talk about.”

“Just be careful,” she said, “things may not be what they seem.”

“Oh I know, I’m a little worried about that. I have to be careful not to get overconfident, it’s been too easy so far.”

“The more you say, the more likely you are to make an error that will get you in trouble.”

“I know, I know,” Alan tried to reassure her. “You don’t need to sound like Elmore or Delos.”

“Heavens NO, I’m just worried about you is all. It must be SO different down there.”

“Sure it is, but I can cope with it. I should probably get going though, there’s still a lot of daylight left and I want to get off this hill before I camp.”

“Sure, let’s hear from you later OK?” Glenelle asked. “It’s getting late here, but I’m on call for the night shift. When you find something else to report, don’t hesitate to beep.”

Stumbling Into Town

There were probably five or more hours of light left, the local sun was still several diameters above the peaks to the west and they were steep. There wasn’t time to get down to the great valley, but maybe he could get to the smaller one in the foreground. He had lost a lot of altitude in the last two

days, but the nights were long and still might get pretty cold. The more altitude he could lose, the better.

The forest was dark and damp, the sun was behind the mountain as he climbed down its steep eastern slope. He climbed, rather than walked over huge roots and dead trunks, falling into drops under overgrown piles of dead branches and sliding on the dead leaves and damp rocks. The lower he went, the smaller the trees were. The bigger ones here were three feet thick head-high on the uphill side, but most were much smaller. Stumps were common here and surrounded by brightly colored, slowly-breathing mushrooms. His footsteps were silent on the moss or mold-like plants covering most of the ground.

The slope gradually leveled out as the average tree size went down. Now that he was on more level ground and out of the shadow of the hill a few shafts of light slanted in, making patches of bare wood shine like gold. Ribbonleaves twined wherever there was light and enough soil or rotten wood to sink root into. There was a lot of bare rock sticking out, and tiny ribbonleaves crawled in any cracks.

He found a rutted track winding thru the forest. The track seemed to follow the contours of the land and go generally downhill. He was so tired of climbing that he followed it for a couple hours until it swung back around the mountain. There was a tiny path here going down so he continued on downhill, but was a little quieter, not wanting to come upon a woodsman unexpectedly.

After another long steep mountainside he was well over a mile below sea level barometrically. After a little more forest, not quite so steep, he came upon another clearing, this one with a fairly uniform coating of ribbonleaves of the kind with the brown stalks with little nodules on them. A hundred yards in front of him the forest resumed, but off to the right the clearing went further and had a row of trees down the center. This must be a branch of the small valley he had seen from the clearing with the view.

The row of trees was like he had seen out in the desert where the stream was, so he assumed there would be a stream here also. Many trunks set out horizontally from that suspected watercourse with festoons of roots holding them a few feet off the ground. All kinds of shrubs grew near the thicket, and he could see large fruits in the branches. He could see the glint of wood from dead trees and quite a few boulders. It looked like there would be food, firewood and shelter all close to water down there so even though it was still a little early, that might be a good place to camp. He might even have time to pile a few rocks together to improve the shelter before it got dark. He wouldn't mind camping early either, it had been a long day and he was getting quite tired.

He crossed the near clearing, and then climbed down thru a small patch of rocky woodland before coming to another clearing where he was closer to the horizontal trunks. He was

more than halfway across this clearing before it became obvious that things weren't quite what they seemed at first. There were boulders that were much too blocky piled on top of each other down at the bottom of this valley. Different plants grew on different sides of the horizontal trunks. Bushes weren't here unless they had some kind of fruit or berry, and he spotted one piece of wood that was definitely a board. He stopped and looked closer and determined that all the trees along the bottom of this little valley either contained houses, or were houses, it was hard to tell the way they were so overgrown. Beside their own limbs they held vines covered with maroon flowers. They could have all been like the ones he had seen earlier, trees grown into houses. Even though there was too much vegetation to see the inhabitants, he could tell this was a settlement, and much larger than any he had come across so far. Standing still and turning his head he could see that it went all the way up and down the stream in both directions.

He turned around, thinking he should get out of sight first and contemplate the implications later. Unfortunately someone was there looking at him. She must have been behind a bush picking the fruit off it when he walked by, but now that he turned around she was in plain sight. She had already seen him and was starting to stand up.

The native girl seemed quite surprised by the way he jumped when he saw her. She probably wasn't used to having people respond like they had just seen a monster when they

saw her, for she was definitely no monster. She was an attractive young woman dressed only in a wrap-around skirt that didn't wrap around anywhere near far enough around for it left a clear view of the soft brown curls tucked neatly between the tops of her thighs. With a supreme effort of will he was able to take his eyes off that and her wide breasts, and concentrate on what she was saying. "I'm guessing you're tourist and quite startled to find habitation?"

"Yes, I'm just coming down off the desert," he answered.

"So what brings you here?"

"Ah..." he thought fast, "I guess you could say I just wanted to see civilization," his hand indicated the sweep of habitation up and down this valley.

"This is civilization?" she asked.

"It's got to be at least on the way. It's the largest settlement I've ever seen. Is this a city?"

Alan had decided on the spot to change the story of his origin. From now on he was going to use the story that he came from out on the desert fringe, he would use Kartha's cabin as the model of his home. He did this because he thought it was more and more likely he was going to run into someone who knew something about Bostok. There was still a great possibility he would run into someone who knew about the desert, but at least he had seen that. He knew from Kartha that there were people out there who didn't socialize, he was going to claim he came from such a background.

"There's about twenty five hundred here, but it's still

more of a town than a city. Where are you coming from?"

"Out on the desert," he answered, "I guess you might call it the edge of the desert. My family called it forest, but it's desert compare to this."

"Beyond Lenchandai?"

"I'm not sure, I don't know anything about the area below the plains. I passed a settlement on the way down here with about six houses and a couple big guys with black beards sitting on a porch drinking."

"There's hundreds of those upstream of here. So what are you doing now?"

"I wanted to get down to the city. Bostok is the only one I'd ever heard of till early today when someone mentioned the name Hazorpean."

"Hazorpean's another long day's hike from here. You ought to stay here in Yoonbarla for the dark," she pronounced it carefully, like he probably hadn't heard it before. "If you help with the picking you can help with the eating."

"I really couldn't impose," he said in sudden panic, remembering how he had been forbidden to do the same thing again even if it was what a native would do.

"You mean you don't like the cheap hospitality?" she said, trying to hide her hurt.

Alan wasn't sure at this point whether they were both in the same conversation. He thought he knew the language fairly well but maybe he was missing something. The officers would have told him to let her keep her misunderstanding and

get out of there. Instead he wanted to be confident of his communicative ability. “Not at all. You grew this food all year and you would let me eat it if I just helped carry it in? I think that’s more than too generous of you.”

“Maybe nobody told you this, but once you’re out of the desert, plants grow all by themselves just for the joy of being alive.”

“These look like crops to me.”

“Yoon berries?”

Alan was beginning to feel ignorant. These berries were much larger and deeper in color than any he had seen before. “We couldn’t have crops out in the desert.” he stammered.

“Right, well let me tell you about it then. These berries grew here, we didn’t even have to so much as watch them. All we have to do is cut down any trees that get big enough to shade them, trap any pests before they eat them, which you must do out there too because they’re food also, and keep a klizhorn around to eat the bugs.”

“I’m grateful for that information.”

“You’ll stay then?”

“Actually I thought I would just have a meal once I made camp.”

“That’s silly, why camp when you can have a real meal in a house?” she said the word ‘camp’ like he was giving up a selection of fine inns to do so.

“I just don’t understand why you would want to be so generous?”

“Just to get a new face around the place, someone different to talk to. AND get some help eating up this dune of berries.”

“You have extra?”

“Sometimes we can’t eat up half of them.”

“That’s amazing.”

Alan was surprised to find these people didn’t have a problem with survival. Once again he could not come up with a reasonable excuse for refusing native hospitality. He immediately began to worry about the trouble this would cause with the crew. He made up his mind that he was not going to stay long. He would stay to eat, it would be a welcome change from his rations. Then he remembered what a fuss they had made when he stayed for lunch with Kartha and thought he should change his mind. That would make him look like a fool. If this girl wasn’t dressed like this maybe he could keep enough wits about him to figure out what he should really do in this situation.

At least he didn’t need to be told how to pick berries. He could see she was taking only the ones that were bright blue.

“So what are you going to do in the city?” she asked.

“I’ve been thinking about getting an education. It’s occurred to me that I’m terribly ignorant in just about every way, and I’d like to do something about that.”

“What do you want to learn?”

“I’ve got a rather unfocused interest in Biology and

History.”

“Can you read?”

“No, I can’t do that either, like I said, I’m pretty ignorant.”

“I can’t really read much either,” she said. “I can puzzle out signs and things like that phonetically, but to sit down and read a book would take me a decade. I’m not even real sure of all the letters.”

“I don’t even know what writing looks like.”

“There’s a girl right here in town that teaches if you’re interested. She knows quite a bit of history too.”

“Does she have a class starting soon?” Alan didn’t think he was going to get away with his secret plan anyway, but it wouldn’t hurt to know. Maybe he could even bring it up to Alfred and get him to endorse it.

“She doesn’t really have classes, there aren’t enough people around.”

“What would she charge for private lessons?”

“She doesn’t really charge. Sometimes she says something about it, but that’s just to find out if you’re serious.”

As they were picking, another native approached, a male only an inch or so taller than the woman, darker of skin and lighter of hair. He was reasonably husky, more so than Kartha.

“Who’s this?” he asked.

“A traveler from the desert,” the girl answered, “I told

him he could eat with us if he helped pick.”

“Just don’t tell the cooks you’re taking their business,” he chuckled.

“The way they fleece tourists, they deserve it.”

“What do they do?” Alan asked.

“They have a hard time keeping the same price for everyone,” the girl said.

“You can’t expect travelers to be carrying local pennies” the guy said.

“Maybe not, but they ought not charge a whole iron for a simple meal.”

“So what brings you this way?” the guy asked, maybe to change the subject.

“I’ve never been anywhere, I wanted to see what was down the other side of the plains.”

“I see,” he answered, “You must not be that old?”

Alan thought as fast as he could to figure out his age in local terms. “Just had my three decades,” he answered, feeling a bit native already.

“Just barely grown. Is this your first trip away from home?”

“That’s right.”

“So welcome. What are you called?”

“Alan.”

“I’m Yhomaire,” he answered, and held his hand up. Almost too late Alan remembered the native equivalent was to press or slap palms. “This is Pneika.” She laced her fingers

thru his for a second when he pressed her palm. Alan hoped it was appropriate to smile back at her when she did. Her attire still kept his temperature high.

They soon finished that berry bush and went on to get a few other things from different kinds of plants as they worked their way toward the house. There were some where he had no idea what he was supposed to pick and had to ask, it was usually the small leaves and buds. Both the man and the woman were aware that crop plants didn't grow in the desert, so he had an excuse for not knowing anything about them. He congratulated himself for switching origins. They were helping him as if they were his parents.

They led him to a house that was, as he thought, grown out of a living tree. It was on the bank of a small ravine at the bottom of this valley. The whole house seemed to be one long room, part stone, part grown wood, with a thick rug in front of a fairly large fireplace. There were built-in shelves, and a couple large cushions much like Kartha had.

The front of the room had a wooden floor, in the center of which was a fairly large but plain table with four rough stools around it, definitely home-made from saplings and slices of larger trees, and one large, ornate chair of carved wood with minimal upholstery, much like an ancient throne. A large shelf with a basin something like the one in Kartha's house overhung stairs to a floor below. Behind it was a tiny fireplace whose hearth was level with the wide lip of the basin, but it was so extensively used as a shelf that it couldn't

possibly be used for cooking.

From the front of this room an open stairway or railed ladder went up to a floor almost fifteen feet above that would be somewhat smaller in the arch of the limbs that built this house. The front of the house curved out in a shallow 'V'. There were mats rolled up under the eaves, just like the ones all the walls were made of in Kartha's house. Maybe a different manufacturer, maybe not. Beyond there was a wide balcony reaching completely around the front curve of the house. He wandered out there to look around.

There was a narrow cobblestone street below. Beside it, right at the base of the foundation of the house opposite, was a small stream. He could see a door in the foundation under this house that the stairway must lead to. All the other houses seemed to have the same arrangement, a stone foundation and a grown structure above. He noticed that the foundations didn't match up with the houses, in general there were two or three houses on each foundation with narrow stone steps leading up between each foundation. He was able to look up one such path across from this house and see that it lead to gardens much like the ones on this side of the street.

There were quite a few people passing on the street, enough for him to see that the clothes these people wore were typical for the area, except that the other women wore skirts that actually reached all the way around. There were a few people with shirts and pants and a few with just shirts, shorts or clouts. There was certainly no taboo about seeing a

woman's breast in this society, the girls seemed to wear shirts less than the men. He saw that while almost all the natives were in the fifteen to thirty year old range, there were a few exceptions. He noticed one man who might have been fifty, a group of three children, and another girl who was carrying a baby.

A few people looked up at him as they passed. Few seemed to take any special notice. A few were a little surprised, and one rather pretty girl smiled after getting over her surprise.

A wagon went by with eight small wheels, four on each end. It was pulled by one of the large multilegged animals, the ones called kedas. Their legs did get out to the side somewhat and the street was narrow so that there were places one would have to stop to let a wagon pass in the other direction. They didn't give off an odor that he could detect from this distance and seemed lively and alert, not like an alligator.

There was a lot of ornamental detail on most houses, porch rails were fanciful twists of thick vine, with clumps of leaves, large maroon flowers and long string beans. Ornamental candle-holders swung from porch roofs. But the only paint was put on by artists, or people attempting to be artists. There wasn't too much glass, but if there was, it usually had photographs in it and was usually upstairs.

The stone first floors of the buildings seemed like some kind of commercial space because most of them had ornate

signs over the door. Not too many seemed to be open at this time. He wondered if this might be some kind of holiday or Sabbath. The signs gave him his first close look at the writing in use here, and his heart sank. They were covered with big nasty-looking hieroglyphics looking like the worst of Chinese and Arabic combined. The signs were works of art, carved and painted. Shopkeepers here obviously take their signs pretty seriously.

He tried to get a better idea of the technology in use here. He didn't see any complicated mechanical devices, but the breeding, training and grafting of plants was highly developed. There were plastics and beautiful photography, but lighting, cooking and heating seemed to be done only with open wood fires or lanterns.

He watched them preparing the meal, and saw that just about everything that went into it came in from the garden in that one trip or was pinched from the leaves of plants that grew in stands along the front of the kitchen. Both Pneika and Yhomaire did about equal amounts in meal preparation and got Alan to help by getting down a large bowl from a high shelf that they would have needed a stool to reach. They both commented on the advantages of being so tall. That was probably the closest they ever came, to suspecting he was an observer from a starship of an advanced civilization.

He would have to call the meal a salad, it was fruit and vegetables cut up with glass knives and served with a generous amount of a thick sizzling sauce poured over it.

Alan thought it was even better than what he had eaten at Kartha's and definitely better than anything that ever came out of the fabricator on the ship.

"Shall we take you up to Desa's after?" Pneika asked Alan.

"I don't know, what's that?" He really should refuse, he'd been out of contact too long already, even if it was going into sleep shift up there.

"Desa's the only teacher around here," the girl answered while chewing.

But this might be his only chance, he could at least see the location. How much longer could it take to be introduced? "I guess it's all right with me, if it's all right with you and you think she won't mind."

"She probably won't, but if she does, she'll let you know. Desa's not one you need to tiptoe around."

"Do you now if Knume's going to be around?" Yhomaire asked Pneika.

"No way I can tell. I heard he threw Valla out and he's been seen with Luray. He might even stay down at her place."

"I think I'll come along just in case."

They spent a lot of the rest of the meal asking him about life in the desert. Neither one of them had been anywhere near it. They finished, and clean up was quickly dispensed with. They each had a bowl, and what they knew was the native eating utensil, a small, pointed wooden spoon with a 'V' cut in it.

“Let me just find my good cup and then we’ll go on up to Knume’s.” Yhomaire said when they were done.

“I’d like to get a fuck before we go,” Pneika said, “But I’m sure Alan can help me out with that.” She leaned against him and cupped his buttock as she said that. He tried not to jump.

“Sure,” Yhomaire replied, “It shouldn’t take me long to find the cup, I know it’s in the cellar somewhere and it shouldn’t take Alan long, lonely as it is out there.”

“I really can’t,” Alan stammered.

“You can’t?” she asked, like maybe he had a medical problem.

“No, not just like that, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, not everyone finds me attractive.”

“It’s not like that at all, it’s just that I’m not used to it so it won’t work for awhile,” he used as a lame excuse. He could feel the red on his face, but there was no way he could stop it.

Pneika looked hurt like he was really saying ‘I wouldn’t do you with his,’ but looked away and followed Yhomaire down the stairs. He rummaged in the confused pile of junk that filled their lower floor until he came up with an ornate stein with a wooden handle bound on with leather. It had a glass barrel with a photograph cast into it. There was beadwork in the leather and something that looked like feathers hanging off the bottom of the handle.

All this time Alan was getting more and more conscious

of the hours rolling up since he last talked to the ship. The fact that it was night shift made it a little less scary, but they knew he was still awake. It was mandatory that he report in before camping.

Desa

As they led him about a quarter of a mile up the street, he got to see more of the lower floors of the houses. Some did hold workshops, some were just storage, but most were retail shops of some kind. When there were pictures on the signs, they were often photographs of some kind of food. Sometimes the pictures and even the items in the windows were unrecognizable. He would have sworn one was filled with placentas in shallow fish tanks.

Pneika called out for “Desa” from the street in front of a nice looking three-story house.

Within a few seconds a girl appeared on the balcony. Alan was quite impressed with her, in spite of the fact that she wasn't the sexiest girl he had seen so far. She had a well-shaped face with a small chin, and the most beautiful hair he had ever seen. Her figure was very nice, but understated and youthful compared to Pneika or Huneen. Alan was most impressed with her eyes, they were large, round and the warmest brown, full of expression and subtle laughter. “What's doing?” she asked.

“A student for you. He wants to learn reading and history, biology too but that can come later I guess.”

“Is that right?” she asked Alan.

“Yes, if it’s not too much trouble?”

“Not at all, come on up. I see you brought your party cup,” she said to Yhomaire, “But Knume’s not here. He and Larneh are working on that old mother tree by the grotto on the lower track. If they get it down it won’t be till dark and then they’ll probably go straight to Myimpaden, possibly by way of Luray’s.”

“I brought it just in case. Maybe I’ll go back that way.”

They went around the side of the house and up the stone steps between foundations and entered a door halfway up.

“Knume wants to save the keg, but I won’t tell if you get that cup wet,” Desa told Yhomaire from the top of the stairs. “Just fill it from the back still-tap.”

He seemed to know that involved going downstairs. Meanwhile she led Alan and Pneika upstairs. At the top of the stairs was a table which was cluttered with paper printed with intricate patterns that looked something like irregular 19th century lace doilies with tassels. They were labeled with lots of tiny captions in that same writing that was on the signs. He imagined it must be what kind of stitch switch because they often pointed to foci of the patterns. Desa turned left around the table to the huge cushion that snaked all around the front room. This house was a lot like that of Yhomaire and Pneika. It was built much the same way but it had the kitchen in the

back and main room in the front. It was more cluttered with possessions and there was a small upper floor that seemed to be a loft.

Pneika made introductions as they all sat down. Desa sat closer to him than he expected, but he didn't object. Her hair brushed his face and was thrilling. Yhomaire was soon back with a full cup, from which he took a swig, then passed it on.

“So you want to learn reading?” she asked.

“That's right.”

“Do you know the letters yet?”

“No, I'm afraid I don't,” Alan answered.

“So you have to start right at the beginning?” she asked.

“Can you do that?” he asked, “I learn pretty fast.”

“Sure, I just have to find the sheet I have all the letters written on.”

The cup came to Desa, she took some and passed it to Alan. He didn't take any, but just passed it back.

“You don't drink Yaag either?” Pneika asked.

“Not right now,” Alan answered.

“What do you mean either?” Desa asked her.

“He says he doesn't fuck.”

Desa the teacher looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“You don't?”

He wondered if that would be a prerequisite to lessons. “I need a little more notice, a couple days anyway. I'm not very experienced at a lot of things and that's one of them.”

“I see, you're just grown aren't you?” she asked.

This lead to him repeat the story of his origin. This was pretty scary because Desa was familiar with the desert, she said she had once passed thru it. She didn't seem to think he had come out with anything completely improbable however, in fact helped verify his description.

“So when do you want to start?” Desa asked, holding his knee so he had to concentrate on the question.

“I can start any time,” he answered, “but when is convenient for you?”

“Not this Dusk, but how about Nightday?”

“Sure, early or late?”

“Any time,” Desa said.

“What's going on this evening?” Pneika asked.

“Lapnar said he was coming by for supper and the sleep.”

“Lapnar?”

“Yeah, I'm pretty silly to expect him to ain't I?”

“You don't need me to tell you,” Pneika said, “I always thought he was about as dependable as Trastrab weather.”

“I know, but I'm dependable,” Desa said. “Meanwhile I think I'll go down and find the books before I get too much yaag in me,” the cup had come around again. “It looks like you've been camping,” Desa said when she passed it back. That was obvious because he still had his pack with him.

“That's right, it's taken the whole daylight to get here.”

“I wish I could give you Knume's room for the night, but I have no way of knowing if he might come back.”

“So you could stay at our house for Dusksleep,”

Yhomaire told Alan. “Our cushion’s big enough to sleep on.”

“Thanks anyway, but there's no need. I think I should be going now anyway. I’ll be back for my lessons first thing Nightday if that’s all right?”

“Sure, but what’s your hurry?”

They tried to talk him out of it but he held his ground and got out of the house before it was completely dark. They seemed to think he was pretty weird for just leaving like that, but he was beginning to get pretty worried about what the souls on the ship would think of the time that had passed since his last report. It would be real easy to get comfortable with these people. It was really tempting to spend more time with that lovely teacher also. He was afraid that if he didn't leave now his reason would have no power over his glands and he might never get out.

But he also wanted to have enough daylight left to get out of town and set up camp. Kortrax was already behind the mountain, and most of the sky was quite a dark blue. He didn't know how long he would have before it was completely dark.

Once Alan was out of the house he took the path uphill away from the street. It lead thru crops, and then into an area of fruit bushes much like those he had blundered into on his way down. He tripped over a tilted board that was embedded in the ground and got swarmed by a bunch of small animals. Even though they weren't large enough to be harmful as

individuals, the fact that they seemed to be attacking en masse scared him. He scrambled out of that area as fast as possible, with some clinging to him, summoning all his will power to keep from screaming.

After that he crossed an open field as far as possible. He was hoping he would be allowed to come back into this native town this Nightday and follow up on the plans he had just made. He was nervous about doing so because that would expose him to the same native for a considerable length of time and he could tell she already thought he was suspiciously strange from the way she looked at him when he left. His background as a just-grown desert hermit should help explain some of that. As he walked across the field he decided he wouldn't even bring this plan up to the officers until he had completed at least his first lesson. There was no way they would approve of it, but if he made good progress and had a lot of information for them they might be convinced.

If he was going to get back to her house after dark he couldn't push too far back into the woods or he wouldn't be able to see where he was going. He knew that 61 C, Cynd, might give him enough light to see by if he was out in the open, but not in the deep forest. Another thing he had to consider was a campsite that would be safe from any carnivore that happened to come by. At the edges of the forest the brush was thick enough that it would at least give him some warning if one tried to push thru it, and hide his camp

from view by any native that happened by.

The camp site he found was just what the officers would like. It was well off any trail and in such an impenetrable crush of vegetation that there was no way he could be found. Right above it was a large rock he could climb up on and see anything nearby. He could look behind him into the open forest, and turn the other way to look over the thicket and out across the fields. As darkness fell the forest was so quiet that he could have heard anyone within a considerable distance. He gave his usual three short beeps on the call button, and was dismayed that Elmore answered almost immediately.

“It's been four hours and thirty five minutes since your last communication, lets not get into bad habits.”

“I had reason, I've come to a populated area.”

“Are you safe now?”

“Yes, I moved back from it over half a mile before calling you. It's just getting dark here but I'm in a very quiet area where I could hear anyone for a considerable distance.”

“That's good, but couldn't you have called about it sooner? Then my watchdog program wouldn't have bothered me.”

“I'm sorry sir, I thought Glenelle had the duty tonight?”

“She did, but like I said, I scheduled myself if you ran late. We're all worried about what could happen to you.”

“Sir, all I can do is apologize, I'm not an experienced planetary explorer and to me this town was very well disguised.”

“So what have you found?” he asked, giving up the lecture.

“I'm within a day's march of the large valley with the river in it.”

“Yes, go on.”

“I was able to see the valley from an elevated point here. The entire valley floor is populated to an extent that would prevent undetected camping, just like you thought. However there is a town here in the mountains that has plenty of uninhabited country surrounding it. The town begins rather abruptly and unfortunately I blundered into it without realizing it was here.”

“You said that, so what did you find?”

“It's a subsistence farming and lumbering community with some small entertainment facilities, what we would call 'bars'. The people are very hospitable, just like all the others I've encountered so far, exactly like Bostok. My biggest problem with the natives is still finding a reasonably polite way to turn down their invitations to eat, sleep and have sex with them.”

“I hope you found a way.”

“All but the eat sir.”

“I thought you understood we would prefer you even use an impolite excuse if you have to?”

“Sir, you must try and understand it is just not that easy. My prime directive is to pass myself off as a native and the natives are just not that antisocial. They just make it seem so

natural that a traveler would want to stop for supper in a house instead of camping out in the woods and eating rations. The girl was highly insulted, and hurt, when I wouldn't have sex with her." Alan overheard Yhomaire comforting her on their walk up the street when he was gawking in shop windows. 'He's just a kid, he's not ready for you yet.' Should he have told Elmore that also, or just what it felt like to hear it?

"Very well, lets stop the argument for awhile and get on with the report."

"I walked thru part of the town and found it to be technologically more advanced than the areas closer to the desert. They do have some form of photography that works very well, at least for stills. I haven't seen what they refer to as 'movies'. They do have plastic, but it seems to be quite rare. They are very good at grafting and training trees, their houses are mainly constructed of living trees grafted into shape.

"A casual conversation revealed that there is someone in town who may have some knowledge of history. I heard nothing to indicate there is anyone here with advanced knowledge of biology. I did see three children and a baby, not very many for a town whose population numbers are in the thousands. I was asked my age and when I answered, the person remarked that I was 'just grown'. I was in two native dwellings and I did not see any aged or children there. These things might indicate that appearance has nothing to do with

age here.”

“That could be, but we'll draw the conclusions when we have a lot more data. What were you doing in native dwellings?”

“Like I said, it's pretty hard to say no. One of them was the people I had a meal with, it was their garden I blundered into.”

“You were in their garden?”

“Yes sir, I didn't know what it was until it was too late. You have to remember I have never seen a garden before, and these are very different from Earth's farms, as different as the tin can in space where I was grown.”

Elmore let that go and stayed on topic. “Did she accuse you of raiding the crops?”

“Oh no, she asked me if I'd help pick some. They have an overabundance of some crops and hoped I would stay and help eat them up before they went bad.”

“That's good, that may be why they are so tolerant. Normally you would expect a primitive tribe to cook and eat anyone they found in their crops.”

“It's hardly a primitive tribe here, sir, please listen, it's more like a touristy part of the Alpine countryside in the Victorian era. Besides, I wasn't touching any of the crops when they found me, I was walking rather carefully in fact so as not to trip over anything. The ground, even the garden paths, is not like a corridor.”

“I'm aware of that also. Are the people still dressed the

same?”

“No, it's even worse here, the girls hardly ever wear shirts.” He didn't even want to mention Pneika's attire. Let it hold back the progress of science if it would once again, but he just couldn't even talk about it with them on official mission data.

“I can imagine you find it hard to concentrate under those conditions. You'll have to carry on the best you can.”

“I might be able to get used to it,” Alan said, though it felt like a lie.

Elmore snorted when Alan said that, but didn't stop to argue about it. “Were you questioned by any law enforcement personnel?”

“I didn't see one or hear a rumor of one. I haven't heard a political word yet.”

“Well if you do, don't get involved. Listen if you can without attracting attention. If you do find any policemen, be very careful, your jig is up if they ask to see your papers.”

“I haven't seen anyone with papers,” Alan said, “and the way they dress sir, their papers would show.”

“They wouldn't use the same things we do. They might have a tattoo on the bottom of their tongue for all we know.”

“I can look.”

“That was just an example.”

“What would you like me to do next?”

“Can you observe this settlement some more without arousing suspicion?” Elmore asked.

“Easily. I could walk around and window shop and chat with whoever I please for hours. There are lots of loggers and travelers passing thru, many stop here for periods of time. I could probably stop here indefinitely with no trouble, even rent a room for awhile.”

“You won't do that!” He paused, “We'll have you observe it one more day.”

“That would be this coming Nightday.”

“I'm not familiar with native terminology,” Elmore told him, “Whatever tomorrow is.”

“Tomorrow is Nightday. It will be dark but everyone will be up and about.”

“Oh yes, you're on the terminator aren't you?” It sounded like he took the time to call up a screen of Alan's location.

“That means we will lose all of today and tomorrow.”

“The brown dwarf will be up in ten hours or so, about the time the natives will be getting up. I'm very near an open field I can cross to get to the town so I'll be able to get there.”

“That will be quite dangerous.”

“Yes sir, but I think it would be less dangerous for me in town than out in this jungle.” He remembered that girl putting her house fifteen feet up in a tree in these woods. They were quite dark now and some different creatures were beginning to make noises close by.

“That means you'll be getting there just about the time off-shift starts.”

“I guess so sir, the time on this phone say's it's almost six

am Wednesday, so no wonder I'm bushed, it's been over twenty hours.”

“You're the one who wants to keep native time.”

“I'll be fine.”

“Good, get some sleep and we'll talk once you start looking around this town.” With that he cut the channel and left him in the wilds with forty hours of darkness to go.

Book V. Teacher

Child of the Desert

It was a raw Nightday, pounding with rain. Desa was just starting a pan of too many nleets for breakfast when something started happening to the door. It sounded like something was banging up against it or possibly someone tacking a petition to it. She leaned out the kitchen window with the candlantern and saw it was that kid from the outback who wanted to learn to read. He was rapping his knuckle against the door. She guessed it was hard enough to hurt.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Oh there you are, I hope I’m not too early.”

“Early to visit or early to punch up our door?”

“I shouldn’t have knocked? You don’t have a bell.”

“What are you talking about?” Desa asked.

“About knocking on the door. What should one do when one comes to see you? Just walk in?”

“You should lift the latch to do that, not batter your way thru. If you can’t work the door or don’t want to walk in unannounced, just holler from out there. But I’d say hi from inside on a dark like this.”

“Is that what people do in this town, just holler at the door?”

“Most of my life I thought that’s what people did all over

the world, at least the basins I've seen of it. I admit this ain't a mansion with a speaking tube. What did people do when they came over to visit you?"

"Oh; nobody ever comes to visit us, we live way up there with the theirops cubs."

Desa's knees almost buckled from her memory of that, even now. She could picture the cabin, she'd seen them on her way out of the desert and into this basin a few decades ago. A few lichen-encrusted planks and dead sticks, tattered skins stretched over it trying to keep out the wind. Lots of deadwood for roaring fires thru the Dawnsleep, lots and lots of pebble-strewn, thin-air desolation, more hunting than gardening.

She had not talked to the people in those cabins on the desert rim and knew little of what they were like. She had encountered some people in the pass itself. Because he knew enough to want to learn to read, she knew this kid was from a much more educated and mainstream family than that.

"So if you *can* work the door, come inside before you get any wetter."

He came inside, taking awhile to catch sight of her up the stairway. She put the lantern back on it's hook, the stub of what had once been a small branch in the house trunk flanking the chimney. "I don't think I could get any wetter," he said.

He was wearing some upland rough-weave more like a river logger from the lower Minok than the cowled pelt

greatcoats common in the high country. It was now such a sodden mass that it must feel like a storm-downed sail over his shoulders.

“Here, hang those clothes by the fire,” she told him as he began to climb the stairs.

“No, that’s OK, they’ll dry anyway,” he blushed.

“Oh good grief don’t be silly,” she scolded, she wasn’t going to let him get sick here. “If you’re shy I’ll get you a robe to put on. Knume’s’ll be wide on you and mine’ll be short, but I promise they’re clean.”

It was only a few steps up around the other side of the fireplace to the shower compartment, outside of which all three of the household’s robes were still hanging. Valla missed grabbing hers on her way out. She handed Alan Valla’s shower robe. He was SO shy he got out of the soggy pants from under the robe.

“Did you eat yet?” She asked.

“Yes, but you go ahead.”

“It’s already cooking.” Why else would she be cooking it even before he arrived? She really hadn’t expected him for breakfast, but it was lucky she put extras in. Not that she minded, it was nice not eating alone, and there were many extra nleets that she wasn’t really wasting any. Maybe she was pretending Lapnar was actually here when she put them in.

His legs were so long the robe fit him well as a tunic. “Do you mind if I stand near the fire?” he asked.

“Not at all, why would you ask?”

“I don’t want to crowd you.”

“Two are never crowded and I’m not even that close.”

It was not possible to tend the pan with a short enough stick to get that close to the fire. Desa had a big fire going in this damp and chilly weather and this years branchwood was going to be coming in before they could get the hopper cleared from last years. Knume’s fireplace was a semicircle, the focus of the cushion, the table and the sink, flanked by stairways down and up and set in the trunks of the house. A very nice hearth for a house this size. Alan was standing over one end of it near the steps to the bathroom, she was way over here on the kitchen end almost on the stairs. They were close enough to reach each other if they tried. She would have expected him to try and hold her to warm himself, especially at his age. But maybe he was raised differently. Shy people might escape from humanity to the desert. They might even raise children. “I take it people don’t like crowded up where you’re from?” She asked.

“My folks lived up there to get away from people. I hardly ever saw other people till now.”

It was probably even worse than she thought. “Around here people rub up on each other all the time and nobody minds it much. In fact most of us like it.” She certainly did. He was silent, so she continued. “If it happens, don’t let it bother you.” He nodded, swallowed, and continued to shiver by the fire. “So is this your first trip away from your

parents?”

“Oh yeah, and I’ve seen and talked to more people in the last week than in my whole life up till I left. I didn’t know there were so many people.”

“You can’t be serious? Surely your parents must have been somewhere before?” She tried to imagine his life. The parents must be illiterate and not have any books or magazines. Otherwise he surely would have already learned to read on them. But half the houses in Yoonbarla had no printed matter to speak of in them. If there were no other houses around, and your parents don’t read...

“I think they came from Bostok a long time ago.” He said, “They don’t talk about it that much.”

“Are you still in your third decade?”

“Well yeah, I guess you could say that. But aren’t you?”

“No, not me,” she sighed, keeping the nleets turning. “I’m a century and two thirds now, not a lot on a cosmic scale, but the only baby out of my body is my recent history and he’s grown and gone a decade ago. What made you think that anyway?”

She glanced his way and saw that he looked like he suffered some kind of pain or dizzy spell just then and stumbled toward the table. Still he tried to answer her, “Oh just something about the way you look.”

Right now she was more concerned about his condition. “Are you all right?” She asked, dropping the pan on the hearth and springing to help him toward the stool. “Have you

come all this way without food or sleep?” He was thin enough to call malnourished, she could feel that as she caught him. He was surprisingly light but hard. That was probably a normal build out there.

“Oh no, I’m fine,” he said, “just clumsy.” He gently broke contact and stood back up. “I’ve just eaten as a matter of fact.”

“Something Chefyete cooked no doubt?”

“No, at my camp,” he said, making a what’s-a-Chefyete face at her.

“You ate at your camp when there’s a town here? When you could have helped me eat these?” She had the tumuf-hide handle of the pan back in her hand again and shook it over the low flames.

“I’m sorry to intrude on your breakfast. I wouldn’t think it impolite of you to ask me to wait outside until a more reasonable hour for class to start. I have no timepiece.”

“That would be obscene” She almost shouted at him. She held herself back. She took a deep breath and thought of what little training in early childhood she had. This was a very innocent little boy in spite of his size. ‘There is something of the deep desert in him,’ she thought, remembering that pathetic boy at the water hole. ‘He needs to know people will not harm him. Use a gentler voice.’ the teacher in her said.

“Especially with this deluge. You should never think such a thing. It’s more impolite of you to shiver up there in a camp when you could have been by this fire.”

“Did I mention that we weren’t a very social family? I beg your forgiveness if I’m a little conservative in some of my behaviors.”

Especially with expressions like that, she thought and tried not to laugh. She had to take another deep breath and pause. “There is nothing wrong with being social,” she said. “Contact with people is pretty harmless most of the time. Although you might be smart not to get swindled by the Yoonbarla cooks. Tonmar’s honest and healthy, and Chiggeed’s a culinary wonder, but he mostly does feasts. But I don’t think Chefyets washed his caldron yet.”

She was probably just confusing him with all this blather like he was any old tourist hiking thru. He didn’t know anyone around here and wouldn’t have any idea who she was talking about. Besides that, she could see that he was taking it all too seriously. He looked like he really would be afraid of the cooks now. Come to think of it, this could be the first settlement he’d ever seen that had a commercial cook in it at all. He obviously didn’t know anything about civilized life, even such as it was out here in Yoonbarla. He might take any exaggeration as the literal truth. There could be a lot more responsibility in this reading lesson than she planned on getting into. Who knows what he knows and doesn’t know? He might need a mother more than a reading teacher.

Meanwhile Alan was noticing her but trying not to show it. She was dressed in the same thin but warm, clinging robe she'd worn the previous Nightday and Alan reacted with what

seemed like an admiring, if bashful, stare. Being physically admired was a nice change. Because he was shy about it she didn't say anything but didn't hide herself either and stood so he could see that she had some resemblance to female shape.

She wondered if it might be a bad idea to get him attracted, he was obviously a bit strange. What would he know of social interaction with any woman other than his mother? Who knows how his mother had acted with him? She didn't want to think about that route. But she couldn't deny that he could be attractive if he only had some hair, and an eager young man could make giving lessons a bit of fun. He was very tall and thin with thick dark-blond hair that might be nice if it wasn't so short. His beard was also too short and thin, but that might be his youth. He was thin and smooth, more like a city person than someone from out on the desert rim, but once again, that could be youth. He might not have finished his third decade. Sometimes it was not good to bed someone that young. Talk to Knume about where that can lead.

She wondered how well he was going to learn. If he turned out to be stupid she would soon send him on his way and tell him to forget intellectual pursuits. If he was intelligent she might be able to do him quite a bit of good. It was obvious from meeting him last Afternoonday and these few minutes today that he had some pretty weird notions. His upbringing might make it impossible for them to relate.

“I could write out the letters for you while these are

cooking,” she said, “I never did find that alphabet paper I used to have.”

“Sure, but I think you’re going to need more time than these little things will take cooking to write them all out.”

“Why? There’s only forty two of them and they’re designed to be easy to draw.” She got paper and quill and sat at the table while he stayed by the fire. “You’ll have to come over here if you want to see.” He did so, his hair still dripping a little.

He didn’t need to actually leave the fire, just move to the middle of the fireplace from the edge. “I’m surprised there’s only forty two letters,” he said, “I thought I would have to learn those big hieroglyphics.”

Desa explained that... “They aren't hieroglyphics at all but a logical and consistent way of writing down the sounds of speech.”

It took awhile before she understood that he was mistaking a syllable for a letter. ‘That proves his family’s illiterate all right,’ she thought. She had to explain how syllables were put together and explain the rules for the order of letters in a syllable. Some of this got him confused.

“That’s a lot of trouble. Why not just put one letter after another?” he asked.

“It would take up more room and then you wouldn’t know which syllable each letter was in.”

“They could just leave a bigger space or something.” “It doesn’t matter,” she told him. “Almost all the lands write

this way and have since the 40's. If you want to read any of the vast majority of what's already written down you'll have to learn it this way.”

She let him start on the first book while she went back to the fire to tend her breakfast. Starting to read is a slow task at first. He had to ask the sound of just about every letter, which is normal, and made quite a few mistakes with letter order, which is also normal. He needed to stand by the fire for the heat anyway, he was still shivering. She probably should have gotten him a fur instead of a robe.

The first part of her first stage reading book had one word beside each picture with the word being the name of whatever was in the picture. This usually helped quite a bit because you could figure out the word from the picture. Unfortunately he had been so isolated that he didn't know what a lot of the things were. Some of them he definitely should have known. Lentas are common on the high plains but his first guess at the word was ‘meat’ so that explained a lot. He spared no effort however and plowed ten pages into it by the time the nleets were done.

“You seem like you are going to pick it up in a couple days, Desa told him, “You do learn fast.”

“It's easier than I thought it would be.”

“There is no sense making it harder than necessary. Reading was designed to make information interchange among people easy, not difficult. Are you sure you don't want some of these?” She offered him a nleet, they had come out

quite well, not burned anywhere and hot in the middle.

“I guess I could fit one or two.” He took it, acting like he had never tasted one before. “Are they made from inglethor?”

“They grow on a vine like larorlie but up in the back field, don't you have them out there?”

“We were too far out for crops, we get a freeze every week. Most everything we eat grows wild. Almost all life is weekly.”

They were WAY up. Maybe they were out in the pass itself? Maybe he hardly ever ate anything that wasn't scrounged from inglethor? “That must make life pretty hard,” was all she could think to say about it.

“It keeps us busy hunting and gathering, but that's good in a way because there isn't anything else to do.”

“I can assure you life is a lot easier here. All you have to do is pick stuff and maintain the garden a little.” What could it be like when every day was a fight for survival? Like the trip thru that pass had been. ‘Will I find water? Will I be able to use it? Will I find anything to eat? Will I be eaten?’ He didn't look or talk like the feral caricatures of humans that lurked around the water hole deep in the pass. He also didn't volunteer a lot of information, she had to give him credit for that. “It can get boring around here,” she said as a way to make conversation, “We don't have survival to keep us busy.”

“But that's another reason I'm so ignorant, there isn't time for any learning.”

Alan read a few more words while Desa wasn't talking to

him, and continued to ask her letters. On the list she had divided them into vowels/glides and consonants, and grouped them by sound. She could see Alan already knew the vowels and was beginning to figure out some words on his own without asking any letters.

By the time they were done eating and she had washed the pan, he was up to the part where there was a sentence beside each picture and not just a word. Alan was now dry, so she invited him over to the cushion. He sat on the end nearest the fire where there was the most light and she lay down and curled around him on the back of the cushion by the table so she could see how he was doing. He jerked forward away from her, obviously repulsed by the contact with her person. He remained sitting up on the edge of the cushion.

Not only was that crushing to her self-esteem, especially after he had looked at her warmly moments before; with him leaned forward like that she couldn't see as well. A part of her felt like jumping up and saying 'if you find me that repellent then get lost Find some other way to learn how to read. I got better things to do with my Nightday than finding out some skinny kid from the outback thinks I'm too gross to touch '

But once again, what would one really act like if one had grown up as he had? She stifled the anger and sat back up on the end of the cushion beside him. She should try to find out what is happening in his mind, like why did he look like a terrified refugee when she looked at him?

“You pulled away like I was a quibarta or something. Did I make you uncomfortable?”

“Well no, I thought I might be making you uncomfortable. I didn't mean to bother you, I didn't think it would be polite to just lean on you like that.”

“It bothered me that you pulled away, that's considered an insult. I know you're here on business and I know I'm not the sweetest cuddle-person in the world, but it hurts to think I'm so repellent that you can't stand any contact with me.”

“It's not anything like that,” he choked, “absolutely not.” He looked genuinely aghast. “I never knew such beauty could exist in human form until now. Just being in the room with you makes it a little hard to concentrate on learning, touching you would make it impossible.” He delivered that line with more seriousness than the best actor she had ever seen in either the Dos or Zhindu cinema, even in a well-produced romantic comedy.

She was starting to laugh before he even finished saying it but immediately stifled it, so it might have sounded like a hiccup. Were he a normal person that line was an obvious mass of gas, but he just might be serious. Who would he have seen after all? His mother and how many other females?

“Now you're talking like I'm a Kyeban siren or something,” was all she said.

“I don't know what a Kyeban siren is, but you do emit a sensation something like you are very highly charged.”

That was a strange way to describe it, but she knew the

feeling he was talking about. You got it from plastic furs on clear sunny Afternoondays, a tingling on the skin. She remembered getting the same feeling from Rendrak. She got that feeling quite often inside, but rarely on the surface. She knew enough physics to know that the feeling you got from furs was due to an overabundance of electrons and enough about biology to know that the one you got from people was due to an overabundance of hormones.

It took her just a bit of thought to understand that he might possibly react that way to her if he'd had no social life. In a healthy male body almost a decade past puberty, and with no female acquaintance other than his mother, the hormonal pressure might be explosive. From what he said about his parents he might not even know the reason for the feeling and it might scare him. It made her a little happier that he was having it, at least he didn't think she felt like a deformed and ancient monster.

It struck her as strange that he should know the word 'charge'. It was a pretty technical term for someone with no learning at all. It was even more unusual that he would know enough about it to use it metaphorically. She couldn't dwell on that mystery, she had to deal with this situation as it was. Almost subconsciously while she thought, she was about to put her arm around him as she normally would with someone who was feeling attracted to her, but before actually making contact, thought better of it. That would only make him feel more pressured. "So you would rather I wasn't in contact with

you?” she asked.

“I... well; what is proper in this situation? My parents weren't that great at teaching manners.”

“I was the one cuddling to you,” she said. “I was going to like the position I was getting into.”

“But then all I could think about would be you, I couldn't do any reading.”

She could only sigh about that, what could she say? ‘Then let's relieve the pressure first?’ He clearly couldn't handle it. They started on the reading book again with Desa sitting up beside him and teaching him from a distance. This was when she gave up the idea that she would get any sex from him after these lessons. She had to admit that this development made her concentration wander somewhat. He was asking her letters and she was wondering if she would be hungry enough to go out after. Lapnar, of course, had not come by for Dusksleep so that very unsatisfying encounter with Enva last week was still her last.

Knume was already down at Myimpaden finalizing plans for next Nightday. There would be plenty of other lumberjacks around and no doubt she could provoke one, but he would think of the encounter as friendly exercise. She remembered the preceding Nightday and realized that exercise wasn't what she wanted.

Teaching this kid would be a better use of the day. He was learning pretty fast, going past five pictures while her mind took that wander.

He came to an abrupt stop when he came to the word 'fuck' (yshi). "I thought you said this was a child's first reading book?"

"It is."

"With that in it?"

"Yeah? it's a pretty easy and common word."

"But for kids?"

"How do kids happen?" she asked rhetorically. "I think maybe your sex problem is more than just inexperience. Did your parents do some deviant things to you?"

"Oh no, no way. They hate sex, they think it's the root of all evil."

"That sounds pretty deviant to me" She had to convince herself to calm down again. Try to reason this thru with him, "If they hate sex they must have produced you in a lab?"

That hit him hard, either that or he was having a second heart attack, but he denied it. "Oh nononono, they had me, but they think sex should only be allowed to create a child."

"Allowed? Should? I don't understand you." Maybe they thought God should have put some corollary into physics or biology that would prevent the organs from functioning unless conception would take place? Or maybe they were advocating some lab cooking up a mod that would remove desire from everyone who didn't plan on parenthood? Probably some lab had somewhere, but she doubted that it sold very well.

"I'm just telling you what they told me, I don't understand

it either. Why don't you tell me how it should be?"

"Most people think sex is a very pleasant activity that people enjoy and some think it's a sign of great affection."

"Which are you?" he asked nervously.

"I'm in favor of both." She just gave him an honest answer without trying to figure out what it would do to him. He was going to have to learn to deal with human interaction sometime.

He didn't say anything more, just looked at her awhile till his breathing slowed and then went back to the book trying to puzzle out the sentence under the next picture. Here it was about play, and the picture showed a group of people in kayaks passing bottles of yaag and grabbing for each other's paddles and splashing.

She had him read out loud so she had some idea of how he was doing. He did so, sounding out each letter, getting the syllable together, seeing if it meant anything, then moving along to the next. Once the whole sentence was together, he said it over as it should be said. As reading it wasn't fast, but compared to illiteracy he was flying. Usually by now it would be a lot of 'what's this', 'k', 'but how does it sound together?' 'kn',... Worse than that, there had been many times she had to spend hours trying to get a person to grasp the concept that marks on paper could represent the sounds of speech. This kid had walked into the room knowing that, once she had drawn out the letters it was more like, 'thanks, that's just what I needed to know'.

It took him some time, but the pictures gave a lot of clues to what the sentence was about and he already knew how to talk pretty well. His speech was a little accented, not surprising from way up there. Not quite as accented as Dos, much less the tribes in the pass. She thought she might even hear a little Bostok heritage in his speech, but that was so close by, her ear wasn't sharp enough. There was little danger of encountering a word that wasn't in Alan's vocabulary however. She still had to help with some of the less common letters but he already knew all the common ones. All he would really need to do now was practice.

“After awhile you get to recognize the words at once don't you?”

“Oh sure, most of them. You already remember the ones you've pieced out before.”

“This isn't going to be that hard, but it's going to take some time.”

“Like anything else.”

He set off into the book again. It ended with a very simple little story of ways to cross a river, meant to be administered to a child about one decade old. He seemed to know it would be like that. If he knew that there was such a thing as education, he couldn't be from a background of pure tribal primitiveness. She remembered the tribe living out in the oasis in the pass. Children or even adults from there would not have understood the concept of non-verbal information storage. This kid's parents obviously came from a better

background than that. Though they didn't know how to read, they knew that it was possible to read. That was also probably consistent with coming from a civilized portion of this basin like Bostok. "So what caused your parents to move that far out into the wilderness?"

"They never told me. In fact they would never tell me much of anything about their past."

She could see that he was quite nervous about it. "It's nothing to worry about, if you really don't know or don't want to talk about it you don't have to."

"I feel like such a dummy for not knowing." He lowered his voice, "and I'm also ashamed that they don't think enough of me to tell me."

That must be a pretty awful feeling. "Well you're out of that now. Most people won't be like that, it's not often that people keep something like that a secret. My past is not secret."

"It's just that they're my parents."

"I can see how that would be pretty painful. But I think it's more likely they have something to be ashamed of than you do. Whatever problems they have, you don't have to inherit them." She hadn't studied the learning deprived. Yeah, she'd taught elementary reading a dozen times in Yoonbarla, but almost all of her student hours of teaching were at university level and most were specialized in the history of the yandrille. She hoped she wasn't doing this tender soul harm with her answers.

He went on with the reading. She helped him but wondered what it would really be like to grow up with parents who were on the run? It was so inconceivable that they could have refrained from slipping up and letting some of it come thru. That little was all he had.

He was easily distracted from the reading by the wonders of the world portrayed in the book. He asked where the pictures were taken. Some of them she knew, some she didn't. Most of the city scenes were taken in Zhindu, most of the country scenes were taken somewhere on the basin floor except for one which was probably taken in the rolling hills of Elevnos nine hundred miles north of here.

He kept asking questions about everything. She found herself rambling on about such things as the genetics of house breeding and the economic statistics of mid-basin agriculture. She didn't know how much of it was making any sense to him, probably very little, but he sat and drank it all in hungrily, trying to act like he understood it all but clearly misunderstanding a great deal.

Alan was spellbound by the fact that sound could be recorded on film and wanted to know all about how it was done. A moment later she realized he got lost somewhere around the frequency domain translation mirrors in the glitterbox. She thought maybe they should get back toward the subject and keep things more in order, so she pointed him back to the reading book. She could see that this much

techno-babble was making him uncomfortable anyway.

By now he was acting a little more like a normal youngster. He still noticed if she sat close enough that their thighs touched he would allow that contact to remain. He still actually jumped if her breast happened to touch his arm, but he let her put her hand on his shoulder. This was still a long way from most guys his age, she remembered how tiring teaching them could sometimes be. Some needed a sex break every couple hours.

After another hour he got tired of reading aloud and just asked her letters he forgot. She slid back farther on the cushion and before long they were lying side by side so he could just hold the book out and point to the letter in question. He was done with the book by the time the candle died, quite a remarkable feat if he really hadn't known anything about reading.

“All you need now is practice.”

“I still don't know a lot of the letters. I wish there was some way I could write down how they sound.”

“The letters *are* the way to write down the sound. It's these four that you really don't know too well and they are so rare that you could survive without them. After awhile you'll know what they are just from the words they're in.”

“I guess that means we're all done?” he said with some disappointment in his voice.

Could it be that this was all an act to spend some time with her? It was the hard way to go about it, and didn't really

fit the way he was acting. He seemed to almost *like* being close by now, but not too close. If she cuddled up to him he would move away, but he always smiled when he looked at her and definitely noticed she was female. He still wouldn't say a word about it, but his words actually fit his actions the best, that he would be too overcome to continue his learning. Perhaps it would be better to get it out in the open but he got so embarrassed when talking about himself that she decided to stick to business.

“Maybe you have something else you want to learn?” she asked, “No doubt you're tired of reading for now.”

“A little, maybe later I could do a little more but they told me you might know something about history.”

“A little, it depends on what you want to know.”

“The main thing I'm curious about is how humans began?”

Desa had to laugh. He looked bewildered and a little frightened. Why he should be afraid of her laughter she had no idea. Anger she could understand, fear made no sense.

But she answered his question, “There are plenty of other people who would like to know that too, but nobody does. It's the most important unanswered question in science. Most religions provide an answer and there are two main scientific theories, the created theory and the imported theory.”

“I know a few religious theories already. I've never heard either scientific theory, so tell me about them.”

“They both involve the Saggothans.”

“What are they?”

Not surprising that he didn't know of them, few who weren't history scholars did. She went thru them both with him in more detail than most young men would be interested in, but he kept her going till he knew as much as she did on the subject.

“And what are some more of the religious theories?” Alan asked. “Are humans created in God's own image/form?”

“Yes, those beliefs are quite common.”

“My parents believe there is one God who has no physical manifestation but who created and controls the whole universe, and fathered a son to die for our immortals souls.”

“Crucifixionism. Was it Scientific Crucifixionism by any chance?”

“Maybe; they did have a scrap or two of scientific knowledge.”

“Sounds like they might have had a falling out with their establishment.”

“Maybe that's why they're such hermits,” he told her, “They made it sound like billions of people worship Him regularly.”

“Well yeah, in all the lands I guess there could be a couple/few billion Crucifixionists. There's only twenty or thirty million Crucifixionists in this basin at most and only six or seven Christs with more than a million followers.”

“Now what exactly does the word Christ mean?” Alan asked.

“Someone who claims biological descent from a divine God himself.” Desa told him, “What else would the word mean?”

“So how many prophets claim that they are the direct Son of God in all the world's religions?” he asked.

“Oh I don't really know,” she tried to think, “thirty, maybe forty thousand altogether. Counting the Christs that were female and/or of Gods personified as female. I'm not an expert on religion however.”

“Do you have a religion?” he asked, it was only fair.

“I admit there had to be a mother God that planned this universe, but I don't think she gets that personally involved in the affairs of the world, much less reproduces here. I think she decides the big important things like designing the laws of physics so life can develop. The universe itself might be her physical manifestation.” That gave him something to ponder awhile.

Using up a candle meant that Nightday was half over and it was a good time to break for lunch. She got up to poke up the fire and wander over to the bins. There was enough thesh and vedn flour for a good batch of dusted rolls in the open bags and all that fresh rinko to stuff them with. She pulled enough thesh for two fatties and wet it down to mat it. He noticed that she was doing something and seemed quite interested. He came over and watched, but didn't ask any questions about lunch. Instead he followed up the previous

discussion with one of the most preposterous questions she had ever been asked.

“From what you said I take it religion isn't required around here?”

She was actually dusting the thesh with a handful of flour to help it stick when that hit her and she wafted the flour over the basin while buckling up with laughter. He looked really worried by her mirth, but she couldn't help it.

Before she could stop he very timidly said, “I guess my parents gave me some false notions about things?”

That made her bubble up again just when she thought she was getting it under control. “Yes, yes, they gave you some false notions. Religion is not required. I would say eating, breathing, pissing, shitting, finding a temperature that will keep the water molecules in your body liquid are required. I would even throw in sleep though I know people who claim there are drugs that can cure that. Speaking of drugs,” it could be he'd NEVER had this warning, “there are many you can get addicted to, to the point where *they* are required. I don't indulge in any of those myself and will not offer you any. People who enjoy certain levels of creature comfort or civilization will tell you other things they think are required. The God I believe in is the one who got to choose what really IS required.”

He was silent awhile after that, she could see him slowly cheering up until he was able to ask, “Papers aren't required?”

“Only if you want to write something down or you got

nothing else to smoke your rord in.”

“The world sounds a lot less scary than they said it would be.”

“Well; welcome to reality. Relax, you're out of the desert now. All you do down here is find something to keep yourself occupied between meals. Just about everybody likes it that way. Unless you find out otherwise, question everything your parents told you that you haven't verified by experiment. Down is still down, but you might not find another of their exact religious sect anywhere in the world. I don't know that, there may be a thousand in Hazorpean for all I know. Personally I haven't cared enough to pay a scraped bead to find out.” His parents might very well have made up their own religion and gone out there to lose themselves in it.

“So far I like what you tell me about the world a lot better than what they did.”

“I'm glad to hear that,”

“What's the most dangerous thing I could encounter around here?” he asked.

She was already stuffing the rolls, she didn't have to look up or pause for an of-course like that. “Theirops; always will be till you get out on the flat, then you might run into a leese or even a kranjan. They're worse and much worse.”

“No pirates or slave traders?”

“I'd rather lose my pouch to a pirate than my flesh to a theirops and slave traders exist only in religious legends, historical fantasy movies from Kyeb or Borlunth and dusty

old history texts in the catacombs of university libraries.”

“That's good to hear. Anyway, seeing as you're starting lunch I better be getting back to camp.”

She wanted to react to that without thinking, screaming ‘what what what’ at him. ‘What do you think I’m doing here? Shall I try to sell the extra?’ She took a deep breath once again, but only calmed down a little. “Just when I thought you were starting to catch on to normal, you come out with some preposterous line like that. Or is it that you can't stand thesh rolls?”

“It's not like that at all. I'm just afraid to eat up all your food on you.”

She made a noise, “We have a garden big enough for three or four but lately only one or two of us have been home.”

“What happened to the others?” He asked reverently like maybe they had fallen victim to a theirops.

She explained how completely mundane the situation really was. “Well one of them is my sister/child Valla but she's been in this gross affair with a creep named Mappu down at the 'Bit of Borlunth’.” She saw on his face that she might as well have been been speaking Mythra. “That’s a commercial sex den in the center of this village. Knume, who used to be her man and actually owns this house, threw her out because he hates Mappu with a blind, flaming passion. Meanwhile Knume’s been down at Myimpaden, that’s a back-path yaag still, or at Luray's, the last two sleeps. I've been

alone here half the meals since last Nightday, and on that one I wasn't home.”

“Does that mean the food will get wasted if I don't stay?”

“Eventually. I'd like you to stay, I made this fat one for you, because I know the appetite of just-grown guys. I had one of my own just a couple decades ago. Forgive me for trying to use up our food surplus on you, but part of my religion is ‘waste not nature’s bounty’. It will take half an hour for these to bake, you could try and get me to understand about life in the desert till then.”

He really had to stop and think. And eventually ask again.

“You have a problem with extra food?”

“Just yesterday I couldn’t get the leshin in because we haven’t quite emptied the bin from last year. We got even more than that of thesh left and we won’t get a chance to bring any of this year’s in till Iyosaign.”

And then he thought about that some more. From all the different levels of surprise and shock on his face she could see the difference the level of survival made in a personality. He must have never encountered the problem of having too much food before. He had probably never imagined that such a problem could exist. His mind digested the meaning of that. So did hers.

“In that case I’ll be delighted to join you for lunch. I’m indebted to your hospitality.”

“I’m glad for the company. I’m having such a hard time really feeling what it must have been like to grow up there.

You've been hardened by a harsh, harsh life my young friend. We're fat and lazy down here in the jungles of the foothills."

"You don't look it to me. You look sleek and prosperous yes, but not fat or lazy. What you are is kind, far too kind perhaps. I don't feel I can ever repay the debt I owe you."

"You don't owe me at all. A Nightday's lesson in reading." She waved it off like it was nothing.

"A lesson in much more than that. I feel like I've already studied several subjects, genetics, housing, audio. I've learned about subjects I never knew existed."

He was still standing up, fidgeting a little. He stood by the fire going over his clothes as they finished drying.

"I'm sorry but I really do have to take a walk."

"We have a bathroom right up those stairs over there if you'd rather."

He actually laughed at that. "No, it's not that. It's just that I've been walking for two days straight. I'm going to stiffen up if I sit still much longer."

She could understand that, she still had a twinge from her Dawnsleep/Morningday consultation with the mountain. "Is that why you wanted to go back to your camp?"

"That's part of it, but mainly I thought it was impolite to mooch other people's food."

"You shouldn't, a lot of the food that grows in this town gets wasted."

"I'll try to control my guilt then, but is it OK if I do take a stretch?"

“Yes, yes, go take a stretch, your clothes gotta be dry by now.”

He took them up to the bathroom to put them on. The rain had almost stopped but the world was still wrapped in total dampness. Desa wrapped the rolls in wet chassa leaves and put them in the coals under a bowl to bake.

“I won't go far,” he said on his way by.

Lessons in Life

Desa was extremely confused by this kid. Sure there was something to be said for getting a little exercise, but it seemed more like he was afraid to be alone with her with no business to conduct. And why had he suddenly run off the previous day? Did he have some other urgent business? What bothered her most about the situation was that it bothered her, that she was feeling responsible for him already. He's a space-case from the desert. She knew better than to get involved in this with only a week to go before her trip.

She tried to imagine his point of view but knew she wasn't even starting to get the feel of it. Intellectually she knew a life like his was possible. She had seen the savages and the hermits on her way thru the pass. No doubt every one of the cabins up there had a different story inside it, some other reason to leave humanity behind. Some problem like a falling out with a fundamentalist church, some idols destroyed, a

shunning; and before you know it, there's another lonely cabin with another lonely story. And a victim child stumbling out of it.

She went thru a few 'couldn't be that bad' loops. Before long she noticed she was daydreaming of him coming back and saying the act was over and hadn't he had her going with it.

It was a fairly long time before he was back, nowhere near as wet this time for the rain was now just sprinkles.

"Are you loosened up now?"

"Oh yeah, I feel great," he said, but nervously.

"Are you hungry? These rolls have been done for awhile."

"Yeah, and I promise to try not to act too guilty about sharing them."

While they ate Desa couldn't help noticing that Alan was acting like he'd never had these rolls before. It wasn't just because he was too profuse in telling her how good they were. That was a broad-farce comedy skit. There was also the way he held it, gingerly like it was going to fall apart. It could be that his parents didn't know how to mat a good wrap and he was used to brittle ones? Or maybe the upland these didn't hold?

"You certainly live better here in the valley than we do up in the desert," he told her.

"This is still a day's hike from the valley," she told him, "I call this foothills, lower central Wescarp. But besides that, people do tend to take the best land first."

“How tough is life in the valley?”

“A little easier than this in some ways. The farms are a little too big for the amount of city around here so the plotters have too much cropland and not enough money, so some of it gets a little weedy.”

He seemed surprised, “Oh? Why do they have too much land?”

“The genetic improvements in agriculture since the land ownership patterns were established. The valley floor has been dry land since the 32nd.”

He looked like he had to think about that statement awhile. “That’s very interesting.” He paused, then asked, “Do you know how Bostok compares to other cities of the world?”

His eyes glowed so with curiosity that she had to take his question seriously. It seemed Bostok was the only name he’d known of the outside world up till now. “Bostok is another small city in central Wescarp something like Hazorpean or Baizion. It’s quite pretty in a small city way, but Noonitondow gets all the movies because of the university there and it’s twenty times bigger. Bostok is actually prettier. It’s also closer to Lastriss than Hazorpean is.”

“Are people the same there as everywhere?”

“I would guess so, I mean in general. Every person is different in some ways but I spent a couple weeks there once and met lots of nice people. I didn’t notice anything unusual about them as a group. Is this because you think your parents came from there?”

“Yes, and it’s the only city I’ve ever heard anything about.”

“It’s a nice place, if I was from there, I think I’d’ve stayed there instead of wandering out into the desert after some God. I liked my visit there better than any one random trip to Hazorpean even though it’s so much farther. Bostok is exactly at the edge of the flat, it’s streets slope, it’s docks are on still water. Hazorpean may be a little bigger, but it’s nothing but an industrial plasticland built on that dam.”

“Hazorpean is industrial ?” He said this like his family might have been out in that pass since some scarier age of history.

“The sawmills mostly, some coachworks, stonecutters and brickbakers. Nothing real scary. On the world scale they’re one of the little dots that loads the ships bound for Zhlindu.”

“What’s that?” he asked, his eyes still wide like a young child’s.

“The great city in the middle of the basin.”

“And what’s that like?”

“Like the pictures I’ve been showing you.”

“I saw that, but what are the people like? What’s the economy like?”

“I’ve mentioned the numbers, but personally I think the pictures just show a lot of people hanging out partying and not a whole lot of economy. A week from Morningday I’m going there to find out for myself.”

It was incredible to think he could have been so isolated

out there that he wouldn't even know the name of the basin's main city, the city the basin was named for. She knew the names of the fifty three largest cities in the world when she was just a tyke. But then she'd been in a semi-clannish neighborhood a few hours hike from one of Dos's outer northwestern centers. She was still with her mother then, only blocks from lake Yyleendaah, a much different environment to grow up in than the bleak skirts of the Kinsheeta.

All this time Alan was stuffing his face fast enough that she should have heard his teeth whir. She should have made him at least two rolls, instead she gave him a bunch of gloribards to see if those would stick his teeth together a little.

"These are fabulous," he said.

"You don't have them up there either?"

"No, I never knew something like this existed."

"They're common, they grow wild in the valley."

"Oh my God" was what he actually, literally exclaimed.

He ate them eagerly. He might have eaten more than that bunch, but she didn't want to pawn the whole surplus off on him. She could see by the way he was so slender that the desert rim was obviously a tough place to make a living. She found the remains of a cake Valla had baked more than a week ago. A little balloonleaf jelly softened it up enough to make a desert, and he liked that too.

They were now completely done eating. In fact they were out of prepared food. He did help clean up, more than efficiently; biologically sanitarily. She let him go, it more

than made up for the cooking. He did a whole week's cleaning in the kitchen so she wouldn't have to do much after Morningday breakfast.

He commented on the artistry of the kitchen implements. He was unreasonably impressed that the color of the designs was inside the glass. He thought pictures would be painted or pasted on the outside where they would quickly wear off. If he had never seen pictures before that could explain why he was so fascinated by the pictures in the books.

They went over to the cushion after, and began on the second reading book. This book wasn't very long, and wasn't really much more advanced than the end of the first one. Each picture told a story like 'Elza, Klubi and Barfet walk home with their tackle after fishing at sunset.'. If anything this book was even prettier than the one before it. She'd bought it as much for the photography, as a book it was practice. The scenes were of the lives of children a decade older than those in the first book, just about to reach puberty. She had loved those years with Dara.

When they took a break a little later on she asked him about his life on the desert and was treated to tales of harsh survival. He talked of the stars and she told him the names of the five points. She knew those and some of the nearer stars, but was not an expert. She told him what little she knew of the nuclear physics of stars. She thought he wouldn't understand the concepts. Instead she could see he was

shocked, like he was on the edge of a high place. “That seemed to scare you?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t call it scared, I just never knew how much knowledge there was. You mean people actually know how stars work?” He was stammering a little as he asked that and looked a little pale.

“People who study such things think they do, nuclear reactions fusing hydrogen atoms into helium. I don’t know more than the vaguest generalities, because nuclear physics isn’t something I studied at all. And you don’t have to worry about it at all. Kortrax will keep doing what he does whether scientists figure out how he does it or not. Just go ahead and learn what you want to learn at your own speed. If there’s anything there’s no shortage of, it’s time.”

“I’m really ashamed to be such an ignoramus. You must be pretty impatient with me by now.”

“Not at all, I can see why you’re not a professor yet, coming from a family like you did. Besides that, you’re still very young. I can tell by the way you learn and how much you understand that you are really quite intelligent, probably more than I. Remember that it’s taken me a century and two thirds to learn everything I know.”

He was silent awhile, thinking about something. Perhaps it was the time. When you are so young, you don’t really know how long time is. When you think you’ve seen a lot of it, you’re still in the preface to your life. Very few people his

age have actually become who they're going to be. But what happens to them now still has something to do with who they're going to be.

After thinking about that he loosened up a little more and allowed her to get comfortable with him on the cushion. He let her lean against him and lay her head on his shoulder. He went back to reading, pointing to where he was so she could follow his progress. He still got tense when her chest touched his arm however.

It didn't take long for Alan to get tired of the reading book again. He tried reading out loud again to show how well he was doing, but complained of a dry throat after only a few sentences.

There were more distractions for long discourses on the subjects of this book. Why fish are stupid enough to swallow hooks. The traditions of the cooks and why there are so many cooks. He took awhile catching on that children aren't as common as he thought.

He did struggle on, with fits and starts, to the end of the second book, but he wasn't getting much more out of the book by then.

"I think that's enough for one day," Desa said when he rolled the book up.

"I think you're right, and I bet you have a lot of other things you want to do today."

He started to get up, she just rolled over and stretched. "Not at all. I should do something about my upcoming trip,

but I've got two more days to take care of that. I've gotten so comfortable here I don't want to move."

He looked at her nervously. No doubt he was afraid she would still try to seduce him in exchange for the lesson. No doubt she wouldn't have minded, but that possibility seemed remote. She should try and loosen him up a little however, before some less patient woman chased him back up to the desert. She looked at him, trying to mimic his expression, which caused him to attempt a smile. That caused her to laugh, which caused him to laugh also, although somewhat nervously.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"I was just imitating you."

"Do I really look that bad?"

"You look so afraid," she said.

"I'm sorry, I just don't know how to act around people, I'm afraid of doing something that will make you angry."

"If you don't try to hurt me or damage the house I'm not that likely to get angry."

"You were angry when I pulled away from you."

"That makes people think you are repelled."

"I certainly was not repelled, oh no, I think you're so lovely and precious I don't know how to act."

"I'll tell you one way to act, stop pulling away from contact. A male and a female usually enjoy contact with each other, pulling away signals repulsion. If you don't want it to go farther, don't go farther but unless you want to insult the

other or are actually repelled, don't pull away."

"I thought it was an insult to a woman to make contact with her."

"Does your religion teach that?" she asked.

"Our religion teaches that pleasures of the flesh are carnal; original sin."

Fundamentalists too. He is a refugee. "Most religions consider the creation of life to be a mortal's closest approach to the divine. Some think any expression of sexuality, even the slightest, as an act of worship."

He didn't say anything, but she could see that gave him something to think about. Religion had to be a big part of his life.

"I'm sorry I did that," he finally said.

"I'm sorry I got insulted. I reacted before I realized that maybe you were raised differently."

"I'm afraid of doing something else rude."

"You aren't that bad, you're just naïve. It's humorous at times, and I'm sorry I've laughed at you also. It's not your fault, it's your parents. But you're not maddening."

"I wish I knew better how to act around people."

"I've been trying to tell you how to correct the only problem I've noticed."

"I don't think I've pulled away from you since."

"No, but you haven't really become at ease." She wanted to explain it better, but couldn't think of a way. "I'm not the best person for teaching this part of life anyway."

“Why not?”

“Because I’m rather strange myself. Most people think I’m a cold, humorless bookworm.”

“You don’t seem so to me, I’d be happy to hear anything you can tell me about how to be normal.”

“OK, I’m happy to try. First, come back down here and lie next to me.”

He sat back down. She pulled him down till he was lying back on the cushion beside her, then she leaned up on an elbow against him. She took his hand and put it on her hip, then put her hand on his chest.

“Does this much contact with me hurt you?”

“It’s very exciting.”

“Well try and get used to it. This is not sex, this is just a male and female friend talking together. Is this evil by your religion?”

“I think if it feels good, it’s evil, by my parent’s religion.”

She noticed ‘his parent’s religion’, “So this feels good?”

“Yes. There is that ‘charge’ feeling but the tingle is being replaced by a pleasant warmth.”

“You haven’t had enough contact with people, you need to get used to it so you only have that pleasant warmth. You need to understand that this is not a big deal.”

“It’s all new to me.”

“Yes; so practice. To take a step beyond just talking together, you might enjoy caressing me. Guys usually enjoy caressing the rounded areas of a woman’s body, her hips and

bottom and breast.”

“You want to be touched there?” he pointed in the direction of her chest.

“Actually that’s my favorite. I know this is just a lesson so don’t get all carried away by it, but I think you should get used to that also. You were pretty jumpy every time your arm bumped my tit you know.”

“Doesn’t that bother you or embarrass you?”

“No, I have a reputation for having very sociable tits.”

“I’m afraid I can’t take it, you’re just too sexy for me.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible. I’m considered to be luke warm on the sexometer, still in the green part of the dial.”

“The whole concept is so new to me. I never knew just touching someone could feel so overwhelming.”

“But my tits aren’t anything special, just friendly. I’m just an average woman.”

“Not to me, you’re the most beautiful and sensual woman I’ve ever met.”

She wanted to shout, ‘You’ve met Pneika ’ Though it was just moments after promising he wouldn’t make her angry. Maybe Pneika just cauterized his retinas so he didn’t remember meeting her. Desa was at least plain enough that he could actually see her.

It didn’t make any sense for him to be saying things like this to her when he wouldn’t take any of what she was offering. From the look on his face she got the impression he really meant it. He was so simple and afraid it seemed very

unlikely that he was using any kind of guile on her. Maybe it was because she was offering as a teacher and not as a lover. She didn't know what to do about that. She didn't really feel like a lover, at least not yet, not with someone this young.

“Let's say, as part of this lesson, that I believe you really mean that, that you think I'm desirable. Let me also say that I think you are desirable too. Now what would you like to do about it?”

“I... I guess I don't know. You've already done so much for me. I think it's wonderful just being here with you, it's such a new experience for me. I just can't stop babbling about you and looking at you. I don't know what to do.”

“I tried to tell you but you weren't interested.”

“But I can't take it. Is there anything else we can do together that you're interested in?”

“Of course. But you'll never be comfortable with me if the hormonal pressure you're feeling isn't relieved. Also I don't think we're going to get to a concert today, it's too dark for outdoor games and I don't have any projects going right now. Besides that the yaag's not ready. We could go down and hang out at Myimpaden with some of my friends, but you said you don't drink yaag anyway.”

“Are those the things you like to do?”

“Some of them.”

“What other things do you like?”

“Let's see. I like to party, but there's yaag and sex. I do like to read, I like music, like to sing and play yandrille, I like

to walk in the woods and I like to travel.”

“What do you read?”

“All the serious music magazines I can get my hands on out here, historical stories, imaginative stories. Just about anything but supernatural stories and status stories.”

“And where do you travel to?”

“I go down to Hazorpean now and then. A week from Morningday, right after Knume’s party, I’m leaving for Zhindu. You ought to come with me, you’ll learn a lot more about the world in a big city.”

“Oh I can’t. I’m afraid I’d get in trouble, my parents expect me back.”

“You would go back there ” she was shocked.

“What else can I do?” He seemed serious about the question.

“Live like a normal person.” She swallowed the ‘of course.’

“How can I do that? I have some money but it won’t last forever.”

“You could work for money in the city.”

“What could I do?”

“Anything that’s paying. There’s lots of factory work or cooking. There’s keda handling, building, cleaning; there’s no end to what you could do even if you’ve never seen any of it before. Zhindu has lots of work just peddling machines or delivering messages.”

“No one would worry about where I came from?”

“Of course not.” Where did these notions come from?

“How would I get there?” he asked

“Come with me on a ship.”

“But how much does that cost?”

“It pays, at least you get a bed and transportation for tending sail even on a lowlife boat. Usually you get a little something for cash to get started with and on some you might even get a percent of the cargo.”

“I’ve never even seen a ship, much less know anything about sailing one.”

“There’s nothing to know. Just pull ropes and crank winches when the deckmaster yells. I’ve been on a few, you wouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

He was quiet for awhile. She watched the embers of the fire and wondered if she should build it up again. It wasn’t a terribly cold Nightday, especially for this time of year, but it was still damp and a few more logs couldn’t hurt tomorrow’s shower water any. As she did that, she also worried how smart it was to invite him on this trip. She’d have to treat him as a son, or at least as a child. He wasn’t done being raised, that was for sure.

“I really can’t, I have to go back. My parents would die of worry not knowing what happened to me.”

She couldn’t let him do that, he wouldn’t have any chance at mental health if he went cowering back there. “Unless they’ve completely lost their minds they must know it is going to take you more than a couple weeks to learn about the

world. I'm only going down for a few years, a decade at the most. Besides that, you could come back any time."

"Why would you want me to go with you?"

"To have someone to travel with and because you could use the experience." She sat back down and leaned against his knees. He didn't object even though this did put her chest in contact with him. She made the most of it because it was probably all she was going to get. "Besides, what would you do if you did go back to the desert?"

"The same as before I left I guess, search for food, search for water, maybe learn more about hunting from my father. I want to bring some books back so I don't forget how to read."

"That would be a good idea. Would you stay up there long?"

"I don't know," he sighed, "I really don't know. I'm finding out so many good things about the world that I never even suspected. I never thought I would even be able to survive out here on my own, you make it sound easy."

"It is pretty easy if you don't get burned out."

"How do you do that?"

"Heavy drugs."

He didn't understand, she had to explain it again. Neither said anything when she was done. He touched her hair, his hand seemed to be able to do that without ill effect. He was studying her intently.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I... Well I'm wondering if you would let me try

something with you?”

“Oh. It depends on what it is, from the way you’re blushing I’d probably be delighted.”

He stammered a bit, then forged ahead. “I was wondering if I could kiss you. I’ve heard about it but nev...”

He didn’t finish his sentence because she took him up on it. He held it for only a second, then stopped. “That’s OK for a ‘thank you teacher’ kiss, but if you mean it as something romantic you should keep it up a little longer like this.” She bent to him again and gave him a lot longer time on her lips, putting his hand back on her hip as she did so. She ended it with a taste of tongue on his lips, which had remained closed. “So how was that?” She asked when their lips parted again.

“It was wonderful,” he said. He left his hand on her, even caressing her a little, not anywhere really erotic however.

She let her hand move over his chest. When he didn’t follow, she continued up to his chin. “I’m glad you liked it. I want you to loosen up and live.”

“I am. It might not seem like much to you but this is the greatest adventure I’ve ever had in my life.”

“I hope it’s a fun adventure.”

“It is, but it’s pretty scary too.”

“Why?”

“Because I feel like I might not stay in control of myself.”

“It’s all part of you. Maybe instinct isn’t in agreement with everything your parents told you but it’s a completely natural and normal part of you.” She leaned over and kissed

him again. Both his arms went around her and for a moment he held her like he meant it.

He gasped for air when they parted. “That’s it, that’s all I can take. I’m going to lose my mind completely and turn into a whimpering fool if I don’t let go of you.” He sat up. “I really, really appreciate all you’ve done for me and all you taught me in just these few hours. Whatever I owe you I assure you it isn’t enough.”

“What do you mean owe me?”

“I mean my bill. I’ve got to get going, my head’s swimming and can’t hold any more, I have to let it settle.” He stood up and brought out a pouch.

“You’re leaving rather suddenly. Have I insulted you in some way?” she asked, quite calmly, she was proud to note, for she wasn’t very calm inside.

“No, you don’t understand, you’re being too good to me.”

“If I promise no more sexual advances can you stay?”

“Oh no, it isn’t only that. I’ve learned so much, my head’s all a-flutter. I need a quiet and familiar space to let it settle.”

“You said that already. If you must, I’ll try and understand. Please be careful out there. Come back soon if you’d like, I’ve got the two light days before Knume’s party and then I leave for Zhindu the next dawn.”

“So what do I owe you?”

“Pppp, I wasn’t doing anything today anyhow and you did such a great job cleaning the kitchen.”

He reached into the pouch and drew out three shiny

coppers. “Is this enough?” he asked.

She couldn’t believe her eyes, no doubt they had popped out like those of a keda. “Where did you get these?” She gasped.

“Uh, we made them. I thought I told you we did a little prospecting.”

“But what are you showing them to me for?”

“To pay for the lessons.”

“Three coppers One iron would be more than enough if I was charging. One iron would be enough for a whole week. What you’re showing me is several year’s income around here.”

“Oh. Well take one at least,” he held out a single copper toward her.

“No way, don’t try to give it to me or I’ll be very hurt.” She shook her hand over it.

“Why?”

“Because it’s so much too much. Do you even know that a copper’s worth a hundred irons, not one?”

“I wasn’t quite sure,” he admitted.

“What you offered is about what I earned per course, per year when I taught university subjects, not reading. You’ll have trouble getting change for one of those in Yoonbarla. I didn’t teach you as a business anyway.”

“I thought this was your business?”

“Not really, it’s something I do for practice. Back when I taught at university it was more like a career. Most of the time

when I teach reading around here it's while hanging out with the mom."

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand."

"That's OK, as long as you understand now."

"I hope so, it doesn't make much sense to me but I'm trying to believe everything you say."

"I'm trying to tell you only the truth," she said.

"I've got to get going." He went toward the door.

"Why?"

"My brain is full, I have to digest all this."

"You didn't learn much history."

"If I can, I'll be back with daylight," he said, "Maybe I'll be able to fit a little knowledge of that in then."

"Good, I'll save breakfast." She got up and went to the open window. "You're in luck, the clouds are gone, Cynd and Narrulla are both showing."

"Thank you so much once again," he said from the bottom of the stairs. He didn't turn towards his camp however, he went down the steps to the street.

She stood there trying to figure this all out. She was surprised to notice that she felt a bit of affection for him. Normally she wouldn't consider anything they did even casual play. Perhaps that was because he was such a challenge? Maybe her body thought that if she was to make it with him, he wouldn't just jump right up again as soon as they were done?

But most likely it was her mother instinct more than anything else. This child needed a real mother and not one that had his real interests in mind instead of someone who was just trying to mold him to the shape of some extremist religion. She shuddered at the thought of parents like that, so wrapped up in their own craziness that they would do this to their own child.

There was another side of her mind that troubled her. The side that was interested in him because he was raw clay that she could mold any way she desired. Wasn't that just what his parents had done? Maybe that was why she was so unsuccessful these days, she had to have someone so totally on her own terms that only a hatchling was pliable enough to serve? The female side of the advice Larneh gave Knume.

And then there was the thought that he was too weird and in too serious mental condition for her own good. If he did go with her to Zhindu, she might invest too much of her soul in trying to help him and find in the end that she had ruined her trip, given herself a vast load of guilt and set another burn-out loose in Zhindu. He might need someone with a lot more psychological training than she had.

It was still early, not even time for darkmeal. She could go down to Myimpaden and see how the plans were coming. She couldn't tell at this time whether she would be looking for love, probably not with these thoughts to sort out, but a good buzz might really hit the spot.

Book VI. Student

Sneaking Breakfast

When Alan awoke it was light out, the branches above were full of so many small creatures making so much noise it was impossible to sleep. He could see a few leaves outside, still wet in the close and misty air. He was almost a mile and a half below sea level at this village and could feel the difference in the air.

He was outside the tent immediately, anxious to see the campsite in the light of a new week, anxious to see if the noises he'd heard had left big claw marks in anything. The air was very cool and damp, he would want a fire for awhile. The light was very tricky, little orange spotlights that filtered thru the leaves. Swarms of balloonleaves floated by with their little fins fluttering. A large bagmouth glided by, harvesting those balloonleaves and many smaller bugs.

He was camped beside a huge rock or outcropping with a huge tree at each end. He got up onto the low side of the rock and walked up the sloped top so he could see over the line of brush and the fields beyond. Above that field the horizontal rays painted orange patterns on the bottoms of wispy clouds high above.

After looking around carefully, he finally decided it was safe enough to call the ship. He was surprised to find Elmore

on the line so late in Sunday duty shift. There must have been a lot of politics while he was asleep.

“So good morning Alan, how’s our young explorer doing this morning? I see it is morning where you are.”

“Very fine so far. It’s quite pretty here, but cold.”

“You remember, it’s either the fire or the sleeping bag.”

“Oh I know. But that teacher wanted me to come back for another lesson today.”

“We remember that,” Elmore continued, “but we think that it would be unwise to make any more visits to this village. If you go back the way you came, all the way to that saddle and down the other way, you’ll come to the next village on the way toward Bostok.”

“Meanwhile,” Victoria came on the line, “You’re being turned back over to Biology until you get to another village. We can identify many sites from above that you could get a closer look at on your way. I’ll be just a minute getting together a detailed plan.”

The devastation in those words paralyzed him. He sat on the boulder seemingly just staring at the sun, or maybe at the field beyond the lacework of leaves. But after all he had seen the previous Nightday, it was the picture of Desa as she had looked sitting in front of the fire that burned in his mind’s eye. He couldn’t believe a human being could be so beautiful, so desirable, so exciting. She was more than just pretty, it involved her actions and personality. She wasn’t at all fake and formal like the souls he was used to, she was so ‘by your

side', so natural. She seemed to be more concerned with him as a person than the girls who had invited him to sex. There was something wild about her, but a gentle wild animal. He had come much closer to accepting her educational advances than the direct invitations of either Huneen or Pneika. Maybe it was because she didn't have another man nearby when she approached him, maybe it was because he had some reason to be with her, maybe it was just because he had been with her longer.

It bothered him when he thought about how old she was. If he believed her, she was born in something like the 1870's. He couldn't get the feel of what his age must seem like to her, an infant, a new-minted module. This fact bothered his intellect but not his gut because she looked so young and fresh that his eyes told him she might be too young for him.

The fact that she had accepted him was so exciting it was scary. His mind knew it was nothing more than sympathy and kindness, but even that was hard for him to understand. Even so he couldn't keep his heart from blowing it up into something much more. Maybe in time her feelings could grow from a casual desire to play into the tingling fire that coursed all thru him this morning.

He wondered what would happen if he did manage to see more of her? Would she eventually get suspicious of him? What would she do about it? What could she do about it? So far the whole society seemed so peaceful and easygoing that it was hard to imagine them taking any hostile action against

him, but he hadn't encountered any law enforcement officials yet. It would be a good idea to find out about such things but the unfortunate part was he didn't really know the words to use in discussing it. The word for 'law' here was only used in the context of natural law. The closest word for 'political' was associated with popularity.

Victoria came back on, "I found a place where you should find many species of plant life that haven't been described yet in a place where you can establish secure communication. The sensors show a low concentration of cellulose and a ground cover only a meter or two thick. It is close enough so you can make it there before off-shift is over, and we're pretty sure it's well away from habitation. You won't be able to return to your present camp for your next sleep period which is in keeping with the new directives from security."

"I'll need to know just where it is," he mumbled distractedly.

"The coordinates are 51.773, 6.035. We've loaded them into the map on your phone. It's on the saddle you passed over before you reached the village."

"The one where I talked to Glenelle about the view?"

"Yes."

She was giving him complete details on how to get to there when he heard a couple people coming. They were walking across the soft field and talking quietly so they were rather close by the time he saw them. They were both large and husky, dressed much the way he was, and each was

carrying three double-bladed axes over each shoulder. They had already seen him since he was up on top of the rock.

“Camped pretty close to town last night,” was the first thing one of them said, “Must’a been dark when you got in?”

“Yeah it was,” Alan answered.

“A few steps more and you could’a spent the night upstairs.”

“I can see that now. Anyplace I could get breakfast?”

“Sure, go inside at Thulin’s. It’s directly across the pond from Lappranile,” he pointed way down the street past Pneika’s house, “halfway around North Circle. She’ll change an iron, you won’t save enough with the cooks to make it worth while.”

They didn’t stop walking. The other guy never said a word, but he did look pretty hard at the hand Alan had palmed the phone with. Alan waited till he couldn’t hear them any more, then waited till he couldn’t hear his heart any more. That was the closest by far he had ever come to being caught.

“You heard that?” Alan asked.

“We all did,” Victoria answered. “We were able to follow everything they said. You sounded natural enough, but you shouldn’t have asked them any questions. We all agreed before you left the ship that you would spend a month just observing.”

“You noticed that what they thought unusual was that I was camped here when I could have been in town, ‘upstairs’ was the word I heard. I would take that as further evidence

that the natives are not hostile to travelers. My guess is I probably could have spent the whole period of darkness at a comfortable inn with good meals and maybe even some entertainment.”

“You’d never get away with it.” Elmore chimed in. “Once you learn how this society works maybe you can do that, but right now you’d make so many mistakes they’d soon be putting you in custody. So go ahead and make breakfast and strike camp. You’ll have a nice leisurely climb back to that saddle and plenty of time to make camp up there. Because there could be lumberjacks all over these woods, you should probably keep the phone in the bottom of your pack and wait till you’re up in that clearing and set up. Check carefully for natives before you make further verbal contact.”

He put the phone away. As he was doing that it occurred to him that they could not see thru these trees. If he broke camp quickly he could go down to Desa’s for breakfast and there was no way they were going to know. His common sense said that was a very foolish thing to do, considering how her physical presence affected him. Maybe if he was an older man with more common sense and more control of his instincts, he could have done that. But at twenty years of age, sense of adventure overruled common sense, so he yanked camp down but left that pack there so the phone could listen to the lumins till it’s charge died. He ran thru the forest around the big field till it was close to the vegetable fields. Doubling back only a little way he was soon at her house.

Desa saw him coming thru the gardens and came out the back door of the kitchen to meet him. She said something in greeting but something about what she was wearing made it impossible for him to accurately remember just what it was. Her only garment was a thin skirt wrapped at an angle around her hips and emblazoned with an intricate and mysterious pattern in royal blue. The way this followed the curve of her hips and left most of one leg exposed was inordinately exciting. The sight of her body above it was even more exciting.

Oblivious to his intoxication, she wrapped him in a friendly hug while in the courtyard. He was way too conscious of her naked soft part pressed to his belly. “Glad you made it back,” she said, “Nothing snapped you up during the night.”

“No, all is well,” he said and wished it were the truth. The Angels weren’t going to be pleased that he came down here for breakfast. His heart was thumping once again from the contact with her person. “I missed you though.”

“You could have come back, didn’t I tell you it was foolish to camp in the woods?”

“I tried to explain how I’m not used to people, it’s rather frightening to me. I’m being much too... how can I say this... affected, I guess is a good enough word.” How could he tell her that the actual experience of being in the presence of a real biological human female was something his intellect had

never prepared him for. He had to separate from her embrace and get his face out of her thick, fragrant curls before the urge to crawl thru it overcame him.

“You’re not making much sense.”

“I wish I could make sense. What sense does it make that I was just having the strongest urge to rub my face in your hair?”

“That makes sense, and I glad you feel at least that much attraction to me.”

“I feel way too much.”

“Then why leave? I would say you felt TOO much attraction if you smothered me with attention, wanted to have sex seven or eight times yesterday and wouldn’t let me out of your sight.”

“But I might do that, just then I wanted to just stand there this whole day holding you.”

“Oh we’d get too hungry,” she said. She put her arm around his waist and led him up toward the garden.

Alan went with her, intending to help and interested to see what the garden was like from her point of view. Here and there next to the house, wherever there was a crack between rocks, thick twisted vines with small clumps of long floppy leaves grew large, brilliant and aromatic flowers and hard green pods. Out from under there, regular polygons of ribbonleaves grew clumps of spaghetti strands out of their centers. There were many kinds of plants resembling thick jumbles of purple above-ground lily pads with thick colorful

leaves. He could tell by the color and texture that they were from the nuclei-free life. A lot of them had recently been pulled up and Desa picked a few more. From small arching bushes she picked a few large golden fruits, other similar bushes had ruffles for leaves and grew things the shape of string beans but bright red, of which she only took two. Tough shelf-like things resembling green mineral pools marked underground fruits. Far from the house, multi-branched fern-like things grew sprays of those magnificent honey-filled grapes that she had given him the day before. She was right, they did have too many. Larger plants grew apples made of cheese, of which she picked a couple. They had too many of those also. Beyond, a wider area held clumps of arching hairy sticks bearing fruit. Between them were mats of thick ribbonleaves that grew sprays of peas and beans without the pod.

Beyond that their lot narrowed to just a path for three hundred feet or so, shared with the next two houses north, with kedas in the fields on both sides. Then there was a couple acres surrounded by the slanting board fence he had tripped over late in Afternoonday. Inside were the large velvety animals with many tiny legs that he thought were attacking him. Desa was gentle with them and went into a clump of trellised vines and soon came back with a few tiny eggs. Alan had never seen a real egg, but knew they were larger than this. Now that he saw the purpose for these creatures he felt even more foolish for having been afraid of

them.

On the way back he saw another animal they kept in the garden. It was a furry octopus with a body the size of a softball, and seven tentacles that looked like cat's tails tipped with eyes. Where the eighth tentacle should have been was a single leg with a four pronged claw on the end. The undersides of the tentacles were covered with tinier tentacles with which the creature vacuumed up any bug-sized things it found.

She made a breakfast by pitting the fruit, putting an egg in each of them and wrapping it all in some of the thick lily pad like leaves, some wetted old leaves and roasting them in the embers of yesterday's fire under a large bowl.

"So what do you want to do today?" She asked while they were eating.

"I have to start on the way home."

"You've hardly left them, why so soon?"

"I've learned to read and I've learned a lot more. I want to talk it over with my folks. I think I'll be telling them I want to see more of the world than just a few weeks. I want to stop somewhere and buy some books."

"Yoonbarla's about the farthest place out you can really do that."

"Maybe I'll go to Bostok and then home, I'm not sure yet."

"You should practice reading at least a little today. It would be very easy to forget at this point."

“You’re right.” He couldn’t dally doing that, he had to get up to that clearing within a few hours or who knows what the Angels might do. “But there’s a little clearing I went by on the way down here that I want to go back and see in Morningday. It’s quite a ways up.”

“Where?”

“There’s a little pass between that mountain and the next one,” they were clearly visible out the kitchen window, “and on that mountain just beyond is an open area. There’s an outstanding view from up there.”

“There certainly is.”

“What are your plans for today?” he asked.

“Today or tomorrow I have to go get some lvinch for the party and that’s the best patch I know of. Do you mind if we hike up together?”

That was both terrific and terrible. It would be more than just a joy to have her with him, it would be extremely profitable because he could ask her about every living thing they encountered. He would get to see more of her, hear more of her and just generally walk on air around her for that much longer. But how would he report in with her around? Maybe they could get separated now and then, he could pretend to get lost or something. He knew that if he was back at the camp he would have known there was no way that could work and he would have to tell her no. With her actually present and looking pleased with the idea there was no way he could say it. He might know he had to, he might even try,

but something in his body prevented the words from coming out. “It would be wonderful to have you along,” were the words that actually came out. He even surprised himself with the glittering joy his voice put into them.

“Tell you what, why don’t you find a book you want to practice with that we can bring along. I’ll go down and tell Knume where we’re going. Come on down when you’re ready.” She grabbed a few more uneaten egg-wraps and went off downstairs to where he could hear other people talking.

The last book he had worked on was still on the couch-like cushion where they left it yesterday, with the sheet full of letters sticking out of it. He found that he could still remember the sounds of most of them. He desperately wanted to write down the English equivalent but he worried that Desa might still get a look at that sheet sometime. As soon as he was away free with it he would do that.

He didn’t want to stick with the child’s reading books he had been working on. There were lots of magazine-type publications around, it seemed that most of them had to do with music and were too technical for him to make much sense of. They had titles like ‘Patchman’ and ‘Great Halls Reporter’ if his translations were correct. On a high shelf he found something that was more the right speed, ‘Settling Wescarp’. It looked like some kind of layman’s history, just a thin little thing that wouldn’t be too heavy to carry and written in plain language that he could understand.

He flipped thru it and found that he could actually make some sense out of it. It was more like an ethnicity analysis than history. That would be informative also. He didn't get sucked into it now because he wanted to get started on the way to the clearing as soon as possible. He should have been well on his way by now.

Accused of Wizardry

He went down the inside stairs and found his way to an entry hall in the bottom of a tree trunk. The front door was just a grille of bound sticks and it was open. The stairs came down between that and another door that must lead to a basement room back under the kitchen. The walls had old bark worn smooth by centuries of human hands as their finish. Across from the stairs was a large room filled with people involved in a discussion about buying houses and building roads. From what he overheard, it seemed like they were going to be responsible for building a road somewhere. This must mean they have something to do with the official life of this town. This would be something worth finding out.

The room down here had stone walls, a counter going across it and one stool on this side. There were trays of those little eggs on the counter, along with a small keg. There was a guy on the stool, one behind the counter, a girl sitting on the counter and Desa leaning on the windowsill near the guy on

the stool. The remainder of the far half of the room was piled with all kinds of dusty old junk.

Desa introduced him to everyone and everyone to him. Alan was beginning to think all the men in this area were pretty hefty, Knume and Larneh were the two here and they were almost his height but well muscled, with broad shoulders, thick black beards and hair. Knume had a rather wide face, a little ruddy, with jolly eyes. Larneh had a longer face, a trimmed beard, a long straight nose and rather large front teeth. His hair wasn't quite as black as Knume's. The other girl was named Sharni. She was tall and shapely with long shiny black hair and space-dark almond eyes. She was wearing a shirt and low hung pants but the shirt was completely open, her black nipples contrasting with her creamy skin. After the introductions Knume went on with what he was talking about, something about the advantages of some other town where there were houses for sale.

“Yeah, like it used to be. It seems like it was once just us here, us and a few farmers, now there's new people all the time. Not that there's anything wrong with them,” he told Desa, “But if I want a city I can go visit one.”

“You don't even want to visit one,” Desa said.

“I get down to Hazorpean every year.”

“That's just a town.”

“Maybe to you. You think every place smaller than Lastriss is a town, but I think any place with more people than I know is a city.”

“So when do you want to go up and look at that road?” Larneh asked.

“You could live there and log the same route you take now,” Sharnie said.

“Not till after the party.” Knume answered Larneh. “We have to load them trunks Afternoonday. Dalzor’s not even cutting till then, I think Danip’s cutting today. We gotta get it limbed sometime too.”

“That’s right, and I haven’t lined up a team yet either,” Larneh said.

“You better work on that today,” Knume said, “I mean to have those trucks up there first thing after Noonsleep.”

“That would be a good idea, it’s going to take all day today to rig tackle to get them logs up on them. We can talk this road over some more down in Hazorpean.”

“If you think I’m going to go straight while we’re downtown you’re nuts,” Knume said with finality.

Someone new entered the store, a tall girl with dark blond hair, very shapely hips and wide aureoles. She had a rather flat face and very pale skin with widely scattered freckles. She wore a gauzy long white skirt and a wide, wide straw hat.

“Hi there,” she said, “Looks like you’ve got quite a party going on in here today.”

“It’s just us natives,” Larneh answered.

“So where’s a cup?” she asked.

“She wants a cup. Do we have a cup?” Knume joked while filling one from the collection in the tangled mass of

bric-a-brac behind him. “Make some room up on the counter there girl,” he told Sharni.

The girl moved over to the counter and sat up there, getting decidedly impolite hugs from Larneh on the way by and Knume when she got there.

“Did you just come in here to drink?” Knume asked, “Or did you want some of the merchandise?”

“I’ll grab ten on my way out. I don’t think they’ll be gone.”

“You never know, Chiggeed might come in here and wipe me out. He might start cooking for Nightday's feast any time.”

“So I claim ten on my way out,” she said, and went on with her drinking.

“What’s new with you?” Sharni asked her.

“Wizards,” she answered when she lowered the cup, “I’ve been told there’s a descendent of Oliar in town right this moment.”

“So?” Sharni asked, “there might be a hundred descendants of Oliar around here, it’s been awhile since the 35th century.”

“I mean a direct descendant, a son or daughter, and I think it’s male.”

“How’d you figure this out?” Sharni asked her.

“There’s an old-time docksman from Hazorpean who was actually here at the time. He wouldn’t say who it was, he was afraid to. Said he’d spell the tongue right out of his head if he

uttered the name. He said this when he was up at the ruins of the castle. He dedicates a fire there every year.” She noticed Alan just then, leaning on the windowsill next to Desa. “Who’s this?” she asked.

She asked very pointedly, like she knew Alan shouldn’t be there. To Alan she suddenly seemed like an official of a government like the crew was afraid of, primitive and superstitious and ready to burn witches. The others didn’t seem very concerned about it. Maybe they had no idea anything was amiss, or maybe this girl just acted that way all the time.

“His name is Alan, he comes from out by the desert. Alan, this is Alore.”

“Where by the desert?”

“Way up that way,” he pointed west, “Way up beyond the source of the Minok on the west escarpment of the Numondit plains.”

“Wow How did you ever find Yoonbarla from there?” Sharni asked.

“Totally by accident,” Alan answered.

“Why are you nervous about that?” Alore asked.

Alan was completely speechless at this point. Things were going so well and now suddenly everything was coming apart. Just a few minutes with an official and she saw thru his disguise like it was cellophane. Did she actually know him for what he was, or was he just in trouble for coming in from the desert without a passport?

“How do we know you are not the wizard?” Alore interrogated.

“Wizard?” Alan was even more perplexed with this turn in her line of interrogation.

“Yes, I can see it in your eyes. Just when I find out there is a wizard in town, you show up.”

“I’m no wizard,” Alan answered, “I may be weird, but I was raised weird.”

“He ain’t no wizard,” Desa told her, “he’s just a kid three decades old.” Desa wasn’t taking this at all seriously. He hoped that meant this girl couldn’t really make trouble for him. It could also be that Desa didn’t know he didn’t have the tattoo or whatever the mark of citizenship was.

“And you know that?” Alore continued.

“Yeah. I taught him reading all Nightday, I know he isn’t old enough to be the child of Oliar, he left the area in the 41st. He’s way too naïve to be any kind of wizard. I’ve been thru that desert and if he’s not a kid from out there, you should talk him into joining the movie as your character actor.”

“Who is Oliar?” Alan asked.

“He was a wizard who used to live around here in the 35th, 40th, and 41st centuries.” Alore, Sharni, Larneh and Desa answered, more or less at once.

“You mean there really *were* wizards?” Alan asked.

“You’re right, he is pretty naïve,” Sharni said.

“Yes there were, and still are,” Desa told him, “But unlike Alore, I don’t believe for a minute that they had any

supernatural powers. They had powers all right, but they were and are technological powers.”

“And unlike Desa,” Alore told him, “I don’t think all their powers can be explained by an equation.”

“Well I’m sorry but I’m a very simple equation, me = Alan, of Alfred and Vicki. I don’t think there were any wizards involved.”

“If you can do equations you’re a wizard by me,” Alore told him with the finality of a supreme court decision.

“I can’t really do them,” Alan improvised, beginning to sweat, “I know my Dad can.”

“So how do we know his name’s not really O liar?” Alore asked, boring in like a prime-time news reporter.

“Alan, just tell her you’re Dad’s name really was O liar,” Desa told him, “And then tell her if she doesn’t stop acting out her part in the movie when we’re trying to have a serious discussion about Tuppardorain Road, you’ll sprinkle her with glitter and turn her into a maroon flufftail.”

“Desa this could be serious,” Alore whined.

Alan relaxed a bit now. This girl obviously had no authority over Desa. Maybe teacher was a higher rank than constable?

“You just notice that he’s a little different and a little nervous. His family is very, very shy, you should be supportive with him, not trying to scare him. Besides, you’ve said the same thing about everyone who looks or acts a little different.”

Another girl came in. She stopped when she saw the crowd, then forged ahead once the surprise was over. She walked languidly around behind the counter and leaned on Knume with her hand on his shoulder.

“Have you met this man?” Alore asked her, indicating Alan.

“Why no?”

Desa introduced Alan to Luray and told her his story. Alan thought Luray was a wondrous creature, just the style that was so popular among the Angels. She was delicate, reserved and mild, not the athletic beauty favored by most of the native girls, though she was a smidgeon taller than Desa. She was dressed in a gauzy flowing robe, semi-transparent and tastefully adorned with tiny bits of embroidery. Shining, wheat-blond hair hung halfway down her back. Her blueberry eyes were huge with lids that drooped with long golden lashes.

“Did you know there is a wizard descendent of Oliar in town?” Alore went on.

“I hadn’t heard,” Luray answered with monumental unconcern.

“I have, and the spirits confirm it, and he feels like the one.”

Luray laughed, a tinkling of silver bells, “Oh Alore, don’t be silly. Any witch can see he’s barely a cub. He won’t even be ready to apprentice for decades.”

“That could just be an act.”

Luray languidly waved her hand, “Go ahead and play,” she said as she turned toward Knume, “but I don’t see anyone filming.”

Alore clearly didn’t like that. She gave her quite a viscous look. She looked like she was going to say something, then thought better of it, making a face like it would be lowering herself to argue with one such as Luray. She downed the remains of her cup, asked Knume for her eggs and handed over a plastic chip.

“Be careful,” was all she said when she left, and that was to Desa.

Alan was shaken by the whole incident. He tried to look casual, but Desa could see that he was concerned. “Now isn’t that a fine way to start a morning?” she said.

“I hope she won’t cause you any trouble because of me?” Alan asked.

The room burst into laughter.

“I don’t think you have to worry about her.” Desa told him.

“OK I won’t, but I don’t see what I did to get her so mad at me.”

“Oh she’s not mad at you,” Desa said, “it’s Luray that spiked her, and I’ve never been popular with her.”

“But she’s SO tiresome with that woo-woo,” Luray said.

“And I’m off to the Lvinch patch and Alan might be off back home if I can’t talk him out of it,” Desa announced as a

‘good by’.

It was very good of Desa to say that because it caused both these beautiful women to give him impolite hugs.

“Why did she think I’m a wizard?” He asked on their way out.

“You’re just different. You talk a little different, you act a little different. Most people are glad to have someone different around to relieve the boredom, but she’s afraid. She doesn’t understand much so she hides behind a cloak of mumbo-jumbo.”

“I hope the rest of the people around here don’t listen to her.”

“Very few, nobody you’re going to care about,” she said, “not even the serious witches.”

They were already in the still room. That was the room under the kitchen. Under a sturdy arch there were two big vats in here with little firebrick hearths under them and chimney shrouds around them. Small fires flickered under each. She took a bottle from a rack and filled it from one of the vats. She kicked a few more sticks in among the embers.

“So you see you’re not even the whackoest religious fanatic even in this little town,” Desa continued. “She proves you shouldn’t worry so much about yourself. Everybody pretty much accepts Alore, more so at parties than everyday, but nobody really hates her. She has enough friends of her own and a cute little new house up the road a ways and a

hobby that she's involved with."

Alan still didn't totally calm down. Things weren't going as well today as they were before. First they had changed his orders, then those two guys almost caught him talking to the ship and now this girl had given him the creeps. He wasn't convinced that she wasn't a government agent or something of that nature. The others didn't seem to think so, but then maybe it was secret as some in the crew believed. Maybe Desa even knew that and wanted to get him out of there before some officers returned. Maybe it was so brutally secret she had to make it seem casual. He would feel better once they were out of town.

Biology Lesson

Once in the wonder of the forest, all thoughts of secret governments evaporated from Alan's mind. They talked extensively about the local biology as they wound their way up the logging road for hours. Though he worried about the slow pace and the passing hours, Alan learned more than he ever could have by his own observations. He probably learned more than the biology department could have with all their instruments if they had been down here. She told him about the phyla the life was in, how they were related, how they evolved, how they ecologically interacted and the biomechanisms of their chemistry. He was amazed by the

amount of knowledge she had about something that wasn't even in her field of interest. She was amazed by how much he was able to understand of what she told. The facts he knew agreed with what she told him enough to convince him that there really was advanced biological knowledge on the planet.

Desa knew the way to this clearing a lot better than Victoria did, but after leaving the logging track there was still an hour of steep climb thru the dense damp forest before they came out in the open space Alan had seen before. The area was rocky and carpeted with ribbonleaves with small golden berries on short stems growing from the woody centers of their leaves. At the top was the view made even more beautiful by knowing it was Yoonbarla. He could now recognize a smaller village up a valley to the west. Alan now recognized villages not by seeing the buildings, but by the gardens and fields around them. Of course now he knew that the row of trees along the brook are houses lining the street, facts that were invisible in the view the last time he'd seen it.

They walked to the center of the clearing and sat on one of the bare rocks sticking up thru the ribbonleaves. By now the water skins were gone and they were getting hungry. While Alan removed his pack, Desa unwrapped her skirt and threw it on the rock to give them a place to sit. She noticed that he swallowed hard. This was something he hadn't expected from her, or at least something he tried to tell

himself he hadn't expected.

“Does it bother you that I took that off?” she asked. If nothing else you had to give this girl credit for speaking whatever was on her mind.

“Like I said so many times, I'm not used to it.”

“Well you better get used to it, I'm not about to catch that skirt all to tatters on these bushes all afterlunch.”

“It doesn't embarrass you?” he asked.

“Why should it? It doesn't even in town unless there are a lot of crudos around who keep putting their face in it.”

“You can get away with having no clothes on in town?”

“You can get away??? What did you really ask anyway?” She looked confused.

“We had some strange expressions out on the rim. ‘Get away with’ is sort of like ‘not get in trouble for’ or ‘is permitted’.”

“You sure do have some strange expressions. None of them make any sense to me.”

“I guess you have to come from the right background.”

This was going to be a problem. Anything he tried to ask even indirectly related to laws and the political system was totally misunderstood. Now that they were alone up here it might be a good time to ask her about it directly. He thought that no matter what went wrong he could prevent Desa from doing him any real harm. If things went really badly he could just get away from her, get away from the area and leave them wondering. The only problem with that was that getting

away from Desa was the last thing he wanted to do. Even without clothes she didn't seem deviant to him. He had been taught to be horrified if a girl undressed in his presence, but beyond the initial shock there was a bit of a thrill and then she was just as beautiful as ever, maybe even more so.

He sat on the rock looking out over the valley. While he was looking at the view she unpacked the small bag and got out the cheeseapples and bottle they had brought. She took a taste from the bottle and passed it to him. Alan tasted it very tentatively, testing for any trace of alcohol. There was none, instead it was a thick yellow liquid tasting of leaves and nectar, as if flowers had been liquified to make it. It was smooth and slick, just cool and wet enough to quench thirst. He was glad there was no alcohol, he didn't want to start an argument over why he shouldn't have any and he didn't want to be intoxicated if an opportunity to call the ship came up. Narrulla would come back to this side of the planet in a couple hours and the main scope would be able to see them.

It was past time to call the ship. He tried to think of a way to get away from her for a few minutes to report in, it might still be soon enough to keep him out of trouble. The best excuse he could think of to tell her was to say he had to go take a crap, but that wouldn't get him far enough away or keep him away long enough to make a report. Once he did call in they would probably want to keep him talking just about constantly, what would he do then? With a sinking feeling he realized that the situation wasn't going to respond

to wishful thinking. He actually toyed with the idea of telling Desa the truth and asking her to keep quiet while he reported. He could see two possible outcomes to that. The most likely was she wouldn't believe a word of it. He could also picture her being quite interested and wanting to talk to them herself.

"These are what we came for," Desa told him, indicating the berries surrounding them.

"What do you do with them?"

"They really help the yaag, they make it what we call boosted yaag. It's great for parties because with this in it you stay up and going and don't mellow down into philosophy so much or go to sleep so early."

"What do they taste like," he asked while reaching for one.

"Don't eat them straight," she said, reaching for his hand.

"Why not?"

"You'll probably O.D., these are lvinch berries. You eat a bunch of these straight and you'll be bouncing off these hillsides at fifty miles an hour. You might blow your heart up. Besides that, if they're not blended with larorlie they're highly addictive."

"I see. So if someone came along who didn't know any better and ate some, he'd be in trouble?"

"That's right. If you didn't kill yourself running over a cliff your mind might never be the same. You didn't eat any of these did you?"

"No, not these. I didn't think about poison berries though,

I wonder if the ones I did eat are safe.”

“What were they like?”

“This big,” about seven eighths inch, “nice and purple. Really sweet, a little chewy. I see some down there.”

“Those are yoon berries. Those are safe, nutritious and tasty, good thing to make a meal out of it you’re caught light in the woods. Yoonbarla was named for them, you’ll find that fact in the book you brought up here.” Then she asked, “Shall we have lunch? I need that and a good rest after that climb.”

“Good idea,” he agreed. He hoped that she might possibly be in the habit of taking a nap after lunch so he could get a chance to get away and report. While she was peeling a cheeseapple he asked, “You know all about me, but I know very little about you. Could you tell me what your life’s been like?”

“Starting where?”

“From the beginning.”

“As far back as I can remember?”

“You know my history since birth.”

“O.K.” she sighed, “but remember your history is a pup’s eye view of spawning. Mine might take awhile to tell.”

“I don’t mind, I’m interested in everything.”

When she finished her current byte, she began. “I remember the number of the year I was born because it’s easy, 53,53,13 (Alan didn’t bother translating that to base ten numbers, his phone had an app for it.) That was about a century and two thirds ago, I’m not sure just what year this is.

It was in the western plots of Dos. My mother never had a real steady partner when I was little, my father never saw me and I'm sure my mother had no idea who he was. She had a sailor friend who taught me sex when I was about two decades old. Envitta, that's my mother's name, also taught me the art of making custom knotcraft clothing, especially the single thohook system.

“When I grew up I moved to Dos and made my living with a thohook at first. Don't try that in the Zhindu basin, people are not into clothing enough here to spend enough for it. I worked in other people's shops for a couple decades until I could open my own. During the first few decades in the city I lived by myself or with friends in a whole bunch of different third floors. I didn't have a steady partner until I'd had my shop for quite a while.

“I did a lot of work for a guy named Lengkiin who owned a clothing store. We'd been pretty intimate since he became a steady customer. After about a decade I moved in with him. He was the first guy I ever really loved. We had some really good times, and a bit of economic success. I made it, he sold it. It was a nice store, much more upscale clientele than what we were living. We liked concerts and travel and he wanted things that were intelligent and interesting. He liked to live a nice lifestyle, and I got to like it too. After a decade together I was sure this was my life partner.”

Alan didn't interrupt even when she paused to take bites of lunch or pass the bottle back and forth.

“After we were together a few decades we got tired of the clothing business, mostly tired of our customers, and moved out on the plots about a week out of town. We found that was too far from the concerts, so another decade later we moved to the closest plot we could live off.

“While we were living there I got seriously interested in music. I got to know some musicians and started singing in a folk group. They played several lineups here and there under many names, none of which I remember. There was a guy in the group named Isandra. Our desire to make music brought us together, our bodies called each other and I left Lengkiin to move in with him. I cursed my mother’s genes for the guilt that caused me. I thought I would stay with Lengkiin forever unless he left me. But I wasn’t content to be only a spectator at music and he had no desire to be anything more.

“We lived in the city, Isandra was a yandrille player. His band had a nice place up high overlooking one of the great canals, not far from a beach. He taught me to play Yandrille while I lived there. The whole band lived at this house then and we had a studio set up in the ground floor. We weren’t what you could call making a living at music then, so I worked in factories and at knotcraft some also.

“A couple decades later the band had a big break up and Isandra left me and the group. That’s when I found the lween player, Jotal, actually owned the house. I kept Isandra’s suite, learned lshi, sang backup and played that most of the time. We got another guy on yandrille a few years after that. He

was good, but we were never very close so I don't remember his name. I remember the band's name was ShenonMaina at this time. As a band we did a lot better then, enough so we could make a living at it and even sell some of the tapes we recorded in that studio. I ran into Lengkiin again because he came to a show once and recognized me. He was overjoyed just to know someone in so famous a group. I wasn't even aware that we really had fans. It was so flattering to have a fan/lover that we partially got back together. I stayed sometimes with him and sometimes Jotal or some of the other guys. I had more sex during that era than any other time in my life.

“Because we were doing well, I got into studying music seriously at the university. I liked theory, but had quite a hard time with the math, especially transforms. I spent quite a bit of time with the group and at school. Lengkiin got tired of all that. He found someone else full time and that was the last I ever saw of the first serious love in my life.

“But I turned out to like people who are full time also, living with Jotal's band was not like that. I went to live with one of my teachers, a guy named Kalotie. This was a totally different type of relationship. We both had different lives, careers actually. I ought to tell you that having a career is much more common on the Dos side of the Kinsheeta than the Zhindu. This was also the first time I had a *really* luxury place to live. Kalotie had, last I knew still does have, a really big and fancy place in an elevator tower high above the main

university complex at the dam on Lake Knoye. This is such a place, he has paid domestic staff.”

“What is Dos like?” Alan asked.

“You saw all the pictures of Zhindu in that book; well it’s nothing like that. Most buildings are built of carved stone or cast ceramic. Dos is much too young to have waited around for everything to grow. There’s tall crystal towers scattered all around, sometimes in clumps and often near locks. Most streets are wide and shady and there’s always fine homes with big lawns and yards. People live in big groups of family and friends, usually ten or more to a house, usually as couples.

“There’s no shaftwood trees, only sprawling archwoods, lavish with flowers. The weather is warm and humid in the summer, cool and humid in the winter. The countryside is green rolling hills, not steep mountains like here or flat like the land around Zhindu. Dos spreads for miles around bunches of blue lakes with clean paved canals everywhere. Most streets are paved with stone, many people have nice carriages, most hire coaches with some regularity.”

“It looks very beautiful,” he said. About now Alan noticed that something about the way Desa told the story was very, very involving. He thought he could see the gleaming towers thrusting out of the rolling green hills. He could hear the wagon traffic rattling on the cobblestone streets. The distracting warmth of Kortrax and Desa were so pleasant that they kept bringing him back to the here and now. They finished the cheeseapples, and she brought out some more of

the wondrous honey-grapes.

“Are you just making this up because you know I’m so gullible? What are the odds that the first person I meet on my stumble off the desert is a famous rock star hiding out as a teacher?”

“I am *far, far* from a famous rock star. I’ve had a couple spells in my life where I might have been called a ‘working musician’ by someone that hung out at concerts.”

“Well it sounds pretty famous to me, tell me more of it.”

“If you let me lean back on you, seeing how you got the tree.”

“You can lean on me all you want as long as you start the movie back up again.”

So she got comfortable and did so. “Let’s see. Our band wasn’t hurt by university exposure. Our reputation grew, we got better jobs and were able to afford better equipment. Recording became common. We played the Glass Cathedral twelve times, headlining four. That’s a big and really nice concert hall in the university district. We played thirty one of the fifty four major halls in the city at one time or another with some really big shows like Bikeyaida or Oninggon. We had a big troupe of dancers with us who were quite athletic. But we lacked the closeness we had when we were all living at Jotal’s. That made coming up with good new material difficult.

“We probably could have gone on making a living for a long time. The same people will buy a new tape when the old

one wears out. We could have continued to play the second tier for decades, maybe even centuries. But in honor of the magic that had been, we walked away from it.

“Then I was in academia most of my time. I stayed with theory at first, still struggling with the math. Later on I went into music history, which was Kalotie’s specialty.

“I still performed around campus. I sang with a few different groups over the next few decades, but it was just for fun. I started getting more serious about playing Yandrille during this time also and did a few solo acoustic gigs. We moved out of the city for the summers whenever Kalotie got tired of teaching, about a week out in the hills to the north. We spent winters in town usually because Kalotie never sold his home in the tower, and there isn’t any winter weather in the city.

“Now that I was in the same field with Kalotie we were supposed to get closer. With different careers we had stayed together almost as long as I did with Lengkiin, but once we worked together we found ourselves at odds. I got involved in a research project tracing yandrille evolution and hoped that would help. He never did research, only taught.

“That didn’t help our relationship at all, I figured out that having a mate in a different career was important to him. I had a position of my own with the university by then, so I bought a big party house on a canal between the university and the music district. This was a fun time in my life. I couldn’t afford the place by myself, it had four big suites, a

kitchen you could make a feast in and crash space for a dozen more on the third floor. There were workshops on a lower floor and a nice little private courtyard behind. I had to rent out a lot of it but I rented the suites to nice fun people from the university and crash space to musicians. I really learned how to party during these decades.

“Later on I went to Kassidor Yakhan to continue that research project, sometime in the 54,30's I think. While there I decided to write a text on yandrille development. I also managed to avoid getting addicted to any of the virulent chemicals in common use up there. They trip RNAcid there for entertainment and it's a rare Yakhanian that doesn't have a habit or two. I didn't meet any guys of note because everyone there seems to want someone a lot more hard-working and hard-partying than me.

“I returned to Dos and found someone I thought I could trust had sold my house out from under me and took off. I had a bitch of a time getting even half interest in it back. I taught at the university there some more and finished my text. It got into use. Early in that career I had a student named Kostiya. We became close and before long he moved in with me more or less permanently. That became the longest lasting but loosest relationship of my life.

“He was also a folk musician, and invited me to join his band. I even remember the name of this one, Yiheeng. It was more of a tribe than a band actually. They were on the party circuit, playing festivals in small towns down the rivers. Their

music was heavy for the Dos basin, but nothing like here in the Zhindu, here we have the heaviest music there is. Yiheeng made their living at their music and all the drugs they could sell around it, and had been since before I was born. They would wait a decade between recordings. After a new recording they would play a few big parties in the city and then wander out into the country for a few more years. Each time they recorded the next in their cycle of fifty and growing songs. Each time they toured the plots it was a different route. That made it take a century for the whole pattern to repeat. At no time were they headliners, you couldn't say they were pushing back the frontiers of their art, but they had a good time and brought a good time with them.

“So when I didn't have commitments, I joined the tour. I couldn't count how many times I went out with them, at least once a decade for the better part of a century. Between tours there was still more than enough time for teaching, the tours were party camping vacations from it.

“While touring, Kostiya and I were pretty promiscuous, but in town we'd have only a few others. When I taught in those days it was often one on one, so I got close to many students.”

“Does this mean you might have relations with your students?” Alan asked.

“Honestly,” she said, turning her head to look at him, “I rarely get students who've been raised in the desert by a cult. In normal life when you put a male and a female together,

alone with each other for hours, both of them healthy, people will entertain themselves sexually more often than not.”

“So that’s normal?”

“In real life. A few times students moved into my house and I spent more time with them than with Kostiya. You gotta remember Kostiya was a good-looking party-band musician, he didn’t hurt for affection at any time. It was more like I had to hit on my students to keep myself warm.

“But when we traveled between festivals, we always traveled together. It was on tour that I lost him. We were on a long trip way out east of Dos in a city called Talthaic. It’s a big city but smaller than Dos, about eight million people. While there, we stumbled across my mother Envitta. She had just had another baby, Valla. Envitta took a liking to Kostiya and managed to beguile him into running away with her. She’s much sexier looking than me and I know she’s an outstanding sexual experience. So that left me stuck with Valla, who was barely weaned at the time. She did leave me the house, but never officially, so I had a tough tie with that also.

“Taking care of Valla was a real trial, motherhood was something I *hadn’t* studied up on. If it wasn’t for some friendly and helpful neighbors I don’t know how I would have managed. My anger at Kostiya and Envitta made it worse than it should have been.

“And then this guy named Rendrak happened along. He was one of these guys who are too hot to put in a movie

because people won't think it's real. Perfect body, perfect hair and beard, perfect voice. And nice! The kindest, most considerate, well spoken, big hearted fellow you couldn't even imagine. He was in the area scoping out the pass thru the Kinsheeta which opens near Talthaic. I helped him find some maps and I knew how to read them. He did too, but that little thing gave him an interest in *me*! Before I could catch my breath, he had moved in with me and little Valla.

“Now it was never my intention to go thru that pass, but my cunt was going wherever he was, so I had no choice but to follow. He agreed to let me join him, he even agreed to wait until Valla was two and a half, old enough to make the trip.

“We had a really tough time getting thru that pass. There are people much weirder than you much farther out in that desert. They're so weird they're nasty. We didn't have anywhere near enough supplies. We had to dig for water and eat dtairs and other things I hate to remember. It was scary.

“But once we made it, Rendrak really liked the spectacular country around here, he liked lumbering and fell in love with Yoonbarla. The little house with the pointed roof next to Marcue's was up for sale, so we settled in and became part of the logging crowd. Valla grew up and fell for Knume, but he never noticed her much at first because she was just grown and rather plain of figure. That's why she went and got enlarged the way she did.

“After a few decades in Yoonbarla, I was convinced that Rendrak was rooted permanently and I had a baby with him.

We called him Dara. Rendrak stayed until Dara was two decades of age, but then on a log run to Hazorpean, boarded a ship for Zhindu. He was so brave and strong in physical matters, but he never could tell me he was leaving. I was devastated, it changed me for years, to this day.

“This gave me a second stint as a single mother, though in truth Dara was nearly a man by then. Dara lived with me until he was about three decades, then he left also. Dara said he’d be in touch, and did come by a few times, even introducing me to a girl who was sharing his home in Noonitondow. After he’d been gone a decade and I couldn’t convince any male to move in with me, I sold the house down the street and moved in with Knume while getting ready to go down to the city.”

By the time her narration splattered against the present at thirty decades a minute they had devoured all the snacks and were just lying in the rays. The bottle was now half gone and Alan was living every word of that narration. The bronze rays had turned to liquid, the valley below to a toy model and the cries of the lumins to a symphony.

To go with it, an overwhelming sense of profundity welled up within him. Though it looked like this small valley could fit in his hand, a limitless horizon stretched beyond it. Peaks and valleys and forests and towns into infinity. He could see beyond the far mountains across the basin floor to the rim of the world, the rim he had seen from the ship above. The ship that held many universes could be hidden in this one

small valley, leaving hundreds more empty in his field of view. The ship could crash on one of the larger mountains, leaving perhaps a small pock that would grow over with jungle again in a fraction of the life history he just heard.

He thought briefly of the ship and something about reporting in. What was the significance of that speck of tin compared to this reality? Besides that, he was in no condition to report. He wasn't drunk, but he'd heard enough warnings about it to know there was something like that going on. He wasn't stumbley, but more like languid. He could see that Desa felt the same way from the cuddly way she leaned back on him sighing. It was impossible not to caress her. His arms went around her, caressing her sides, her hips, her belly, and then her softest curves.

“Mmm, thanks for being able to do this today,” she purred.

“I just can't believe how good this feels. What is it about you? You seem to be made out of the same substance as I am but you feel so impossibly much better.”

“Hormones, it's all done with hormones. My throat's dry from talking, I suggest we enjoy them now and analyze them later.”

“I don't know how to enjoy them.”

“Aren't you enjoying this?”

“Well yeah...”

She took another swig of the bottle, “For the throat,” she said.

“...but are you?” he asked.

“I already told you I’m well known for loving it.”

“I was taught to avoid touching women here.”

“I bet you were taught to avoid everything that feels the best.”

“There isn’t supposed to be any pleasure in touching,” he said, not even feeling the guilt he should for doing this.

“In my opinion, that statement is somewhat in error.”

Alan thought she was somewhat understated in her comments. He still wished he could understand why her flesh felt so much better than his own. His own and the androids had felt nearly the same, he couldn’t tell the difference. Hers felt sweeter than the honey-grapes tasted. He tried to follow her instructions and enjoy it now, but his body began to get out of control.

“What’s wrong?” she asked when he sat up.

“I can’t take it after all.”

“You mean because you’re starting to turn on?” She asked and touched him there, making him flinch. “That’s supposed to happen. See how my nibs are so pointy? That’s the same thing. This is a good thing, it tells a girl you’re enjoying her, it tells her you approve of being in the same species with her. Girls like to know that, we need reassurance that we’re acceptable sometimes.”

“I had no idea I was acceptable.”

“You are, or you certainly will be if you would allow yourself to please a girl instead of apologizing for it.”

“And how can I please a girl?”

“That was a very good start.”

Alan allowed her to lean back on him again, allowed himself to react to her and even allowed her to get comfortable with it. The small of her back moved against him.

“This is pleasing to a girl,” she said, “Is it to you?”

“Too, I’m afraid something might happen.”

“I think you really need to learn about sex.” She was brushing her hair over his chest as she said that and languidly arching up into his hands. “And I’m in the mood to teach you.”

“You would? You could like me that much?” Alan’s heart revved up to relativistic speed. It should have been terrifying, but right now all he felt was a flood of desire. Then he thought of how silly he must be. She would just tell him what to do, maybe she could do it with a normal student, but surely she didn’t mean to actually do it with him.

“I will warn you that I’m not committing to be your mate for life or anything like that. All it means I’m feeling pretty horny, your flesh is attractive to mine and I think it might do you a lot of good to experience this. Am I wrong or have you never had sex before?”

“I never thought I would ever do it,” he answered. She actually meant to do it Not just tell him about it

“You should try it. I’ll warn you though, it gets better with a little practice.”

“What do I...” he started to ask, but she turned and kissed him. She led his hands over her body, and put hers on him. She had no trouble removing his shirt.

“Just do what I do,” she said, and ran her finger around his nipple. She kissed it, he did hers, both of hers. His peter swelled more than it ever had before. He let it.

There was no way he was ever going to remember any of this. He was beyond himself somewhere, lost within her. She looked like a perfect sculpture to his hands. The perfect softness, vibrating with life. He had so little hold on that other life that it seemed totally unreal. How could he relate to steel and plastic corridors, silicon mind and the power structure when he was adrift in a field of violet blooms in the golden light of Kortrax? How could he relate to orders given by a starship captain frozen in stone when there was a golden-skinned naked girl on him, swaying to the rhythm of mental drums, beckoning him into her arms, into her body?

What are orders but words? Vibrations in the air, less real than the scent of her desire wafted on that breeze. What is this moment? Just star-born photons impinging on his retinas. Planet-born flesh calling to space-born? Planets slid into space as he should slide into her, completing the cycle and helping them unite in a circle of oneness as they became one beneath the smiling face of Kortrax and the frowning face of Gordon's Lamp. Somewhere he knew that he should check for Narrulla in the sky, but couldn't.

She tried to open his pants, but became frustrated by the

zipper. “What kind of deviant locking device is this ?” she asked.

He showed her how it worked. He could have never imagined doing such a thing just half a bottle ago.

“Oh I see, it’s something like a rippleknit. Enough of that for now, it’s what’s inside I’m interested in,” and with that he was out of the pants.

Almost without thought, almost as an observer he watched his body respond to hers. All the while he swam in an ecstasy so intense, so perfect he never would have believed living matter could reach it. Yet also he was clearly aware of the orange rays, the eerie hooting of the lumin’s song, the softness of the tiny leaves beneath them and the perfection of her skin to a level beyond that given by mortal senses. The motion of it was greater than that of the ship thru the void, more caring than sleeping in a mothers arms, more primeval than rocking in ocean swells.

He continued to do as she did, but had to improvise around the differences. She liked his fingers running thru her curls. She took his hand in hers and showed him where the sweet spot was inside her. Alan knew he would explode and told her so. She swung over him and guided him inside her, out of childhood and into adulthood. He was sure the universe had changed entirely. She moved; up and down, slowly, deeper each time. An involuntary scream broke forth as he did. He spasmed in his whole body, nearly bucking her off. Without conscious thought his hands had grabbed her hips

and pulled her onto him. It went on and on, gradually slowing, gradually becoming less forceful.

“Wow,” she said, “You needed that more than I did.”

He was still panting. “I did? I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“No,” she said, “I was just getting started, but I did say you would need some practice. And I am MUCH more durable than that. That was very nice, but we just need to do it longer.”

“What more could possibly happen?”

“Then I’ll get to come too.”

Alan had heard the concept before, but it wasn’t something much discussed among people who had been Angels for over a hundred years and averaged ninety something years of age by the time they gave up their flesh. “If you want to I’d be glad to continue.”

“I certainly do want to,” she said.

She pulled his hands to her chest again, and leaned into him. He never even got to fully retract and already he was growing again inside her. She began moving again, his hands began moving again, repeating the things she seemed to like. This delight went on for a long time, time seemed changed somehow. It might have been an instant, it might have been days. They grew more urgent, she cried out gently and before she slowed, he was over the top again. She sank down on top of him and they lay there, intertwining, caressing and slowing. His face was buried in her beautiful luxurious hair. He swam thru it in limitless bliss.

She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. She kissed her finger and put it to his lips. “You’re a fast learner.”

“You’re an outstanding teacher.”

She giggled and got up, pulling them apart with a little sticky pop. “It’s a good thing there’s a brook down the bottom of this hill.”

They were in no hurry. They drifted down the hill in each others arms, not saying anything. The brook was small but there was a pool big enough to sit in. They both shouted at the temperature of the water, and immediately ran back into the sunlight. Alan filled the water skins, he needed a deep draught of something that wasn’t going to send his head back into unknown corners of the universe. They held hands on the way back up the hill.

He tried to contemplate the length of time Desa had lived, something that seemed altogether more important right now. Hearing the number was nothing like hearing that story that would have filled many lifetimes in his own world. She was much older than any immortal Angel. No Angel had yet been born as flesh when Desa was already a couple careers into her life. She was born when Earth had technology like this.

“You do have a long history, you sure don’t look or feel like the oldest person around.”

“Oh no, I’m not even close. I’m considered one of the kids. Knume’s over fourteen centuries and Braneen is older than that. There are people in the Kassikan that have survived from the Energy Age.”

“What was that?”

“That’s another long story. Lets get some of these berries picked or we’ll just soak into this rock until noon fries us off of it,” she giggled. “It’s going to take hours to fill this bag.”

“I don’t know if I can move. We better start with the ones within reach.”

“We will, I’m not long on ambition either right now but it will be fun just sitting in the sun picking.”

History Lesson

While they picked the berries she needed for the yaag, she answered his question. What was called the ‘Energy Age’ was more or less the 14th thru 22nd centuries. During that time there was high energy technology based on burning rocks that were now all used up. There was more money, genetics was invented, there were high speed vehicles that glided on tracks all around the world, huge mechanical floaters in the skies and maybe even ships that were able to leave the world entirely. During this time photonic logic was invented and all the photonic devices on the planet had been built.

This narration was taking a lot longer than her own life story. Part of the reason was they were doing something else, which made other conversation necessary, part of it was that Alan wasn’t familiar with a lot of the words and had to ask, and part of it was that Desa wasn’t just blasting along like

before.

She told him how before the energy age people had only lived a short while because of various genetic diseases which caused a general deterioration of the body. Twenty decades was about all they could expect. A very few lived to twenty three or even twenty four. Alan had given up even trying to mentally translate the numbers at this point and let them carry him as they felt. He knew what she meant. In order for humans to survive as a species they had to reproduce as soon as they were able and they would be quite deteriorated by the time the children were grown. The children had to be born after longer gestation to avoid the extra years of infancy. Desa tied this in to the laboratory theory of human origins. The technology was early when humans were created and not as reliable as genetics that had arisen naturally. From this Alan surmised that native wildlife did not age. This fact seemed like an 'of course' at the time.

He remembered that this was one of the big mysteries of the planet he was supposed to answer. He remembered reporting it and remembered that the crew didn't actually believe it. The story of Desa's life was definite proof as far as he was concerned.

While they picked, Desa went on and told him about the bad part of those times. They had violence, criminality and interpersonal force. Life was dedicated to a constant struggle for dominance over others. She was careful to explain how people would dominate even the private lives of each other,

something like a bad factory boss that you couldn't leave. Much of the technology was used for ghastly weapons and those who had bent some people to their dominance would send them to their deaths trying to enforce their dominance on ever larger groups. This culminated in two planet-wide empires centered on Dempala, a vast city that grew to six hundred miles in extent at it's peak.

He finally learned the word for government, toomda, literally, 'bully group'. He had to ask about it to be sure that's what it meant. He still didn't dare ask about the government of today.

During the collapse of Dempala, the monsters were produced. It was the second Empire that had really perfected genetics and with energy and metal supplies dwindling, they turned to them for military advantage. As the monsters got wild this turned out to be a horrible disaster. Normal humans were exterminated from much of the planet, leading to what was called the 'Troubled Times'; the 22nd thru 40th centuries. It was only the inability of the Orcs and Goblins to form a productive society that lead to their collapse.

The cures for aging had been lost to most of the population during the Troubled Times. At that time it still took occasional treatments to continue survival and there were no more labs to produce them. If it wasn't for the university established in the wilderness by a few scientists soon after the wars of magic, it might have been lost forever. That university had grown into Kassidor Kassikan and the

residences around it into Kassidor Yakhan.

“Is that cure still available?” Alan asked.

“There were actually cures for many problems, very few of the problems are left in the gene pool today and there’s probably a contagious vector around for any that are. I really, really, doubt that even your parents were so far out and out there so long that you would have anything to worry about, but way out in the pass it does happen. If anything does show up there’s a couple labs right down in Hazorpean that’ll take care of it.”

“What other problems were cured?” Alan asked.

“Violence was one, that driving need to dominate others. In ages past people would do violence to one another without much cause. Just because someone with dominance over them had ordered them to was the basic reason what they called 'following orders.' Religions were one of the most popular excuses by far. Back then people used to *like* Gods who’s priests told you to kill your neighbor because he worshiped a different God.”

Alan shuddered at the thought. He hoped Desa thought he was shuddering because he also thought it was such an abhorrent concept. He was actually shuddering because of all the passages in the old testament she just described.

And it was with that cure that his final question was answered. With man’s need to dominate man much diminished, his ability to use force against his fellows removed, all governments had just withered away. There was

no way to enforce a law, there was no way to enforce a tax collection. And that was the beginning of the current age. Since the time of Christ no government had power over any square inch of territory or a single citizen of population. There were plenty of commercial enterprises. There were some voluntary organizations in the cities that coordinated certain projects but they were more like a chamber of commerce or volunteer group. There was nothing coercive by force.

People had to find other ways, you had to pay someone for any service you wished to receive, a structural assessment of a building you wanted to purchase for instance. If you became too poor to eat, hope you got friends that can feed you because people do burn out and starve to death and whoever can't stand the smell will dispose of the body. Society's only recourse for crimes like thievery was ostracism. It wasn't perfectly effective, the thief had to move and the wealthy had to employ staff to protect their wealth for a thief couldn't hurt anyone to take it.

Once that story was over, the bottle was gone. Gone also was Alan's respect for the officers and all they represented. What matter were those figments of some computer's imagination, puffing about their silly tribal pecking orders when he was standing on a world which had outgrown such savagery thousands of years in the past?

He saw them, the whole Pan-Solar league, all nations both

mortal and Angelic, standing on the threshold of a vast new universe. One so large they could enter without creating much more than a ripple in the corner. He recognized that Desa had so correctly guessed his origin, a splinter religion that had wandered far into the wilderness to lose themselves in their own creed.

And here they were, the two of them, looking to that civilization of the past like the distant past themselves. A human couple, one naked, on a sunny hillside gathering nature's fruits. Were they so advanced that they were primitive? Had they so long ago given up playing with unnecessary physical toys? Had they come full circle and returned to Eden? That was a common theme in Earth's fiction.

The berry bag was about two thirds full by now, and the picking was going slower and the bag seemed to be getting bigger. After awhile Desa asked him, "Have you thought about coming with me to Zhindu?"

"Oh I've thought about it. It sounds like a glorious adventure but I still don't think it's right to leave my parents wondering for that long. I really should get on my way back to them, at least let them know I'm OK and that I'll be gone longer."

"How long will that take?"

"I was thinking about going over to see Bostok first, that will take a few weeks, then a few weeks to get back."

"I should have told you this back at the house, your best

route to Bostok is to come with me to the Trans-lantis canal, then get another boat up that way. It will take at least a week less than going overland on foot. Your fastest and easiest overland route is on the streets of the valley in a coach.”

“But you won’t be leaving for two more days.”

“You’ll still get there sooner,” she said.

“But I haven’t even decided to do that. In a way I want to just go right back up there and say I’ll be gone much longer than I thought. They seemed to think the world was so small and evil that I’d have my fill of it in a few weeks.”

She didn’t directly try to talk him into it any more, but just told him more about the wonders of that city. He didn’t argue, how could he? She was talking to herself about her upcoming trip as much as anything, Alan thought. What sense did it really make to try and learn what they needed to know out here on the fringe of the native civilization? If the officers had any sense, that’s where they would want him to go.

But how could he discuss this with them? Would they discuss anything at all, as long as it had been since he reported. What was it, ten or twelve hours now? Had they swung the main scope this way? Narrulla was up again, it passed overhead from west to east every light and every dark, so if they had, they could see him now. If they saw him, they could see he was with someone. They would know he couldn’t talk with them under these conditions. They would expect him to move away, but he had the excuse that he was

supposed to report to this field to conduct biological observations. He was just waiting till the area was clear to report. Already he'd learned the whole history of the planet and answered all the assigned questions while he waited.

At last the bag was full. "There's no way I'm climbing back down this mountain today," Desa told him as they lay in the shade of a large tree. "I think I'll just sleep out here for Noonsleep and head down early Afternoonday."

"Is it safe?"

"Oh, safe enough if there's two of us."

"What about food? I still have some of my trail rations left if you want. And one more skin of water."

"That's right, you've got all your camp gear. Can you make a fire?"

"Sure?" he questioned.

"And have you got a decent knife?"

"Yeah, but what are you going to do?"

"I'll herd up some supper while you get a fire going."

She grabbed the lunch sack and his knife and went down the hill toward the brook. He started a little fire, it was getting too warm for a big one. He hoped she might go far enough to let him call in, but no such luck, she was still in plain sight. She pulled a few plants up out of the ground and broke off the roots. She was gone for a few minutes, probably washing those off, and was soon back. She gathered some large berries that grew on bigger bushes near the edge of the clearing. Then she stripped a few long thin twigs off of them. But the

next part was the most interesting. She looked around some of the larger bushes and began bending one of them down. She grabbed for something and caught it. It was probably a small multilegged. With a quick snap she snipped off it's head. She did this again and again, catching over a dozen of them. She cut a sapling and stripped it's bark, and then used it as a tiny cutting board to clean the tiny animals. These went to the stream. It was less than a half hour altogether before she was back.

“It ain't much but it probably beats dry rations,” she said, laying the bounty before him. “If you've got a little container these roots would be better cooked, but we can eat them raw if you don't. These pkattas we can toast over the fire. You got one just the right size for them.”

The bodies of the little critters were only about four inches long. Alan did have a pan in his mess kit. It wouldn't hold all the roots at once, but after cutting them up pretty small they would cook fast. They started right away toasting a pkatta each.

“Don't hold it too close,” Desa told him, “You don't want to get the bones burning. Just let the fuzz burn off and get the skin toasty. You couldn't have lived out there without toasting inglethors before?”

“My mother did ALL the cooking,” he said.

She looked at him like she really didn't believe it. “It must have been a very strange cult,” was all she said.

It was a pretty good supper. The roots were kind of

creamy, had a taste something like vanilla ice cream. The pkattas were really good, especially with some of the berry juice squeezed on them while they cooked. The remainder of the berries they had for dessert. They were the same kind he had found himself.

When they were done he got out the sleeping bag and opened it out for them to lie on in the shadiest spot around. He was starting on the vermin net when Desa asked what that was for.

“It keeps us from getting bitten by little things like the bugs or whatever might bite us while we sleep.”

“That flimsy net won’t slow down anything big enough to bite a full grown human. That knife is our best protection against anything that bites.” He worried about the implications of that while he put the net away. She lay down and rolled over, looked at him with a mischievous smile. “So come on, lets see if we can wear out your new toy.”

Book VII. Lumbering Day

Abandoned

Desa didn't sleep as long for Noonsleep as she probably would have back in the house, but it was still nice to be out in the open enjoying the delightful weather of Lmonteira, the middle of fall. She turned to see how Alan was and saw that he was gone. He must have awakened earlier and gone down to the stream. She noticed his clothes were gone and was amused by how shy he was that he couldn't go down there without them.

She was glad he had improved as much as he had, yesterday he had been so much better, still naïve but fun and affectionate. Pretty good sex for a virgin. The only thing that worried her was the obvious intensity of his sudden attraction. She should have expected it in one so young. With his emotional background it would turn just as suddenly. She would see how things went on the trip to the city. He hadn't actually said he was going, but had murmured about it as Morningday ended in his arms. This reminded her that she still had a few things to do to get ready for the trip.

She rolled over the other way and saw that everything of Alan's was gone. The only thing that remained was the quilt they slept on. It was a pretty nice camp sleeping quilt. She had never seen anything like it in either the Dos or Zhindu

basins and wondered where he got it. He couldn't be far, since it must have cost dearly. But then she remembered the way he waved coppers around and wondered if he might not even miss it.

Nothing of hers was gone, her skirt and bag were still here. Even the unused book he'd brought up to practice with was here, along with the empty bottle they brought the yaag in. That might have been the reason he was affectionate yesterday. And of course the big bag of lvinch.

Maybe he had just gathered all his gear and taken it in his pack down to the stream to wash up. She went down to do that herself, and found Alan and his camping supplies nowhere around. She called him. No answer. She washed up as best she could, then went back up to the clearing and called again. Still no answer. This had her hissing like a hkyiitn in annoyance. So OK, he'd changed his mind about coming with her to Zhindu. Maybe he was even on his way back up to his parents. Couldn't he have at least had the courtesy to say goodbye?

She figured out why he couldn't. "You would have tried to talk him out of it," she scolded herself aloud. Still it hurt and sobs began shaking her. She knew what her mind had done to her. She had already been planning on this fresh young pup fawning on every word as she played tour-guide to life for the whole journey. She had already been planning on having his eager young body for her entertainment thru the whole long, lazy river ride wasn't she? Well it wasn't going to

work out that way was it? That brought the anger at herself back up in her, wasn't this the perfect punctuation to her recent love life in Yoonbarla? "Wham, bam and see ya later" she screamed at herself. "From a virgin no less"

With this she put on her skirt and sandals, gathered up her things and the berries. Using Alan's sleeping mat as a pack, she started the slink back to town. Hours later the anger wound down into a dull emptiness as the trail got long and the cargo got heavy. She had to stop and rest from it several times. It was a good thing she was getting away from here this Nightday. At this point she had no desire to see Yoonbarla again. She certainly didn't want to see this long trail of woe to that mountain again.

Once back in the forest it was pleasantly cool and quiet except for the occasional sound of a distant ax. The way she wandered off the track, deep in thought, was steeper than the way they had come up and a little farther to the north. There was only the vaguest hint of an old log-skid path here, but Desa was familiar with these woods even though she hadn't been on this exact spot for years.

She reached town far toward the center, she had unconsciously followed the trail that led to her old house. Since Marcue should now be returned from Hazorpean, she thought it would be a good time to visit. She needed to talk to someone or the depression that was building in her would spoil the party. She was a little afraid that she would depress

Marcue also, but there had been many times in the past that Marcue had cried on her after a break-up.

Marcue's house was somewhat different from Knume's. The roof was complexly gabled, six trunks joined to make a pointed dome. A short stairway from her retaining wall reached the bedroom balcony, and up that Desa went.

Marcue was still in bed, but opened an eye when she saw Desa's shadow at the window. The bedroom was actually used as the main room of the house, like in Dos, being larger and more luxurious than the kitchen below. Marcue owned no space at street level. Desa could see that Marcue was alone. Danip hadn't gone with her to Hazorpean and might not know she was back. Or he might already be up in the woods. While Marcue stretched, Desa went on inside.

"So you made it back," Desa said, "You must not have got here till Noonsleep was almost over."

"Is it that late?"

"I've been up to the upper lvinch patch and back already," she said, holding up the bag.

"No?"

"I did so, but I did start yesterday. But tell me how you did?"

"Amazingly, awesomely wonderful. You'll never guess who's signed up to play at Lappranile this very Nightday."

"You know how lousy of a guesser I am."

"I see how grumpy you are to play 'guess', but the word 'Dundorada' should give you a hint."

“Dundorada, Good work ” It should have been real enthusiasm in her speech. They and Pongi were the only two ‘real’ bands in Hazorpean. Dundorada was the one Desa liked better, even if most people thought Pongi was more fun. Desa knew her dull enthusiasm would never fool Marcue.

“Oh I know when you get to the city you won’t even remember them but we haven’t had a show like theirs in town since when?”

“That’s a fact. Since I lived here anyway. And I am pretty excited, at least I will be when I get there and get some decent yaag in me. So, are the wheels and teams lined up?”

“Got all that. It was so late when I got back that some of the guys were up already so they took the wheels up with them using Demrin’s team. I got a team for Danip waiting over in Dalzor’s field, and Sharni took the team I got for Larneh up to their place. She said she thought he had one, but he didn’t when I left so I got one anyway. Maybe a couple guys will want a third keda. I needed them to pull Dundorada’s gear up anyway.”

Desa knew the guys would be up early this Afternoonday, but maybe she was here a little early for Marcue. “It sounds like I shouldn’t have got you up.”

“Oh it was hours ago. The shadows were here when I went in.”

Desa felt a little better, the shadows had moved half a radian across the floor. “So all the guys are up in the woods now?”

“Right. They told me you had a student from the desert with you yesterday?”

“Yeah, a just-grown guy name of Alan. He wanted to learn reading.”

“Danip says he saw the same guy on his way up to fell Morningday. Says he was sitting on a big rock in the brush out past the vedn fields playing ventriloquist with a piece of bark.”

“I’m not saying this kid would win any sanity contests.” Marcue got the message that Desa knew a lot more about how weird he was than just playing with a piece of bark.

She didn’t pry for details. “Are you still planning on going to Zhlindu?”

“Oh yes, I’m definitely going. My second trip to the mountain has reconfirmed my conviction that this is the year to go.”

“When?”

“Right after the party. Knume’s log is my bus. Did you happen to see Vyinga?”

“Not in yet. But she left Lastriss before noon of week K’shitn and I left word.”

“Thanks, now can I convince you to come with me?” Desa asked.

“To Hazorpean?”

“No, all the way.”

“I can’t, I’m finally getting Danip convinced to live in a house, if I go on a long trip now he’d give up even attempting

to turn his camp into a real home. This place isn't fit to leave either, I've got to get the rinko patch cleaned up and there's weeds in the onions. I should be working on it right now but I'm too lazy."

"Nobody wants to go with me."

"What about this Alan kid? Going there might be good for him."

"He made a couple noises like he wanted to go late yesterday, but sometime during Noonsleep he took off."

"I'm sure that didn't endear him to you," she knew perfectly well with an ominous shiver.

"After that I'm not sure I'd want to take him."

"I can see your point in that," Marcue agreed.

"Even if he hadn't left me I'm afraid I might take him for all the wrong reasons. He's such a baby."

"And you're such a natural born mother. But if he's gone you don't have to worry about it anyway."

"True. I have no plans to go by way of the desert rim or Bostok in the next day or so," Marcue started howling at this because she knew how far both places were. "I wish he hadn't run off though" she hissed, "It just makes me so mad And so miserable too."

"So this is the reason for this mood?"

"Yes. What's wrong with me anyway? This kid actually said he was in love with me. He was worried that I was offended by his ignorance. He said I attracted him so much it scared him."

“Maybe he thought he had to use lines like that to get in you. You weren’t standoffish with him were you?”

“No way, I had to ply him with yaag before he would even touch me.”

“But he did?”

“Oh yeah, and it was nice, for a virgin. But then, just like all the other creeps in this town, one fuck; well three actually, and off he goes. It’s like I must be so lousy. I know people call me a bookworm but it always seems to be my sex that drives them off.”

“Danip tells me otherwise.”

“But you’re the one he kept,” Desa said.

“That was only because he didn’t want to see me cry.”

“Too bad I didn’t know that at the time. It doesn’t matter, I’m a lousy crier anyway.”

“I think that’s more likely the problem. You’re so monstrously tough you probably make the guys feel weak.” There was a second’s lull, then Marcue asked, “So do you think Alan’s gone for good?”

“I have no way of knowing. He’s really fighting with himself. His parents taught him that people are evil, sex is evil and yaag ain’t too good either. He says they want him to come right back up there as soon as he learns to read and he doesn’t seem to understand the concept of ‘do your own thing’ too well. He might have run back to his parents or he might have just run off in the woods to argue with himself. He had to run off for awhile during Nightday.”

“Why?”

“He said it was for the exercise, he was going to stiffen up. I wasn’t totally convinced. I think it might be the strain, his mind can’t take changing so fast. I think he’s finding out that just about everything he’s ever known is either wrong or irrelevant.”

“Then he’ll be back,” Marcue said. “If he can find his way.”

“I’m sure he can if he wants to, all he has to do is walk downhill. He’s really not that dumb. In fact he’s so intelligent I wonder where he got it.”

“So he’ll figure out he’s much better off going to Zhindu with you than wasting away in the desert. He may have gone off to think and now he thinks you ran off on him.”

“I called him from the patch to the stream. Yesterday he said he was going back home or over toward Bostok. He thinks that’s where his parents came from and has mentioned going there.”

“Then maybe you won’t see him again. Has he learned to read yet?” Marcue asked.

“Pretty much, he asks so many questions about everything that it really slows things down but he’s so smart that he still goes faster than average. I can see he understands everything, even technical matters, but he doesn’t know anything yet.”

“Why is he so ignorant?”

“He says it’s from his parents being such hermits but they’re more than simple hermits. They’re on the run, there’s

a cult involved, could be wacko. Some of his notions are right out of ancient times, I even asked him if he, well his parents actually, were out of some crypt. He denied it but I saw him cringe. He also cringed when I asked if he'd been grown in a lab.”

“It sounds like he should have found Alore first.”

“Oh she found him early yesterday,” Desa said, “acted like her good witch had found his bad wizard. Made quite the little scene out of it.”

“That’s the script for the fourth assignment in Kaha’s movie club.”

“Do you think he could be coming off an RNAcid bumper?” Desa asked.

“Maybe, and maybe he’s practicing for a movie or maybe someone is filming this right now.” Kaha’s movie club was one of Marcue’s favorite gossips.

“Or it’s a sociological experiment?”

“Did you ever ask him if he’s playing a game or something?”

“Every time I ask in any way he just says he never knew because they’re so far out in the desert and so weird in their desert ways.”

“So what are you going to do if he comes back?”

“I just don’t know,” Desa whined, “Sometimes I think I’ll just use him because he’s so naïve and I love to teach, sometimes I’m afraid of what I might find in there.”

“Do you think he could be dangerous?”

“Not like primitive violent. He’s tender as a new-hatched talrin. What I worry about is what if he sticks to me but never gets off this weirdness? Then if I try to get away from him, I might really harm him. He knows so little, I feel overly responsible and cautious of what I might say to him and how he’ll take it.”

“So as I see it,” Marcue said, “if he comes back here and asks to go with you there are three possibilities. You might hit it off real well, I wouldn’t put it past you because you don’t mesh well with mundane. Or he might get over you in which case you get hurt.”

“Nothing new about that.”

“And three, you get over him and he gets hurt.”

“That’s safe logic.”

“But if he comes down here and you tell him not to go with you, you’re choosing alternative three right now.”

“He might be less attached now,” Desa said.

“First loves don’t work that way,” Marcue said. Desa knew she was right, even though her memories of those distant days were very vague.

“Of course he might not come back here.”

“Then it’s already case two.”

“You’re right. You make a lot of sense you know that. Now if you could figure out what’s really wrong with him,” Desa wondered.

“The RNAcid bummer, that’s a whole lot less assumption than some ancient crypt, or even a sociological experiment.”

“Yeah,” Desa said, “I hope he gets over it though. The bummer could be as bad as some kid who really did come from the desert.”

“Maybe, but I’ve seen cases of bad RNAcid that look less promising, like drooling and eating kvarits raw.”

“Alan’s nowhere near that bad. He’s coherent, logical, well spoken. It hasn’t crippled any of his basic functions, just filled his memories with bad data.”

“Those recover,” Marcue said, “I met a few of them down in Zhindu also. Some never regained a ghost of their old memories, not even in dreams, but the person that they were was there, they were real people and had normal lives and relationships again.”

“Good, in that case that’s the worst Alan will be. He might still recover memories he had before this.” After a short pause Desa asked, “So’d you buy any tapes?” to change the subject.

“Just one, some new group with nobody in it I ever heard of. They might have some potential. We can try it out if you lift the weights.”

She wished there was time, but the last day before the party was passing quickly. “Before we spend the day playing tapes, why don’t we eat something. I haven’t had breakfast and it’s getting close to lunch.”

“Yeah, I’m getting a bit of famish too. I need to get out into the garden today, stuff really needs to come in.” As it will in Lmonteira, Desa thought.

Preparations

Preparations for the 22,10,23rd annual Yoonbarla Lumbering Party were coming along nicely. Chiggeed the feast-master was already out in the woods as Afternoonday began, along with two bowmen and a bolt-bearer, hunting a theirops that was rumored to be rummaging around up past Napar. The song of Napar's population driving the theirops to where they waited could be heard ringing thru it's valley since the wee hours of Noonsleep. Many loggers had gotten an early start also and the woods sang with ax and tackle. The air was sweet with late flowers and noisy with the flutter of birds and leaves in the warm breeze off the basin.

Knume's first keg would be tapped at Myimpaden where the 'inner' party would get rolling. From there they would move on to the Lappranile where Bloric, Danip and Lapnar had kegs. The feast was going to be in the square where South Street came to the central pond. Chiggeed's crew had already set up awnings over an enormous table, and were building a huge bonfire to hopefully cook a theirops. That's where Knume's second keg would be.

Once back at Knume's she washed some clothes she would be taking, while they soaked, she squeezed and strained the lvinch, filling three big skins with the juice. She took her old manual yandrille and left it with Varniss, one of the owners of Myimpaden, while she lightly doctored the first

keg. He would treasure that piece of history and keep it safe till she returned, he hid it somewhere in the family rooms below while she poured the smaller skin into this keg. She told him to ship it to her if she wrote him to do so because she might sell it in Zhindu towards buying a new one. Varniss would buy it, but it was worth a lot more than he could pay for it's historical value, not for the way it played.

On her trip around town to doctor the kegs she saw how well everything was coming together. She did Knume's other keg down at the feast table and left a special bottle with Chiggeed's fire crew also.

Next she came back and packed. She wasn't taking all her clothes because it was hot in the basin and shirts were rarely worn. She brought the remainder of her clothes and a whole box of books and magazines back down to Marcue's. She must have walked a hundred miles in the last couple weeks by this time. She was taking one cooking dish and leaving the remainder of her cookware, and all her other books and papers, with Knume.

Now that it was getting late in the day, all she was doing was trying the bundle, trying to get something she could carry around without too much trouble, adding a few last-minute things, removing the fur she would need tomorrow.

“Where is everyone?” Valla called from the upper stairs.

“Knume and Larneh are out in the woods. I'm downstairs packing.”

“Packing what?”

“My stuff, I’m leaving for Zhindu with the log. I’m surprised to see you here.”

“It’s a good thing I decided to come up for a visit, I wouldn’t have seen you otherwise. I never even asked you why you’re going?”

“There’s a few reasons, I wanted to see if I can find a steady guy...”

“Wanted? has that changed? Like maybe you figured out it isn’t as ideal as you thought?”

“No, it’s still my ideal. But I also need a change of scenery and I’d like to get a new yandrille.”

“Don’t you think that’s an awful long shopping trip?”

“Did you ever try to buy a yandrille around here? Did you ever try to earn the money to buy one with?”

“What would you do with a new yandrille anyway?”

“Play it of course.”

“What for, who could you play it for around here?” Valla knew how poorly Desa got along with Lappranile’s current owners.

“I’ll be in Zhindu remember?”

“Are you going to stay there?”

“For awhile, until I get bored with it.”

“Why bother then? It sounds like the only reason you’re doing anything is so you can get bored with it. You want a steady guy so you can get bored with him. You’re bored with life here so you go down there so you can get bored with that.

You're bored with your old yandrilite so why not buy a new one and get bored with it too."

"My intent is not to get bored but to get out of boredom. It is one of the great perils of the modern age you know. What's your problem with this trip anyway?"

"Cause it won't help, it's just running away and you can't run away from yourself. It is ourselves that are responsible for our problems. If we're bored it's because we've made ourselves bored. You have plenty of opportunity here but you have to be able to take it. If you can't take it here, you aren't going to be able to take it anywhere else. You want a steady guy but you have to bring something to him to make it worth his time to stay with you."

Valla hadn't been this negatively philosophical since puberty. She had always tended to believe more in appearance than substance, but she hadn't made a discipline out of it, and she was never this nasty.

"Sounds like you're just depressed."

"Just depressed" She exploded. Desa was afraid of something like this. "I wouldn't call it JUST depressed. I'm sick of life altogether. I'm sick of Yoonbarla, I'm sick of Zhindu, I'm sick of people, I'm sick of things, I'm sick of eating, I'm sick of sex."

Desa was all set to start out with 'Yeah, you think you got problems' and whine about Alan but realized that her problem was pretty small compared to screwing up the first true love of your life, who was a pretty decent guy too. She thought it

was more appropriate to deal with Valla's problems. "That comes from hanging around with such depressing people this past week or two."

"Depressing people? I've been hanging out with exciting people, famous and unusual people. I'm too depressing, that's my problem, what have I got, I mean besides these tits? What can I contribute, I don't know any moves, I can't act. All I'm good for is a drudge."

"So," Desa asked, understanding what must have happened, "Mappu sloughed you off?"

"He doesn't want me on stage any more for awhile. Oh I'm sure he'd let me hang out with his fondler girls if I want to."

"I'd have thought you'd have had your fill of the sex entertainment life by now."

"Maybe I'm hooked on the fame."

"Do you think Mappu, Ingyay, Dfera and all those 'Bit-wallowers are famous?"

"They're a lot more known and respected than Knume is."

Desa shrieked with laughter, "All the science in the Yakhan couldn't code an RNacid trip where that was true."

"It IS true, these two weeks I've had all kinds of people from all over town ask me about it. Tjhemra, from East Street, bought me lunch off Nechlee just to ask me about what goes on in the upper rooms. When I was with Knume she barely said 'hi'."

"Yes, it gets you attention, but that's not respect. What

chatter I've heard gave you more respect before. I think you could get just as much attention as a sex entertainer with your tits alone, you don't need Mappu. Personally I think you have too much substance to be happy as a sex entertainer."

"When you say I have too much substance, aren't you really saying I'm too dull and stuffy?"

"You're the one that's downing you. I'm trying to tell you you're better than that but something between your ear and your brain seems to be changing my words."

"You thought it was stupid to go with them in the first place."

"Maybe you did hear me shouting at you a couple weeks ago? But everybody does stupid things now and then, just don't make it worse by being too stubborn to back out of it."

"What do you think I should do?"

"Just come back here."

"He's got Luray now if you hadn't noticed."

"She's just someone to drink with. They cuddle a little but I don't think they hardly ever actually fuck. Even if there is something between them he'd let you stay here."

"Just to be his drudge in the kitchen."

"Valla come on, you are an artist in the kitchen, you're much more respected for your cooking than your tits. You know cooking is a creative art and everyone who knows you knows how you enjoy the fulfilment of doing it well. He knows shutting you out of this kitchen would be worse punishment than shutting you out of his bedroom."

Just then they were interrupted by a fairly strong quake that brought cookware down from the shelves and caused the foundation stones to grind alarmingly. They ran around trying to catch things before they fell and broke the sink. They both screamed a little while it was happening, but couldn't be heard over the racket. Just as suddenly as it began, it ended, leaving the dust to settle in silence. Valla was wide-eyed and Desa was shaking herself.

“That was a big one,” Valla said, “I hope that didn't bring down the weaving barn.”

“They haven't got that put back together yet have they?”

“No, it's still all temps.”

Desa went out on the porch. Everything but the brook was silent. Shovah, three houses down, came out on her porch also, looked around and waved. “I don't hear any screaming. I think we would if anything major came down,” she called to Desa, who waved back to her.

“That's one thing I don't like about these mountains, there's too many damn quakes,” Valla said when Desa came back in.

“Then come with me to Zhindu, there's just about none there.”

“I have no desire to become even more insignificant, just a speck in a sea of sixty million humans, all of them strangers.”

“You could move out to a small village on the basin floor.”

“I can’t run away from myself.”

Desa turned from putting the fallen objects back on the shelves and looked at her. Valla had returned to the table and was sitting at it with her chin in her hands, staring at the floor. It was hard to tell if anything being said was getting thru to her at all. Desa knew there was still something else on her mind and asked her what that was.

Valla didn’t answer right away. Desa thought she had lost her altogether because she just sat there inspecting the ends of her hair. Desa sat down across from her and looked up into her face. In a small voice Valla began, “Did you know Chirla’s back?”

“No, but I don’t see why I should care.”

“She bought a mod from some lab in Lastriss, she can fit him now.”

Desa fought to keep brunch down. The thought of a hole cavernous enough to hold Mappu’s gross deformity was sickening enough, but on a girl who already prided herself on smelling slimier than a hundred swamps?

“So that’s why I’m out. It’s been so many decades since he could use his meat that he couldn’t resist.”

“This is all just too sickening for me.”

“So you can’t give me an objective answer on whether or not I would get him back if I also had that mod?”

Desa thought there must have been an error in her ear. How could Valla actually think like that? It was true she had spent all her adult life in this insignificant hamlet lost in the

mountains of Wescarp, but she was a grown woman who'd been living a normal country life for a long time. Yoonbarla wasn't cut off from all reality, movies got here from Lastriss and Zhindu. How could she think so little of her biology, didn't it have to last her forever? Desa could have gone into a lecture about the above, but Kortrax was starting toward low and there were still things to do. She decided to give a straight, obvious answer and let her image of Valla fall where it might.

“I don't think so, once the novelty wears off he's going to cast Chirla off the same as everyone else. Besides that, what does it do to your body? Will you have to lose a lung? Where do they reposition your other internal organs?”

“I don't know, all I know is I had to change to get Knume so why wouldn't I have to change to get Mappu?”

“You didn't have to change to get Knume, he would have taken you anyway and just teased you about it a little like he did then. He thinks you went too far and he's ashamed of that. Even though you did get the jugs, that's not nearly as drastic a change as you're talking about now.”

“Is it really that drastic?”

“Of course it is, there would be lengthy, dangerous and agonizing internal surgeries involved as well as all the mutations. And how would you get back when you want a normal guy again?”

“But Mappu would rather have me, it's business that makes the physical side of relationships take priority.”

“That line of shit is too runny to fertilize crops. The man has never learned the possible correlation of words to truth. When I say he’s slimy, I’m not just talking about what comes out of his cock, that slit in his face drools a lot of slime too, as does the hole in his ass. Besides that, where are you going to get the money it would cost?”

“So it’s a dumb idea. I’ll have to resign myself to being a boring nothing. I just thought we were doing so well. He told me I was really becoming a part of things.”

“He’s used that line so many times even he can remember it.”

“Oh don’t keep rubbing it in ”

Desa stopped. She could see that this was hard for her, Valla had such a need to preserve her pride. Even though she had done things Desa considered many times more degrading than admitting a mistake, Valla thought differently, maybe it was because she had grown up too fast out in that pass? If Desa could avoid teasing and prodding, Valla was going to come around.

“I have some kedas to tend over at Nalu’s. Want to come along or wait around till I get back?”

“I’ll go, but what are you going to do with them?”

“I’m going to give them a sack of grain. There’s five in that field meant for two normal sized ones so we don’t want them to strip it bare. You could fill the biggest gourd with water if you want, they’ve probably drained the tub.”

“I suppose you want me to carry it out there also?”

“You’re welcome to do so.”

The grain was in a bin under the counter. There were three bags left and more would be on the way soon. The bag was heavy, she had to walk it onto the counter and drag it to her shoulders before she could struggle thru the door. She wasn’t about to wait for Valla. While staggering thru the outer garden she stepped on a kalic, squashing it to uselessness and not helping her foot any on it’s tough stem. She heaved the sack over the fence just as she was about to lose it, then checked her foot for holes.

Valla made it up as Desa finished tearing the sack open. “Here Ogg, come get this before I drop it.”

“What would you have done if I asked you to carry the bag?”

“Grunted at it while it didn’t budge. I don’t know how you did it. I can’t get them out of the bin.” Valla had not kept up with her training after the pass. Desa had given up nagging her about it ten decades ago.

Desa took the enormous gourd and emptied it into the water tub. The tub was also fed by a little trickle that ran down thru the fields, but the weather had been rather dry lately and that was barely running. Valla also climbed over the fence, and they both sank to the ground to rest.

The kedas came over, lead by Nalu’s huge twelve, Eyalore. They all showed up for scratches, Nalu’s other named Ninchore and Kelkar’s pair as well as the little fancy

Luray kept.

“How’s it going?” A voice called. It was Nalu coming thru the pasture gate.

He was a small, wiry, pretty, guy with long black curls and a round face. If it wasn’t for his dark skin he would have resembled Marcue. Cultured girls drooled over him and his current favorite, a tiny Pixie named Althay, was no exception. She came thru the gate right behind him and clung to his arm as they strolled across the field.

“I didn’t see you come by,” he continued, “Looks like you brought some feed up?”

“Yeah, we came over the fence.”

“I appreciate it, you could have called me to carry it.” He reached them and sat down, idly stroking his kedas.

“Knume’s not back yet?”

“No.” Desa answered.

“Good to see you back anyway,” he told Valla, “We’ve missed you and Knume ain’t been himself lately.”

“I’m just visiting Desa.” Valla answered.

Althay sat on Ninchore’s back. She was so light he noticed with only one eye. “Are you and Knume split?”

“I think so, he doesn’t want any part of me now that I’ve been contaminated by Mappu.”

“He’d get over that.” Nalu said.

“Are you coming by Myimpaden this Nightday?” Althay asked her.

“I don’t think so.” Valla said.

“Yeah, you can still come to the party, it’s everybody’s party, not just Knume’s and I’m sure he’d be glad you came.”

“I just wouldn’t feel right.”

“Why,” Desa said, “Are you afraid you might remember we can have some fun also?”

“No, I admit you loggers have some good times. I’m sorry I got distracted by the fame but I don’t want to argue about it any more. Now I feel like I let you all down.”

“Oh don’t worry about that,” Althay told her, “Don’t bring those loudmouth fakes with you and come party.”

In the distance they heard deep voices bellowing some old mountain drinking song, in no danger of finding a recognized musical scale. When they turned to look they saw Knume and Larneh emerging from the forest on the far side of the grain field. Althay continued to work on Valla while they hiked across the fields, still caterwauling and leaning on each other. Valla never really gave in and for awhile it looked like she was going to duck out before the loggers saw them.

“Yo, we’re over here,” Desa yelled when they were close enough.

“Just where you should be, getting those beasts fired up. Too bad we emptied these skins or we could really get them flaming hey They’re gonna need it too, we got a bole up there like to break the trucks, if this mountain-man hadn’t helped me I’d never-a strapped it to. He’s a roper from way back I’d say.” Then he saw Valla, “Hey, hey, look who’s here,

could you be done with your flitting around?”

“I don’t know.”

Everyone was silent. Desa hoped they would stay that way and not set off Valla’s stubbornness.

Knume drew a breath and wasn’t silent. “You don’t know? Well figure it out girl. We’re having a Loggin’ Party this Nightday, in case you haven’t heard, with everybody, just like in the old days, and we’re gonna *drink* some yaag and *eat* some feast and it sure would be nice to have you part of the festivities.”

“Am I still welcome after all this?”

“As long as bloatdick’s not with you,” Knume said.

“I might see how it goes.”

“Good, I got to put these away,” he shook the axes, “and get ready to hitch up this team, come walk with me while I’m in a good mood.” He reached over the fence and took her hand. She tried to let go of his after she was over, but he kept all six of his axes in one arm and a hold of hers with the other and lead her back thru the gardens.

“Last time he mentioned her name he was saying he’d never speak to her again,” Larneh said, “Now look at this.”

“I would have expected it,” Althay said.

“Too bad I haven’t got time to bewail it,” Larneh continued, “I’ve got to find some nourishment before bringing this team up there.”

“You’re going to need lanterns to get them logs into town if you don’t hurry.”

“I’m stepping to it,” he said and was off across Knume’s garden.

The Big Rig

They thought it would be a good idea to get the kedas into harness while Knume was down at the house or they would also need lanterns to get the wood down. Each Keda had his harness, custom fitted and made of either plastic or quibarta hide. Sparka was required to lead, partly because he was so small the tension produced by the others might pull him off the ground but also because his harness was so light it couldn’t take the strain. They would make a train longer than the log when they were all hooked up.

It took quite a while to harness them, not because they fought, they were quite cooperative. It was because there were so many straps and buckles to get right on all their many shoulders. Kedas are picky about their straps and will point their tongues at any adjustment they aren’t happy with. They are totally patient while you get it right before they will budge the load in the slightest.

They were still at it when Knume re-appeared. “Are they all hitched up yet?”

“Just about,” Desa answered. “What did you do with Valla?”

“Told her to stop acting like a fool before she loses all her

friends. I hope I was right that you can all still accept her.”

“It’s nothing to me,” Althay said, “I wouldn’t hang out with those jerks, and I don’t hang out there, much less get on the stage, but that’s her business.”

“So what’s she going to do?”

“She’s going to get her stuff, but don’t go making a big fuss over it and scaring her off again.”

“I’m glad she wised up,” Nalu said, “I won’t even pick at it in fun.”

“Yeah, let her mend.”

“I’m glad you mended,” Desa said, standing up from her last strap on the larger of Kelkar's pair.

“Don’t pick at me either, if this wasn’t today I might have run her right back off.” He saw that Nalu and Althay were also done strapping and got his party voice back out, “So let’s get this mob of critters into action.”

“Let me go get a shirt,” Desa said, “It’ll be cold up there.”

She knew the tree was in a deep dell who’s bottom Kortrax couldn’t find even at noon, at least before that tree went down. Kortrax was already behind the mountain in this field, it could well be dark by the time they returned.

“Hurry it up, we don’t want to miss the party on account of hauling lumber.”

“What about Danip, is his even down yet?”

“Oh he was down yesterday, it’s just a little twenty eight or twenty nine inch thing but he’s got it topped and roped today. Marcue was going up with the company team and his

wheels while we were coming down.”

“Are the two of you going to lead all these tugboats thru the woods?” Nalu asked, “Want us to come along?”

“It’ll take two hours.”

“That’s not bad, want to go?” he asked Althay. “I’m sure Ninchore wouldn’t be bothered in the least to have you sitting on his shoulders.” Ninchore indicated the next shoulder by pointing with all five eyes at the end of their tentacles. Even their lashes were pursed to a point. Althay moved and his eyes began to bob jauntily.

“Yeah I’ll go.”

“I’m grabbing warmer clothes, I’ll catch up with you,” Desa said as she swung over the fence.

Valla was just coming back as she did. She had put on a strap-top and sandals and looked to be going with them also.

“We’ll let Sparka follow on his own,” Knume said, “he’s the tamest. And watch how they sort out, I want to hitch them in the order they like.”

She heard them heading out across the field as she got in the house and grabbed a big old soft roughweave shirt and a pair of sandals, there would be wet sand and gravel as it got dark. She strapped them tight and jogged out to the others before they even reached the woods.

On the trail thru the woods it was more the keda leading you than the other way around. Valla climbed on top of Eyelore before the other one of Kelkar's got away from her.

Nalu got him calmed right down with Sparka taking off on point thru the woods. Everyone had to walk continuously to keep up with the kedas. Kedas flowed like water thru the woods, even uphill. All the humans were out of breath by the time they reached the part of the trail that was quite steep. The kedas kept right on going at the same speed and pulled the humans right up to the road, past the last monster switchback. From here it was an easier walk, and the kedas calmer. The humans were done panting by the time they reached the cool hushed grotto where the timber lay. The light was dim and reverent for the giant that had fallen.

“Wow.” Someone said.

“The top of that is the third largest piece of wood here.” Nalu said.

“No, Nobron dragged one down up there that’s bigger than Bloric’s here.” Knume said and pointed at the second largest one visible.

The main trunk was almost as thick as Althay was tall, certainly more than four feet. It was still nearly three feet where they had to cut it so it wouldn’t be too long to get thru the streets on the way to the mills. They got Larneh’s log out of it, and still the top was more than half of it. The top would fuel both houses for years, it would take them all year to cut it down.

It was already up on the trucks, huge pieces of wood themselves, carved out of selected stumps with roller-rings three feet across and a four foot yoke that was overhung by

the log at the front. Knume had taken the time to chop himself a little seat atop the front of the log. It looked small on that log, but Knume's butt still fit in it.

There wasn't much hurry at this point. The strapping of the kedas was actually done by Valla and Althay as everyone else stood around marveling at the difference in this dell and what trees would grow and why this was the year to do it. They lamented that there wasn't permanent water here to make a village since all agreed this was a pretty spot. Althay suggested they could put a well, Desa pointed out they would have to change it completely to get sun to a garden.

Valla and Althay walked back, straight down the hill. Desa got to ride as brakeman, Nalu lead the team. The brake was used a lot more than the kedas on the way down. It took longer to get back than it did to get up since the road took a very roundabout way. Centuries of Yoonbarla loggers had built this road little by little, following the contour around thru the woods looking for timber. Desa was minding the rear truck of Knume's log for this ride and lost in her own thoughts about the trip. Her eyes took in all they could on this cool evening ride thru the darkening shaftwood forest. The road wound for miles thru the deep shady woods of the mountainside all the way down the side of south valley till it met South Street, way above where it enters Yoonbarla.

A half hour later they entered the outer part of town where wide fields of vedn and orange-cluster reached all the way to the street. Out of the forest there was a bit more light so she

could see quite a bit. It had all become so familiar since Rendrak brought her thru that desert. This was the street where they first entered Yoonbarla and thirteen decades was not enough time to see a lot of change. Out here the first houses were mostly saplings helped out with some plank floors, a few foundation stones, some canvas roofs and a lot of roll mats.

There was an area where houses lined only one side of the street, the other side was steep and rocky with the small stream at the base of it. These houses are well grown, they were a clump by themselves a century ago. Next there is a long stone structure with a whole row of newer houses on top of it and a tiny pond beside it over twenty feet wide and eight deep at the millwheel end. This was the newest factory in town. It wasn't that new because the roots of the houses on top of it were thick already. It was probably older than any factory Desa had ever worked in. In spite of getting an early start, Yoonbarla did not blossom as a factory town.

Once past that, you were essentially in Yoonbarla. Just about every house had some use for the rooms in the old stone foundations below. Here's the woodworkers quarter where there were plenty of little workshops. In this area the ravine became steep enough that there were now stairways between the houses out to the gardens. Woodworking ended by Knume's house.

Getting the trunk thru the street was pretty ticklish,

especially in the turns below Knume's. It was necessary to get off and use the tackle to keep the wheels aimed as-required to get full advantage of every bit of width in the road. The kedas can't pull to the side too well with those long-tongued logging trucks, and can't turn the rear truck of course. It had to be right the first time because backing up meant unhitching the kedas and taking them around thru the fields to some place above the log. On the first bad corner there is the disadvantage that the stream is on the wrong side of the road. As they tried it, the trunk scraped the foundation stones of Yhomaire's house alarmingly.

At this point they stopped to take a look at the situation. This corner is where the side path to Myimpaden turns off, there would be traffic here. To make things even more embarrassing, Danip and Marcue showed up with his log while Knume was wondering whether his right rear wheel was going into the ditch. Then Nobron showed up just as he was getting ready to try inching forward.

"Hey, you think you could bend that thing?" Nobron called as he walked around Danip's team. Nobron was a pretty good looking guy, taller and slimmer than most of the loggers, with thick brown hair like Desa's.

"Yeah," he bellowed back. "Just looking for a place to stand where I can get a grip."

By now he had his tackle tied to a big root across the brook ready to pull the wheels around. He was just wrapping the rope in his arms as he answered Nobron.

“Take ‘er down a half a step,” he called to Nalu.

The kedas leaned forward, there was more scraping on Yhomaire’s foundation and the rear end swung out a little more.

“You’re going off” someone yelled.

“Stop” Knume yelled, but too late.

The right rear wheel of the rear truck swung out into space. There was a horrible creaking, but the other right rear wheel stayed on the curbstone. Desa stayed frozen to the brake staring into the six or seven foot deep chasm below the opposite wheel. She wondered if she was heroic enough to tend the brake if the lever was on that side or would she just jump for Ftara’s porch?

“That looks bad,” Danip said.

“A little,” Knume sighed.

“Looks like you’re going to have to string up to the branches of that house,” Nobron told him.

“That’s Ftara’s,” Nalu told him, walking back to eye the problem, “She’ll never go for that.”

“We’ll ask her how she’d like to have this as a front step for the next few decades.”

“We could use Yhomaire’s here, it’s stronger anyway,” Knume said.

“And if you keep a pulley wanting this way, you won’t get pulled farther into his foundation,” Nobron added.

“Good, you got your tackle?”

“Be right back,” Danip said, “mine’s a caravan closer.”

Desa hollered up to Pneika and Yhomaire, but there was no answer.

The woman in the next house down came out on her balcony, “They went up to Myimpaden, something about a party.”

Marcue was standing on the Myimpaden side of the scene, heard that, and went to get them. Danip anticipated their approval and began to climb into the house branches looking for a place to mount his pulley. Knume had to rearrange his to provide the right force to bring the wheel back up on the road. Nalu went back to the team. They were just about ready when Yhomaire showed up.

“I think this wheel hanging here in the air is your problem,” he said when he saw what was happening.

“Yeah, that’s why we need your house.”

“I see.” He inspected the rig. “You look like you’re all set up, why don’t I give you a hand hauling. Wait The windows It took so long to save up for that glass.”

Pneika was right behind him on the path from Myimpaden and just a short dash under the log to their downstairs door. “I’ll get...” was all they heard.

“I had no idea what was taking you so long, I was just seeing if I could lend Varniss a hand, see if he’d let me decorate a little.”

“We’re about ready to go now,” Knume told him. “I’ll tackle this truck to land while you guys hoist ‘r up.”

“...ey’re open,” Pneika called from the upstairs.

“Get ready down there, they’re gonna lift,” Knume called to Nalu.

“Get your rope tight first,” Danip told Knume.

Desa really didn’t like the fact that Knume’s rope looked like it was going to pull them as much into the ditch as up out of it. So with much creaking from the truck and much grunting from the guys, the rear end of the log was lifted enough to regain the curb.

“Ease it forward,” Knume called and Nalu motioned to the kedas.

Desa thru all this was still standing on the brake on this truck. On the inland side, thank you. The ravine the wheel is hanging over is all rock except for the splashing brook. She eased off on the brake and the other wheel came off. Desa started shaking, she and tons of lumber could also swing into the ravine, which was just big enough to hold this rig at this point. Knume’s tackle held, as did Danip’s, but Yhomaire’s house leaned over, furniture slid inside and Pneika yelped. “Spilled your bong,” they heard her call.

Yhomaire groaned, no doubt he hadn't changed the water lately.

“Let it down a little more,” Knume bellowed, and the original floating wheel returned to land. “Let it down just a smidge, he told Danip and the others,” and let out a fraction on his own rope. “Forward a little more.”

Desa whooped when all eight wheels were once again on the ground.

“Lets move this thing,” Knume said, “It’s been fun hanging out on this corner with all you friendly neighbors, but we got some logging to finish up.”

“Just don’t do this again on the next corner.”

“That’s a right, then it’s as straight as a Lumpral ascetic to the pond.”

They made that other corner with Knume using his tackle to steer a little. From here you could call it Lower South Street. There were busy torchlit shops here. By the time the street got to the bridge there were two stories of stone, well maintained, before the grown houses. The back street goes across at the second floor. Four huge logs spanning thirty feet each. Two great living shaftwoods as the pillars between the street and the brook. Beyond here the street widened out so the brook gurgled thru a wide green and there was a wide street on either side. Large awnings hung from the two or three story stone buildings where craftsmen and cooks would set up in the busy part of the day. The wider parts of these streets were normally where hill folk parked their wagons when they came to town. Now the whole South Street Park that wasn’t taken up with the already-blazing firepit and awning-covered table was full of logs. They passed Lapnar’s, Demrin’s and Tovar’s, who was still unhooking his team. This barely left room to get Knume’s by.

At the very center of town there’s a wide circle with a pond, lawns, wide street, stone buildings up to six floors high

and again a few floors of living wood above. Awnings shelter an actual paved sidewalk between the street's inner row of trees and the building walls. Knume drove into the circle. The east lawn's hard to get to and the 'Bit's on that side so he signaled Nalu to go on by. The west lawn was also full of logs, so Knume pulled up on the sidewalk in front of the Kuthra building, who's shops were already closed for the dark. Danip had to go on and take the sidewalk in front of Chiggeed's tent, Nobron pulled between some benches on the inner side of the circle. There was just enough room to get traffic between Danip's and Nobron's logs. No doubt the south side of the circle would be totally closed off by the time Nightday began.

“I haven't seen this much lumber in town since the flume.” Knume was saying. “There was a hole right here where the Kuthra is now called the Luminaire the last time we had a party with this much wood.”

Nalu went to return the kedas to his fields after receiving many thanks for his help. Knume went to see how Chiggeed was doing. Desa crossed the circle and climbed over the intertwined roots that formed its pond-side boundary. Beyond the trees was a cobblestoned and ribbonleafed area leading down to the water. There were half-log benches between some of the trees. Desa thought this would be a good place to chill after the log adventure. The leg that had held the brake was still trembling.

Alan Says His Prayers

She looked back at the Kurthra building, it was already pretty old. A few stones had cracked, the trunks and vines were knotty. But look at ed'Shenale and the difference is obvious. The stone of ed'Shenale was split by quakes in many places, and the newer stones that had been cemented in were eroded. Phosphorescent green tendrils of limewort held pitted, half-crumbled blocks and left veiny deposits of new rock on the old. In many places generations of it's work showed. Only a few driftwood-like hunks of the original log rebuild structure remained, preserved in the grip of the live growth around it, growth that was very, very old. It was not lined up with the circle, it was older than that, back to the late troubled times, the time of Oliar. It followed the tight and tangled alleys of a town who's center was where the pond is now. Knume was young when the old town, which had become diseased and abandoned, was torn down, and the pond, park and circle replaced it.

She noticed that the weaving barn survived. It was a large building, six stories of stone. Awnings, trees and vines hid most of that, the scaffolding hid the rest. This side of it was the Lappranile, all grown of framework, lots of window, and room-sized glass balls in the upper branches. At least six levels of it's own, the main room starting on the second floor. On the far side of the weaving barn was a newer curved two story stone building following East Street. It had lots of shops

but one door lead to the whole lower back room of that building which was the Bit of Borlunth. Beyond that, the wide, sunken, East Green and the road which she would be following at next light on the way to Hazorpean. Beyond that, the pottery barn and stores, then the whole long retail area of the north circle.

The time of dusk is the quietest part of the week. The buzzing wee-flutters and day lumins are already silent and the chernockas not yet out. A single small dactyl circled slowly in the gathering purple, silent as a thought. The hangleaf fronds hung limp, slowly curling against the approaching dark. This would be her last dusk in Yoonbarla for some time and all the eye-watering beauty washed over her.

Across the pond the mournful, monotonous, chugging of Plowie's chipponga escaped from the 'Bit, the calls of patrons near the door almost drowning it out. They were too far away to be much annoyance, she could hear voices from Chiggeed's tent also. She felt so at home here in some ways, it would be easy to come back to this ancient hill town some day. Her anger at the town from early in the day had long dissipated in response to it's beauty. But tomorrow brings the lumbering party and the dawn brings a new adventure. She was tired enough to sleep and be really ready for a good party.

She stopped only briefly by the tent, saw that they had caught the theirops and were about to gut it out. She didn't stay for that but went on up toward the house.

On her way up she passed Luray sitting on her porch. "So

did Knume get the log down yet?”

“That's right, floated it right down by here on the brook.”
Desa wondered how she could be numb enough to miss the excitement, but considering the amount of yaag in town right now...

“He still down there?” she asked.

“Yeah, he was at the tent helping Chiggeed set up. He did get a theirops.”

“Sounds like there's going to be a party,” she sighed as she heaved to her feet.

Luray disappeared inside the house, no doubt getting her cup. Desa didn't wait to see her off but kept walking up the street. Luray's house is just up from the lower corner. Desa got all the way up past Yhomaire's before she ran into Valla, dressed in a shape-hugging, easy-opening robe.

“Do you know if Knume's coming back up to the house?”

“Luray was just grabbing a cup to go join him down at Chiggeed's tent. They got a theirops so they gotta get it gutted out and hung. That's going to have to get cooking first thing Nightday, maybe even a few hours sooner than that. They'll be standing watches with the coals anyway.”

“I think you're telling me this party starts now?”

“Not for me it doesn't, and Knume's been drinking since he got the log on the trucks, he really ought to get as big a piece of Dusksleep as he can.”

Valla quickened her pace but said over her shoulder, “Oh, some kid came by looking for you, you traveling with

someone? I told him I thought you'd be up to the house sometime so he just wanted to wait.”

Before this was over, Knume was going to be in the middle of an interesting situation with those women but she was in an interesting enough situation of her own. Now she had to get over her shock at the news that Alan had returned and decide what she was going to do about it. There would be a responsibility involved. She had invited him. He is fundamentalist enough that he might be sexually exclusive or not at all. How much of that could she stand? Probably not even thru the whole logging party. But wasn't this her mother's genes again? Hadn't she wanted someone steady, along comes someone who could be exclusive, and she's ready to give him one roll in the flowers and then tell him what? 'Oh, if we run into each other again after a few decades I could imagine I might be willing to try a relationship with you'?

The house was almost dark when she entered, just the coals of Valla's supper fire glowed in the main room. There was a dark shape on the cushion, perfectly motionless and silent, staring into the coals. What had happened to him she couldn't guess at this point. She could see his cheeks were streaked.

“I spent most of the time praying,” he told her. “Please forgive me for that, I know no other way.”

Well that explained what Danip and Nobron saw. “So?”

She asked, “You're religious and you pray? That really doesn't bother me. It's running off and leaving me alone with the theirops that bothers me.” She was so proud of herself for not shouting.

“I couldn't, you're too strong for me, I couldn't tell you I HAD to go pray if you argued with me. You have such good reasons for everything, I just can't convince you that I MUST.”

“It's OK.” Desa hugged him. 'Is this the start of my third episode of single parenthood?' she wondered. Dara was as mature at two decades as this kid is now.

“After a day of praying, I've decided I'd like to go with you on your trip if you'll still allow me. And there won't be any running off again, no matter what might or does attack you.”

“Even if I attack you?”

“Feed on me if you have to, you've already done more for me than my life deserves.”

“That's a horrible way to express yourself.”

“That's how serious I feel about you.”

“Please understand that I'm making no more commitment to you than to be your travel guide to Zhindu. I am not promising any more future relationship than that.”

“I'll try to live with that, I'll get better.”

“You don't look better right now. I've never known anyone to get so worked up over traveling to the city before.”

“I'm afraid when I get to the city I won't fit in because I'm

so weird.”

Desa couldn't help laughing, even though she could see he was hurt by it. “Don't worry about that You may be a little strange and a little naive about some things but in the city I'll show you WEIRD weird. Things like scrounges feeding families off garbage for generations and mutating in the darkness. You'd be well within the band called 'normal' even in Dos and Dos is straighter than Lastriss. When you're in Zhindu people might call you 'sir'.”

“That's good to know.”

The way he said it made it obvious that there was something more. “What else is bothering you?”

“It's my parents, I'm expected back by now, they're going to be furious, they'll certainly disown me.”

That rang about as true as a paper-mache gong. But pretending for a time that they would disown him, “So what? I know you can't help having some feeling for your parents, especially at your age, but what have they done for you so far? It sounds like they crawled out there so they could raise a child using the most outlandish notions. They kept you away from everything you might enjoy or learn from and fed you some kind of fundamentalist extremism instead. They taught you nothing about the real world, in fact they taught you things to deliberately make you afraid of the real world. Other than giving you life, they did more damage than good. Sounds like a good thing for you if they disown you.”

“But they were my whole world, the remainder is all

unknown to me. Sure you taught me a lot, and with what you've given me I can learn more, but they don't know what's happened to me. How will they know?"

"How do I know what's happened to Dara? He might come this way again. I might run into him sometime somewhere. Kids grow up and move away, that's what happens to most of them all over this world. You get messages sometimes, if you work at it diligently."

"I wish I could let them know."

"You'd have to walk back up there, and you'd never get back here by the time I leave."

"But what will they think?" he wailed.

"Are trying to tell me you're coming or trying to tell me to wait until you go tell them? If so guess again. There's a captain coming in now who's going all the way to Zhindu and runs a fun ship. There's a log leaving after the upcoming party that's going all the way to that ship. I intend to ride both of them. You might make it up and back before she sails, you might not. I'm definitely riding out of here on Knume's log tomorrow late, I'm already packed."

"I'm excited about going if you don't mind taking care of me on the way. I'm just going to feel so guilty about leaving my parents."

"If you get over that, I'd love to have the company. There's plenty of boats on the river but you're welcome to share one with me. If you act more like you did yesterday you're welcome to share a nest with me. What you're feeling

is as old as mothers and sons, I went thru it myself when Dara left. He was gone about ten years before I heard from him at all. I worried about him, I sometimes still do. I can also assure you that our relationship was longer and closer than you have with your parents.”

“Then you should be able to understand my grief.”

“Not enough to wait for you to go back up there and tell them.”

“I'm not asking you to do that. I'll go with you now if I'm still invited.”

“Is this the second or the third day in a row I've been inviting you?”

“Then I would love to share a ship and a nest with you on the way to Zhindu.” He looked into her eyes and leaned forward to kiss her.

She put a hand on his chest and held him back, “But I have one condition.”

He looked very nervous, “What?”

“That you never, ever do to me what you did to me last sleep.”

“What?”

“Go off and leave me alone like that.”

“Leaving you alone in the wilds?”

“Leaving me alone anywhere. No sneaking off without even scratching a note in the dust.”

“I really couldn't help it, I HAD to go.”

“Then don't stay around me.”

“I won't have to do that again, I know I won't, not if you let me come with you.”

“If you won't do that I'd love you to come with me. You need me to stick with you and be your guide. I need you to be there when I wake up. It's gotten to the point where that's all I ask of a guy, just be there when I wake up. So you see I'm not your new God, I'm not even your mother. I'm just a girl who's maybe older and wiser than you but just as mortal.”

“I will never leave you again. If you ever go to sleep by my side again, I will be right there when you wake up, unless I went to pee.”

“Then we'll get along just fine.”

He was still fighting with whatever was inside his head. He turned and desperately clung to her. This time they kissed, long and tender. His tears wet her.

“I really do love you Desa, I'm overcome with joy. I *am* going to use the word love, that's one thing about me you're going to have to accept.”

“O.K.” she whispered and rubbed the back of his head, swaying from side to side. What she could feel the most in him now was the pup. Her feelings came more into focus. She had a mother instinct, it was real, it was active, and it was going to have to be considered. In her mind she already knew she might pass up a better chance for a partner for awhile, just to perform this duty and have this automatic companion. She would have to be careful of that. Why did she ever do such a foolish thing as inviting him on this trip? It was spur of the

moment then, she never thought he'd really come did she? Now there was no convenient way to back out.

She could have a lot of fun with this kid though. She could do like Larneh had done with Sharni and raise him to be the guy she wanted. She would have to work on music, starting tomorrow at the Lappranile. He was energetic enough that she shouldn't have to prod him much about nesting chores. She wondered if she should be totally honest with him about her feelings. With his religious background he might be psychologically unable to make love to her again and she didn't want that. Alan was physically full grown and would be attractive with hair.

The fact that it had been only a week since she first saw him was a little disturbing. Normally she would want to know someone longer than that before promising to guide them to Zhindu and back. Although she had shared cabins with traveling companions met the day before, they had been adults who seemed normal and there had been no promise other than bunkmates until one or the other of them changed their mind. She wasn't going to consider this a formal promise because of the volatile nature of Alan's mind that he was showing tonight. If he did become trouble she would get away anyway no matter what either of them said. If he got better she would probably be quite happy. It would definitely help her self-confidence a great deal to have someone stay with her awhile.

“I need you for survival, Desa,” he said to the back of her

neck. He looked into her face and kissed her again, passionately this time. They clung together a little longer in the deepening dusk.

Eventually Desa rose and poked the fire back to life while her thoughts swirled uselessly. “Think you could eat some supper now?” she said while strolling into the kitchen.

“Soon,” he said, while catching up with her and kissing the back of her neck. “Can't you see how overcome I am with the presence of you? It's still almost more than I can handle, it's a new life for me.”

“Leaving this town is a new life for me also.” She was looping thru all of the ways this was going to affect her trip. She wasn't really in the mood to cook, so she just gathered up a few flavors of rinko and cut open a kalic.

Alan seemed happy and dreamy as they ate, like he already had a buzz on. Part of his mind was still a long way off. “I need to go pray one last time,” he said when they were done.

“Now?”

“Yes, please let me do it. If there's anything to my parents religion maybe they can hear me, maybe they can understand why I have to do this.”

“They probably know already.”

“Maybe. I won't be too long.”

As she put away the remains of supper she thought that

this praying might be what was really wrong with Alan. Hadn't Danip seen him talking to a piece of bark? Hadn't every strange change in his behavior been associated with what he now admitted was a prayer walk? Maybe before she got too cozy with this kid she should hear what he was telling his God. She might learn a lot more if she watched unobserved than when she asked him about it openly.

She slipped out the back door, feeling a little ridiculous slinking thru her own garden following him. This was not her normal mode of getting to know a guy, but Alan was not a normal guy and it was a long way to Zhindu. The evening was now cool enough for dew, and it made her feet cold but sandals would have made noise. She left their garden and crouched thru Nalu's thumor bushes, then slid over the fence into the keda field. Still keeping low she hurried up beside the fence, silent as fog. She parted the leaves and saw Alan. He was looking for a dry place to sit behind the talrin pen.

He looked around like he was checking for followers but didn't see her. She slipped very carefully thru the fence and crawled thru the vedn to a spot where she could see clearly over the far side of the talrin fence. She was getting quite cold and wet lying on the ground, but she ignored it and concentrated on watching him.

From his pocket he produced the chip of bark that Danip had talked about. Even from here in Narrulla's light she could see that it wasn't bark but some kind of textured plastic bark imitation. She was even more sure it wasn't bark when he

folded it open like a book. On the lower part were a couple of bumps, one of which he poked three times with a finger. Each time he poked it, it glowed with a dull red bioluminescence, which implied technology from Kassidor Yakhan.

A fraction of a second later the plastic thing made a noise, and she really got the chills. She was not aware that it was possible to make a speaker that small, and even if there was a speaker in it, she could plainly see that there was no hose of any kind attached to it. That meant there would have to be a tape inside this thing which was too small to hold a speaker, much less a tape, a motor to drive the tape, a pressure source to run the motor and sense the data on the tape, and a sonic block to synthesize the acoustic signal. Not any one of those could fit in there. She knew about things like that, she knew what was involved in making even the rather crummy sound that Alan's thing produced. Zhindu was backward in some things but audio technology wasn't one of them, so she doubted that there was some other basin where such technology existed.

Once the thing said something, Alan held it up and sure enough began to converse with it. She wished she could hear the conversation, but even this close it was drowned out by the chernockas. If this was some fantastic ancient device it would have to be from the Energy Age, but how could he get here from then?

This new mystery darkened her spirits. She felt her

warmth hemorrhaging out into the cold ground. It filled her with horror to listen to that plastic thing squawk.

Now what? In her attempt to find out what was wrong with Alan she had opened up something much bigger. What was that thing he had? How did he get it? What were they saying? How could a recording be placed in a device so small? Why would he carry on a conversation with a recording? Or was he a really good ventriloquist carrying out some kind of a hoax? If so, why would he do it when he didn't think anyone was watching? Did he know she was watching? Was that thing actually some form of artificial life?

There were more questions than that, there was an endless stream of them running thru her brain. Could he really be from ancient times? It would make a little sense. She had never heard of devices like that even then. Just because she hadn't heard of it didn't mean it didn't exist, there were lots of secret labs as the Energy Age ended. Come to think of it, there were quite a few secret labs now, he could have something to do with one.

Maybe there was an unknown valley out in the waste where a society had remained since the Energy Age? The Kinsheeta was large enough to hold such an area. It certainly wasn't the people she had encountered on the way thru, but if a colony of ephemeral savages could exist, why not a remnant of the Energy Age? If he was from such a society, it was quite possible he might not have the instincts of modern civilization. The people of Lbron't Nevn hadn't when they

were discovered and caused great mayhem until a Trenst genetics company developed a contagious vector to spread the Instinct thru their population.

She wondered if there was any way to test him to find out if he was dangerous? She found it hard to think he might be, but she had just been shown all too clearly that things are seriously different now. Maybe she should get out of here right now while she could, especially if he knew she had followed him. As she kept thinking about it, that made less and less sense. The discovery of an unknown basin with dangerous inhabitants was much too big an event, a young ventriloquist practicing his act alone is much more probable, happens dozens of times all over the world every year. An impossible device is just impossible.

She wondered if she should tell him she had followed him out here and insist that he explain the device. If Alore was here claiming it was something supernatural she probably would have done that, but by herself in the last grey-purple dusk, it was a little too scary. It was too scary wondering what such a question would do to Alan should she slink close enough to hear them and then just saunter up and get in on their conversation. First she should find out if this is really some kind of device or just a prop. What was this person really like? He might be as tender and innocent as he seemed. Maybe he found this thing out in the desert and was almost as scared of it as she was? Maybe he thought it was his burden to bear?

There was a point in the conversation where the voice coming out of the device clearly changed. This one was also female but just barely, she worked in the cargo trade in some big city. She was loud and she was a preacher, a hell and damnation preacher talking about obliterating villages with meteors and such.

Then Desa figured out what this thing must be, some one had microminiaturized it somehow to call it supernatural and sell it to bumpkins, but it was like one of those toys with the tape in it that plays something different back each time you wind it up. You pray and it comes up with a sermon, probably at random. She still had to know how it worked, her technical curiosity required that.

The conversation became more heated, Desa heard the dyke's voice bellowing commands about channels and pickup sites. She couldn't hear Alan's reply. There were more words, then Alan shouted 'The only choice you have is whether you answer the call or not ' like he was now arguing with his Pocket Prophet and the God who gave it to him. She wanted to stay and see how that argument came out, but it might end suddenly and she was afraid of what would happen if he got up and found her spying on him. She slunk back passed the talrin pen and thru the keda field, then worked her way out and around Nalu's and Cthanthan's houses and back up to Knume's thru the front. She went right into the shower, partly as an excuse to take off her wet clothing and partly to warm up. The chills went deeper than just what the dew had given

her.

The Pocket Prophet

Desa was still in the shower when she heard Alan come back into the house. She was still worrying about what he was and what he would do to her if he knew. She did compose herself enough to come out and face him, but she was wary. He seemed as agitated as she was, maybe even more. She felt like asking him about his prayers, but realized that conversation could go just as badly as his had with his gods. He was probably agitated over that. What was she agitated over? “So are you ready for the trip?” She asked, hoping to keep talk away from his prayer walk. “I know I'm getting pretty excited about it.”

“That and the party,” he answered. “I've never been to one before, I have no idea how to act.”

“You don't have to worry about it, you don't have to act, you're just passing thru on your way to Zhindu and we've teamed up for the journey so you're there with me. Everybody knows you don't know anyone around here. The only thing to keep in mind about a party is that it's all about fun so just relax and have some. Don't get upset by all the sex and drinking.”

“I just want to be sure I'm not going to lose you,” he said while gripping her in a hug. “You're all I have you know.”

“You're traveling with me. Even if I do spend some time with other people at the party, remember that I'm leaving them. This is the last I will see anyone around here for a long time. As soon as we get on the river you'll be seeing too much of me.”

“I just need to be sure you haven't changed your mind about me. I have irrevocably made up my mind that I will go with you and I don't know enough about life, especially about cities, to survive on my own.”

“What brought this on?” she asked. “I wasn't taking about leaving you.”

“I'm just afraid you'll find me so simple and boring once we get to the city.”

She wanted to shriek. ‘What is so boring about carrying devices beyond any technology I know about?’ ...but can't talk about that... “It's a long time before we get to the city, we'll know all about each other by then.”

“I want to be someone you want.”

“Don't worry about it, that's the biggest step you could take right now. My nature is to cling to people, there could come a day when you try to shake me.” ...like when I take that hellish thing apart. “I don't ask much,” ...just tell me what that is... “I'm pretty flexible. If you want to have a relationship with me enjoy the relationship and don't worry about the relationship.” ...worry about that thing in your pocket.

He wasn't talking like a wizard, but still the naive and

dependent little child. If anything a little too whiny. She was convinced there was no danger from Alan himself, no he was still the pup he had been a few minutes ago. It was the device that was his problem, addling his tender mind with demonic sermons from some ancient creed. Maybe his parents had found that in an ancient crypt and it was what had caused them to stay out there in the wilds.

If Desa was going to continue conversing with him, she would confront him about the prayer stick but was too tired for that. “I think I'm going to try and get some sleep,” she told him. “We have a bunch of hard partying to do tomorrow and probably thru the sleep after and then an all-day ride down to Hazorpean.”

He followed up to her room. She tried to act normal, even tried to make love, but neither of them was able to concentrate. He just needed to cling; she was distracted by the cabinet in which he'd put his clothes.

Desa didn't want to fall asleep. She wanted to wait until he was asleep and then get out the device and examine it. That didn't happen. Alan took a long time to get to sleep and after this huge long day she was just too tired to stay awake in spite of her agitation. She slept fitfully having a whole series of dreams about history and guys from ancient times dragging her into slavery in some ancient-fantasy Zhlindu that looked a lot like what she imagined Borlunth looked like. She didn't come fully awake until almost Nightday when Kunae was just

peeking in the west window. Alan was finally sleeping soundly so at last she had the opportunity to examine the mysterious object.

She was on the side with the cabinet. She slowly opened the door and felt the black space within. Maybe the device knew she had seen it? What a ridiculous thought. She remembered how Alore felt about Alan, and wondered if there was something supernatural about that little plastic case. Maybe it had even told Alan that she had watched them and that was why he was so distracted. She didn't believe in the supernatural, but something like this device might push her over that line.

Her mind continued to race while her trembling hand probed around for the object. She was careful not to move any other part of her body so as not to wake Alan. She nearly jumped when her fingernail clicked against it. Carefully she got a grip on it. It was just inert plastic and did nothing to her.

She drew it out and looked at it in the dim light. It was plastic, but not a familiar type, harder than soft but not hard, more like tightened rubber-bands. It tasted like no normal plastic. She found the tiny catch and opened it, checking to see if Alan had moved. He hadn't. There was a little picture inside that she hadn't seen from the distance. There were two bumps on the bottom. The cover had a pattern of tiny holes in it. She pressed one of the bottom bumps and it glowed red just like it had for him. She didn't dare press it the other two times to activate it. Instead she had just noticed that poking

the little picture made the picture change.

Then it spoke, without warning, with only that one poke of the bump. That was too much for her nerves, she jumped and tossed it in the air; stifling a scream. It fell to the mattress barking, “Alan ” using the voice of that waterfront dyke, “Alan, if you're going to get me up in the middle of the night you'd better have something to say ” while she scurried over to the corner of the room as far from it as she could get.

Book VIII. Gordon's Lamp

Thursday May 26, 2271 - 02:17am

Delos didn't want night shift duty in the first place. He would never be one to question the fact that Angels needed sleep, he was never one to want his interrupted. He didn't care that electronic science had learned to copy the human mind, at a near molecular level of detail, and make it work without fully understanding the process they simulated. He cared that being scheduled to take a message prevented him from sleeping. He read. He tried to get the vague data from B to fit a favorable cost structure. He watched entertainment, but there was nothing new available. He hadn't gotten mail from Sol in almost a week, the only personal mail he got from there was legal notices.

He really wouldn't have cared if there was no biology department. The fact that there is a biological planet in this system was of passing interest as another source of nature shows, he didn't find it interesting from any other standpoint. He didn't get involved in debates about the native's souls. It's gravity well was far too costly to get materials from, it gave off no energy other than it's gravity, it interrupted the rather weak solar flux which was their whole economy's source of energy for almost an hour every day, adding wear to backup systems. But it did distract almost everyone because it was

such a pretty nature show.

And then the annoying biology department had to go raise a mortal in a lab, tease it with androids until it went nuts and then let it loose on the surface. Now they were mystified that it wasn't behaving properly. Delos knew exactly what would happen with this human lab-rat of Alfred's. It would go feral on him as soon as it sniffed a potential mate.

Now Delos had to stay up late listening for the mortal because Elmore thinks he's a sociologist of some sort and might understand what this kid was going thru. Well Delos didn't, a hundred seven was his last mortal age, that had been in the year 2159. Delos had maybe watched a movie about kids on a sailing ship once in a Hollywood history park when he was a kid. Delos had never camped when he was a mortal, he'd spent most of his mortal life in office towers and high-rise hotels when he hadn't been vacationing at a resort somewhere. He'd been able to retire to a light gravity level of New Dallas in his eightieth year. His favorite entertainment was the Klok Mannim series, from London. Klok was a contract bodyguard for corporate sheiks.

Having this mortal beep so ridiculously late was kind of an insult. The mortal was supposed to report about some native village. There was a list of questions. The mortal could handle a conversation channel, he had a whole stack of hardware drivers Delos wasn't used to seeing, but with them he could converse. Delos had never really cared about the fact that a mortal had been genned from the seed pool and had

certainly never conversed with it or mailed it before it was released on the surface and Colonel Bovok thought the natives might have some relation to economics.

But finally it beeped and the driver stack went green. “So have you looked at this village?” Delos asked, the first action item on the mortal’s list.

“Yes, some of it, I've actually done a lot better than that.”

“That's very good, what have you done?”

“I've started learning to read. My teacher said this is how all writing is done all over the world. It's much simpler than we thought. We should have guessed this. I have a sheet she wrote out, I wish this was a better camera and I had more light than this lighter. I'm going to pass the camera over the sheet, record this all down, these are the letters.”

“You're sending video.” Delos clicked the controls.

He passed his little phone-cam over a neatly hand written piece of paper with rows of marks on it. The lighter and the phone’s screen were enough light that it would be readable after enhancement. He spoke the sounds of the alphabet while he did it. Delos recorded it all. He knew somebody assigned to this level of detail would look at the recordings, his duty was to see that they got done and properly addressed. Bio, the Colonel, Security, Captaincy should about cover it.

“Here's how they go together, this is key, the early consonants are on the left if they're harsh, top if they're soft, vowels and glides roam toward the middle, later consonants

on the right and bottom, R, L, Y and W can also be vowels.”

Delos attached that to the log entry. “So; how did you learn all of this?”

“Well, you probably heard how I happened into this village yesterday.”

He’d had nothing better to do while he waited so long, so he had reviewed the logs. “Yes,” was all he said.

The mortal went on, sounding too excited for an official report. “So yesterday I heard about a reading class that was being given today. So I went back by there today and found it was just getting started, so I took it. It's a very first beginning, start-to-read reading class and I'm doing very well.”

Delos scrolled quickly thru the mortals orders, “I don’t see anything authorizing you to make conversation, much less enroll in a school.”

“It’s just a one on one lesson, turns out I was the only person who showed up. It's not really a school, the teacher gives classes in her house.”

“Who is this teacher?”

“She looks like an elegant, dark-curly-haired seventeen year old with knowing eyes and a face that’s a bit elfish.”

“So you're being tutored by a high-school girl, is she a student teacher?”

“No, she claims to be about four hundred years old.”

“That must be four hundred of their years, about twenty five decimal Earth years.” Delos had a package of assistants running that Elmore had left him, he only had to read off the

screen.

“She said ‘KegvaekYeengauaspfeealthdee’, that’s literally ‘Age mine Yeeng and thirds two is.’ Yeeng's are ten thousands of their years in base six,” Alan reminded him, “about two hundred twenty nine decimal Earth years.”

Delos never thought he would have to get personal with the native language-encoded audio driver on the path of his messages to the soul in Alan's flesh. “How is that possible?”

“I don't know for sure yet but the pertinent question was, ‘why do all the natives look the same age?’ and I think the answer is ‘because they don't age’. There's been other clues pointing to that. Now the next question should be, ‘how do they do it?’”

“How could they avoid aging?”

“They look and sound pretty advanced in biology and this sun puts out a lot less ultraviolet. There’s less radioactivity and they burn no fossil fuels. They eat no artificial foods either. From what I could see most food is pick-and-eat. They have less stress in their lives. My guess is some combination of those factors causes it. I might be able to find a way to ask her.”

“DON'T do that,” Delos said. “I don’t see you being authorized to strike up a conversation and interrogate the locals. I certainly don’t think the mission plans include you going back to ask awkward questions and listen to some teenage native girl fantasizing. She could be leading you on because she can’t believe you’re so gullible. Besides that, her

parents could very well be back by now and how would they take to her tutoring a twenty year old?"

"Sir, this woman knows that the houses they live in have six nucleotides in three replicating pairs. The fact that she knows this is important. The greatest medical genius in 17th century Europe didn't know that the body was made of cells, the 19th century barely knew even that. That is not some teenage fantasy. They buy vials of genetic treatments to apply to their homes to control their growth."

"How do you know this?"

"I asked her," Alan said.

"You asked her?"

"Yes, I asked her as a child would ask his teacher. I also asked her another question we wanted to know."

"What was that?"

"How humans got here."

This WAS right on this list, as was, 'why are all people the same age?' Even so, Delos was convinced he should be reprimanded for compromising security. He listened to the mortal relate the answer with genuine interest.

It turned out the natives had two theories. One was interesting, a previous, native species had brought them here. The other was obviously false, that the previous species cooked them up in a lab as artificial life. Even the mortal knew which of those was right. The notion that the previous species which built that earlier civilization was now the common draft animal seemed a little unlikely.

“She also told me there are thirty or forty thousand holy men who claim to be fathered by God himself, so some approximation to Christianity exists here.”

“That is very interesting news. The saint and the captain will care about that.”

Alan continued to prattle about native religions and manners for awhile, Delos wasn't really interested in that. He wrote down Alan's point about the genetic knowledge, even though he wasn't convinced it was that significant. He recorded the audio. He wanted to wrap this up.

“I see you're scheduled to observe the village for a few more hours. You may do that, but from now on just observe, don't interact. Your expedition orders were clear on that. Stay completely out of sight of the girl who tutored you.”

Alan drew a breath before he continued. “I was going to stop at a ‘cook’ and get some lunch. That would be a good place to just observe.”

“If you're willing to subject yourself to native food.”

“I've eaten it three times so far and each time has been the best thing I've ever tasted in my life.”

“Well then; enjoy your lunch, but be completely discreet. Pretend you're mute if you have to, just shake your head and keep walking or eating or whatever you're doing.”

Alan started to argue about that until Delos had to get a little sharp about it. “Just be a soldier and follow your orders.”

Thursday May 26, 2271 - 11:48am

Elmore was annoyed that Alan was so late calling in. But when he did he spewed forth a wealth of data. Most of it was interesting, some was almost frightening. The natives knew that stars produced energy via nuclear fusion. They knew about nucleotides in genetic programming. They worked in music recording studio's using frequency domain transforms of audio signals in fluidic circuits. Millions of people lived inside the jungle-covered basaltic plug in the center of this basin making audio equipment, ceramics with photographs embedded in them and conducting research into the psychoacoustics of audio cognition. There were high-speed photogravure printing presses in full color turning out millions of copies of glossy publications to millions of consumers basin-wide. They got to the country by sailing ship and animal cart but even on his phone pictures he could see they were as good as any produced on Earth in the days of paper media.

He sent a probe to that volcanic plug to get some detailed pictures of the feature. Until now it mapped as a jungle-covered mountain surrounded by a teeming pre-technical city.

Elmore debriefed him for over an hour, then turned him over to Biology, then let him get some sleep. His report was disturbing news. In spite of the lack of metals, electricity, and energy resources, there were some advanced technologies on the planet. He wondered how much danger this would be?

The ship was still safe, there didn't seem to be anything that would make space travel possible to the natives. He prepared a report and posted it. The captain soon requested interface, but so did Delos. Kelvin, of course, came first.

“This is important data. We aren't equipped for this, we could make some very big mistakes here.”

“In dealing with these natives?” Elmore asked.

“Yes. Perhaps we should pull Alan back, at least for now. Get him about a day's travel or so away from that village. Maybe Biology could use him meanwhile. Talk to Alfred and come up with a program for him. We need to think about this carefully. It could be that picking him up will be the prudent thing to do.”

“I'll start putting this into effect.”

He sent the message to Alfred, then turned his attention to what Delos wanted.

“I'd like to know how Alan found out the information he learned.”

“Since he talked to you?”

“Yes.”

“He said he heard most of it while he was eating at a cook's stand, I guess it's busy around those but if you're just leaning on the rail eating and keeping to yourself nobody notices you and you can stay quite awhile and overhear quite a bit. He learned some stuff by window shopping and looking at the devices employed and for sale. He learned to read a little bit as your report stated and did some browsing at a

magazine stand.”

“Good, I was just following up on the orders I gave him. He wasn’t happy with me when I told him not to see that teacher again. I actually told him not to talk to anyone.”

“He ordered a meal, asked the prices of a few things.”

“I could call that insubordination if I wanted to.”

“You wouldn’t want to,” Elmore advised him, politely, but as his commanding officer. “He followed your orders and they helped him make many important findings. We now know the natives have much more technology than we believed. We’re going to re-think our whole approach, he’s being pulled back from this village after he rests. Kelvin may even pull him back up.”

“That wouldn’t bother me,” Delos said. “I was very skeptical of what he was telling me, it just doesn’t look like an advanced civilization. The energy use alone...”

“I’m not really sure it is, except in some specialties. Most of their advances are biological, Alfred and Victoria have to analyze what it means.”

“No matter what they can do in biology, it may effect Alan, but it can’t effect us.”

“So we think,” Elmore said, “but you never know what bacteria might infect, especially bacteria that can produce plastic, which Alan says they have.”

“I think we should leave the natives alone until a proper inter-cultural expedition can get here.”

“There are too many who care that it won’t be from our

church. It will be the Brazilian expedition.”

“We can go broke looking at this bauble,” Delos reminded him for the millionth time, “Things leak, no materials are entering the system. Whatever importance it has, we have to put it aside soon or carry on economic trade with it.”

“We would have to make our presence known for trade to work.”

“I'm joking, there's no way that could work, the natives don't have any way to transmit credit.”

Delos was way too office to make a good officer, Elmore thought. Elmore volunteered to take the call tonight, Alan's morning, when he would finally have daylight again. Delos had no more feel for this mortal than he did for mechanical engineering. Alan would probably sleep late, it would be late in off-shift but no real bother. Elmore would have to tell him they were pulling him back and turning him back over to biology. The young man would be disappointed and would probably argue. Delos would have no sympathy and probably start an incident. Elmore would be firm, but let him be heard.

Friday May 27, 2271 - 06:30am

Ava Brancour manifested just seconds before Kelvin tinked his glass to call breakfast to order. He looked a little perturbed by the floating into position of her 'loons and boas, garments that she patched around his personification censors.

She knew that in his mind these breakfasts were dignified duty ceremonies. To her it usually seemed more like the time to cat-howl about the most spiteful petty politics.

Captain Kelvin M'Kintre's public space was space itself. The view from where the ship was located was interpreted in the most visually pleasing and informative way. In this space was whatever public image the soul would provide, floating at comfortable speaking distances. All were well lit, no data was imparted thru the skin senses, but there was a slight flowery fragrance that seemed to emanate from the side the planet was on. They were all sitting at the long table he had manifested here, in zero G or the chair of their choice.

The tinkling of his glass was also the signal to his servers. He prided himself on the flavors he could imagine from them, and was interested in souls with highly developed culinary senses.

The first item on the agenda was the proposal by Heymon Kruger that the ship itself be moved to 61 Cygni B. Kelvin began, "First I commend you for the job you've done in preparing this proposal. The supporting materials are very well presented." They had all seen the proposal, it was entertainment. "I agree that if we are going to find any economically viable materials it is going to be in the environs of B. I also agree that the human natives won't be properly studied with just the token biology department we brought with us. Our job is to find something here that can sustain a permanent base and so sustain a proper study."

He turned toward Alfred, “How are our present investigations proceeding?”

“Alan has been pulled back but is still on his way to the outcrop we’ve selected. It’s been five hours now so he should be well on his way. We don’t expect to hear from him till he’s there because he has to keep the phone out of sight until he’s set up and secure. It seems the area he’s stumbled into is relatively populated. I’d like to point out that if the trees could be houses, we could be seriously low in our estimates of the number of natives.”

“How far is he from a suitable pickup site when he gets there?” Kelvin asked.

Elmore Bovok answered. “He will be within twenty five miles of a point where the atmosphere shuttle could land unobserved. It’s close to the route he took on his way into that village. If he gets in touch with us soon and we start him then, it will be easy for him to get to a suitable site before dark.”

“I believe we already have an approved reservation on Mister Larkin,” Alfred piped up.

“I was getting to that,” Kelvin continued, “Is it on his way out of the village?” he asked Alfred.

“Oh yes, it’s at the outcrop he’s moving toward now.”

“And how long will these investigations take?”

“A day or two sir. Glenelle has a theory about local evolution that can be tested.”

“Yes of course. All I’d like to do is make a decision by this Monday of a rigging change by next Monday. If you used

him this period of daylight, he would have another period of daylight to get to a pickup point before next Monday. Let me know if he has any new data when he makes contact. Unless security changes I'll be inclined to grant your request.”

“I'll keep that in mind when I communicate with him.”

“He is here, is he not?”

Kelvin flashed a hundred mile wide cursor on the planet's surface. Alfred knew Alan's locale by the video Alan transmitted and some coordinates. Ava knew Kelvin's cursor was as accurate a plot of his last transmission as the system could represent to their souls, as was the image of the planet. The cursor was about one eighth of the way into the lighted side of the planet. Alan and the natives in the area would be up and about.

Alfred finished checking the coordinates, “Yes it is sir, and the point where we would be making those observations is well within your cursor.”

Kelvin blanked the cursor. Ava knew his mind was already made up. He'd as much as said that Monday he was making it official that they would begin rigging to move ship the following Monday.

They were onto the second item on the agenda long before the servers had finished displaying their plates of flapjack morsels Kelvin had set out for the first course. Ava was still selecting a syrup when he went on to a report from Morgan Evans of engineering on the ship's potassium

balance. This was a much more immediate problem. A shortage of any element could force them to find a source at A no matter how poor. The accel and decel to B would take over two years. This could affect substrate production, but could also mean deaths of specimens in the biology labs. Alfred was thus very interested in this issue also.

This had been an ongoing topic and today's report was on where the potassium might be going. Either the hull breach sensors were all haywire in agreement, or it was not escaping into space. The breach sensors were all green over every hull, pipe and fitting from lower hardware engineering.

Ava knew some idle slink program or rogue soul sneaking around in system space might be trying to hide what it was doing with it. She could imagine several ways the biology lab could have been sabotaged already, but no way to generate a danger to the continued existence of the ship. It could well be a problem for Alan when they got him back up. The only thing that bothered her was that the surface of this moon was high in potassium and maybe a soulless entity could want it to experiment with.

Lot's of novel ways were being used to determine what might be happening. The best astro-pro prospector remotes had been used to examine Gordon's Lamp itself and only the potassium known had been detected. Ava knew this could also happen if the virus was anywhere in the hardware data layer. More seriously, it could mean that the virus had detected the interest of the souls in the potassium balance and

was trying to cover it's tracks.

Once that business was concluded, Saint O'Connor went over who wished to be seated where at tonight's dinner, and asked everyone to begin requesting their seating at the 'dinner in God's heaven' he was planning for the coming Sunday.

Friday May 27, 2271 - 9:37am

Alfred was getting bothered by the lack of response from the human. He should have made it to the observation site hours ago. He had to grovel with Elmore to get him to swing the main scope and take a look for him as the moon came back around to their side of the planet.

It didn't take long to find the spot and the atmosphere was stable enough to determine if anyone was there. It didn't take long to find out there were multiple humans there, two of them sitting on the ground. You could make it out, yes, *picking berries*. Their fabricator had been coaxed into making better optics in recent years so it didn't take much enhancement to determine the larger was Alan. It took awhile longer to render an enhancement of the other human. This was a young, nude, rather pretty, female human with long, dark, curly hair. You could tell they were talking, the girl was just going on about something while they worked and Alan was listening to it.

Alfred had been flesh once, only a hundred and thirteen years ago. He ascended at age eighty eight, but felt more like thirty four as an Angel. Alfred knew his biological observations would wait while Alan conducted some biological observations of his own. Of course this was all over the ship within seconds. It became quite the buzz, Alan and the native girl. They dispatched a close orbital to watch him. The whole crew watched while they could, but the camera seemed to zip by the target site in a few minutes every three hours, so they couldn't watch for long. The schedule on the main scope was pressing so they could no longer watch with that either.

It was quite a scandal that Alfred's department had allowed this to happen. Like there was something he could have done about it? Alan couldn't very well talk to them with this native girl around, but he certainly shouldn't have brought her along with him, he shouldn't have let her stay nude and he certainly shouldn't be sitting here whiling away the planet's long afternoon picking berries with her

Friday May 27, 2271 - 3:31pm

Victoria was on post watching Alan. Only the remote scope could see them at this time, the ship and it's scope were stuck with the inner moon, far around the planet. At least the remote was parked in a geosynchronous orbit over the planet,

much farther out than this moon, so he could remain in their sight. Alan had gone with the native girl into the shade, and brought the sleeping bag with him. It's a good thing they went under that tree or Morgan Evans would be trying to tap this channel and Bishop Rendelbyn would be calling for a missile strike.

Glenelle drifted back from logging readings, her personification the little zero-gee fairy with goldfish fins on her feet instead of wings. Her little fairy body was far too shapely for political advantage, but Glenelle didn't care about that at all. Glenelle had ascended when she was only thirty seven years old, victim of an accident in the warehouse where she worked as a mortal. Glenelle wasn't as troubled by Alan's behavior as the others in the crew and was content to wait by the channel till he was done fooling around.

“You know the captain had a security meeting about this?” Victoria told her.

“Doesn't he have one when any indicator goes red?”

Victoria wished she wouldn't talk like that. They were on duty and this conversation was recorded, if it was reviewed, some would gossip.

Alan and the native girl had been under that tree for well over an hour when Alan came strolling out. He was wearing just his shorts and sandals, but the surface temperature was ninety one. Even so she was sure she heard clucking from every universe on the ship. He walked for quite a distance,

got up on a rock and looked around, then pulled out the phone and called.

“Why haven't you called in much earlier?” Victoria began.

“There was a native here.”

“Oh we all know that.”

“She followed me up here. She was coming out here to pick berries and didn't want to be alone in the wilderness. She made it clear long before we got here that she wasn't going to let me shake her.”

Victoria could understand how this would make some sense, but Alan was unarmed and without serious mortal survival skills. Still, if a large carnivore attacked, all she would have to do was outrun Alan, something she looked quite capable of doing. No doubt in the native's society sex as payment for bait service was considered a good deal.

“You didn't try very hard to get away. The whole crew has been watching you two like a movie all day long. ‘Our mortal and the native girl playing camp’. The whole crew loved watching you two disappear under that tree after supper, holding hands, with the sleeping bag over your shoulder.” She knew there were bets among the crew about how many times he had her, but she certainly wasn't going to try and satisfy that crowd by asking about it now.

“It was worth it, wait till you hear what I found out. There are seven major plant phyla in two different lives. There are five independent lives on this planet, not just the three we've found so far. All the soft plants you've classified so far

are from the Sumaid phylum of the Sumoid kingdom of Sumoid life...”

And so opened the floodgates of a world of detailed and comprehensive knowledge of all the planet's biology. They both listened as he summarized the classification, evolution and physiology of life on the planet. They both knew he didn't get any of this from his own observations, yesterday he had to be coached to know what was plant and what was soil. At first she thought he was making it all up, but then she noticed it explained questions they had discovered via chemical analysis that they wouldn't have even been able to ask Alan yesterday.

“...these are called jellybarks and the jelly is really a skin of the plant. That's because the whole Shaftwood phylum is in the Cellulose kingdom, ...” He just kept going and it kept fitting together. Could it be that the native girl who had followed him knew all this and explained it to him? How would she know all this? This was college-level biology. Even if that naked savage could know this, how did he get it all out of her?

While he was reporting all this and Victoria was having these thoughts, Alfred joined the channel. “What is he doing?”

“I would say he's giving us the synopsis of a couple semesters of college biology, 61 Cygni style,” Glenelle answered.

“And how does he explain his escapade?” He asked,

letting Alan's data just record.

“He said the native girl followed him up here,” Vic told him. In spite of what he’d done, she still felt protective of her son.

“She used him as carnivore bait,” Glenelle added.

“I think we will be required to give a little more explanation than that for this interlude, how long has he been out of contact, nineteen hours?”

“No, just over sixteen since he talked to Colonel Bovok when he first woke.”

“I still think I need to ask him for some more detail.”

Victoria transferred control of the channel over to him, and he huffed a little interrupt. “I say Alan, we need to know more about why you waited so long to contact us.”

“On my way up here this morning I met this native girl...”

“Alan; we all watched that part. We think you could have gotten away from her if you tried. We didn't see you making any effort.”

“She just knows too much, she told me about history, I didn't even get to that yet.”

“Alan, what does she know about you now?”

“That I'm a just-grown son of religious hermits who live out on the desert rim. She's been thru there, knows exactly what I'm talking about, feels sorry for me for it and doesn't doubt that I need a lot of education in a hurry.”

“So who is this girl?”

“Her name is Desa, she came over to this basin from the

one to the west about 2200ad. or so. She used to be a professor back in her native land, the group of cities in the lakes about fifteen hundred miles west of here.”

“She must have told you about the immigration and therefore the government.”

“Oh yes she did, she knows enough history, a LOT of history, more history that Earth has. She even knows a word for ‘government’, it's a standard compound word, 'toomda', literally 'bully group'. There's been no such thing here since before the time of Christ, there were genetic modifications made to mankind that caused all governments to, 'dissipate' was her word for it.”

“I thought the person you saw in that village was the only teacher around here but now you walk just a little ways into the woods and run into a university professor?”

Alan's voice got very small, “It's the same girl,” he had to admit.

“What?” Alfred very calmly pronounced. “I know you were ordered not to speak with her again, Delos was quite thorough in making sure we all knew that. Now you've gone and spent the whole day with her. What kind of way to follow orders is that?”

“What should I have done, run off? We were going the same way, she’s already met me. She made it clear she was staying with me if I was going to that clearing. She had this skimpy little bag, I have that sixty pound pack. She's lived on the planet all her life, I've tried to train for it. She’s lived in

these woods for seventy years, I stumbled thru them by accident. I couldn't get away from her if I tried, and if I tried I'd just injure myself. Why make everything deliberately unpleasant? Why not make the best of it and get as much information for us as I can?"

"You couldn't protect her, she was using you as bait." Glenelle said.

"I agree with you on that. It makes the most sense so far for the observed behavior, even though it is less than flattering to my ego."

"Be that as it may," Alfred said, "I think we've done all we're going to do for this trip, we're going to move the ship over to B and you're supposed to be long on your way to the pickup point."

"Oh? I thought I was coming up here for biological observations."

"You've done those and more with what you've told us so far. We're interested in everything you have learned, but we want you to get to a safer location before you continue."

"But sir, it's nearly midnight my time, she could wake up when I get my gear, she's on the sleeping bag."

"Leave it."

"I'll die without that in the cold."

"We'll let you spend the dark in someplace warm enough to survive."

"I can't just leave her out here in the wilds, there might be carnivores around. She's sound asleep, trusting me."

“You even admitted she was using you as bait. Security will have less of a problem with what you've done if she does get taken by a carnivore.”

“Sir you can't be so cruel, you're talking about a living, breathing human being here. She can be a little blunt at times but she's a really good person.”

“I doubt that these carnivores are that common or you would have encountered one when you slept in the woods.”

The conversation was then interrupted by an override. The interrupter left a few moments of silence on the channel, then began.

“Mister Larkin, this is Colonel Samrova of security. It is unfortunate that I have to speak to you personally, I hope you will listen carefully to what I have to say. This concerns being put under combat rules.”

“What?”

“We have determined that you could be in a hostile situation and therefore, you are a soldier. Any failure to follow your specific orders could be considered treason, do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“Yes MA'AM soldier ”

“Yes ma'am, I understand that.”

“Do you understand that treason is a capital offense?”

“Yes Ma'am.”

“You performed your duties adequately on board but since you were stationed groundside you have treated a very

important mission as a lark, a holiday. You seem to think you can set your own hours and tramp around any place you please, whenever you please like a character in one of those trash novels you read. You think all you have to do is make insipid little chatty reports that sound more like a child's calls from camp than valid scientific data. And you only do that when there's nothing else on your mind. Now you risk this whole expedition so you can entertain us with a porn show.”

Victoria wondered how long she'd worked on that speech, but Glayet continued, “You will NOW retrieve your gear, except for the sleeping bag which you said is *under* your little prize. You will begin a forced march to the southwest, keeping this phone open at ALL times. We will see what you see and hear what you hear. When you pick up your gear leave this phone where it can see you and she can't see it. If she wakes up, grab everything and run. Security DEMANDS that you kill her, and a real soldier certainly would, but we now know a sniveling little rodent like you couldn't manage to kill a healthy young woman even if you had the backbone to try.”

Alan gasped, “I can't believe what I just heard.”

“Then you certainly aren't qualified for a military mission.”

“This wasn't a military mission.”

“It is now, so MOVE.”

Alan did as ordered. He put the phone on the ground and stayed in view of it. The girl was not in view. He looked

towards her as he very quietly got his things together. He backed away from her and picked up the phone. He could have mouthed her a kiss but it wasn't possible to tell with only a few pixels of the back of his jaw. He backed away from the area. They walked from there, phone held low and inconspicuous as possible, showing a view of forest bouncing by at hip level. She heard her son sobbing.

Friday May 27, 2271 - 8:37pm

After a twenty two hour day, Alan had finally been allowed to sleep. Glayet had kept him marching for three hours and then they had taken turns debriefing him. The young man certainly had a good point, he had learned more in the sixteen hours he was with that woman than he would have in six months of his own investigations. The only difficulty was, how much of it was true? Most of the crew followed Delos' belief that she was really just a kid making up stories because Alan would believe anything. It was true that she did know some things they could verify, but that didn't mean all the things they couldn't verify were true.

Alfred thought it was really sad that all the detailed info they had came from that one native girl. They had managed to render a pretty good picture of her with the big scope, and she just didn't look like a distinguished university professor. If one allowed that the natives really did not age then there is no

way to relate the youthfulness of her appearance to the amount of knowledge she could have picked up.

But whether all her tales were true or not, enough of them were verified to prove that the natives were far more advanced, in some things at least, than the expedition had believed for the past four years. It stood to reason that with the planet so poor in metals, they should be behind in industrial technology and electronics. If their history was as long as this girl claimed and they had been exposed to an advanced civilization during the ice-age, they had plenty of time to advance in many other areas.

Victoria entered his presence. “Do you think we could get back here after the stop at B?” was the first thing she asked. “I say this because I believe Kelvin’s mind is made up and we are going over there. I just don’t think we are going to find anything so interesting over there that we will remain there permanently.”

“I don’t see that coming,” Alfred said, “Kelvin doesn’t think we have the facilities to study this planet. I think we have to shift strategy a little. Maybe we can get him to let us land some probes outside habitation. No, we won’t be allowed to study the human society here, but maybe we can still study some biology. We should be able to receive from surface mounted instrumentation for a few months anyway.”

“I was never able to understand why we weren’t allowed to land all the probes right from the start?”

“Just because one was found by the natives and excited Kelvin’s paranoia.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with landing them out in the wilds?”

“He doesn’t know where the wilds are. We thought we were landing that probe in dense jungle.”

“We know some of them. Even given that the natives can grow houses, they can’t get inside one where the vegetation is only a foot deep. Our radar can tell if there is so much as a coffin six feet under to hide in for a hundred miles in all directions.”

“But Kelvin doesn’t know that,” Alfred told her. “He doesn’t understand the grown housing yet or care to. We know how much protoplasm there is on this planet, but we don’t know how much of it is human. He’s really still stuck on the theological issue of having humans here. The theological symbolism is more important to him than all the science combined. And it’s made him more afraid of this planet than interested in it.

“But all we can gather now will make it easier to plan and equip the next expedition.”

Yes, the next expedition. How Alfred would like to be on that one. What would they be capable of in 2300? The next expedition will be the one to really get their hands dirty on this planet, but they wouldn’t arrive till 2400. They would surely want to consult someone who had been here for the discovery, all he had to do was wait those long, boring years.

It was possible that they would find enough materials at B to start a thriving economy. Maybe a time would come when they could afford to equip an expedition back to A from there. He shouldn't dream of that, Kelvin would undoubtedly harden in his opposition as the years went by. The planet would become a devil to him, the more he didn't learn about it, the more he would fear it, then hate it. It wouldn't surprise Alfred to find that Kelvin would push their economy to get it to the point where they could destroy the planet before the Brazilians got here.

Victoria was thinking about the next expedition, "Can you imagine what the next expedition will be like. I can't think there would be expedition's going anywhere else for the foreseeable future. Everyone who can will be building ships as fast as they can. Most of the top people in most fields of study will be competing for positions."

"You could be right," Alfred said, "I wonder if mortals on Earth will try to find a way to make the trip?"

"I don't see how they could, how could they live long enough?"

"If that girl is correct, she's older than we are." Alfred was born as a mortal in 2079, Victoria in 2054. "If Alan studied at one of their universities he might learn the technology in four to eight years and the message could reach Earth in twenty. Mortals from Earth could be here by 2400," Alfred said, "even sooner if dust deflection continues to improve."

Alfred noticed an image file had been forwarded from Elmore. It was a video probe he sent down to the jungle covered mountain in the center of the basin. It was exactly as the girl had told Alan. Miles of multistory ceramic and grown structure, surging crowds, The big docks they had already seen actually sent traffic four stories deep into the face of the mountain. There were artistically tiled and landscaped promenades at the tops of the cliffs. When examined closely, the cliffs themselves were forty to sixty story walls of apartment balconies.

A few minutes later, while he was still engrossed in this, Elmore sent more pictures that other probes were sending back from the other huge cities thousands of miles away from where Alan was. The cities were as the girl described to him. Whether she had actually been there or not didn't matter, who cares if she made that up, she knew of them so clearly the planet had a global society. Alfred had listened to most of the debriefing, he remembered Alan mentioning 'photonic devices'. The girl had described warfare with devastating weapons and artificially-bred monsters so nasty they had become legendary.

One structure in one of the cities she had described was truly astounding. From a distance it was a huge pyramid, looming over the smaller grown skyscrapers like the Pharaoh's pyramids over the desert. It was a tetrahedral pyramid, not quadrilateral. As you got closer you could see the texture of it's surface was pocked with balconies of all

different sizes. Each was a conversation circle or lecture area. This had been dismissed as a ruin earlier, in the midst of thick jungle earlier but now that they knew what to look for they saw a densely populated lacework of canals. The city she told Alan she was from was also there right where she said it was, and looked just like she'd described it. Alfred began to really fear at this point that what this girl was telling Alan might be all true to the best of her knowledge.

Victoria was looking at the visuals with him. "What does this really mean?"

"Everything that we can check, is true." He tried to sound cool and scientific about it.

Victoria did remain cool and scientific. "That makes it even more imperative that we investigate this planet much more carefully. The Captain will have to change his mind when he sees this."

"This makes it even less likely. Think, for a minute, what it means if this girl is right. This planet has a huge and ancient civilization with millions of people who are thousands of years old. What if this planet really has billions of people who are as old as we are? How many hundreds of souls from Earth are our age?"

She was beginning to let it sink in. Alfred went on, "She told Alan this planet has thousands of Christs. She knows how many nucleotides code an amino acid in all five of the kingdoms of life here, not just the three that we've found. They had space wars here when Earth had just invented the

pyramid. If Khafre had been on this planet he might still be alive today. She told Alan that the men who teach in that pyramid are that old. I went over the whole recording, every word he said while everyone else was talking and letting his data just record.

“Kelvin will never risk what we confront here,” Alfred continued. “We could hope he won’t be smart enough to know what we confront here, but I think he will. When he sees these pictures, the first really detailed views we’ve had inside any big native city since the probe was dismantled, he’s going to want to run at least to B.”

He was indicating a picture from the shore of that volcanic plug at the center of this valley, the immense dock, lined with sailing ships on both sides, with a four level road leading into the base of that three mile long, forty-story wall of balconies, all grown out of living vines on a carbon-fiber reinforced ceramic skeleton. Alfred could imagine Kelvin’s unease. Alfred felt more than a bit of unease himself.

“We have to convince him to risk it,” Victoria said, “get him to find some backbone somewhere. We can’t just go off and leave this unexplored, this is the jackpot of all discoveries. This makes Columbus look like he found some mostly deserted island.”

“We’re more like Marco Polo,” Alfred said, still engrossed in the images Elmore had sent.

“How many would-be Marco’s Polo’s were like Kelvin and turned back once they saw there were people where they

were going?”

“Could have been hundreds,” Alfred chortled, “we never would have heard their travelogues.”

Saturday May 28, 2271 - 4:00pm

Getting summoned to a security meeting wasn't Alfred's favorite way to spend late Saturday afternoon. No doubt Kelvin knew that Alan's channel was off again and had been for hours. Glayet had brought him into it less than an hour ago, it was her opinion it had been too long.

Kelvin began the security meeting right on time. He had re-decorated his space. In here now they seemed to float only fifty miles or so above where Alan was supposed to be by now, a desolate patch of high ground on the upper slopes of a mountain. It was a gentle climb, he should have been able to make it easily. It was less than twenty miles from where he had slept.

“We all know that we are here to discuss the whereabouts of Alan Larkin, the mortal we sent to the surface. Alfred I already know he's been out of contact and that both you and Colonel Bovok have been rather reluctant to bring that to my attention,”

“Sir, at the top of that cliff should be a path called the ‘Great Seekron Road’. He may be walking along with a group of people making their way to that larger plain,” Alfred

responded. “I didn’t think it was an emergency yet.”

“He shouldn’t be walking with them.”

Elmore continued to defend him with, “Humans in these conditions don’t act like that. If he stopped to fix a shoe or any of the maneuvers you’ve mentioned, people actually stop with you and continue to chat about whatever they were chatting about. They don’t even notice that they’ve stopped.”

“Can the scope see them? Do you know this to be true?”

“The paths are too shaded, we can’t see most of it. That ‘Road’ is barely wide enough for two to walk abreast. We’ve seen about a dozen people so far, a couple of them might have been him, we didn’t get a good enough look.”

“For whatever reason, his phone is off.” The Captain next addressed Heymon Kruger, Colonel of Engineering and Fabrication, “Heymon, could you tell me what it will take to home in on his phone with it turned off.”

“Sir, I’ll need atmosphere-tolerant probes that will have to get within a few miles of him at least.”

“It’s now fourteen hours since our last contact with him, he could be anywhere within thirty miles of where he was at last contact, that would be this circle.” He lit a red circle on the planet they were facing.

“He is most likely to have met harm on the steeper parts of the ascent, which are quite near his camp, down in this area,” Elmore said as he lit that part of the planet in green. He could have fallen on those cliffs.”

“Here was his camp, and here was his last contact less

than an hour later when he got to the base of the cliffs. We sent him around on the east side where we sense a gentler slope. He was moving in that direction when he signed off.”

“We do have to consider that he could be willfully withholding communication,” Glayet told them, “He’s been a discipline problem since we turned him loose.”

“I think it’s more likely some calamity has befallen him,” Alfred said, “maybe he fell while looking at the view.”

“That is likely,” Elmore added.

“But,” Glayet pointed out, “That village where he met that girl is nearly within the circle.

Kelvin didn’t want to even think about that, so he just nodded to Glayet. “Elmore,” Kelvin asked, “You seem to have observed the natives more than anyone else in the last couple days, I would like to know your opinion on what action they may have taken against him.”

“Sir I doubt that they have taken any. We have learned that they have some advanced technologies and an old and widespread civilization. We have not seen anything to make us believe they would be hostile. I think if something did happen to Alan and he was found by natives they would probably do all they could to care for him.”

“I think he’s in more danger from a predator than from hostile action by the natives,” Alfred added.

“Do you see any way the natives could pose a threat to this ship?” Kelvin asked Heymon.

“Not at this time. If they have photography they also have

optics, and it is possible that they could focus a beam of sunlight on the ship. Nothing we've heard about could bring anything more to bear on us from the surface. If we were to attempt a landing we don't have the firepower to hold off a tribe of determined savages with spears for a great length of time. Other than that I don't think we need to worry about them militarily."

"I don't believe we have any way to recover his body; even if it was found," Kelvin said, "He knew the risks."

"Have we given up on him already?" Elmore asked.

"I wouldn't say we've given up on him, but he won't be a factor in Monday's decision. If he is alive and does call in, he may have only two more periods of daylight to be picked up. I will abandon him there rather than let him change this ship's schedule just so he can flirt with a native girl. We need someone on call for him if he gets in contact."

"I'll take it," Alfred said. "He was my project."

Saturday May 28, 2271 - 4:47pm

Kelvin had her put Alan's channel on his own and Glayet's blind alert list, and Ava put it on her own also, blind even to them. So a lot of souls knew when Alan's beeps came in. Alfred was fairly slow in acknowledging and the last one on the call.

"Hello Alan, what's happened to you? You seem to have a

very weak signal, is your phone damaged?”

“Not that I know of, you probably have the antenna aimed wrong.”

There was a short period of silence. Ava could monitor enough channels to know Alfred was re-calibrating the antenna positioner.

“You’re back in that village again ”

“That’s right.”

“I just got out of a security meeting about this. You must know it went rather badly. Finding you back there is going to make things even worse. The captain said he’d leave you behind rather than change our departure day for B.”

“That’s fine, that will all work out for the best.”

“What are you talking about?” Alfred demanded.

After a deep breath Alan abruptly announced. “I’m leaving for the big city in the middle of this basin in a matter of hours.”

“What kind of a stunt are you trying to pull?”

“I’m just letting you know what I’m going to do.”

“I thought you understood you were under combat rules?”

“There’s no combat here.”

“That’s totally immaterial, I don’t think you understand your situation.”

“I think I understand my situation better than anyone up there seems to.”

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

“I mean I’m down here, and you’re up there. It might not

have occurred to you but I've seen it first hand, but this is a very big planet down here and one human is a very small speck on it. I've figured out that I don't really belong in a tin can in outer space, I belong on the ground with all the other mortals of the world, so," he stopped and took a deep breath in his run-on sentence, "I'm going to stay down here."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do about this, are you saying you aren't going to follow orders?"

"Something like that."

Kelvin cut everything he could off the channel at this point. He cut Alfred and Victoria off, but kept Glayet on and had her take over. He couldn't get it off the log and couldn't get it off a couple system channels she had it on. Of course he didn't even know that she was listening in.

Glayet began right in on Alan. "You mean you're mutinying?"

"I don't think of it that way," Alan responded, "I think of it more like I'm resigning my position with the expedition. I'll be glad to continue on as an independent agent if you'd like, I'll call you with good info when I come across some and can get to a place where we can talk."

"You must be dreaming. Have you been drinking?"

"No, I'm perfectly sober."

"You can't be, how can you be so childish as to think we'd allow such a thing?"

"The only choice you have is whether you answer the call or not."

“We could obliterate that whole village with a meteor strike.”

“Not before I’m out of it. But is that what you want to do, murder thousands of innocent civilians?”

Ava saw the captain give Glayet a private indicator that he was about to enter the channel. He presented himself gently. “Alan, this is Captain M’Kintre, I don’t believe we’re spoken since you got to the surface.”

“No sir,”

“I regret to tell you that we’re drawing your part of the mission to a close. We feel that the dangers we may encounter because we’re not properly equipped for this study outweigh the benefits of learning sooner what a better equipped and staffed mission will learn in their own time.”

“The next expedition here will be Brazilian.”

“I’ll have to leave it to their good judgement not to damage this world.” Ava knew they would wade right in trying to look for commercial possibilities. “And whether they do or not, I’m going to do my duty and leave the society of this world in the condition in which I found it in hopes that it can be properly studied some day. I regret that I don’t have the time to extend this conversation. I will expect you to begin moving toward the pickup site as soon as it is light.”

“No sir, I won’t be doing that.” Alan’s voice was shaking when he told him that, but he made it loud and clear.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“I’m not coming back.”

“We’re terminating our investigation of this planet, your part of the mission is over.”

“Fine, it’s over, don’t pick up the channel if I talk to you again, I resign from the expedition anyway.”

“How can you resign?”

“Because the mind you are conversing with is running on a flesh processor in a flesh body down here on the surface of the planet where everything I need can be found till long after you and your ship are dusty, pitted ruins drifting somewhere in the cold void. I choose not to move to any pickup sites. So long and it's been nice knowing you, I wish you and your expedition all the best.”

“Son listen, there’s a virus or something in the air down there that’s affecting your thoughts. Civilized people are part of a whole, we don’t just prowl around like animals grabbing at whatever we want. We are part of an organization, and to be part of an organization you have to follow orders.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’ve chosen to live here instead.”

“You’re making a complete fool of yourself, all because you were overcome by your hormones with this native girl.”

“I’ve found myself a whole world, something I’ll never have with you.” This time Alan’s temper got the better of him. “There I would live by myself in a tiny cage, caring for a few other lab animals for a few years.”

“You can ascend as soon as you’re back aboard if you’d like and be a full member of the crew like any of us. I can

offer you that, at Lieutenant.”

“The facts are that I am staying here. If you don’t enrage me too much more, I’m willing to continue to send back information.”

Kelvin let his heat show suddenly and thundered, “We’ll disown you, we won’t be here when you come begging us to come take you back out of the dirt and squalor you will find down there. If you do this, you are done for.”

“I’ll give you a day or two to think about it,” Alan said, “I’ll call and talk to Alfred and Vic then to see if anyone’s interested in any reports from the surface. So long till then,” and the channel closed.

Kelvin was apoplectic when Alan hung up on him, “Young man I hope a carnivore devours your genitals on the way back to your tart!” he screamed at the simulated dead phone.

Ava watched him put Glayet on as Alan’s monitor. Alfred wasn’t even informed of how the conversation ended. She didn’t think this was fair. Alfred and Vic had put in a lot of time with Alan. She knew how Delos felt, but she knew enough about humans to know that without those androids Alan would be flinging excrement and have the personality of a spider. They had invested as much time in him as most parents. They had enjoyed animating the androids. Alfred and Vic had never known each other as mortals and those years meant a lot to them because of it. She thought it was only

fitting to send them a blind copy of it.

Sunday May 29, 2271 12:17am

Morg kept his space as a beach. One's personification had to have methods for gravity to enter his realm and she certainly couldn't use her foot-wings here. The sun was always setting or rising over the water, he'd allow that magic. Sometimes it would rise to a full daylight for sports, sometimes it would become full night for romance. He swore that his island was the most secure space on the ship, but she knew it wasn't secure from Ava. Glenelle knew that part of her friendship with Ava, and part of Morg's security was due to the entertainment she provided in universes like that owned by Morgan Evans. She had to use the three-d reality Earth Mortal personification to come here, one that was a very good representation of what her mortal person had looked like the year she was killed, maybe a little more shape, a little smoother and with hair a tad bit loosened from the 'fro she'd worn at the time.

Morg's space was a playground, and it was huge, big enough for year-long cruises on his yacht and fish three times the height of your personification. It abounded with rugged islands with waterfalls and coral reefs, lots of sand and palms. He wouldn't abide cherubim, not one cheron cycle was consumed by his universe, even the wildlife was Earth-

recorded VR. The only human bodies that she had ever seen in his universe were personifications of immortal souls.

Morg manifested as an athletic male human off duty, none of this stylish shimmer of light and curl of smoke to house his soul. One could almost think he wished he was mortal. Glenelle appreciated this environment. Glenelle had enjoyed mortality in her turn, and didn't mind this kind of reminiscing. The beauty of natural occurrence, visual surprise that even the most radical fractals can't provide in a commercial universe.

“So what's up with the flesh?” he asked.

“My guess is he's found some sweet honey among the natives and went AWOL for the day. Glayet cut us off when he finally called in.”

“It wasn't possible to prepare him for the hormones.”

“Or the hallucinogens. He says the planet's lousy with drinking and drug abuse.”

“Is he going to be all right?” Morg asked.

“I have no idea. Nobody ever thought to worry about him being able to disguise himself as a native TOO well.”

She really wasn't that interested in discussing the mortal all evening, she could sense that the sand on these secret beaches was just perfect in temperature and softness.

Glayet woke from a sound sleep disoriented by a piercing blast. At first she had no idea what it could be about, but then realized it was Alan's call button and that it was now her duty. Once she was awake, his channel was silent. There was that one long blast, then nothing. "Alan? over!" she tried to bark, but she was still too sleepy.

There was a loud thump but nothing more.

"Alan, Tenhut" now she was awake enough to put some command in it.

There was still no answer. She took a deep breath and bellowed, "Alan Alan, if you're going to get me up in the middle of the night you'd better have something to say" There was a rustling sound like clothing being moved, but still no answer. "Alan I swear I'll drop a cargo pod on that village if you don't answer me"

"Hold it, hold it, hold it," Alan said sleepily, "You're going to wake up the whole building."

"What building?" Glayet barked.

He was a long time answering, it sounded like he put his hand over the mic. Once he came back on, he sounded more awake. "It's one of those hollow trees, I'm up in the branches on a third floor. I think the next bedroom is empty, so maybe nobody heard you."

"So why did you call? Are you ready to reconsider?"

"Oh no, I'm really sorry about the beep. I didn't mean to

send it, I must have rolled over on the phone in my sleep, I won't use my pants for a pillow while it's in the pocket, I guess the cover ain't that strong."

"It's 2:AM."

"I'm really sorry I got you up. It's later than that here too, I'd be glad to let you get back to sleep."

"See that you're more careful in the future."

"Yes Ma'am, I'll call Alfred next Tuesday. Sorry Ma'am."

With that he was off again. She wondered what it was really about. She was sure there would be others listening in, so she filled out a report taking him at face value. What else could they do? It was perhaps harder for her to admit than the others, but at least she could face the facts. For all practical purposes, there was nothing they could do about his defection. Whatever was going to happen to him was beyond their control.

Monday May 30, 2271 - 9:07am

The captain had taken Alfred and Victoria aside after the announcement that they were to begin rigging for the journey to B and informed them that they had been given the duty of monitoring Alan's channel if he ever did call in again. They thanked him for that. Victoria asked to present a plan they had discussed briefly late the night before. Alfred was afraid to mention it now before they had databases full of numbers and

lots of pretty graphics, but Vic went right ahead.

“We’d like you to leave us here,” Victoria told the captain, “While you go over to B, let us remain behind and continue to study this planet and receive any reports Alan sends up.”

“So are you also resigning from this expedition?”

“We are simply offering a proposal,” Alfred pleaded, “A way to prospect at B and study this planet.”

“Do you understand you’ll need maintenance equipment? Your laboratory will require additional power?”

“Our laboratory, the mechanical pod with it, one reactor module and one maintenance pod.” Victoria told him, “Everything else can be moved over.”

“We’ll need the atmosphere shuttle also.” Alfred added. “And the atmosphere probes. These are all items that would only slow you down on your mission.”

“We need all reactor modules,” Kelvin said, “you’d have to make do with collectors. I admit that everything else you want to keep here is nothing but dead weight in the straits we find ourselves. However I feel it would be cruel to leave you behind. Jettisoning the parts of the ship we can no longer afford is one thing, abandoning officers on them is something else.”

Alfred didn’t want the eighteen hour control delay but would at least consider it. “We would rather be here where our work is,” Victoria pleaded. “There is nothing more we could ever desire than to observe and study this biosphere.”

“You would almost certainly perish here. If we find as

little there as we think, coming back for you might be a luxury we couldn't afford."

"I could imagine nothing better than to be stranded here for a century till the next expedition arrives," Alfred told him.

"You would likely perish. Without proper support your systems might fail."

"We'll back up regularly. There will be another expedition, we already know that just from our early messages."

"I'll have to consult the books, I'm not sure I'm allowed to let you put yourselves at this much risk."

The captain left them. They wanted to jump in jubilation. He hadn't automatically, without paying it even the slightest attention, just rejected it out of hand. It was a good plan, leaving the cumbersome biology department and atmosphere shuttle parked here and taking a leaner ship to B.

"I'm surprised he took it so well," Vic said.

"Me too, and he didn't balk a bit at giving us back Alan's channel."

"It's like he's washing his hands of us, putting this whole bad dream behind him."

Book IX. The Boy From YingolNeerie

Confessions of a Spaceman

Alan was scrambling in a suit over the pods of the ship, Colonel Samrova pursuing in a glittering stainless bot. Then Desa appeared, she screamed and ran, dodging into the back corner of the dormer where she slept. He dived in after her and there was the phone laying open on her mattress screaming with the Colonel's voice.

“Alan I swear I’ll drop a cargo pod on that village if you don’t answer me ”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it,” he said to it, beginning to realize he was waking from a nightmare. “You’re going to wake up the whole building.”

“What building?” Glayet barked.

Desa was curled up in the corner cowering like there was a detonator in the room. He grabbed the phone in his hand, covering the mic. “Just be quiet while I calm her down,” he said and watched Desa’s eyes get even wider. He could only hope, there wasn’t time to give her more details just yet, he had to deal with Glayet first. “It’s one of those hollow trees, I’m up in the branches on a third floor. I think the next bedroom is empty, so maybe nobody heard you.”

“So why did you call? Are you ready to reconsider?”

“Oh no, I’m really sorry about the beep. I didn’t mean to

send it, I must have rolled over on the phone in my sleep, I won't use my pants for a pillow while it's in the pocket, I guess the cover ain't that strong."

"It's 2:AM.

"I'm really sorry I got you up. It's later than that here too, I'd be glad to let you get back to sleep."

"See that you're more careful in the future."

"Yes Ma'am, I'll call Alfred next Tuesday. Sorry Ma'am."

He knew damn well what really happened was that Desa found the phone in his pants and undoubtedly poked the call button and blasted Glayet's ear half out the other side of her chips. Desa was obviously pretty scared of it.

Alan was pretty scared too. Now that he had made the final break with the ship, was he about to make the final break with Desa? He began to shake with the very real possibility that his elders might know more than he thought and he might soon be chased out of town. He felt and smelled his nervous sweat.

There was real fear in her eyes. She wasn't screaming, she wasn't hostile, she was just paralyzed. What could she be thinking? That he was an agent of a secret government? That he was from outer space and was here to rustle tender maidens?

"It's turned off now," he told her.

That burst a dam, thru the spread fingers of her hands came the hoarsest whisper. "What IS that OTHERLY thing? Where in some contra-dimensional hell did you find it? Is it

ALIVE? Can it HEAR us ?”

“Desa please calm down, this device is extremely harmless.”

“What IS it? Some kind of Pocket Prophet?”

“It’s called a phone. It can transmit voices back and forth so you can talk to people who are far away.”

By now she had some actual voice, “You mean like a speaking tube?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see any string or hose.”

“It uses an energy more like light to transmit the voice, an infra, infra, infra red that we can never see.”

“You mean like a suntower?”

“I have no idea what a suntower is.”

She was still in the corner of the room, sitting with her legs drawn up and her arms hugging them, eyes still big and head drawn down. Even in that position and in the dark Alan could see how exasperated she was with that.

“You have this thing,” one hand pointing in rapid staccato, “which is more advanced than any suntower I’ve ever seen, and you don’t know what a suntower is? Alan you have to start making more sense. Where did you get this thing? Did your parents find it somewhere? Do you even know what it is?”

“I know that it just transmits voices, like with two cups and a string but much farther and without the string.”

“This device might have been possible in the Energy Age

but I don't see how it could have survived, it looks relatively new and cheap actually. So what are you doing with it?"

"My parents let me take it so I could talk to them."

"I'm talking about that device and not your family problems. Where did they get it? Did they find it in some ruins? Was there some roaming tent festival selling them? Those aren't available in any audio shop I've ever seen in either known basin that borders that desert."

Desa obviously knew the phone was impossible here, now what could he say? One thing he could tell her was that he never knew it was all that strange until she freaked over it, responding with something like 'What the fu..? It's a stupid phone, get over it.' Alan thought about trying to go along with her guesses and say his parents got it from some wandering Messiah who said he had Angels making them for him. Tell her it talks to Angels up in heaven as well as his parents. It would be pretty close to the truth.

He knew enough of Desa to know she wouldn't accept that. She was profoundly rational. She didn't ask who the conversation was with or what it was about, she'd asked how it was done. Desa read professional audio research trade magazines for entertainment. Like the natives of the far side who had found a probe, she would disassemble the phone if he didn't tell her how it worked. And that would be the end of communication between Angels and humans at 61 Cygni.

The sudden clutching in his chest made him realize he didn't actually want to go that far. What if Desa left him on

the dock at Hazorpean when he couldn't qualify to work on a ship? What if no one else on the planet would say more than hello? He couldn't be sure he'd really be able to survive on native food yet. The whole of the civilization he had ever known, the only parents he'd ever had, were in this phone. He wasn't ready to toss it, he didn't want it disabled either, as it surely would be once the substrate was removed.

He thought about just not telling, calling it classified information and refusing to tell. If they couldn't use violence on him how would they make him talk? They probably couldn't. She would probably let him keep it and might have enough honesty not to disassemble it without his permission, but maybe not since she didn't ask to go in his pocket after it. Would she allow him to remain in her company if she didn't know it's origin? Desa didn't seem like she would tolerate that mystery very well. If she didn't just leave him, she might draw a lot of attention to him by trying to find out where the thing came from.

“So can you tell me where they got it?” Desa repeated after his long pause.

While ‘talking to Angels in heaven’ might be the truth, it would not be a truth she could understand until she understood the simulation of the human brain in silicon. But Desa deserved a better explanation than that. He should tell her the real core of the truth, in a way she could understand and get that over with now. This looked like an all or nothing situation, so he decided to find out now if she would run

screaming and he was going to have to grovel back to the expedition.

“Desa there is a whole form of technology your planet doesn’t know anything about, probably because you don’t have enough metal here to string wires.”

“What do you mean my planet?”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“What secret?”

Alan knew the stars, what other landscape did he grow up with? He knew before he opened the window where Sol would be and pointed out the window for Desa. She was still in the corner by the cabinet, although not in quite so tight a ball. She slowly came across the mattress. “See that yellowish star, the almost bright one?”

She had to lean out the window a little. The dark wasn’t that cold yet. “Yeah, it’s called YingolNeerie, what of it?” She drew a deep breath and in an ‘oh no’ tone of voice continued with, “I don’t want to hear some chant about that distant star having magical powers that can make a crummy piece of plastic roar like an enraged bull dyke ”

“It’s inhabitants have technological powers that can, and you do believe in technological powers.”

“Technological powers have to obey natural law, even there. There’s no way to get a speaker in that little thing, much less a sonic block, pressure supply, even a weak, wind-up rubber-bag one like that, and the tape? It can’t all fit.”

“Desa, remember when we talked about ‘charged’? Well

the technology of YingolNeerie is more advanced at sending charges thru intricate microscopic paths of metal than the labs in your magazines are at sending audio thru tubules. The sound can be represented by electrons instead of air, it has pressure, flow and restriction values in it's equations just like air.”

“But how does it get the energy to produce that much sound in so small a space?”

“It's like the difference in density between metal and air.”

Alan couldn't avoid explaining as much as he knew about how the thing actually worked. This girl wouldn't let go of it until she was satisfied that the laws of physics allowed it. She had such a good basic understanding of physics and such intelligence that after an hour she was able to agree it could be possible that charged electrons in a microscopic crystal could handle energy more densely than an acoustic circuit could.

“Alright, so I accept that this technology is possible. So how did you get it?”

“I brought it with me.”

“From YingolNeerie?” she asked.

“From the starship that came from YingolNeerie.”

This is when Desa caught on to what Alan was really trying to tell her. She backed up a little and looked at him very hard, inspecting the details of his irises and any other details like the way his hair and beard grew and the shape of

his nostrils. Alan wondered if this would be something she just couldn't handle, or something she just couldn't believe. It might be the final straw to get her to send for some professional psychiatrists. She might just laugh and tell Alan she'd taken all she could of this. She studied him a good long while before she said anything, he could tell she was figuring out that he believed it. She could probably tell by the way he was shaking after having admitted that. He really wasn't sure that he wouldn't have to jump and run, he wasn't quite sure the Angels wouldn't drop a rock on him if they found out he'd told. "So why were you hanging out with the starship?" she finally asked.

Desa was giving him too many opportunities to back out, now he could say he really did grow up with his parents out on the desert rim and this starship full of reclusive Angels came down and left off that phone. No, he wasn't going to do it, he wanted Desa as a partner so much that he was going to tell her the actual truth.

"No, I'm actually from there, well my parents were, I was born on the ship."

"OK, I'm listening, but this story comes in an awfully big credibility pill," she said as she turned from the window to face him. "Please understand this, I know, mister visitor from YingolNeerie, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that there are labsmen who can code that memory, so complete that you have seen it all your life. If you take too much sometimes your old memories are blotted out and you never do get them

back.”

“Would they have this?” he held up the phone.

“There is still a big credibility problem there, but the source could be some Gnome lab rather than YingolNeerie. Or the rogue labsman found it in the crypt where he renders his potion.”

“So you do believe in magic potions?”

“They’re not magic, they’re chemical encodings of memories, mainly in the form of RNA in targeted-viral delivery that you swallow in a nice big keda-pill of a capsule and then lean back in some den and enjoy. You often do it with a friend so you can reminisce about the memories together. If you O.D. you can get like you are, you can’t remember anything else.”

“I don't remember taking any drugs” Alan stated.

“Why would they code ingesting the memories into the memory?” Desa asked in return. “They usually have a memory trip start with being born and it’s usually not that long ago, just grown is most common.”

She sounded so convinced that he almost believed that himself. This environment seemed much more like a natural habitat for a biological human to grow up in than a large tin can eleven light years from it’s nearest living relative. However, some native couldn’t have made up all his memories, all Earth’s output from nursery rhymes to video games. How was a native going to dream up video games?

Since he was silent, she questioned him. “So tell me this,

if you're from YingolNeerie, why are you human? It is obvious you are human. You're pureblood Nordic if I don't miss my guess, a little tall even for them. There is no chance whatsoever anything at YingolNeerie could look anything like a human. I've seen movies where the alien is some squiggly-tentacled thing doing mind control. So are you using some projection to make me think you're human?"

"No, we have the technological power to make phones that can carry voices over thousands of miles and starships that can carry souls and frozen zygotes over tens of light years, but no mind control more effective than video advertising. The civilization back home has an energy technology beyond what Kassidor did in the Energy Age, but not even the biological knowledge you had then."

"But you're not some alien, you're as human as me or Nalu, you would not have evolved like that light-years away?"

"Yeah, our science agrees on that, that's why I was supposed to find out how humans got here. You know the theories you told me about, humans were either brought here or made here, but definitely did not evolve here?"

"Yes, I told you those just this Morningday."

"Well we were pretty dumbfounded when we got to this planet and found it inhabited with what are obviously humans who obviously didn't evolve here. You see there is a very clear history of humans evolving on the planet Earth, which is the third planet of the star you call YingolNeerie. Many large

animals have five fingers. All multicellular animal life on Earth has mitochondria and ALL life on Earth has the same four nucleotides in groups of three coding the same amino acids. Our scientists support the 'brought here' theory.”

“That is, of course, the common theme in these trips and movies like you’re probably on. Are you filming a movie by the way? It’s not too bad so far.”

“If I am, I’m as much an experimental animal in this as you are. I am totally convinced that what I’m telling you is real. If someone is filming us, they are doing it without my knowledge.”

He really hadn’t planned on having to prove he was from Earth. He had planned on trying to hide that fact. Now that he had been found out, he admitted it, but she didn’t believe him. He was almost ready to say ‘alright, I got the damn phone off some Christ who says it talks to Angels’ and see if she liked that one. He didn’t, instead he felt like he would just stick to the truth, let her ask what she wanted and puzzle it out for herself.

She was silent awhile, thinking about this. Alan thought it was pretty clear that she wouldn't have believed one syllable of this narration if that phone wasn't still sitting there on the mattress. He picked it up and put it away. She didn't object.

“All that does is carry voices?” she asked.

“Exactly, you just heard the voice of a person on the starship.”

“Well let her stay there, was that your mother?”

“No, that was the person assigned to punish disobedience.”

“What?”

“You would not have such a person here. The society of that ship is much more regulated and stratified than any of those ‘bully group’ things you talked about in history here. Yingol-Neerie is as far ahead of Kortrax in the development of government as in electronics.”

Desa shuddered over that, and grimaced “Are you safe from it now?” she asked.

“Yes I think so. They are going to move the starship away from Narrulla and over to Kunae, and I’ve decided to stay here.”

“Listening to that dyke that’s up there, I’m not sure Kunae is far enough away, but Narrulla’s way too close.” Narrulla was up now and it’s mottled light played across her body as she sat in the windowsill.

Alan didn’t say more. He would continue to let Desa ask the questions. If he was going to ask anything it would be things like, ‘should I run?’ ‘Will you be afraid of me or detest me now?’ but he was actually too afraid to ask her even that much.

“So you really can talk to your parents or the starship or whatever when you walk out by yourself?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“You had an argument with them.”

“How do you know?”

“I watched you,” she said.

“I should have guessed you did when you found the phone.”

“I hope you can forgive me?”

“If you can forgive me for coming from eleven light-years away and growing up in a big jar, I can forgive you for spying on me.”

“Oh I can forgive you for that,” Desa said. There was another pause while he continued to worry. “I can’t believe it’s real because why would it happen to me? Remember when you said it was so unlikely that you could come traipsing in off the desert and immediately meet a famous musician, which I never was by the way. Now why should I believe an expedition comes here from the planet humans originated on and goes out to the middle of nowhere to find me?”

“Once they put me down on the surface to learn about this planet, it was just about inevitable. I was going to look for a reading teacher, Yoonbarla was the first settlement the crew thought was large enough to observe. I stumbled into town, asked for a teacher, Pneika said you’re a teacher. She gives excellent recommendations and I thank her very much.”

“There are millions more villages like Yoonbarla.”

“Not on a desert rim.”

“Oh I bet there are,” Desa said, “We’re not even that close to the desert.”

“However many there are, you were the one it happened

to. Sometime somehow, this had to happen. Given that one line of humans was separated from the other, and humans being what they are, one would be the first to build ships to cross that space, and someone on the receiving planet had to be the person to encounter the first human to cross that gulf.”

“You’re not the first person to invent a story like this,” she told him.

“We have them too, and never have I read a fantasy where the first explorer was welcomed as warmly as I’ve been. You’ve been a fount of knowledge, telling us more than we could hope to learn in years by ourselves. Besides that you are warmer and more beautiful than the first contact in any story I’ve ever read. I am so profoundly grateful that you are the person I happened to find when I wandered in from the desert.”

“Well thank you for all those flowers,” she said, “But if you and a whole expedition just journeyed all the way here from YingolNeerie in a starship I’d think you’d want to pull up in the center of town with your best speakers blasting your best tunes and celebrate.”

“Oh definitely not. Our captain, that’s the biggest boss of the WHOLE expedition, doesn’t want any native of the planet Kassidor to ever know we were here.”

“But why?” she asked.

He had to explain the security precautions the ship took. That also took some time and didn’t seem to make much sense to her.

After that she changed subjects a bit, “So your starship is now on Narrulla?”

“Not on it, the starship itself can’t handle gravity, it can never touch a planet or moon. It’s hanging in what’s called a stasis point between Narrulla and Kassidor. If you look real close below and to the east of Narrulla you might see a tiny little whisker just below it pointing a bit to the southeast.” The angle was so foreshortened that the ship looked very close to the moon.

Desa looked at it for awhile. “I can’t say there isn’t a tiny one there, but that’s just because it twinkles, I can’t say that there is.”

“I think I can see it, but that’s because I know it’s there.”

“That sounds like a faith-based observation.”

“Unless you’ve got a nice telescope, one that could show Narrulla up about this big.”

“Over towards Noonitondow, the University there has an observatory with telescopes that would show it up much bigger than that, they’ll show craters on Narrulla that big.”

Alan realized that such a ‘scope would be able to count the pods making up Gordon's Lamp, maybe even see the instrumentation clusters and read her League ID number. So much for keeping their presence a secret. Some on this planet must have known of their presence for years. He was surprised it hadn’t made it to the public press. He wanted to know how far that observatory was from here, but Desa continued...

“The ship’s captain’ll have a nice little scope, probably make Narrulla look about this big.” She showed him a circle almost half as large as he indicated.”

“That would be plenty to see it was there, it would look like a tiny string of dots. If you can look thru one of them between now and when they leave you can see it. It’ll take them a year to get out of sight.”

“And you came here on that ship?”

“To tell you the real absolutely barest truth, I came here as a frozen zygote and was raised in a jar in that ship since it got near here, three of your decades ago. I grew up in a big tin can, like a big box about the size of Knume’s house. There’s no air outside the box and another circular path about as long as to the end of your outer garden and back. I was released on this planet a week and a half ago, it feels like I was born then.”

“Well Alan;” she sighed, “that certainly would explain your strangeness.”

“I’m sorry to have to admit it, but I actually am that strange.”

Stuck on an Alien Planet

She was silent for awhile, staring at Narrulla. Alan wondered if they had the big scope on her, could they see her. He’d been told Narrulla looked half the diameter of Earth’s

moon from the ground. It was a noticeable egg pointed toward the equator of the planet, hurtling around from west to east twice every week. One could almost see a tiny hair hanging above the point of the egg; Gordon's Lamp.

Could they see the triangular window she was sitting in? The thick vines framing it? The deep coats of varnish on it's sill? The organic shape of the overhang of roof that sheltered it? Could they get a really good picture of Desa, here by Narrulla's light? Would they understand why he had to stay with her? If his teacher had been a woman like his mother, or even worse, Colonel Samrova, maybe a little authoritarian and strict, he might have gone back to the pickup point. He could not say no to a girl so beautiful inviting him off on a grand adventure across this world. Everything he'd ever read told him he couldn't do that.

He wondered what she would do now. Maybe she was wondering if she really could see a starship hanging above Narrulla. Was she going to demand he supply some sensible explanation? Would she say that if he couldn't do better than some fantasy about stars and starships he'd better get out of her life? Instead she turned back to him and caressed his face.

"I would love to have this be true, " Desa said, "This is just my kind of adventure. But in real life I can't provide evidence for you other than saying 'look at this thing he had in his pocket'. I don't really believe it but I think you do. I won't argue about it. I don't know if you're going to get anyone else to play along with it though. You probably will at

the party but not much after that. Most people aren't as knowledgeable about audio technology as I am, they won't think this is any more magic than any other speaker."

"I don't want people to believe I came from YingolNeerie. The ship doesn't want anyone to know, they'd be furious if they knew I told you. I don't want the publicity either," Alan added.

"You could make a fair bit of change off it," Desa told him, "Especially if you could get some people to believe it. You'd meet a lot of hot babes that way too. I'd never be able to keep you."

"Please keep me, I'd be afraid of all that attention. I still want to travel with you to Zhindu. I want you to keep teaching me about the world. I want you to teach me how to be someone you might really fall in love with."

"You scare me when you say things like that."

"Why?"

"You know my thoughts and weaknesses. You're trying too hard to be my fantasy Alan. You know me, I spent the whole Morningday on Nvednmere baring my soul to you, my whole life story. You know you couldn't have picked a better story than this starship tale to spark my interest. I told you last evening of my vulnerability and now you ask me to mold you. Alan, I warn you I'm a clinger, and you're very, very young, no matter what planet you're from."

"I could imagine no greater delight than clinging by you."

"You don't know anyone else, I'm a bookworm and not

very emotional. I'm lazy about indoor chores, I don't remember jokes, my sex is rather conventional."

"Sounds like just the girl I want to get to know. May I stay with you until you get tired of me?" he asked.

"Yes, yes. Just don't turn that thing on without warning me." She pointed at where he'd put it away.

"Oh I won't, I'm not supposed to let anyone see it."

"I don't know if I want that much media attention if it was true either. Still, if I was to sing with a band again, interstellar seductress might be a good gimmick."

"Desa this is not a joke, I am afraid of what would happen if everyone found out. Do not doubt that they are powerful in the destruction they could wield. They could destroy the city of Zhindu if they wanted, but they will not unless they feel threatened themselves. I'm sure they will not even destroy Yoonbarla. They are civilized and have laws against harming innocent civilians."

She could see he was serious, and didn't argue that, though it looked like she wanted to. "Well if you don't want it known then don't talk to that thing while people are around and it will never come up. You'll find it easier to keep people from finding out if you throw that freakish thing away. Listening to that will make people think you're a lot less normal."

"I want to talk to my parents at least once more."

"Are you free from it's power?"

"Yes, I've resigned from the expedition and decided to

become a citizen of Kassidor, if that is possible.”

“You’re stuck as a citizen of Kassidor till you die unless you really can call a starship down to pick you up.”

“I wouldn’t want to. I’m here now, the journey is over and I like what I’ve found here much better than anything they ever told me about. I’m so thrilled that I found you to teach me how to be a normal person and help me forget all about YingolNeerie and that whole ugly part of my life.”

But she wasn’t about to forget about it. Alan didn’t get out of talking about Earth, it’s politics, it’s military might, it’s economic output, the lives of the people, it’s agriculture, it’s culture and history. Eventually they heard people up and about. It was Nightday of week Lmonteira, Logging Party day. Desa took him downstairs and taught him to make thesh rolls for brunch. They styled them up with rinko and cheesapple and a few bits of onion. This was definitely a good lesson in life. All his food on the ship had come from ration dispensers. They continued talking about Earth thru the meal. She might have started to believe some of it because of the volume of information he had, but she believed so little of it.

“Will you still want to report back on what you see?” she asked.

“If they care to listen.”

“Why not? If they’re scientists they will.”

“Because I resigned from the expedition. They call it

mutiny or treason. They think I'm a criminal for doing so."

"So that was the argument yesterday?"

"Yes, and that's why you're my only friend now."

"There'll be plenty more," she sighed.

From what he'd just told her, she should be able to understand his desperation, how alone he was. "But they won't be as good a teacher as you are. They won't know this secret about me and won't be so willing and able to help."

"Oh don't worry, you'll be fine. You're too well educated to be a hermit from the desert rim. Some of the facts and figures you learned about the other planet won't apply here, but knowing how to think is still the same."

"You're still all I have."

"And I will be your guide, to the city and back if you need it," she sighed, "but you'll soon find out there are plenty of other people to interact with. You'll find plenty of them at the party. I should probably talk to you about this party."

"I could just stay right here if you'd like," Alan said, "If you could let me know when it's time to leave on the actual trip. I didn't expect I was invited to the party."

"Don't be like that, being invited on the trip is a much bigger deal than being invited to the party. Of course you're invited to the party, everyone's invited to the party and I really hope you'll come. There's just some things about your planet or religion or RN Acid trip or whatever's screwed your head that might make you a little uncomfortable there. You seem nervous about drugs and sex."

“So is there’s sex at this party?” He would be too embarrassed, he would have to stay behind.

“There will be a lot, especially at Myimpaden where it will be mostly close friends. Some will be out in the open, some will be in the back rooms. Lots of people will be naked, probably including me. Most people will be petting, including me, I enjoy that a lot. The personal contact you were afraid of last week is normal in casual conversation here. Everyone will be doing it, everyone will be enjoying it,”

Alan noticed himself getting nervous. “I hear you. That will be very different for me. What I said about my parents and their Church is true, they are very inhibited about sex.”

“Can you stop being like that?”

“I did, didn’t I? We’ve had several episodes now.”

“You’re better than you were at first, but that’s just with me. I want you to be able to enjoy other people also, especially today. I hope you won’t make other people feel insulted by pulling away or refusing to touch them, most people aren’t as intellectual as I am, they might be really hurt.”

“I’ll try to remember that. What is permissible?”

“Have all the sex you want with as many people who want to do it with you. Caress the girls who caress you.”

“So this party is more like an orgy?”

“No, it’s not all sex, it’s mostly drinking, feasting and telling of tales, but what you think is wild eroticism we think is just saying hi. I’m sure some women will be interested in

you just because they've never met you before.”

“But we've been together, shouldn't I save myself for you?”

“No; I certainly won't.”

Alan's heart immediately speeded up and his insides began to vibrate. What jumped into his mind was that she was about to tell him that because he was from another planet he was not to touch her any more? She did just say she would still be his guide, to the city and back if need be. Was she just going to tell him that she would never have sex with him again? What ever she would tell him, he couldn't do any more than tell her how he felt before she destroyed him. “You will always be a special love to me because you were my first. You even remember your first.”

“Yes, that is true, and I agree, that is special. But please understand, you are not my first. Or last.”

Resignedly he said, “I can certainly understand that you won't want to couple with me any more, now that you know what I am. It probably sickens you to realize what you've done it with already, but I still need a guide on this world.”

“I'm not saying that at all,” she said, looking at him like he must really be from YingolNeerie. “You're still human and the sci-fi thing is actually a bit of a turn-on for me, not that you weren't cute enough without it. Don't worry, there's going to be Afternoondays on that river when you're going to wish I could think of something else to do.”

Now his heart really beat faster. “Can we leave now?”

“No, first there’s this party, and that’s what I need to tell you about. I’m saying goodbye to a lot of these guys today. A lot of these guys have been intimate with me in their own way for awhile now. Do not think I am forsaking you if I have some fun with them. I will still be leaving with you for Hazorpean, Lastriss and Zhindu when Kortrax next shows.”

“All I ask of you is guidance, any more delights you bless me with are gladly appreciated.”

Alan was quick to answer, but the real impact of her words came to him after he gave his answer. Would he have to watch her doing it with someone much better than himself? Would people make fun of him for it? Would she laugh about his ‘beginner’s lessons’ as she went wild on someone? Would he spend the after-lunch and evening sitting by himself at the bar, the butt of people’s jokes, the weirdo from YingolNeerie?

Would he still feel the same about her after? Would he be ashamed to be with her again? Did he feel quite the same even now? There had been a part of his mind that held on to the notion that Desa wasn’t as promiscuous as other native women. That notion was fading with this conversation. It was probably just fantasy that he ever had that notion. She was beautiful, intelligent and friendly. Why wouldn’t she have all the lovers she wanted? Would he be the kid she’ll use when there’s no one else around? What sexual abilities might their biological science give them? How would he keep up?

But she didn’t wait while he thought that over, “I’m glad you like me, thank you, but please try and be friendly with

other people also, at least today.”

“I’ll try, should I keep my hands off of you so you can circulate?”

“If you go back to being like that with me I just might refuse to be your guide.” Was she really saying the price of his passage was going to be to provide sexual favors on demand? “I hope we arrive together and we’ll be together while I introduce you to people and get settled. I thought I’d sit with Knume awhile, he’ll be at the keg table I’m sure. You better be cuddly with me while we’re together or I’ll be insulted.”

“Ok, ok, I certainly will. I just wanted to be sure I knew proper etiquette.”

“It’s always proper to return as much contact as is given and it’s proper to stop doing anything that isn’t returned. I’m talking about this in a general way, I don’t mean each exact touch for touch, but the same level of sensuality and sexuality.”

“What level should I expect?”

“There’ll be females that’ll volunteer to share orgasm with you I’m sure. Not every one will, but if you pursue them you can probably find enough to tire your just-grown peter out.”

“I doubt I will be doing that.”

“Just don’t be too standoffish, at least touch other girls and let them touch you. You don’t have to return anything more personal than that if you don’t want to.”

How would one remember this if overcome by attraction like he felt for Desa and under the influence of drugs? He thought a person would do whatever animal instinct demanded under those conditions and have no conscious control over it. Then he wondered what he should expect in the way of drugs. Would everyone be in a narcotic coma? Would he have to partake to be admitted? “What if I don’t want to take any drugs?” he asked.

“Better bring something else to drink. Fill a couple skins from the hose. Actually Varniss has a water tap at Myimpaden.”

“All the drinks are drugged?”

“Alan, you were with me when we picked the berries. I explained to you about the yaag. I think I remember telling you about how many guys had kegs there.”

“That yaag stuff is a drug?” he asked.

“You got stoned when you drank it didn’t you?” she asked like he was being a rather slow student on this subject.

“Yeah?”

“There you go.”

“Is there alcohol at this party?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s definitely one of the drugs, as is alcohol with lvinch. There’ll be rord, norrot and you’ll probably run into someone with some laboratory hallucinogen or other.”

More questions ran thru his mind about what he’d gotten himself into. “I don’t want to sustain any worse damage to my mind than I have already, I don’t want to become an

addict. I don't want to lose control of myself and do something stupid and I don't want to throw up."

"Just drink off whatever party keg is going. It's all just yaag with a dash of lvinch in it to keep you awake. Don't glug down whole flagons one after the other and you won't get that wasted. Don't get uptight about it, getting uptight's the best way to turn it into a bummer. Whatever happens to you with yaag, you'll be over it when you wake up and won't be that much worse for wear unless you get into some rough sports or something."

"Is that likely?"

"No, not indoors in the dark. Yaag tends to make you more cautious than reckless, the lvinch will counteract that a little and the alcohol might make you more reckless but not enough to worry about until you get really hammered. Just don't take anything that comes wrapped in cellophane and don't take any pills. There are some that are safe but get a few parties under your belt before you get into that."

"I don't want to get into any of that. The yaag was fun, and I don't feel like it hurt me, but I'm scared to go farther than that. I might try a beer. I've heard about that."

"That's best at the 'Bit." He could tell that was somewhere she wouldn't be going. "I don't like beer this time of year 'cause it's warm. After Iyosaign it might snow and the houses'll scrape some up and get their barrels cold, then beer's really good. I can drink enough to get my sea legs back on a day like that. I'll probably do a shot of one of those

syrups that Kyagi mixes up.”

“So you’re actually quite a partier aren’t you?”

“I think I rate a two out of six, maybe three on a wild evening. If you don’t do any more than I do, you’ll be good as new when you wake up.”

She stood up and took the two items used to prepare the meal, a pan and a knife, to the sink. She shoo’d him off to the shower, came right in with him, and dragged him thru dressing and out the door. She put on a rather long shapely wrap around her hips, made of soft fringed suede. It was open in the front to mid thigh but the fringe in the back reached down to her calves. She wore a shirt for the first time since he’d seen her, something rather substantial and quilted with a line of fur trim, almost like a jacket, but it had no buttons.

She was not like the stories he’d heard of Earth where the woman took hours getting ready to go out. Her hair was only towel dry as they left. She said it was going to frizz out as wide as her shoulders and make her look like a musician, but she wanted to get there. They stopped downstairs and picked up Desa’s party cup, and picked one out of Knume’s collection for Alan to use.

“This one’s called Thollalla,” she told him. “It’s less than two centuries old actually, but it’s a dwarf style from the 34th Century, when Yoonbarla was young. Rendrak used to carry it when he first got here, till he found a nice tall Elven horn down in Hazorpean.”

“Cups have names here?”

“Yeah, it’s an old lumberjack custom, comes down from when Dwarves were common around here. Knowing the tale of your cup is often a good conversation starter. This is a twenty ounce bowl on here so you don’t need to go jumping up that often. Kelthwiss here,” she held up her own, “Is only sixteen, but I like the style, it’s got a certain Dos-like sensuousness to it that I like even though the stem is pure Zhlindu.”

It had a tall and slender glass bowl. The glass had stylized photographs of a naked couple flying or swimming thru the air, their eyes closed in pleasure. It was clutched in the grip of a network of vines which were all drawn together and bound into a tall, thick stem and handle by leather wrappings. The one she gave him was a tall, tapering, clouded glass stein, with photographs of whiter clouds embedded in the glass. The thin vines enclosing it in diamond netting grew to be a sturdy handle on one side, also wound with strips of leather. From the top of the handle a heavy wooden hinge held a wooden cap that fit snugly into the opening.

“So there were Dwarves here?”

“Most people around here have a lot of Dwarf in them, the population of Wescarp is now a pretty homogenized Troll/Dwarf mix.”

“There are Trolls here?”

“Yeah, they’re one of the most common races of the old times. I’m about a quarter Troll myself.”

“You couldn’t be, Trolls are ugly things.”

“Alan, humans have been able to control their appearance for centuries. No one would volunteer to stay ugly, it’s too much of a social handicap.”

Myimpaden

By now Desa was leading him down the street. The way to Myimpaden was up the path right across from Pneika’s house. It was hardly any different from any other garden path, just a little wider and with only two steps. After the steps, the path was lightly cobbled and sloped uphill. They could hear the music and voices from the party as soon as they got that far. Along the path were nine houses, generally one story, built of woven vines on low stone foundations and set back from the street, usually behind a hedged and trellised courtyard. Some had stalls or stands in front of them instead of courtyards. On the sides and behind them were gardens.

The way wasn’t very long. The end of the path on the four house side was taken up with an ancient vine-covered stone building built onto a slope overlooking the center of the village. On the side of the upper floor they were approaching, the front porch came out to the path like a drawbridge, lit with torches. It had been built as the stables of Oliar’s castle, the ruins of which loomed behind the house and fields on the other side of the street. Alan thought it looked like the ruins

had lain there at least a thousand years.

There were quite a few people hanging out on the porch talking and laughing. “Looks like the party’s already started.” He said.

“Since Knume never made it back for the sleep, I guess he probably went straight thru from Afternoonday, there were probably a few others who did too.”

They were on the porch when Desa got stopped by a chunky blond guy. His hands gave Desa quite a friendly greeting as he talked about her upcoming trip. Alan was consumed with jealousy over the way this guy was caressing her, but this was what Desa had warned him about. He struggled to understand it from the perspective of an anthropologist, not that of someone young and in love. Desa introduced him to Bloric, another of the lumberjacks with a log in the caravan. She told him Alan would be going with her on the trip. They chatted a few minutes about some local gossip. Bloric told Alan to take care of Desa and try to be sure she finds her way back. He hoped he conducted himself properly, it hadn’t been easy.

Inside there was just one large room with some tables around the edge and a raised area at the end opposite the fireplace serving as a stage. The tall windows were recessed into the front stone wall and more torches plus the great open fire lit the interior. The archways on the far side of the room were just alcoves with no windows in them. Knume was filling a steady stream of cups from a keg on the end of the

table nearest the front door on the stage end of the room.

Alan could now see how the music was being produced. He would have been OK if one of the instruments had been a huge pipe organ taking up all of the stage end of the room, except that it also made sounds no pipe organ could even hypothetically consider. He could only tell by coordinating the sound with the motion of the player that this sound was coming from something which looked sort of like a long-stringed autoharp with a keyboard on it, but the keys were just painted on a chunk of wormy driftwood that covered the ends of the strings. He noticed that this instrument was also making the sounds for something like a separate glass xylophone that sounded like it was set up on the far side of the stage. The drum and bass seemed to be coming from the naked girl with big blond hair slapping away on a big panel full of little hexagons. There was another guy blowing something looking a lot like a flute with the keys painted on, that had some tubing coming out of the far end. The sounds it made were like something from clashing analog circuits. It took Alan quite a while to figure out that the things that looked like big wooden pumpkins with tall glass flowers growing out of them were the speakers. They were very good at making the music sound like it was coming from somewhere else. He was now convinced that their acoustic technology was more on a par with Earth's electronic technology.

There were a fair amount of people inside, many clumped

up at the keg where Knume was manning the spigot. Desa introduced him to everyone. He'd met Valla earlier at the house and was amazed at the size of her chest all over again. She had to lean back to balance herself, but she had them right out there greeting all the guys in the keg line. He had also met Luray before, but she was a lot less at ease today. Valla and Luray were each wrapped around one of Knume's arms, Valla was talking to Svarloe, Luray was just eyeing Valla as she held the spigot-side arm. Larneh and Lenchei were listening to Sharni tell a ponderous joke about bad yaag. Two more people Desa knew named Marcue and Danip came in while they were still waiting in the keg line and saying hi to Knume.

Danip was one of the guys who had seen him sitting on the rock talking to the ship when he was camping. He was the other blond lumberjack, and a little more wiry than the rest of them. Marcue was also really pretty, her hair was even curlier than Desa's, darker, but not as long. She had a really cute round face, smokey, creamy skin and a cute little shape.

"You must be Alan?" She asked. "Desa told me about you. So seeing as you're back, does that mean you're going with her to Zhindu?"

"If she'll still let me. She must have told you about me yesterday, I doubt that she liked me then."

"Well..."

"Don't worry," Desa told Marcue, "I already told him how mad I was. He knows I won't tolerate anything like that

again.”

Desa encountered someone else she knew in the group around the spigot, someone she knew much more seriously than the guy on the porch. Alan could see it wasn't all pleasant, there was anger mixed with lust in her eyes. This guy wasn't as big and husky as most of the lumberjacks. He had the classic male-model look, and was quite well-dressed for a native in snug pants with a paisley quilted jacket trimmed with suede cuffs and collar.

“Desa, I'm sorry to hear you're moving on,” he told her while hugging her.

“For awhile anyway,” she answered.

“It's going to be boring around here without you to lend a bit of urban flair to our simple lives.” He had put his hand under her skirt and caressed the inside of her thigh as he said that.

Alan noticed that she pressed close, but did not put her hands on him. “You'll survive it,” she whispered before she pulled away.

It was finally their turn at the keg. While they were there, Knume asked them to fill the empty cups on the table. So they filled a round for Yhomaire, Pneika, Braneen, Lapnar and Dalzor.

“What are you trying to do,” Braneen asked Knume, “Make us keep up with you?”

“If you want to keep up with me you got to drain a cup like this.”

He raised his monstrous stein and looked like he threw down the yaag, flagon and all, then gave forth a belch that sounded like it plunged into another keg somewhere in his belly.

Desa and Alan squeezed in at the table by sitting on the windowsill behind it. There wasn't quite enough room for them both side by side so Alan got up behind her and she sat between his legs. This way she could have his arms around her and wasn't at all shy about placing his hands exactly where she wanted them. Alan started to jump, but remembered the incident during his reading lesson and forced himself to relax and go along with it. Once the initial shock was over he found he didn't want to complain at all. Lapnar and Braneen were on this side of the table, along with Dalzor and two other women Alan hadn't met before. Alan tried to ignore what those girls were doing with him. Marcue and Danip got the next windowsill which was also behind the bench on this side, on the Dalzor end.

“Who's the musical group you got here?” Alan asked, awestruck. “You didn't tell me there was going to be one here too.”

“They're just the people who own the place,” Lapnar answered, “they couldn't get a group.”

“They're terrific.”

There was a lot of talk about that as they explained to him how the instruments were pitch corrected so they don't let you play off key. They wondered why he didn't know any of

that.

“He’s only three and grew up in the desert,” Desa answered for him. “He’s not very well educated,”

“Then you better stick with Desa,” Lapnar said, “she knows more about music than anyone I know.”

“True,” Alan said. He took a deep swig of the yaag, noticing how everyone else was well ahead of him. “Hey this stuff tickles your nose.”

“He’s never had any fuming yaag either?” Braneen asked.

“A week ago he hadn’t had any.” Pneika added.

Pneika, Yhomaire, Larneh, Lenchei and Svarloe were on the far side of the table, but Pneika was leaning over to hear the conversation. Pneika was dressed, if possible, more blatantly than before. She had on something like a long coat or dress, fastened at the waist but wide open above and below. Lenchei, who resembles Marcue a bit, was the first female he had seen with pants. Marcue was dressed a lot like Desa. All the guys had pants and shirts, a couple had harnesses over them. The two girls with Dalzor were just wearing skirts and had his arms over their shoulders for tops.

Another guy came in the door. He seemed to be known to all but Alan. He bypassed the keg line and came around the door and behind Luray at that end of the table.

“Desa guess what?”

“What?” she replied, leaning forward to hear.

“I hear Vyinga’s just come in and got your message.”

“Terrific,” Desa answered.

“So who’s this?” he asked about Alan.

Desa introduced Alan and Nobron, and told him Alan was traveling with her, but meanwhile Luray was saying, “You’ll like going with Vyinga, she’s very easy going, but she’ll eventually get you all the way there. It will probably take a whole year, but you won’t have to change ships and you won’t have to pay for the part of the trip closest to the city where the cost is higher.”

“I’m not in a hurry, so I won’t mind the speed.”

“She usually picks a pretty friendly crew. She’s Darceenian you know, so she doesn’t even own clothes.”

“Sounds like fun,” Desa said.

“What about you?” Marcue asked Alan. Obviously Desa had talked about him.

“I don’t know, do I have to go naked to sign on to her ship?” Alan asked, fearing once again that this wasn’t going to be as easy as he thought it was.

“What do you mean have to?” Marcue asked him, “It gets pretty steamy along the river, you’ll probably want to.”

“I’ll have to make my mind up about that when the time comes.” He’d secretly seen classified photos of whole beaches full of naked people. He knew it would come to this didn’t he?

“He’ll get used to it,” Desa said.

“It looks like Svarloe wandered off with that cup.” Luray said.

“I know,” Desa said, “Why don’t you fill yours, and take Kelthwiss when you get to the tap, I’ll have this first one done by then.”

“Tip it up, I’ll be back in a flash.”

She didn’t really have to go far, she was still standing next to Knume who was still pouring. But there was a waiting line for the tap by now and she had to go get in it.

Yaag

Alan took another swig of the yaag. He realized he was now participating in Nightday as a native would. It was too dark to do anything in the fields or forests where most work in this community was done. This is the time when country people would try to partake in whatever social activities their location had to offer. He suspected that for most of them that wouldn’t be anything more than visiting friends, but for those who were lucky enough to live in a town this size, there were public places like this.

“I see you learned to drink yaag,” Marcue said to him.

“I don’t have anything else to do today. But if I lose control of myself, don’t take anything I say seriously. I have a pretty active imagination when I get loose.”

“In that case,” she said, “I’m glad we got the good stuff here.”

“How’d you manage to get this anyway?” Nobron asked

Desa.

“Knume saved up for the party and had both vats bubbling, there’s almost half of this keg left and he’s got another at the feast.”

“So that’s why he’s been so stingy lately,” Luray said as she arrived back at the table with full cups.

“I’m sure you found something,” Desa said.

“But this doesn’t taste like Knume’s usual brew,” Nobron said.

“I put some lvinch in it, and a little something I got at Lenchei’s bottle shop. Plus he found a way to let them fester a whole week so they’re a little better than the wash he’s been drinking lately.”

“You just wait till you get to Zhindu,” Luray told Alan, “Then you’ll learn how to drink.”

“Oh I already know how, I just don’t need that much practice,” Alan replied, causing a bout of laughter from all but Luray.

“So what are you going to do once you get there?” Luray asked Desa.

“I want to get a new yandrille for one thing, I can’t play that old long-stroke any more.”

“You going to have to do a lot of working to save up the money,” Luray told her.

“I know, that’s why I’d like to find a way to strike it rich down there.”

“I never found a way,” Marcue said. “Not that I really

looked all that much. When I needed money I used to just go check the boards for the day. I found the pay is best in heavy industry but the work is really hard and in most places the heat of the kilns is hellish. The pay is lowest for copying tapes because it's easy and everyone wants to do it. I hear some people make out good compiling master tapes if they figure out what will sell.”

Luray added that... “The people with the most money are those that own the industries. I know a guy who owns the plant where quite a few magazines are printed. He must take over ten aluminums a year from that, but it took him centuries to get to that point.”

“What about research, are there any good positions in that?” Desa asked.

“I never ran into any,” Marcue answered.

“There are in genetics,” Luray said, “And a few in mechanics. I think you could be a technician, they can make up to about nine irons per shift.”

“I used to make that in the bearing factories,” Marcue said, “A strong man can make a copper in a double shift.”

“That's true,” Luray said.

“Technicians have a lot easier and more interesting jobs,” Desa said, “but I think I need something like ten aluminums for a yandrille I'd really like.”

“You aren't going to get that kind of money working off the boards, you're going to have to find some kind of hustle.” Luray said, “You might get it out of master tapes, but you'd

get yourself in the magazines by the time you were halfway there.”

“What can you get for singing?” Desa asked.

“It depends, if you were in a well known group playing the big halls, you’d make that in a decade.”

“I’ve seen stories of people taking a century to save up for their yandrille.” Marcue added.

“I don’t think I’m that dedicated,” Desa said.

“Why are they so expensive?” Alan asked.

“The strings are made of metal,” Desa began, “And some of the highest denominations. There’s a lot of technology involved in the pickups. Most of the good ones today have active pickups which take a lot of precision to be accurate enough and not use too much air. You can get cheaper ones like the one they’re playing here. It has plastic strings, fixed pickups and roller pitch. I might settle for one of those in a floor model, but they’re doing some really true things with tension pitch lately, I might settle for a better plastic-string with that. I think Varniss paid forty two coppers or so for that. But he’s putting it thru a thirty four copper block that synthesizes a lot of it back.”

“So what do the strings cost?” Alan asked.

“Oh they’re four fifths of the cost on a top floor model forty two string with tension pitch and rack pickups. Over half of the handhelds most bands use. One big bass string can go as much as an aluminum on one of the great built-ins in some of the halls.”

“That’s a lot of money,” Marcue said.

“Is there any market for quanta-mechanics workers?”

Alan asked jokingly. He was already beginning to feel a little heady, whether it was the start of the yaag effecting him or just the release of tension he wasn’t sure. Of course the releasing of tension was the yaag hitting him wasn’t it?

“Very little,” Luray answered.

“Any technology that would need that would be too expensive for the mass market,” Desa said, “What do you know about quanta-mechanics anyway?”

“I heard the word once, it sounded really deep.” He wasn’t drunk enough yet to go babbling about Earth if he didn’t have to.

“It’s about as deep as you can get if you ask me,” Marcue said, “I saw a book about it once, it was all full of these big equations made up of little squiggly marks.”

“He’ll probably understand it when he gets older,” Desa told her, “He’s good at stuff like that.”

“Good for him, if it makes sense. Just don’t send anybody thru some probability barrier or something,” Marcue said to Alan.

“If there’s people around who know that stuff, why can’t they make a working stargate?” Luray asked.

“From what I’ve heard,” Desa answered, “It has to do with probability. You might send one atom thru, but each one is a separate case and the probability of all atoms going thru at once is so small.”

“You’d have to control probability,” Marcue said.

“And that’s God’s portal to control the universe,” Luray said.

Alan had to lean back a minute and let this all sink in. He would expect a discussion like this to occur among the more educated souls on the ship. Their lives depended on practical applications of quanta mechanics. Here in a stone building lit by torches among people who had to find enough wooden wheels and draft animals to cart ax-cut timber over dirt roads to be loaded onto sailing ships, a discussion of quanta mechanics and it’s practical application to interstellar transportation seemed a little out of place.

He tried to examine the effect of the yaag. Knume and Luray weren’t moving very fast, neither was Valla for that matter. Yhomaire was stopped. He was just sitting next to the keg, eyes following the speaker or the music, the occasional nod. His eyes however, looked like they should almost be out on stalks like keda eyes, stalks that drooped downward. Braneen had moved over onto Lapnar’s lap to make room for Nobron at that end of the bench and she was just bopping to the music and rubbing up on Lapnar. The back bench of the table was almost against the windowsill, Desa’s foot was on the bench and Nobron was caressing her calf. Dalzor and the girls with him were quite involved with each other. Alan was able to have his arms around Desa and not get THAT aroused. There must be something like alcohol that relieved

inhibitions, but something that was also calming.

What Desa had warned him about was true. All the woman were cuddly with pretty much all the males. Even though any camera going here would have been considered an explicit film aboard Gordon's Lamp, it was, like Desa had also implied, not a real big deal. It was just something everyone enjoyed about social occasions. Thinking like an anthropologist once again, and how long this population of humans had been separated from those on Earth, he wondered if it could have evolved from grooming behavior.

He took another pull, draining the cup, then burped and leaned back against the window bars. He was still looking for similarities with what he'd heard of alcohol, and not finding very many. Next time he looked up he noticed that the colors in the room had brightened up a lot, and some people's motion was starting to strobe. He wondered if something had been done to the torches. Then the music, which had been completely beyond space already, turned to a cool, slightly viscous liquid, into which he fell without being able to help himself.

He spent a while just swimming there, or was it just in Desa? He watched the party as a movie and sank deeper and deeper within it, until he really WAS in this ancient building in some alien civilization at an extra-terrestrial party. And it felt natural. It was good that for centuries they had been perfecting the science of making themselves beautiful and artfully displaying that fact. Of course he appreciated it more

on the part of the women, but he could tell that the women enjoyed caressing the males also.

He wondered if that had a lot to do with the differences in the native's behavior from what he knew of mortals back on Earth. He knew that not all mortals were attractive, and that made them jealous. Or maybe when humans were brought here they were modern in form but were still like bonobos in behavior?

Among the hubbub, Yhomaire caught Desa's eye across the table, "Wherever you got this keg, it was the right place."

"We made it," Desa said, and with that volunteered to fill Alan's cup.

"Take mine too," Danip said while holding his out.

Alan realized at this point that not only was he out of contact with the ship, he might soon be out of contact with reality altogether.

Desa returned with the cups just as a new arrival walked in the door. "Aha," she said to Desa, "the guest of honor herself," and laced fingers with her.

Now all the native women he had seen so far could be considered beautiful. This one was well beyond that. She had very long, shiny, soft, golden-brown hair, golden skin and emerald eyes very clearly turned up at the corners. Her body was soft, smooth, and perfectly shaped, clothed in a one-piece, skin-tight jersey-like outfit with a low, low as in under, cut top that made a very fine presentation of very fine features, just the right shape between curve and point,

voluptuous but not sloppy or out of proportion. The jersey was thin enough and her belly was flat enough that you could see the shadow of her tuft.

“What makes you say that?” Desa asked.

“I heard this rumor about you going off to Zhindu and this is your sendoff.”

“It’s the logging party, I just took it as a convenient time to catch a bus.”

Lapnar leaned from the bench and wrapped her in his arms as she approached and buried his face in her crotch. “Ah the flower of highland womanhood,” his muffled voice intoned.

She giggled and wound her fingers in his hair, “Are you still pining away for me?”

“I’ve always hungered for you since I was old enough to know how.”

“Enough, enough,” she said after a minute, “Let’s not get this dress wet.” She pulled herself away from him. “Maybe later we’ll have a tumble but first let me catch a buzz.”

“So come meet Alan, he’s traveling with me,” Desa said. “So make a little room for Kaha with us, you’ll find her most pleasant to squeeze in with I’m sure.”

By this time Desa was settled in on Alan’s left thigh, leaving a tiny space beside him on the windowsill. The goddess handed her cup to Alan and squeezed in beside him, wrapping her arm around his to do so, pressing his arm against her bosom and causing him great pleasure in the

process.

“Now this is cozy,” she said, maintaining that position.

“Comfy?” she asked.

“Well, uh... I’m thrilled if it's all right with you.”

“Do you know him?” Lapnar asked.

“Desa said he’s traveling with her,” she answered,

“You’re not from Yoonbarla are you?”

“No, I come from out by the desert.”

“He’s just coming off some bad acid,” Desa added. He was stung by that but should have expected it.

“Alore thinks he’s a wizard,” Luray added.

“So what makes you think he’s been on a bummer?” Kaha asked Desa.

“He’s got too much under it. He’s no desert rat, he’s an educated guy.”

“This keg’ll wash any bad acid out of him,” Braneen said.

Demrin had been over talking to Dalzor. He came around to talk to Pneika. They groped each other and pretty soon she went with him, Dalzor and his friends off toward the far side of the building. He heard Dalzor say something to Lapnar about getting the serious pussy now before he got too keged up.

“I did some RNacid once,” Kaha said, “It was about going down the Vanseigiss. I did some norrot with it so it was really realistic, much more than any trip you ever get off yaag. But it wasn’t something made up, it was the memories of someone who had done it.”

“They make up trips in the Yakhan,” Desa told her.

“How do they do that? Does someone imagine it and then they lift it?”

“No, that would never be realistic enough. They make it up brute force, codon by codon.”

“It must take ages,” Lapnar said.

“The process is pretty automated, they have photonic systems with software to do a lot of the details.”

“That’s right, you’ve been to the Yakhan haven’t you?” Kaha asked.

“Yeah, a century ago.”

“If you remember it at all I’d love to hear about it some time, I’ve never been past Zhlindu.”

“I’ve never been to Zhlindu, this’ll be my first trip.”

“Yeah, that’s right, it’s tomorrow you’re leaving,” Kaha said.

“Riding a log.”

“Then I won’t get to hear about it.”

“I could tell you a little now,” Desa began, and spoke of the great city far away that she had told him about yesterday. He was able to picture the canals and tall grown buildings. She talked of addictive drugs and people who work and play harder than in this basin. Alan paid little attention because he would never see it, it was many years of travel from here, and because both girls were pressing against him to converse.

While Kaha and Desa were talking about Kassidor Yakhan and Lapnar was trying to participate in that, Braneen

was still sitting on Lapnar's lap, but she was talking to Danip about the treehouse he was building up above town beyond the vedn field. Alan could hear bits and pieces of that, it sounded pretty nice. It would be small and cozy with a great view overlooking the whole town and out over the valley to the east. He had found a large rare enra tree to use as the main structure, and had cut the top off it ten stories above the ground so the limbs at that level would grow new trunks.

When Desa was done talking about the Yakhan, Kaha remembered something she had to ask of Braneen.

"Yes," Braneen turned to Kaha.

"We need you."

"Who needs me, for what?" Braneen asked her.

"Naon and I, for the sunset scene."

"You know I don't like making movies. They never get finished and then everyone always gets mad at you when you quit. Besides, what happened to Jmory?"

"She quit."

Braneen raised her hands in a big blossom.

"But I didn't get mad at her."

"Now you'll have to do that whole chapter over."

"No," Kaha said, "we're almost done with it, we just need you for two little spots and neither one's a close-up."

"I don't look enough like Jmory to fool people in the back row."

Alan had no idea what Jmory looked like, but Braneen was probably better. Desa once told him she was one of the

oldest people around, born while Alexander the Great was conquering Asia. She looked as fresh as nineteen and as sophisticated as thirty. Her skin was very clear and smooth, a smoky ivory color. Her hair was a slow brown waterfall, her body long, slim and elegant, dressed in a long and soft knit jacket, open at the top around charming lively cupcakes and with a colorful pattern on it that looked like butterflies with kite tails.

Braneen wanted to participate even less when she found out she would have to play the part in the ruined castle. Kaha tried to convince her they were ‘all fixed up’ but they hadn’t looked it to him.

“What’s your movie about anyway?” Alan asked when that was over.

“I’ll be glad to tell you as much as you want to know, but I warn you that could take a while.”

“I’ll listen to as much as you want to tell.”

“Tell you what,” Desa said, “I got another empty cup and I want to make a lap around and say good-bye to some folks. Alan’s new here and doesn’t really know anyone so would you be his party-guide for awhile?” she asked Kaha.

“Sure, as long as he’s cuddly.” Kaha replied and pressed him hard against her bosom again.

“You be cuddly,” Desa said, and Alan nodded and saluted. Desa obviously had no idea what that gesture meant, but she just rolled her eyes and didn’t ask.

“Where are we doing lunch?” Kaha asked.

“We had a brunch already, I thought I’d just pick up some backstreet ingletors on the way into the Lappranile.”

“Near Kolay’s?”

“Probably,” Desa said as she got up, “somebody will be cooking there on a day like his.”

Kaha

At the same time Desa left, Nobron got up to help Larneh wrestle another keg into the spot where he had just been sitting. Kaha had to move or put her legs on top of it so she sat between Alan’s legs the way Desa had and pulled his arms around her the way Desa had. All the more thrilling as she took a deep breath to begin telling of her movie, which was about a girl addicted to filming the news and how she was used by her publisher.

Meanwhile Danip, Braneen and Marcue wandered away toward the stage, where the jam had stopped and people were lining up tapes to put in. Lapnar stayed with them a while longer. He already knew a lot of the movie, and apparently had acted in it. He was very interested in Kaha. As naïve as Alan was about society, he could detect that. He was also able to detect that Kaha was not particularly interested in him and was cuddling up to Alan because of that.

Kaha soon drained her first cup, a step on the way to her

announced plan of catching a buzz. She took him by the hand and lead him out and around the table. Kaha pulled him thru the keg line, keg mob actually. Larneh topped Thollalla off from his keg even though he'd only lowered it an inch and a half, then they wandered around the room. Kaha seemed to know everyone in the place, or at least everyone in the rear corner on the fireplace end, and it seemed that most of them were in the movie, because that was the main topic of conversation. Kaha spent a lot of time filling Alan in on what they were talking about and how it all fit.

She liked to pet, not only with him, but more with him than he could handle. She came across a guy she wanted to show her butt to, and asked Alan to lift her skirt and caress her cheeks to tease him. He felt used, but took the opportunity to enjoy doing it anyway. If he wasn't already so buzzed he would have started to worry about what he was getting into by running away from the expedition. As it was, he just went along with everything, his brain on total overload so that he was drifting like a dust mote in a sunbeam. Kaha seemed to like to lean on him like he was a lamppost, liked to have his arm around her, liked to have her arms around him, and liked to have at least one breast in contact with him at all times and the other in contact with whoever she was talking to, male or female. He worried about Desa and how she would feel about this, but he didn't see her in the room.

Alan began to understand that Kaha did not write the movie. The actors did as much as anybody, and they argued

about the dialog and the meaning of the parts. Kaha would mediate. Alan and his cup felt like they were at some big-time media party. Kaha clearly enjoyed the fact that he was awed by it all. Once again he really WAS on some other planet at an extra-terrestrial party. To him it felt more organic than any party he had seen films of.

“You should be filming this party,” Alan said.

“Yeah, I can use these party scenes in it, but we filmed the Lumber Party scenes a decade and thirteen ago.”

“It was crazy rowdy that year,” one of the nearby guys said. “That was the year Knume got naked and did Valla right on that stage.”

“Over Klegnif’s boards,” someone who’s name Alan had already forgot said.

“The beer was cold that year,” someone else mentioned.

Soon after they settled at a small table in the corner next to the back door, on the fireplace end of the room. That door lead to the back hallway and the stairs. Downstairs was a path to the center of town, the still, the restrooms, and under the back half of it, a large home where the owners lived.

“Do you ever act in the movie?” He asked.

“Not much, I mostly run the camera. Naon is the only other person around who can run it.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re so beautiful of course. People would

rather see you.”

“Oh I don’t think I’m that uncommon. I’m interested in being beautiful, I think being beautiful is wonderfully erotic. But the woman this movie is about isn’t like me, she’s only interested in keeping herself presentable enough to do her job.”

“But don’t you have to make as much money as possible with this movie?”

“Make money with a movie?” She looked at him like she suspected he came from another planet.

“Yeah, isn’t that what people make movies for?”

“Not really. People do it for the art of it, because they like to express themselves and act out a life they don’t actually have for themselves. Once in awhile someone will sell a movie to a distribution company and make a few thou off it, that might be nice, but I don’t expect it.”

Another very photogenic couple joined them, with empty cups and it was Alan’s turn to make the keg run. He felt like a gigantic contraption walking to the keg. He thought the yaag pouring so smoothly into the cups was absolutely hilarious and almost fell down with them at the tap. When he got back, Kaha sat with Alan in what once might have been a window ledge, but was now boarded in with some other room behind. The other couple sat on the table with their backs to the room. All of them had their feet on the bench of that small table. Kaha still had no problem placing his hands where she

wanted them on her body, and no problem with what part of his body responded. He was glad it was behind her, even on the third cup of this stuff, he couldn't stand out in a crowd like Dalzor. The other couple were even more involved with each other.

The girl was Jmory, who had quit the movie. She and Kaha obviously didn't let the disagreement about the movie hurt their friendship. Braneen was the same kind of look as Jmory, but Jmory had more tan, a little more light in her hair and was quite a bit more muscular. She would still need studio fright makeup on to resemble someone who's appearance was just good enough to do her job.

“Now that we're by the fire, I'm ready to get naked,” Jmory said.

“Yeah, it's about time,” Kaha added.

They were both as good as their word, as was the guy with Jmory. Alan enjoyed the view, but did not feel ready to join them in disrobing even though he was in the back of the alcove where his body's opinion of Kaha's body wouldn't be seen anyway. Kaha was in front of him, he could not help responding to her, and she did not stop responding to his response in her motions with the music. Alan tried to keep his body under control and began to seriously wonder just what he'd gotten himself into by running away to the natives. If it wasn't for the drugs he would have spewed by now and even if he didn't, he would have been too embarrassed to participate.

While they sat here a lot of people wandered by to enjoy the view of these girls. The girls knew it and liked it and conversed about it with the guys who commented. They cultivated this in their appearance. They languidly writhed and purred and posed for their admirers. Kaha wasn't raunchy even though guys asked, 'lets see that love flower in bloom,' and similar pleas. Jmory wasn't as decorous however.

Alan learned that it was impolite to ask a woman for sex while she is in bodily contact with a male. The same holds true for women, but it is still OK to have plenty of petting going on with the people going by. There were females going by too and a couple even took advantage of Alan's presence, making control impossible if not for the yaag. One girl even reached behind Kaha and grabbed it like it was the manual over-ride of the main airlock and said 'ah, cute' and kissed him right on the tip, then continued with her social rounds. Kaha had leaned forward so her tits could play with his knees while her friend leaned in. That was just when Sharni came from the back with her skirt over her shoulder, wrapped up in Nalu.

"Anything open back there?" Kaha asked her.

"Yeah, the one we were in just emptied out, next to the end on the outside. It's still pretty dry."

"Let's get it," she told Alan and once again took him by the hand. She went a few steps than stopped. "Would you rather go for a four-way?" she asked.

"Four way what?" he asked, puzzled, worrying more

about his pants than her question. He was losing the bone but not fast enough to lose the blush. He worried a little more about what he was getting into. They were already in the hallway next to a table with some pennies and a pile of sheets on it. He tried to stay concealed by that.

“I’ll guess that would be a ‘no’,” she said, and resumed walking down the back hallway with him in tow.

This was a corridor with little rooms off of it, a row of eight of them on each side, they were nothing but a large bed. The next to last one was empty. It was a lot like Desa’s bedroom back at Knume’s except that the whole back wall was latticed window overlooking the back fields and the center of town. Alan actually wasn’t fully convinced of the purpose of this trip until he caught the aroma.

As soon as they were inside she began to take off his clothes. She didn’t rip them off aggressively, she did it slowly and gently and sensuously with a tease that made his gonads throb. “You’ve been feeling so good behind me that you gave me a seething desire to get on you,” she said, and I guessed you wouldn’t want to do it out there.

“The way you’re undressing me, you might be too late.”

She laughed at that, then whispered in his ear while kissing at it, “You mean you’re not used to this out on the desert rim?”

It wasn’t easy to do too much more talking. She got him undressed in time, but the only other talking she did was a

little what to do and where. Kaha is a very fit woman and they had quite a romp. Alan had some difficulty prolonging it enough for her, but she seemed to sense his immediacy and moved in ways that kept him on the edge of orgasm for longer than he thought he could bear. It was a damn good thing he was high.

They lay beside each other, catching their breath, “When you stop by here on your way back from Zhindu, lets do this again,” she said.

“Thanks,” he panted, “I’ll be glad to. You are wonderful at this.”

“I’m glad I pleased you. Sex is a sport I want my partners to enjoy.”

“Way beyond that,” he motioned with his hands, “You’re more potent than the yaag.”

“Maybe what you were feeling was the yaag.” She touched him in a way that proved it wasn’t the yaag.

“Definitely not. It was all you.”

“So what’s this RNAcid trip you were on?” she asked.

“Why would you want to hear about that?” He sat up nervously.

“Desa said it was about coming from the desert?” she asked.

“No, that one’s the truth, the RNAcid trip is that I came in a tin can from YingolNeerie?”

“YingolNeerie?” she asked, as in ‘never heard of it.’

“It’s a star. That’s the RNAcid trip. The Angels and their

ship are from there, I was grown here, in a laboratory on that starship, with mechanical parents.”

“Wow? What did you pay for that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Please understand something about me and what I’ve been thru. This trip seems entirely real to me.” Alan was starting to get his pants back on. Kaha was so comfortable nude that she might remember her dress out at the table later today.

“Maybe it is,” she said, “Desa’s pretty smart but she can be wrong. Maybe you really are from YingolNeerie. What’s it like there?”

So he had to tell her while they went downstairs to clean up. That was quite an experience, there was only one shower room. Danip and Klegnif were already there. He swallowed hard and went ahead anyway. Nobody paid any attention, and Kaha went on asking about his trip. This meant the others got to hear about it also. The story, what he told of it, jived with what he told Desa except that he pretended he believed it really was a bad RNacid trip, at least he thought he was pretending. He didn’t show her the phone (it was hidden deep in his pack in Knume’s house, a third of a mile away). He would have liked to have been able to slap his pocket and feel it at this point, just to reassure himself it really wasn’t an RNacid trip. Kaha was interested in it from the adventure side. She wanted it to be real even more than Desa did, and never questioned the science of it at all.

“Lets go get the starship and take a ride,” she said as they

made their way back up the stairs, “That would really make this a great party.”

“It’s not that simple,” he tried to tell her, “It takes half a century or more to get anywhere and the starship can’t stand gravity. You have to use the atmosphere shuttle to land on a planet, and it takes days just to get that ready. Starships really aren’t the best party entertainment.”

She didn’t understand and was disappointed.

Captive of the Witch Queen

They went by the taps again and found that Knume’s keg was empty and Nobron’s was now open along with Larneh’s, which was already getting a little low. They got a cup and found this had a lot sharper flavor, interesting in an orange sort of way.

Kaha wasn’t the only girl entertaining the males. Pneika and Alore were also undressed and basking in the attention on one side of the fireplace. Jmory and Tuong were doing it long and slow on the table they’d been sitting at, while chatting with two other couples. They found Desa, Marcue, Sharni and a few more girls on the hearth by that table and all undressed. Desa was lounging in the arms of the guy she had spurned earlier. Alan had seen her post-coitus only a few times, but he could tell.

Alan was embarrassed to see that Marcue was doing Nalu

on the ledge where he and Kaha had been sitting.

“Have you been back there?” Desa languidly asked Kaha.

“You told me it would be alright,” Alan said, overcome with guilt and jealousy at the same time. “I thought you meant it.” He wondered if she had just used it as a trap to get away from him.

“Oh I certainly did mean it. Now I won’t feel so weird, as long as you had a good time?” she asked Kaha.

“Oh yeah, I had a great time,” Kaha said, “And I see you managed to get him again.”

“She won’t even point up for me,” the pretty boy said. “She was out with Nobron a while ago and he must have been in rare form tonight.”

“Maybe it’s just you?” Kaha asked. She sat down beside Desa and Alan sat behind her again. The heat of the fire felt good on his back, the shower had been pretty cold. “Try mine,” she said, “If you can’t get a response from me then you must be due for a re-charge.” Alan was now beside him so he could easily reach Kaha. Alan was now sure that the sex play in this bar room could get away from him.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” he said after attempting, “You must be concentrating on dtair-infested rinko or something.”

“Maybe it’s Alan,” Marcue said.

“It could be,” Kaha told the guy, “Why don’t you try again later, like after lunch when I might pop by the ‘Bit for awhile, I’ll be good to go by then,” Kaha told him.

Alan gathered that this was a pretty plain statement that she had just kept Alan entertained for Desa's behalf and that after lunch she would be ready for some real fun. He wanted to tell her she could change places with Desa any time she wanted, but that guy mumbled something about his cup being empty and got up to go fill it. Desa shifted position and leaned against Alan once he was gone, taking the arm that wasn't around Kaha and wrapping it around herself.

At this point he had a very different view of what he had done. Maybe it really was a playground where people were just trying to have as much fun as they could without getting hurt too bad. He certainly wasn't hurt now. The plentiful contact of these wonderful bodies was so pleasant that he thought he was dreaming it. But no, he really was at a party on a distant planet. "This has got to be the real heaven," Alan sighed. "I'm so glad I came to this planet. I don't care if there are monsters in the swamps and you have to wash clothes by hand, with natives like this..."

"...and yaag like this..." Kaha added and lifted her cup in the air.

"So you told her about your trip?" Desa asked him.

"Yeah," Kaha answered, "But what if it's real? I wish it was, so we could take a starship ride."

"It's much more fun here," Alan said. "The only good thing about that starship was it brought me here."

"So you're having a good time stopping by Yoonbarla?" Kaha asked.

“I can’t believe it. How often is it like this?” Alan asked.

“Like what?”

“This party.”

“Well Myimpaden doesn’t get this crowded but for the logging party,” Desa told him. “But with between half and a quarter as many people it gets like this on Nighdays. This is where most of the loggers come to socialize and find sex. Lots of times when I come down here I like to get into a jam with Varniss’s yandrille. It’s getting toward Lappranile time and I ain’t played a note yet but I do see Klegnif eyeing over this way like she might be thinking about it.” She got up and waved. Klegnif waved and pointed toward the stage. “I got a song I want to play for you,” she told Alan as she walked away.

“Oh wow, Desa’s going to play ” Kaha said as she pulled him to his feet. “The main reason I drag my ass way up this hill is if I think she might sit in. Wait till you hear this, this chick you’re traveling with is MIGHTY on yandrille.”

“Where do you live?” Alan asked, thinking she might be from out of town.

“Way down the east end. Not above the store because there’s no garden space there, but I hang out at the ‘Bit and Lappranile more than here, or at Koza’s keg down by second bridge on East Street. That’s my ‘stop by for a brew and screw’ place actually.”

They were up to the stage end of the room by now. Desa

was fiddling with the controls on what would be the amp if this was an old time rock & roll gig in what Earth's music history now called 'the age of the electric guitar'. It was a large hunk of smokey crystal with tiny veins buried in it. There were dozens of little pegs and hoses sticking out of it. They were saying things like 'let me have a little more separation of the hammer-chord' and 'don't put any plazmoid on the mic, I've been drinking too much for this voice as it is'.

"I'm glad you came up here," Desa told Alan, "I think you'll get a kick out of the words to this. It's a centuries-old highland song actually, I think it comes from out around the Oterlaveshta area originally. That's highlands on the far side of the world. But I think it tells about how your trip isn't unique." Which trip was she talking about? His trip from the desert or his trip from Sol? Or was she sure it was a drug trip and was that what she meant?

Klegnif began a chord, starting as a drone. Desa did a quick little tinkle, Klegnif's drone metamorphosed into an orchestra and Alan got blown halfway back to YingolNeerie because suddenly that yandrille was screaming in all colors and the whole room was stomping with it. He didn't know these notes were possible, much less this song. It hung suspended in space; Desa almost turned back to the microphone, like she was going to whisper to it. Her first words were "From a distant star to this dirty bar..." and it went on from there to tell how she'd known him for many

lifetimes. Then the power came back as she screamed that she was everything he desired, everything he could desire, that he was the captive of the witch queen and that it would go on, from lifetime to lifetime, century to century, spinning thru eternity.

The whole story of his origins, what Earth was created for, why mankind developed science and why the Orthodox Christial Church picked 61 Cygni as the destination of their expedition found its purpose in that song. He was pretty sure video games was just something she made up to throw him off the trail by the middle of the second chorus. He imagined truer words were never spoken. There was now no doubt in his mind that the whole YingolNeerie trip was just RNAcid that Desa had cooked up to get him back under her spell. He *was* the frozen slave for as many cycles as it took, thru all eternity. This song told him he was all those lovers of her long life and she had brewed the potion that made him what he was.

Kaha was poking at him and saying, “See, see, I told you she was huge on yandrille. She’s great at singing also. She doesn’t sing as much when it’s just a jam.”

He was paralyzed and could not answer her, it was all he could do not to fall down while he understood that all of his upbringing, the whole collection of universes that was Gordon’s Lamp, was just a figment of this girl’s imagination as she set him up for the next cycle, the move to Zhindu.

And at the climax, it sounded like there must have been

two of them there. Desa had been lying to him about being just a ‘working musician’. She was undoubtedly world famous under a different name. Kaha bounced and rubbed against him, locked into it thru the whole song. He was just lucky that she was nimble enough not to step on his jaw.

Then it ended. She put down the yandrille, said some words of thanks to Klegnif and stepped off the stage. A few people, most of whom he’d met and should have remembered, crowded around her. She had a few words for them but soon broke free. Her purpose was clear, as she’d blasted it into his yaag-addled brain with that song. There was nothing he could do now. She walked over to HIM and put her arm around HIM. Alan almost blacked out.

Book X. At the Castle

Far around the planet from Yoonbarla, many times as far as Zhindu, over the mighty TduunZhorp range, beyond the Trastrab, Prvest and Borlunth basins and thru the even mightier Fronzhorps, is the vast swamp city of Trenst. A thousand miles beyond Trenst is an area of rolling highlands called the Kendre Plateau. It is beautiful country by any standards, mainly wooded but with plenty of neat, small farms. There are a few small cities, and at least a thousand villages, with more brick, stone and mortar than you see in the lands of Zhindu, but as much of the vine growing on it. On the southern edge of this plateau, overlooking the Karedarzin lowlands and the river itself, far in the distance, there is a series of lofty cliffs stretching irregularly for hundreds of miles. On the top of one of the nearest cliffs to the river itself, so close the twenty-mile-wide water is blue in the distance below, stands a great castle.

Twin towers reach into the air thirty stories above the cliff tops framing a large opening designed for admitting floaters to the inner courtyard. The whole structure seems carved from the white granite of the cliffs, especially the lower parts. But as one looks higher or into the interior courtyards one can see some of the lightest, most delicate, most intricate and most ornate stonework to be found anywhere.

The stone looks carved from the cliff itself, in truth it was

cast in place, the work of a century or more. This art had been the careers of many, art that can only truly be appreciated from the air.

Flanking the courtyard are walls of glass many stories in height behind which grand balconies sweep from rich chambers in the towers to a park sized room opening thru a vast portal to the court. Beyond and into the mountainsides are countless smaller rooms and above them smaller courts and gardens and fields winding away for miles over the hillsides. From a distance the grown structure rambling across the mountaintop can't be distinguished from the forest. No trace of the labs beneath can be seen from the air or the ground.

Several dozen floaters of the best breeds drift on their tethers from the towers, lazing over the main court in the silence of dawn. One was a blue-blazoned behemoth capable of carrying thirty people. There is a whole brood of smaller single-tails capable of a single passenger, and a few small twin-tails that could carry a few people at a time. If all the important people at the castle wanted to leave at once, there might be enough floaters.

Atop one of the towers is a large, round, coal-blue globe. Below that is a tall room with a door that leads to a tiny platform where you can take the view from the pinnacle of this castle. The wild plain bordering the longest of Kassidor's rivers reaches all the way to the base of these cliffs, more than five hundred feet below. These plains teem with wildlife and

flood for hundreds of miles at times.

Inside the room behind that balcony is a complicated crystal pillar with a luminescent panel protruding from it. The pillar grows wider as it nears the lofty ceiling, close inspection can show that it blends into the globe above.

This dawn, a tall, thin man stands at this panel. He is gaunt with long white hair and beard, with one hand having two thumbs, each of which is really a short tentacle with a bony knuckle on the end, and the other hand having at least eight fingers and no thumb at all. His current name is Brancetrabble, and he is the owner of this castle and the vast fortune it represents. He was born when the legions of Dempala first entered the Lumpral basin, a time that only history scholars know, long before the times that gave birth to legends and fairy tales. Since then he has been a street beggar, a God, a keda, and the world's foremost chipponga player. Over the centuries he has amassed a fortune great enough to buy for himself one of only eight helmeted suntowers in operation outside the Kassikan. Much of the time he can be found here at its control panel in touch with the far corners of the world. Today he passes his time watching at the fringes of the world, learning of all the oddities and the unexplained.

He has in his possession a magazine article published in Kln, a city of forty-something million about nine thousand miles to the northeast. It wasn't a general circulation magazine, just an astronomical journal of that city. It had

caught his attention because it could pertain to one of his most passionate interests, travel beyond the sky into the great void beyond.

One of the astronomers up there had written about what were believed to be some asteroid fragments that had become trapped in the gravitational null between Narrulla and the world this decade. There were two things odd about these fragments. They had arranged themselves into a long slender row almost two miles in length. All the fragments seemed to be metallic asteroids, but they were adorned with large metal fibers or whiskers.

To the best of his knowledge no other astronomer had taken the time to really analyze these bodies. He'd found many other observatories that had noted their presence and geometry but none that had analyzed their composition.

There was a great deal of speculation in his article on how the objects came to be trapped in that gravitational null. The gravitational laws that allowed it to stay there were well known and the derivation that showed they would stay in line was easy enough to follow since he'd taken RNAcid of all the world's great mathematical minds. But then there was quite an involved proof that not even one body could have come to rest in that point without colliding with another in a nearby orbit. Nuplayy, the astronomer who published the article, also re-published an old proof that showed that this null wasn't stable and that all the bodies would eventually crash to the surface. Each one was large enough to cause quite a crater

when it hit and he published this as a plea that it be watched so that when it did move people could be warned.

This problem was disputed by other astronomers who published other equations saying the body's own gravity would keep them together.

There was another article by another observatory on these bodies. This observer was trying to measure the total mass of these bodies, assuming they were metal as Nuplayy proposed, they should have enough mass to measurably perturb Narrulla's orbit. Brancetrabble saw a few errors in the math this guy went thru, but they were secondary effects that probably wouldn't be observable anyway. His point was that we should measure any perturbation in the orbit, that would indicate the object's mass.

Brancetrabble wasn't having any of this because he knew of a few more oddities these astronomers probably weren't aware of. Brancetrabble had been alive when the Dempalan military built the great floating forts high in the upper air. He knew about the explorers and adventurers who had used them as platforms to blast themselves free of the world completely. He had heard the rumors of an even higher fort built beyond the world, and of sun-sailors who explored the moons in a last desperate effort to find the metals to keep the golden age alive.

He was pretty sure that some of them had been lost or deliberately sailed off into the void seeking worlds where

metal might be plentiful and The Fall could be held off forever. Such a voyage would take countless centuries. None of this was official knowledge of course, because the Dempalan military had always been a secret world unto itself even on the surface and in population centers.

He remembered the barracks in ancient Dzenovah. It was a tall windowless building from which silent soldiers emerged, patrolled, and to which they returned without ever speaking a word to the natives. There was only one source of information on them and that was the women they sometimes took within and even more rarely released. The few who survived without exception told tales of wizardry so advanced that Brancetrabble had forever been fascinated by anything Dempalan.

Today, what remained of those days was; for the most part, locked up in the depths of the great university, Kassidor Kassikan. Some products of those days, such as the suntowers, had been found, understood and put back in use, but none were in production, and little of the knowledge buried in the great crystal at the Kassikan was understood. What was understood was often of no use because it required great quantities of metal and even scarcer energy.

Another fact in Brancetrabble's possession of which the astronomers were unaware was that a strange device made of some of the highest denominations of alloy had been found in the city of Norbin. It was obviously intended for ultra high

speed flight and had some kind of reactive-explosive propulsion device. It was built with a technology that could only have come from the ancient Dempalan military, though none in Norbin would really know that, since the site of today's Norbin was thousands of miles into uninhabited wilderness all thru the Dempalan age and centuries thereafter. The device's purpose and origin were unknown, but there were pictures in the article that clearly showed a lens, making him believe it was meant to observe. It didn't take much faith for him to think it was meant to observe the present condition of mankind and return that information to what could only be an ancient voidship above.

He tried the tower, seeking to know if dawn had brought enough light to reach the distant Yakhan. He could only communicate with them for about an hour at dawn and another hour and a half at dusk. Those were the few hours when both their towers, and all those in between, were lighted. He knew that in Dempalan times there was a method of lighting the towers without Kortrax, but most of the time today they functioned in only their most basic relay capacity, something that had been called Passive Diagnostic Mode when they were new. But they did function, and as the rays of Kortrax made their way down the Karedarzin, a clear channel at last opened into the city he sought.

Today he wasn't seeking information so much as distributing it, because he thought he had stumbled across

something significant enough that other minds should know about it. By ‘other minds’ he meant the circle. Few others even knew about the existence of the circle, for it’s members were high on the peak of the Kassikan and did not seek publicity. Few of the faculty knew of it. But Brancetrabble not only knew of it’s existence, he knew how to patch into it without their knowledge. That was his most closely guarded secret. Only five immortals survived from before the fall, as far as he knew, four of the five who were now the Circle of the Dempalan Elves, and he, Brancetrabble, originally of Bef Lazahn. In the past, they had not always been on the best of terms. They drove him from the Godhood he had set up in the Lumpral basin in the 31st century, dispatching a dactyl that nearly took his life in the process. They couldn’t do that today, having fallen victim, like all of mankind, to the Instinct his labs created to save them from the Empire of Lbront Nevn.

So gingerly he tapped into the beam that lead to distant Kassidor Yakhan, and into the Kassikan. Only a helmeted suntower or eye could use one of the real data channels of the ancient devices and even then, only if they were lighted. Using a forged key he was able to activate a little-known resource survey block that would tell him who was on the crystal. He found this wasn’t the greatest time to snoop since Yhohonshu and Myanfyngaa were still both symbiont. It was dusk there, nobody should be doing any serious work at this time.

He really couldn't wait. So with some trepidation he put on the helmet. It wasn't possible to do anything useful with the amount of knowledge and logic contained in the crystal with any interface so crude as a keyboard and screen. To use this equipment it was best to modify one's self to have a nerve bundle growing in the center of each hair, so that impulses could be picked up as chemical signals and synapsed to the photonic amplifiers in the helmet and transmitted over the suntower thru a data-capacity channel. On the return path light from the suntower was synapsed into the nerve endings, giving him an effective mind-link with the most powerful information storage and manipulating entity on the planet, and with any other minds so linked.

Getting under the helmet was a little like the onset of norrot, there was the instant of whirling confusion as the contact map is built, then always a sudden rush of knowledge and experience. But this was different from the drug in that the information and experience was something new and not just boosted memory retrieval. It was also good for a feeling of power because it was as if you could now remember all the information in there. Today he remembered of a channel that lead to discontinued student volumes that finally lead to an old diagnostics port he had resurrected.

He found they were engrossed in speculative simulations on ways to gain the maximum possible economic benefit from the introduction of their latest augmentation achievement, which they really didn't even have deliverable

yet. It was something to do with increased muscle strength and they were specifically examining how that would effect the waterfronts in certain cities. He saw it in Yhohonshu's mind as glimpses of delta-warehouses per big-bead. Myanfingaa's thoughts were more vocal, voices whispering questions. Brancetrabble shared in the answers the crystal provided, they appeared as memories that felt like you'd always known them. He also experienced it as the view of the river these docks were on, choked with ships and becoming the new bottleneck for that city's economy. They launched into an effort to analyze improving the channel, and found that would cost them more than the new muscles would gain them.

They stepped back and began to muse further afield in an effort to find profit in their project. They poked at spectator sports and found that lead to nothing but balrog technology.

Brancetrabble thought it was now a good time to propose his idea. With his fingers he stepped to the keyboard and composed a message.

Kiethying, Althart & Friends –

Just to speculate a bit with you I tap, some lines on a device discovered in Norbin, bird-shape but superspeed streamlined. Solid Alloy with semi-crystalline, part-photonics interior detail. Lenses and a very high velocity burner device.

Norbin Science News – 55,40,52 pg 17

Now a Nuplayy of Ebnaiyah out of Kln has published some observations on the new and tiny chain of moons, stuck in Narrulla's null point.

The Sky Watcher, Kln – 55,41,13 pg 24

Speculate you, like me, that these moonlets may not be natural? A visitor perhaps, or perhaps more likely, a return?

Brancetrabble

He then used a normal public channel to address this into the mailboxes of the five members of the circle. Now the riskiest part; they must look in the mailbox. They would find it eventually if he didn't do anything, but then he wouldn't know what they thought of it. He wanted them to look now when he was connected so he could listen in and know how they reacted. So he had to introduce the thought into their stream, and to do that he had to forge a key to their active stream.

In some of the oldest deleted areas he kept a mind he simply called the key-forged. He woke it up and it set to work. At the hardware level where this worked, getting into the channel is mainly a question of finding it's address. The key forger followed the structure of the master maps, searching for holes where the circle access might be. Then it was up to

his intuition to guess how they might have it connected today and send the forger in blindly to see if it found anything.

He was always afraid of a secret trap-map at this point, while he was trying to get the feel of an unfamiliar table. Once he had been caught and had to escape by shuttering his tower. Today it must have been Myanfyngaa who set up the channel since the keys were arranged as backskips again.

Now his head, and everything he had built into it, had to take over. He had to force control so no stray thought leaked out, and then exude just the tiniest suggestion of a whim. It got shaky on his way out. He could feel his control slipping under the temptation to get loose in the crystal and command it's full power. As it was, he got out in time, he knew because of the listen-only connection he had maintained thruout. They didn't notice him, and they also didn't notice his suggestion to look in the mailbox.

He had to try the whole process again. This time his frustration and agitation were too much, they detected something as soon as he entered the channel. He broke immediately, but they knew someone had entered. He listened to Myanfingaa's list of names, watched Yhohonshu's mind's eye scan a sea of faces. They checked all their traps and reviewed quite a bit of stats. He was happy to feel that they suspected mainly students. They changed the key to the channel, but that didn't effect him any more. They had no idea that the diagnostic channel existed, it had been deactivated long before their crystal had been rescued from the

ruins of Dempala. They who owned that crystal didn't even know that the parts they thought were read-only, really weren't.

Finally they got around to checking their mailboxes, it seemed they each had several others that weren't on public channels. When they found his message they briefly suspected him of entering the channel, but forgot about that once they read it.

Kiethying would be the one most interested by what he had learned. He had participated in several launches back in those days that few history texts even took seriously. In fact he was probably the only living being to have ever left the planet, unless what Brancetrabble suspected was true and some other had returned.

Personally Brancetrabble thought it would be Ranyart. Of all the spacers he'd heard of in those days, he was the only one who seemed to take it seriously. Some others were rumored to have drifted off behind sails of film, towed in bags of spheelunge skin or kranjan intestine, tied with larorlie root and sealed with leese dung.

Yhohonshu wasn't so interested, she wasn't even an original member of the circle and hadn't been born till after The Fall. Myanfyngaa was a little more interested, but she thought it was more likely a non-human visitor than a returning expedition. They were going to get interested in it, she was starting to look up the publications he referenced

when the light left a tower along the route.

With a slight feeling of triumph, he removed the helmet. At least he had them interested. But would they be interested enough to squander a few trillion of their fortune to pursue it?

Book XI. The Logging Party

Nobron

If you liked Kaha's company, asking about her movie was one sure way to keep it for awhile. It had been her passion since she was old enough to hold a camera, as long as Desa had known her. Kaha put everything she learned about life into her movie. Whoever she filmed, pretty much acted out what they wanted, the only place Kaha's script entered was when she edited it. Kaha would sometimes say things that would trick people into the conversations she wanted to film. Kaha often didn't use the sound from what she filmed anyway, she just filmed people walking around talking to each other, put music to it, and narrated the script. It was a little corny at times, but it was very pretty because Kaha is an inspired photographer and her subjects, the people and scenery of Wescarp, are very beautiful. She said more with the mood of the photography than with the actual text of the script about the story anyway.

Kelthwiss was empty again, they seemed to be slipping by like doorways seen from a streetcar. Larneh was just bringing up his keg, so she had to go all the way around the table. Before she got thru the crowd, both kegs were going, but it still took a while to get to the spigots. She was beginning to feel the yaag now, the giant contraption stage. There was a lot

of body in the buzz tonight, not surprising with lvinch in it. Yaag can be like that, and it's always best to go with the trip that is, rather than bum the currents.

Knume and Larneh were swapping stories and laughing with the guys filling their cups. Klegnif had disappeared as soon as they stopped jamming. Luray seemed to be curled around Larneh now while Valla straddled Knume's knee, but Luray didn't seem the worse for it. She looked more like Luray as Desa usually knew her, watching the humans converse about the way a keda would. When she was talking about Zhindu earlier this evening, that had been a surprise. Luray could be quite interesting and informative when she was still active.

Svarloe came up and got cuddly with her when she got to Knume's spigot. This was surprising as he was often slow to get his hormones up. When their cups were filled they got to hang out standing up leaning on each other next to Valla and visit with everyone without blocking the way. It was a good thing Svarloe was there to hold her up or she would have fallen right in the spigot-wallow over some of the jokes that went round, but between the two of them they stayed upright. Of course she knew at the time she wouldn't remember any of them. Most of them wouldn't have been funny without a few cups and Valla's tits there to provide the atmosphere. The yaag was also helping her enjoy the fact that this skirt wrapped quickly and his arm around her waist could get inside and get very sensual.

So when Alore and Bloric came by and invited them to a nest with Nalu, Althay, Nobron and Sharni, Desa was ready. Their cubby was almost all the way down the back hall, second from the end. It was packed in there once they all got in, everyone was sitting around the walls in a circle, legs intertwined in the center and trying not to knock over the huge bong Nalu had set up in there. It was smoky with rord in the room already. Sharni had her wind-up tape player on her knees, fighting with the one in the hall.

These guys were two thirds of her relationships of the last few decades, almost half the sex if you go by orgasm count. She probably would have moved in with any one of them that asked her. This trip to Zhindu was what it took to get over the fact that none of them had. She was sorry that being one of a 'common pool' wasn't satisfying, but she wanted to experience a life partnership again. In spite of their disagreements on this subject, they were good people and this was good-bye to them for awhile so they had good reason for a delightful petting session all the way around the room. Desa enjoyed this as a party game and everyone was up for it today, especially Althay. But by the end of one lap around most of them were too horny to continue.

"I'm going to get on you," Sharni breathed to Bloric and straddled him right here in this cubby. Althay took Svarloe out of the room. Alore and Nalu looked like they were going to stay here and guard the bong, but Desa and Nobron preferred privacy.

All the other cubby's were occupied, so they went outside. Nobron lead them down the back stairs and way down the path and out on a stone wall in the vines. It was way too cold to take their clothes off, but the way her skirt and his clout worked, along with their shirts, it was possible to tent themselves together and try to make two layers. They cuddled close and were energetic about it too, but then Nobron is an energetic and enthusiastic person and this was just a little 'hey let's get it on' at a party.

An interlude with Nobron is best on a hot and steamy Afternoonday early in the spring, Chezhervizhod or so. That will slow him down and let him languish. You might sit in the garden with a bottle for awhile, tinker with some appetizer recipes and spend more time grooving on the cushion than you thought. Then it might stretch into a whole long lazy day.

They sat together on the wall, done but still snuggling in their cocoon. "This is turning out to be a legendary party," he said.

"Yeah," she sighed, still filled with pleasure.

"Are you sure you want to leave all this and run off to Zhindu."

"Well, yeah, but I was just dreaming about two summers ago, our cooking-lab Afternoonday."

"I still remember that well myself. There'll be another summer starting in another seven or eight weeks."

"And every year thereafter. There'll come logging parties

when we'll reminisce about 'my first sendoff' to Zhindu."

"Whatever happens," he said, "I'm delighted to spend this part of the day with you. This is the part of your first trip to Zhindu that I'll reminisce about."

"Thank you for picking me. I was afraid you'd want one more switch to get Sharni."

"Oh no," he said, "We went around once, I was the last with guest of honor, so I win." He took a breath, "So for me it's a great party. Thanks again for sharing this with me."

They were interrupted by Danip calling, "Hey Nobron, if you're out there, we need to tap your keg, Knume's's dead."

"Go ahead and tap it," he yelled back, "I'll be right up." In a normal voice he told Desa, "Of course with what you did to Knume's, people are going to think mine is water."

"They never have in the past. But we can get back, I might be still squeezing but now that we're still, it's getting pretty cold."

They drifted back, because that was just how she felt, like a cloud, fog. They still kept their arms around each other and leaned on each other up the path. They would be back down this path before too long, the still air of darkness easily carried the sound of Dundorada going thru sound checks at Lappranile. Nobron was well into the wind also. He'd been back and forth to Myimpaden awhile, not thru the sleep, but since early Nightday.

He went right to the keg but she stopped to clean up. Desa

stayed awhile with him at the spigot, still a little tingly with that excellent sex and wishing she could curl around him for another hour. But she could only distract him from the demands of the keg line. He was so facile with jokes that she could only be a hanger on and listener in his presence. The bad news was that Nobron's raunchy taste in jokes was one of the things she didn't like about him, so she soon went over by the fireplace.

Jmory and Tuong were over in the corner doing the public thing. Sharni and Nalu were with them, along with Lapnar. Desa sat on the end of the hearth with Lapnar. There were quite a few other of Kaha and Jmory's movie friends there, at the tables on this end or in the back alcoves. But she didn't see Alan or Kaha. All the other females and half the males were naked and the guys talked her into helping out with the scenery. Desa isn't like Jmory and Kaha and to some extent Sharni, looking for a chance to show themselves and be admired. On the other hand, she doesn't really object if there's guys who actually want to see her and it's as warm as it is here on the fire side of the room. Being naked had been a little daring in the canals of Dos but not in the yaag dens of Wescarp. At this table she'd had to have been abnormally shy to be clothed.

Lapnar asked for more than the view, but had to learn he was too late. She put her arm around his shoulder and said, "I just got back, I'm barely out of orgasm. We'll be down at Lappranile before I'm ready again." If she only had sex once

at a party, that was fine, and she never did it more than three times. She teased him about not coming over a week ago Dusksleep, like he said he was going to. If she would have known how things turned out she would have had Alan stay over right then, but she didn't lay that on him. She still felt bad about sending Alan out to camp.

Lapnar was OK to stay here and cuddle and watch the show Jmory and her friends were putting on and cultured enough not to whack off over it. Marcue happened by with Enva after a little while. Enva sat next to her and Marcue got up in the planked-in window-ledge with Nalu. Marcue is quite hot and likes to have sex about five times at parties so no doubt they had been in the back. Lapnar soon went to the keg, and Enva cuddled up behind her. She acquiesced. He'd had enough cups to lose the arrogance. There were a few more of Jmory and Tuong's friends there, a couple were on the back bench of the little table and three more girls who's names she couldn't remember were leaning against the wall, flirting and petting with many guys who walked by. One of them took a guy and got up on the table with Jmory and Tuong. Desa didn't know her but knew she took the stage at the 'Bit regularly.

An Old Hill Song

When Alan returned with Kaha she had no doubts about where they'd been. Kaha was all bouncy and Alan looked a little ridden. Desa was a little surprised that Alan had actually done it, but then Kaha just does guys whenever she wants and doesn't really ask. She's never heard 'no' so why bother asking? Desa could tell that Enva was glad to see Kaha, since he was getting annoyed with Desa's lack of responsiveness. He was able to figure out where Kaha had been also, but perked right up when she said to look for her later.

Alan was pretty wasted by now. He had told Kaha his starship story and Kaha believed it enough that she was nagging him for a ride on it.

Just after that Klegnif caught her eye for a jam and she knew a song that would suit Alan's trip. She was familiar with Varniss's yandrille, having taught him to play it. The yandrille was a decent piece of equipment, a large, creamy-white handheld with twenty four strings, a fingerboard and quite a few pedals. He had even more amp than yandrille. It was serious little klikeustra with a panel of flop switches, plenty of configure pegs and effects knobs. It was capable of individual string patching to as many as three active spectra, and could sort impact and pressure to different voices. His voice library wasn't large but it had all the effects loggers like.

However, it still actually required the string as the start of it's spectral generation, and with plastic strings the ring

always missed that edge. It had decent roller actuators, but they took a lot of air and with the weight set they had, you could only play a song a few minutes long. The pickups weren't on the actuators as they should be with a roller-pitched hand-held, that caused the spectra to vary with pitch, something that sounded distorted to the modern ear, but old time loggers seem to like that distortion.

She had to set the stringboard up, for this song took two spectra. She patched the chord selection to the footpedals since there were parts of the song where she would need both hands on the strings. Instead she patched the fingerboard to the effects controls. The two spectra in this song were played in the simplest possible way, hammer-chord the plasmoid and finger pick the morbuloid, but it had to be simple if she was going to sing at the same time. She had to put some of her weight on the tall wicker flare-back stool to work the chord pedals properly, but nobody would be filming this anyway. With another two twists of the mic neck, she was ready.

Klegnif could play a northern pound in her sleep, but didn't know this particular song, Desa told her what the patterns were, where to fill, Klegnif took the chord on patch. The intro was a building drone in E, Klegnif knew how to warp that thru, which Desa would que with a hair-toss.

Alan made her think of this song, for it told of a witch queen luring a guy from a distant star to a dark meeting house on some rain-soaked decaying waterfront, and from there

pursuing him thru centuries and lifetimes to finally capture him on a windy hillside. The instrumental ending taxed her playing to the utmost, especially when she was this baked. There were two separate interwoven parts, one of which had to change spectrum a couple times and there were impact notes mixed in with pressure notes, both in complicated patterns. Klegnif for her part did an excellent jam of a rhythm part to it, feeling the crescendo and giving it a new creative interpretation that might have even advanced the song.

She thanked Klegnif's deep soul for the interpretation as she put the Yandrille down. They exchanged a few words and hugged, a bit of a turn on when nude because Klegnif is pretty busty. Desa said she'd miss these jams and looked forward to having her own yandrille to jam with when she got back. Klegnif said she was looking forward to that and hoped to be good enough to play at Lappranile some day.

Desa came back over to Kaha and Alan and put her arm around him. When she did he nearly slumped to the ground.

“Are you OK?” she asked, “What's wrong?”

He regained his balance but kept his distance, not quite pushing her away but stretching to the end of her reach.

“That's all true isn't it?” he asked, shaking, wobbly on his feet.

“What's all true?”

“You are the one aren't you, the one who's done this to me. I can't believe it because Earth seemed so real, but all I

have of Earth is memories of pictures. But since you obviously are a world-famous musician and vocalist, why wouldn't you be able to weave a drug spell on me?"

"What?" Desa didn't understand what he was getting at. "Has Alore slipped you some hallucinogen?"

"That song, that's all true isn't it? How many of the people in your life story am I? How many times have you done this? How many times have we spun around this loop?" He was trying to keep himself from sobbing. Kaha was starting to notice something was wrong with him and made a face at Desa.

"Lighten up, it's a song, I thought it kind of fit your trip and the way you talked about me. The only thing I had to do with it was play it."

"If you can play like that, what other powers do you have?"

"I can make many a cup of yaag disappear but that's about it. That yandrille's just about so automatic that all you have to do is know the words."

"Don't listen to that," Kaha said, "She's the only genuine big-city yandrille player in these hills." By now she had only her hand on his shoulder.

"Don't say that," Desa told Kaha, "he'll believe anything you say."

"I'll believe that," Alan said.

"See," Desa said to Kaha and Kaha said to Desa in unison.

“So what am I and what are you going to do to me?” Alan asked her in a terrified voice.

“Who knows what and who you are. Maybe you really did come from YingolNeerie, I can’t prove you didn’t and that would be fun. I think it’s more likely you OD’d on RN Acid at some Troll camp on the way out of the desert. As for what I’m going to do with you, I was going to travel-guide you to Zhindu, but if you’re afraid of me now that you know I can play a little yandrille on an old hill song, I won’t do anything with you.” She dropped her arm from him and stepped back as she said it. Other people had come by asking what was going on and if everything was all right. Kaha started explaining the situation to them.

Alan was suddenly terrified. He damn near broke down into tears. ‘Serves you right, cradle robber’ a voice in her head said. Alan stepped toward her and said, “No! Now that you’ve done this to me, you can’t abandon me ”

She sighed and took him back in her arms, “I’m not abandoning you and it was just a song.” She thought he was going to cry on her shoulder but they were interrupted by the crowd.

A few more people overheard this and started asking ‘what’s this about YingolNeerie?’ That distressed Alan even more, especially because Kaha was already telling the whole story in a way that started more people nagging Alan for starship rides.

They had to press their way back to the corner where

she'd left her clothes and cup. The crowd followed and even over there YingolNeerie was the topic of conversation. Everybody was buzzed enough by then that dropping by Myimpaden from another star didn't seem that improbable. Now it was Alan who tried to prove it wasn't real. He finally got them off it by going thru this exercise.

“Can you spell the ‘yan’ in ‘yandrille’?” he asked.

Several could, in spite of the hour and the yaag consumption.

“Can you spell the ‘ribbon’ in ‘ribbonleaf’?” he asked next.

A few could even do that.

“Can you spell the ‘fuck’ in ‘starship’?” was his next question.

“There ain't no ‘fuck’ in ‘starship’,” several answered.

“That's what I've been trying to tell you ”

That didn't make any sense to anyone from this planet but did get the subject changed.

Desa neglected to bring up that pocket prophet because only Klegnif and Varniss would know there was anything otherworldly about his device. By the time they got everyone convinced he really had nothing more than some bum RNAcid, they'd each finished another cup and the guys were passing Nobron's nearly empty keg around and drinking from the spigot. There were boo's when Lapnar got the last drops out of it.

“There's plenty more coming up,” he said, “We got some

real cloud-render waiting for us down at Lappranile.”

“Let me at it then,” someone shouted.

“Let’s get ON TO LAPPRANILE.”

“You’s’ll want to get your clothes on, it’s colder than ever outside,” Svarloe told the girls. She would anyway, she was much more intimate with the people here than the crowds at the Lappranile.

Lappranile

They went downstairs and out the back door, she thought, there was a lot of build-up from the yaag by now and Nobron’s keg had NO resemblance to water. It might have had less fume, but it had a lot of belly and she knew this buzz was going to last. She saw the vine-latticed windows with the candles in them and knew that her feet were a long distance away. She just drifted along with the rest of them, holding Danip’s hand ahead, Alan’s behind. He was still a terrified kid, afraid to come with her but afraid to let go. She was too stoned to worry about it now.

There were many paths thru the larorlie patch, she couldn’t tell if this was the same one she came down with Nobron or not. The budded pods looked like little keda eyes hanging on the vines, but they swayed in the breeze more and didn’t blink. She thought that vines didn’t really have eyes, but on a night like this, when she was walking around with a

guy from a distant star? The sky was bright in the crisp air and the teeth of the mountains tried to bite it off. What kind of creature was it that had jaws that they and the whole town could fit into so readily?

Alan became excited as they looked out over the center of town and called it some Yingolian names. If she ever did give anyone an RNAcid trip it would be a lot better than his.

“I think we got him stoned,” Marcue said to Desa.

“He’s exhibiting all the classic symptoms,” Desa agreed, “But then I was just noticing the eyeballs on these vines myself.”

“Once you get to Zhlindu it’s like this just from the fragrance,” Marcue told them.

They reached the part of the path that was steep and twisty and they had to concentrate on their feet which was cause for much laughter and holding on to each other. At the dead end, for it was the wrong path after all, Dalzor lead them up on the stone retaining wall. It was only a couple feet high on this side, but at least ten on the other. They were able to make their way along the uneven and sometimes unsteady wall by holding onto vines. The vines had recently been cut back or they would have hung over the wall, preventing people from taking this route. The wall ended at the other path, at this point a stairway leading down with a few twists and turns between two of the town’s great houses to one of the little circumferential streets behind the pond circle.

On a corner of this street two twists from the bridge was the back door to the Lappranile. The back door entered a small hallway that was narrow and cave-dark when the doors on both ends were closed. The inside end opens into another hall under Lappranile's balcony and along the side of the third floor of the weaving barn. From here there are two passages to Lappranile's balcony and several short hallways into the barn. There are booths along here, and today most of them were in use. Tonmar had set up a grill in one where he was doing a brisk business in brined yellow-stripe, and red belly. Kolay had set up her jugs right next to him.

“What's this, toasted lizards?” Alan asked, as they stopped at Tolas'.

“Lunch,” Marcue replied. “These red belly's are really good. I want a bunch of 'em.” She told Tonmar.

“Looks like I better put some more on,” he said after handing four to Marcue.

But most of the guys went right by and headed for the stairs that lead down to the floor and the kegs. “I want at least four also, Desa told him.”

Alan was a little skeptical, but had to be hungry by now and took a few for himself. “And what's this,” he asked of Kolay's stand, “A milk bar?”

That HAD to start a fit of the sillies, even Kolay had to laugh. “Do I look like I could fill this big old jug?” she asked. While Kolay is ample enough of figure for comfort and might easily feed twins, she couldn't have attempted commercial

production.

“That’s right, there’s no cows here,” Alan said.

“What’s that?” Kolay asked.

“Kolay, meet Alan, the only known starship-rider in Central Wescarp. And Alan, a drink of this is what we call a slap, and I think we are going to need some between now and Noonsleep.” She put her cup on the counter.

“That will be good for a whole week,” Kolay said, “But what’s this about starships?”

“Alan OD’d on a bad ‘acid trip about coming here from YingolNeerie on a starship. ‘Kowz’ is probably the name of some factory that synthesized milk in that trip. We’re sharing this cup by the way.” If it wasn’t for that device, she might have sounded a lot more convincing. She turned to Alan “You need some of this if what you say about the days there is true.”

“What?” Alan asked

“We have the remainder of Nightday and all of Dawnsleep to party and then all of Morningday on the way to Hazorpean.”

“How is that related?”

“You don’t want to fall asleep in the middle of it do you?” She was ready to tell him SHE didn’t want him to fall asleep in the middle of it all because she was not about to be carrying him. Thin as he was, he was so tall that he probably weighed more than she did.

“No.”

“Then drink some of this.”

“Oh?” He did take it.

“You people have been glugging down the yaag haven’t you?” Kolay asked. “Anybody could be from just about anywhere at a time like this.”

“That’s right,” Desa admitted, “So be sure and check the news.”

Kaha caught up to them. She still had Lapnar following her and was now accepting his attentions, at least for the time being. She had her dress back on, and a small jacket, but it was also open.

“Better watch out for that stuff,” she told Alan.

“Look who’s talking,” Kolay retorted.

“I ought to know, right?”

“It’s not so bad if you don’t try to keep it up for a year,” Kolay said.

“A year ” Desa exclaimed, “You could kill yourself that way.”

“I know, I know, that’s why I’m warning you.”

“You were just a kid yourself then,” Lapnar said to Kaha.

“Just about, I was in my fifth decade I think.”

Tonmar knew about the time, and started telling Lapnar about it. Mostly he told how that episode and the damage it did caused her to rebound into taking very good care of herself and had a lot to do with the shape she’s in today. There were other people coming by also, keeping Tonmar

busy grilling up batch after batch. Meanwhile the tale of Kaha's incident of addiction sent some of the other guys off on taller tales of greater indulgence in stronger stuff farther back in history.

Meanwhile Alan was busy chowing down on the toasted inglethors and telling her about how great the food is here. He got a second batch. She tried to find out what food is like on Earth. He just swaged off into some tale about how it all comes from factories wrapped in cellophane. Desa felt that this was just more evidence that what effected him was really just an RNAcid trip, since it should be pretty obvious that food in any real world can't be produced in a factory. And they certainly can't invest three times as much in the package as the food. It still didn't explain the pocket prophet, but she was trying to think of that as a separate problem.

Kaha and Lapnar had only a couple inglethors apiece and then left to go downstairs to the kegs. After eating, Desa wanted to take a look inside and see how things were going. The Lappranile is a pretty nice little hall actually. There is a large semi-circular balcony slanting down toward the stage and back up over the hallway to the fourth floor. The balcony does not actually reach the stage floor. The open part of the floor isn't very large, only about one third as large as the balcony. But it does go back under the balcony where there are some tables and chairs scattered around. Also under the balcony are the kegs, the stairs up to the hallway they came in

on, the stairways to the ground floor and the restrooms.

Dundorada had not come on yet, Khyungee and Bensrie were on stage opening at the time. They aren't bad for self-taught, party musicians.

“See, this proves what we were saying about you,” Alan said, still looking like a frightened refugee. “You go all the way to Hazorpean looking for musicians, and I don't think these guys are as good as you are.”

“These guys are not Dundorada.” He could see she was confident of that. “And Khyungee can play. He might not know much formal technique, but he has fast fingers and a great sense of timing. With a little study he'd be way better than I am.”

“So who are they?”

“They're from town here, they open here quite a bit. Bensrie, the guy on chipponga, has a day job as a weaver. Actually he maintains the looms now for the guy who owns the barn. Khyungee doesn't have a day job, he's got a young house and garden out on west street and does this for his pocket money. Quite often Shira sings with them but I don't know where she is today.”

“Do you ever play here?”

“I have, if I have someone to play with. More often I just sing and play backup if I do anything here.” She didn't want to have to explain the whole complicated personality clash thing right now.

“Why not more often?”

“I don’t get asked.”

“Why not?”

“Because you see, I’m really not such a big deal. Yeah I can play a few songs, and if I worked at it I could learn plenty of new ones. I’m not really up to the crowd they get here, you’ll see a little later.”

“I still think there’s a lot more to you than you’re telling me. There was a lot more in that song than you’re telling me.”

Desa sighed, she was going to run him back up to the desert if he didn’t get this out of his jaws soon. “You know, there are times when I wish you were right. There’s a side of me that would love to be a famous performer, but that side is overwhelmed by the side of me that doesn’t have the ambition. As it happens I’ve been completely honest with you. I’m a pretty average girl in real life, when we’re not all spacey on yaag I mean. I think I’m more intellectual than average, and I can play music a little better than average. I’m sorry I scared you, but I’m NOT the character in that song, I can only sing of her. I thought you might get a little laugh out of it actually, show you how silly you’ve been to think so much of a plain old schoolteacher like me.”

“I’m sorry I got scared, but you ARE much more than you give yourself credit for. You have awesome talent, both playing and singing, and it’s not just me saying that, Kaha was excited as soon as she saw you go up to play. She went running up to the stage dragging me. And you know so much about everything, why wouldn’t I think you might be the one

to code a trip or whatever it was that brought me here.”

“No, I know it can be done and I’ve read about it, but I wouldn’t know how to start whatever device(s) you actually do it with and would never want to. I’ll brew yaag but that’s as psychedelic as I’ll produce. I wouldn’t even have a guess who you could have gotten it from around here.”

“Then why were you scared when I told you I wanted you to teach me to be someone you could fall in love with?”

“Because of what I’ve been thru lately. Lately, huh, like since Rendrak left to be brutally honest. Maybe in your couple hours with Kaha you saw a bit of it, saw how people are here anyway. Kaha is very pretty, a nice and interesting person even if a trifle shallow, but she lives with Naon, her partner in the store, not in her love life. You can see how popular she is with the guys, but she doesn’t have anyone steady, and that’s the way she wants it. When she wants to have sex she goes out and picks whoever she wants at the time and has sex with him, then goes home after.

“I want to live with someone. I want someone there when I wake up who wants to be there, not someone who’s there because I’ve trained him to be.”

“Desa, there is nothing I could imagine wanting more.”

“What about Kaha?”

“I went with her because you asked her to be my party guide for awhile. She pretty much lead me by the hand back there, I didn’t even know what was up until I smelled the semen in that room. I’m back with you because I want to be.”

“Even if I scare you?”

“Kaha scared me more. Well scared isn't the right word, but made me uncomfortable. She's such a total show-off. I don't think I could ever get comfortable with someone who loves to display herself for everyone the way she does.”

“I was naked also.”

“Yes, but not the same way. You were still just the same person, maybe not covering yourself, but not flaunting it either.”

“I'm not the looker that she is.”

“I think you're better in many ways.”

“Pppppp.”

“I'm not just saying that. You are more natural, she seems like she's almost a drawing, an animation, a product.”

“She's done a lot, but I've changed my look a little also. I was born with pale and delicate ruddy skin that I immediately had changed. I got the curls just over a century ago.”

“They still look very natural. You're a beautiful person, not as flashy maybe, but I'm sure you never have problems because of your looks. You seem to be just about as popular as she is.”

“In the Yoonbarla way, I can pick third to sixth on a given night in Myimpaden and that's more than I need for sex and I get better than I give I think. I'm just not sought out as a life partner. But please, don't be afraid of me, I'm completely harmless.”

“I come from a culture in which it's illegal to have sex

outside an exclusive marriage with a partner agreed to by both families at an elaborate and expensive ceremony.”

“I’ve never heard of such a repressive social system in all my studies,” Desa said, she had to think about this a second. “So in your society you HAVE to live the way I’m talking about.”

“Yeah.”

“No, I just want a society where you CAN have a partner sharing your space. Even I don’t want to HAVE to.”

“If you ever do find someone to be your partner you’ll break my heart. Unless, of course, it’s me.”

“Oh Alan, Alan, Alan,” she sighed, “You’re going to get over this infatuation long before I find a life partner. But come on, lets go downstairs and see if we can make it back from the kegs before Dundorada comes on. Then you’ll see what a modicum of talent is really like.”

She put her arm around him and walked back to the hallway and then to the stairs, noticing that Alan was still pretty stoned so she shouldn’t worry too much about what he was saying. He obviously wasn’t ready for this much yaag all at once and she should be ashamed of herself for not slowing him down. Would she have let Dara drink like this with her? Then she remembered that Dara had been drinking like this since he was two and half.

The stairway to the floor comes out in the worst possible place, right over the kegs, right across from the stage and

right next to the stairway that goes down to street level. When there was a party like this going on and a group like Dundorada playing, the traffic got unmanageable. It was a solid press of bodies pushing toward the kegs, especially Bloric's, the current party keg. To this was added all the people coming up and down the stairs to and from the kegs and all the people just standing on the stairs to get a little better view of the stage.

They got mired in an almost immobile pack, out of which various people oozed on their way up the stairs. There was lots of nice contact. On their way by, some shared their cups with friends working their way down, and even emptied them, thus joining the traffic going back down.

Most of the people squeezing by stopped to say good-bye, even a few she wasn't sure she knew. She must have met all the inhabitants of the town at one time or another, but she really couldn't say she knew them all.

One that she did know was a friend of Knume's who lived in a cabin way out in the woods, a day's walk at least. "If you're ever up on Rankor hill," he advised, "And I'm sure you will be; there's a little plank door right next to the stall side entrance to the Conchidenabla with a sign over it that just says 'World's Best Yaag'. It's purple, glows in the dark and puts off fumes that flow down the side of the cup. It works better than that, don't casually attack it with something the size of old Thollalla there."

Dalzor, who was also stuck in the crush, got him to

reminiscing about some of the times where Thollalla had counted up some of it's gallons. This allowed them to inch forward a little more.

Dundorada

It was later in the afterlunch by the time they managed to get back up to the balcony. They missed about two and a half songs because of the time they spent in traffic. Marcue was still with them but Danip had gotten lost somewhere around the keg. When they got back up here they spotted Knume and were going to go sit with him. Before they got there they noticed that he was sound asleep, so they let him be.

It had been quite a while, more than two decades, since Desa had last seen Dundorada. Since then there had been a few changes in the group. They had added a lween and another yandrille so that now there were six members, a fairly large outfit. Their songs had become faster and livelier than she remembered. They would have to be if all these people were going to get a note in. They still had two primary vocalists, both female, but one was either different or had learned to play the lshi. They still weren't a very visual group, even though both yandrilles were hand-held. They stood their ground and delivered their power tower music like stonecutters banging out blocks.

They moved down to the front of the balcony. At this

point Desa recognized one of the singers, and had spoken with her once or twice. Her voice had picked up a lot of hard miles in the last couple decades, but she had been concentrating on her appearance since then. The new vocalist was concentrating on her voice. It was a very liquid smooth creamy-honey with some weight behind it, as at home floating-on-the-canal tranquil as echoing-off-the-mountains powerful. As for her appearance, from this distance Desa could sub for her if she could only sing like this. She remembered that this would be a good time to point out to Alan that she was almost pretty enough to be the plain one and almost sang as well as the pretty one, but he was away to the keg when Desa happened to notice this.

When he got back, he had a whole story of Alore accusing him of being a wizard again. When he said he was just coming off a bad RNacid trip about being from YingolNeerie, she immediately started pushing people out of the way and tried to do some kind of a shaman-dance in a star pattern around him, droning some chant all the while. From the fact that he'd admitted it, she guessed even he was beginning to accept that some bad RNacid was all that had happened to him. Might she even hope that in a few weeks he'd be over it? She'd still love to know how that pocket prophet worked though, technology like that could produce a capable sonic block that weighed far less than the current average of about two hundred pounds.

“Did she hurt anybody?” Desa asked to show she was

paying some attention to his narration.

“No, but she held up the line for awhile and I had to go thru the WHOLE YingolNeerie story ALL over again.”

“Did people pay very much attention to her?” Desa asked.

“They were careful to get pleasing body contact with her but they were paying more attention to me.”

“At least you got the yaag back here.” Marcue said.

Desa remembered what she as going to tell him. “And yeah, I gotta point down there as what we mean by a small town rock star.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah but you play a lot more like they do than anything else I ever thought of.”

“But that’s because I happened to be the second yandrille player you ever heard in your life. These two guys are the fourth and fifth. The fact that you thought I was a world famous performer is perhaps the strongest evidence you’ve given me so far that you really are from YingolNeerie.”

“Good, I’m glad something might help convince you I’m telling you the truth. I just hope you can stand it when you come to really believe it.”

“I still think it would be fun if that is the truth, I’m looking to help you prove it.” If she could, she would probably learn how that device worked in the process.

“But could you stand it?”

“I’ve one third believed it all my life. The ‘brought here’ theory of human origin has merit. I never expected it would be me to meet someone from the planet of origin. As long as

no news crews start filming around me I'll try and handle it. Playing tour guide to the boy from YingolNeerie hasn't been difficult so far." If he was a real creature from outer space, slimy and green with hundreds of writhing tentacles or a seething foamy mass, it would be difficult.

"Even if you're not a world famous performer after all, you're still a wonderful person and a most informative tour guide. I'd hire you at whatever your rates are, to guide me to Zhindu and back."

Desa just laughed at that, he needed more reassurance that she would be his guide even if he was from YingolNeerie and even if he wasn't.

There was quite a bit more concert, and they stayed right there in the front row of the balcony, close enough to the people on the floor to talk with them between songs. More than half the balcony was full. The Lappranile could hold half of all residents of Yoonbarla, but more were on the floor, a tossing sea of bodies and cups. Occasionally people came and visited, sitting in the next row behind them. Alan didn't know any of them and was lost in the music and the yaag anyway. At least he seemed to be getting over that witch queen thing.

It was right after the long, dreamy 'Saga of the Janek Migration' when it was Desa's turn to fill the cups. Bloric's keg was open at the time and Dalzor's was running very low. That was all that was left of the party kegs at Lappranile.

She was standing in line, talking with a guy who lived

down on East Street about her trip when it started, so she didn't see the very beginning. Luray was standing near the keg, as would be expected, and Valla was at the head of the line filling Numenvadn. There must have been some words exchanged because Luray started shrieking, something like...

“You aren't worth the bottom of that, you blubber-bunch bouncer. You aren't worth the drip of a 'Bit wallower's disease.”

It was pretty hard to tell just what she said because she was undoubtedly well fried by this time and if you've ever tried to scream insults while deep in your cups you know you're not likely to get the words in the right order, much less the letters.

Valla for her part just started chanting, “Deadhead, deadhead” at her, in her own swaying rhythm.

“You shunna never crawled up of that slimy hole and got good people on it.” Luray screamed at her, or something like that.

Most people laughed at the tortured language Luray used. It ended as suddenly as it began when Luray ran screaming into the dark, down Lappranile's front stairs and out onto the circle's sidewalk. People moved aside to make way for her, she probably would have climbed right over them if they hadn't.

This became the topic of conversation for the remainder of her time in the keg line. She met Danip in the crowd and he followed her back up to the balcony. He thought Valla had

teased Luray to start it, but didn't know what she actually said.

Knume was lucky he couldn't step between them. He was still asleep halfway back in the balcony with dozens of other dozers and semi-dozers. He was not even hearing the gossip about it.

“That had to happen,” Marcue said when they reached their seats and told everyone. “Even Luray was bound to get torqued up over how that situation played out.”

“It was still something to hear Luray screaming,” Danip said, “You hardly ever hear her talking.”

“She should have done it a long time ago when she could have actually said something instead of just make noise,” Marcue told them.

“She should have expected this,” Desa said.

“Oh I’m sure she did and that’s why it hurts all the more,” Marcue said.

“Luray is deeply hurt over Knume?” Desa asked.

“Yeah, I have to admit it, she really loves Knume. She’s been working on getting him back again since I can remember.”

“Getting him back again?”

“I hear they were a couple for a long, long time, but before I was born.”

“Four centuries ago?” Desa asked.

“Yeah, way back.”

“But Luray wasn’t even here when I got here.”

“Oh when she goes to the city it might be for a century, but she's been here many centuries. It's just been less than five decades that she's been back this last time. I also think Valla swished back in far too easy. With all the bluster from Knume about Mappu too. I know Luray can be pretty empty but there is something there once you get to know her outside the max party mode.”

Dundorada announced that this would be their last song. Chiggeed had asked them to pass the word that the theirops was off the coals and the rolls were in the vats. It seemed like Nightday had really flown while they sat here watching, but the candles said they'd been here twice as long as Myimpaden. This also turned out to be their longest song, an uplifting thing reminiscent of 'Monolith of Triumph' but more about individual lives than mankind as a species. It was named 'Why I Will'. She thought of it as inspiration to succeed in Zhindu.

The Feast

“So what did you think of the music,” she asked Alan as they made their way out.

“I've heard some recordings of Earth's music thru headphones before. I have to admit that the audio systems here are a lot better than headphones. Compared to tonight, I've never heard music before. You are eleven light years

better than what I've heard thru headphones. I've heard rumors that Earth might once have had music like that, but it's long been outlawed by the Pan Solar League. This expedition had the further censorship of the Christial Church. I've never heard anything like this, and it's not the yaag making me say that, I'm less effected by that than I was when we got here."

"You're just getting used to it," Marcue told him.

"They outlawed music there?" Desa asked.

"Oh yeah, it's illegal in lots of countries," Alan said, "And heavily regulated in most. It's seldom used for entertainment."

"Why not?"

"Because before it can be performed in public or sold to the public it has to be reviewed for political content, psychological effect and moral tone. They can't allow it to stir up the population the way this music obviously does."

"Most of us were so stirred up we complained when it was our turn to go fill the cups," Desa said

"Well it was very energetic music," Alan said, "A lot more so than anything my government would allow."

"How can they allow? How do they even know who's playing what?"

"Oh you can't sell unlicensed products, the cops will hunt you down and put you in court, where you stay till you're out of money, then you go on to the correctional system."

"What's an unlicensed product?"

“Desa; there is no way I could explain to you in a single evening all the permits and rules and regulations that go into the sale of something so simple as a meal. Every ingredient has to be approved by the government. Every establishment of every company involved in any ingredient at any time has to follow volumes of regulations that you don’t have a bookshelf long enough to hold. Every person touching anything in the place where it is sold has to be licensed, pass a test and have a certificate from the government allowing them to be involved in food production or handling. The premises where food handling takes place has to be approved and licensed. The construction of the premises must be inspected by several layers of government at several times. Every single penny that changes hands must be reported to the government, but that’s true of all business. Every person involved in delivering supplies is licensed and subjected to ongoing personal testing. So is every person involved in carrying away the trash.”

This made about as much sense as food coming from factories. How such a ridiculously fabricated society could ever possibly hope to function was impossible to imagine. This was such a cartoon-like drug-dream that she wondered if he was just making it up as he went along, the way he must have made up that nonsense about governments raising children. Maybe he never even actually took any RNAcid. She would see how far in the corner he’d go with this, “Why does anyone put up with all that?” she asked him.

“That’s the way it is and the way it has been for generations and nobody knows anything different. So courts would have never approved this music and I could have never heard it.”

By this time they had shuffled their way up the aisle and got to Knume.

“You want to come over to the feast,” Desa asked him, or stay here and sleep?”

“I’m not sleeping, I’m just grooving deeply on the tunes.”

“They’re done, Dundorada’s put their patch boxes and instruments in their cases and are heading for the their ops.”

“Well then, I guess it’s time to go,” he mumbled, looking confused. He’d probably been ‘deeply grooving’ since the opener’s second song or thereabouts.

He tried to get up, it took a couple heaves. It took awhile to shuffle their way down the stairs and out into the street. There was still quite a crowd milling around the entry discussing whether they were going over to the feast or somewhere with someone first. It was obvious many were finding somewhere close by with their someone. It was obvious Knume was still really buzzed as soon as they got within sight of the pond.

“Look at those lights,” he said. There was still some traffic getting thru on the north side of the pond, shops were still open there on Logging Night and their lanterns were

turned up. “You dragged me to the city didn’t you? But look, they have one of those reflective floors over there in the next room.”

“That’s the pond,” Desa tried to tell him as he stumbled across the circle.

“Look how they did that, it looks just like water out there,” he said as he descended the steps. “I’ve been told there’s hidden projectors...”

“He’s gone,” Lapnar said as he came back by, with Braneen again and not Kaha.

Meanwhile Knume blundered on out into the water. “I’m actually getting wet” he said when he finally stopped. “How’s THAT for realism Wherever you took me, they make a mighty fine trip.”

“It’s reality man,” Lapnar called.

“A town called Yoonbarla,” Valla chided. “There’s a tiny little pond in the rotary and you’re out in it.”

“Is that right?” He squinted thru the trees and the torches. He looked quizzically at those that had followed him to the water’s edge and were walking along the shore toward the street with Chiggeed’s awning. “Yeah it looks like ol’ Yoonbarla but it’s all built-up and lit-up.” He had to ham it up now that he figured out he was what they were laughing at.

“What you natives call a Logging Party,” Valla scolded.

“Wow, what a pleasure to come home to,” he puffed as he made it to the top of the bank. “And look at this feast, is that for us?” He rejoined Valla on land. They slapped and pushed

about getting wet. Desa overheard him say, “I needed a little dip to wake me the fuck back up.”

Alan was afraid to go near the table at first, but hung back on the street just watching. He looked even more overcome than he had been by the song she played for him, paralyzed with fear, body rigid, eyes out on longer tentacles than most kedas. If he was on a YingolNeerie trip, he might have never seen a theirops before. Knowing he had been camping in the same woods with this guy might well be a serious mental moment for him right now. Maybe now he was understanding why everyone thought it was so silly of him to camp when there was a town right here. In true Wescarpian feasting tradition the fangs and claws were still on, but blackened by the fire. Those were the parts Alan stared at the hardest.

There was a thick slab of a groaning board set over the two monument stones. In the center was the steaming roast theirops, still on the four-pole rack that sixteen guys had used to pull it from the coals. The main stuffing was legino, spiced as only Chiggeed knew how. After the fur was burned off, the whole had been continuously basted in a sweet 'n sour, lightly fermented sauce.

A shout went up from the table, and Alan screamed and started to run, like maybe he thought it was coming back to life. But all that happened was someone found there was a special surprise inside the theirops, an egg, nearly ready for hatching. She grabbed him and pulled him back, he came

with her fatalistically. No doubt the baby had been cleaned and stuffed with a passionberry jelly, while the remainder of the egg was stuffed with a rinko-nut mix. The egg had been roasted in the belly of the theirops, just above the coals. Early diners had just discovered this and there was a feeding frenzy building as they watched. Also on the table were the first batch of sizzling rolls stuffed with every condiment that could be dredged from the interior of a theirops.

A dozen char-pots had been set out, the backstrap was little more than aged and marinated right to grill. Meanwhile the bacon was crisp. You cut your theirops according to how you liked it done. Desa would go for the hottest stuffing that wasn't burnt and a piece of lower trianguloid from a hinder leg so she wouldn't have to more than crisp the surface on a grille.

Knume had reached the table by now and was able to bang Numenvadn down on it and say, "That's right, I've got another whole keg stashed down here don't I?"

"I'm afraid so," Valla answered.

"And this is the one Desa worked on isn't it?" She had crushed and stirred the pods and re-topped it after Alan's first lesson.

"I was afraid of that too," she said. And thanks to her, Luray wasn't here to help him with it.

"So let's get it open," Bloric hollered from over by a char-pot where he was already slicing broil for Demrin, Lenchei, Alore and himself.

“I can’t believe anyone could want more yaag,” Alan wondered, still paralyzed and staring at the theirops with eyes bigger than it had. She still couldn’t get him to approach the table.

“You might find Nightday was the warm-up and now we might see some serious drinking,” Desa warned.

“I’m not going to be in much of any mood in this cold,” Marcue told them.

“Not without some furs. I think I’ll run up as fast as I can and grab some from Knume’s. I’m hurrying so they don’t have this all devoured by the time I get back.” She yelled to Alan, “I’ll bring you something warm to wear.”

“Alan, get some of the baby for us,” Marcue called over her shoulder as she accelerated, optically pulling Desa to accelerate with her.

Quite a few others were going up after warm clothing, but Marcue and Desa were the only ones who were running. Running felt like flying at this point, but not as scary because she felt like she was on some kind of rope or rail. It was exhilarating in the cold and really cleared the cobwebs, a lot like Knume’s dip. Soon they were ahead of everyone and just jogging side by side up the street, in a rhythm. They kept right in the rhythm right past Marcue’s house. They were four houses up before they noticed and stopped for another fit of sillies.

“Some streetcar pilot you are,” Marcue said. “After all the

time we've been together you ought to know where I hop off."

"I was just a running dactyl, miles up, gliding over the countryside."

"Well, don't miss your stop."

"I'll try to keep at least a pin-hole focus."

She got her winter fur, unneeded on the basin floor that Zhindu was in the heart of. There were some thick old leggings she put on over her sandals. Then she remembered the old fur she had come thru the pass with, was still in Knume's closet. That was for Alan. Then she grabbed Knume's for him also. With one on and two to carry, as well as the long uphill run to get here, she was winded.

She waited for Marcue a while, then called her. When there was no answer Desa was transported a few minutes back in time. Marcue had come running out, waited a few tense seconds, called once and then run down toward the pond at full downhill speed. Desa would have just walked back but she remembered that Alan didn't have anything warm with him, and tried to jog a little bit, but soon gave that up in favor of a loose amble.

She got back there to find Marcue helping keep Alan warm, and thanks to Larneh, they had a good slice of the baby. Actually half of a half inch thick slice all the way thru the egg, a feast in itself. A sampling of the parts of a theirops,

at their most tender and with these stuffings

That got her to thinking about how humans and their ops are one of the few mutual eat or be eaten pairs of species on the planet. She figured a their ops was a pretty honorable opponent. With a six inch top fang and four inch lowers, eighteen inch scissor claws strong enough to sever arms and legs, acute senses and intelligence, as well as reflexes that might deflect an arrow, an armed human was barely on even terms with it.

It sure did taste better than it looked. It was amazing that such a fearsome monster (they looked much more frightful upright with their brilliant fur and plumage with their claws clacking and saliva dripping from their jaws than they did skinned, cooked and partially devoured on the groaning board) could have such tender flesh. Of course Chiggeed's skills certainly didn't hurt any, the long day's kegs might have helped also.

Alan had to dwell on his astonishment on seeing the critter on the board. If he wasn't from another planet, this kid acted a lot more like it than any actor she ever saw. Sure enough, this was his first encounter with a real one. He was terrified just imagining what this thing must look like on it's feet alive. Yes he was quite shaken by the fact that he had been camping out in the woods with one of these things wandering about and went on about it. His imagination was nowhere near as bad as the reality of a their ops. A keda can't outrun a their ops, a human has no bodily performance figure

ahead of a theirops. There is only devices and teamwork or climbing a tree.

Now was not the time to drill him on theirops safety tips. On the Lhar would be ample time. Alan had enough trouble getting over the theirops for now if it was only as dangerous as he thought it was. He got over it enough so he didn't have any trouble eating it, and lots of the rolls. If he continued to eat like this he wasn't going to stay scrawny. If he worked sail on a ship for a year he shouldn't get flabby either.

For quite a while there was quite the frenzy going on. Guys all over the theirops cutting, slicing broil, charring it. People eating standing up. A hubbub of voices. Even though the table was huge, it was only possible to sit at the ends. Chiggeed, his crew, and Dundorada were at the head end, the lumberjacks at the other.

“Now this looks like what the people on the starship thought I was going to run into down here,” Alan said, “people dressed in furs devouring wild beasts by torchlight. There's guys up there hacking off chunks with daggers and then picking it off the dagger with their teeth. Then there's Pneika face-down on the other side of the table. Now you got this big old wooden keg up there with all these guys around it yelling and waving their cups and slapping each other's backs.”

“Happens here often. Knume goes out for a hunt once or twice a year, after nyobba or lenta, not theirops,” was what Desa answered but Alan kept rambling over it.

“She ought to be tired, she never stays up late and slaps make her nervous,” Marcue replied about Pneika. “She’s been going since Afternoonday.”

“It looks like a neolithic hunting party.” Alan continued.

“Well, the tradition goes back to that,” Desa told him.

“It’s just the décor,” Marcue added, “And it’s fun.”

Axiospeengya

Eventually it got to be what could be called Dawnsleep, and the center of town got pretty deserted. Most of the revelers had stopped by for a few bites and maybe a roll, but by now there were few more than the loggers. Most of the buildings actually facing this block had workrooms or storage on the second and third floors, what apartments there were, clung to the very top. There was actually a couple playing in the pond in spite of the temperature. Sure enough, Althay was not here at the table. There were still quite a few couples on the benches also, maybe working up enough appetite for more food. Anything left of this theirops would be taken with daylight by anyone who came by who could use it. It makes good roll stuffing for all the next day.

There was another group out in the street playing Binat. Alan had never seen it before and was watching it in fascination. It was a fairly complex game, played by a large number of people in a hexagonal spiral lattice. You throw

some soft object over some part of the group, and the people thrown over move according to a bunch of rules, and you score a point for reaching the center cell of the lattice. It is played fast and can get pretty involved and downright athletic when you've been drinking all day. Needless to say, Alan didn't understand it all just from watching, and didn't really understand it after an explanation either.

For a few minutes a gentle snow fell. It was the pretty, sparkly kind, a few big flakes sinking slowly down and muffling the sound. Not enough came to stop anything or get more than just the top of your hair wet. It wasn't often a first snow came in Lmonteira, she'd seen it four weeks later.

She took the opportunity to walk around the other end of the table to get the bottle of Axiospeengya from Chiggeed. The old singer was still there, and even recognized her in spite of the years. She told the story of 'on her way to Zhindu', and was informed that the new singer had recently come up from there. She said it was real busy, a lot of stuff happening, too much to keep up with in fact. So after a promise to stop by where they're playing again some time, and a delicious round of shots and a round of Axiospeengya, she brought the bottle back around.

There is some argument among connoisseurs over whether or not Axiospeengya and similar potions can actually be called yaag. It is true they are made from larorlie pods, but they are so heavily modified that the relation to wild larorlie was rather tenuous. The stuff is quite thick and green like the

best natural yaag, but opaque. The taste is more like that of ultra-violet energy. Even in the bottle it fumes well and you can take a real ride by savoring it awhile on the tongue.

“Here, take a little swallow of this,” Desa told Alan after taking her swig, well; now her second wasn’t it? “Just a shot, don’t swill it down like that country yellow you’ve been drinking. This is just a taste of the city.”

He put it to his lips, quickly took it down, “AAA, it tastes like AC current” he said.

“Whatever that is” Desa said, but didn’t really care. “Pass it that way,” she said about the bottle.

“Axiospeengya,” Marcue said, “You went all out.”

Lenchei had three more bottles in her shop. Marcue extended, enfolded and coalesced around the bottle, as Desa slipped thru the gate, wondering once again how this stuff could work so fast. Before Marcue could hand off to Knume, Desa knew she was going on a trip. Maybe she shouldn’t have done that second one?

Desa floated up over the game, who’s spiral continued to flower. Bloom of humanity scatter over the world, praise green life.

There was a curtain before space, lift it, lean back and drink from the black sea. Points of white open new flowers, alien strange-blue, bloody red but living. A world is not enough, and her arms held the galaxy. A field of space blazed with spiral flowers, and thru it the children ran. ‘Alan set us free’ they laughed. ‘The boss is mad, he thinks we’re bad, but

Alan set us free'. Twinkling dust of stars fell from their feet, their voices sparkled into the distance.

She saw the granite voice Knume, "Ax – eye – oh – speeng – yaa" with a rush like the dawnwind issuing from a cave.

And still the curtain lifted, still the black poured in. Yogsothoth's jaws and azeltoth's claws, or mechanism's of Andromeda? 'We are not dust, we are the flowers' the humans twinkled as their children tiptoed around the galaxy. 'Metallic taste alone' the flowers answered.

They ride; spiraling into the loving laughter of the beauty while time crystallized into a late-party blitzo-constructiod around the hollow in that bottle.

The Road to Hazorpean

And after a time, a lap or two, still water touched their shore. A landing or awakening, candledeath? Knume was mumbling something, she was just comfortable somewhere, in Alan's arms it seems, leaning against the table with her feet under her. She knew Alan had been talking with Nobron. Their voices must have soothed her to sleep. Only a few were still here at this table. Pneika and Yhomaire were asleep in each other's arms, and looked like they had been there awhile in spite of the fact that Knume thought he was talking to them. Chiggeed was asleep at the other end of the table, lying

crossways on that end, flat on his back with his furs on, snoring loudly, his generous belly making a mound. Alan was examining the theirops bones, bemused that they were made of wood.

Desa gave up watching at the stars. She was sure she had seen the starship earlier, but Narrulla had sunk low and was now just a fingernail where the horizon wasn't as dark as it used to be. She looked for Marcue and saw she was out in the street helping Danip hitch his kedas.

“You're pulling out?” She called sleepily.

“He is, I'm not going down.”

“Why not?”

“I can't stay awake any more, that blammo-blopter put me out.”

“You're telling me? Looks like Bloric left without his lumber.”

“He's gonna go sleep first, don't be surprised if he doesn't get down to the mills till Afternoonday.”

“Got to him did it?”

“Well, that and Alore, she invited him home.”

“I guess I should go up and get our team.” Desa said, “I just wonder if Knume's going to want to wait till later?”

“It'll be light in a couple hours. Let's see Danip off and I'll walk with you.”

She gave the harness a final check while Danip gave Desa a nice hug goodbye in case he didn't see her down in Hazorpean. Then it was Marcue's turn for Danip's goodbye.

“You know girl, it’s getting hard to spend a day without you,” she heard him whisper.

“For me to,” Marcue answered.

He climbed up on the front of the trunk and gave a wave to the team. Desa and Marcue each gave a tug on a harness at the same time, but that was more symbolic than any percentage of the effort they exerted.

Demrin was just coming down with his team and Nobron stood up and announced he was going to get his. Knume looked around and agreed.

“It’s light enough to get the kedas up already ain’t it.” Knume yawned, “Man but wasn’t this a bash ”

“Biggest and best ever old buddy, I think we still know how to party.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s going to be a rush getting those Kedas.”

“You just get woke up,” Desa called to him, “I’m on my way after them right now. Get yourself strapped in up there if you want.”

“Desa’s had a nice nap,” Nobron said, “should have plenty of energy to deal with those kedas.”

“You got another bottle of something?” Knume asked. “We could have a really great sunrise on the high road.”

By that she knew the axiospeengyaa was gone. “We’ll find something I’m sure.” Desa couldn’t believe even Knume was still ready. There was a bottle shop just after you hit the valley floor. No way Lenchei was getting her shop open this coming Morningday.

Marcue, Nobron, Desa and Alan were soon walking up the street. It seemed like Nobron was giving Alan a ‘who’s related to who and how’ history of Yoonbarla, almost in the form of a gossip review. Desa and Marcue were soon a few paces ahead of them.

“I’m going to miss you too,” Marcue said. “I’m really afraid you won’t be back this way.”

“Sure I will, you’ve been there twice and made it back each time.”

“But I’m a country girl at heart, I like my plants and a quiet life. I’m not too bright or too curious. You’re a city person, that’s easy to tell. You have such a mind. People like you don’t always come back here.”

“I would at least have to come back for all the stuff I left here.”

“Oh maybe for awhile, if you don’t just send a message to have it shipped.”

“Unlikely.”

“And are you sure you’ll be alright with Alan, I mean what if he really is from YingolNeerie?”

“Oh I’m coming towards believing it, I don’t actually believe it yet but I don’t disbelieve it any more. I might disbelieve again by the time I get to Hazorpean, I guess I let my cup get a little out of control tonight.”

“Whatever he is, he could be wild and dangerous.”

“He is not dangerous, except thru clumsiness maybe, and

he's not really bad about that, he just has a tendency not to pick up his feet high enough."

"Yeah, the Numondiit plain's pretty flat." Marcue said.

"So are the corridors in a starship."

"You are starting to believe it."

"I'm starting to understand that it can't be DISproved so easily." Especially if you found his pocket prophet, but she wouldn't worry Marcue with that.

"Well be careful."

"I'm always overcareful, you know that. That's why I don't have as much fun as I wish I did."

"That's the way to live long."

"Think of what this must be like for him, even if it was an RN Acid trip. He's got to be terrified."

"He has you," Marcue said. "You'll take care of him."

"How can he know that?"

"You've just got that mother smell or something."

They didn't talk any more on the way up. Marcue went with them up to the field, she had enough energy for that. Nobron was only a few doors down from Knume on the opposite side. He turned off at his path with a good-bye hug for Marcue.

It was good that Marcue had come up because Alan didn't have a natural instinct with kedas. He was a good learner, and properly respectful of them since they are huge and it was still pretty dark. With just Alan helping she would have been

able to get it done but it might have taken an hour. With two experienced humans it took only a few minutes to get them all back in harness and in a train as they would be on the road. She noticed that Kelkar's pair had torn up Enva's field pretty bad digging scrapes for the dark. They sent Alan in to get his pack and Desa's duffel while the girls adjusted the straps and lead the kedas out of the field and down to the street. Marcue continued to walk beside Desa until they reached her house, Alan followed along behind, no doubt still dazed from all he had been thru this dark.

“Well, you're on your way,” Marcue said. “And just be careful like I told you.”

“Don't worry about me. A century from now we'll be reminiscing about this at another one of these parties.”

“I hope so, and this was a party to reminisce about wasn't it?”

“It was.”

They held each other, getting tears in each other's hair. “Have a good trip,” she got out, and then went inside without looking back again. Desa continued to gaze at the house that held her for a few seconds, then lead the kedas on down the street. Alan was still following along, not saying much. Even if he was just a kid from the desert raised by hermits, this must have been an overwhelming dark for him.

There were still a few people around the log as Desa arrived, still talking quietly. The volume picked up a little as

they approached.

“Here she is with the kedas,” Larneh said, “I hope you’re all strapped in there real secure.”

“I couldn’t be any strapped in.” Knume rumbled, “Lets get those kedas tied on and we’ll be rolling.” Alan helped her tie the kedas’ harness to the big ring on the front truck’s tongue while Knume began to bellow, “I just want to thank everyone for one tree-mendous party. We had some hum-dingers in the old days, but this was right up there with any of them.” Then he leaned over and lifted Valla right off the ground to stand on the front wheel where he could give her a good-bye kiss and squeeze. “You be good now woman,” he said quietly, “I want you around when I come back.”

“I will be, as long as I don’t get a better offer.”

“It better be better than Mappu.”

“OK, it will have to be better than Mappu. Now let me get down off here before my feet start to hurt. We haven’t got time to get sappy, the others are rolling already.”

Demrin was already moving past Knume, as he went by, they saw a passenger perched atop his log also. A slender woman with shiny blond hair, an elegant nightcoat and a large sturdy duffel. Luray. “Vyinga’s taking crew,” she said, “An auspicious time to go to the city.”

“Well welcome to our humble caravan, most elegant lady,” Knume said.

“Thank you for your caravan. How say you?” She asked Desa.

“Wow, this is sudden, but wow. A couple days ago I thought I was traveling alone, now we’re a trio, and you’re experienced on this route.”

“Oh yeah, Vyingaa knows me.”

“I’m glad to share paths with you,” Desa said, hoping she would still mean it a year from now.

“Thank you. Shall our happy journey begin?” she asked Demrin.

As dawn glimmered over the road ahead, Demrin waved to Kelkar’s kedas and they pulled his log on by Knume’s. Nobron was bringing his up behind. Knume saw it was time to move, so, with Larneh at the harness he waved his crooked fingers forward and shouted, “Off then you critters, give a heave there, ON TO HAZORPEAN ”